


# Artistic Ways Of Knowing

## Unveiling The Artist Within Every Student

By Joanne Haroutounian, NCTM



**J**ustin had reached the point in conquering the Bach fugue where it was technically proficient, played at an appropriate tempo, with stylistic structure in place. However, something was missing. He had done his homework learning the fugue, but he had not yet truly connected with it artistically. I asked him to think about the mood of the piece—what could he envision when performing it? He sat for a long reflective “thinking time,” obviously realizing the music in his head. He looked at me and smiled—“Why it’s Don Quixote!” Eureka! We explored this adventure together, and by the end of the lesson, the fugue had gained a new interpretive dimension—it became *Justin’s* fugue.

Justin’s technically proficient performance was transformed by fine-tuning perceptions and developing a unique interpretation—by *thinking like an artist*. How can we teach every student in our studios to think like an artist? We spend so much time guiding students through performance skills to perfection that we often overlook the value of developing the process of artistic problem-solving and decision-making. When students have the opportunity to explore artistic “knowing” in the learning process, they add depth to understanding, creativity to interpretive decision-making and refinement to abstract reasoning.

I have been on a quest to explain how artists “know” for the past several decades, working across the fields of music performance and gifted arts. Those of us who work in the arts pride ourselves on the unique way we create or creatively interpret through our artforms. However, translating the inner-workings of the artistic mind to those outside the arts poses a challenge. If we take away the technical trappings that define each arts area,

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we arrive at the core of artistic thinking/perception or how artists *know* during the creative-artistic process. Artists in every area use the same types of cognitive/perceptual functioning as they create or creatively interpret in their arts area.

*While the surface of the painting proves visible enough, what might be called the art in the art is invisible. Looking is not enough; the art in the art must be looked for.*<sup>1</sup>

—David Perkins

Artistic Ways of Knowing describes the perceptual and cognitive processes inherent in working in the arts—across the domains of music, visual art, dance and theater. Students can learn to think like artists by incorporating these perceptual/cognitive elements in the studio from the start.

## Artistic Ways Of Knowing<sup>2</sup>

- Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination: To perceive through the senses with acute awareness.
- Metaperception: To internally manipulate perceptions and emotions while making interpretive decisions.
- Creative Interpretation: To rework and refine interpretive decisions, using elements of perceptual discrimination and metaperception.
- Dynamic of Performance: To communicate a creative interpretation aesthetically through performance.
- Critiquing: To evaluate oneself and others with artistic discrimination.

## Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination

The artistic process begins with fine-tuned perceptual awareness and discrimination. The artist pays attention to what surrounds him or her and enjoys delineating intriguing details. The dancer will instinctively move to rhythms heard in the environment. The visual artist will be fascinated with minute details in everyday objects. The value of bringing this type of focused awareness to our music students encourages them to truly listen for details in their music and their environment. In a world bombarded with stimuli, we are often forced to tune out, rather than tune in to, the sound and sights that grab our

attention. Creating an environment in the studio that zeroes in on focused listening nurtures the essential first step of thinking like an artist.

Young musicians may not be listening carefully because they are intent on conquering technical problems of correct notes and fingers rather than listening to the music. How often do students claim they “forgot dynamics” after a performance? The more we engage them in decision-making in defining dynamics during the learning process, the more students listen for these details in their performance. Fine-tuned ears will sensitively hear the difference between *f* and *p*, *mp* and *p*, and even *p* and *pp* as students experiment with balance and dynamic details. When students personally write these dynamic details in the music showing the scope of a phrase or crescendo, the more they “own” the interpretation.

## In the Studio:

- A simple listening task—have students sit somewhere outside for 3 minutes with eyes closed, given the task to listen carefully to the sounds around them. They open their eyes and jot down everything they heard, sharing these sounds with their teacher or peers. How detailed were their descriptions?
- In the age of YouTube, there are ample videos of performances from beginning to professional levels. Choose three examples of performances of a piece the student is currently learning. Make a copy of the score for this task. Rather than watching the video, have the student eye the score while listening, jotting down details they hear using a differently colored pencil for each performance. Repeated listening encourages detailed markings that will expand their own interpretation of the piece.
- To focus listening tasks in a performance class, pass out cards showing a single musical concept to listen for—balance, dynamic scope, rhythmic patterns, melody—right hand, left hand? Several students share the score (if performances are memorized) to listen for details in the performance like a teacher. Critique then comes alive with student comments derived from focused listening.

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## Metaperception

Metaperception describes the cognitive, perceptual and expressive functioning that is inherent when making artistic decisions. The term describes the artistic parallel to metacognition in academic decision making. Metacognition describes the process of mapping out ways to think in order to solve problems. Metaperception combines cognitive thought with sensory perception and personal expression to describe the process artists use to create or interpret through their artforms. Interestingly, this term was an outgrowth of my research across fields and was a “eureka” moment for me because it is a term understood by both artists and those in academic fields to explain the difference between the cognitive academic mind and the cognitive/sensory mind of the artist.<sup>3</sup>

Artists manipulate ideas by realizing them internally, evaluating them and reworking them further through internal and external molding of ideas to create a unique personal interpretation. A dancer may internalize a movement, realizing it inwardly before actually moving expressively. Often this inward perceptive behavior shows instinctive bits of movement as the dancer thinks/senses through ideas. Musicians often internalize musical ideas, inwardly realizing different parameters of dynamics or tempo choices, as they work through passages in practice. Again, inner perceptions may show movements of the head realizing the musical line, leading to experimenting with bits and pieces of these ideas to physically hear them.

### In the Studio:

- An easy way to understand metaperception is to have students internalize *Mary Had a Little Lamb* (sing “inside”) while conducting it (in 2). Now have students realize the song internally thinking of the song as a funeral march (think minor), then a football fight song, and a lullaby. How did the tempos change? Have students sing the song out loud with their choice of expression.
- Encourage “inside” realization of the music as students work through pieces at the lesson. They can inwardly realize the music with expressive dynamics worked on at the lesson and then play them “outside” to hear and evaluate. Working in listening chunks reflecting small sections of the piece can define details in this inner listening. Expand inner listening beyond audiation of pitch and rhythms to encourage expressive elements in the music.
- Combine rhythms with metaperceptive inner listening at a performance or theory class by having students take turns realizing a song internally while

clapping the rhythm to the song. The person who guesses correctly is the next person to clap and internalize another song.

## Creative Interpretation

As one works metaperceptively through an arts medium, the expressive reworking of ideas grows into an artistic interpretive process that results in a unique creative interpretation. A creative interpretation may be a carefully polished musical performance, a spontaneous drama improvisation or an inventive textile work. Creative interpretation describes the process of communicating personal ideas to others through a particular arts medium. It requires lots of experimenting with growing ideas, combining inner and outer working of these ideas through the artform through practice until reaching a point where the artist feels the performance or product portrays his/her artistic intent.

This process requires reworking bits and pieces of ideas, “glimpses,” that eventually evolve into a unique creative performance or product. Visual artists begin with numerous sketches that transfer bit by bit to canvas. Twyla Tharp describes her creative process in dance as “scratching” for ideas, collecting items in a cardboard box to coax creative ideas to the surface. Musicians rework “chunks” of a piece until the tempo, mood and dynamic parameters portray the intended emotion of the music. In essence, the musician or artist effectively seeks to communicate his or her personal emotional intent through the art form.

### In the Studio:

- The teacher and student share an inside-outside practice session at a lesson where the student explains his/her musical intent of a passage then plays this section repeatedly, experimenting with different musical ideas shared with the teacher until it “gels.” This is the normal work done at lessons, with more input of purpose from the student to connect with what is being worked on.
- At a peer performance class, students can explore concepts of mood and character by having performers try their pieces at different tempi to see how the mood may change. In critiques, students can share what mood the music is portraying, leading to possible musical story lines.
- Students can create a story or poem that describes the piece they are developing. The more detailed and colorful the words of the story or poem, the more connection the student makes with the musical interpretation of the story.

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## Dynamic of Behavior and Performance/Product

The artistic process described thus far naturally leads to a performance or an artistic product. The musician, dancer and actor communicate an interpretation to an audience through a performance. The audience experiences the performance, sharing the interpretive process. The mutual aesthetic experience of audience and performer creates the dynamic of performance. In the visual arts, we have all experienced being drawn to a painting or sculpture, sensing details and connecting to it aesthetically, again creating a dynamic between the artwork and the viewer.

Some students may react to performance through an insightful critique or exhibit artistic sensitivity but may not be an outstanding performer due to limited technical skills. These aesthetic behaviors in reaction to music or art may predict a future critic or outstanding teacher, director or choreographer able to translate artistic ideas to others through words. Teachers can easily detect and develop these behaviors in the studio.

### In the Studio:

- As the creative-interpretive process grows in learning a piece, students can periodically record their pieces as they develop, listening for details and “judging” their performance using musical concepts to specify areas needing improvement. The *Musician’s Performance Portfolio*<sup>4</sup> offers a tool that provides this ongoing self-assessment using numbers and comments to instill critiquing skills. Peer performance classes offer a comfortable way to bring the dynamic of performance into the studio setting, adding the opportunity for building critiquing skills that will highlight students who are adept in listening and evaluation of performance.
- Most studios present periodic recitals for parents as a normal approach to assessing progress of students through a performance. To instill a broader approach to creative interpretation, the Creative Recital Project combines performance with a student-chosen focus, research and creativity.<sup>5</sup> It can be done individually combining musical study with academics in school or as a group project with an end-of-year performance from topics such as the study of French impressionistic music and art, the music of George Gershwin or whatever!

**Performance Critique Form**

**Evaluator:** \_\_\_\_\_

Use this form to judge your own recorded performances of a composition you are learning. Place the date of the performance in the appropriate box. As you listen, jot down sentences that describe the performance you hear on reverse side of the form. Constructive comments include strengths about the performance, as well as specific things that need improvement. After you have listened to the performance, place numbers that match the level of performance in each of the musical concept areas listed. You may add additional concepts or listening tasks on the open lines provided under each category.

**Use the following scale to judge the performance:**

1	2	3	4	5
Insecure	Needs Work	Average	Almost There	Polished

**COMPOSITION:** *Minuet*      **COMPOSER:** *J.S. Bach*

		1	2	3	4
<b>Performance Dates:</b>		9/3	9/14	10/4	10/20
RHYTHM & TEMPO:	Accurate rhythm	4	4	4	5
	Appropriate tempo	4	4	5	5
	Consistent tempo	3	3	4	4
	<i>Ritard at end</i>	3	4	5	5
MELODY:	Well shaped phrasing	3	4	4	5
	Suitable tone quality	4	4	5	5
	<i>Well balanced</i>	2	3	3	4
TECHNIQUE:	Accurate notes	2	3	3	4
	Precise articulation	3	3	4	4
	Continuity & Cleanliness	1	2	2	3
MUSICALITY:	Observed dynamics	1	3	3	4
	<i>Portrayed mood of music</i>	2	3	4	4
	<i>Stylistic confidence</i>	1	3	3	4
MEMORY:	Securely learned	-	-	3	3
OVERALL PERFORMANCE:		2+	3+	4	4

1. Constructive comments: *Rhythm is basically accurate and tempo is a good one for performance, but maybe too fast for me right now. I really need to work on getting notes accurate, and listen for clean articulation and even eighth notes. I don't hear any dynamics at all. Need to look at these more carefully.*  
My practice plan for improvement: *Get the metronome out and practice at a slower tempo until I can get all the notes correct. I need to listen to see if I am doing the dynamics on the page. Need to think about the mood of the piece when working on dynamics.*

2. Constructive comments: *Slower tempo improved note accuracy and continuity. I can hear more dynamics this time which improved musicality. Listen carefully for balance - accompaniment is still too loud. Forgot a few dynamics in section 2*  
My practice plan for improvement: *Drill trouble spots with metronome to get technical places comfortable. Work on memorizing, listening for clear dynamics. Try the tempo a bit faster now.*

3. Constructive comments: *The tempo definitely was more dance-like. Phrasing and articulation was much better. Memory lapses in middle section, but musical ideas improved. Melody needs better balance. Clean up all notes.*  
My practice plan for improvement: *Secure memory working backwards in 4 measure sections. Look and listen for correct notes. Continue metronome work.*

4. Constructive comments: *Solid performance! Tempo and melody to dance "almost there," A few spots to clean up technically and a few memory spots, but it sounded good!*  
My practice plan for improvement: *Get ready for the recital - play with music + met, then by memory with met, then by memory internalizing beat.*

5. FINAL EVALUATION: What improvements do you hear in your playing through these performances?  
*I improved a lot in listening for clear cut dynamics and balancing the melody - things I never listened to before. I realized the value of metronome practice to secure the tempo and notes - first at a slow speed, then gradually into the appropriate tempo.*

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**Use the following scale to judge the performance:**

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Insecure	Needs Work	Average	Almost There	Polished

**COMPOSITION:** \_\_\_\_\_ **COMPOSER:** \_\_\_\_\_

**LISTENING FOCUS:** \_\_\_\_\_

		1	2	3	4
<b>Performance Dates:</b>					
RHYTHM & TEMPO:	Accurate rhythm				
	Appropriate tempo				
	Consistent tempo				
MELODY:	Well shaped phrasing				
	Suitable tone quality				
TECHNIQUE:	Accurate notes				
	Precise articulation				
	Continuity & cleanliness				
MUSICALITY:	Observed dynamics				
MEMORY:	Securely learned				
OVERALL PERFORMANCE:					

1. Constructive comments:

My practice plan for improvement:

2. Constructive comments:

My practice plan for improvement:

3. Constructive comments:

My practice plan for improvement:

4. Constructive comments:

My practice plan for improvement:

5. FINAL EVALUATION: What improvements do you hear in your playing through these performances?

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## Critiquing

The artistic process is not complete without the self-assessment of one's work as well as the ability to critique others, showing understanding of the art form. This critique involves examination beyond performance through perception and reflection to add depth to the artistic process. Affording opportunities for students to reflect upon and critique their work fosters the development of artistic reasoning. There is nothing more rewarding than seeing students with whom you have worked through the artistic process sharing ideas through constructive critique with their peers.

The value of student critique is twofold: it benefits the student whose work is being critiqued as well as those making the criticisms. The process of reflecting, evaluating and translating artistic perceptive qualities into words helps build a definitive artistic vocabulary. Critiquing professional performances or art exhibits provides an opportunity for students to thrive in describing these experiences in words verbally or on

paper. Developing this artistic vocabulary helps students describe what they do in music or the arts to others, pushing them farther in understanding the intricacies of their craft.

After years of encouraging student self-assessment and critique in performance classes in my studio, I came across the following critique written by a high school student in response to a middle school student's performance of the third movement of Beethoven's *Sonata Op. 27, No. 2*. It made me realize the importance of critique as the reflective plus in the artistic process.

Make sure you get a good clean start. The octaves right after the beginning Need to be a little quieter. In fact, I think, having played this piece, that it's the quiet parts that make this exciting. When you drop down really low, it makes the big parts (and there are plenty of them) that much bigger. This piece is not exciting – it's dramatic. And the difference is this: dramatic is the contrast between quiet and loud. Exciting is boring after a while, but the alternation of loud-soft, Loud—soft,

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LOUD—soft—makes this piece dynamite. And you can make it so! The notes are very good, only a little trouble in that notorious part with the repeated notes. Memory is perfect. Just concentrate on the drama. You will play this well. P.S. I know you can do this because you DO it sometimes, right before the coda. You get real quiet and build and it was really exciting. Now, if you do that all over the piece, how great will it be?<sup>6</sup>

## In the Studio:

- YouTube provides the opportunity to critique comparative professional performances of the same piece with students. Each video can be paused periodically to provide immediate comments about details the student/teacher notices as the performance progresses. Encourage students to initiate the pauses as they hear details they want to comment about.
- Students take the role of music critic at a peer performance class just before a studio recital or festival. Students write written comments for each performer similar to judges at a festival. They verbally share their critiques in class, providing the written judging sheet for each student to take home to read as they practice for the upcoming performance.
- Once students gain critiquing skills in working with the Performance Portfolio process and in peer performance classes, they can enjoy the experience of “teaching” one another. Students choose a piece to learn on their own that is several levels easier than their repertoire. Rather than bringing the piece to lessons, the students bring the piece to peer performance classes and are taught by their peers (no teacher allowed!).

*There are painters who transform the sun into a yellow spot. But there are others who with help of their art and their intelligence transform a yellow spot into the sun.<sup>7</sup>*

—Pablo Picasso

## Putting It Together

In the opening vignette, Justin and I were fortunate to share a special moment when he discovered the joy of music making at a personal level, and I enjoyed seeing him come alive artistically in his interpretive choices. We all have these moments—from the success of a begin-

ner playing a primary-level piece hands together with colorful dynamics, to the fine-tuned subtleties shared between an advanced student and teacher prior to a senior recital.

We are so fortunate to have the opportunity to share the artistic-interpretive process with each student we teach. Take advantage of this golden opportunity to have students truly listen with focus, inwardly realize what they want to do to communicate their feelings to others, and share these interpretations through performance and critique. Unveil the artist within every student. ☺

## Notes

1. David Perkins, *The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1994).
2. Joanne Haroutounian, *Artistic Ways of Knowing: How to Think Like an Artist* (Unionville, NY: Royal Fireworks Press, 2015), xi.
3. Refer to: Joanne Haroutounian, “Talent Identification and Development in the Arts: An Artistic/Educational Dialogue,” *Roeper Review*, 18 no.2 (1995): 112–117; Joanne Haroutounian, *Kindling the Spark: Recognizing and Developing Musical Talent* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), xv–xvi; Haroutounian, *Artistic Ways of Knowing: How to Think Like an Artist*, 27–42.
4. Joanne Haroutounian, *Musician’s Performance Portfolio: A Process for Musical Self-Assessment* (San Diego CA: Neil A. Kjos Music Co., 2013).
5. Joanne Haroutounian, *Fourth Finger on B Flat: Effective Strategies for Teaching Piano* (San Diego, CA: Neil A. Kjos Music Co., 2012), 293.
6. Joanne Haroutounian, “Judge for Yourself,” *Piano and Keyboard*, July/August (1996): 46–50.
7. Picasso quote—www.artquotes.com.

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