Max Cardilli (00:00): Welcome to *ESO Offstage.* We've all heard that expression “practice makes perfect” — but what does this really mean? This episode, I take a deep dive into practicing and performance psychology — looking at what goes through the mind of a performer when it's time to walk on stage.

[MUSIC - 00:19]

Bianca Chambul (00:37): Oh, hey dad. How are you? I’m okay. Great, thanks. Dad, Max is just sending you the podcast link. If you just click that link, it's not a virus. If you just click it.

Max Cardilli (00:51): As part of our “Behind the Screen” series our recently appointed Principal Bassoonist Bianca Chambal and her father spoke to me about their experiences in preparing for high stakes performance. Though one of them threw the discus. and the other plays the bassoon — there are more similarities than you might think.

[MUSIC - 01:10]

Borys Chambul (01:11): My name is Dr. Borys Chambul. For the last 38 years I’ve been a Doctor of Chiropractor. I was fortunate enough to compete in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal as a discus thrower. I was also a member of the University of Washington Track and Field team and that year in ‘76 I won the Olympic Trials. I set a Canadian Commonwealth record as well as an NCAA record. I was able to win the Commonwealth Games in Edmonton and make the Olympic team in 1980, which unfortunately we boycotted. But the interesting aspect is in 1978 the Commonwealth Games were in Edmonton — that's where Bianca is right now — and I met my future wife in Edmonton, Bianca's mom. So, it's kind of interesting how full-circle this has gotten because Bianca got her first start as a First Bassoonist for the Edmonton Symphony and back in 1978 I was fortunate enough to win the gold medal in the Commonwealth Games. So, Edmonton has a very special feeling in my heart right now.

Max Cardilli (02:09): Bianca won her audition for Principal Bassoon in June 2019 and was appointed to the chair later that year in October.

Bianca Chambul (02:34): It was pretty surreal; you go through this process and it just feels like this insurmountable wall. The one thing stopping me is just getting past this audition. So, when I won, I just remember I understood in that moment that you can become — like I understand why in the movies it's like somebody gets some bad news and they faint and I literally felt light-headed. I just remember Eric Filpula, the Personnel Manager came in and it was the second round and I was expecting to play for another round. I was thinking “okay, am I gonna make the cut or am I gonna get cut?” and then

he just walked in and he thanked everybody and he just said “we'd like to hire candidate Number One” and I just thought — what? Like I drew Number One — which I was really concerned about. I was like — you know what, this is a bad start already. And he just said, you know, “we'd like to hire Candidate Number One” and I just, I — yeah. I just couldn't, I couldn't wrap my head around it you know. He said, you know, “do you need a minute?” just to collect myself and I said “I’m sorry, pardon me?” and he said “you need a minute?” and I’m thinking “I know you're speaking English but I can't tell, you know, I have no idea what you're saying.” He said it louder and I was like “oh right — yes — no, you know. No problem” and it's like, you know, as Rob Knopper says — you're taking auditions, you shouldn't be operating machinery. You know, Eric had to show me where the stairs were onstage because I was basically gonna go walk off, like it was, I was not was not all there.

Rob Knopper (04:05): I never actually thought about the connection between, you know, the five minutes of you playing in the audition could actually be like a multi-million dollar lifetime achievement. My name is Rob Knopper, I’m a Percussionist at the Metropolitan Opera. When I am waiting for my next entrance in the Opera I am backstage writing blogs, working on videos, practicing, and pursuing my project which is to help musicians work on their audition preparation.

Max Cardilli (04:39): Bianca and many other musicians have benefited from Rob Knopper's *Audition Hacker* website to help them prepare for their auditions.

Rob Knopper (04:47): It took me so long to figure out those steps through trial and error, through struggling through, you know, so many audition rejections. I auditioned for about a little under 10 years. I took, I think, 54 auditions and my audition preparation process changed a lot throughout those 10 years. After every audition I would find tweaks based on what went wrong. I would look at the actual steps that I went through and update it and it was only at the very end — in the last year and a half or two years — I finally figured out what works for me and I felt like I had discovered this magical process. I do feel kind of a duty — sense of duty — to, like, lay it out for people in very plain, easy-to-follow methods so that they can test out my methods and potentially use them successfully. But in the end, your method to win an audition is by discovering your ideal process. The process that reflects the way your brain is wired, that reflects your strengths and weaknesses. So, my audition prep isn't going to be right exactly for you or for anyone else because we're all different.

I wish that I could tell you that throughout my audition prep I was balanced — like as a person. I don't think I really was. I don't think it's necessarily super healthy to be in that state for a long time. This is an Olympic sport — like, this is a profession that requires the absolute highest levels. So, I’m not really sure if I could explain how to do it while

also being balanced, necessarily. My approach, it was less about how much do I need to practice and more about how much am I not going to practice — how much of the day am I going to stop practicing for.

Borys Chambul (05:56): I had to become very skilled in the technical aspect. I had to be able to perform under all kinds of weather conditions whether it was rain or snow. The way I prepared mentally is, you know, either meditation, prayer, breathing techniques. I probably saw myself mentally going through the motions and going through, you know, the performances under all kinds of conditions but I had to actually train under those conditions — the less ideal the better — I could prepare. But the Olympics, you know, something happens to you when they call your name on the Grand Stage and that was a learning experience. When I didn't perform up to par — I was not able to get enough warm-up — I failed to make the final in the Olympics. It's interesting how you get the highs and lows in your career. 1976 was the peak — winning the NCAAs, winning the Olympic Trials, winning the Conference Championships — so I was riding high but when I failed to make the final cut it was very depressing for me. I think at that point I was so depressed I actually left the Olympic Village without attending the Closing Ceremonies, but I vowed that the next day that I would be much more prepared to overcome any of this not arriving there in time, not warming up enough. Between ‘76 and ‘80 I trained hard under all kinds of conditions and I was going to determine that I wouldn't make the same mistake and as a result in ‘78 I ended up in Edmonton. I won the competition on my first throw but 1980 was a great year for me as well but unfortunately, we boycotted along with the United States and that kind of ended my career at that point.

Rob Knopper (08:50): My Achilles heel was shaking. Of course, when one of the main things you're expected to do is play some very delicate, soft snare drum etude where — or soft snare drum solo — where maybe you have to play a soft roll, where the exact amount of pressure that you're pressing with your fingers into the sticks will have a huge outsized effect on the resulting sound. You know, nerves that result in shaking is a deal breaker — that is an immediate “uh no thank you” basically so this was like, you know, an incredibly difficult obstacle to overcome. It's something that I didn't make progress on for a really long time. It took a lot to get past it, you know, I had a bunch of different strategies but one of the main ones was I wanted to front-load that discomfort. I figured “okay, I am going to experience shaking at the audition so how can I mimic that way ahead of time and experience it over and over and over?”

I did a mock audition six weeks before the real audition and, of course, like whenever you do your first mock it just always feels terrible, it always feels like you're suddenly back in Middle School. I started doing one mock audition per day. Then I tried something where I was, like, I’ll stand in front of the drum right before I play, I’ll tense up

every muscle that usually gets tense for like five straight seconds — like extremely tense one-hundred percent tension and then I'll relax it. Through this experimentation I started to develop some strategies — these strategies were ways to get my mind off of what I was doing and into the music. I call it a pre-excerpt routine — it's a pre-excerpt routine that is kind of like what sports players do when they are leading up to doing something stressful like right before the batter steps up to the plate or right before the basketball player steps up to the free throw line. They always have some routine and it's kind of different — every player does it differently. I started to develop this. It was like if I want to make sure that my mind feels like it's back in the practice room. I have to have a whole bunch of steps that happen first before I play the first note and that was able to get me kind of in the zone for that excerpt. So things like finding the tempo by singing a particular measure to myself or wiggling the sticks through the air in some way or pressing my fingers against the sticks — it was different for every excerpt and every instrument. You know, each on the margins, helped me feel more comfortable with my nerves and my shaking at the same time, just the experience of doing the daily mock started to feel more like a habit. I started to feel like I could just go through the motions literally, like I didn't even have to think about what I was doing.

Borys Chambul (11:53): I think you can label it flow or you put it on automatic pilot and you just said I'm just going to key in on the beginning of it and just once I get the beginning part of my event everything's just going to fall into place, with all the months and years of practice and then you just have faith that, you know, just do it — as the Nike commercial said. Just go out and do it. Sometimes you're going to this altered state while you're in competition and I'm sure Bianca's felt that — where at the end of the competition kind of saying "what the hell just happened?" pardon me the expression, and then all of a sudden you did better than you thought, you did you know?

[MUSIC - 12:50]

Bianca Chambul (12:56): My teacher Eric Hall, who is the Principal Bassoonist of the Canadian Opera Company and the Principal Bassoonist of the Grant Park Orchestra in Chicago — he mentioned centering and we did just touch on it very briefly. And he said it's about, you know, just trying to get into your happy place or your peaceful place and I thought, you know, I think I need to actually research this because I think I need more of this. I feel like this kind of mental prep — especially since everybody's playing at a pretty reasonably high level, you know, more or less when you're getting to auditions. Like he said to me — maybe it's kind of I guess it's a made-up statistic- but maybe about, you could guess, 80 percent of people can basically play the notes at the audition, they're able to navigate the instrument and it's like well, where's the rest of that 20 percent. You know, maybe 10 percent is like the forward-motion phrasing and maybe the other top 10

percent is staying mentally quiet enough to be able to, you know, allow the work that you did in the practice room to shine through and play like the best version of yourself.

Don Greene (14:03): Hi, my name is Dr. Don Greene. I'm a Peak Performance Psychologist. I help train musicians to do better under pressure than in the practice room — hopefully to win auditions or just achieve peak performance in their playing. I was a Sports Psychologist working with three Olympic teams, World Championship teams and professional athletes like Grand Prix race car drivers, tennis players, professional golfers for about 10 years and by that time I achieved most of my dreams in Sports Psychology. I met a musician who was also a golfer and the more we talked the more I saw that they were similar in the mental approach that musicians take or golfers take and that's when I started working with musicians and I've continued ever since.

Sports Psychology was introduced to athletes in the '50s and early '60s and these were professional athletes that just wanted to do better and they had budgets like professional baseball teams. Football teams had a large budget so they could do a lot of training and it just never really came into the music world before I started working at Juilliard. They're basically the same agendas for them to train to improve in areas like controlling nervousness or channeling adrenaline, building confidence, strengthening courage, developing mental toughness and focus. Focusing past distractions and getting in the zone — that's what Sport Psychology and Performance Psychology is all about. The adrenaline is going to be there if it's consequential at all — which it is most of the time. The pressure is going to be there, the adrenaline is going to be there — it's not a question of suppressing it like with beta blockers or alcohol, it's a question of learning how to use it to perform better under pressure than you do in a practice room. That's what happens with Olympic Athletes. Not only do the Olympic records fall every four years but the World Records also fall at the Olympics more than any other time because the Olympic athletes know how to use that power that adrenaline to jump higher, throw longer — all that.

Stress is stress, whether it's an audition or a job interview, and stress manifests in three different ways for musicians and athletes. Physically the surging of energy, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, shaking hands, dry mouth, tight jaw, tight muscles, changes in breathing — those are just some of the physical symptoms. Then you have the mental ones which are disorientation, confusion, overthinking, left brain analysis, doubts, increased doubts and the emotional which is fear and fear of failure for your success which causes anxiety. So, those are the three symptoms and as a result like for performers, musicians, those are going to affect the performance and they're not going to sound as good as they do in a practice room. It's not going to be right on, they're going to make mistakes and then that goes to the top of the circle again and it's just

more stress and it can cause a downward spiral. Once the adrenaline hits you're not going to feel relaxed and the more you relax the more you confirm that you're not relaxed. People don't say relax when they're calm!

Let's do what I do with the Olympic athletes, let's teach them how to use that power and that's when my clients started wearing a lot of auditions. Centering is a focusing strategy that comes from the martial art of Aikido, which is where we learned about focus, and Western Sports Psychology. It's seven steps, each having a different purpose and a different function — all designed to go against the stress that I talked about before — the physical, mental and emotional aspects. So, it has to do with breathing, controlling energy, shifting from left brain noise to right brain focus, relaxing key muscles that tend to tighten under pressure, getting in touch with your center — which is a tricky thing — and then using the energy, not shutting it down. It manages the energy and channels it but it doesn't shut it down and that's one of the main strategies I teach.

Bianca Chambul (18:41): I think Imposter Syndrome is very real. I remember my teacher, Eric Hall again, saying to me maybe, I would say, about a year before winning the audition he just kind of put — you know — he put his two fingers together and he just said “you know, you're this close” and he said “but you just have to believe it”. Because, you know, it's so easy to get inside your own head too much and just obsess about every little thing that went wrong and unfortunately while we have to be critical if it gets to the point where it's debilitating it actually has, you know, definitely an adverse effect.

Borys Chambul (19:18): Well, you know, I was like yourself. I think we — you — got some of my genes regarding self-criticism and “it's not good enough”. You know, when I was going through High-School and I was winning competitions and then in college I still felt self-critical — even though I won! I didn't think I performed as well as I could have and the only time that I remember surpassing my expectation in competition was in a competition before the ‘76 Olympics. It was four days before and it was a pre-Olympic meet and I had been practicing a certain technique, like you would. Putting all the pieces together and at that moment it was — to me — was my perfect throw. But unfortunately, it didn't happen in the Olympics, it happened four days before. So I peaked early but I just remember you being very self-critical of your performance even though everybody else thought it was great. You know, so I knew in your mind that you were — you're not going to be satisfied no matter how good it was. My thought right now, in my — I didn't enjoy my performances as well as I should have. I was too critical so I’m just saying — enjoy the journey and, you know, yes you can self-evaluate but I think the more you throw yourself into music and you enjoy it all that stuff comes out. You know, you have enough preparation just, you know, love what you. Do what you love.

[MUSIC - 20:45]

Don Greene (21:11): Confidence comes from three sources, three main sources. One is preparation, okay, you gotta practice, you got to put in the time. But after that it's mental, how are you talking to yourself? Most people don't know how to program their subconscious mind to build confidence because that's where confidence comes from is the subconscious mind not the conscious mind. The other part is the right-brain — can you imagine it going well, can you hear it, feel it, and see it and if you can't you're not going to feel confident about it — if you can't even get it right in your own head. What are you going to do when you pick up the instrument? So, these are the three parts. Doing the right things, doing what your teacher says, putting into practice — but that's only one-third of the equation. The other two-thirds are non-physical, going on in your head all the time by what you're saying to yourself in a dialogue — positive or negative — and whether you are imagining success or imagining failure. You got to accept it, you're not perfect. Mistakes happen in Classical Music, it's inevitable. Be good to yourself! Put away the stick and take out the carrot. Treat yourself like a friend, not like your worst enemy. You don't get to be good in any area of expertise without setbacks, it's just inevitable. It's got to happen, it's part of the process and what you need to do is imagine the correction for it. What needs to happen? Start working on it. You can't correct the past. If you're still alive and breathing, without any scars you can make the best and move on with it and then eliminate it from your mind. Don't go back, don't go back — it's too easy to go back. If you do go back what I suggest is for every time you go back imagining something wrong imagine three things that you did right. It's called cue utilization. That if you're gonna have those thoughts, which you might, you might as well take advantage of them as a cue to put you in a better place. If you didn't do a good job with the Mozart, imagine three times when you nailed the Mozart. What you think about expands — if you dwell on the mistake you will create more mistakes — it's that simple.

Rob Knopper (23:19): In the United States and Canada in ICSOM there's 3,000 musicians in ICSOM. So 3,000 audition winners, approximately.

Max Cardilli (23:27): ICSOM refers to the *International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians*.

Rob Knopper (23:32): “Audition World” is full of rejections. All 3,000 of those ICSOM musicians I mentioned have experienced lots of rejections. There's almost nobody who has never gotten rejected. I think a lot of people respond to those rejections by trying to find justifications for them, like “it's not my fault, it's fill-in-the-blank” and so like there's all sorts of these, like, “it's not my fault, the committee already knew who they wanted to pick” or, like, “oh, you know I didn't go to a conservatory” or “oh, I’m already, you know”

— I remember thinking this when I was 24 — “I’m already 24, you know, that's so old! So many people younger than [me]”. Which is just ridiculous, obviously. Or “I have a family already, so how can I um how can I find enough time” or “I have to gig” — and these limiting beliefs are the things that cause you to decide to put your energy towards something that's not “how do I practice in a more impactful way?”

The people who end up in the finals and winning the jobs are just the people who put all of their energy, all of their, you know, whatever it is — anxiety, the feeling of disappointment after a rejected audition — the people who win jobs are the people who channel that passion, whether it's positive or negative into figuring out how to improve themselves. Because I know for me that feeling it turns from “that was terrible” to “how can I make it better? If I were somebody who is going to win a job in five years, what is it that I’d be doing right now? It may be productive to think about those types of limiting beliefs in a sense to say “okay, well, this is one of my obstacles. Now other people might not have that obstacle so therefore how do I actually have to structure my life in a different way to have a chance when competing with those other people?” You know if you think about it, it's just a game. The game is to figure out how to do the right kind of work. To tweak your performances, to solve the problems that the committee wants you to have solved. Any of those considerations that the judges are making — like all the objective elements, Rhythm, time, intonation, following the dynamic directions or any directions on the page or the subjective elements like, you know, phrasing, character, tone, style. None of those things are insurmountable. Each one of those things is like a little project inside the game and the game is to figure out how your own brain works so that you can trick yourself into practicing in exactly the right way so that you don't get No-votes and you do get Yes-votes.

[MUSIC - 26:25]

Don Greene (26:36): There's no such thing as muscle memory. Muscles don't have any memory, they just fire or relax. It's the neuromuscular program, the myelin that builds up around the neurons connecting the brain to the fingers to the embouchure. Every time you make a correct repetition you build that insulation, that myelin, that sheath and the more you build it the more conductivity. So the impulses, the neurons connect quicker and fire quicker, so you're on time not behind the beat. So, this is another reason for correct practice is to build the myelin so that under pressure the myelin works for you and overrides overthinking. You trust your myelin and you trust your repetition. You trust that so-called muscle memory — but it's not that, it's neuromuscular programming. And, you're programming it through correct repetitions. A reason why you want quality practice because if you repeat enough wrong executions that's where your body will go under pressure. Body doesn't know, it just follows the path, the most conductive path, like driving through traffic. So it's back to, you know, practice practice practice but to

build up the myelin that you can trust under pressure -that's what the deep learning is all about. Practice makes permanent. There is no perfect, especially in music. I'm not a big fan at all of perfectionism it gets in the way.

Borys Chambul (28:30): I've mentioned to Bianca that the vehicles were different. Her vehicle was music — she was, she had the gift, but she also had the desire to work at it, and that was important. We never had to tell her to go practice — if anything at midnight we would tell her please go to bed, it's late! We're all very proud of Bianca. We love her dearly, we miss her — but we know she's in the right place.

[MUSIC - 28:57]

Max Cardilli (29:00): In this episode, you heard excerpts from Mendelssohn's *Song without Words* performed by Bianca Chambal and Alex Prior.

Thank you to our wonderful guests Bianca and Dr. Borys Chambul, Rob Knopper and Dr. Don Greene who shared their time and voices for this episode.

In the Show Notes, you can find links to Don Green's and Rob Knopper's websites for more practicing tips, courses and resources, as well as a link to the full performance of the music you heard in today's episode.

This episode was produced in amiskwaciy-wâskahikan also known as Edmonton on the traditional lands referred to as Treaty 6 Territory — a place that has been a meeting ground, travelling route and home for many Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial including the Cree, Métis, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, and Blackfoot whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence and enrich our vibrant community. The Edmonton Symphony Orchestra is dedicated to ensuring that the spirit of Treaty 6 is honoured and respected.

This episode was written and produced by me, ESO double bassist Max Cardilli. If you want to connect with me about the podcast you can write to eso.offstage@winspearcentre.com.

[MUSIC - 30:39]