

Music Performance Anxiety

The Role Of Teachers In Addressing Anxiety In Adolescent Students And Beyond

Although most music teachers have personal experience with performance anxiety, few have a clear picture of how to guide students to end the cycle of anxiety. Studies show it is of utmost importance that this lack of knowledge is rectified and performance anxiety is not overlooked. This point is supported by a research study conducted by Lydia Fehm and Katia Schmidt, where 86 percent of the adolescent musicians surveyed called for more assistance in managing performance anxiety.¹ The following analysis of available research will provide teachers with the necessary tools to begin addressing performance anxiety in their studios and to better equip students for successful performance experiences.

PART ONE: SYMPTOMS AND CAUSES

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)

Definition

Before addressing available treatments and teaching strategies to combat performance anxiety, it is important to have a clear understanding of the symptoms, causes and contributors of performance anxiety.

Paul G. Salmon provided what has become one of the most commonly used definitions of performance anxiety: "Music performance anxiety is the experience of persisting, distressful apprehension about and/or actual impairment of performance skills in a public context, to a degree unwarranted given the individual's musical aptitude, training and level of preparation."² Another recognized definition is provided by Dianna T. Kenny: "[Music performance anxiety is] the experience of marked and persistent anxious apprehension related to musical performance that has arisen through specific

anxiety conditioning experiences, and which is manifested through combinations of affective, cognitive, somatic and behavioral symptoms.”³ Both researchers focus on the apprehension that accompanies music performance anxiety and the resulting symptoms and performance impairment.

Anxiety is the body’s natural response to perceived threats, whether real or imagined, and triggers the innate “fight-flight-or-freeze” mechanism controlled by the autonomic nervous system. While in this heightened state of arousal, the body experiences physiological symptoms that can interfere with performance, behavior is often modified, and the mind is more susceptible to negative cognitive processes and self-doubt. These three categories of symptoms—physiological, behavioral and cognitive—all contribute in varying degrees to the negative effects of performance anxiety. It is important to remember that these symptoms are the result of anxiety, rather than the underlying cause.⁴

Symptoms

Because of their outward manifestations, physiological symptoms are often easily detected by both students and teachers. This category includes symptoms such as excessive sweating, shaking voice, trembling hands, racing heart, difficult or altered breathing, dizziness, nausea, muscular tension and increased thirst. These symptoms can interfere with performance and have a significant impact on a student’s success, but they are also relatively simple to combat. Various treatment options for physiological symptoms will be discussed at length below.

Behavioral symptoms refer to any changes in a student’s normal behavior patterns and can be observed by teachers, parents or fellow performers. These include pacing, frequent trips to the restroom or water fountain, talking much more or less than usual, speaking quickly and fidgeting. Some behavioral changes appear in the days and weeks leading up to a performance and can result in a student avoiding practice and engaging in procrastination, or practicing significantly more than usual.⁵

Cognitive symptoms include negative thought patterns and self-talk, self-doubt, distorted thinking, catastrophizing, worry of mistakes or memory lapses, and fear of embarrassment.⁶ At the root of these symptoms is fear; in his book on performance anxiety, Eric Maisel provides a list of potential fears: “fear of criticism, fear of diminished self-esteem.... fear of failure.... fear of memory loss.”⁷ According to Hee Sun Chung, anxious thoughts can bombard musicians both before and during a performance.⁸ Although they are often difficult for teachers and even students to recognize, these cognitive symptoms can be extremely detrimental to performance success. A performer’s thought patterns can determine the intensity of performance anxiety and have a significant impact on the maintenance of symptoms.⁹ Unaddressed cognitive symptoms can lead to physiological and behavioral symptoms, as worry and anxiety have physical manifestations.¹⁰ Margaret S. Osborne and Kenny state, “Negative cognitions appear to have a more important role in causing performance disruption than physiological or behavioral components of performance anxiety.”¹¹ Clearly, cognitive symptoms cannot be ignored by students and teachers, nor can they be taken lightly.

Causes And Contributors

Although the manifestation of performance anxiety varies based on the individual, researchers and pedagogues do agree on some common causes and contributors. These factors affect students in different ways and to varying degrees of severity.

Preparation

In his book *The Musician’s Way*, Gerald Klickstein discusses a category of contributors to performance anxiety, which he labels “Task-Related Causes.” His list includes “Overly challenging repertoire; insufficient practicing; weak practice skills; and lack of performance skills.”¹² Learning and performing repertoire that is above a student’s ability level can increase anxiety. The feelings of inadequacy that may result from unrealistic challenges can lead to a greater risk of cognitive symp-

toms and self-doubt. More time spent practicing is not always the answer to combatting music performance anxiety, but poor preparation can be a large contributor to anxiety in some cases. Klickstein points out that in some individuals, avoidance of practice is the result of performance anxiety and can be seen as a behavioral symptom.¹³ Whether the result of anxiety or lack of discipline, poor preparation can greatly affect the success of a performance. Regardless of the performance strategies employed, there is no substitute for quality practice and preparation.

Trait Anxiety

Trait anxiety is a large contributor to performance anxiety. This refers to an individual's general level—or baseline—of anxiety that is experienced in everyday life. According to Heather Winter Hunnicutt and A. Scott Winter, "The body has a natural alarm system deep within the temporal lobe of the brain called the amygdala. Scientists believe the amygdala of people with high trait anxiety is far more reactive than those with low trait anxiety."¹⁴ Because the general anxiety level of individuals with increased trait anxiety is already at a high level in routine activities, they experience extremely heightened levels of anxiety when placed in performance settings. In *Psychology for Musicians*, Andreas C. Lehmann, John A. Sloboda and Robert H. Woody suggest that professional musicians are more likely to suffer from high trait anxiety when compared with individuals in other disciplines. They also put forth the idea that "an anxious personality results from an accumulation of life experiences."¹⁵ Trait anxiety should not be confused with state anxiety, which is anxiety resulting from stressful or threatening situations.

Gender

Gender can also be a contributor to performance anxiety. Females generally experience higher levels of performance anxiety than their male colleagues. This is due in part to women's tendency toward high trait anxiety. Hunnicutt and Winter attribute this pattern to women "being more emotionally

invested than men, taking even small failures personally, and internalizing personal struggles."¹⁶ In a study conducted by Charlene A. Ryan that surveyed 26 sixth-grade piano students, it was found that the girls experienced a greater increase in heart rate immediately before performance compared to the boys.¹⁷

Introversion

Introversion has also been found to contribute to the occurrence of music performance anxiety. Individuals who can be categorized as introverts often experience anxiety or apprehension in social contexts. In extreme cases of introversion, social phobias can be diagnosed. Researchers often consider music performance anxiety to be a type of social phobia. In these cases, performers are overly concerned with how listeners will judge their performance.¹⁸ Lehmann, Sloboda and Woody put forth the argument that musicians have been "conditioned to be introverts," and that this is the result of the "thought processes of musicians as they practice, prepare for a performance, and eventually take the stage."¹⁹ In a study conducted by Jason P. Thomas and Ted Nettelbeck, it was found that extraversion is negatively correlated with music performance anxiety.²⁰ Whether it is the result of personality traits or due to the demands of life as a musician, introversion has been found to increase the potential for individuals to experience symptoms of performance anxiety.

Social Phobia/Fear Of Negative Evaluation

In her book *The Psychology of Music Performance Anxiety*, Kenny cites fear of negative evaluation as a manifestation of social phobia and music performance anxiety. Individuals suffering from social phobia may fear being judged as awkward or boring in social contexts such as parties, and in the same manner performers fear being judged as incompetent or less than perfect by their audience. In 2002, Osborne and Franklin documented a strong correlation between the thought processes of musicians with high musical performance anxiety and individuals who suffer from social phobia.²¹ One psychologist deemed fear of

negative evaluation to be the “most important psychological contributor to the onset of performance anxiety.”²² This is especially true in adolescent musicians, because “during adolescence, cognitive capacity undergoes rapid development, moving from the ability to understand only the material world and the present, to a capacity to engage in abstract thinking and to project oneself into the future.”²³ This newly achieved level of thought leads adolescents to fear the potential for negative evaluation if a performance does not meet a certain standard of perfection. The fear of negative evaluation is integrally tied to the act of performance for musicians, because evaluation and critique is experienced in lessons, competitions and public performances.²⁴

Competition

Although fostering a competitive spirit in the piano studio can motivate students to practice and achieve goals, it can also contribute to the potential of performance anxiety in some individuals. The desire to defeat competitors—whether in a friendly studio setting or in an actual competition—takes the focus off the music and places it on the performer’s abilities. This pattern of self-absorption increases anxiety and worry, and leads students to place inordinate weight on performances. According to Julie Nagel, in some cases “guilt may develop over wishing to outplay one’s colleagues, leading to anxiety about self-assertion on stage or in other situations.”²⁵

Perfectionism

Perfectionism has been found to have a strong correlation with music performance anxiety. On the surface, one would assume perfectionism would lead to better preparation and performances, but research shows the opposite. According to Hunnicutt and Winter, this is because perfectionists set unattainable goals for themselves and subject themselves to stress whenever these goals are not met. These individuals experience greater levels of anxiety in everyday life, as well as in performance, because of their

mindset of continually striving for perfection.²⁶ Kenny highlights this paradox and cites research “showing that individuals who are high in perfectionism and who tend to be cognitively preoccupied with attaining perfection in their performances may be more vulnerable to impaired performance, have difficulty concentrating on their performance, and experience higher dissatisfaction with their performances.”²⁷ Perfectionism results in the focus being removed from the music and, instead, being placed solely on the outcome of the performance. Individuals with perfectionistic tendencies place extreme pressure on themselves to meet high standards and deal with feelings of personal failure when they are unable to meet these self-imposed goals. Perfectionistic tendencies are formed and prolonged by thought patterns using words like “should,” “ought,” “need” and “must.”²⁸ Perfectionists also are likely to equate their self-worth with the outcome of performances and view a performance as either a complete success or a failure, without any middle ground. According to Kenny, this renders them “prone to chronic anxiety and depression, as well as embarrassment and shame.”²⁹

Low Self-Esteem

The sense of self-worth that both perfectionists and musicians in general invest into performances can easily lead to low self-esteem. Dale Reubart states, “Whatever the original source, low self-esteem as a pianist is ultimately the outgrowth of a bad experience in performance. One learns performance anxiety from the performance.”³⁰ In a study conducted by Osborne and Kenny, it was found that students who had experienced a negative performance reported higher levels of music performance anxiety.³¹ Nagel points out that performance anxiety can threaten a student’s sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.³² Low self-esteem can also be carried over into performance from other areas of life—whether it is a student’s home life, academic struggles or social/relational issues. Hunnicutt and Winter define self-esteem as “a psychological term for a person’s own

The use of systematic desensitization as a method of reducing performance anxiety is built upon the premise that anxiety is a "learned response that can be unlearned."⁴² Christopher Arneson described systematic desensitization as a treatment "which aims to gradually replace the response of fear and anxiety with an alternative response."⁴³ According to Nagel, "Systematic desensitization involves introducing the student, through verbal imagery, to increasingly anxious recital-type situations and then helping him/her cope with reactions and feelings towards these imagined situations."⁴⁴ Teachers should begin by describing easy performance situations, such as playing for one person in a small room, and gradually work toward larger performance venues and audiences. As the performance situation is presented verbally, students should allow

themselves to experience the emotions and feelings that are elicited, and work through the causes behind the anxiety. The student should not try to move to the next step until any anxiety has been worked through at the current stage. Teachers must be prepared for a great deal of repetition for some students.⁴⁵ During this process of describing performance situations to a student and eliciting their emotional and cognitive responses, teachers should listen for “negative and unproductive verbal responses” contributing to increased performance anxiety.⁴⁶ By helping students recognize these negative thoughts as cognitive symptoms that can intensify anxiety, teachers can begin teaching students productive coping strategies.⁴⁷ Systematic desensitization can also take on the form of a sequence of actual performances, called *in vivo* practice, with an increased audience size, a more anxiety-inducing environment or a more important performance each time. Teachers can guide students through this process by providing a variety of performance experiences, beginning with extremely low-pressure situations. To be a beneficial and positive experience, teachers should ensure performance situations are well sequenced, the student receives positive constructive feedback and the student is approaching each performance with a positive attitude and healthy thought patterns.⁴⁸ These practice performances should begin as informal events, but by the end of the sequence, they should reach a level of formality to elicit and imitate the manifestations of anxiety that will be present in the actual performance.⁴⁹ According to Alison Maeker Garner, “With continued exposure to performing, a musician gradually gains practice coping with the negative symptoms associated with anxiety, eventually becoming more inured to them.”⁵⁰ Systematic desensitization works hand-in-hand with cognitive restructuring.

Cognitive Restructuring

Cognitive restructuring (or relabeling) focuses on treating performance anxiety by changing the negative or unproductive thought patterns of performers. Kenny

defines cognitive restructuring as “a process whereby negative, unproductive, or catastrophic thinking is replaced with more rational, useful ways of understanding problem situations.”⁵¹ Through this process, teachers can help students recognize and identify these faulty cognitions and irrational beliefs, and replace them with positive thought patterns, also known as self-talk. According to Hunnicutt and Winter, “Your job is to point out when a negative thought is unrealistic and self-defeating, and then to draw out of her what a reasonable restatement of the facts would be.”⁵² Nagel believes this substitution of positive cognitive habits can lower performance anxiety levels.⁵³ Chung offers a three-stage procedure for cognitive restructuring: “(a) discovering one’s automatic thoughts, (b) recognizing the consequences of these thoughts, and (c) substituting more adaptive thoughts for dysfunctional ones.”⁵⁴

In *Notes from the Green Room*, Salmon and Meyer break the process of cognitive restructuring into four steps. In step one, students engage in “self-monitoring,” where they notice how they interpret thoughts and feelings. Step two takes this process deeper and seeks “to gather information about these thoughts and attitudes.”⁵⁵ The third step involves seeing yourself in light of this self-awareness and determining how your interpretation of events and feelings affects anxiety levels and self-image. Lastly, the student must change unproductive attitudes and thought patterns and reshape perceptions of themselves as performers.⁵⁶

These thought patterns—whether healthy or unproductive—are generally referred to as “self-talk,” or the inner monologue. Self-talk can be thought of as the “commentary that regularly runs through everyone’s minds.”⁵⁷ This commentary can have a profound impact on the confidence or anxiety experienced by performers both before and during performances. Salmon and Meyer point out that “Self-talk is usually considered a sign of self-consciousness, because it reflects a tendency to think *about* what one is doing rather than simply being caught up in the activity.”⁵⁸ There are three potential areas of focus when

performing: self, audience or music. A performer's focus can be determined by their self-statements, with self- and audience-focused thoughts being the most detrimental to performance. Cognitive restructuring seeks to center the focus and attention of the performer on the music. Kenny writes, "Since much of the attentional focus on self and audience involves thought processes that are described as catastrophizing, shifting attentional focus from the self and the audience to the music will have the joint effect of making more cognitive resources available for the cognitive challenge of performing the work, but also reducing the number of catastrophic thoughts."⁵⁹

Catastrophic and unproductive thoughts can be centered on a variety of things, but among the most common cited by Chung are worry about memory lapses, concern over tension, fear of disapproval from the audience, lack of confidence in performance ability, and concern about coping with anxiety.⁶⁰ Before these negative self-statements can be exchanged for positive thoughts, students must recognize them as unhealthy and irrational. Once this step has been accomplished, students can begin restructuring their thought patterns and refuting negative self-statements. Instead of allowing thoughts to center on what could go wrong or the anxiety itself, students should focus on positive self-statements, such as "I am well-prepared for this performance," or "I am excited about sharing this piece with my audience." Salmon and Meyer suggest that self-talk should be centered on the idea that performance is a choice and that on at least some level the performer has a desire to share the music with the audience.⁶¹ Although it is unproductive to allow negative thoughts to remain in one's mind, it is also unhelpful to work to suppress these thoughts; instead, replace them with positive thoughts or simply dismiss them as irrational and allow them to slip out of the mind. This is what Donald U. Robertson and Kevin E. Eisensmith refer to as "developing a Teflon mind."⁶² According to Lehman, Sloboda and Woody, "Constructive self-talk can help musicians learn to accept

the physical and emotional responses that naturally accompany a public performance and come to appreciate this kind of arousal as potentially facilitating."⁶³ Although productive self-talk focuses on expecting positive outcomes, it is important to maintain a realistic perception of one's abilities.⁶⁴ Affirmations and positive self-statements serve two purposes: (1) they reduce anxiety in the moment, and (2) over time they can redefine a performer's perception of himself, leading to decreased anxiety in general.⁶⁵

Progressive Relaxation

Anxiety and stress often cause the body to become tense, and this tension can, in turn, both prolong and intensify performance anxiety. Developed by Edmund Jacobson, progressive relaxation techniques focus on releasing this tension and bringing the body into a state of rest. According to F. J. McGuigan, "Jacobson's research showed that if one wishes to relax the mind and the body, one must relax all of the complexly interacting systems of the body. One does this by directly relaxing the skeletal musculature, whereupon the central nervous system relaxes along with the various components of the autonomic system."⁶⁶

The first step in progressive relaxation is to deepen the breathing, and maintain slow, long inhalation and exhalation patterns that are consistent and easy. Focusing on the breath can also quiet the mind and allow for better focus and concentration.⁶⁷ Once students find a rhythm in the breath and are able to feel comfortable closing the eyes, they are prepared to move forward in the relaxation process. To begin releasing muscular tension and entering a state of relaxation, they should alternate between tensing different muscles and then releasing them. It can be helpful to start at the feet, and slowly work up the body, moving on to new sets of muscles only once relaxation has been reached in the current muscles. Maisel provides an example of the detailed inner monologue that can direct you through progressive relaxation: "*Relax your forehead. Relax the area around your eyes. Relax the corners of your mouth. Listen to the sounds surrounding you but do not concen-*

trate on them. Feel your arms and legs become heavy.”⁶⁸ In *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*, authors Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman and Matthew McKay include step-by-step instructions for the basic procedure of progressive relaxation. They suggest beginning with the fists, and moving up the hands and arms toward the face, tensing and relaxing the forehead, eyes, jaw and lips. From here, they move to the neck and then down toward the shoulders, chest, stomach and back. They end the sequence with the lower body, focusing on the muscles of the legs and feet.⁶⁹

Salmon and Meyer point out three benefits of progressive relaxation: 1) you become aware of the different sets of muscles in the body; 2) it fosters the ability to identify both tension and relaxation; and 3) it promotes relaxation.⁷⁰ In a research study examining the effectiveness of progressive relaxation as a treatment for musical performance anxiety, D. R. Lund found that it led to a reduction in anxiety in instrumental musicians and that performance levels improved as a result.⁷¹ Research has also shown that to experience the full range of benefits from progressive relaxation, musicians should maintain a regular practice of relaxation techniques under normal levels of anxiety.⁷²

Flow

Performance anxiety can generally lead to a focus on self, loss of control, lack of focus, worry about the outcome and lack of confidence. A field pioneered by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the state of flow is the complete opposite experience as that of performance anxiety. As described by Joann Marie Kirchner, “In a state of flow, an individual’s attention is completely absorbed by the task at hand, with no room left for irrelevant thoughts, whereas in musical performance anxiety, the person is usually distracted and has difficulty focusing.”⁷³ Lehman, Sloboda and Woody explained it as “the experience of being fully engaged in an intrinsically rewarding activity.”⁷⁴ Some general characteristics that promote a state of flow include balancing the challenge with the skill level; being totally absorbed in the task at hand; having clear

goals for the performance; receiving immediate feedback; experiencing a sense of control; lacking self-consciousness; and losing awareness of time.⁷⁵ When a performer experiences a state of flow, they are so completely absorbed in the music there is no room left for negative or unproductive thoughts, and there is a sense of calm.⁷⁶

Self-confidence, expression, experience goals and the ability to maintain focus have been found to be predictors of experiencing flow.⁷⁷ To remain focused and distraction-free, performers must learn to remain in the present moment, pace their energy use to maintain focus over long periods of time, overcome distractions through adversity training and quiet the mind to prevent it from wandering. According to Kirchner, “Adversity training sustains the duration of focus by combining all the distractions: visual, auditory, and sensory, which are competing for our attention. After layering on these distractions, one at a time, the person should attempt to focus with all the distractions occurring simultaneously.”⁷⁸ This practice will prepare performers to maintain focus and concentration in performance settings.

Goal setting is an important element of flow potential, because goals help performers focus on what is important, lend direction to preparation, strengthen persistence and motivation, and promote creative practice strategies. Goals should be specific, and students should set both short-term and long-term goals.⁷⁹ Students should create realistic goals for themselves that can be objectively measured and have a logical progression. Kirchner writes, “Clear goals facilitate the flow experience since it is difficult to become immersed in an activity which one does not know needs to be done, or how well one is doing.”⁸⁰ Performance goals should be specific to each piece and student and include areas of both strength and weakness.

To experience flow, it is crucial that the performer’s ability matches the level of difficulty and that the music is not overly challenging. According to Lehman, Sloboda and Woody, “if the music being performed is too difficult, musicians will expend much attention to

physically producing the music—especially the ‘trouble spots’ in a piece—and not have the mental resources available to monitor feedback.”⁸¹

Yoga

Over the past 40 years, yoga practice has received a great deal of attention for its positive benefits on depression, anxiety, mood, concentration and performance. According to Sat Bir S. Khalsa et al., “Evidence of the psychophysiological benefits of long-term yoga practice supports its use as a therapeutic treatment for many medical conditions.”⁸² In addition to the postures and movements of yoga, anxiety reduction is accomplished through yoga’s “meditation, control of attention, breathing, and deep-relaxation exercises.”⁸³ Research studies have documented the benefits of yoga practice in managing the symptoms of musical performance anxiety in adult musicians.

Khalsa et al. conducted a study to determine whether adolescent musicians could also experience these anxiety-reducing benefits of yoga. The study took place in conjunction with the Boston University Tanglewood Institute in 2007 and 2008, and lasted for six weeks each year. The program attendees were split into an intervention group who took part in yoga classes several times a week and a control group who received no intervention. Yoga was found to be an effective treatment of performance anxiety in adolescent musicians, with the intervention group showing drastically reduced levels of trait anxiety and music performance anxiety at the end of the six-week program. These findings are consistent with previous studies surveying the effects of yoga on adult musicians.⁸⁴ Yoga practice can also reduce the potential for performance-related musculoskeletal disorders that, according to Khalsa et al., can plague up to 17 percent of adolescent musicians.⁸⁵

Performers can benefit from cultivating a daily yoga practice, as well as utilizing

pre-performance yoga sequences. An energizing sequence could include poses such as Tadasana (Mountain pose) and Helicopter pose, while a relaxing sequence might combine Pranayama (deep breathing), neck turns and twists, and easy seated and standing twists.⁸⁶ Teachers can encourage parents to enroll students in yoga classes or take advantage of the many available online resources.

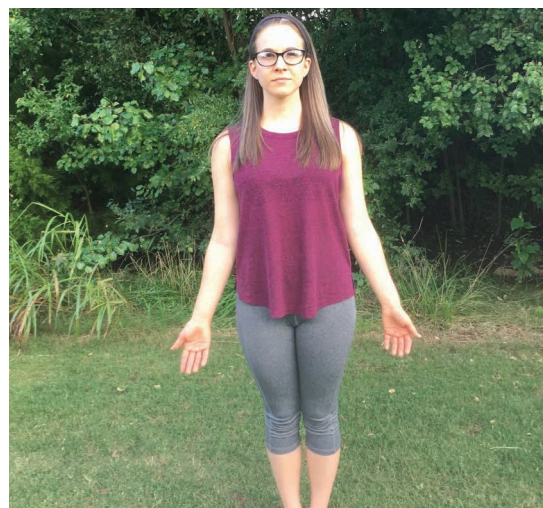
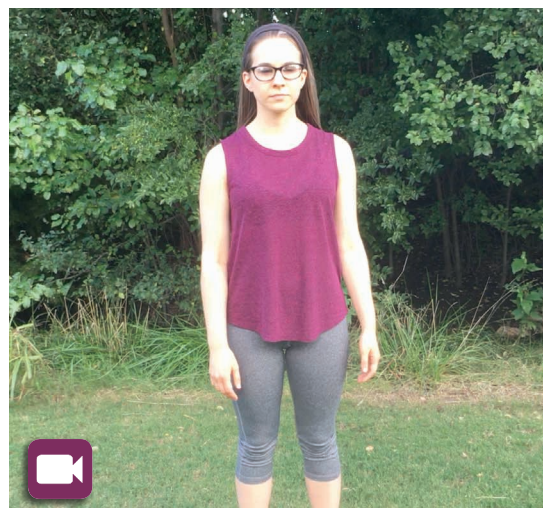


Figure 1: Tadasana (Mountain Pose).



Video 1: Helicopter Pose.



Figure 2: Seated Twist.

Improvisation

A study conducted by Robert Allen has shown that free improvisation may be a useful treatment for students suffering from musical performance anxiety. One of the contributing factors to performance anxiety in music students is the expectation that the score carries—"a preconceived musical product whose interpretation is predetermined."⁸⁷ Free improvisation eliminates these preconceived expectations of the audience and leaves the music completely up to the discretion of the performer.⁸⁸ In this study, Allen compared the anxiety levels of students performing classical repertoire versus free improvisation. As anticipated by the researcher, the students performing standard repertoire experienced higher levels of anxiety than those performing an improvisation. This supports the idea that anxiety is reduced when the audience is "perceived to be without the ability to judge the performances based on predetermined outcomes."⁸⁹ Allen posits that free improvisation "may encourage individual musicians to explore different aspects of musical creativity as a way to overcome stress, nervousness, and other symptoms that are manifestations of anxiety."⁹⁰ Teachers should be open to exploring the benefits of free improvisation with students suffering from performance anxiety.

Deep Breathing

Performance anxiety often interferes with normal breathing patterns and leaves performers short of breath. Because of the nature of their instrument, pianists often fail to recognize this compromised state, whereas vocalists and wind players are acutely aware of its negative impact on performance quality. The shortness of breath occurs when "the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system begins to work harder and causes symptoms such as increased heart rate, respiration, dizziness, and muscle tension."⁹¹ Breathing training can reduce levels of stress and anxiety and promotes concentration and a state of calm. Focusing on the breath can combat performance anxiety, as demonstrated by a 2010 study conducted by Yu-Huei Su et al. In this particular study, the researchers investigated the effectiveness of relaxation breathing training for reducing performance anxiety in third- through sixth-grade music students. Relaxation breathing training is described as "a process of deep abdominal breathing that encourages subjects to inhale from the nose and to exhale from the mouth."⁹² Researchers discovered that there are significant immediate benefits to relaxation breathing training and that performance anxiety is reduced when used directly before a jury. This study proves that relaxation breathing training is useful for pre-college musicians, as well as their older counterparts. Relaxation breathing training has not been found to provide long-term reduction of music performance anxiety levels.⁹³

There are two different types of breathing patterns: chest breathing or abdominal breathing. Chest breathing generally has a faster rhythm and is shallower. This type of breathing is associated with stress and anxiety and, in extreme instances, becomes a case of hyperventilation. Abdominal breathing, such as the breathing pattern used in relaxation breathing training, fills the abdomen with oxygen and encourages relaxation of the diaphragm. Much deeper and slower than chest breathing, the abdominal breathing pattern promotes relaxation and reduces stress. According to *The Relaxation*

and *Stress Reduction Workbook*, abdominal breathing “is the easiest way to elicit the relaxation response.”⁹⁴ There are several possible breathing exercises that can be used to reduce tension and anxiety. Leading students through these exercises during normal levels of anxiety will equip them to utilize the breath when faced with anxiety-provoking situations.

The first possibility is called “letting go of tension.” In this exercise, students think “breathe in” while inhaling through the abdomen, hold the breath for a moment and then slowly release the breath while thinking “relax.” This sequence can be repeated for several minutes, or as long as is necessary to reach a relaxed state.⁹⁵

The next option is “mindful breath counting,” and uses the breath to maintain focus and release tension. Using slow abdominal breathing, students count their exhalations, one through four, and then begin once more with the count of one. For example, “inhale...exhale (‘one’)...inhale...exhale (‘two’)... inhale...exhale (‘three’)...inhale... exhale (‘four’)...inhale...exhale (‘one’)...and so forth.”⁹⁶ Other thoughts will inevitably intrude on this attempt at focusing solely on the breath. When this happens, the leader should instruct students to acknowledge the distraction and return the mind to the task at hand—counting the breaths.

A final breathing exercise has been called both breath training and breathing retraining, and is adapted from work by Masi. This exercise is especially helpful in moments of high anxiety or panic. To begin the pattern, exhale deeply to make room in the lungs for a deep breath. As they prepare for the exercise, encourage students to both inhale and exhale through the nose to help regulate breathing and prevent hyperventilation. As the student inhales through the nose, instruct them to slowly count to three, pause for a moment, and then exhale out through the mouth, once again counting to three. Depending on the student, the inhalations and exhalations can be lengthened to four or five counts each.⁹⁷

Imagery/Mental Rehearsal

Imagery can be a contributor to performance anxiety, as well as a method of treatment. When employed in a detrimental manner, imagery involves students imagining that they will have a poor performance or that a catastrophe will occur. Positive imagery, which is also referred to as mental rehearsal in some specific settings, involves visualizing what a confident, successful performance feels like. Teachers can walk students through guided visualization, and lead them to create different mental pictures to help combat performance anxiety. Students can imagine a calm, peaceful scene—whether a favorite room or environment, a setting in nature or with loved ones. Once this mental image has been established, students can be directed to let go of any worries or anxieties and begin picturing a successful performance. According to Maisel, “Providing yourself with verbal cues, you can guide yourself step-by-step through a successful performance, picturing yourself acting or singing with confidence or presenting your message with great flair.”⁹⁸

Another potential use of imagery in performance preparation is visualizing the character, emotions and story that the music is expressing. Imagery can also help students make deeper emotional connections with the music and thereby increase focus and diminish the power of anxiety.⁹⁹ Garner suggests that students imagine the smells of the concert hall, the feel of the keys and the sound of the instrument to engage all of the senses.¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, imagery or mental rehearsal serves to improve a student’s focus and confidence. As Kenny writes, “Mental rehearsal is intended to program the body and mind for the special conditions of performance. It also serves to occupy the performer’s thoughts in a more constructive, rather than destructive, way.”¹⁰¹ In the beginning stages, students will need to be guided through the process of visualization, and they can slowly move toward engaging in the practice on their own.

Performance Preparation

There are several steps involved in preparing for a performance. One must first

invest time in quality practice and study of the music to be performed. To completely internalize a piece, especially one that is to be performed by memory, the learning process must go beyond the tactile approach and engage other memory types. According to Garner, "Practice that supports sensory perception, mindful repetition, and continuous investigation into the compositional and performance facets of the piece is essential to the successful acquisition and retrieval of a musical work."¹⁰²

A method of mindful repetition is "chunking," where a piece is divided into smaller sections that are isolated for practice purposes. The chunks should be repeated with careful attention to aspects of form, notes, rhythm and harmony. This process creates musical cues, which help students to retrieve during performance the music that has been committed to memory.¹⁰³

Another important stage in the learning and memorization process is analysis of the piece. This step may vary widely for students of different levels. For young students, analysis will take place in the lesson, with the teacher serving as a guide and facilitator. Aspects to cover include hand position changes, form, melodic contour, and distribution of melody and accompaniment between the hands. It can also be helpful to have students draw a pictorial representation of the phrases in the piece, indicating direction of melodic lines and the like.¹⁰⁴ When working with more advanced students, they should be taught to analyze the form and key areas, harmonic structure, melodic patterns, fingerings and other aspects relating to the piece. This will enhance their understanding and strengthen memorization of the music.

Students should be taught to engage in self-evaluation during practice to learn and progress between lessons. Being able to identify errors and weaknesses in their own playing will increase productivity and allow them to learn music more quickly. Recording run-throughs and performances can help students learn to accurately assess their playing, and can also be used to combat performance anxiety. The pressure created by recording

imitates some of the symptoms of performance anxiety students will face in actual performance settings. This tool can be used to solidify helpful coping techniques such as positive self-talk, breathing, progressive relaxation and more.¹⁰⁵

When students are preparing for an important performance, it is valuable to provide them with low-pressure performance opportunities. These performances can incrementally increase in pressure, moving from playing a piece for a friend, to playing for a small group and eventually playing for a studio or performance class. This gradual process will provide students with a chance to become comfortable performing the piece and learn which coping strategies work best for them.¹⁰⁶

PART THREE: THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN ANXIETY MANAGEMENT

Role Of The Teacher In Addressing Anxiety

The close bond of the teacher-student relationship that results from private music lessons is comparable to the relationship of a psychologist and client. This relationship can be a powerful tool in a student's battle with performance anxiety. There are times when students should be referred to a mental health professional, but in many cases the teacher can serve as a guide and resource for students.¹⁰⁷ Nagel writes, "Although music teachers should not try to be psychologists, it can help immensely if they are psychologically aware, particularly of developmental milestones, current stressors in a student's life and their own vulnerabilities."¹⁰⁸

For the full potential of this relationship to be experienced, Chung sets out five responsibilities for teachers to accept. First, the teacher must be able to identify in each student the causes and contributors of performance anxiety and understand how their personality and life story influence practice and performance. Secondly, it is the teacher's responsibility to engage students in open discussions about performance anxiety and its causes and treatments. Third, the teacher must take on the role of encouraging a healthy sense of self-esteem in each student by "giving balanced criticism with positive

reinforcement and positive performance experiences with a supportive audience.”¹⁰⁹ Fourth, the teacher must embrace his or her position as a role model for students to follow, both in life and in performance. It is important that teachers exhibit healthy attitudes toward performance for students to imitate. And lastly, teachers must make it their responsibility to ensure students are adequately prepared to face the anxiety that naturally accompanies performance and teach coping strategies that are individually tailored to each student.¹¹⁰

The unique teacher-student relationship cultivated through private music study provides teachers with a platform for their influence to reach past the music. They have the opportunity to encourage students to learn important traits such as discipline, self-motivation and healthy self-esteem. This privilege is accompanied by the responsibility to view each student as a whole person, rather than simply a musician, and help students face the complexities of life. As Nagel writes, “Similar to the parent, the music teacher is on the front line for the infinite variety of issues that accompany a child’s physical and psychological development.”¹¹¹ A common struggle in the studio is performance anxiety, and teachers must be prepared to help students understand and cope with anxiety in a healthy manner. According to Nagel, “It is crucial for teachers to help children tolerate a multitude of contrasting feelings, especially defenses about perfectionism, and to give permission to make mistakes so that feelings of reality-based competence can be enhanced.”¹¹²

Teaching students about performance anxiety is an important part of guiding and nurturing them toward a healthy performance mindset. As presented previously, even young children may suffer from performance anxiety, and a teacher is remiss to send even the youngest students into a performance without adequate preparation. When entering a performance setting, Ronda Cole insists, “Students should know that they may experience heightened energy and awareness.”¹¹³ In discussing children and perform-

ance anxiety, Barbara Schneiderman presents her belief that “children can be spared this trauma and, indeed, experience the opposite—the character building and rewarding joy of *giving* through performance—if they are prepared appropriately.”¹¹⁴ Conversations about performance anxiety also give students the opportunity to learn that they are not alone in their anxiety, and this understanding can bring relief.

Teacher Qualities

Just as no two students are identical, every teacher brings a unique personality and teaching style to the studio. There are, however, some observable teacher qualities that are recognized to produce confident performers. As Schneiderman writes, “Every exchange between teacher and student presents an opportunity to cultivate or diminish self-respect in the student; either to call forth the uniqueness of that individual and help him feel his own strengths and know his own opinions, or set up arbitrary external authorities and snip off the budding artist.”¹¹⁵ Teachers must recognize the important role that teacher-student interactions play in a student’s progress, reaching far beyond how the music is taught.

In her dissertation, Chung lists seven important qualities that equip teachers to address performance anxiety in students. First, a sense of collaborative partnership between teacher and student must be fostered, where the student plays a part in decision-making and goal setting. It is also essential that the teacher “be an open, trusting, and warm partner who communicates to the students.”¹¹⁶ In addition to teaching students how to be successful, the teacher must be prepared to help students recognize and correct unhealthy thought patterns and coping skills. Teachers must possess discernment to identify the widely varying causes and contributors of performance anxiety in individual students and determine which coping strategies will be most effective. After selecting coping strategies, teachers must be willing to invest time and energy into helping a student overcome his or her struggles with anxiety.

Teachers must be proactive about entering into conversations about performance anxiety and openly share their own struggles and victories with anxiety. Lastly, teachers can help students form a healthy relationship with performance by engaging in conversations about positive and realistic performance mindsets and goals, and encouraging students to take an active role in the discussion.

Teachers who approach student interactions with empathy and compassion can help alleviate potential struggles with performance anxiety. George Robert DeForest states that “empathetic teaching seems to be the single most important factor in helping students build a solid base of self-esteem.”¹¹⁷ In the same way, apathetic and abusive teaching can increase anxiety in students. Abusive behaviors are anything that can “belittle, humiliate or frighten the student or others.”¹¹⁸ Nagel points out the positive impact that a teacher who is a compassionate listener can make on a student, whether or not they are able to supply answers to every situation that may arise.¹¹⁹ DeForest also points out that teachers who are flexible in their approach with each individual student are effective in preventing and combating anxiety. When a student feels like they and their teacher are a team and they are not alone in overcoming anxiety, performance anxiety will hold less power over them.

Nagel suggests that open communication regarding anxiety should be a common occurrence in the studio.¹²⁰ She goes on to write, “Discussing performance anxiety in the teaching studio in an intelligent, sympathetic, and informed manner is reassuring and emotionally calming. Such discussions indicate to students that teachers can handle tough topics and feelings, and these discussions convey the belief that students can too.”¹²¹ It is also effective to engage in conversations about performance anxiety in studio class settings, providing students with a sense of community and discrediting the belief that they are the only performers who struggle with anxiety.¹²² Teachers who have personal performance experience and are able to both explain and demonstrate concepts have a

positive impact on anxiety.¹²³ In *The Psychology of Music Performance Anxiety*, Kenny cites studies showing that teachers who are “enterprising and friendly” produced students with high levels of musical success.¹²⁴

The Teacher’s Role In Addressing Perfectionism And Low-Self Esteem

As established previously, perfectionism and low self-esteem are two major contributors to performance anxiety. Teachers must be prepared to address these issues in the studio and help students develop and maintain healthy approaches to performance. The teacher who is psychologically aware and listens carefully to each student will be in a better position to help students work through underlying issues and mistaken beliefs.

Nagel emphasizes the importance of teaching students that perfection in music performance does not exist. She suggests that “when students talk about playing ‘perfectly,’ the teacher can help best by discussing how ‘perfection’ is both magical and impossible.”¹²⁵ Schneiderman holds a similar belief, asking, “How many of us have been to an error-free professional performance? It is rare. Yet we can be moved, inspired, uplifted just the same.”¹²⁶ Both Nagel and Schneiderman agree that anxiety is immediately reduced when students begin to understand that perfection is not required for a moving performance. Students should not be taught to believe that quality preparation aims for anything less than perfection, but rather that perfection is both an “unworthy and distorting” performance goal. Schneiderman goes on to say that as a healthy performer you “do not go into a recital focused on perfection. In fact, this attitude is kin to an emotional straight-jacket and is likely to produce exactly the opposite effect—tension and blunders.”¹²⁷ Nagel suggests that teachers “encourage excellence” rather than perfection.¹²⁸ As teachers we must help students understand and accept that mistakes are a part of performance and that a less than perfect performance will not bring rejection.¹²⁹ Schneiderman sums it up well: “Mistakes are a part of life—a well-documented, normal, natural element

of human behavior. Why in music-making should people demand of themselves 100% perfection and fear anything less when we know we all continually commit errors in all aspects of daily life, language, for instance."¹³⁰ Performance anxiety will be reduced as we guide students toward a healthy acceptance of mistakes.

Teachers can unknowingly send students the message that success and affirmation require perfection through careless comments and a lack of positive feedback after less-than-perfect lessons and performances. Schneiderman encourages teachers to examine their teaching language and adopt a positive approach to correcting errors. Ask students to listen for even eighth notes rather than fixing an incorrect rhythm, or encourage them to think about how the notated articulation adds to the character. She urges teachers to "provide an affirmative objective, don't ask for an absence of negative or errors."¹³¹ This takes the attention off perfection and instead focuses on the music, lessening the effects of performance anxiety.

Teachers should always be quick to praise and affirm students, while still maintaining honesty. Students should never be lied to, and effort and progress that does not exist should not be praised. However, positive feedback and reinforcement should be used even when students may not have met expectations. Marcie Zinn writes, "Make sure students know they are doing well *at all times*. Ensure success through honest verbal persuasion."¹³² As suggested by Andrew S. Berman, teachers should be conscientious about how often they interject with corrections or criticism when a student is playing, as this can increase anxiety.¹³³ After a student presents a piece, Zinn encourages teachers to take the approach of "this piece is really good, now let's make it even better." She believes this method will promote decreased levels of anxiety and an increased desire to listen to suggestions.¹³⁴

In an effort to help students focus on the music, rather than the presence or absence of errors, Cole suggests that teachers tell their students what they are listening for in their

playing. She also writes, "If young children develop the habit of looking for what they like in a performance then they are more likely to expect that when they perform, people will listen for what they enjoy."¹³⁵ This outlook can free students from the hold of perfection and reduce the effects of performance anxiety. Discussing each piece of music is a critical element to overcoming and preventing performance anxiety. Whenever students have a firm grasp on the musical message of a piece and are focused on sharing that message with their audience, the spotlight will be on the music rather than on their own playing. To have something to share, a student must have a solid understanding of the piece they are performing. It is important that teachers take the time to introduce students to the composer and where they fit in history, the style and genre of the piece, the form, character and any other elements that will shed light on the interpretation of the piece. Less mature students cannot be expected to formulate informed, musical approaches to a piece without guidance, so teachers must consistently address these concepts in lessons.

In an article exploring the origins of performance anxiety, Nagel includes a quote from a reader regarding a previous article in the series. She beautifully captures an effective teacher's approach to addressing perfection:

I stress ALWAYS that we are making music: this is not a test; making music is not an athletic event to see who is the fastest, etc. It is about expressing something through sound.... I tell the students that the music already exists, that the composer endeavors (imperfectly) to notate it, that we endeavor (imperfectly) to realize this already extant music. The "imperfect" is a given. The only questions are, "Did we make music, share something, express something?"¹³⁶

Music teachers have a unique opportunity to instill and cultivate a healthy sense of self-esteem in students, but the opposite is

also true. When a teacher is overly critical or cold, students are more likely to develop low self-esteem regarding performance, which in turn, increases the likelihood of performance anxiety. Maisel cites three results of what he terms "toxic criticism": "It harms our self-image, reduces our motivation, and causes us to fear criticism in the future."¹³⁷ DeForest found that students with above-average music performance anxiety reported negative and critical interactions with their teachers, whereas students with below-average performance anxiety "reported having teachers who made them feel special and supported in their endeavors to become better musicians."¹³⁸ According to Berman, it is crucial that students "believe that you believe in them, and that you'll continue to do so even if they bomb."¹³⁹

To combat low self-esteem, students must be taught to believe that every performer has value and that by bringing their own life experiences to the music, they have something unique to say. Understanding this truth can have a deep impact on a student's approach to performance and how they view themselves. Schneiderman stresses the importance of healthy self-esteem when she writes:

Indeed, it is essential for every human being to believe in his personal ability in order to learn or achieve any capacity. Confidence cannot be swallowed like a vitamin pill or injected as a last-minute counter measure. It must be fed from a deep well of self-esteem that grows gradually over months and years, evolving with beneficial life experiences.¹⁴⁰

Teachers can feed into this "well of self-esteem" each week by treating students with respect, helping them recognize their own strengths and encouraging individuality. As students progress in their musical studies, they should be taught to think and learn independently, rather than depending solely on their teacher. This transition from dependence to independence can also instill healthy self-esteem and confidence in the

student.¹⁴¹ Hunnicutt and Winter suggest that when helping students overcome low self-esteem, the teacher's role is not to give them a false perception of themselves, but instead "to empower the patient [student] with the capacity to appreciate and enjoy his or her strengths while being able to realistically address his or her weaknesses."¹⁴² For instance, if a student struggles with memorization, the teacher can help him identify this weakness, and they can work together to find memorization methods that work for that individual student.

Some students who suffer from poor self-esteem may avoid practice or performance because the experiences force them to confront perceived weaknesses. This can lead to inadequate preparation, which in turn, increases performance anxiety. If a teacher observes this behavior pattern in a student, it is crucial that the issue is addressed. One method of overcoming practice avoidance is to assign graded task assignments. In a psychological setting, these are "step-by-step plans for management of an overwhelming task or problem that are generated during therapy and carried out by patients as therapy homework assignments."¹⁴³ Graded task assignments can help students structure practice time in a productive and confident manner and decrease the feeling of being overwhelmed. The student should be involved in the development of practice plans and goals.¹⁴⁴

Assigning short, easily mastered pieces can also help build confidence in students, especially those who feel defeated when pieces take long periods of time to perfect. According to Edmund Dawe, "This gives students a sense of accomplishment and musical security as they confront performance jitters."¹⁴⁵ When approaching a performance, it is important that the teacher offer positive and encouraging feedback. This will help the student enter the performance with greater confidence and self-assurance.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated throughout the course of this article, students may begin

experiencing musical performance anxiety at a very young age. This requires that teachers proactively address anxiety from the outset of music study, preparing students to cope with anxiety in a healthy manner. Anxiety in pre-college musicians can often be treated in similar ways as that of their adult counterparts, but the teacher plays an important role in the recognition and treatment of anxiety in young students. Whereas the majority of college and professional musicians could implement the treatments discussed independently, when working with pre-college musicians this burden falls primarily on the teacher. This necessitates that teachers of pre-college musicians have a greater awareness of the symptoms of anxiety in students and a working knowledge of available treatments. ◀◀

Notes

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