

# C A R M E N M O R I N

## *Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 9: Harnessing The Testing Effect* Episode 9 Transcript

### **Carmen Morin:**

Hello everyone and welcome to the Music Mindset podcast. I'm your host, Carmen Morin, and this is episode nine, harnessing the Testing Effect. So we're cutting straight to the goods today. We have been hard at work in our programs and I can't wait to share with you all that we've been learning, exploring and expanding on. But first, a thanks to our sponsor. This episode is brought to you by Heartstrings Jewelry. Heartstrings Jewelry is the most stunning line of eco-jewelry handmade right here in Canada by a local artisan. They have the most stunning pieces of fine jewelry, but get this - they are made from the strings of pianos. That's right, stunning and classic pieces that I get so many questions and compliments on when I wear them that are made from the strings of pianos combined with precious metals and gems. I'm so excited to collaborate with heartstrings jewelry with the launch of this Fine Piano String line.

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Alright, so welcome back to episode nine: "Harnessing the Testing Effect". For my regular listeners, those who receive my Music Mindset newsletter or articles you might have noticed, it has been a while since I shared a podcast episode with you. I haven't been on holiday. We have been very busy and productive. Myself and my team, we've been supporting thousands of students inside Piano Foundation Formula, Piano Beginner Blueprint, and most recently we've really been focusing on our program and community that is just becoming so close to my heart, which is Momentum Piano Academy.

So Momentum Piano Academy has been incredible to watch unfold in so many ways. It really began as an experiment to sort of test the depths of the quality of the results we can bring out in our students' learning in this online format. Obviously, I own and operate a large brick and mortar school here in Calgary, Canada, where excellence and quality, and building of long-term relationships is of the utmost importance for us there. And so I really wanted to test the limits to see how far we can take the depths of learning now in this online format. So as an educator, it's really been fascinating just exploring the different formats of teaching. You know, really diving into curriculum design, different mediums.

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Really what I wanted to explore was where the limits are to how far we can bring people with this online learning format. So our students inside Momentum, who might be listening (hello if you are!). I'm sure that they would agree that our space has evolved so much in the past few years to something that is completely unique and different from any other learning system that I've heard about or experienced elsewhere before. It's really, it's not a course, it's not a membership. It's like this entire learning experience. It's interactive but asynchronous. So many different things that have come together really through this exploration. So my team and I, we've been hard at work with lots of experimenting and lots of exploring. So although it's been a while since I shared a podcast episode with all of you, I have been collecting and making notes of all of these insights along the way, noting what I know will make a very valuable podcast episode, especially for fellow teachers and of course fellow learners who are here in this space.

So I really, I can't wait to share all of these things that we've been up to with you now that we are back to another episode of the podcast. So we are here for episode nine today. I want to talk to you about something that has really been at the root of a lot of the different action steps that the students are taking that have really led to changes in their entire learning process. I wanted to start here with what's called "The Testing Effect". If you follow me on Instagram, you probably notice that I'm talking a lot about this in post because I'm often talking about the things that we're testing and exploring behind the scenes. So it's harnessing the testing effect and how we can do this to really lead to deep learning and most of all, confidence. So I'm going to be referencing some of the research around the testing effect in this episode.

As always, you can find the details and links on my website for this episode, which is [www.carmenmorin.com/episode9](http://www.carmenmorin.com/episode9). So you can take a look at that research. You'll definitely find it interesting if you are a teacher, if you're fascinated with psychology, all of those wonderful things. I will also be talking about the bigger role of how we're incorporating these things in Momentum, which is our 4-part momentum mastery learning system. This is the whole cohesive system that we're really exploring and learning through there. This is the framework for growth that you'll be hearing about the students experiencing this topic is one of the aspects inside that whole four-part process and that learning system, and you can access and view that in its entirety. Also in the show notes for this episode, which is [www.carmenmorin.com/episode9](http://www.carmenmorin.com/episode9).

I'll unpack that gradually through the next episodes, but just if you want to access that overview, it is there for you. All right, so in all of my programs, we have Piano Foundation Formula, Piano Beginner Blueprint, and now Momentum Piano Academy. Ultimately internal processes and growth have always been at the root of everything that we're doing. That's really what I found in all of my teaching in private piano teaching, in running our school. It's that when we're really focusing on cultivating character traits, um, that will lead to external results, that's when you

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have that long lasting outcome and really a fulfilling experience. And this is because ultimately anyone can learn new practice drills, exercises, more pieces, more scales, more drills... But if you aren't really addressing at a foundational level the things that you will need to carry you forward long-term and the mindset and the systems and the processes that you'll need to succeed long-term, then you're really going to be building in limits of how far you can go with things in a rewarding and meaningful way.

So inside Momentum, students have been building so many skills. They do focus on practice drills. We do tons of technique, obviously transformation in piano, foundation formula, all of these things. The external outcomes are there students who had never played before joining. Now they're receiving high, high marks, high nineties on their formal examinations. So the skills do come as a result of these things. But the root of what we're really focusing on is that internal learning process, systems and frameworks, mental models of learning that they need to experience the growth and fulfillment long-term empowering students with understanding as well as the knowledge and the skills, but most of all in having the most impactful experiences through the process. So some of the quotes that you'll find if you go to my website or any of our program sites include many, many testimonials from our students who have done these programs.

But I'm going to give you some of the examples just to give you some of the context. So one is from Steve from the United Kingdom, who we love so much in our programs. His quote is, "I'm absolutely convinced that my confidence has resulted directly from your support and that of the community since starting with Momentum". Another one is from Juliette. Hi Juliette from Australia. Again, someone that we love so much, a big part of our community who shared "this piano course and group provides so much more than improvement in technique and skill. There's a lot of personal growth". Lastly, one from Norma. Hi to Norma from the United States who shared at the end of her quote, "this course will help you gain the confidence to fulfill your dreams in playing piano". So you'll notice this theme. We are so thankful to receive any and all of this incredible feedback. But what you'll notice and what we're really noticing from the experiences that our students are having is that at the root of all of the transformational experiences they're having are changes in internal processes, beliefs, and most of all, confidence.

The outward skills absolutely are there because they grow in skills, they grow in tangible outcomes. But what they're sharing is they're not talking about just learning a new set of exercises. We do learn those things, but the transformation that takes place is really in that internal learning process, which I'm finding of course in our local school, but that we've been able to transfer over into our online space, which we are continuing to grow and develop and

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explore how we can do this to best serve and support our students. Okay, so that will be the focus of the next few episodes. I'm really excited to share the things that we've been testing out and exploring.

I'll share also some things that we tested out and that are kind of considered the norm right now in online learning. And so we kind of assumed we'd be doing things like that and we actually didn't, and we aren't going forward with any of those things. So I'm going to explore what we've tested, what we're going to keep doing, and what we've decided we're not going to keep doing. But today I'm going to begin by talking about a learning strategy that you can put into work in many ways that we feel has been at the root of massive transformation for our students as we support them through, which is the testing effect.

Today we're talking about the phenomenon called the testing effect. Now, testing may not feel very glamorous, especially if you grew up in traditional school systems. In many ways we might dread test day, but this is not that. So stay with me. The testing effect is at the center of fairly recent research that has shown the power of regular and active testing within your learning process. So, clear ways that active and regular testing enhances your learning, deepens your retention, supports your memory retrieval and recall, and also drastically increases your confidence in yourself and your power over your own outcomes and abilities. Okay, so that's really what I'm talking about here. Studies and research around this have shown that being tested on material you're learning greatly increases future performance and long-term performance. And it does so far more than any amount studying or if you're playing an instrument, of course any practicing for an equal amount of time. It shows that there are benefits in both open and closed book testing and the benefits increase even more if you can receive feedback along the way with each test that you take.

So, the key to why this is so beneficial is that the testing forces you to engage in what's called effortful retrieval. Basically, that just means it forces you to be put on the spot, feel a little bit stuck, and then you need to figure it out. So maybe you'll stay stuck, maybe you'll find your way out either way, because the interesting and very important part of this is that even unsuccessful efforts, they still deepen and enhance your learning, your retention, and they support your future results. All right, so the studies and research around the testing effect, you'll see if you take a look at the articles, they're relatively recent, you know, 2006, 2009, that's still quite recent because of this, it's still relatively new. So, many educators, and certainly many students, aren't looking at tests in this way. They're not thinking of it as a positive tool.

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They're thinking of that pressure point that they might have some anxiety around. So certainly there are arguments and discussions to be had about too much or too little testing in schools, too much emphasis on marks that you receive on tests. I'm not really talking about that. By breaking this down the testing effect today and talking about how we've applied this into active learning practice and growth in lessons, what I hope to share with you is to reframe this, that active testing can be a powerful and useful tool that you can now put to work in your practice, in your teaching, and any other skill building activities. So it's not about externalized ranking or getting a mark. This testing effect really is a strategy that you can use in all of your learning and all of your growth. So that's why we are starting in this episode by talking about the testing effect.

I want to talk about three key benefits that are on the other side of using this as a learning strategy and as a tool. I'm going to share the ways that we've been applying it into our program, some of the ways, because there are many ways that this has kind of permeated everything that we're doing now. So that you have examples of the ways that you can incorporate this as well.

When I talk about how we've applied this, it's one piece in our larger, again, four-part framework that is inside Momentum Piano Academy. I might reference some of that. So if you would like the full context of that, again, that whole four-part framework you can access in the show notes [carmenmorin.com/episode9](http://carmenmorin.com/episode9) so that you can see the larger picture. But I will be kind of unpacking that in the next few upcoming episodes as well.

All right, so the testing effect, first of all is for long-term memory and retention. So first benefit, the initial research around the testing effect was all based around memory in the study of memory and learning. So there are three processes involved in human memory. First it's memory encoding (o when you take a thought, turn it into an actual memory) then storage, (which is how we store the information. Do we store it in our working short term memory or our long term memory?) And lastly we have our retrieval (how are we able to access that memory?). And those three all have to be working efficiently if we're going to be able to rely on it. So the research around the testing effect was all around the process of memory retrieval and is often also called retrieval practice. You may have heard that term before.

So it's when we actively need to retrieve information and draw the information out from our memory because we are put on the spot through a test, it forces us to work through a more challenging mental process compared to when we might just be practicing or studying. So that feeling of being put on the spot, which is often what most people will dread when they are being tested, forces us to practice drawing out the information. So we practice that retrieval and then it

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strengthens the neural connections associated with the information that we're learning. So this then makes things easier to recall in the future, but it also strengthens all the associations that we have because we've really had to frustrate ourselves and draw out the information when we need it. So while you're reading or you're studying or you're practicing, you're learning a new skill.

Things like repetition, which is a big piece of preparation, might improve your short term memory. You might feel that you're memorizing something and you're remembering something more confidently when you repeat something, you're using your working memory. But if you're put on the spot with a test, which forces you to actively try and retrieve information that may not be top of mind, you may not have heard it quite recently, that is how you really reinforce things to be moved into your long-term memory storage. So when information is in your long-term memory, this ultimately leads to deeper learning and understanding and of course confidence around the material, right? So for example, to think of the difference between short-term memory and working memory that requires you to kind of repeat it, hear it over and over again. You might tap into that if you are learning a new phone number.

So you get a phone number, you recite it, you say it out loud over and over again, maybe you picture the number in your head so that you don't lose it, then you're really able to remember it, maintain it, but you have to kind of keep repeating it in that way that's feeling like you're memorizing it. But you're actually storing it in short-term memory versus if I were to ask you probably what your childhood phone number was, you could probably tell me it without a second guess or without a pause because that's something that is in your long-term memory. There's a deeper level of knowing and confidence around the information depending on how you've stored it, right? So the testing effect has been given many names over the years. You may have learned "active recall" or "retrieval practice", but it's all the same mechanism. Putting your brain on the spot to remember and solve something, even if it feels stuck, even if it feels a little bit insecure, having to feel a little bit frustrated and then retrieve that information on cue is going to reinforce and strengthen all of the associations and move it into your long-term memory.

So how have we been applying this into our programs? First of all, it's been a big part of how we're teaching our students to memorize in their practice and in our teaching. You know, often you do hear people talking about their memorization techniques and they do involve a lot of what would incorporate short term memory. So they repeat it over and over again. They practice with the music and without. And so a lot of that repetition, but thinking of that example that I just told you with the phone numbers of short term versus long-term memories. If all of your

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memorization strategies are around repetition and rehearsal, your memory is likely to be maintained all in short term storage, which ultimately will always feel less secure than if you were to move things into your long-term memory. And this is an active way and a strategy that you can use to do that.

So with this active and regular testing, this testing effect is one of the most powerful tools that you can use to move that material into that long-term storage. And there are many ways that we incorporate this into our programs. This is the difference of studying and repeating until you feel ready, and then taking away the score versus the way we're really encouraging students to prepare a smaller portion and then putting your retrieval to the test, observing where you get stuck, struggling to find your way out and then trying again, right? So it becomes this kind of active formation of the memory and storing it in a reliable and secure way.

So the second way that we're really incorporating this testing effect, you'll find similarities and overlap in all three of the ones that I'm talking about today. Regardless of memorization, we are really focusing on this to deepen learning and just reliability around the material that the students have learned.

So if you ask someone what they need to do to be prepared, they will often answer, "you need to practice", which is true, but there is often so much more to it than that because there are things like, you know, if you practice in ineffective ways, you can make yourself worse. Some people practice and think that just because they've put X amount of hours in, then they're guaranteed to get results. So it can give them a feeling of kind of over-preparedness. If you really think about the first way that we use the testing effect in our programs with memory expanding on this then is in how we can really lead to deeper learning and understanding, right?

So the saying goes, practice makes perfect or so you've heard, but in reality that practice is not likely to guarantee perfection or results. If you haven't listened to episode number five of this podcast, which is titled The Most Important Things You Don't Know About Practice, I have a lot to say about this topic. I could go on and on about it. Of course we'll have more episodes about it, I'm sure practicing while it's of course important, the retention improves with increased rehearsal. Meaning when you put these skills to the test under a set expectation or element of pressure to see how they stand up. So while the practice is important, always working in that study mode and that preparation mode can actually cause people to overestimate how well prepared they are because they can think that they're more prepared because they've added a

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quantity of hours to the practice. But it's what's happening in the practice that's most important. How much have you tested to see how well everything holds up?

So ways that we are applying this on a practical level in our programs. Of course, if you're preparing for a concert, things like practice performances and actual rehearsals probably come to mind as I'm explaining this. But a big part of what we do inside Momentum, for example, and in our programs at Morin Music Studio in Calgary, is in what we call our performance prep classes. This is where students are actively working together, observing and shaping their skills in their playing and in their performance. We do this not just with performing pieces, but also in the way that we practice. So I think what most people may not realize is that a formal practice performance might seem like the first step of testing your skills, but in many ways that's like step 10 when you use the testing effect to build confidence. What we've really found huge success for our students is that we build it into every step of the process along the way. So when our students in Momentum get started, for example, a big component that they experience is in the way that they grow in confidence.

You heard that in the quotes that I shared early on, and we have lots and lots of similar experiences. So when they start, we let them know that through this process we're going to support them to share their music and draw out confidence in performing. And their first reaction might be to feel a little bit overwhelmed that they're going to be put on the spot in a concert or performance. But this active testing and active growth actually starts in techniques that are used privately in your own practice, in the way that you approach each layer of what you're learning. It begins with that shift of observing what happens when you're practicing alone and you switch to testing yourself. So for example, next time you're practicing or working on a skill, maybe you're working through, you know, playing a passage on the piano, you play it 10 times and it's going well. Then, you make the simple shift of telling yourself that for the next attempt, you're on the spot. This is going to be the TEST, you're going to test yourself to see how well you perform. So maybe those past 10 attempts, it went really well. But when you pause and shift and say to yourself, this next one is the one that counts, and see what happens next. Now, if you've done this before, what you've likely noticed is that you might be practicing and in the zone up until then, but then when you make that switch of putting yourself on the spot in an active test, all of a sudden something unravels. Same thing as if you were practicing, let's say basketball. You make 10 baskets in a row. But then if you switch your perspective and your mindset to say, this is the one that counts, I'm going to imagine that I'm in the final second of the championship game.

That is when you can see if your skills can withstand or if there are elements that still need to be



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strengthened. So what can happen is that maybe things unravel and you don't play the passage well or you don't make that basket when that happens. What can happen in other circumstances is that people might panic, they might take on negative beliefs about themselves. Maybe I'm not good at performing, you know, the whole spiral can ensue, but actually this is just a part of the skill building and learning process. So we don't think of it as, okay, here's the big test, and you either tested yourself and you either passed or you failed. It's that the testing itself forces you to struggle through, maybe get a little bit stuck, but you figure it out and things get stronger. It's not even that cliché of like the experience makes you stronger.

It's like this active formation of your skills that you kind of need to go through for things to be able to take shape. So of course we don't want these unraveling to happen at our big performance or the final second of your basketball game. This is why we build in all of these layers of this active testing at each step along the way as you are building your skills and preparing. So this all goes for our students in momentum who are building this up through many layers, one of which is, you know, our feedback posts. They might start with this internal shift in their practice and then they will move to a feedback post where they have to share a recording. So they will regularly tell us the same thing that they might be practicing alone and everything feels great, but then as soon as they press that record to share a clip of what they've been working on, all of a sudden these cracks begin to show.

So the difference is that when you understand and you're explicitly talking about the testing effect as a tool, you realize that those cracks are not a cause for panic. It's a sign that you're in that active formation of these skills and this is a part of building up those skills and working on what you're growing. So it really does begin with you shifting your internal processes, then growing in challenge of the level and the type of testing and the frequency of testing that you're able to withstand. And you really just feel this drastic difference in how you're able to withstand and also how you react when things happen that are unexpected. When you shift this active testing, what I've noticed is that you almost become a little bit glad when something that you put under a test unravels because it really just helps you to zero in on where you might be, you know, skating on thin ice, and it helps you to really isolate where you need to focus on more and what might need some more support.

So our third point on why active testing is so valuable in the learning process is that active testing is at the core of effective practice. So in my program "Principles of Practice", I discuss the three key components of practice. It's a framework of how we practice effectively and in a way that draws out our abilities rapidly. In teaching this program, I've realized that for many people a big misconception of practicing is thinking that it's all a matter of reproduction and repetition. Now of course, repetition and preparing reliably are going to be important, but it's

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really not about building skills to do something well and then just repeating it from there. There are many reasons for this, but since we're talking about the topic of testing, it's most important to know that when you improve on something, certain aspects of it become automatic in the process of being able to do it and again and again.

So let's say if you really work hard in your practicing to bring your playing to a certain level in one piece, you then become satisfied and then your goal just becomes to maintain from there. But there is no such thing as maintenance. Things are either improving or they're dying. So there needs to be an active deepening of your skills and your processes and your awareness. Or in many ways, things actually become more shallow the longer you work with them. You become less aware when it becomes easy unless you keep deepening the challenge. So if you really want to reinforce and deepen throughout the entire practice process, then you need to continually shift how you're approaching things, as in you need to add new tests, continually add new tests. So this active testing becomes a key component to how we are learning how to practice. Once things reach a certain level of comfort and you can achieve them reliably and comfortably, it's important that you put it under new tests to see what you can do to activate new neural connections.

So how are we applying this? If you've been working hard to learn to play a passage you've struggled through, then after your hard work you succeed, that's great, that's fantastic. But even if the playing itself is exactly how you want it, you're going to have to continue to deepen and strengthen your approach, whether it's your awareness, your listening, we need to find different ways to put these skills to the test now in your practice. Otherwise the learning becomes shallow. So it's not about reaching an end point and then repeating it to keep it the same. You're always actively keeping things moving and evolving so that you're shifting your perspectives and your awareness and context to deeper levels and different levels throughout. So active testing as a practice strategy is about building resilience in your skills, adaptable skills. It's a different level of confidence when you can walk into a performance and know that you've tested your skills in so many different ways and that no matter what comes up, you know you'll be able to navigate through because they've been able to stand up to all the tests that you've thrown at it.

Lastly, I want to just add the most important benefit that I've seen our students experience through engaging in the testing effect, and that is that they are actively and willfully shaping their own confidence and their belief in themselves. So with all of these practical points that we've shared that we've talked about memory learning practice strategies, the most valuable shift that I see in our students inside Momentum Piano Academy and our local school is that internal shift

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that this awareness and this strategy brings. One thing that I know and believe is that external results we experience are only ever going to be because of the work and the growth that we can experience internally. There are a few reasons for this. So first of all, incorporating active testing through our growth process. What I found is that it really just takes a lot of the pressure off.

I see our students enjoying the process so much more. It's not really about this pass fail mentality. It's not like you're practicing one day and then you're going to have a test at your lesson or performance another day. It's all just a part of the process and it has made testing to be just not such a big deal. We meet so many students who have a wide variety of goals, especially joining momentum. Some want to do exams, perform. Some want to build skills. Some are teachers. Ultimately reaching their goals requires some element of performance though. So being put on the spot to do something well when they really need to and when it matters to them most is really what they'll have to be able to do. So incorporating this idea of embracing testing into your daily work, it reinforces memory, deep learning, neural pathways, all of those great things that we talked about today.

But instead of making any one test like this grand finale that all of the pressure is building up towards, it makes the element of testing and being put on the spot just another thing that you practiced and learned about and gained exposure to. Now, the other aspect that I see really shift in students is when you start to talk about this and really explicitly draw awareness to it and use it as a tool that's in your toolkit, it really shifts their internal locus of control. So locus of control is a psychological concept that refers to a person's belief about the extent to which they have the control over the events and outcomes they experience in their lives. So individuals with a strong internal locus of control, believe that they have control over their own actions and the outcomes they experience. They believe that it's their own choices and efforts that determine their success or their failure.

Believing this makes them proactive, makes them take responsibility for their actions and really just believe in their own ability to influence outcomes and events by learning how to actively test and harnessing this testing effect that we're talking about today. What I've noticed most in our students inside Momentum and in our school is that they really shift to believing and understanding actionable steps that they can take and that they have taken to have power over their outcomes. We have students who share in Momentum, for example, they share that they were nervous to even speak for others before they began and now speak eloquently and perform with so much grace and confidence. Others who thought that they could never play for

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others, they only ever played for themselves and now they're performing in prep classes and recitals and completing exams and doing public performances in their community.

It's all a muscle that we can grow and build all of these skills that come through the piano lessons. But then it's the mental strength and that awareness that you need to really develop to be able to withstand the preparation and the challenge of being able to grow outside your comfort zone. So testing, being put on the spot, becomes a useful tool that can be used for you, not something that you have to be afraid of. So as I mentioned, this is one small piece of a large framework that we use inside of Momentum Piano Academy. We have been building out a learning system that we have been testing and evolving and allowing to take shape these past few years. Inside Momentum that I will be sharing about in these upcoming episodes, things that we've tested that we've really loved and things that we've tested, and we've said it's not for us or what we're going to do here in this space.

It has been an absolutely transformational system that has students sharing things like the quotes you heard earlier in today's episode and many more that I'll share. You can access that entire four-part framework and all of the articles that I referenced in this episode on my website at [carmenmorin.com/episode9](http://carmenmorin.com/episode9) in the show notes. And you can access the entire breakdown of the four-part system there. So if you are a teacher, a learner, or both, you can access everything that we talked about and I'd love to hear from you if you have any questions around anything that I talked about and our experiences in our programs as well today. So it is so, so great to be back here to the Music Mindset podcast. Thank you so much for joining me today. I'm looking forward to sharing more with you about what we've been up to behind the scenes. I'm excited to share what we've been doing inside our programs and frameworks. These next few episodes are going to be sharing valuable insights that I've been tracking in our programs. So make sure to hit subscribe on whatever platform you like to listen to your podcasts on. Thank you again for joining me. I'm Carmen Morin and I'll see you next time on the Music Mindset Podcast.