

# Self mastery

## Empower yourself and set yourself free



Self-awareness is vital for musical development. We are often unaware of what is happening in our bodies and this can lead to all sorts of problems. Equally, we can also be unaware of the thoughts that run through our heads. We can become stuck in habitual patterns that are unhelpful. It is easy to become preoccupied with everything that is happening externally but sometimes the challenges we face can be internal, ones that practice alone won't resolve. A pause and some inner reflection is needed.

By considering how we relate to our bodies and minds I believe much more progress in playing can be achieved. Awareness is the first step towards change. A heightened awareness of body and mind provide valuable feedback.

Let us look at the mind, for example. Have you ever considered what percentage of your thinking is nurturing and supportive? Most musicians run a very critical inner voice. We have somehow come to believe that scolding ourselves from the inside will motivate us to do better.

*Visualising a positive outcome can lift your performance to new levels says Niall O'Riordan*

If you think this is you, ask yourself: how has this approach served me so far? Does it make me feel good? Am I willing to try a different approach? Most musicians have experienced performance anxiety at some point in their life. We allow this anxiety to build days and even weeks before a performance. But where does it start?

Anxiety can originate from a simple thought. This can be related to a past experience, but may not. Catastrophic thinking can be defined as ruminating about irrational worst-case outcomes. Musicians are very good at scaring themselves, and this worst-case scenario can become ever more elaborate as we run it over and over again. It is known that when visualising, the brain confuses what is real and what is not. People who suffer from performance anxiety usually run a process like this but have little awareness of it and have not developed the skills to put a stop to it. Think about how the body reacts when you're watching a scary film – you can actually jump with fright. Your body is reacting to what you're seeing on-screen as if it were real. A similar process happens with visualisation: if

you visualise a frightening outcome your body will begin to react as if it were true. We forget that what we are thinking is not real.

### How do we change?

Breath awareness is a fantastic way to connect with the body and is also one of the finest methods there is to stabilise and calm the mind. Yogis have been using such techniques for centuries. The breath enters and leaves the body at a rate of approximately 15 times per minute. Of all vital functions in the human body, breathing is unique. It lies at the interface of the conscious and unconscious mind. Breathing normally functions unconsciously but we are also able to take conscious control of it. Other unconscious processes such as the heartbeat, body temperature and metabolic activity cannot be controlled by the average person.

Of all these vital functions the breath is also the easiest to become aware of. It provides a valuable insight into our mental and emotional state at any given time. For example, when we are happy the breath is normally rhythmic, deep and slow. In contrast when we are tense

*“You are not a helpless victim of your own thoughts, but rather a master of your own mind.”  
Louise Hay*

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or unhappy the breath is gasping, shallow, fast and uneven. This valuable information, when observed, can provide a real turning point when dealing with performance preparation and performance anxiety. Regular and relaxed breathing induces relaxation in the whole system. When we are nervous or anxious our breathing always reflects this. It is usually shallow and quick. This type of breathing can also add to chaotic thinking patterns and these thoughts in turn generate even more anxiety and cycle continues.

### Taking Control

How do we break the cycle? We need to cultivate awareness in two areas. We must learn to become aware of our breathing and we need to become aware of thought patterns and see them for what they really are: thoughts. The first step is to become consciously aware of your breathing.

As you are reading this now, notice your breath as you inhale and exhale. Become aware of its depth, speed and texture throughout the day and continually bring yourself back to this. Become a witness and cultivate awareness of how your breathing reflects your mood. The second step is to intervene by regulating the breath at times of stress and anxiety. Regular deep breathing calms the mind.

The second step is to stop scaring yourself by visualising worst-case scenarios. Remember it is only thought and a thought can be changed. From my experience many musicians find it very easy to visualise negative outcomes but find it much more difficult to visualise positive experiences.

### Mental imagery and visualisation.

The sports profession has been using mental imagery and visualisation with huge success for decades. In one of the most well-known studies on creative visualisation in sports, Russian scientists compared four groups of Olympic athletes in terms of their training schedules:

- Group 1 - 100% physical training;
- Group 2 - 75% physical training with 25% mental training;
- Group 3 - 50% physical training with 50% mental training;
- Group 4 - 25% physical training with 75% mental training.

Group 4, with 75% of their time devoted to mental training, performed the best. They discovered that mental images can act as a prelude to muscular impulses. Visualisation techniques have become common practice with athletes and I believe that such an approach can equally benefit musicians. By using visualisation you can ease anxiety and bring your musical performance to the next level.

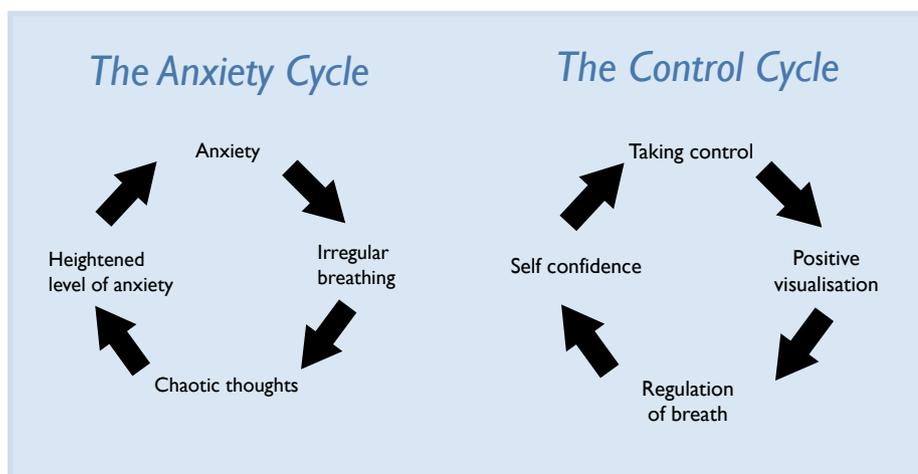
*“Your mind is a tool you can choose to use any way you wish.”  
Louise Hay*

### How does this work?

The reason visualisation works lies in the fact that when you imagine yourself performing the way you want to, you are in turn physiologically creating neural patterns in your brain, just as if you had physically performed the action. Mental imagery is intended to train our minds and create the neural patterns in our brain to teach our muscles to do exactly what we want them to do.

Visualisation can be used in many ways by musicians, particularly in dealing with performance anxiety. I recommend at least two weeks before a performance using a daily visualisation to run the performance in your mind from beginning to end to exactly the outcome you would like to achieve. Some people are better than others at visualising but it is a skill that everyone can develop with practice.

I strongly believe our outer world reflects our inner world. If you can change your thoughts and the beliefs you hold about yourself you can change your outer reality. We are always in control, although sometimes it may not appear to be so. With practice and some patience we can develop self-mastery. To quote Moshe Feldenkrais, “Nothing is permanent about our behaviour patterns except our belief that they are so.”



More from Niall at:  
[www.niallflute.com](http://www.niallflute.com)

## Exercise

- Find yourself a quiet place where you will not be disturbed
- Take some time and become aware of your breathing
- Observe its depth and texture
- Scan through your body and release any tension that you're holding
- In your mind's eye see yourself performing a piece that you're just working on
- Visualise yourself playing how you would like to play - remember it is a visualisation and everything is possible
- Notice how it feels in your body when you're playing so well
- Build in as much detail as possible in your mental image - visualise your audience, the room you are playing in, the sounds that you can hear, even engage a sense of smell and taste
- Visualise how it feels in your body to perform standing tall and confidently
- Run through the performance again and again in your mind, each time building the picture of the outcome you wish to achieve; experiment by intensifying the colours and brightness in your visualisation



**Niall O’Riordan** was awarded his MA and BMus from Cork School of Music, Ireland. During his early years and BMus Degree, he studied with Evelyn Grant, receiving consecutive scholarships to the Cork School of Music. Other significant mentors include Prof. Robert Winn, Dr Anders-Lungar Chapelon & Sir James Galway. Niall enjoys a varied career performing, teaching, and writing. Recent masterclass engagements include the Lisa Friend Summer School in London as well as giving workshops at William Bennett’s Summer School in 2011. Niall was also a visiting lecturer at Lund University Sweden in 2009.

Niall practices yoga and meditation. He is researching how flute players can use yoga techniques to enrich their practice and performance. He leads applied Flute Yoga workshops across Europe and the UK and has given workshops at the last two BFS International Conventions. Niall is now training as a certified

Feldenkrais method teacher. His holistic approach draws inspiration from a variety of yoga practices and philosophy as well as Feldenkrais method, voice work and visualisation.