

Reducing Anxiety

Studio Strategies for Performing Salvation

Abstract: This article offers a brief overview of the causes and manifestations of performance anxiety and suggests methods for professors to combat it in the studio setting. The topics of mentoring, physical and mental relaxation, dietary health, and imaging are explored. Primary source material is referred to throughout the article, so readers can easily continue their study of the issue.

Keywords: anxiety, imaging, mentoring, performance, relaxation, strategies, teaching

The relationship between a student musician and his or her teacher is extremely complex. In most studios today, teachers focus their energies on the development of a solid technique and a free sound. The best educators engage their students in conversation that leads to rich artistic choices and meaningful music making. That said, there is something that still remains largely overlooked: the student must be trained to *program the mind* for consistent, high-level performance.

The art of performance, on any instrument, is one that involves precise muscle coordination. The slightest alteration can make the difference between a gloriously produced sound and one that causes people to raise their eyebrows in alarm. Consequently, many students become highly anxious about the act of performing in front of others. Unfortunately, this anxiety only exacerbates existing problems while creating

still more. An article in *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* notes,

Musical performance anxiety has been described as one of the most difficult problems for musicians. Studies suggest that a significant number of musicians experience high levels of performance anxiety during their lifetimes and that it may be unrelated to levels of training and experience. Performance anxiety has been associated with poorer performance quality, altered career opportunities, overuse syndrome, and a negative impact on general well-being.¹

Unfortunately, many educators and educational institutions act in such a way as to aggravate this tendency in their students instead of helping them find ways of solving the problem. Fortunately, people are starting to understand that teaching music extends

Music educators can make a tremendous difference in their students' anxiety levels. Here are some suggestions for dialing down the fear.

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beyond the basics of tone and technique into the realms of mentoring and mental coaching. Another article from *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* states,

Anxiety is the most prevalent form of psychological distress. It is estimated that 80 percent of people experience anxiety whenever they are called on to make *any* appearance where the attention of the group is focused on them. Musicians, already vulnerable to the stresses of perfectionism and competition, are especially susceptible to performance anxiety, and are among the top five occupational groups admitted to mental health facilities.²

Many students are lucky to have teachers who provide solid support and encouragement in an otherwise highly critical environment. These students have probably already obtained at least some assistance in coping with performance/audition nerves. Conversely, many students go into their weekly *lessons* feeling nervous about performing in front of their *teacher*. This is to say nothing of the anxiety that many experience when performing in front of other faculty or when competing for financial aid or a seat in the orchestra. Of course, all musicians must face the reality that they will be judged by others. Indeed, the role of the university is partially to act as a microcosm of that which is to come in the real world. That said, the university, particularly at the undergraduate level, should be a place where students are not overwhelmed by judgment and condemnation.

Anxiety is partially a *learned* response. All music educators must consider if and how they are contributing to this serious problem.

Caine . . . describes a dilemma for the . . . performer in which a potentially humiliating and frightening mistake is less and less tolerable. A behavioral feedback loop becomes established. The act of performance becomes the stimulus perceived as

a threat. In situations of danger, the individual's physiology primes him or her to become more alert and sensitive to all potential threats in the surrounding environment. Anticipating mistakes increases arousal, which further enhances access to memories of mistakes and feelings of humiliation. This activates more fears and more arousal. This process is linked by catastrophic thoughts, physiologic manifestations of anxiety, and negative imagery. Unfortunately, this process is often initiated very early in a young performer's training.³

It is the ethical responsibility of the teacher *not* to perpetuate this syndrome. Instead, he or she must introduce techniques into the studio that actively combat the negativity that occurs from both *outside* the studio and *inside* the student.

There are many reasons for educators to shift their focus and take a more constructive approach. The bottom line is really very simple. As the recently deceased voice pedagogue Richard Miller states, "no matter what the technical orientation or level of skill, a pessimistic singer is not a successful singer; mental attitude can make or break a career."⁴ A musician who enters into a lesson or a performance in a state of fear is bound to experience one or several of the following physical symptoms:

1. An increase in heart rate
2. Quickening respiration
3. Secretion of adrenaline
4. Movement of blood away from the stomach and toward the heart⁵

One of these physiologic symptoms *alone* can throw off even the most experienced performers if they have no means of combating the fear.

Physical symptoms of fear, troubling as they are, are only part of the problem. Cognitive and behavioral manifestations are equally, if not more detrimental.

Behavioral manifestations may include the performance quality itself, facial expressions and other body language during the performance, and more occult manifestations such as measures taken to avoid the performance situation entirely. Cognitive aspects of performance anxiety can include the ruminations both before and during performance, such as self-doubts, projected criticisms or comments by those in the audience, and mental focus on technical difficulties, potential for memory lapses, or the consequences of a faulty performance. All of these may prove distracting and indeed may be self-fulfilling.⁶

It stands to reason that any teacher truly intent on helping the student to realize his or her potential will aim to instruct in such a way as to preempt or correct negative thoughts, behaviors, and physical symptoms that are the result of anxiety. Students must learn to achieve balance not only in their performing but also in their self-concept, goals, expectations, and performances. Many are now recognizing the effectiveness of Mental Sport Training in encouraging this type of mental flexibility. Richard Lederman writes,

A musician *is* an athlete. The only difference between the two performers is that musicians control micro muscles (fingers, embouchure, tongue) compared to the macro muscles (arms, legs, hands) controlled by athletes. Both music and sports involve the movement of body appendages in either a fast or slow motion, and each activity is performed before an audience, which can also affect the performance of the participant. Athletics involves preparation, training and coaching, as does music performance. Since there is very little difference between the two activities . . . , the mental training techniques used in athletic training can be applied with very little change, if any, to the practice and performance of music.⁷

These mental training techniques include such things as biofeedback, concentration and relaxation exercises, positive self-talk and positive imaging, specified goal setting, and specified performance planning. It is well worth the teacher's time to try to incorporate some or all of these techniques into the studio setting depending on the needs of the individual student.

In *The Inner Game of Music*, Barry Green discusses this shift that professors can make. He champions a type of teaching that involves less "instruction" (e.g., "Do this" or "Try . . .") and more awareness (e.g., "How does this feel?" and "Let's experiment . . ."). Simply by becoming aware of when his or her method of instruction is dictatorial, the teacher can move away from the "do this" mode of teaching toward the more beneficial mode of awareness instruction. Green states,

Awareness instructions put students into an entirely different frame of mind. They are based on the students' own experience—their ability to learn by noticing what's happening. They don't involve "right" or "wrong" ways to go about things. They don't involve a complex series of steps that are easily confused or forgotten. They never demand more of a body than it is capable of handling. They don't invoke doubt. And as a result, they free students from doubt, confusion, frustration, and discouragement. . . . Awareness exercise only ask one thing of the conscious mind: that it should *pay attention* to what's happening, not to what's right or wrong, good or bad. The key is simply to be aware of what is going on. That's the way we all learned to walk, and that's the way we learn best.⁸

Educators should do their utmost to ensure that the lesson time remains about the student and that student's aspirations, *not about the teacher and the furthering of his or her own agenda*. Young performers should know right from the

outset that they are free to discuss lesson difficulties openly, without fear that the teacher will take student input in a defensive way. Further guidelines on creating a healthy student-teacher relationship can be found in the 2002 winter issue of *The Mentoring Connection*.⁹

Another top priority for the educator should be to actively discuss with each student his or her reasons for performing as well as the fears that get in the way. This type of interaction will help the student to clarify personal objectives and to resolve inner conflicts standing in the way of his or her attainment. Such information can then be used to highlight negative thinking patterns so that they can be replaced with positive alternative statements. The end result is a student whose perception of self is more objective, and less critical.

In their book *Power Performance for Singers: Transcending the Barriers*, Shirley Emmons and Alma Thomas point out that performers' top fears tend to be those of failure, success, rejection, change, discomfort, and the unknown. They have this to say to teachers:

Continue to give positive reinforcement to your students' efforts, because studies have proven that [performers] who receive negative appraisals much of the time *lower* their self-estimates, whereas [those] who have been given positive feedback *raise* their self-estimates. Some students may be negative not only about . . . technique but also about their self, which attitude can be far more damaging.¹⁰

Many professionals have noted the benefits of journal writing as a means of developing a healthy self-concept and of conquering fear. Music teachers should consider enforcing a policy whereby students keep a daily record of thoughts related to themselves and their performance. The student could track his or her thoughts over the course of each week and then bring up pressing concerns and areas of growth at the scheduled lesson time. Reading these entries would help the

student to recognize where he or she has made negative self-judgments. He or she could then actively reformulate his or her thinking into something more positive. Studies have shown that this type of regular, disciplined, positive self-talk does wonders to combat both personal and performance anxiety. Emmons and Thomas note,

Where your mind goes, negative or positive, your performance will follow. . . . Self-affirmation allows you to plant in the conscious mind positive thoughts, which you then connect to giving an excellent performance. When you repeat these positive self-affirmations and use them, they become part of the subconscious. Therefore, they affect *your own perception* of your strengths, qualities, skills, and ability. This expanded positive perception heightens your confidence during all the circumstances of performance—before, during, and after. Therefore, your performance has a better chance for improvement.¹¹

Emmons and Thomas also recommend developing "triggers" to stop negativity and start positive thinking immediately. One common suggestion is for the performer to visualize a red spotlight every time negative thoughts enter his or her mind. The *teacher* could incorporate such "triggers" into the lesson. For example, if a student were to say something negative, like "I'll never get it," the teacher could hold up a big red stop sign and then direct the student to say positive things about his or her performing.

Beginning a lesson with a physical warm-up is a simple technique that teachers could easily incorporate into the studio. Three to five minutes of light stretching would direct the student's awareness to areas where tension is being held *before* beginning to play. This release of tension would disable certain negative tendencies while promoting the mind-body connection essential for peak performance.

In some cases, a teacher might want to spend an even longer amount of time

on physical relaxation. Studies have shown that these types of activities can “trick” the mind into the desired mental state that Barry Green calls “relaxed concentration.” Psychologists have figured this out and will often have their patients begin sessions with deep, diaphragmatic-abdominal breathing in order to coax the patient’s body into a state of calm that then carries over to the mind.

One form of physical relaxation outlined in many an article is that of autogenic training, a type of biofeedback. The following exercise would be easy for any teacher to adapt and incorporate into a lesson:

The process was developed by Dr. Johann Schultz and Wolfgang Luthe in the 1930s and consists of six standard exercises . . . meant to teach an individual how to create at-will sensations of heaviness, warmth, heart-rate reduction, change in respiration, apparent warming of the solar plexus and cooling of the forehead. A person can perform the exercises in either a sitting position or lying on one’s back. Each exercise begins with deep diaphragmatic breathing, and then, through self-talk, the athlete envisions a particular sensation in a certain body area. An example of this would be the exercise for warmth, which will increase blood flow to a certain area. In this exercise the athlete would repeat to themselves: “My right arm is getting limp and warm.” [Repeat four to six times.] “My right arm is getting warmer and warmer.” [Repeat four to six times.] “My right arm is completely warm.” [Repeat four to six times.] “I feel supremely calm and warm.” [Repeat one time.] After warming one arm, the athlete would proceed to warm the other arm and the legs. Each of the six exercises would be done for approximately two weeks.¹²

Another simple technique that could be incorporated into a lesson is that of progressive muscular relaxation. Developed by Edmund Jacobson, it involves repeatedly tensing and releasing given

sets of muscles in order to induce deep physical relaxation.¹³ By alternating total tension with total release, body-mind relaxation will be accomplished and a student will develop a heightened sensitivity to the level of tension required for optimal performing.

Before leaving the topic of physical relaxation, it is also worth pointing out that a conscientious teacher should encourage his or her students to get enough sleep, drink plenty of water, and eat a healthful diet. Students should be aware that alcohol is a depressant, caffeine exaggerates the physical symptoms of anxiety, and fats decrease overall energy. Regular physical activity is something recommended by psychologists for managing both depression and anxiety and should be encouraged by music teachers. It promotes general health and body awareness and is widely acknowledged to improve self-esteem.

Perhaps one of the most far-reaching techniques for boosting one’s level of performance and reducing anxiety is that of imaging. It forms the core around which Robert Caldwell’s book *The Performer Prepares* is written.¹⁴ Emmons and Thomas prize this technique above all others presented in their book. Concerning imagery, Emmons and Thomas say,

Imagery is about using all the senses, not just sight but also sound, taste, smell, touch and kinesthetic sense (physical sense of the body. . . . Imagery will permit you to get the best out of yourself in the practice room, the voice lesson, or the performance itself. . . . Top-class athletes, too, use their extremely well developed imagery skills daily. With imagery they prepare themselves, first, to get exactly what they want out of their training and practice, and second, to see themselves as successful while developing a high sense of self-belief. Imagery has become highly refined and sophisticated; instead of relying on your wishes and hopes, you can use imagery very precisely in your

performance. Without an ability to image, expression in performance can be extremely limited.¹⁵

Imagery can be used in several ways. The more precise and filled out the student’s sensory images are, the greater the possibility that he or she will deliver a truly convincing performance. Furthermore, rigorous application of imaging will ensure that anxious students spend less time thinking negatively about themselves and their performances. A simple way for the teacher to incorporate this type of work into the studio would be to ask the student leading questions about the piece of music that is being explored. The trick is to make sure that the student takes the time necessary to *truly and completely imagine with all of the senses*.

Another very powerful way in which imagery can help the performer is as a tool to *induce* relaxation or a state of performing readiness. Students wishing to calm themselves can imagine that they are in the place that causes them to be most at peace. To generate a state of performance readiness, students can follow a practice that athletes have been using for decades, and imagine themselves reliving a previous *successful* performance in incredible detail. In one study, *Psychology of Music* reported that combined use of this type of success imagery with Rational Emotive Therapy involving positive self-talk resulted in a significant decrease in musicians’ overall level of performance anxiety.¹⁶ In combination, positive self-talk and success imagery are perhaps the most powerful antidote to self-doubt and fear.

Imaging can also be used in practice to accelerate the learning process. By imagining himself or herself performing a task before actually doing it, the student increases the chance that it will be well executed. (This is provided, of course, that the student imagines executing the skill *successfully*.) Studies have shown that the body responds subtly to this type of imaging, in effect rehearsing

Some Resources for Musical Performance Preparation

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and preparing itself in advance. Having students mentally rehearse a difficult skill before doing it also helps them inhibit bad practices and cultivate good ones. Naturally, this would increase the student's level of confidence, thereby also serving to reduce anxiety.

Imaging is also the most effective tool available for mental performance preparation. A student should imagine all of his or her practices, lessons, and performances in as much detail as

possible before actually doing them. Such things as the surroundings, the audience, the temperature, and the acoustics should all be considered and imagined into the given performance. Teachers can aid this process by *helping* the student construct these images, reminding him or her of any details that might be overlooked.

In his article, Barry Lenson even goes so far as to suggest that students whose fears are overwhelming should *actually*

stage "nightmare performances." This is not unlike the ideas of Barry Green, who suggests that people who particularly fear certain members of the audience should engage in role-playing. The music teacher could easily participate in this type of activity with the student, by assuming the role of the feared audience member and conversing with the student about his or her fears. The more of these types of scenarios that are worked through in advance, the better

the student's chances of beating performance anxiety or of at least managing it well. By extension, teachers and students should flesh out detailed preperformance/lesson/audition rituals according to the needs of the individual in question. These rituals provide a security net, something the student *knows works well*. Familiarity equals comfort, and comfort reduces anxiety.

Along these lines, it is the duty of the teacher to help ready the student for performance through thoughtful goal-setting. David Paprocki has this to say:

Goal-setting is the first step to initiate athletic training. The process involves defining a "mission statement" and setting long-and short-term goals. In setting goals, the athlete forms a target toward which he can aim. Without this target, the athlete does not have any checkpoints to gauge progress toward that goal. Goal-setting helps the athlete form a solid commitment to fulfill the "mission statement."¹⁷

This means that together, teacher and student must have clear, attainable goals that are both short- and long-term goals. Furthermore, they must *agree* together about what it is they wish to accomplish so that they work *with* one another instead of against each other.

Monthly, semester, and yearlong goals should be charted out. Periodically, teacher and student can check to make sure that what they are doing in lessons from week to week lines up with the objectives laid out in both the agreed-upon short- and long-term goals. Teachers should further encourage their students to establish *daily* goals for their own practice sessions. Adhering to a structured plan will help the student to feel that he or she is in control and is slowly but surely accomplishing what he or she set out to do. (And indeed, the student will feel this way because this will in fact be the case.) In addition, the forward-looking student will more quickly get over postperformance highs

and lows. A more level mental state is one that is less prone to anxiety.

Finally, teachers must recognize that the ultimate objective is to make the student a confident and communicative performer. This means that the teacher should provide ways for his or her students to repeatedly perform. Master classes and dress rehearsals are useful, but not comprehensive enough. A student should be provided with some opportunity at *every* lesson to feel that he or she has *performed*. This is why, after working on a serious technical issue in a given work, it would be advisable for the teacher to then allow the student the opportunity of performing the newly acquired skill(s) *within the context of the music*. If a serious audition or performance is on the horizon, the teacher should make sure to discuss preperformance opportunities with the student. Really motivated teachers might consider taking their entire studio to give a holiday concert at a hospital, a retirement community, or a similar venue.

Performance anxiety is a complex problem requiring a multifaceted response on the part of the educator. It is absolutely true that professional boundaries between student and teacher must be observed in order for the relationship to function in such a way as to fulfill its purpose. That having been said, teachers who do not respect and care for their students enough to carefully address these individuals' fears are not doing their job. People's fears go to the heart of who they are and what they believe. The music teacher must create an environment in which the student is truly accepted, fears and all. Only when this is the case will the student realize his or her best self, both as a person and in performance.

NOTES

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2. Bonnie Robson, Joy Davidson, and Elizabeth Snell, "'But I'm Not Ready, Yet': Overcoming Audition Anxiety in the Young Musician," *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 10 (March 1995): 32.
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5. Ibid.
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11. Ibid., 99.
12. Daniel A. Paprocki, "It's All in the Mind: Performance Anxiety and Sport Training," *Clarinet* 26 (March 1999): 75–76.
13. Emmons and Thomas, *Power Performance*, 157.
14. Robert Caldwell, *The Performer Prepares*.
15. Emmons and Thomas, *Power Performance*, 162.
16. Harry E. Stanton, "Research Note: Alleviation of Performance Anxiety through Hypnotherapy," *Psychology of Music* 21 (1993): 79.
17. Paprocki, "It's All in the Mind," 76.