



The Mind Over Finger Joyful Practice Challenge

A 12-day challenge to infuse your practice with more mindfulness, joy, and efficiency!

Guidelines:

- For the next 12 days, commit to spend 10 minutes of your practice focusing on one of the prompts or on anything that makes it fun, enjoyable, and/or meaningful to you.
- The prompts are a great place to start, but don't feel in any way limited by my them! They're merely suggestions! The important thing is for YOU to explore what brings joy and meaning in YOUR practice.
- I strongly recommend that you write down some notes every day and keep track of your experience , the questions that come up, and your findings.
- Think of enlisting an accountability/inspiration partner to go through the challenge with you

Now that you're all set, here we go!

Day 1 - Easing into joy

Pick up your instrument and play anything you want – some long tones, an etude, a piece you like, an exercise you're curious about. Or maybe you feel like improvising? Anything goes! Pick something you REALLY WANT TO PLAY. Enjoy it. Make it feel delicious! As the 10 minutes comes to a close, start thinking about a specific project you'd like to pick for this challenge. Is there a piece you'd like to learn, or a technical skill you'd like to work on? Or you just want to keep this completely open and have "free play" every day. Once again: ANYTHING GOES!

Notes:

Day 2 – Nurturing a child-like curiosity

When you practice, are you scrutinizing everything with a severe ear and a judgmental heart? Is your quest for perfection causing grief and frustration? The way you approach practicing can really slow down your progress.

Let's try a different approach: nurture a child-like curiosity in you practice today! For 10 minutes, experience playing with COMPLETE open-mindedness. No judgment. Only curiosity, exploration, and objective observations. What am I curious about today? What do I want to play? How do I feel right now? What does it sound like? Am I noticing anything new in the score? What would happened if I tried it like this instead?

Ask yourself those questions and notice your thoughts. What other questions popped in your mind? What did you notice? How did it feel to approach things this way? How did it affect your playing?

Notes:

Day 3 – “Breathful” practice

Before we even begin to practice, our heads are often so full of thoughts, goals, expectations, concerns, and anxiety! The best mood/mindset regulator is actually the easiest thing for us to do: breathing!!!

How mindful of your breath are you when you play?

Try this today:

- Begin your practice session by closing your eyes and taking several deep breaths or by doing a breath exercise of your choice
- Play something slowly for 5 minutes and bring extreme awareness to what is happening to your breath
- Don't try to control your breathing: simply notice HOW you're breathing

What do you notice? How does it feel??? What happens to your playing when you focus on your breathing? What happens to your body?

Notes:

Day 4 — Pick one teeny tiny thing

Today, bring your focus to one teeny tiny thing you'd like to improve and you explore it:

- Pick a really small element in something you're playing – the transition between two notes, an articulation, one shift, a bow change, the shape of one note, etc...
- Explore what is happening gently and with patience
- Ask questions and consider solutions using positive language
- Don't try to *fix it,* just explore different options for fun
- And notice what happens to the passage when you're simply exploring, without judgment and with pure child-like curiosity

Notes:

Day 5 – Body Scan

Before you launch into “serious practicing,” use your 10 minutes of joyful practice to do a body scan

- Pick an exercise or a piece that you enjoy and can play rather mindlessly (e.g. long tones, slow scales, a piece you know really well by memory, or improvise)
- As you play, bring your awareness to your breath – not controlling it: only noticing it
- Move the awareness slowly through all the different parts of your body and notice what happens
- Notice where the tension is
- Pay attention to your feelings as well! Maybe bringing your attention to 1 specific area will awaken a feeling – either good or bad. What do you feel? Why do you think you’re getting this specific feeling/sensation?

You can also try that exercise throughout your practice, whenever you feel tension or frustration rising, or when you’re working on a particularly difficult passage and feel stuck: play the passage while focusing on your breath, and moving the awareness slowly throughout the body, and observe what happens.

Notes:

For Day 6 – The power of the gaze

In general, our focus is heavily influenced by what we look at, (in yoga “drishti” [or the *yogic gaze*] is a big element in improving concentration, bringing precision to the movements, and in directing the energy] so we’re gonna have some fun with it!

In your “joyful practice segment” today:

- Play letting your eyes go anywhere they want. Notice where they go, what you see, and if/how it influences what you’re playing

- Bring your gaze to specific areas of your body (use a mirror if necessary) and notice what happens. For example: what happens if you look intently at your left index finger? What are you thinking? How do you feel? Do you notice an effect on your playing?
- Play a short passage with your gaze fixed to the ceiling. What do you notice?
- Then, try playing with your eyes closed. What do you experience?

There are many other things you can try! For example: what happens if you play a passage and look intently and with hyper focus at the music, as if trying to imprint it forever in your mind? If you play the same passage again with your eyes closed, can you “see” the music?

Keep experimenting, and trying new things!

Notes:

Day 7 – How creative can you get????

Do you get stuck in a rut whenever you work on a hard passage? Always resorting to the same way of working on the same stuff???

Today, I challenge you to come up with at least 5 NEW, FUN ways to work on a passage!

- Pick a passage that presents a challenge at the moment
- Think of a least 5 ways to work on in that are completely different than what you’ve done for this type of difficulty in the past! Get really CREATIVE!
- Some possibilities... How about:
 - Playing it slower than you’ve ever played it, analyzing every movement, every detail
 - Fast practice with note grouping
 - Playing it in a different key? A different string? Backwards? With a different style?

- o Arranging an etude to fit the passage

Anything is possible!!!! Go wild! Do anything you'd like! We're not so much focused on the results as to experimenting with new possibilities and seeing WHAT could help!

Notes:

Day 8 – Observe Fear

What would a joyful challenge be without a little bit of fear??? 😊 In exploring fear, we get familiar with it and we diffuse some of its power!

Think of a passage that's giving you grief. Now, let's pause for a moment... Are you struggling with this passage solely because you lack the skill? Or is there something more at play here? Might there be some fear getting in your way?

Let's explore that!

- Play the passage a few times and examine your feelings as you're playing it
- List all the negative feelings that come to you when you play this passage
- Keep playing and examine further:
 - o Do you have strong emotions about the whole passage?
 - o Or is it just a few specific notes in particular?
 - o Or one particular element about the passage?
 - o Why do you think you feel that way?
 - o To what degree? How strong are the emotions?
- Without judging it and without trying to change anything, play it a few more times, and keep observing your feelings and thoughts

Keep in mind: This is just EXPLORATION! WE'RE NOT FIXING ANYTHING! We're just getting acquainted with fear! ... the rest if for tomorrow! 😊

Notes:

Day 9 – Taming Fear

Now that we've allowed fear to be in the practice room and we've explored it, let's see if we can get comfortable with it!

- Pick a scary passage (same or different from yesterday) and play it a few times, investigating your feelings similarly to what you did yesterday
- Once you've identified your feelings and their possible origin, play the passage several times and try different approaches to tame your fear. Some suggestions:
- Take a deep breath and play the passage while *accepting* fear FULLY!
- Identify where fear shows itself in your body: where does it cause tension? Just notice where it is.
- Bring your full awareness to the tension and let it defuse, "feel" your breath dissolving the tension
- Engage your courage muscles and "jump in:" as the scariest part approaches, focus your awareness more and more on something really tangible (e.g. "flowing bow arm," "relaxed shoulder blade," etc.)
- Bring a hand to your heart, close your eyes, breathe deeply, and mentally play the passage, "infusing" it with joy and physical comfort (Sounds tacky, I know! But it can be really powerful! I'll expand on that in the live video!)
- What else can you try????

Let your fear (the type of fear, the degree at which you experience it, where and how it manifests itself in you) inspire what you try.

What else did you try? How did it feel? What happened to the passage as you experienced taming fear?

The reason why it's important to figure out the origin of fear is because sometimes there are some really concrete measures you can take to get comfortable with it.

If it's coming from really not feeling comfortable with a specific skill, then you can plan on working on that skill, make the decision to get information on the technique, work on it, except that it might take some time and some patience and embrace the process

Another reason might be simply because you don't practice playing it at tempo so you don't have acquired the skill to play it that way. Kind of like learning to ride the bike – the balance point comes only at a certain speed so if you don't grab your courage and go for it you never get the momentum to ride the bike

If it's deeper than that, there might be a need for a greater personal reflection, incorporating some meditation in your life, or exploring other modalities to get a better understanding of yourself and of where the fear lives and how to get comfortable with it!

Notes:

Day 10 – Time for a treat!

You've worked pretty hard the past few days, and you've focused on pretty serious stuff for the past 2, so let's ease back into something more soothing! Let's sing!

- Pick your absolute favorite passage in a piece (whether a piece you *have* to work on, or any piece you'd like to play!)
- Focus on phrasing, on singing, on letting the music flow through the passage
- Explore and have fun 😊 with different ways to phrase!

- Some things to experiment with:
 - Sing through the passage a few times. What do you feel instinctually drawn to, phrasing wise, when you sing?
 - Think: how would it sound on a different instrument?
 - Is there a specific emotion you're trying to convey in this passage?
 - Do you have a narrative, a story to tell in this passage?
 - What is going on in the accompaniment, and how can you use that even more?


Let yourself be free and allow yourself to ENJOY expressing yourself through music in this passage!

Notes:

Day 11 – Record yourself (joyfully)

So, I know that the idea of recording yourself might sound as remote as possible to any feeling of joy! We can feel so exposed and it can trigger so many feelings of frustration! But recording ourselves can be one of the absolute best ways to progress faster, and THAT's a great source of JOY!!!! There are ways to get more comfortable with it! Let's see...

- Pick one phrase you'd like to work on (maybe one for Friday's challenge...???) 😊
- Take a deep breath and set your mind to having an objective view of the experience and a non-judgmental approach of assessing your playing
- Record the passage – audio or video (I use the voice memo or camera apps for this. Nothing fancy.)
- Listen to it 1 or more times (as many as you'd like) and:
 1. List 3 things you LIKE about your performance

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2. Identify 1 thing you'd like to play differently on your next take
 3. Record another take, trying to execute the element you thought of above right away, without practicing
 4. Repeat this process a few times

Keep in mind this very important concept: MUSIC MASTERY IS A PATH! You WILL hear things you don't like when you record yourself and beating yourself up about it is not going to help.

Appreciate the process – the fact that you're here, holding the instrument, curious, ready to improve. That's a big deal! That's an awesome thing! Appreciate your dedication and your discipline to sit here on a quest to better skills and greater musical expression! You should be proud of yourself!

Listen to your playing with critical but non-judgmental ears: identifying aspects that can be improved without attaching a judgment to who you are as a person.

If you feel frustration mounting, stop and move on to something else and try again later.

Notes:


Day 12 – we have – “No shoulds, no shame. Just relentless tenderness.”

That's it! We made it!!!! Last day!

So, we've done many things in this challenge! We've played things we wanted to play, brought curiosity into the mix, gave attention to our breathing, used hyper-focus, did body scans, gazed intently, practiced creatively, faced our fears, sang our phrases, and approached recording ourselves from a joyful perspective!

Phew! That's a good long list!

Today, I want you to just go back to where we started, and just play. With no should. No shame. Just relentless tenderness.



And just be there. Experience it with no expectations and no judgments. LET GO. There will plenty of hours of hard, dedicated work ahead in the days and months to come. Take that 10 minutes and make it deliciously yours! Listen with tenderness. Feel your body with tenderness. And reconnect to what it is you enjoy about music-making...

Let your thoughts and your feelings rise - let them come and go! Simply notice. Notice how you feel and what's enjoyable right now!

And when you're done, see if you can carry that peacefulness in the rest of your practice that day. When you let the pressure and the "need to" "have to" get in the way, you close your mind. If you bring more of this relentless tenderness in your daily practice, I think you'll find that you're much more engaged and interested, and, as a result, way more open to problem-solving solution, and much more efficient.

Notes:

I hope you enjoyed!

À bientôt! Renée

Keep me posted!

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