

Musical Performance Anxiety

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Musicians, at some point in their careers, experience anxiety prior to a performance. Most commonly this experience is early in a career, particularly prior to his/her first public performance, for example, the first recital. However, recurrent episodes of anxiety are not uncommon and may precede taking the “next big step” in a career. Many performers relish this feeling of exhilaration, even stating that “if I ever lose this feeling, I’ll stop performing.” Such statements reflect constructive self-rewarding, resulting in increased self-confidence. Indeed, self-confidence is the opposite of performance anxiety.

Where does this anxiety come from? The website VeryWellMind.com offers a good overview of the destructive critical thinking that is found in persons with Musical Performance Anxiety: (1) “Black or White thinking” (either I’m perfect or I’m a failure); (2) “Overgeneralization” (tonight was bad because I’m bad); (3) Mental Filter (my mistake ruined the whole performance); (4) “Disqualifying the positive” (My performance tonight was just lucky); and (5) Jumping to conclusions (the audience was quiet, they must have hated me.) Crossing the line from exhilaration to dread turns a performance into a battle with one’s mental self. Debilitating stage fright is the subject of numerous studies in the medical literature. It affects not only musicians, but also public speakers, athletes, dancers, and even surgeons. Debilitating anxiety may require skilled psychological intervention if the process is to be helped and the performer returned to the stage. However, a number of preparatory activities can help a performer overcome the more aspects of stage fright.

First let’s talk about the origin of stage fright. Stage fright is addressed in several websites such as MusiciansWay.com. This very informative website discusses the “fight or flight” reflex as a trigger to performance anxiety. The fight or flight reflex is a primitive reflex built in your automatic (autonomic) nervous system that causes you to become anxious and vigilant in the face of perceived danger. The reaction is caused by a release of adrenaline and cortisol into your blood stream. Your pulse quickens, muscles tense, breath rate increases, and energy levels surge as your body prepares to either engage in combat or run away. For you as a singer specifically, this means a lack of breath control, of tone control, and of overall confidence in the note or phrase you are about to sing. Rather than avoiding the “fight or flight” reflex, voice lessons can help you focus on embracing the fight aspect. Finding what about that note or phrase is challenging (breath support, posture, range, etc.), making the proper adjustments, and gaining confidence in your own skill and instrument.

Increased self confidence and improved performance can come from extensive training and practice, increasing dexterity/vocal range and improved overall vocal quality. Performance anxiety is something that affects performers of any capacity, whether on stage, in classroom, or on the field. With voice training, it is the duty of the instructor to analyze your unique voice and find where improvements can be made technically and mentally. Stage fright and performance anxiety do not “disappear” and can occasionally come back in to play when the performer goes in to “auto-pilot” (i.e.: singing a song so many times, you start thinking about what you’re going to eat for dinner that night instead of performing). Often it leads to a lack luster performance or to becoming so distracted you forget what you are doing. Which is why it is important to have regular check-ins with your teacher.

The goal of voice lessons is to be able to gain the knowledge of how your body is creating the correct sound and how to make the proper adjustments when needed. Confidence in technique and controlled breathing leads to confidence in your performance. Once you begin to trust proper technique and it becomes second nature, performance anxiety decreases and performance quality increases.