

CHAPTER TWO

The Three Causes of Error

When you flub a technical passage, have a memory slip, cannot grasp a difficult rhythm, stumble when reading or singing a passage, or when, in spite of hours of careful practice, you cannot perform under pressure, your problems can usually be traced back to three main causes that I refer to as *reaction*, *anticipation*, and *looking back*.

Each of these three causes of error is characterized by a specific set of symptoms that you can learn to identify and will probably recognize from your past experiences. Once you know the symptoms, you can apply an appropriate cure; you can adjust your thinking so that instead of failing, you can succeed. How can there be only three causes of the seemingly endless array of errors you might make as a musician? It is because most errors stem from how you use your mind. Your attitude when performing tasks, whether simple or complex, determines your success or failure.

At first, it seemed to me that mistakes happened randomly or as a result of lack of talent or ability. However, I have always been unwilling to accept this concept, having taught individuals that were considered (by conventional notions) either talented but unmusical or musical but untalented. The talented but unmusical individuals perform difficult musical tasks with ease, but they often cannot convey musical meaning in anything they undertake. They are the “trained birds” mentioned by C.P.E. Bach ([1787] 1948) in his famous treatise on playing keyboard instruments. On the other hand, those who are musical but untalented play with conviction and passion because they love music deeply, but they may have significant physical and mental barriers that prohibit success.

After having taught for several years, I began to discern that when errors occurred, my students, whether talented and unmusical or musical and untalented, exhibited specific traits in their behavior. These traits were absent when they performed well. As I focused increasingly on the attitudinal behaviors accompanying errors more than the errors themselves, a clear pattern emerged. When an error occurs, the mind is engaged in one of three main behaviors: zooming in on what you are doing as a response to being surprised; daydreaming, guessing, or fantasizing while performing a task; or judging and criticizing as you are trying to perform.

Knowing why you tend to behave in ways that are destructive helps you change those behaviors. To that end, you profit from knowing the roots of the cause of error; you profit from knowing why you have, in the past, adopted methodologies which bring about failure; and you profit from knowing why you continue to choose those failing methodologies! Fortunately, you can learn to avoid choosing these unsuccessful strategies and apply successful ones.

What follows are thumbnail sketches of the three causes of error in which I identify the mental and behavioral characteristics (the symptom), the probable reason for choosing the inappropriate response (the cause), and the best means of replacing the unsuccessful strategy with one that works (the cure).

REACTION

THE SYMPTOM

You suddenly stop during the performance of a task; you mentally “freeze” on the spot. You cannot seem to think or respond without great effort. You have a memory slip, being unable to remember. You cannot continue. All of these symptoms are accompanied by an extreme visual zoom into the object of focus.

THE CAUSE

This is caused by a limbic response to surprise. A mental state of fight or flight, likely caused by the activation of the more primitive part of the brain, called the limbic region. The unwitting activation of this region of the brain is

brought on by change or surprise, no matter how large or small. This frequently gives rise to a secondary reaction, caused by an aversion or repugnance to the negative stimulus.

THE CURE

Avoid being surprised by mentally expanding your conscious awareness so that it includes all parameters which you are likely to encounter—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—in the performance of a task. Know your domain. Accept your domain; accept it with equanimity and embrace all aspects or elements of a task. Be in *Eagle Vision*: the mental perspective in which you are high above any task and where you can calmly and effortlessly keep track of a vast array of elements below. **Expect the unexpected; learn to accept surprises with joy and delight!**

ANTICIPATION

THE SYMPTOM

You do something wrong without missing a beat, often without being conscious of having committed an error at all. There are two different types of errors of anticipation:

1. Malevolent anticipation manifests as paranoia or arrogance. You do not trust that you will be able to rely on your senses, so you second-guess what happens. You impose the way you want things to be, rather than accepting them the way they truly are.
2. Benevolent anticipation manifests as distractibility or daydreaming.

THE CAUSE

The mind disengages from external sensing modalities (visual, kinesthetic, and auditory) in favor of internal mental constructs, notions, or fantasies. You disconnect from external reality. The inappropriate cognitive modality is being used in place of the appropriate one; for example, the mind is listening when it should be seeing or is seeing when it should be listening.

THE CURE

Lead with the sensory modality—visual, kinesthetic, or auditory—that is appropriate to the task, and let the other senses follow. When you read, lead with your eyes; when you listen, lead with your ears; when you dance, lead with your body. Learn to use your mental modalities effectively. If you tend to prefer what you do better than what others have done, create your own original works; you will become better both as a creator and an actor if you do.

LOOKING BACK

THE SYMPTOM

You are looking backward (visual), hearing a critical commentary in your mind (auditory), and/or having a feeling of being pulled backward (kinesthetic) in the course of a performance. Imagine this scenario. There is an Olympic swimmer and her coach. The race has begun, and the coach sees that the swimmer is doing something wrong, so he jumps into the pool and screams at the swimmer who struggles to continue. The swimmer can neither keep swimming for long, nor can she hear what the coach is saying. This scenario is an apt metaphor for the symptom of looking back—you are both the struggling swimmer and the screaming coach!

THE CAUSE

Judging or assessing takes place during the performance of a task. Your mental “coach” interferes with the action. You attempt, unsuccessfully, to implement mental software before it has been correctly installed. The coach has not prepared correctly and wrongly believes it necessary to correct problems during the act, when it is too late.

THE CURE

If you are literally looking back, go into Eagle Vision, where you can clearly see what is currently going on below. If you feel the magnetic pull backward, imagine that the pull is from an electromagnet for which you have an on/off switch. Turn it off, now!⁴ Feel the release from the pull as you move freely. If you have a coach talking in your head, say “coach out!” As you say this, imagine

that he or she is instantly sucked backward out of the pool (your mind) and is silenced. To permanently fix looking back, your mental coach must learn the three-step process which leads to success:

1. Prepare to the best of your ability, know the necessary components of a task, and work on any which are weak.
2. Remove yourself from thinking, programming, and judging during the action; stay out of the pool! Trust your inner athlete to do the right thing because it knows what to expect and what to do. Stop all inner talking.
3. After the task, reflect on and review what went well and what remains to be improved. Use this information to prepare for the next event.