

## **What Can Musicians Learn from Sport Psychologists?**

Vanessa Cornett

Overview: In 2013-2014 I took a research sabbatical to study mental skills training and performance anxiety management for musicians. Among the most helpful people I interviewed were a group of sport psychologists. Interestingly, two of them were working with musicians.

### **Wait, I'm not an Olympic superhero. How are musicians like athletes?**

They require long hours of practice.

They develop a highly refined physical technique.

They engage in competitive activities.

They perform in front of a critical audience.

They require intense skills of focus and concentration.

They perform best when alert and energized, but not overly anxious.

They rely on highly developed mental skills, cultivated either consciously or unconsciously.

The greater the mental resources, the more powerful tools a performer has at her disposal.

### **How are musicians at a disadvantage, compared to professional athletes?**

Musicians often focus on the technical or physical aspects of training and development.

(Athletes include mental skills and other mind-body methods from early on in their training.)

Musicians practice alone more than they perform in front of others.

(Athletes perform in front of others more than they practice alone.)

Musicians do not have the luxury of having a coach to assist them during each practice session.

(Athletic coaches often train in sport psychology and mental coaching methods.)

The good news is that many researchers have studied the peak performance skills of elite athletes, and their findings include a wealth of information that can benefit musicians.

Sport psychology is oriented in cognitive-behavioral psychology, which seeks to change unhealthy patterns of thinking or behavior for improved performance and wellbeing.

### **Some sport psychology practices can be modified to benefit performing musicians:**

- Situational control
- Detachment training
- Attentional focus
- Externalizing thoughts and emotions
- Emotional awareness
- Adversity recovery
- Structured and rehearsed self-talk
- Mental imagery
- Automatic execution
- Anxiety management
- Goal setting and systems planning
- Post-performance analysis

## Online resources for music teachers

### [MTNA Wellness Resources](#)

[MTNA Statement on Wellness](#) (PDF)

[Wellness Resources for the Musician](#) by Linda Cockey (PDF)

[Strategies for Coping with Performance Anxiety](#) by Gail Berenson (mp3)

Webinar: [Injury Prevention: What Musicians Can Do](#) by Christine Guptill

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy Committee on Wellness for the Pianist

[Wellness Curriculum Outline](#)

[College Music Society webinar series](#) on Musician Health and Wellness

[Mindfulness Practice for Students and Faculty](#) by Vanessa Cornett

[Mental Health Courses: Challenges and Opportunities](#) by Julie Jaffee Nagel

[A Musician's Guide to the Brain](#) by Lois Svard

[Athletes and the Arts: What Musicians Can Learn From Athletes](#) by Randall Dick and John Snyder

### [Athletes and the Arts](#)

[Performance Anxiety Fact Sheet](#) (PDF)

[A Mindful Approach to Warm-up for Musicians](#) (PDF)

### [Ohio Center for Sport Psychology](#)

Blogs:

[The Bulletproof Musician](#)

[Julie Jaffee Nagel](#)

[The Musician's Way](#)

Please contact me with your own experiences with mental skills training or sport psychology techniques. I would love to hear from you!

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“The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness.”

— Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*