

JMU SCHOOL OF MUSIC
PERFORMANCE ANXIETY, or How to Enjoy Performing!

by

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Most performers, regardless of age or experience, endure some sort of “rush” or “heightened awareness” before or during a performance. For many, this “rush” is not of a purely musical or artistic nature, but is more of an undesirable mental or psychological state. Often, a negative psychological outlook results in physical manifestations that detract from our performance. In other words, nervousness takes over and prevents us from being able to create the ideal artistic experience for our audience and ourselves.

Positive things to consider:

- ◆ Why do you love music? How can you convey that to your audience?
- ◆ No one else has the privilege of standing up there at that given moment and GIVING to other people the way you can at that moment.
- ◆ Use positive self-talk.
- ◆ If you are prepared for your performance, there is no reason to doubt yourself. Performance is an opportunity to demonstrate what you do on your instrument, but more importantly, it is an opportunity to share something with others, to communicate in a more elevated way than words.
- ◆ Your audience WANTS you to play well.
- ◆ Try to enjoy yourself. If you are enjoying your performance, your audience will, too!
- ◆ It’s not about YOU, it’s about the music.

NERVOUSNESS

What causes nervousness?

Fear: fear of failure, of stakes/consequences, concern for other people’s acceptance or opinion

Ways to combat some of the physical symptoms of nervousness:

- ◆ Accept that you will be nervous. Accept that your hands may shake, or your tone may quiver a bit. The key is to learn to handle your nervousness.
- ◆ Be prepared.
- ◆ Concentrate first and foremost on what you want to communicate musically.
- ◆ Focus on the task at hand.
- ◆ Practice deep breathing.
- ◆ Try to achieve the ideal performance. Put yourself there mentally.
- ◆ Try to focus on listening to the music. Focus on the phrase you are playing, how you want it to sound, where you want it to go.

GEARING UP FOR THE PERFORMANCE

1. Physical
 - a. Exercise! Playing an instrument is a physical activity that requires training similar to an athletes’ training. Your lungs will be better off!
 - b. Eat mild foods, limit caffeine and sugar intake. Bananas have a natural calming effect. Other fruits are good as well.
2. Intellectual
 - a. Be smart about your performance. Given that you’ve prepared properly, you’re ready to go. You’ve practiced; you can play the music with conviction and ease.
 - b. Deal with potential problems, i.e. page turns, breathing, etc. Have a plan for any logistical mishaps.
3. Mental—***maybe most important element of preparation.***
 - a. Stay focused in your preparation.
 - b. Positive self-talk, biofeedback, visualization.

VISUALIZATION

- 1.) Visualize every element in vivid detail of what the performance scenario will be like. Imagine the space, the clothes you are wearing, how you feel physically and mentally, what the applause sounds like....
- 2.) Go through your entire program, hearing every phrase, every sound, exactly the way you would like to play it.
- 3.) You can't know *exactly* what the experience will be like, but if you've already mentally practiced, you will have already done it. It's a mental dress rehearsal. It takes practice visualizing in order to be able to concentrate and really get something out of it.
- 4.) Before you play, do a lot of "self-talk" backstage, telling yourself to just do your best. Your best is all you can really ask of yourself.

THE PERFORMANCE

- ◆ Think of the performance not as a chore, but as an opportunity!
- ◆ Talk positively to yourself.
- ◆ Breathe deeply.
- ◆ Loosen up physically backstage.
- ◆ Try to enjoy the opportunity and make an effort to convey the music and the emotional atmosphere for which you are striving.
- ◆ Take a deep breath and a few moments to hear the opening phrases of the piece in your head.
- ◆ Remember, "A New Now." Composer Michael Colgrass advises that if something doesn't go the way you've planned, physically move/take a small step to another location on stage, to put yourself in "A New Now."
- ◆ Try to remain in control, and don't move around too much. Try to think about body, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers being relaxed.
- ◆ Focus on particular musical issues, such as phrasing and exaggerating dynamics.

STAGE PRESENCE

- ◆ Being a performing artist means that sometimes you have to act. Even if you don't feel completely comfortable, you have to pretend like you are having the greatest experience of your life. You have to LOOK like you know what you're doing.
- ◆ SMILE!!!
- ◆ Walk confidently and quickly onstage. Look at your audience. Eye contact is very important. They're people, too!
- ◆ Keep the music stand low. The audience wants to see what your body (hands, mouth, etc.) is doing.
- ◆ Gather your thoughts, feelings, courage, and take off!
- ◆ Relax and let your inhibitions go. Try to let the music flow through you and become part of your movements, in a natural, non-distracting way.
- ◆ If something doesn't go exactly as planned, don't worry. Don't wince. Pretend that it was exactly the way it was planned. Many times, no one even noticed but you!
- ◆ When finished, be gracious and appreciative that your audience took the time to listen to you.
- ◆ Smile and confidently walk offstage, as if it were the greatest performance of your life, no matter what!
- ◆ **Ultimately, you are a vehicle for the music, so the music should be the real goal!**

Suggested resources on the psychological aspects of performance

The Inner Game of Music, Barry Green

The Audition Process, Stuart Edward Dunkel

A Soprano on Her Head, Eloise Ristad

Mental Toughness Training for Sports, Dr. James Loehr

Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect, Dr. Bob Rotella

My Lessons with Kumi: How I Learned to Perform with Confidence in Life and Work, Michael Colgrass