

The Importance of Keeping Things Simple Under Pressure

Description

Whenever I went on a trip, I used to pack all of my most important documents and possessions in my violin case. Wallet, passport, keys, traveler's checks, sunglasses, music, phone, every last critical thing I could cram in would go there.

Friends used to question this practice, pointing out that if I ever lost my violin, I'd really be up a creek.

While that was certainly very true, I figured I was pretty much screwed if I lost my violin anyway, and found it much easier to focus all my energies on keeping that one super important possession safe, rather than splitting my attention ten different ways in order to keep track of ten different important things in ten different places.

Contrast that with my wife, who has been misplacing sunglasses for as long as I've known her (and there was even that time she accidentally flushed her sunglasses down the toilet). Sure it's cute and endearing and all, but with her attention constantly divided between keeping track of her wallet, phone, keys, and sunglasses, the sunglasses inevitably drift to the fringes of her attentional capacity, and get left behind in the most random places.

What does this have to do with performing better under pressure?

Keep reading...I promise I'll pull it all together eventually.

Pickpockets steal more than your wallet

Magicians, illusionists, and sleight-of-hand artists are keenly aware of the limits of our attentional capacity, and have mastered the art of stealing our attention.

Watch the [following video of master pickpocket Apollo Robbins](#). You know in advance that he is going to be stealing some items, but it's still a challenge to keep track of everything as it unfolds.

So how'd you do? Did you catch everything? (If you found this intriguing, check out the video put out by The New Yorker where [Apollo reveals more about how he manipulates attention](#); and read [Apollo's fascinating profile](#); and watch [one last entertaining video of Apollo at work](#).)

You knew what was going to happen, but it all happened too quickly, and there was too much to pay attention to, right?

We encounter the same problem on stage when the stakes are high.

We can juggle only so many balls at a time

In a high-pressure performance or audition, there are dozens, if not hundreds of things that vie for our attention – most of which are not going to help us play better. The nerves and jitters we feel. The new environment we are in. The other people around us, our own doubt and fears, the acoustics, the temperature of the hall, the need to bow, smile, and maintain positive body language – the list is endless. With so much going on around us, it's easy to get frazzled, to feel scattered, and become overwhelmed by it all.

On one hand, that's what [proper dress rehearsals](#) and [preparation](#) are for. But even with all the preparation in the world, it's not necessarily the case that we will naturally maintain our focus on the most important ingredients for peak performance.

If we want to be assured of staying focused on the most impactful, task-relevant, and performance-enhancing factors, we have to take a bit of time to figure out what these might be in advance.

Take action: create a performance cue

Think back to your best performances and those times when you have played your very best. What factors were common to each of those occasions – as in, what do you recall as being the most important ingredients that led to your great performance? What were you thinking about? Focusing on? Doing physically?

Alternately, what's the single most valuable piece of advice your teacher gave you in regards to performing your best? As in, if you just focus on and prioritize this one thing, you'll more than likely end up having a pretty great performance.

For me, the key was simply remembering to keep my fingers in the left hand light, and to stay in the moment by singing or actively shaping the line in my head. So my performance cue would have been "light fingers; sing".

I have a friend and colleague, who has observed that she plays her best, and all the technical details just work themselves out somehow when she makes it a priority to trust her body to produce what she hears in her head. Or as she puts it, when she "leads with her ears" and trusts herself, everything sounds so much better. So her performance cue might be something like "lead with your ears; trust yourself."

Assuming you've put in the work in the practice room, and you've worked out the intricate details, nuances, and technical complexities of the repertoire you're playing, you have earned the right to keep it simple, let go, and trust your body to naturally produce what you have trained it to do through all those hours in the practice room.

Keeping it simple may be scary at first, but with a bit of practice and experimentation, I think you'll enjoy the calm and mental quiet that come with this – not to mention the increased level of your playing.

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