

A Few Things Every Musician Ought to Know About Stage Fright

Description

Think back to your last big audition or performance. What do you remember feeling, moments before you walked on stage?

Heart pounding in your chest? Butterflies in your stomach? Cold, clammy hands? Feeling light-headed, tight, weak, or shaky?

Perhaps you had trouble concentrating? Felt your mind racing? Doubts and fears popping into your head? A vague sense that something bad was going to happen? Kicking yourself for not practicing more?

Sound familiar?

Is It Just Me?

Well, you're certainly not alone. In fact, you're in good company. Pablo Casals, Arthur Rubinstein, and Luciano Pavarotti (to name a few), are reported to have struggled with performance anxiety at various points in their careers.

For what it's worth, anxiety is pretty common even amongst professional musicians. In one survey, 96% of the orchestra musicians surveyed admitted to anxiety before performances. In another survey of 48 ICSOM orchestras, 1 out of every 4 musicians said that stage fright was a problem for them.

"Ok, fine, but the fact that Rubinstein struggled with nerves isn't going to help me win an audition."

Good point...but there's more.

Will It Ever Go Away?

Well, there's some good news and some bad news.

Bad news is that unless you're a robot, zombie, or just don't give a crap, you will probably experience some degree of anxiety every time you go on stage. *"Say WHAT? You mean I have to suffer through this for the rest of my career?"*

Well, the good news is that no, you don't have to let your nerves control you, and you most definitely don't have to suffer.

Have you ever had a performance when everything just "clicked?" Where you felt like you were in total

control, everything just flowed easily, and you sounded great (at least until you started thinking about how well everything was going)? You may have heard of this referred to as “the zone.” Well, this magical state pretty much requires that you experience some degree of anxiety. No anxiety, no zone.

If you ever get to a point in your career where you start feeling nothing and walk on-stage as if it’s no different than going for a walk in the park (i.e. it’s just another day, another venue, and you’re just mailing it in), your audience is probably not going to get the best performance you have to offer.

Let me tell you a story that will help illustrate my point. My senior year of college, a few of us were preparing for a competition. To give us an opportunity to run through some of our repertoire, my teacher set up a small concert in one of the recital halls.

I decided to play the most challenging piece on my list – Wieniawski’s F# Minor Violin Concerto. For those of you who aren’t familiar with it, the piece starts out with parallel 10ths, and just gets trickier from there. Needless to say, it takes a lot of energy to stay focused through all three movements. I was feeling pretty good about it on this particular day, but was still pretty nervous. Not freaking out, but definitely a little anxious.

When it was my turn to play, I walked out on stage, smiled, and as I turned to look out into the audience, for a second, I saw nobody. What? Was this intermission? Wait, no. Sitting in the back right corner of the hall were two elderly women. My pianist stifled a giggle.

Instantly, my nerves vanished, and my heart sank. I didn’t know what to do. I seriously contemplated turning around and leaving the stage. It was finals week, after all, and I was tired and burned-out from a long semester. I really didn’t feel like playing this monster of a piece for just two people. I didn’t see the point. I tried my best to care, but I couldn’t.

As a result, the performance felt just like a casual rehearsal with my pianist. I was calm, relaxed, and didn’t experience any anxiety whatsoever. But I also sounded dull, uninspired, and ultimately, very forgettable. The musical equivalent of soggy Rice Crispies.

If you want your performance to really reach out and grab the audience, you kind of need that adrenaline to give it that extra pop and sizzle that is missing in the practice room. The problem is not adrenaline itself, but not knowing how to control, manage, and channel it effectively into your performances.

Why Do We Experience Stage Fright?

So why do we experience anxiety in some situations and not in others? If the two people sitting out in the audience were Isaac Stern and Leon Fleisher, my anxiety probably would have gone through the roof. What gives?

Well, the biopsychosocial stress model is probably the best explanation of why we experience performance anxiety.

“Anxiety is the product of a complex and dynamic cognitive appraisal process which actively balances an individual’s perceptions of resources, situational demands, and internal and external sources of feedback prior to, during, and following performances. One’s appraisal of the demands of a performance situation (e.g. task difficulty, consequences of failure, others’ high expectations, and the perceived importance of the outcome) are compared with one’s unique individual characteristics (e.g. self-efficacy, trait anxiety, skill level, degree of preparation, and past experience), resulting in an overall assessment of the degree to which the situation poses a threat.”

What does all that mean? Basically, your brain tries to calculate the odds that you’ll nail this performance, and the odds that you’ll fall on your face. If your brain decides that you are probably going to do really well, you won’t feel anxious. Excited perhaps, but not anxious.

On the other hand, if your brain thinks there is a good chance you could crash and burn, you will probably be feeling those butterflies.

So What Can I Do About It?

Well, here are some things I’ve tried that didn’t help so much...

- Trying not to care is not the answer (good luck trying to fool yourself anyway!).
- Some take supplements like kava (I tried this a few times; didn’t notice a difference).
- I used to deprive myself of sleep the night before, thinking that my being tired would balance out the adrenaline a bit. Will probably just make you cranky and tired on top of being anxious.
- I tried drinking lots of chamomile tea before performances, even though I don’t much care for tea. This just made me paranoid about having to go to the bathroom at the worst possible time...
- A friend told me that I should eat bananas, so I even tried this a few times. It just made me feel a little sick to my stomach (I’m weirdly finicky about banana temperature and ripeness).
- Another friend told me to eat turkey explaining that turkey has the amino acid tryptophan in it, which supposedly makes you sleepy. But are you really in the mood to chow down on bananas, turkey, and tea 30 minutes before you go on stage?

Fact is, I haven’t seen any research evidence that the potassium in bananas makes any difference in your anxiety level before performing, and if you’re going to load up on tryptophan, it would be more efficient to eat egg whites (4x as much tryptophan as turkey), cod (3x), or parmesan cheese (2x) instead of turkey. But here too, I’ve not seen any concrete evidence that tryptophan reduces performance anxiety, let alone make you perform better.

“But wait! What about all of those people who swear that bananas, turkey, tea, etc. make them feel calmer? How do you explain their experience?”

Actually, they are probably telling the truth. These things probably do make them feel calmer. But not

because of any special chemical ingredient in these foods. It's called the placebo effect. Statistically, about one out of every three people who try something, will swear that it worked – even if it was completely bogus. Wikipedia has a nice page on the [placebo effect](#) if you'd like to read more about it.

But here's the real kicker. A lot of people assume that reducing performance anxiety is a good thing, but in reality, the research suggests that this is actually not how things work. In fact, if you look back on your own performance history, you'll probably be able to think of performances when you were *too* calm and *too* relaxed, and saw your playing suffer as a result.

Even more people (experts included) believe that a *moderate* amount of anxiety is best, and that too much or too little anxiety is bad. But...this isn't completely true either. Some folks actually have their best performances when they're pretty amped.

The key takeaway being, that reducing your anxiety or shooting for a moderate amount of anxiety may make you more *comfortable*, but not necessarily help you play better. This is why trying to relax is often not the answer. Being more comfortable being uncomfortable, is perhaps the best approach – as violinist Midori explains [here](#) .

6 Mental Skills

As you engage in more practice performances, there are a number of mental skills that can help with preparing for the unique pressure of performances and auditions. Like...

1. [Practice effectively](#): Learn how to practice the right way
2. [Manage nerves](#): Learn how to control your body's response to adrenaline
3. [Build confidence](#): Learn how to build confidence
4. [Become fearless](#): Learn how to play more courageously (vs. playing tentatively and worrying about mistakes)
5. [Attention control](#): Learn how to quiet the critic in your head, stay in the moment, and focus past distractions
6. [Resilience](#): Learn how to stay motivated, become mentally tougher, and recover quickly from mistakes and setbacks

Once you develop these skills, you will no longer be quite as concerned about stage fright or performance anxiety. You may not be 100% comfortable, but it won't matter so much. Your performances will speak for themselves – and they'll feel more like an exciting challenge and a thrill than a threat!

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