

Part 3. Being Independent

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Both of the previous two sections of this guide are, in effect, about working independently and therefore taking responsibility for different aspects of your time here, one in a very practical sense (time management) and the other in a more reflective sense (staying motivated).

In addition to the earlier ideas to do with managing your time and organizing yourself, being independent also means being aware that for many new students, up to now you have not had as much responsibility for keeping yourself organized as you do now. Whether it's something as straightforward as getting up on time without being nagged or something potentially more complicated such as working out how you are going to fit practice, study, part-time work and doing your share of the housework around your timetabled classes and rehearsals, you will need to act independently and take responsibility for how organized you are in a very practical sense.

In a wider sense, you also have a responsibility to yourself to make the most of your time here: many students starting the course this year will graduate with significant debts – that is often unavoidable, even for students who do not pay direct fees. How will you feel about yourself if you graduate in four years' time with a very large debt and the feeling that you have not made the most of your time here; that you could have worked harder, tried harder, stretched yourself more, achieved more? It's not the most cheerful thought, but it is something you should consider.

Resilience and wellbeing

There has been a lot in the news in the last year or so about students suffering from stress and anxiety, and the pandemic obviously did not make that any better. Whilst it is important to recognize that sometimes stress and anxiety can become a serious problem, feeling under pressure is genuinely a normal and potentially good part of life. Without some level of pressure, you would never feel excited about anything – it's the pressure created by something new and challenging that creates excitement. Without some level of pressure, you would lack motivation to achieve anything, because you would feel no incentive to improve or develop.

The point that healthy, motivating pressure turns into unhealthy stress is going to be different for different people: two people may experience the same set of circumstances and react to them differently – it is at the point that someone no

longer feels that they are able to manage a situation that pressure becomes stress.

What, then, is “resilience”? There are a lot of different ideas around this, but here are a few. Brown (2010) defines a resilient person as demonstrating most or all of the following characteristics:

1. They are resourceful and have good problem-solving skills.
2. They are more likely to seek help.
3. They hold the belief that they can do something that will help them to manage their feelings and to cope.
4. They have social support available to them.
5. They are connected with others, such as family or friends.

As a first year student, we would not necessarily expect you to have developed all of these yet, but they are certainly something to aim for!

How well do you feel you currently meet Brown’s idea of a resilient person? Consider picking one or two of these to work on in the coming term: which will it be?

Seligman (2011) takes a different approach and draws on positive psychology to define a set of three core features and some additional features demonstrated by people who “flourish”. He says “To flourish, an individual must have all of the ‘core features’ and three of the six ‘additional features.’” (Seligman, pg. 26)

Core Features

Positive Emotions
Engagement, Interest
Meaning, Purpose

Additional Features

Self-esteem
Optimism
Resilience
Vitality
Self-Determination
Positive relationships

As part of developing the core features, Seligman developed the “What Went Well?” exercise (Seligman, pg. 33), which is similar to the “gratitude” exercise often used in Mindfulness training, but more specifically aimed at thinking about one’s own achievements.

*Exercise: Take a few minutes and write down up to three things that have gone well for you today and **why** they went well.*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

An essential part of developing resilience and managing your own well-being is that

if you feel you have tipped over from a healthy level of pressure into unmanageable stress, you should reach out for help – there are a range of support services available at RCS if you need them. However, if you work on the basis that all pressure is bad, then you deny yourself the chance to embrace new challenges. Many performers feel they need the pressure of an audience in order to bring out their best performance – it's not that it is not challenging, but that the challenge is embraced in order to achieve something that is better than it would have been without that pressure. Musicians need to be resilient, and to think about how they can develop their resilience to manage pressure effectively and positively – the Introduction to Professional Skills module will be looking at this. So, your responsibilities as an independent learner and musician include

- actively engaging with your own wellbeing
- thinking about how you have reacted to pressure or stress in the past
- embracing the challenges the next few years will bring
- using the pressure of new experiences and opportunities to your own advantage, to develop your resilience and achieve your full potential.

Good habits

A key aim in your first year will be to get into good habits. The commonly held notion is that it takes around 21 days to establish a new habit (assuming that it is something you are going to do every day). To be successful as a student you will need to have good habits regarding practice, study and punctuality; and also in relation to keeping yourself healthy.

What do you feel are your current good habits in relation to your musical and academic studies? In which areas do you think you are going to need to develop new good (better!) habits?

Another key aim is going to be setting yourself goals. Your teachers are going to set goals for you, but you should also take responsibility for knowing what it is you want to get out of your studies. If you let someone else set your goals for you all the time, they are by definition not your goals. **What are the things you want to achieve this year, and how will you make sure you have the best possible chance of achieving them?** Some of this will only become clear to you once you arrive, but that's another thing to stay aware of – the advice in this guide is not only about what to think about before you get here, but what to think about throughout your time on the course over the next four years.

Hallam and Gaunt see taking responsibility for your own development as perhaps the most important aspect of preparing for success. Among the things they identify as part of this is the following:

Be honest about what you find difficult, but do not avoid these things. Seek out opportunities that are both enjoyable and challenging. Ask for feedback from people who will be constructive. (Hallam and Gaunt, 2012, 4)

One of the important ideas underlying this statements is the idea that your time here is not about confirming what you can already do. You know what you can already do. Part of taking responsibility for your development is going to be about identifying and working at the things you find genuinely hard and would rather not do at all rather than rather than concentrating on the things you already feel fairly confident about and know you will be able to do well. Later on, it makes sense to play to your strengths: by the time to get to year 4, there are going to be things you know are never going to be your strongest areas, and in your final year modules, it will make sense to focus on areas where you know you can excel. Right now, however, you cannot be certain that things that are currently not your strong points do not have the potential to develop into real strengths.

The self-assessment task we are asking you to complete now focuses on this area in particular: what are your current strengths as a person and as a musician, and what areas are going to need more work? Do you feel you are already very organized, able to manage your time and keep yourself motivated? Do you feel you a particular strong or weak in terms of your knowledge of music, your skills in harmony and aural, your essay writing? As a musician, do you feel you already have a good knowledge of relevant repertoire, good habits when it comes to your private study and practice time? What are the particular aspects of technique that you feel confident about or may need to work on? These are all things to think about in completing the task.

If you have got to the end of this third guide, well done! That is already a really good start. We look forward to meeting you in Welcome week, and to reading your self-assessments.

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