

## Tune UP!:

### A Psychodramatic Mindfulness-in-Action Practice

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Tune UP! is a simple yet comprehensive psychodramatic practice that engages cognitive processing, somatic awareness, deep inquiry into core values, and movement. Informed by the principles of neuroscience and the underlying metaphor of a bowed stringed instrument, Tune UP! is a discrete, values-based theory and practice designed to increase emotional resilience, trauma-symptom resolution, and self-directed behavior. In keeping with the artistic theme of this 100th anniversary of *Daimon*, the article includes the author's first-person narrative of her creative process as a professional viola player and psychodrama trainer, educator, and practitioner developing the model. Video files available online elucidate the written material.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychodrama; music; mindfulness; sociatry; interpersonal neurobiology; polyvagal theory.

## INSPIRATION

When life itself offers no order and meaning, the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of the earth which flow through his instrument.

Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>2</sup>

On June 11, 2017, the front page of the Sunday *New York Times* read: "Strings Take to Venezuela's Streets After Violist Is Killed at Protest" (Herrero & Casey,

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Thank you to Kenji Bunch for assistance in the video demonstrations. He gave signed consent to use his image, personal content, and performance.

<sup>2</sup> From the foreword of the program book of the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival. Reprinted by arrangement with The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King Jr., c/o Writers House as agent for the proprietor New York, NY.



**Figure 1. Willy Arteaga.** *New York Times*, June 11, 2017. Photo by Federico Parra. Reprinted with permission.

2017). The accompanying photo showed a slender figure with his back to the camera, violin in his left hand and bow in his right, arms outstretched as he sustained the blast of a water cannon from an oncoming armored vehicle (Figure 1). The young musician in the photo, Willy Arteaga, was protesting the recent murder of his friend and fellow orchestra musician, 17-year-old violist Armando Cañizales, who had been shot to death while protesting what even Venezuela's attorney general condemned as excessive police repression. In all my years as a professional symphonic viola player, this was the first time I had seen the word "violist" on the front page of a major newspaper.

These young people had come into the public eye as members of El Sistema (The System), a state-sponsored youth orchestra started in 1975 in an underground garage for a handful of students by musician, politician, and activist José Antonio Abreu. Over the past 43 years this program has served hundreds of thousands of at-risk kids in at least 60 countries and become famous in the international music community for demonstrating how music education fosters deep, systemic social and even political change. (Abreu died on March 24, 2018, between the writing and publication of this article.) As a psychodramatist familiar with the concept of sociatry, J. L. Moreno's proposed social corollary to psychiatry, I have viewed El Sistema as a form of successful sociatric practice. Reading the *New York Times* article, I resonated with the young musicians' probable intent of passionate yet peaceful social action, yet was gripped with shocked despair at the cold clash of value systems that had moved these young people from innocent music making into physical danger and even death.

This was not the first time that extreme social tension wired to the viola had inhabited my social atom. I sat remembering the story of my beloved childhood viola teacher, Manuel Díaz. He finally confided to me when I was 40 that he had survived not only the Spanish Civil War (in 1939 his family arrived in Chile with over 1,000 other Spanish citizens on the ship *Winnipeg*, chartered by Pablo Neruda) but also the dictatorship in Chile. Through his musical connections, Mr. Díaz had been able to move his family to the United States just days before Pinochet's coup in 1973.

I found myself this June 2017 morning in a scene of past, present, and future viola-related sociopolitical news. It was fitting and synchronistic timing, for this was the morning I had planned to begin this article that uses the viola as a metaphor for bringing harmony to the body/mind. In the article I will show how this metaphor of physical tension required to tune up the viola (i.e., the tension of the strings) can be translated and harnessed as a psychodramatic mindfulness practice. By exploring the body/mind instrument through tuning the inherent tensions between potentially polarized core values, I will show psychodramatists and others a relatively simple, replicable practice for creating intrapsychic harmony in action. I call this practice Tune UP!

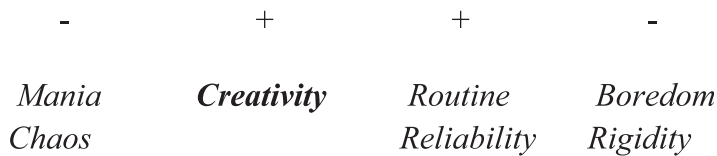
## EARLY INSIGHTS

In June 2010 I settled into an auditorium at Seattle Center for a weekend intensive with childhood attachment expert Daniel J. Siegel and famed Vipassana meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, whose book *A Path with Heart* had been my trusted guide during my career transition from classical music to the healing arts. As the lecture began, I was both surprised and comforted to hear terms from my music training; the teachers spoke of mindfulness and mental health as matters of resonance, attunement, and synchronization. Through a demonstration he called the Complexity Chorus, Siegel showed how neurons in an integrated, regulated nervous system operate much like a chorus of linked yet differentiated voices. He went on to discuss the role of prosody, the patterns of rhythm and intonation in the voice, in developing secure attachment between child and caregiver. In an intuitive jump, my divergent career paths suddenly made perfect sense as I realized I knew through my violist's body how it feels to be "in tune" with myself and others, and thus also how it feels to be "out of tune." At the core of relationship is neural music.

Then in 2013, at a local humanistic-psychology conference in Portland, OR, Don Mihalow taught our group what he called the Theory of Positive Opposites through a simple yet powerful pen-and-paper values exercise. This written exercise, which he never formally published, provides the foundational structure for Tune UP! Like a musical etude designed to improve a classical-music student's technique and range on their instrument, the positive-opposites exercise can serve like sheet music for understanding one's values.

## THEORY OF POSITIVE OPPOSITES

Mihalow demonstrated the positive-opposites exercise on a whiteboard, drawing four columns. Above the two inner columns he drew plus signs, and above the two outer columns, minus signs. He asked, "What's a positive value or trait? Anything?" Someone in our group called out "Creativity!" Mihalow wrote this in the left-hand



**Figure 2. Example of the positive-opposites exercise, based on the value of creativity.**

positive column. “OK, what’s the opposite of creativity that’s also positive?” he asked. For a moment our group sat puzzled, unaccustomed to thinking of opposites as having a positive correlation. Mihaloew encouraged us to stretch our habitual black-and-white thinking. As the group’s spontaneity rose, we began to understand. Someone called out with a question in their voice, “Routine?” Another offered, more confidently, “Reliability!” Mihaloew noted these in the adjacent positive column. Finally, he asked us to think of words that described the negative extremes of each of these positive examples: “What does creativity turn into at its extreme? Chaos! Mania!” Likewise, reliability at the extreme might become rigid rule following. Routine becomes boredom or stagnancy (Figure 2).

As we practiced parsing out other examples, I found myself tuning into a felt sense of each value word with the instrument of my body. For instance, when I tuned in to creativity, my body felt open, alive, and curious. When I tuned in to creativity’s potential extreme, chaos, I noticed a shift to anxious, frenetic, ungrounded sensations. Routine felt like an inner metronome click, but its extreme, boredom, was heavy and weighed down. Without leaving my chair I was tuning in to these value words as states of being and experiencing their impact deeply in my nervous system. I was attuning to myself.

Attuning is a basic requirement for classical musicians, who play a wide range of pieces with varying emotional timbres, tempi, and volumes on the same instrument. We run the written notes, the little black dots on the page, through our bodies first, then our instruments, in order to convey the felt sense of the music. For me this is also how it feels to participate in psychodrama, where we run different roles through our bodies. In both media we work as individual instruments in common cause with others.

Over the weeks, months, and years following that conference, I got out of the chair, exploring the positive-opposites exercise in action. Through concretization, role reversal, and somatic exploration, Tune UP! emerged as a discrete, embodied, mindfulness-in-action practice. I offer a deep bow of gratitude to the late Dr. Mihaloew and to his wife Betty, who has given me her blessing to riff on his etude. May he know on some level that his idea continues to resonate in the world.

**WIRED TO LIVE IN TUNE**

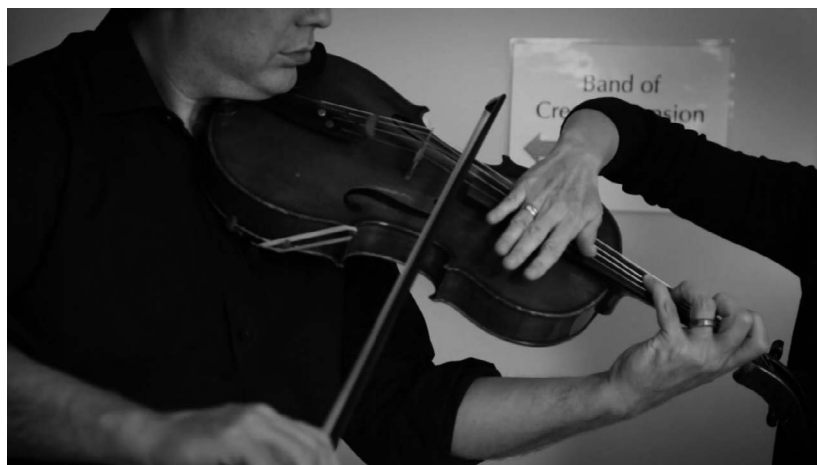
The peripheral nervous system of the human body consists of billions of nerve cells that run through the body like strings (Beale, 2017). In Supplemental Video 1 (available at <https://doi.org/10.12926/18-00009.1.s1>) my colleague, professional

composer and violist Kenji Bunch, and I improvise what this might sound like on our violas.

A regulated or in-tune nervous system naturally springs back from discrete stressors like violin strings naturally spring back from the pressures of the bow. In fact, the origin of the word stress, the Latin *strictus*, means “drawn tight.” According to the World Health Organization, our species as a whole is becoming ever more burdened and tightly drawn by ongoing, accumulated pressures and traumas, which immobilize healthy functioning. In fact, the organization has named stress “the health epidemic of the 21st century” (Fink, 2016). Unresolved long-term stress, including relationship problems, has led to chronic depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic symptoms not only in the United States but also prevalently in low- to middle-income countries. In other words, a greater and greater percentage of human beings on our planet are living out of tune.

Daniel J. Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine who coined the term “interpersonal neurobiology” to describe processes that emerge in the brain, body, and nervous system in relationship with self and other, has proposed that neural integration is at the heart of personal and relational well-being. He describes neural integration as a complex linkage of differentiated neural regions into an interconnection of widely distributed areas of the brain and body proper (Siegel, 2007). If we imagine this brain and body proper as a musical instrument, with strings vibrating at varying amplitudes and frequencies (and thus in need of tuning), it stands to reason that Tune UP!—which seeks to purposefully tune autonomic processes through deliberate activation, deactivation, and reactivation of neural firing patterns within a supportive social setting—may over time create more fundamental states of coordination and balance in the body/mind.

Steven W. Porges, a distinguished university scientist at the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University and a research professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, has spent his career conducting research spanning neuroscience, psychology, and evolutionary biology to discover how primary human emotions are related to functioning of the autonomic nervous system. Through his introduction of polyvagal theory, Porges has identified the role of the two-branched vagus nerve—the longest nerve of the autonomic nervous system, running from the brainstem to the abdomen—as central to the mammalian social-engagement system. The term *vagus* comes from Latin/Greek meaning “wandering.” The ventral vagal branch of this wandering nerve is associated with self-soothing and prosocial behaviors, while the dorsal vagal branch is associated with the terrified freeze response when death is perceived as imminent. While an in-depth discussion of polyvagal theory is outside the scope of this article, it is interesting to note that the functioning of the vagal system and its influence on a felt social sense of safety, danger, or imminent death may be understood in terms of vagal *tone*. “Tone” and “tune” are related words originating from the Greek *tonos*. Higher vagal tone means, in very simple terms, the ventral vagal capacity to restrain a fearful, racing heart by applying a neural brake. Lower vagal tone means, again in very simplified terms, that a sense of danger has prompted the heart rate to rise so the creature can move to protect itself. Lower vagal tone is of course critical when a perceived threat is real;



**Figure 3. Immobilized response.**

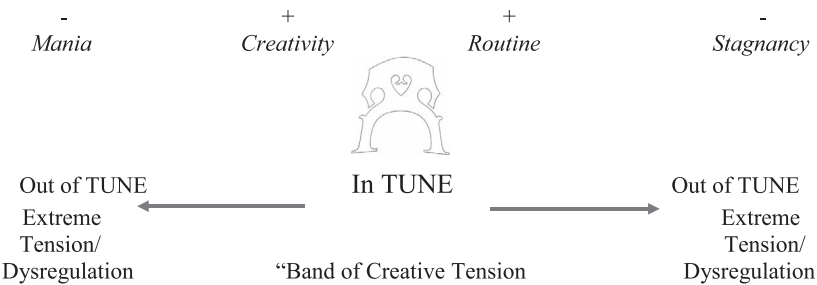
however, it becomes maladaptive when neutral or even potentially positive circumstances are consistently experienced as potentially harmful.

Porges asserts that socially engaged play is a natural way back into a mobilized state (Figure 3) for the person whose nervous system is locked in a freeze response due to traumatic experience (2008). In Supplemental Video 2 (available at <https://doi.org/10.12926/18-00009.1.s2>), Kenji and I demonstrate what a healthy nervous system might look, sound, and feel like when tamped down by the dorsal vagal response.

Tune UP! is a form of socially engaged yet serious play, a safe, replicable form of practice for stretching one's capacity for adequate, situation-appropriate neural responsiveness. In psychodramatic terms, Tune UP! is a contained, practicable form of spontaneity training, offering a strong structural frame for leveraging neural tension toward more harmonious life roles.

### REFRAMING TENSION

While the Diamond of Opposites measures complex layers of sociometric choice based on single criteria on a coordinate plane (Carlson-Sibelli, Sabelli, & Hale, 1994) and traditional spectrograms measure single criteria through a linear, rank-order scale (i.e., not at all to very much), Tune UP! provides a new fulcrum for holding sociodynamic, dialectic complexity between seeming opposites of polarized extreme states—for example, isolated/engulfed. While Mihaloew's original exercise looked at two complementary positives across four static columns, I have coined the term “Band of Creative Tension” to describe a more flexible, stringlike relationship between the poles of positive and negative extremes (Figure 4). A bridging balance point at the center connects yet differentiates the positive values, while the extremes contain the immense range of emotional energy, physical activation, and creative (or destructive) potential. In physics terms



**Figure 4. Tune UP! template using the same value example, creativity, as in Figure 2.**

this is called *elastic potential energy*. In Tune UP! we move into physically understanding this elastic potential *psychological* energy in action.

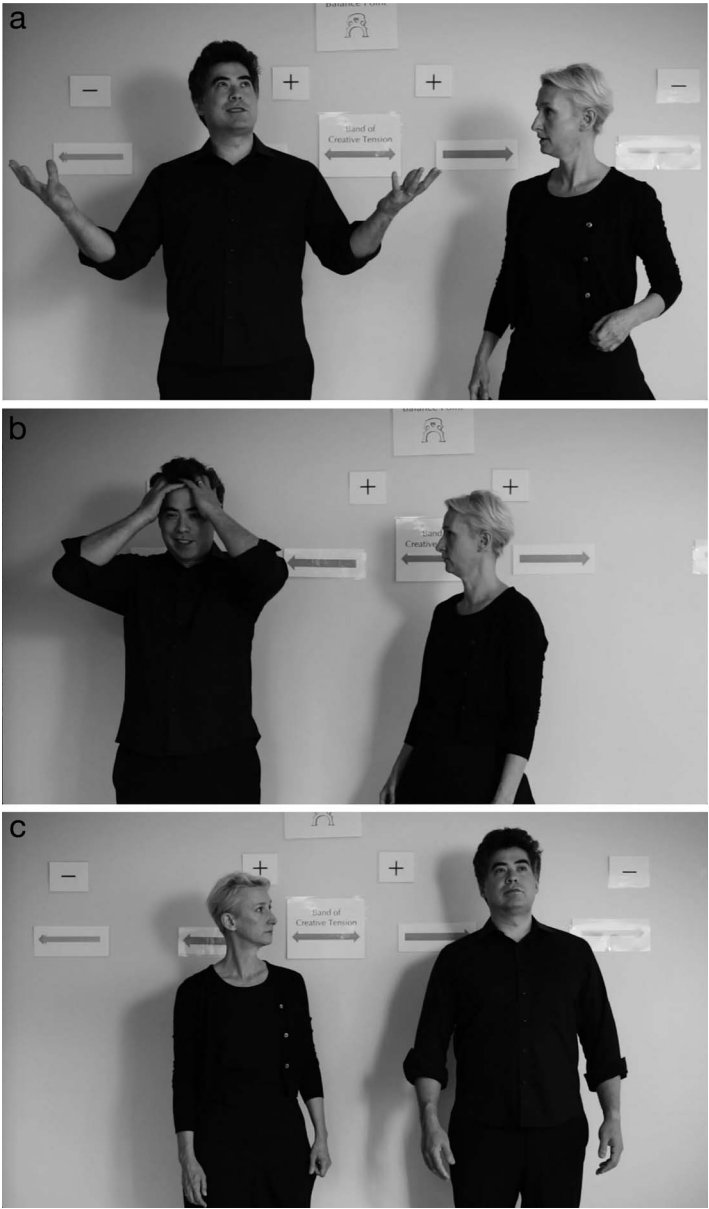
When values are placed in relationship on a conscious continuum, they become a practicable matter of intonation. No longer must they remain unconsciously acted-out polarized opposites; instead they become a potent creative partnership. When we courageously practice stretching core values to their negative poles purposefully through embodiment in the Tune UP! practice, we gather cognitive and somatic insight into roots of intra- and intersychic disharmony, and potential steps back to individual and social balance.

**TUNING UP**

We string musicians tune our instruments every time we set out to play. This preparation is called *tuning up* (Figure 5). In Supplemental Video 3 (available at



**Figure 5. Tuning up with the template in the background.**



**Figure 6. (a) Protagonist (Kenji Bunch) tunes in to his positive value of creativity. (b) Kenji describes his felt sense as “chaotic, a burden, messy, unpredictable.” (c) Kenji describes a sense of “organizing my body the way it’s intended.”**





Figure 6. Continued. (d) Kenji describes feeling “closed off, rigid, inflexible with the variables of everyday life.” (e) Kenji senses his ideal balance point between structure and creativity. (f) The author joins Kenji on his structure side.

<https://doi.org/10.12926/18-00009.1.s3>), Kenji and I discuss how the concept can be applied psychologically.

By adjusting the tuning pegs, we increase and release tension on each string until the frequencies align and come into resonance with each other. This state of frequency synchronization across the instrument is called being *in tune*. Tuning up requires stretching the strings in order to tune to the appropriate perfect pitch for that particular string. The only way to get to the ideal pitch is through working that tension. Then and only then is the instrument poised and ready to receive the pressures of the fingers and bow, ready to make music. In our metaphor of the body as an instrument, being in tune is equivalent to a state of self-regulation and emotional resilience, where vagal tone is high and we are ready to face the music of whatever life brings our way.

In Supplemental Video 4 (available at <https://doi.org/10.12926/18-00009.1.s4>), Kenji and I discuss the concept of working with tension as we tune our strings. I state, “We’re not afraid of tension, we actually use it.” Kenji adds, “That’s one of the first things we learn [as string players], to recognize when [we’re] in tune.” I make the connection between being in tune on the instrument and being metaphorically in tune with oneself, and go on to describe that practicing Tune UP! can help a person learn to sense when they are in tune with themselves and when they are not.

The word “tension” comes from the Latin word *tendere*, meaning “to stretch.” In Tune UP! we concretize the metaphor of stretching, of tuning up in action. By tuning in to positive opposite values in action and working the creative tension elicited by these value states somatically, we become more comfortable and masterful at synchronizing, harmonizing, and self-regulating the body/mind instrument moment to moment.

For the purposes of the following teaching example, I made directorial choices designed to limit the development of the protagonist’s personal material (Supplemental Video 5, available at <https://doi.org/10.12926/18-00009.1.s5>). Experienced psychodramatists will note that while Tune UP! is a potent stand-alone practice, it can also function as a powerful warm up to further psychodramatic enactment.

In Figure 6a, the protagonist “tunes in” to his positive value of creativity. He describes the felt sense of this state as “exciting, receptive, open to what comes into my head.”

Stretching to the negative, overvalued extreme of creativity, the protagonist describes his felt sense as “chaotic, a burden, messy, unpredictable” (Figure 6b).

Stepping to the other side of the bridge into structure, a positive opposite of creativity, Kenji describes a sense of “organizing my body the way it’s intended” (Figure 6c).

Stretching to the extreme state of structure, he describes feeling “closed off, rigid, inflexible with the variables of everyday life” (Figure 6d).

Moving to the middle, with a foot on each side of the bridge, Kenji senses his ideal balance point between structure and creativity (Figure 6e). He describes this state as “the ideal position for me. I’m open to creativity, but I’ve still got enough order and structure to be able to operate on a daily basis. This feels great.” I ask, “Which foot do you need to lean on a little more in your daily life?” Kenji replies, “Generally I have less problem being creative than I do being structured, so I could use a little more of this,” pointing to the structure side.

Joining him on his structure side, I double, amplifying Kenji's intention to tune up through putting more emphasis on structure in his daily life (Figure 6f): "I'm the part of you that wants you to value structure by creating routines and sticking to them, but not in a way that limits us from the flexibility of life." Kenji replies with a smile, "That's what I need."

## CODA

As musicians, we take pride in our contribution to the collective, knowing that our combined energy of deliberate, individual practice becomes the quality of the music itself. Our practice begins with tuning our instruments every time we set out to play. In the same way, deliberate practice of one's own body/mind instrument may be in the best interest of all concerned. Tune UP!, the fundamentals of which can be learned in as little as 45 min, can ground and revitalize the nervous system, support self-awareness and purposeful, self-directed behavior, catalyze personal and group creativity, and harmonize intrapsychic and interpersonal relationships.

Tune UP! will be a useful addition to the repertoire of psychodramatists, sociodramatists, and sociometrists who seek containment and trauma-informed methods for working in action; for drama therapists and applied-improv artists ready to bridge aesthetic distance and delve into personal material; and for music therapists and others who wish to implement action methods in counseling, coaching, consulting, personal growth, and social activism.

In Supplemental Video 6 (available at <https://doi.org/10.12926/18-00009.1.s6>), Kenji and I playfully improvise around themes of rigidity, chaos, and harmony. Standing on either side of the Band of Creative Tension, we offer a musical metaphor for what neural dysregulation might sound like and move together toward what a regulated state of balanced harmony might sound like.

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