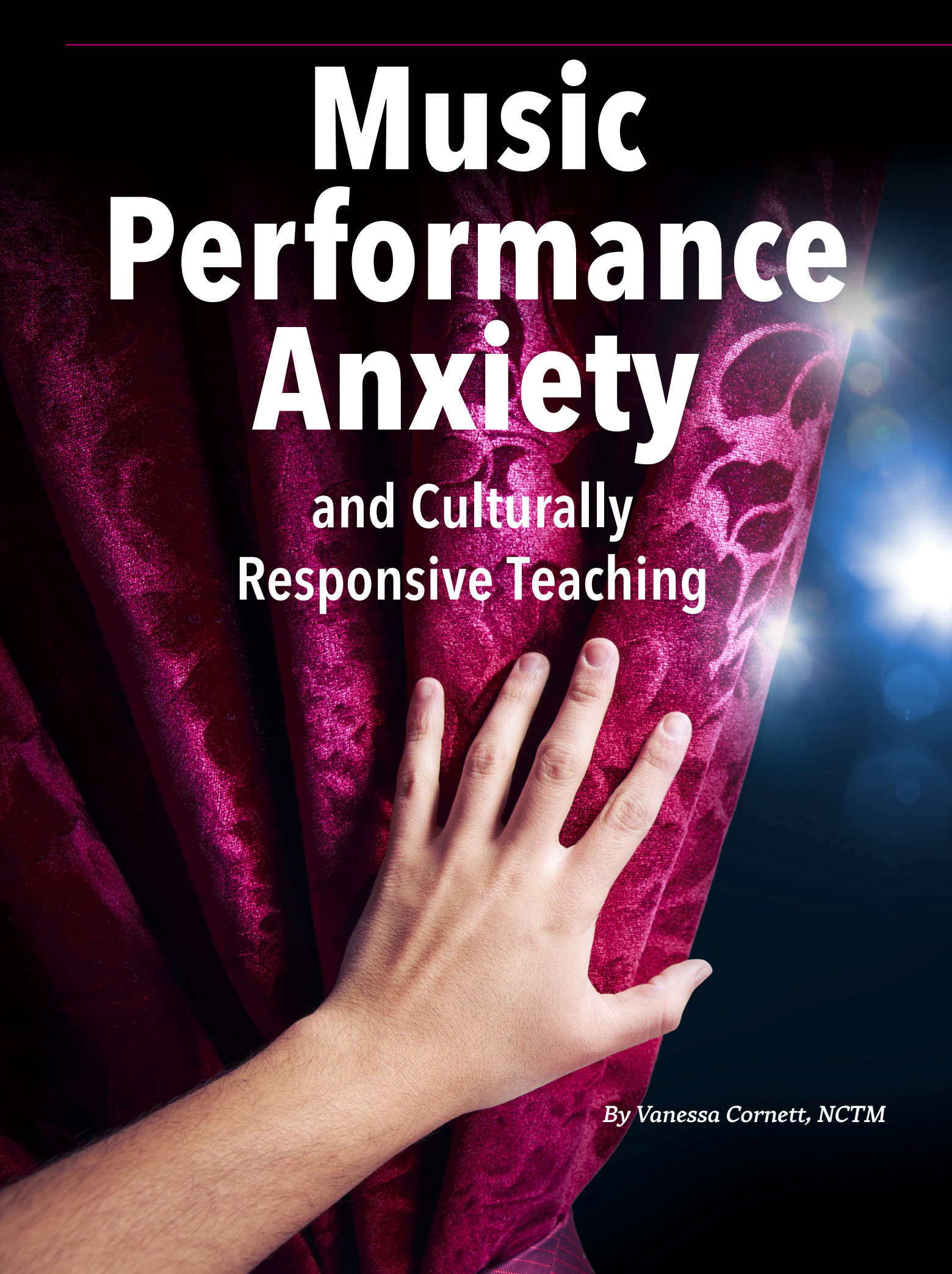
# Music Performance Anxiety

## and Culturally Responsive Teaching



*By Vanessa Cornett, NCTM*

Performance anxiety is a universal challenge among musicians, but attitudes and solutions are culturally specific. We have come a long way since the first upsurge of performance anxiety research studies in the 1980s. For example, we now understand there is no panacea, no "one size fits all" approach to managing stage fright (Nagel 2004, 39–43). Researchers are adept at investigating the causes of performance anxiety and proposing accessible solutions but tend to disregard the diversity of the very musicians they are studying. Our research tends to overlook the musical and cultural differences that make each performer unique. In other words, the resources we consult do not always pertain to the students we teach. Culturally responsive teaching means that, regardless of what we think we know, we honor the lived experiences of our students.

Music performance anxiety is the apprehension related to performing music for other people, often manifested through physical, psychological, emotional and behavioral symptoms. It can affect musicians of all ages, regardless of their level of musical training or accomplishment (Kenny 2011, 61). Scholars and educators tend to examine performance anxiety in two ways. The first is through the gathering and analysis of data from various questionnaires in which participants are asked to reflect on prior musical experiences. This information is often published in research journals or disseminated at peer-reviewed conferences. The second is through the observations and experiences of performing musicians, music teachers, mental health professionals and medical professionals who work with musicians. Both methods are invaluable, and both methods are imperfect. Inventories rely on participant self-reports of past experiences, which may not be entirely accurate, and these surveys may be administered poorly or interpreted incorrectly. Since professional experience may or may not be grounded in research, anecdotal approaches may be harmful if not properly vetted. Importantly, both methods are flawed in that they may not apply to diverse people or musical experiences.

By far, most research papers and performance guides for musicians struggling with stage fright are published in the English language. Specifically, the most robust research comes from North America, the U.K. and Australia. The benefit, to English-speaking musicians, is the variety and accessibility of information. The downside is that the best practices in our field are in fact Eurocentric approaches to understanding and managing stage fright. One example is the preferred music performance anxiety inventory currently in use, the Kenny Music Performance Anxiety Inventory (K-MPAI), developed at the University of Sydney (Kenny 2004, 757–777). Two items on this questionnaire read, "When performing without music, my memory is reliable," and "I am confident playing from memory." The inherent assumptions in these questions are worth examining. One assumption is that the respondent does in fact perform from memory, perhaps as a solo musician. Another is that, if a musician does perform without music, she must be performing composed music notated in a particular tradition, presumably the Western art music tradition. These two questions overlook the experiences of solo and ensemble musicians who perform using printed music, who improvise over a musical framework that may or may not have been notated or who perform music learned by rote or by oral tradition. Most music-making humans around the world, then, are disregarded in this widely accepted inventory.

## trauma-informed teaching

"what is wrong with this person?"

"what has happened to this person?"

Even with the impressive amount of available research on performance anxiety management, myths abound in our field. One persistent myth is that jazz and popular musicians do not experience stage fright as deeply or as often as classical musicians do. Yet, the number of famous non-classical musicians who have spoken openly about their performance anxiety would indicate otherwise. In addition, recent studies suggest jazz musicians experience significant degrees of stage fright, equivalent to classical musicians (Martin-Gagnon and Creech 2019, 414–425). The research on performance anxiety among non-classical musicians is slowly increasing, but the facts that 1) most inventories in use are developed for classically trained musicians, and 2) jazz, popular and traditional musicians tend to be lumped together into one group ("pop," or even worse, "other") suggest that we have not yet decentered Western art music to accommodate diverse musical styles and performers.

Furthermore, very few research studies explore the performance anxiety experiences of musicians of color, disabled musicians or neurodivergent musicians. English-language comparisons of stage fright experiences across cultures, or among different social or ethnic groups of musicians within the same culture, are also extremely rare. While an exhaustive comparison of musicians around the globe is not possible, it is important to consider cultural differences in the way musicians talk about music performance anxiety. Some studies illuminate cultural differences among music students in South America, West and South Africa, East and Southeast Asia and parts of the Middle East (Cornett 2023), but do not necessarily compare these experiences to the oft-published experiences of North American or Western European musicians.[1] Why is this important? Because the following established beliefs among many Western musicians are *not* necessarily true across diverse cultures:

- Most students want to talk about their stage fright experiences.
- There is no longer a stigma surrounding mental illness.
- It is normal and acceptable to seek help from a psychologist.
- The private music instructor is a safe person in which to confide.
- Mindful breathing and stretching are universal and accessible mind-body practices.

In my international work, I have stumbled across these and countless other examples of my culturally specific assumptions not pertaining to many musicians. Teachers working with diverse groups of musicians, including international students, lack sufficient information about how their students might experience, report or respond to conversations about performance anxiety.

One compelling and underrepresented issue in the literature is that of trauma, specifically the sources of trauma in our globalized world and the effects of trauma on music performance experiences. Trauma, "an exceptional experience in which powerful and dangerous events overwhelm a person's capacity to cope" (Rice and Groves 2005, 2), can profoundly influence a musician's experiences of stage fright. Like music performance anxiety, the roots of trauma may be cultural. The fear of performing in a recital may be the natural result of adrenaline-fueled jitters, or it may have been triggered by a deeper trauma response. An understanding of cultural trauma can help teachers be more sensitive to diverse student backgrounds.

The Adolescent Health Working Group (AHWG 2013) designed a visual "spectrum of trauma," which I have modified here for readers (see Figure 1). Many U.S. Americans perceive trauma as an individual phenomenon, such as experiencing or witnessing a

## What musicians are underrepresented in the performance anxiety management research?

- Musicians of color
- Jazz, popular, folk and traditional musicians
- International students
- Musicians with disabilities
- Neurodivergent musicians
- Musicians who have experienced trauma

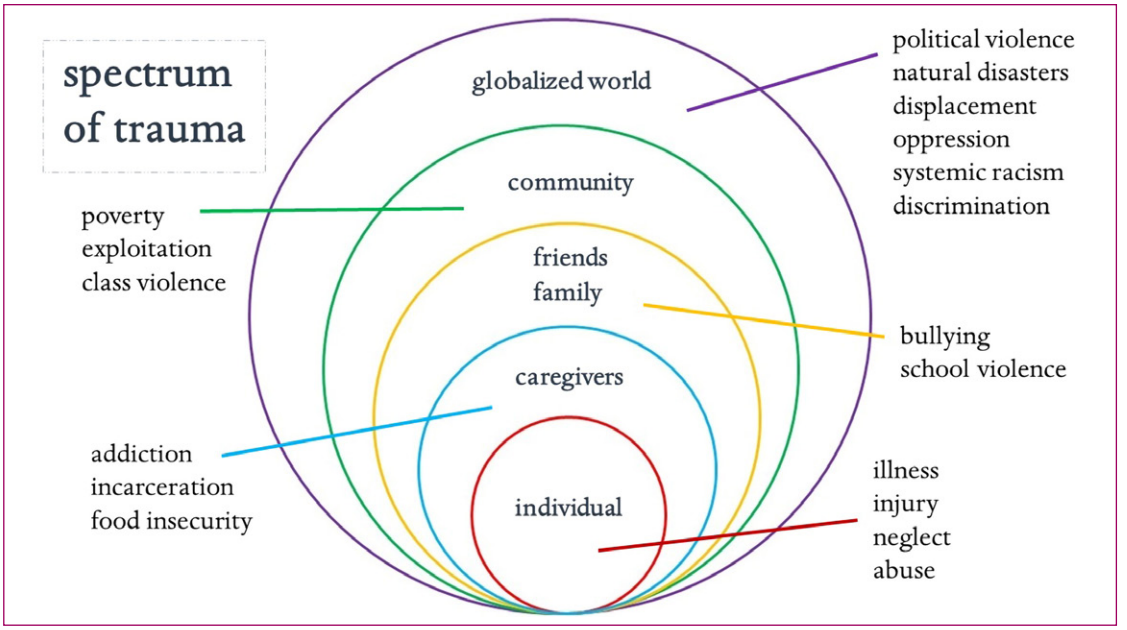



Figure 1

frightening event. Of course, this is often true. But individual trauma can also stem from injury, neglect, or physical or mental illness. If a student's parents or guardians have been incarcerated, struggle with addiction and/or homelessness, are divorced or separated, or experience domestic violence or food insecurity, these ordeals affect the student daily. Broader social traumas can include bullying at school or work and the ever-growing incidents of violence and threats of violence on school grounds. Traumas related to a musician's place in the community may include poverty, exploitation and violence related to geography or social class and can be overwhelming at any age. Global suffering may include political violence, such as war and occupation, displacement from the home or homeland, natural disasters or any form of oppression or discrimination. Importantly, we must remember that any human being who is situated as a minority of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, faith tradition, ability or other forms of "difference" has experienced injustice across their lifespan. In other words, systemic racism, misogyny, homophobia and ableism are all manifestations of cultural trauma. We must acknowledge that musicians belonging to any minority group have been the victims of both subtle and overt traumas. These experiences can alter or intensify the experiences of stage fright.

While the research has not yet adequately explored the link between trauma and music performance anxiety, we can adopt trauma-sensitive teaching strategies in the spirit of culturally responsive pedagogy. This requires a shift in mindset from one that is primarily critical ("What is wrong with this person?") to one that is rooted in empathy and compassion ("What has happened to this person?"). When adopting this attitude, gentle curiosity replaces judgment and the urge to "fix" teacher-perceived problems. In the context of performance anxiety management coaching, this may mean modifying how we speak to students about stage fright or what solutions we recommend to them. For example, a trauma-sensitive approach to mindful breathing, stretching or imagery would involve presenting activities as a collaborative invitation rather than as a requirement. It would mean never demanding that a student close his eyes for any reason, since closing the eyes can trigger a trauma response in many individuals (Treleaven 2018, 107). Instead, we can give students additional options, such as gazing softly at a spot on the floor or not participating in the activity at all. A trauma-sensitive approach necessitates that

we pay attention to non-verbal cues and pivot skillfully when appropriate.

In many of our communities, seeking professional help for anxiety or depression is not an unusual course of action. Many U.S. American music students speak openly about the psychological help they are receiving for their performance anxiety or other challenges. In many cultures, though, including subcultures within North America, psychological interventions are viewed as shameful. Performance anxiety may be a taboo topic because mental health challenges still carry a strong stigma. It would be more tactful to ask questions rather than immediately recommend psychological help to, for example, an international student from a culture not well-known to the teacher. If a student seems reluctant to share her feelings or experiences, a teacher should not force the issue. Furthermore, many of our students have endured cruel or abusive treatment at the hands of their music instructors, and many students are conditioned to fear their teachers (Cornett 2023). We must not assume that past or current music teachers, including ourselves, represent "safe" people for our students, as we continue to cultivate patience and compassion. Culturally relevant pedagogy requires an understanding of cultural diversity, an appreciation of diverse students, flexibility with different communication styles and a willingness to listen and learn with sensitivity and humility.

This article serves as a call to action for performers, teachers and those who conduct or supervise research. We need to look at performance anxiety from broader cultural and cross-cultural perspectives. We need to pay attention to the needs of our students of color, our international students, our students who are first or second-generation immigrants and our students who perform jazz, popular and traditional styles of music. We need to consider the role of trauma in stage fright and establish trauma-sensitive learning environments. We need to remember that, like excellent music teaching, performance anxiety management strategies need to be flexible to accommodate musicians from diverse perspectives and backgrounds. As our world grows smaller, our awareness needs to expand.

***AMT***

**Notes**

1. One exception is a small but growing body of research on the music performance anxiety experiences of East or Southeast Asian musicians, which may be helpful when compared to well-documented experiences of some North American musicians.

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