

■ Achieving the Flow of Great Performance

by Tom Terez

On August 22, 1741, George Frideric Handel shut the door, sat down at his keyboard, picked up a quill, and began to compose. Twenty-four days and nights later, he emerged with 260 ink-filled pages, some of them streaked from his own tears. The result came fully to life on April 13, 1742, at Dublin's New Music Hall, with the debut of the majestic oratorio now known to the world as *Messiah*.

Recalling the creation of his two-and-a-half-hour masterpiece, Handel told a friend, "Whether I was in the body or out of my body when I wrote it, I know not." He worked non-stop, frequently skipping meals. The effort so captured his heart that he often wept as the music flowed. After composing the section known as the "Hallelujah Chorus," he wrote in his journal, "I think I did see all Heaven before me and the great God Himself."

What exactly happened in that room during those three weeks and three days in 1741? How did Handel create such a magnificent work in so little time? Are there things we can do in our own lives to create our own *Messiah* equivalents on a smaller scale?

Part of the answer lies in a concept called "flow." Made famous in his book by that name, author and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains: "The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile."

Early in his research, Csikszentmihalyi studied photos of visual artists at work. The photos

had been taken at three-minute intervals, allowing him to be a fly on their studio walls – a bit like watching Handel in his composing room. All the photos showed a stunning degree of involvement and absorption, with the artists intensely and exclusively focused on their work. The mental noise and distractions that afflict so many of us appeared to be absent.

Csikszentmihalyi looked beyond the art studio and found that this phenomenon exists elsewhere – among rock climbers, dancers, chess players, athletes, composers, musicians, and others. In fact, wherever he found peak performance, Csikszentmihalyi found "flow."

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Athletes refer to it as "being in the zone." Basketball champions have left their best games saying that the basket somehow seemed to widen in diameter just for them. Baseball great Ted Williams reported after multi-hit games that he could see the seams on incoming fastballs. Gymnastics standout Carol Johnson once said that the balance beam would seemingly grow wider for her on days when everything came together – to such a degree that "any worry of falling off disappeared."

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■ Achieving the Flow of Great Performance *continued*

Was Handel “in the zone” when he wrote *Messiah*? Pelé would likely think so. The Brazilian soccer star often experienced “flow” in his *Messiah*-quality performances on the soccer field. It’s a “euphoria,” he said. “I felt I could run all day without tiring, that I could dribble through any of their teams or all of them, that I could almost pass through them physically. I felt I could not be hurt.”

Perhaps you’d like to run all day without tiring and achieve results like Handel or Pelé. If so, the good news is that you can. The bad news is that flow can’t be turned on like water from a faucet. In fact, thinking too hard about putting yourself “in the zone” is probably the worst way to go about it. That’s because the best performance is largely an unconscious proposition – something that emerges from deep within us.

But there are things you can do to create the right conditions. For starters, you need to like what you’re doing; if you don’t, you’ll never achieve flow. Try to stretch yourself, striving for a performance that is above your skill level but still within the realm of doability. Make a habit of this “stretch” process, always aspiring to a higher level as your performance improves. Remove all removable distractions – so turn off that cell phone and stop the multi-tasking.

As your work unfolds, stay in touch with the emotional feedback you’re getting from yourself. Monitor progress, enjoy the glow of achievement, and roll it back in so you can

achieve even more. This is vital if you’re working on a big project that will span several weeks or more.

If it seems like a lot of work, go back to Handel. In the first half of 1741, the 56-year-old composer thought his best days were behind him. Chased by creditors, suffering from rheumatism, and coming off of two poorly received operas, he was planning to pack up and return to his native Germany. Then he received a letter with inspired lyrics. The writer was seeking music for his words and felt that only Handel could do the job. That’s when he picked up the quill and worked miracles.

What about you? Are you staying open to opportunity while exercising a Handel-like work ethic? Are you creating the conditions to turn work into “flow.” Are you transforming those mundane tasks into a meaningful mission? Are you doing ordinary things in extraordinary ways?

These are the questions that can turn ordinary notes on a page into beautiful music.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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