

I Can't Go On! How to Recognize and Tackle Performance Anxiety in Students (and Yourself!)

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4 Common Types of “Performance Anxiety”

- “Butterflies”
- Self-Consciousness
- Inadequate Preparation and Associated Emotions
- **Debilitating Fear, Dread, Panic**
 - The Mayo Clinic defines performance anxiety as “anxiety and panic caused by the thought of performing.” This is why this definition is the only form of stage fright that can be defined as “performance anxiety”

“Butterflies”

- Definition: fluttery feeling in stomach. Can be intense. Not pathological. Referred by seasoned performers as indicative of readiness. **Is not Performance Anxiety.**
- Time of Occurrence: Right before the performance (can be hours or minutes before.) Disappears as soon as performance starts
- Effect on Performance: Enhances performance
- Remedies: No remedy needed. Learn to enjoy them

Self-Consciousness

- Definition: A morbid awareness of oneself as the object of attention for others. Pathological, but easily remedied. **Is not Performance Anxiety (no anxiety involved).**
- Time of Occurrence: Whenever performance is thought about (before, during, and after).
- Effect on Performance: Compromises whole performance. Emotional expression and meaning are especially compromised
- Remedies: 2 step process:
 - 1. Understand audience's intentions (they enjoy MUSIC, not you)
 - 2. Develop true self-awareness (kinesthetic, tactile, emotional, etc.)

Inadequate Preparation and Associated Emotions

- Definition: Mix of shame, confusion, avoidance and fear. Not pathological, but rather just human. **Is not Performance Anxiety.**
- Time of Occurrence: Constant in the weeks preceding a performance. Low grade because of the avoidance factor
- Effect on Performance: Spotty and Substandard (due to lack of preparation, not because of the associated emotions.)
- Remedies: Do not perform. Cancel. Call a sub. Reschedule. Never let a student or yourself perform without proper preparation.

Debilitating Fear, Dread, Panic

- Definition: Intense waves of emotions. Expressed physically through sweating, shaking, involuntary movements, rapid breathing, dry mouth, senses distorted or diminished significantly. Is pathological. **IS Performance Anxiety.**
- Time of Occurrence: Episodic through the entire phase of preparation. Can occur anywhere at any time without a trigger. Unpredictable. Subsides, only to reappear later.
- Effect on Performance: Performers may refuse to perform. If performance does happen, fear is visible and audible throughout performance. Sensory distortion affects ability to read music or hear their instrument. Memory slips and pitch/rhythmic distortion. Rarely effects emotional meaning and expression.
- Remedies: F.E.A.R. response....

The Context of Classical Music in our Culture

- Performance Anxiety is not personal, but rather a product of the culture surrounding classical music.
- 3 aspects of our culture must be examined in order to move past performance anxiety
 - Where does Performance Anxiety occur?
 - How is classical music presented in our culture?
 - What is the status of classical musicians in our culture?

Where DOES Performance Anxiety Occur in our Culture?

- Situations where Performance Anxiety DOES occur:

| What?/Where? | Why? |
|---|--|
| Preparation for an audition into an orchestra or colligate program | Preparation of material that has been canonized by the Western world and typically has one “correct” interpretation. |
| Preparation of a solo work, such as a concerto or sonata | |
| Preparation of a non-performance musical exam, such as a test on music theory or history of music | |

Where DOESN'T Performance Anxiety Occur in our Culture?

- Situations where Performance Anxiety DOESN'T occur:

| What?/Where? | Why? | Musicians in the non-canonical classical music sphere do not feel pressure to perform to a standard that is set to canonical Western classical music. |
|---|---|---|
| Professional Amateurs playing chamber music | Playing for the joy of music. Not scorned by colleagues for “mistakes”. | |
| Church Musicians | Music is not the means to the end, but rather adds to the celebration of faith | |
| Indian classical Musicians | Communal nature of training. Never isolated from peers when practicing | |
| African Drummers | Mistakes are not named. Students move on to more difficult patterns when they are ready to do so. | |
| Rock/Jazz Musicians | Audience serves as motivation, not deterrent. Improvisation acts as cushion | |

How Does our Culture Present Classical Music?

- The way auditoriums are constructed (audience seating, audience participation)
- Performance/Audience Etiquette
- Recordings of Classical Music
- Comparison Bias
- Infrequent Performance Opportunities

What is the status of classical musicians in our culture?

Evidence: Jokes (A young child says to his mother, "Mom, when I grow up I'd like to be a musician." She replies, "Well honey, you know you can't do both.")

Evidence: Cover story in city magazine: How to impress your friends this year. Tip number ten: Buy season tickets to the symphony. Never go.

Evidence: Musicians' salaries as compared with others who have spent decades of hard work in preparation for what they do.

Evidence: The way musicians are treated at the White House.

Rosalyn Carter made sure that musicians were greeted when they arrived and that they were served good food and had a comfortable place to change clothes and warm up and rest between performances, but other occupants of the White House have not followed her example.

LOW

Evidence: the reluctance of symphony management to adopt and adhere to elementary safeguards for musicians and their instruments, like temperature control, reasonable schedules, and ear protection.

Evidence: the failure of universities to credit practice time and score study as work/credit hours for students and professors alike. Imagine doing the same to scientists and their research.

The F.E.A.R. Response to Performance Anxiety

- F – Feel the fear
- E – Embody the fear
- A – Arrive
- R – Relate
- This process is daunting and mentally demanding, but it is truly the only thing that I have gotten to work.

F – Feel the Fear

- Many people try to diminish the fear they feel or ignore it. This is ineffective to solving performance anxiety. Feel the fear.
- Fear is not felt in isolation of other emotions. We must feel those other emotions too. They have to be felt in relation to fear (whether it is anger, self-compassion, love of music, whatever)
- This will probably not diminish the intensity of fear, but that is okay. Physical manifestations of fear will begin to subside (sweating, shaking, etc.)
- Cultivate other emotions you are feeling. If you love music, great, enhance that love. Don't stop feeling fear, just give it some company

E – Embody the Fear

- Similar to the other emotions we just put in context, Fear cannot overwhelm when in the company of other emotions. Emotions cannot overwhelm when we pair them with sensations. This is embodiment.
- Put the emotions you are feeling in context of the tactile sense around you. Can you feel your skin? Your clothing? The air in the room moving?
- Put the emotions you are feeling in context of the kinesthetic sense around you. Move around your space (you will be moving for your performance anyways). Is something constricting your natural movement, such as your clothes or the room?
- What other sensations are you feeling? Hunger? Thirst? Pain? Pleasure?
- Doing this will make fear a violin in the symphony, just one note in a complex unified whole
- This must be done every time performance anxiety rears its head. No exceptions

A – Arrive

- Now, all this richness of feeling must be put into the context of a performance. This is Arriving
- Unsuccessful strategies: “I pretend to be in the practice room when I perform.” This removes you from reality and holds up your imagination, which you need for your performance.
- Come to the performance space early. Walk out on stage. Get clear on where the walls, doors, windows, seats are. Claim the space.
- Do the same with your practice space.
- Watch the audience arrive. There is no use in pretending like nobody is coming to a performance
- Acknowledge who the audience is. Are they hostile? Did they pay to come see the performance? You are not responsible for your audience and how they behave, but you are responsible for how you behave and treat the music you are performing.

R – Relate

- Fear is now still there, but is just an emotion that you can handle. The final step is relating. Relate to the space. Relate to the audience. Relate to the music. Relate to your instrument.
- Relate to the space: Again, this applies to claiming the space. Do not walk out on stage to a pretend room the size of your practice room. Let the audience in to your performance.
- Relate to the audience: Remember, you are performing for them. They are there because they enjoy music and appreciate the work you put in, which will help you perform. Performers who do not relate to their audience lose out on this aid, and it's a big loss to everyone.
- Relate to the music: Make a full emotional response to the music. Let the music benefit you as much as possible
- Relate to your instrument: “Warm” your instrument up. You know your instrument better than anyone. You know what your instrument needs for a successful performance

Benefits of F.E.A.R.

- This method does not eliminate fear, but puts fear into context and makes it manageable.
- Time is extended when using this method before, during, and after a performance. You have more time to make smarter practice decisions when preparing a performance. You have more time during a performance to make musical decisions. You have more time after a performance to reflect on what went well and what didn't.
- This method becomes second nature over time. Much less deliberate, and just something that you do before any performance.

Tips for Helping Students Manage Performance Anxiety

- **Help your students see that their fear is not purely personal but is a shared, cultural phenomenon that requires a cultural change as well as a personal one.**
- **Frequently remind your students that becoming a highly accomplished amateur is an option for them. Encourage your students to explore and enjoy all kinds of music and to see themselves as part of a community of musicians that includes all kinds of musicians.**
- **Encourage your students to seek out performance opportunities.**
- **Encourage your students to play or sing chamber music at every possible opportunity, just for the joy of it.**
- **Cultivate a positive environment and set clear rules for how students treat each other. Always perform on your students' recitals or concerts, always. They need to see your preparation and they need your modeling.**

Tips for Helping Students Manage Performance Anxiety Cont'd

- **Help your students from the very first lesson to truly know their instruments. Many students are handicapped and fearful because they are playing fantasy instruments which differ greatly from the instruments they actually have. Always let the students know the limitations of the instrument they are using so they don't feel bad because they can't make their student violin sound like your professional instrument.**
 - **Deal constructively with wrong notes. Much of the time you don't even need to point them out. Just play the piece again yourself, asking the student to listen carefully. If you feel its important to give feedback about the**
- note, just say that the student played a note the composer didn't write and always play that note yourself. "You played this (you play B flat); the composer wrote this (you play B natural)." Give the student time to hear the difference and to play the difference, one and then the other, so that the correction can truly be assimilated. Put the correction in a musical context, asking, "Why did the composer choose B natural here instead of the B flat you played?" Sometimes the student will have played something that actually sounds better than what the composer wrote. Always acknowledge that when it is true.**

Tips for Helping Students Manage Performance Anxiety Cont'd

- Be very, very careful to give students age appropriate and skill appropriate music and not too much of it.
- Keep students at a skill level for a long time, letting them enjoy their success in coming to that level, so that year after year as they grow they get to experience real competence and musicality.
- Never, never, never let a student perform unprepared. Just reschedule the student to the next recital or concert if possible.
- Keep your young students out of competitions and seek opportunities for them to play for supportive, knowledgeable colleagues in non-competitive situations. Stay with them in those situations so you know they are being treated well and constructively.
- Teach your older students how to treat auditioners and jurors as genuine audience.

Resources For Managing Performance Anxiety

- [Psychiatric Assistance](#)
- [Alexander Technique](#)
- [Systematic Desensitization](#)
- [Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#)
- [Breathing Techniques](#)