

Episode 1: How we practice in a hard time

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SPEAKERS

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Hattie Butterworth 00:03

Welcome to Things Musicians Don't Talk About with me your host, Hattie Butterworth. I'm a cellist and writer in my final year at the Royal College of Music in London. And I think we need a new way of talking. I've spent many, many years feeling in the dark about issues in the classical music profession. So often it can feel like you're the only person struggling with anxiety, depression, career doubts, money, injuries, and so much more. Who do we go to when we feel we've had enough for whatever reason? I hope this podcast will be a space for change in the music profession, a new voice for all the trials we face. We're not alone, and I hope the podcast will show you that there really is nothing to hide. Join me and guests as we end the stigma with honest conversations about the things musicians don't talk about. I look forward to the journey ahead and sharing it with you all. So please do follow us on Instagram. Our username is @tmdtapodcast. So please enjoy the podcast and you're really welcome whether you're a musician or not. So welcome to the first episode. Oh my goodness, I am very excited. It's been a lot of thinking about doing this podcast. I've thought about it, written about it, I've talked to people about it! And I just haven't had the courage to get round to making it, but it's been the most fun so far. So welcome. It's so great to be on this platform, sharing whatever we need to share, to be honest, like, whatever needs to be spoken about is going to be spoken about because it's been a journey, and I feel so in the dark, as I said about so many things. And I think a lot of people do you know, and at any time I've shared a bit of my experience, through my blog, or through an Instagram post, I always have people who say, "thank you for sharing that." And it's all those people that have said thank you or said "You've helped me", those people have spurred me on and given me the confidence to make this podcast because I don't think without you that I'd have the courage. And so today, I thought we start off, sort of how are you all to be honest, I mean, I'm fine. I'm doing well, as well as I can be doing at the moment, with the whole Coronavirus and all of that, I don't need to go into it particularly. We're dealing with it, you know, and we could be dealing with it better some days, we could be dealing with worse on days. And yeah, I'm currently in Scotland, um, staying with my parents, which has been really great. I've had a lot of green space, I've had a lot of time to think. But I have struggled a lot with my anxiety in the last few months, I've struggled a lot with feeling confused about why I have this really urgent feeling that I need to practice, but also not having much motivation. So it's a sort of strange place to be in where we don't have much to work towards, but I still feel like I ought to be working. Yeah, it's taken a few months to sort of find

my place with that. But I wanted this first podcast to be about how we practice in a hard time, like whatever that might mean to you. You know, whether you are struggling with your mental health, as I often often do, you know, I will have days where I need to do something, I need to do some practice and it's just impossible. And other people, you might be grieving, you might have an injury, you might just be completely unmotivated and feel lost in, in music or lost in your, in your life, for whatever reason, there are so many things. Some of them are quite benign, some of them are very debilitating. But there will be days and weeks and months where the idea of playing your instrument is just really tough. So yeah, this is definitely something musicians don't talk about. We have such a hard time admitting that we are having a hard time. You know, who feels comfortable in the world of super confident and super successful people to say, "do you know what? I'm actually having a tough time with practice and with creating and I'm doubting a lot and I'm feeling low." You know, it's incredibly difficult to have the vulnerability to admit that. I've been thinking so much about this recently, you know, as the pandemic has continued, and you know, mine and other people's mental health is suffering. And I have some thoughts about you know, the ways we can continue to make music in any way despite the pain and fear that you might be facing. And it goes without saying that these are also really helpful tips. If you're just feeling a little bit under the weather or unmotivated, you don't have to be feeling horrendous to give yourself a break, you know, you can be feeling just tired and absolutely give yourself the permission to take time. So number one is: Accept. Accept somehow that you're not going to be able to practice at the level or volume that you might be used to, and this is a hard pill to swallow if you're a workaholic. You know, it's so much about the mantra of how many hours a day or how much a day of each thing has been sold to you, you know, I've been told different numbers by different people, and even near the start of the pandemic, some people were asking me, "how much practice are you doing?" And it can lead towards just an absolute sense of self loathing if you know you're not doing as much as other people or the comparison, oh, my goodness, you could go on for hours about this, you know, it's a really, really tough one. But we have to accept if we're feeling low, you have to accept that we have to be in that space for ourselves, give ourselves the permission to be feeling really unmotivated. And secondly, I think it's important to remove any parts of your practice that usually trigger dread, even when things are good. So you might feel able to do a bit of scales. That's something I just, you know, went to naturally when I thought about things that I dread, but it could be anything, you know, you could dread ... you could dread YouTube, you could dread looking at YouTube videos, and then take that away absolutely fine. Well, that's good. But you know, anything, if you don't like studies, if you don't like a certain piece you've been forced to learn, please have the care to be able to say, "Not at the moment, not right now, I need to be doing something different. I need to be doing, playing pieces that I feel happy and excited and slightly, slightly motivated about". And I think that's the third thing is you need to find something that you're feeling drawn to at the moment, or that you enjoy, you know, so if you're feeling "wow, I realise that I am in a really conscious and relaxed space, or more than I normally am when I'm drawing or when I'm listening to jazz or listening to pop music or listening to whatever or going walking or something." So you have to find the thing that you're feeling drawn to. And stick to that. Focus your practice sometimes around making a cover, or just playing or doing some painting, feeling, listening to some music and doing some painting. I don't even know... singing or whatever it is, you know, first of all, find the thing that can be creative, and that can make you feel like you've accomplished something. And it doesn't have to be within the parameters of classical music. So I kind of think what I'm getting at is that you cannot expect yourself to study the great concertos, or the symphonies in depth, when you're struggling in any way, you know, we have to break it down for our brain to cope with. Our brain is under stress. It could be that you're thinking constantly, you have no... no break from your thoughts. And therefore you putting another expectation on to figure out this huge concerto or this huge symphony that you know was written by

people that might have also been feeling a bit messed up, because it won't serve your mental health and can lead to more resentment and therefore avoidance of creating or practising. Use the time to play just for pleasure, and it can be as little as you need. If frustrated, and if we're feeling doubtful and we're feeling upset that we can't play on the level that we might have been before, this is going to last...make it last so much longer. It's going to impact the way we see our instrument and the way we see our profession in a very negative light. You know, if we allow real downtime, we allow real time, real break and the ability to sit. "I'm not enjoying listening to symphonies. I'm not enjoying listening to string quartets." No shame involved in that. And there doesn't have to be one type of music for you to relax to, or one type of creativity. This is such a good time to explore that. Let your brain find something else. There's so much more, there's so much more that can even impact it when you're feeling better. So this kind of leads into the next point is I think it's important to think about breaking down your huge goals at the moment. We have these maybe have these great goals about what we want to achieve as a musician and I know when I'm anxious that I catastrophize about what this downtime will do to my progress as a musician and sort of "what if what of my career if I'm not at full speed", and wow, this is something I get quite emotional about, because in my first year of college and my whole way through college, this has been the constant worry. Because for me I've suffered with and still do suffer with an anxiety disorder. And the problem with an anxiety disorder is, it's very good at making you feel like you can't move. It's very good at making you stop in the middle of your practice, and just feel like you can't go on because you can be ... feel very overcome with anxious emotions. So I can't, a lot of the time, I can't think big, I can't think about the huge goals. I can't worry about that. Because the present moment is so terrifying in but it has led me to feel as if I'm miles behind everybody else and feel as though I won't be able to complete my end of year exam, or I won't be able to do an audition for this great project. Let me tell you this, that, if anything, the performances I've given in an anxious state, are probably the best performances I've given, or the auditions I've done have been some of the best outcomes, you know, it doesn't make as much difference as you think. You might not be at full capacity right now, and that's fine, but it's better to acknowledge it, take the time off than continue in this rut that won't serve you. So I have another anecdote. You know, I remember having this awful time with anxiety in November of 2018, I think it was. And I was performing a small concerto in Hereford, where I'm from originally, and I had to get the train from London alone was feeling so so awful about travelling, and about being around large groups of people. So the whole November it'd been, you know, anxiety death. It had been a really tough month for me. And I was doing the absolute bare minimum practice. And by that, I mean, if I did 30 minutes to an hour, that was really good. So anyway, I was playing the Bloch Jewish pieces, which, if you know, they're not the sort of the hardest thing that you'll ever have to play at all, you know, they're lovely to play. They're quite, some of them are quite slow, not major pressure in terms of the actual technical repertoire. Anyway, I'd plan to play from memory in sort of this huge building called the Shire Hall, which is quite, it's quite scary. But on the way on the train, I realised, "oh, my goodness, I don't think I can do this". I had this massive thought, like, "I can't do this" and started panicking. And so I knew I had to get through it in some way, shape, or form. So I decided, you know, I'm not going to play from memory. I know the piece, but I just can't bear playing from memory right now. It's too much. And I was really nervous to tell them. I was sort of got ... got to the venue, and I said, "you know, do you mind if I don't do it from memory?" And they were like, "What are you on about like, we've got your stand! Like we got you a stand already. What do you mean, of course, you don't have to play from memory. We didn't think you were going to anyway!" And I was just like, "oh my goodness, yay like they don't expect that of me. That's so nice." It's amazing, because I was ... no one seemed to bat an eyelid about that. The thing that I was killing myself about all the way there, you know, "I don't know think I can play from memory. I don't think I can do this concert." People didn't care. You know, I remember feeling just so proud after that concert that

I had shown up, you know, the showing up was just the absolute pinnacle for me, at that moment. I showed up, I played in the space I was, and because I was feeling so horrendously awful, I went onstage with no expectation from myself, because I just couldn't have ... there was no room in my brain for expectation. And it turned into being one of the most enjoyable concerts of my life. And I got home and I just felt so unbelievably proud that I hadn't let it define me, that I had done everything I could in that situation. Everything had fallen into place because I didn't try and I didn't have an expectation. And the audience didn't care. They didn't seem to mind. They didn't seem to see that I had the music or that I wasn't feeling my best. So anyway, I understand this isn't, you know, an ideal scenario for anyone and it's a much more settling feeling to be prepared. But it showed me what I'm capable of, on the bare minimum. You are not falling behind, taking your time to show yourself that your value as a human being is greater than your value as a musician. Oh my goodness, the door is opening. That was ... I don't know if you could hear that. It creaked open. That was a very poignant moment you ruined, door. Anyway, your value as a human being is greater than your value as a musician, and the audience do not care how much you practiced. Anyway, at the moment in this current Coronavirus world, it's not likely that you're going to be performing a concerto with orchestra, but it is important to remember that it isn't the end of the world if you can't play at the moment, in the context of your big life, you know, we're going to get back in time and whatever that means, it might be an incredibly different world with different expectations, but I think now our first priority is with our health and not allowing pressure and stress to get in the way of healing. You're still a creator, still a musician, still a really great person, even at 10% of the capacity that you've been at previously. So I don't know, you might be thinking, this is all well and good, but what if I have an exam or something I can't get out of coming, coming up? You know, it's all very well and good, forgiving yourself, but, you know, this is real life, and I totally get that. And actually, this is sort of where the fun bit comes in. Because you have to be creative for your anxious brain cannot cope with your normal practice schedule. And we've ascertained that, so you might have to find other ways of practising. If you have a good piano, this is actually a good place to start, I love piano procrastination, I love playing through the piano part in bits, or playing my part on the piano, because for some reason, the fact that I don't have to get my cello out of the case, is just so relief... it's such a relief, like I can just, you know, mess about on the piano for a bit and become familiar with the piece that way and then hear ... and you also kind of hear it in a different way. I might be just trying to convince myself that it's useful, but I just, I feel like it is. So my bed is my safe place in a half ... in a halftime? In a hard time. Or a coffee shop, or a bench in a park, or a hill or something. But obviously, the coffee shop one is off the, off the cards at the moment. But anyway, I recommend you do as much practice in your safe space as you can. This is just for me, some people find being in their bed or whatever, very depressing all day or for an extended period of time, but for me, I just love to sort of make myself a bit of a cave, sit in my bed, on my bed, have my music around me and study in that way, you know, I get my pens out, I do some writing about it, or I might colour code it or I might do some research. But you know, if you do as much practice in your safe space as you can, it really takes the pressure off when you're feeling low. Because you can feel productive, and also feel like you're resting and feel like there isn't an expectation on you. You know, and like I've said before, that you can, you can be practising through other mediums. So you know, I've written some terrible procrastination poems in my Bach Baerenreiter addition, because I'm convincing myself that, you know, it's a way of expressing how I want the peace to sound. And the whole of my Bach is now covered in, you know, different little poems. But you know, I really like that. And quite often I will stop practising and just feel inspired to write, and sometimes I bloomin' won't. And that's fine, if all of these kind of faffy-on the side..., or if they sound faffy and on-the-side to you, practice methods are not your thing, and you want to do some actual practising, I recommend that it's seriously slow, and seriously quiet in order to be beneficial. This is literally a note to myself more than anybody else. I just cannot... I find it so

hard to play slowly. And I've convinced myself I ... that I can and I just find it so difficult that every time I do, it makes the biggest difference. So what I found to be helpful is to have say, four lines in one practice session, four lines, and you're going to play them slowly, and you're going to play them incredibly quietly as well. And as you go, you just notice the sound and notice the sensation. Think about the note that's coming and feel about how you're going to move there or whatever. And this is actually a really wonderful mindfulness technique as well as being calming for your brain and very good practice, because the way we transition can often be so fast and compulsive, and it really slows it down, so that we think about music note-by-note, and not in this kind of stressed, overwhelming, "I have to play 1000 pieces a day" kind of feeling. So moving on from this, it's important to say that you should be kind to yourself if you have an exam coming up or whatever play or perform something that you're familiar with, as well. So you might want to choose one new piece, and then one piece you know incredibly well. And if you're comfortable sharing with your professor why, then maybe explain, "look, I'm having a difficult time, and I feel like for my health, I would rather take the pressure off and do this piece that I've done before." And I'm sure they'll understand. A lot of people do that even if they're not having a hard time, just take the pressure off sometimes. You don't have to learn 1000 new pieces. People will understand. It's much more rewarding to have one piece on the go and learn it slowly, learn it with mindfulness and calmness. It's much better to do that than to play three new pieces with, you know, really damaging your mental health and feeling a great deal of pressure in the process. I think whether you're having a hard time or not, you know, we definitely overload ourselves in this way and forget to listen intently to what we're learning. But anyway, that's just some ideas and things I've learned through quite a few hard times. You know, and I think the last thing to talk about, very last thing isn't about practising, it's not about music, it's just about being a human in a difficult space, and remembering that you will get through it. And you have to give yourself credit for anything you create right now, because only you know how difficult it is. I know how difficult it is to go through mental health problems for example. You might be in an equivalently terrible situation for another reason, and you will get through it. Things change, time is flowing. And it's just the most amazing fact. You know, and music is a really lovely way of showing us that colour and music and keys and chords and changes and everything is moving, everything is flowing and no emotion that you feel right now is forever. No situation you think you're in is forever. There's always space for change and for development and for learning how to deal with it. There are times in the past moments and days where I never thought I would cope with the emotion or cope with the situation. And every single time, I was wrong. Every time I came out of it, like, stronger in some way. It sounds like a cliché, but it's an absolute fact. So anyway, give yourself as much time as you need and if you were just listening for some general motivation advice, I really hope it was helpful. I look forward to sharing more podcasts. Hopefully next time, it'll be with a guest. I'm pretty sure I've got someone in mind. Really excited about that anyway, so I'm sending loads of love to you all. Thank you so much for listening and do remember to follow us on Instagram if you like @tmdtapodcast (things musicians don't talk about podcast).