

Do Classical Musicians Get More Nervous Than Non-Classical Musicians? (And If so, Why?)

Description

A few years ago, I reconnected with a childhood Suzuki friend, who spent most of his formative years learning the standard classical repertoire, and eventually, playing in a professional orchestra.

But then, one day, his path diverged, and he became immersed in the world of jazz, improvisation, and a range of other non-classical styles.

And now, with a thriving non-classical music career, he remarked that although he used to get really nervous on stage playing Sibelius or Paganini, the anxiety went away when he began performing in non-classical styles.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard a story like this. So I've always kind of wondered.

Is there something inherently different about classical music that makes classical musicians more anxious on stage? And if so, what could that possibly be?

Who experiences more nerves?

To find out if there is any difference in the anxiety experienced by classical and non-classical musicians, a [group of British researchers](#) conducted a survey of 244 musicians, to see if there were any patterns or trends.

The sample consisted primarily of undergraduate music students (70%), but also included a good number of professional musicians (30%). And while most were classical (48%), 27% were pop musicians, 18.4% jazz, and 6.6% Scottish Traditional musicians.

Everyone gets nervous, but...

It's not like nerves were limited exclusively to the classical folks, as students and professionals in all musical genres experienced anxiety. But, in general, classical musicians *did* report experiencing more anxiety in performance (especially solo performances) than musicians in other genres.

So why is that? Is it the formality of the performance environment? Or some feature of the music itself?

Anxiety in performance and practice

To get at this question, pianist and music psychology researcher Elsa Perdomo-Guevara conducted a [survey](#) of 625 musicians from 36 countries.

46% were professional musicians, while 27% were students, and 27% were amateur musicians.

There were 43 different instruments represented (71% were piano, guitar, voice, flute, violin, percussion, and clarinet), and in terms of genre, 71% were classical musicians, 9% jazz, 9% pop, 7% folk, and 2% rock or metal.

All in all, the questionnaire had 36 questions, intended to get a sense of these musicians' experience on stage and in the practice room.

Emotional experience during performances

As expected, there were some notable differences between the classical and non-classical musicians.

In performance, non-classical performers experienced more “elation,” “joy,” “positive arousal” (i.e. excitement, or a “good” kind of nerves), and “confidence” than their classical counterparts.

And in addition to experiencing less of these positive emotions, the classical performers also reported more “worry” and “fear.”

Five approaches to performance

To find out why this might be, the researcher asked participants to recall their last “highly enjoyable performance experience” and select from 23 different statements describing their mental or emotional approach to the performance.

Statements like “You felt connected with the audience or co-performers” or “You felt the music came to you from ‘elsewhere’” or “You felt proud of your performance.”

From this data, she found that there were essentially five approaches to performance:

1. Some had a more “**people-oriented**” approach, where the musician’s focus was on connecting with the audience or the other musicians on stage.
2. Others had a “**source-oriented**” approach, where the focus was more on letting the music speak or flow through them.
3. Some had a “**self-oriented**” approach, where the focus was more on being confident, feeling powerful, and performing up to one’s standard.
4. Then there was a “**fitness-focused**” approach, which I wasn’t entirely sure I understood, but I think

has to do with feeling like they're in good playing shape.

5. And finally, a “**magical-moment**” approach, which was simply about being in the moment and enjoying what was happening.

These approaches weren't mutually exclusive, so musicians usually had some elements of each. However, the non-classical musicians tended to have a much stronger **people-oriented** approach.

Meanwhile, the classical musicians had a much stronger **self-oriented** and **fitness-focused** approach to performance.

How to have the most positive experience on stage

All in all, the study suggests that we're likely to have the most positive performance experiences, if we approach performing with a greater emphasis on connecting to the audience, our fellow performers, or the experience of letting go and allowing the music to speak through us rather than trying to perfectly micromanage all the technical details in the moment.

Indeed, the study found that the only performance approach associated with fear, was the fitness-focus. As the author notes in her paper, these folks “did not play *for* an audience but *in front of* an audience.”

And a curious detail about practice...

Which speaks to a curious detail the researcher noticed in the data about classical musicians' experience in the practice room. Interestingly, while performing was not necessarily a positive-feeling activity for many classical musicians, *practicing*, on the other hand, was.

The author explains that

“...when considering their negative performance-related emotions in the context of the positive experiences reported during practice, the absence of valuable goals in their approaches to performance, and the higher incidence of this profile among classical performers, it can be concluded that the concerns highlighted by the classical music milieu may be so focused on the means to achieve musical excellence, namely practice, that the joys of sharing and reaching out to others that performance may afford are overshadowed and become irrelevant.”

Hmmm...could there be something in the classical music culture or tradition that somehow leads some (but certainly not all) musicians to end up at a place where they find satisfaction in the practice room, but have little desire to experience performing?

Reconnecting with the point of it all

This reminded me of an exercise Itzhak Perlman conducted at a master class some years back (whom I

always loved watching, because he always seems to be having a good time on stage). Anyhow, one of his students was playing Kreisler's [Liebesleid](#) , and he asked her to play parts of it again several times, each time approaching it differently using emotions or characters suggested by the audience. Like "sarcastic" or "furious."

Words that do not at all describe Kreisler's intention for the piece (the title translates to Love's Sorrow) – but help get us away from a "fitness-focus," and perhaps prepare us better for our actual purpose on stage.

Which was nicely captured by a sign that Juilliard's Director of Chamber Music (and Naumburg-winning flutist) Bärli Nugent once spotted on the door of a dance studio at school, which read: "[The only reason for mastering technique is to make sure the body does not prevent the soul from expressing itself.](#)"

The stress-to-fun continuum

In reflecting on all of this, I was reminded of how much I enjoyed playing with piano as a kid. And with a string quartet. Or full orchestra. I even remember Suzuki "play-ins"¹ as a fun event that I'd look forward to.

All of this ensemble playing could lead to profoundly transcendent, and thrilling experiences – probably even more for me than the listener (which might not be ideal, but that's a topic for another day...).

That's not to say that they were not stressful too, but on the stress-to-fun continuum, they certainly felt much more balanced, if not tilted to the fun side of things.

Take action?

So are there things that could be tweaked on the "classical music culture" level, that might help more of us experience the kind of elation or joy on stage that non-classical performers seem to enjoy?

Like, as a small example, might performing feel more positive if our very first performances occurred as part of a larger group or ensemble, rather than by ourselves or with a pianist? I'm not sure, but now I'm definitely curious about what Dr. Suzuki's thought process and rationale might have been for the play-in (BTW, does anybody know? Please share in the comments if you know the back-story.).

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