

Giving your Best Performance: Managing Anxiety in Musicians



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Performance anxiety is very common among musicians. In fact, 96% of orchestral musicians report experiencing some level of anxiety before a concert. That's understandable given the hours of practice behind every performance. It shows that you care about what you are doing which is a good thing.

Your level of anxiety may differ depending on the venue, the audience, whether you are performing with others or how challenging the piece is. Even if you are lucky enough not to experience anxiety, the strategies used to deal with it may help to give you an edge for your performance.

The mental pressure experienced by musicians is similar to that experienced by competing athletes. Many performers and athletes have been highly successful despite feeling extreme anxiety at times, for example swimmers Michael Phelps and Susie O'Neill, and singers Adele and Barbara Streisand.

So why do we get anxious? Sometimes we might have lofty expectations of ourselves while at the same time perceiving our capability as very low. Let's call that gap 'the chasm of despair.' The greater the difference between our expectations and our perceived capabilities, the more likely we will feel under threat. When our bodies feel under threat, they respond. It's natural. Our bodies go into fight or flight mode (or often in the case of musicians—freeze). It works like an on/off switch and is a defensive mechanism for survival that has been part of our evolution since primitive times.

Our emotion centre, the limbic system, is part of our midbrain. When we feel under threat, the limbic system sends a number of hormones coursing through our bodies including adrenalin. This sets off our autonomic nervous system which creates a multi-system reaction. That's why we feel anxiety all over our bodies. You might notice a range of physical symptoms including a change in breathing, a variance in voice, an increase in heart rate, palpitations, clammy hands, sweating, feeling hot or cold, shakiness and, if extreme, feeling faint or having the sense you are going crazy.

Often it is our thinking that sets these things in motion. Many people find there are themes to their thoughts before a performance. Catastrophising, thinking about how many things could go wrong, being very self-critical and imagining negative impressions from the audience are all common—e.g. *I'll forget my piece, I'm a hopeless musician, the audience won't like me, I'll make a fool of myself.*

So how do we deal with ourselves and our thoughts to get the best out of our performance? Although everybody is different, and circumstances will vary, you can gradually build up a set of strategies that will work for you. Let's look at setting the foundations:

Strategies:

In the lead up to your performance:

Manage daily stress

Look at your diet, whether you are getting enough sleep, try to do some exercise for stress relief and wellbeing, do whatever works for you personally to wind down so you are calmer in the lead up to a performance. It can be the more traditional types of relaxation and meditations (I like apps such as Relax+ and Calm), or it can be looking back at old movies or TV shows that make you feel good, doing some puzzles to distract the mind from worry, listening to audiobooks or calming music (ironically!), or spending time with the right friend.

Practice your pieces

Practice is the time to be constructively critical and analytical, pulling apart elements in the music so that the piece is played the way you want and the composer intended. Expect that you are not going to be great at a piece initially. There needs to be a growth mentality and an understanding that you will improve incrementally with patience and persistence. Be aware if you are being mean to yourself while you are learning. Some of us had previous teachers with less than optimal approaches to learning whose unhelpful voices may pop up. Start to take notice if you have a mean voice in your head now.

Practice performing

You can practice performing as you go, even performing parts of your unfinished piece to whoever will listen. But the way you approach performance practice needs to be different to general practice. This is not the time to be pulling music apart or looking at the minutiae. Instead, it's all about keeping the big picture in your mind and thinking about the whole performance, how you want to play and how it feels. You might find some words like "liquid" or "glide" ready your body and mind. Have faith that you've done the required practice and can perform without having to focus on each individual element so that you can stay 'in the zone' and go with the flow.

Try practicing under difficult situations and if you still feel very anxious, take a graduated approach where you set up less scary scenarios and build up the difficulty when you are ready. If the next step seems unobtainable, then add a rung in the middle of your metaphorical ladder.

At the venue:

Come organized

Bring the right music and equipment, come in good time, take control of what you can control. That way if things pop up that you didn't foresee, such as a broken string, you have the time and mental space to attend to them.

Decide your audience is friendly

I remember reading once that if you want someone to like you, like them first. Of course you won't have ultimate control over whether they do or not, but why not set up a positive default, that they will like you rather than that they won't. Imagine you are playing to an audience who is there to enjoy your music and who want you to succeed. The majority of your audience will fit this profile.

Expect some physical symptoms

Be aware of the way you interpret what is happening in your body. Imagine two people approaching a rollercoaster—one likes them and one doesn't. They may both feel increased arousal except one interprets this as excitement whereas the other interprets it as anxiety and a sign of weakness that they can't cope. So tell yourself these sensations are just your body's way of warming up. Moderate stress, in fact, can often lead to a good performance.

Quieten the inner critic

It's not unusual for that voice of doom to start talking loudly on the way or at the venue. Realise anxiety often peaks at these times. There are two different ways to 'squash your ANTs' (Automatic Negative Thoughts). Notice if there are themes to your thoughts—like catastrophising, an inner critic or mind reading—and try to challenge your thinking. This approach is called cognitive therapy. Often thinking about what we would say to another person in the same predicament can help us come up with more helpful ways to think.

Accept these thoughts are a natural occurrence. Acknowledge them and allow them to come and go without judgment. Recognise they are an old tape that plays under these circumstances of arousal. Don't naturally assume they are correct or let yourself get hooked by them.

Playing your piece:

Become what the situation dictates

Walk out as the performer you think the situation dictates even if you don't feel like a good fit. Fake it until you make it. It's a job, and with any job there is a role to play even if that involves a bit of acting, at least initially. Amy Cuddy's TED talk –'*Your body language may shape who you are*' suggests we make closed postures when feeling uncertain and bigger postures when feeling victorious. These postures have been witnessed in people who are blind and have not seen other's reactions. When using big postures like a superwoman stance before going on stage, her mind adjusted to the posture and she felt the confidence grow out of necessity to match her stance.

Get a good start

Make sure you are wearing something that you feel comfortable in but fits the performance and what is expected of you (if you have a choice). Get comfortable with your instrument, take a breath, look at the way you place your hands on the instrument, warm up your brain for your performance. Find a ritual that works for you. If worrying about all the things that could go wrong becomes a ritual, you may find it strengthened when nothing does go wrong. Be aware that this belief system needs to be broken. Devising a ritual that doesn't involve worry or other unhelpful safety behaviours as its centerpiece is beneficial.

Stay in the zone

Musicians often talk about the feeling of being 'in the zone' during a performance – that magical moment when the mind and body work together with ease and without distraction. But some also speak of the fear of flipping out of that state and then becoming lost. *Where am I up to in my music? What just happened? OMG!* It's a similar phenomenon to when we are riding a bike or walking down stairs and we suddenly flip from an automatic state to a manual one and feel like we might fall off our bike or trip down the stairs. The initial learning stage and the 'do competently' stage seem to require two distinctly different brain states. Think about when you first learnt to ride a bike and how different it is to now. Sometimes we go back to explicit learning (initial step-

by-step learning) when in fact the process has already been transferred to our procedural knowledge (do competently stage). What can we do about this?

A leader in the field of helping musicians with performance anxiety, and a talented violinist himself, Dr Noa Kageyama at the Julliard School in New York (see *bulletproofmusician.com*) suggests you imagine a person in your audience who is both deaf and psychic. Aim to communicate your music to this audience member by singing your piece as you play it. In order for him or her to hear your music with clarity, you need your mind to remain clear of other thoughts. You can also create a way back with certain anchors in your music so if you suddenly flip out of your automatic mode, you can find your way in again.

When you're done:

Wind down afterwards

Celebrate your successes. Learn from your performances then move on from them knowing that they are all part of a larger journey—always looking ahead to your goal of being better. If things go really badly and the worst case scenario happens, deal with whatever the consequences are then but don't torture yourself unnecessarily. Give your energy to the music and bringing good to the world. Those of us who haven't been blessed with your talent need you to keep the music playing.