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

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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 Schneiderman

For Further Study:
- “When Every Performance is Molto Agiato,” 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