Slowing Down and The Benefits of Boredom

The Earth isn't actually moving faster. It is continuing to spin on its axis roughly every 24 hours, complete one orbit of the sun every 365 days or so and together with the sun, orbit the center of the Milky Way Galaxy approximately every 225 million years (a galactic year). However, humanity and our relationship to technology is making it seem like *everything* is moving faster and faster. It is making it harder for us to slow down, harder to concentrate and contemplate, harder to deeply experience simple joys of being alive like the sweet relief of a gentle breeze on a hot day. But we still have a choice in the matter. We can be prisoners to our puny human perspective, rushing to and fro in a state of fragmentation and distraction or we can take the cosmic perspective and realize there is no rush when we're just moving in slow flat circles anyway.

Our music practice is a great place to facilitate slowing down. Telling students to play something slower may be my most common instruction as a teacher. Oftentimes, there is a barely discernible deceleration when I do. I usually have to play an example of just how slow I want them to go. This gets them closer but rarely is my slowness matched. Unfortunately, the speeding up of human life pervades everything we do. I often notice students bringing a very task orientated mindset to lessons and practice, like there is just so much to get done and not enough time to do it all. This results in a quantity over quality approach that I believe yields less improvement. Better to practice one thing exceptionally well than 10 things poorly.

Here's an example and an exercise to consider. I teach a scale. The student practices the scale. In the next lesson, I ask them to play the scale for me. Inevitably what I hear is a succession of quickly struck notes, barely having a chance to sustain and resonate before rushing to the next. The sequence has been memorized but it doesn't sound very musical. It sounds more like someone counting in pitches. No wonder you often hear people say, "But scales are boring!" Well, they are if you play them that way.

Try this exercise to change that experience. Choose a scale. Strike each note with authority. Really make the note ring with its fullest potential. Keep your finger fretting the note, allowing it to sustain all the way until you hear a few seconds of

silence. Now move onto the next note and repeat the process. As the notes sustain, listen to the everchanging afterglow of each note (these are called harmonic overtones, a naturally occurring and beautiful acoustic phenomenon). As you do this, notice all the places your body contacts your instrument *other* than your hands. Place your focus on the feeling of your instrument resonating and vibrating against: your arm, your chest, your thigh.

On your next trip through the scale, try playing different note lengths. Play some long notes, some short notes, some medium notes. Repeat some notes, skip some notes. Notice when you like the sound of something. Try to repeat it. This is the gateway to improvising. Even playing a scale exactly in order, one note at a time but with different note lengths will make it sound like music instead of scale practice.

Don't just slow down here. Slow down everywhere. Try playing something you know really well but much more slowly. You may find it quite difficult. How well do you know something if you can only play it at one general speed? One gift of teaching is that I was forced to slow down what I thought I knew "in and out" only to find I just knew it "in." It was a major challenge in my first year or two of teaching and in moments it still can be. But I have learned the immense benefit of doing so, not just for my teaching but for my playing. It has made everything clearer, richer and more fluid. It also helps with moments of overthinking. When we play from muscle memory alone, we are on autopilot to a large degree and sometimes our thinking mind interrupts, leading to difficulties. Practicing at a variety of speeds, especially slowly, is a great antidote to this problem. It gives us a chance to process the music in an entirely different way for our mind and body. Practice by this mantra: If you can't play it slowly, you can only *kind of* play it.

Lastly, concerning the idea of boredom as related to scales, slow practice or life in general. I like to live by a lyric from a 1997 hit rock song which says: "If you're bored, then you're boring." We often treat boredom as a negative state. However, I think boredom can be a gift, rich with creative opportunity and potential for deep relaxation. How often do we even get a chance to be bored these days? If you get the chance, use it!