

David Juncos & Elvire de Paiva e Pona: On ACT and a New Approach to Overcoming Performance Anxiety

Description

Whether you're taking an orchestra audition, sight-singing in ear training class, or asking someone out on a date, I think we all know that nerves are normal and to be expected. But that doesn't stop us from looking for ways to try to get rid of those anxious feelings, because butterflies and jitters aren't usually much fun.

I certainly tried my darnedest over the years to get rid of nerves, often by trying to reduce the self-imposed pressure that I put on myself. But whether it was telling myself I didn't care what seat I got in orchestra, or that it didn't matter what school I got into, my brain knew better, and was never fooled by my attempts to reverse psychology it into a better headspace...

I also tried positive thinking, but found this to be a real challenge too. I mean, it can be hard enough to visualize yourself playing a simple scale perfectly in tune. How the heck does one imagine performing a whole concerto or recital's worth of repertoire going perfectly? Of course, if you've been told that it's important to "think positive," and you can't even see a positive outcome in your imagination, it can feel like you've lost the mental game even before you've started...

Is there another way?

A preoccupation with battling nerves and negative thoughts can also make it easy to lose sight of the real goal. That is, to play beautifully, where the performance is a positive experience for both performer and audience.

So, the question more researchers have begun to ask in the last couple decades is...how important is it really to vanquish our nerves and negative thoughts? Could there be other paths to optimal performance?

Well, if you've struggled with nerves and your positive thinking efforts have been more frustrating (and exhausting) than helpful, there is indeed a relatively new wave of evidence-based approaches and techniques to handling stress that come from the therapy world, but are increasingly being used by high-level performers in sports and music.

These techniques aren't yet widely known, so I thought it might be interesting to chat with a psychologist and a singer, who have both been integrating this approach into their work with musicians, and recently co-wrote a book on this subject too.

Meet David Juncos & Elvire de Paiva e Pona

David Juncos is a clinical psychologist based in Philadelphia, PA. He works with adults, teenagers, and couples on clinical issues ranging from anxiety to mood and substance use disorders at Hopewell Springs Counseling Center (Marlton, NJ), and is also on faculty with the Voice Study Centre in the UK, where he lectures on topics such as peak performance and statistics/research design, and trains music teachers in using ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) coaching principles to address performance anxiety and enhance music performance.

Based in Vienna, **Elvire de Paiva e Pona** is a classically trained singer who performs internationally in operas and concerts ranging from classical to French chanson. With degrees in vocal pedagogy and psychology in addition to vocal performance, she is also a dedicated educator and teaches individual and group singing lessons and facilitates music classes for young children.

In today's episode, we'll explore...

- 3:42 – What is ACT?
- 6:15 – How the belief that performance anxiety is bad paradoxically make it even harder to manage.
- 8:49 – How do you get to the place where you can genuinely experience performing and nerves in a more positive way?
- 13:10 – What is the “continuum of willingness” and how do you help a student (or even yourself) move through this?
- 17:56 – Could doing so help us overcome the resistance many of us experience around recording ourselves?
- 21:51 – What is “cognitive defusion”? Does this new way of relating to our thoughts and our inner critic help to explain why some folks seem to navigate challenges more effectively?
- 31:00 – Dave describes “hexaflex” training, and the six processes that promote more flexibility and resilience.
- 33:04 – How our habit of attaching our future happiness to specific outcomes creates a lot of pressure. And how we can take away some of that pressure.
- 40:01 – Is ACT something that teachers can use to help their students with nerves, frustration, an overly active inner critic, and more? Is this something we can do for ourselves? Or is this something that only works if you consult with a psychologist?
- 42:45 – What does it look like to integrate ACT principles into lessons? Say, for instance, with a student who is getting frustrated that something isn't working.
- 49:21 – Where to begin if you'd like to learn how to use ACT in your own performing or teaching?

Notes

- 5:06 – Dave brings up the concept of psychological flexibility, the core goal of ACT. If you'd like to know how you score on this measure, [Steven Hayes](#), one of the founders of ACT, provides two

quick assessments to gauge your psychological flexibility here:

- [The ACT Advisor](#) (PDF)
- [Acceptance and Action Questionnaire](#) (PDF)
- 14:29 – Elvire and Dave both speak about the difference between values vs. goals, and the impact of focusing on process rather than outcome. It's a simple but transformative concept that is key to high-level performance, whether in sports or music. Here's a short video by [Russ Harris](#) (whose book was Elvire's introduction to ACT in grad school) that explains this in more detail, and why this can be so helpful:
 - [The Values-Focused vs The Goals-Focused Life](#)
- 31:20 – Dave lists the six core ACT flexibility processes; if you'd like more tips on how to hone these processes, Dr. Hayes offers several tips in each of these skills here (if you'd prefer a video to text, check out the next link below:
 - [ACT Tool Kit](#)
- 35:11 – I mention Kennedy Center Opera trombonist Douglas Rosenthal, and how he has described his experience separating happiness from audition success:
 - [A Tale of Two Auditions](#), by Douglas Rosenthal
- 36:35 – Dave mentions RFT or relational frame theory. Dr. Hayes talks more about this in a TED talk – but more importantly, shares additional tips on how to get our mind to slow down and avoid spiraling to the bad place:
 - [Mental Brakes to Avoid Mental Breaks, with Steven Hayes](#)

More Dave & Elvire

You can order a copy of their book *ACT for Musicians* here:

- [ACT for Musicians](#)

David Juncos

You can learn more about and connect to Dave online here:

- [actformusicians.com](#) (will go live in mid-September)
- [Voice Study Centre](#)
- [Hopewell Springs Counseling](#)

Elvire de Paiva e Pona

You can learn more about and connect to Elvire at her website:

- [ACT & Vocal](#)

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