

Why Worrying about Shaky Bow Just Makes Things Worse (and What You Could Focus on Instead)

Description

The summer after my sophomore year in college, I flew to Jerusalem to meet some old friends, with whom I'd be participating in a chamber music bootcamp of sorts. An intense couple weeks of daily master classes with musicians like Isaac Stern – and many others whom I never imagined I'd ever have the opportunity to meet.

Naturally, I wanted to make a good impression. But I was pretty intimidated by their presence, and the level of the other students there. I felt like a total imposter. As if I had somehow lucked into a situation that I didn't deserve to be in.

It was probably the longest sustained period of pressure that I'd ever experienced. So maybe it's not surprising that about a week into the workshop, in a performance on live national radio...I suddenly had an episode of shaky bow.

This was not the annoying-but-manageable jitters, but the full-blown, mortifying, what-the-heck-is-happening-to-my-arm shakes that make you feel helpless, and only get worse the harder you try to control them.

It got so bad that I ended up having to cut the last note of the piece short (the [2nd movement of the Schubert B-flat Major piano trio](#), if you were curious), so that I wouldn't end the movement with an unwritten spiccato.

I couldn't look at anyone afterwards. But when I confessed to a friend in the audience, he said he hadn't noticed anything.

And when listening back to the recording, I have to admit that unless I listen for it, it's probably not the thing that stands out most about the performance.

Which makes me wonder...is it possible that our nerves are a lot less noticeable to others than we think? Kind of like how listeners (and even other musicians) generally [notice much fewer of our mistakes](#) than we think they do?

And is there anything we can do to stave off such episodes of shaking?

Fear of negative evaluation

Social anxiety is not the same thing as performance anxiety – but the two share some common ingredients. One of which is the fear of being evaluated negatively by others.

And we know from research on social anxiety, that in embarrassing or anxiety-inducing situations, *both* socially anxious and non-anxious people have many of the same physiological reactions. Like blushing, an increased heart rate, or sweaty hands.

However, those who struggle with social phobia tend to be more *hypersensitive* to their physiological symptoms, and worry that other people will think less of them if they are sweating, shaking, blushing, and appear to lack confidence in the situation. Much like how in those final few bars of the Schubert, the only thing I could think about was how the other students would think less of me when they saw how nervous I was.

Put simply, a big part of social anxiety (and I think performance anxiety too) is *anxiety about being anxious*.

Singing on camera

A [2007 Australian study](#), for instance, compared the subjective¹ and objective² experience of 21 women who were high in fear of negative evaluation (FNE), and 21 women who were low in FNE, as they sang “Old MacDonald had a farm” on camera. A task, that for obvious reasons, made *all* participants feel pretty embarrassed and anxious.

Subjective vs. objective experience

Not surprisingly, the participants who were most concerned about being evaluated negatively, reported feeling more anxiety about singing than those who were less concerned with being evaluated poorly. The folks high in fear-of-negative-evaluation perceived more of an increase in trembling and blushing while singing too.

But here’s where it gets interesting.

While the high fear-of-negative-evaluation participants may have *felt* like they were shaking more and getting red in the face, their physiological responses to the situation – i.e. heart rate, breathing, sweating, and facial temperature – were actually *no different* than those in the low fear group.

In other words, participants in both groups experienced embarrassment and anxiety while singing, but the participants who were more worried about being evaluated negatively, were more preoccupied with their symptoms of anxiety and embarrassment, and experienced more anxiety than those who were less concerned with how they’d be evaluated.

Kind of like how my mind was so consumed with the horror of what was happening to my bow arm, and stressing about how I would lose whatever respect I might have had from the other musicians in the

audience, that my anxiety instantly [went up to an 11](#) .

Are shakes actually normal?

The fear of shaky bow stuck in my head for a while. But a few years later, I played with a friend who always seemed to be at ease and in control on stage. Who never seemed to get nervous. Until one day, when performing in a chamber music group together, I looked over and noticed that their fingers were shaking. Quite noticeably.

Of course, you couldn't tell from listening to them play, and they looked just as engaged and focused as ever. Which made me respect them even more, as I realized that they were probably just as nervous as I was. They just didn't let the nerves faze them.

But how...?

Don't try to control your muscles!

Indeed, it seems that thinking about the shakes, or worrying about them in advance only makes us more nervous. Which just makes the shakes more likely to happen. And there's a ton of evidence which suggests that one of the worst things we can do under pressure is to monitor, or try to control our muscle movements. Which might work ok in the practice room, but disrupts our coordination and timing in performance.

How, for instance, focusing on the *trajectory* of a tennis ball over the net leads to [more accurate shots](#) than focusing on the *contact point* of the ball on the racket.

Or how focusing on the sound of the piano, leads to [more accurate playing](#) than focusing on one's fingers.

Or how watching a video while running leads to [greater running efficiency](#) than focusing on one's breathing, or the movement of one's muscles.

Ah-hah! So does this mean that Netflix could be our new practice buddy? Or that we could eliminate shaky bow if we could watch TV while performing? Kind of like the headphones scene in [The King's Speech](#) ?

Ha. I wish.

But then again...sort of, maybe?

Narrative thinking

Imagery is often discussed as a practice tool. A way to augment our physical practice and build confidence.

But it's something you can do *while* performing too.

Perhaps this is why some performers find it helpful to engage in “[narrative thinking](#).” Where instead of obsessing about one's fingers, breathing, or racing heart, you immerse yourself in telling a story with the notes, dynamics, articulations, colors, rhythms, etc..

Likewise, every single minute of our coachings that summer were devoted to exploring the music in more detail. Not once did intonation, technique, ensemble – or my shaky bow – come up.

For instance, we spent the better part of a week working on getting the character and spirit of the opening of the first movement just right. At one point, I remember the faculty debating a range of adjectives amongst themselves, eventually agreeing on the word “panache,” and the image of [Cyrano de Bergerac](#), riding on a horse, as the one that they felt best captured how we should approach the opening (listen to Stern/Rose/Istomin playing it [here](#)).

Night and day

And when you compare our performance on Day 1 to our performance on the final day, the difference was night and day. From our vibrato, to our articulation, bow strokes, bow distribution, phrasing, pacing, dynamics – it was like listening to a completely different group playing.

That final performance was also much less nerve-wracking, and way more fun. Perhaps in part, because I had gotten used to playing in front of these folks.

But I'd like to think that Cyrano had a little something to do with it too. After all, it took a **lot** of mental energy to bring these images to life, leaving me with very little mental bandwidth to worry about whatever shenanigans my arm muscles and sweat glands were up to in the moment.

Which in hindsight, was probably the entire point of the workshop. And an enduring lesson that has stuck with me. And maybe narrative thinking won't eliminate shaky bow entirely, but maybe we don't have to let it define our performance either. Because at the end of the day, I suspect performances are a lot like what Maya Angelou once said about people: “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

References

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