

Confronting the Fears: The Teacher's Role in Combating Performance Anxiety

Clara Boyett, NCTM | Baylor University
claraboyett@yahoo.com | claraboyett.wix.com/pianist

Performance Anxiety: “The experience of persisting, distressful apprehension about and/or actual impairment of performance skills in a public context...” (Salmon, 1990)

- ❖ Combination of physical, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms
- ❖ Performance anxiety is not an isolated issue, but involves the *whole* person

Contributing Factors:

- ❖ Perfectionism: unrealistic expectations and critical self-assessments
- ❖ Introversion: social phobia increases chance of performance anxiety
- ❖ Trait anxiety: general level of anxiety
- ❖ Gender: females are at a higher risk
- ❖ Poor preparation: no substitute for quality preparation and practice
- ❖ Comparison and competition: focus on what the audience will think

Why does it matter?

- ❖ In a study conducted by Fehm and Schmidt, 86% of students called for more help from teachers
- ❖ As teachers who care about our students as both musicians and as individuals, we **must** address performance anxiety in the studio, and not treat it as something to be ashamed of

Young Children and Performance Anxiety:

- ❖ Young children suffer from performance anxiety
- ❖ Early training and anxiety may have a significant impact on their future
- ❖ Ignoring performance anxiety in young children can be harmful in development

Self-Esteem and Anxiety:

- ❖ Low self-esteem = high performance anxiety
- ❖ Teach students to replace negative thoughts with positive self-thoughts
- ❖ Remind them constantly that every performer has value
- ❖ Empower students to recognize their strengths and realistically assess weaknesses
- ❖ Empathetic teaching has been shown to build students' confidence
- ❖ Assign short, easily mastered pieces to help build self-confidence and decrease performance anxiety

Magical Elusiveness of Perfection:

- ❖ Perfectionism: unrealistically high expectations and obsession over minor mistakes
- ❖ “Perfection is both magical and impossible.” Dr. Julie Nagel
 - Talk to students about the balance between these two ideas, and that while we should strive for a perfect performance, it is not a standard to hold ourselves to
- ❖ Teach students to focus on making, expressing, and sharing music
- ❖ Help your students accept that mistakes are a normal part of life

Teacher as Therapist:

- ❖ Music teacher/student relationship = psychologist/client relationship
- ❖ Get to know your students and keep communication open
- ❖ Listen closely to what they say about performance anxiety
- ❖ Help students understand that performance anxiety is common and they are not alone
- ❖ Be a role model and share your own struggles/victories with performance anxiety
- ❖ Help students shape realistic and positive performance goals

Teaching Tips:

- ❖ Discuss the composition, character, etc. of *every* piece
- ❖ Give detailed practice instructions
- ❖ Offer students specific feedback in a positive, constructive manner
 - Use “do” instead of “do not,” and avoid words such as “must” or “should”
 - Try to use positive wording to correct mistakes whenever possible
 - Be liberal and realistic with praise and affirmation
- ❖ Challenge irrational beliefs and self-doubts
- ❖ Provide students with low-pressure performance opportunities, such as studio classes
- ❖ Do not use the threat of upcoming performances in a negative manner to motivate students to practice

Performance Preparation:

- ❖ Help students prepare thoroughly and intentionally
 - Structural analysis, piece dissection, and mental rehearsal
 - Familiarize them with the performance space/instrument whenever possible
- ❖ Guide them in setting specific, realistic performance goals
- ❖ Encourage students to practice performing for friends and family
- ❖ Help students focus on conveying a message by developing images or stories for each piece, and not obsessing with perfection

“We must not assume severe stress as a given in performance.”

Barbara Schneidermann

For Further Study:

- ❖ “When Every Performance is Molto Agitato,” Berman
- ❖ “Anxiety in Musical Performance: Literature Review and Implications for Piano Pedagogy,” Hee Sun Chung
- ❖ “Performance Anxiety in Gifted Adolescent Musicians,” Fehm and Schmidt
- ❖ *The Musician's Way: A Guide to Practicing, Performance, and Wellness*, Gerald Klickstein
- ❖ *Psychology for Musicians: Understanding and Acquiring the Skills*, Lehmann, Sloboda, and Woody
- ❖ “Do Perfect Performances Exist?,” Julie Nagel
- ❖ “Psychological Issues in the Studio,” Julie Nagel
- ❖ “Reducing Students’ Stage-Fright: Can Music Teachers be Psychologists?,” Julie Nagel
- ❖ *Confident Music Performance: The Art of Preparing*, Barbara Schneiderman
- ❖ “Overcoming Performance Anxiety,” Whitcomb