

How to Make the Most of a Dress Rehearsal

Description

Ever notice how easily toddlers tend to get distracted? A new toy, shiny object, or interesting sound enters into their awareness, and they're off in a new direction.

Under pressure, our brains behave just like little hyperactive toddlers.

When we are faced with a stressful situation, our brain kicks things up a notch. Our neural activity literally speeds up, allowing us to think more quickly, process more information, and make more accurate decisions related to our safety.

This may be great for survival, but this heightened neurological state isn't particularly conducive to performance or audition success. Why not?

Time Distorts

Well, since we are not accustomed to this speed of cognitive processing, it can feel as if time is distorted. You may feel that you are dragging even though you are actually playing a faster tempo than normal or you may over-anticipate entrances and come in a split-second too early. You may even decide to spontaneously try a different fingering or change the location of a breath (with unfortunate results) even though you have meticulously worked out these details in the practice room.

Your Focus Goes Everywhere Except Where You Need It

Even worse, your hyperactive brain will divert precious attentional resources to any new and different stimuli that it happens to pick up around you. Sudden movement in the periphery, how the heels you are wearing feel different on the pedals than your normal shoes, how the hall sounds different now that it is filled with people, how that bagel you had for breakfast feels lying undigested in your stomach, and all sorts of other completely irrelevant factors.

It goes without saying that performing your best requires a tremendous amount of concentration and focus. In fact, based on the hundreds of studies I read during the writing of my dissertation, I am inclined to say that it is the single most important factor in optimal and peak performances.

How do you solve this issue?

Obliviousness Training

Part of the solution involves training yourself to be more oblivious to irrelevant external stimuli so that you

can reserve more of your brain's processing capacity for details that are relevant and helpful to your performance.

Unfortunately, performance situations are by their very nature new, different, and shiny. Coughing, sneezing audience members. Cell phones ringing. Uncomfortable or unfamiliar concert clothes. Unfamiliar surroundings. Unusual time of day. The nerves, expectations, etc. All this feels new and different because it only happens in a performance, and is not part of our day-to-day practice and rehearsal experience.

How can we learn to become more oblivious to irrelevant details during a performance?

The Power of Habituation

One of the most powerful tools in the psychological toolbox is a phenomenon called habituation. It's another way of saying that our brain gets bored with familiar stuff and starts to tune it out. When I moved to NYC for graduate school, I was coming from a small college town in Ohio, where pretty much the only thing you heard at night was the sound of crickets. I remember feeling a little overwhelmed at first, not being able to shut out the din of 24/7 NYC traffic, car alarms, people shouting, etc. But after a few weeks, I didn't notice it anymore and could sleep through the night like a baby no matter what sort of craziness was happening outside my window.

This is a well-known psychological principle that you can use to your advantage. In fact, this is what the dress rehearsal was designed for — to acclimate yourself to the many differences that exist between practice and performance. Unfortunately, most of us don't really utilize this strategy as it was intended, nor as often as we should. The dress rehearsal generally occurs only once per concert, and it's often not much different than a normal rehearsal — it just happens to be the last one before the performance so it gets the word "dress" slapped in front of it.

As a general rule, keep in mind that the greater the number of differences between performance and practice, the more likely it is that these differences will pose a distraction and cause your performance to suffer.

Personalize Your Obliviousness Training

Make a list of all of the possible differences you can think of between performance settings and practice settings. Any detail is fair game. Clothes, shoes, time of day, energy level, nervousness, audience factors, etc.

Think about which ones really throw you off, and see how many of these relevant differences you can begin integrating into practice situations in order to adjust to it (or "habituate") in advance. Some days you might try practicing in a dress or tux. Other days you might play through without warming up as much as you'd like. Play at different times of the day, in different rooms, in different temperature settings, etc.

I once heard about how this violinist who was the concertmaster of a major US orchestra only practiced his orchestra music sitting down, and always just to the right of the stand — exactly as it would be on stage

where he has to share the music with his stand partner. Furthermore, when warming up for the concert in his dressing room, he always arranged the stand and chair so that it faced in the same geographic direction as his stand and chair on stage.

Whether you think this is taking it too far or not, my point is that the more things we can adjust to in advance, the fewer distractions we will encounter, and the more likely it is that our attentional resources can be devoted to the music and the elements of our performance that actually matter.

Bottom line, when you are beginning the countdown to an audition or performance, be creative and find ways to make practice settings more like true performance settings so you can begin to eliminate the number of distractions you are likely to encounter when the moment of truth arrives.

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