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Performance Anxiety

Almost everyone has suffered through stage fright, whether mild or debilitating. The few who have never experienced it may actually have a different amount of adrenaline-producing hormones in their system, so feel lucky if that describes you. In fact, do not bother reading any further unless you have students who are having palpitations when they play.

When I was young, I never felt any worries while performing. In fact, I would think to myself, I'm just a kid! Nobody expects me to be perfect! Then I would go out there and enjoy myself, playing my music with abandon. When I decided upon music as a career at the age of seventeen, it suddenly mattered if I did well. I was starting a brand-new, difficult instrument, the harp, and it dawned on me that expectations had risen. Boom! Now, when I went onstage, I was shaking all over, hands sweating, panic-stricken. This was a new and entirely unwelcome development.

It took me several years to figure out how to cope with this. I noticed that certain types of music frightened me more than others. I felt happy playing Debussy, even with myriad pedal changes, but miserable playing Handel. Why? In Handel's music, it is much more obvious to the audience when there is a mistake. The solution: I had to develop my technique much further before performing any music that I could not play comfortably at home! That meant I also had to improve my practice habits. Judy Loman said, 'You have to learn your music 200% and have it ready at least three weeks before your performance. It's like putting your hair in a bun with only two bobby pins. It will stay up for a few minutes, but if you want it to last, you will need dozens of pins.'

Be aware of exactly what you are playing! To prepare for an important concert, I practise both my right and left hand separately and memorize them so that I can literally play them in my sleep. (I pretend to read them off the ceiling.) Most people are only concentrating on the melodic line, and when they are out there in the bright lights, they suddenly notice their left hand wandering around the strings on auto-pilot. That is when 'brain cramps' can happen.

Analyze the harmonies, so that you always know what key you are in and what accidentals are involved. Look for all the cadences, modulations and patterns. Mark A, B, C, etc. at starting spots all over the piece, with pedal patterns written in, and be able to start playing at any of them. If you do have a memory lapse, you can just jump to the next letter. If you are playing in an ensemble, know the other parts so that you know where you fit in. Group the starting spots in families, such as all the spots that start in the same key, or use the same patterns. If there are repeated sections, as in a Rondo, be very aware of which one you are on and how it connects to the following section. It helps to attach colours to these sections in your mind, i.e. section A is white the first time, the second time is blue, third time is green. Use the colours of the rainbow in order and there's some logic to it.

Practise in a relaxed way all the time. If your muscles are in the habit of being loose, they are less likely to lock up in performance. BREATHE DEEPLY whenever you feel any tension rising. This increases the flow of oxygen to your muscles. I used to hold my breath when I was playing difficult passages, and then wonder why my fingers felt like boards! Make sure your jaw is not clenched, your tongue is not sticking to the roof of your mouth, and your head is not craning forward to see the strings or music. Yo Yo Ma, the great cellist, suggests doing yoga and stretches as a way of maintaining relaxation.

If you have bad eyesight, you will need specific contacts or glasses that allow you to see your music perfectly, the strings a little less well, and the conductor rather blurrily. It is fine as long as you can see the baton moving in rhythm and whether he or she is smiling, frowning or crying. Practise playing musically all the time. Dynamics, style, accents, evenness, phrasing, rhythm, tone, emotions, etc. are more important than anything. You could play all the right notes, but, as Duke Ellington put it so well, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

Have a Plan B! If you make a mistake while practicing, keep going to see how you would get through it. Go back and devise a method of recovery, so you will feel confident that you can keep the music flowing. We have all heard performances by great musicians who have played handfuls of wrong notes, but yet we still enjoyed the concert immensely. If you know your harmonies and rhythms, the audience is usually completely unaware that a note might be missing here or there. However, always practise slowly and methodically so that you program your hands and feet to play the right notes and pedals. If you plow through the piece every day, making mistakes all along the way, you are teaching your muscles to play incorrect notes. As harpists, we have the great luxury of being able to tune our instruments before we start. Sure, sometimes it is necessary to tune again mid-concert (a few notes, not the whole harp, we hope!) but at least we do not have to deal with bad intonation.

Practise performing! Once you have a good grip on the piece, record yourself and listen to it. Once you are comfortable with that, perform for your family. Next level: friends. Then finally: recital on a stage. The same piece that gave you the dry heaves can become easy after several performances. If it is STILL too hard, then abandon it for now and choose easier repertoire. Come back to it when your technique has advanced further. Always start a recital with a piece that is very comfortable for you, if you have a choice. You could even warm up, disguised as checking the tuning. If you are waiting for a while without a warm-up, get your fingers working at least two minutes prior to playing, and keep them warm.

Do not assume that the crowd is not listening to you if you are playing background music. Numerous times, I have been surrounded by a clutch of admirers, all ears. Always choose pieces that you know well and bring along a stand lamp with an extension cord or batteries. Practise intervals, arpeggios, scales, etc. with your eyes closed to improve your muscle memory. Your muscles can learn the distances, so you do not have to get worried if you are playing in an orchestra pit and you cannot see your strings very well.

Anticipate all the things that will be different in performance. Practise in your concert shoes and attire. Try to simulate the same kind of lighting. Play through the whole program without stopping, once a day, for at least two weeks before the concert. Do it all: come out, smile, bow, sit down, play, then get up and smile and bow to the fake audience at the end. Do not forget to smile. It produces a very happy audience who will love you and applaud all the more.

Try to get some time onstage to get used to the acoustics of the hall/ Get there early enough to warm up and tune up and then still have time to sit quietly and visualize your first passages before you go on. If this is a chamber music or orchestra situation, make sure you know if the A is higher than 440, and calibrate your tuner accordingly.

Focus! Keep your eye on the ball, as Barry Green's analogy puts it. Do not think about anything other than the music. If you start wondering what that critic in the front row is writing about, you are liable to forget what you are doing and make a mistake. Your performance should feel like a gift you are giving to those lovely people in the audience. I often look for a friendly face in the crowd and play just for that person.

The more you perform, the less frightening it gets. There is a reason why great soloists look so confident: they have played in that situation many, many times and they practise for hours every day.

Barry Green puts it into an equation: Performance=potential minus interference.

References:

Barry Green: The Inner Game of Music (1986)

Frank Wilson: Tone Deaf and All Thumbs (1986)

Barbara Schneiderman: Confident Music Performance (1991)

Eloise Ristad: A Soprano On Her Head (1982)

Harp Haikus and Assorted Doggerel by Elizabeth Volpé Bligh:

I tune. I warm up.

What shall I work on today?

Ring! Who'll get the phone?

The harp is so cool.

Once plucked, it plays itself.

What's not to love?