

Jennifer Montone: On the Unspoken Mental and Emotional Aspects of Being a Musician

Description

When I was navigating the music world as a kid in the 80's and 90's, nobody really talked about performance anxiety.

I mean, I'm pretty sure it was something we all felt, but it was so rare to hear anyone acknowledge it any way, that I still remember the one time another student brought it up before a concert.

I was 10 years old, warming up backstage with the other kids in the studio, and one of the older "star" students arrived, and kind of jokingly let out an "aagh" and said something like "why do we all do this to ourselves?!" We all kind of smiled and laughed, and knew exactly what she was talking about, but that's pretty much where it ended.

Enduring gratitude

I haven't had any contact with this person for decades. And I never thanked her for this. But I do think this moment had a lasting impact on me. Because in that brief moment, I learned that what I was feeling was normal. That this person I looked up to, who had much more performance experience than I did, and who would go on to have a successful music career, felt the same jitters and butterflies that I was feeling too.

And knowing that you're not alone in this experience, especially when you're 10, and nearer the beginning of your musical journey, can make such a difference in how traveling along that path feels.

Have things changed?

I sense that the mental and emotional aspects of performing, teaching, and studying music are being more openly discussed nowadays. But I think it makes a real difference when we hear the discussion happening not just amongst our friends and peers, but amongst the people we look up to and admire the most as well.

So I thought it might be helpful to have this conversation with folks in the music world who have had terrifically successful performing and teaching careers, but are also really open and thoughtful about their experience of the mental and emotional sides of being a musician.

Meet Jennifer Montone

Jennifer Montone is Principal Horn of The Philadelphia Orchestra, and teaches at the Curtis Institute of Music and The Juilliard School. Jennifer is an active chamber musician, has performed as a guest artist or soloist with numerous orchestras, and the recipient of an Avery Fisher Career Grant, has also won a Grammy Award for her performance of the Penderecki Horn Concerto with the Warsaw National Philharmonic.

...and special guest co-host Catherine Cho

Today's episode is made extra special, in that I'm joined by guest co-host Catherine Cho (violin). A top prizewinner at the Hannover, Queen Elizabeth, and Montreal competitions, Catherine maintains an active performing career, serves on the faculty at The Juilliard School, and has also recently been appointed Artistic Advisor of the biennial Starling-DeLay Symposium.

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

- 3:57 – Why is playing horn such a mental game? And what do horn players worry about anyway? Jennifer illustrates the mind of a horn player by walking us through one of her recent low points – and how she recovered.
- 8:17 – How do you separate how you feel from how you sound? As in, how do you avoid getting sucked into the mental negativity spiral of assuming that if you feel bad you must sound bad?
- 11:14 – What do violinists (and string players) worry about? And whether as a horn player or violinist (or any musician, really), how can one get to a better place mentally?
- 13:50 – Jennifer describes the three ingredients that seem to contribute to an optimal mental balance during performing.
- 16:55 – A funny anecdote which illustrates how different musicians approach nerves differently.
- 18:23 – Are young musicians nowadays more open to talking about nerves than in previous generations? Or is that just because teachers are more open to providing a space to talk about this than in the past?
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23:31 – How does parenthood affect you as a musician? What are the positive impacts, and what are some of the challenges?

- 28:28 – Jennifer and Catherine describe their teaching journeys and how they've worked at the craft of teaching over the years.
- 35:07 – What kinds of notes do Jennifer and Catherine take during (or after) lessons?
- 37:29 – What it says on the refrigerator magnet that Jennifer will look to for support on tough days.
- 34:53 – The thing Catherine did one year with her studio that made a “very, very significant” change in the growth of her students that year.
- 42:51 – What is something that was really difficult for Jennifer and Catherine? And what is something that has come pretty easily?
- 45:47 – The approach Jennifer adopted when recovering from a serious jaw injury that helped her go from feeling like a player with lots of technical shortcomings, to feeling like a much stronger and more confident technical player.

Notes

- I mentioned a metronome conversation that took place in Catherine's podcast episode, which you can listen to [here](#).
- Catherine mentions teaching a community engagement seminar with cellist Natasha Brofsky. You can hear Natasha's podcast episode with the late violist Roger Tapping [here](#).
- Jennifer mentions her teacher Julie Landsman, whose podcast episode you can listen to [here](#).

More with Jennifer

You can connect with Jennifer and listen to more great interviews at her website:

- [Jennifer Montone](#)

More with Catherine

You can connect with Catherine and watch her teach a masterclass at her website:

- [Catherine Cho](#)

Also, you can learn more about (and apply to) the 2023 Starling-DeLay Symposium, to which Catherine has recently been appointed Artistic Advisor:

- [2023 Starling-DeLay Symposium](#)

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