Executive Functioning for Flutists: Rethinking Practice, Performance, and Progress

By Dr. Patricia Surman

As flutists, we are trained to refine tone, technique, and musical interpretation; but far less often are we taught how to manage the cognitive demands that make those outcomes possible. Today's musical community includes a wide range of neurodiverse thinkers: musicians with ADHD, dyslexia, anxiety, and varied cognitive processing styles that shape how we focus, organize, and learn. These differences are not obstacles to musicianship; they are part of the richness and diversity of our field. In fact, many of these differences are also strongly associated with enhanced levels of creativity, a tool that is essential to our craft!

We often find that traditional models of training assume a narrow approach to learning. This approach prioritizes sustained focus, linear progress, and self-directed structure without explicitly teaching how to develop those skills. For many performers, this mismatch can lead to frustration, inconsistency, or the feeling that they are somehow falling short. This can lead to lifelong mental health struggles associated with the act of learning and performing music.

In the practice room, these differences often appear in ways that are misunderstood. Difficulty starting a session, trouble maintaining focus, inconsistent preparation, or feeling overwhelmed by large projects are frequently labeled as lack of discipline. Many of us have internalized the idea that if we are not practicing enough—or not practicing effectively—it reflects a personal failure.

But what if that narrative is incomplete?

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"What looks like lack of discipline in the practice room is often not about motivation at all—it is a breakdown in executive functioning."

Much of what we experience in these moments is not about motivation, but about *executive functioning*: a set of cognitive processes that enables us to plan, focus attention, manage time, regulate emotions, and complete complex tasks (Miyake et al., 2000). These skills are fundamental to musical success, yet they are rarely taught explicitly in our training.

Without them, even highly motivated musicians can feel stuck. Not practicing is often not a choice—it is a reflection of not knowing how to begin, how to structure time, or how to navigate cognitive overload. What looks like avoidance can instead be overload. Reframing these experiences shifts the conversation from judgment to strategy.

Executive Functioning in the Practice Room

Executive functioning is not abstract. It is embedded in nearly every aspect of flute playing. When we prepare for a recital, we are planning and organizing. When we apply feedback from a lesson, we rely on working memory. When we sustain attention through long tones or technical work, we regulate focus. When we begin practicing at all, we engage task initiation. And when we listen critically and adjust, we self-monitor.

While frameworks vary, five core domains are especially relevant to musicians (Diamond, 2013):

1. Planning and Organization

This includes setting goals, sequencing tasks, and managing time. For flutists, this might mean mapping out recital preparation, structuring daily practice, or allocating time across repertoire, technique, and fundamentals. Without this skill, practice often becomes reactive and unfocused.

2. Working Memory

Working memory allows us to hold and manipulate information in real time—remembering alternate fingerings while shaping phrasing or integrating multiple layers of instruction simultaneously. Limitations here can make it difficult to retain feedback between lessons or rehearsals with an ensemble.

3. Attention Regulation

Sustained and selective attention are essential for effective practice. This includes the ability to stay focused on a task, resist distractions, and shift attention strategically between details (e.g., articulation) and broader musical goals. This skill is a growing challenge for everyone given the world of digital distraction.

4. Task Initiation

Task initiation is the ability to begin work without undue delay. For many musicians, this is the most significant barrier. Importantly, difficulty starting is often misinterpreted as lack of motivation, when it is more accurately a breakdown in executive functioning.

5. Self-Monitoring (Metacognition)

This involves evaluating one's own performance, identifying errors, and making adjustments. Strong self-monitoring allows for independent learning and efficient practice; without it, mistakes are often repeated.

Practical Strategies for Flutists

Understanding these domains allows us to design more effective practice strategies. These strategies are aligned with how the brain learns.

Scaffolded Practice
Rather than approaching practice with a vague goal, use a simple structure:
Goal → isolate → strategy → evaluate → reflect.
This reduces cognitive load and creates a repeatable process.

Backward Planning
Start with a performance date and work backward to establish weekly and daily goals. This transforms preparation from reactive to intentional and reduces last-minute stress.

Time-Blocking
Practice in focused segments (20–30 minutes) with a single objective. Research on attention suggests that shorter, structured intervals improve both focus and retention (Posner & Rothbart, 2007).

Reducing Cognitive Load
Isolate variables. Work on rhythm alone, then pitch, then articulation. Breaking tasks into smaller components supports more efficient encoding and learning (Sweller, 1988).

Structured Reflection
At the end of each session, ask:

- What improved?
- What still needs attention?
- What is the next step?
  This builds metacognitive awareness and independence.

Applying Executive Functioning to Your Own Playing

For performers, the most meaningful shift happens in daily practice.

Start with **task initiation**. If beginning feels difficult, lower the barrier. Commit to five minutes with a clearly defined goal: one scale, one phrase, one technical exercise. Beginning—not duration—is often the biggest hurdle.

Next, clarify your intention. Before you play, decide what success looks like for that session. Write down two or three specific goals. This reduces decision fatigue and directs your attention.

Support **working memory** by simplifying. Instead of managing multiple elements at once, layer them. This aligns with how the brain processes and retains information.

At the end of your session, engage in **self-monitoring**. A brief reflection transforms practice into a feedback loop, reinforcing progress and guiding the next step.

Most importantly, reconsider how you interpret inconsistency. If you are avoiding practice, pause before labeling it as laziness. Instead, ask: *What part of the process is breaking down?* Starting? Planning? Focus? Identifying the barrier allows for targeted solutions.

Toward a More Inclusive Model of Practice

Executive functioning strategies are particularly beneficial for neurodiverse musicians, including those with ADHD or anxiety, but they benefit all performers. By making these processes explicit, we move toward a more inclusive and effective model of music training.

The familiar directive to "practice more" is no longer sufficient. Without structure, more practice often reinforces inefficient habits and increases frustration. A more useful question is: *How can I practice in a way that works with my brain?*

When we begin to answer that question, we shift from willpower to design—from judgment to strategy. In doing so, we create conditions for more consistent progress, greater artistic freedom, and a more sustainable relationship with our instrument. *Happy practicing!*

About the Author

Yamaha Performing Artist and Fulbright Scholar to Greece, Dr. Patricia Surman is an internationally active flutist, scholar, and educator whose career spans North and South America, Asia, and Europe. She is Professor of Flute and Director of Woodwind Studies at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Her work integrates performance, pedagogy, and research on executive functioning, inclusive teaching practices, and contemporary repertoire. Her recordings are available on AvidSound, Centaur Records, and major streaming platforms. www.patriciasurman.com