Performance Anxiety

Have you ever felt butterflies in your stomach before a performance? Ever had a sense of dread that you will not be able to perform as you did in the practice room? If so, you are not alone. Feeling nervous before a performance is normal. Anxiety in moderation can actually help you focus on the task at hand. However, if your anxiety level increases and causes you to feel uncomfortable while playing, it will impact your performance. Performance anxiety is something that can affect musicians and actors, public speakers, test takers, and athletes and others. This article will focus on the unique environment of a musician that may contribute to their anxiety levels but the suggestions can prove to be helpful for other performers as well.

Often musicians have focused on their instruments for a majority of their lives with training on average beginning at the age of 10 (Fishbein, Middlestadt, Ottai, Strauss, & Ellis, 1988). Moreover, there is a significant amount of time and energy invested into this career choice without a guarantee of employment as a musician. Despite the intense dedication, musicians are often entering into a job market where the rates of unemployment are high and the pay can be inadequate. The competition for positions is considerable which can add to the anxiety of having to perform perfectly in front of an audience and/or when auditioning.

Performing for an audience implies that musicians not only show they have mastered the piece, but also that they deliver the music with their own interpretation of the score. Thus, a musician is required to maintain control of the music by playing it technically as written, while simultaneously letting go of control to successfully transcend the music. This combination can be a challenge and foster anxiety in those who are unable to channel the nervous energy that can accompany performing.

For some the performance anxiety will disappear once the musician begins. However, for others the anxiety may begin to grow as the performance continues. It may start with a focus on someone in the front row shifting in his seat. Then another person is whispering to her neighbor and you wonder whether they like the performance or not. You begin to question whether you are interpreting the piece correctly or what your teacher may think. You may begin to think that others will be disappointed in your work and your hands begin to shake or become sweaty. You may question whether you are made out for this profession at all. As your mind begins to wander from the performance itself you find you are less and less able to concentrate. Nervousness, memory lapses, and technical errors may increase which can intensify your discomfort. Moreover, you are more likely to become anxious about performing in the future and can thereby set up a self-defeating cycle.

The following are four steps to help manage your performance anxiety.

Step 1: Know Yourself
- Examine your motives for performing, and take note of your strengths and limitations.
- Ask yourself what you are truly afraid of occurring during the performance. Notice your feelings, but don’t dwell on them. Think of these feelings as just information and allow yourself to open up to more information.
- Pay attention to problematic thinking which can intensify your anxiety. Understand that some anxiety before a performance is normal and accept it.
- Don’t try and fight your nervous energy or misinterpret it as fear. It is often the act of interpreting our nervousness as bad that creates a snowball effect of becoming more nervous.

Step 2: Gradual Exposure and Preparation
- Practicing is essential. Be aware that some students struggle with “preparation anxiety” rather than true performance anxiety. In those situations exploring tactics for adequate preparation are crucial to reducing the anxiety you feel.
- Prepare ahead of time, both mentally and physically, for your performance. Find someone who can listen to you and simulate the performance in front of an audience, or tape yourself to be heard at a later time. Visualize yourself performing well.
- Engage in pre-performing exercises such as deep breathing, yoga, or meditation. Using these techniques on a regular basis can help to reduce overall stress.

Step 3: During the Performance
- Arrive in plenty of time so you are not feeling rushed and thereby more anxious.
- Understand that you can always do better but in this moment you have practiced to the best of your ability. Trust yourself and your preparation.
- Encourage yourself with positive self-talk to create a positive attitude: “I have done all I could up to this point.” “Enjoy the music.” “The audience is here to support me and wants me to do well.”
- Make one area of your performing a priority before going on stage, such as your posture, so that you don’t overwhelm yourself with many areas of focus.
- Remember to focus on the task at hand, not the outcome. Judgments made during the performance will take you away from concentrating on the music and will break the flow of your performing. Stay in the moment and avoid thinking of the future or finishing.
- Do not interpret the audience’s reactions. You cannot perform and listen at the same time. Mentally stay on the stage, not in the audience. Focus on how you are communicating to the audience what you have practiced.
- Enjoy your performance. This is your time to share and communicate with the audience all that you worked so hard to achieve. Allow your emotions to show your passion for the music.

Step 4: After the Performance:
- Review your performance, acknowledging what you did well and where you may need to improve.
- Do not over focus on the negative; this may not be helpful in improving performance.
- Pay attention to whether you have a pattern of negative thinking and how those thoughts snowball, and work on ways to counteract that process.
- Celebrate what you have accomplished.

Caution...some individuals have relied on the use of various drugs to help reduce/avoid anxiety. While some medications can be effective, their misuse can be highly dangerous. Never use an anti-anxiety drug unless it is medically necessary and has been prescribed by a medical doctor.
Also, while some may report immediate relief of their anxiety through the use of caffeine or nicotine, these are stimulants that add to the physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g., shakiness or restlessness).

While many may benefit from these suggestions, for some, deeper exploration of the origins of their anxiety and how they may continue to perpetuate it is crucial for overcoming performance anxiety. Contact the Counseling Center if you would like further assistance.

Resources

http://www.uwec.edu/counsel/pubs/mucinxiety.htm
