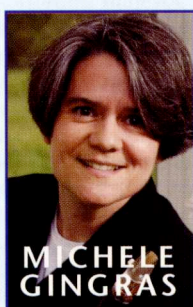


BRAVING STAGE FRIGHT

STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING PERFORMANCE ANXIETY



Music teachers hear it so many times from applied students: "But I sounded so much better in the practice

room!" It occurred to me that students prepare for their weekly lesson (in the practice room) during six days while in contrast, they perform their lesson assignment (out of the practice room) during one day each week. Similarly, musicians seem to expect to deliver a perfect performance in front of an audience even though they spent most of their time preparing in a vacant room.

One obvious difference between practising and performing is that the musician becomes more self-aware when people are present compared to when they are alone. A quick example would be to evaluate practice productivity and efficiency with the practice room door (or window) open rather than closed.

When we practise hour after hour, we enter a zone where musical concentration is paramount. Our self-awareness seems to disappear, and all our attention is focused on correct fingerings, note attacks, tone nuances, breathing, and so forth. As soon as external factors come into play, we suddenly move out of the zone and become much more aware of our bodies and the movements we are executing

during practice. Moreover, some musicians reported to me that they experience a strange feeling while on stage: they suddenly become aware of their fingers and bodies to the point that they fear they will actually forget simple fingerings or even drop their instrument. Each movement becomes a chore, panic sets in, and the performance is compromised.

Coming back to the idea of practising six days and performing in a lesson for one day, I would like to theorise that during the six days of practice, the student is exercising the left-brain, i.e. analytical process, perfection, and mathematical reasoning. On the other hand, the experience of performing in a lesson or in front of an audience is potentially controlled by the right-brain, i.e. artistic flair, musical expression, desire to please, and overall effect.

If this theory is valid, it can be assumed that a student who performs during a lesson in front of a teacher becomes more self-aware and suddenly uses the right-brain (artistic) but since the right-brain has not been exercised during the week, it feels like they are 'running on empty' and subsequently, cannot perform to the best of their ability as they did with the left-brain (analytical) in the practice room. It would be like preparing a speech on a specific topic for six days and being asked to speak about a different topic on the seventh day. Similarly, an applied music instructor who teaches privately every week might feel out of balance if an observer sits in the lesson because what otherwise comes naturally and spontaneously now becomes subject to potential criticism or disapproval.

If a musician walks into a lesson or performance with only half of the brain 'muscles' exercised, it is inevitable that he or she will be lacking some necessary tools to perform successfully. The feeling of performing with only half of the existing 'muscles' translates into insecurity or self-doubt that leads to stage fright or performance anxiety. In reality, the feeling of stage fright is only a façade for what truly ails the student: unbalanced

preparation. I propose that students would gain a great deal by exercising the right-brain in the practice room to improve their 'batting' average in lessons and performances.

1. What Is Stage Fright?

Stage fright or performance anxiety is a fear to perform publicly. This fear can arise days, weeks, or even months before the actual event. Some symptoms include a fast pounding heart, shaking hands and legs, dry mouth or excessive salivating, difficulty to swallow, memory blanks, exaggerated self-consciousness, digestive problems, and nausea. Stage fright can afflict amateur musicians as well as world acclaimed artists and can vary in severity depending on the concert venue.

It would seem easy to simply fix stage fright by preparing as much as possible in the practice room and hope for the best but this strategy does not offer any guarantees. Also, stage fright is a condition few of us musicians care to admit; however, it is healthy not to ignore the problem and embrace solutions instead.

2. Are you Left-Brain or Right-Brain?

Numerous studies suggest that our brain functions on two different modes (right – intuitive, and left – analytical) and that one side (or hemisphere) is dominant in some people and equal in others. Left-brain people focus on logic, analysis, and accuracy. Right-brained people focus on aesthetics, feeling, and creativity. I suggest that practising with both brain hemispheres (as opposed to only the left – analytical) can simulate a live performance and drastically enhance the end result. This strategy provides extra tools to rely on while performing under stress, which is very different from simply practising alone. Note that our right and left hemispheres control the opposite side of our bodies, i.e. the right hemisphere controls our left side, and *vice versa*.

3. Artistic vs. Analytical: Flexing both Right- and Left-Brain

Most musicians usually exercise the left-brain in the practice room. However, creating situations where we can also exercise the **right-brain** is essential to simulate public performance settings. Here are some ways to practise with the right-brain:

Record your practice sessions. Using a recording device allows the performer to be more accountable for what is being practised if a 'tape is rolling'. Since we can be our own toughest critics, it is essential to listen to each audio clip and assess them. An interesting exercise is to turn on the recording device, leave the room, and re-enter as if a listener is waiting for us in the practice room.

Videotape yourself. Recording both audio and video components of our practice increases our level of self-awareness and therefore helps us flex the right-brain.

Look in a mirror while you practise. The distraction it can cause allows us to concentrate both on the technicality of the music (left brain – analytical) and the overall musical result (right-brain – artistic). A variation of using a mirror is to **use a webcam** to video-record yourself in real time.

Solfège your entire piece instead of playing it. Also practise your piece using rhythmic solfège instead of traditional solfège. Rhythmic solfège is a helpful sight-reading technique taught in French conservatories. Unlike traditional solfège where the notes are sung with their respective pitch names, rhythmic solfège involves naming each note in rhythm while hand-tapping each beat without singing. Use whichever nomenclature you prefer (do-re-mi or A-B-C), and start with a slow and steady tempo. Name each note correctly without changing the tempo (naming accidentals is not necessary). This exercise is surprisingly tricky. Start very slowly to avoid stumbling; this enables you to virtually x-ray the music and identify each note more effectively (this flexes the right brain – visual). After some practice, challenge yourself and try doing the exercise with another person in unison. Using both solfège techniques will expand your knowledge and understanding of the piece and also help with its memorisation.

Memorise your piece. Even though you may decide to perform with your music, memorisation can give you an array of 'back-up' tools in moments of stress.

Practise random spots in your music and see if you can play them error-free on the first try. This can drastically shift your comfort zone and provide a whole new way to learn challenging sections.

Be self-aware as you practise. While practising, imagine and visualise the concert hall, as well as each person in the audience, the stage spotlights, and the overall ambience of the evening. One idea I find helpful before a casual or semi-formal recital is to **greet audience members** as they enter the recital hall. This makes the experience less formal and gives the performer the impression of performing for friends and acquaintances rather than strangers.

Practise with accompaniment as often as possible. Again, the experience of focusing on other things than just our solo part allows us to use both sides of the brain while playing.

Use SmartMusic interactive accompaniment software (visit www.smartmusic.com). This interactive accompaniment computer program is a fantastic practice and teaching tool. It follows the musician's expressive tempo changes, making it a joy to practise over and over in preparation for rehearsals with a live accompanist later on (it is also a great tool to improve intonation). Most compositions from the main instrumental repertoire are available through an online subscription or new ones can be created using the compatible computer program called *Finale*.

Other factors can contribute to the development of right-brain aptitudes. Steve Bodner, Director of Wind Ensembles at Williams College in Massachusetts (US) explains: "At least anecdotally, youngest children tend to be the most outgoing in their families, seeking attention and constantly craving the spotlight. These children naturally learn how to become performers, so to speak. As the youngest child in my extended family, I was no different: from an early age, I naturally learned 'how' to perform. Since those right-brain skills were already developed, either genetically or through early childhood experiences, my saxophone lessons in college did not need to focus on performance skills such as overcoming stage fright or how to communicate with an audience. Instead, we worked on developing specifically left-brain skills such as perfecting instrumental technique. While I am not sure if the majority of youngest sibling performers had similar early-childhood cognitively developmental experiences, I believe that musicians who develop pathways on both sides of the brain increase their chances of success."

Eric Pritchard, Associate Professor of the Practice of Music (violin) at Duke University in North Carolina (US) finds that "stage fright is generally most pronounced in adolescence and young adulthood because stage fright is a phenomenon of the incorporation of the analytical into the intuitive. As students gain the self-awareness to move from a purely intuitive relationship with music to

one that uses more of the intellect, the price can sometimes be a period of crippling self-consciousness. Overcoming this self-consciousness is primarily a process of successfully integrating the newly discovered tools of the intellect into our original, intuitive nature."

4. Choosing a Perspective

Perspective can alter our way of thinking in a flash. Imagine you are on your way to play an important solo recital out of town and during the trip you have a car accident that leaves you stranded hours away from your concert location. Suddenly, the dreadful thought of **missing the concert** makes you wish you were back in your car and race to your concert. Wouldn't it make sense to adopt this way of thinking without an accident having to take place? I like to think about how lucky I am to be invited to play a concert and how unfortunate it would be to miss the opportunity. This perspective, along with a general sense of positive attitude, can be a wonderful remedy for stage fright.

Another factor to consider is that during our **musical training years**, we are still working on perfecting our art and theoretically, our performance skills improve year by year. Since our skills are not as advanced in earlier years, it is possible that the sense of imperfection we felt as younger musicians inadvertently carried over as adults. Consequently, the feeling of inadequacy and technical imperfection we experienced in the formative years is deeply imbedded in our memory and can remain unchanged even when we attain professional status as musicians. For example, if we work on a Sonata by Brahms at the age of 16, the challenging sections of the piece will take several months to master. However, at the age of 30 a similarly challenging Sonata by Poulenc would only take a few weeks or days to master. In contrast, if we decide to perform that same Sonata by Brahms again at age 30, the past experience from age 16 could resurface and give us the feeling of inadequacy even though we possess more efficient tools of practice at age 30. It is important to let go of this train of thought to ensure more peace of mind as performers.

Another important factor to remember is that **performing and/or sharing a musical message with an audience is the most important reason** we study, analyse, practise, and perfect a piece of music. The concert hour is the ultimate moment in a musician's life, and viewed in this way, it can indeed put things into perspective and bring back the joy in performing.

Lastly, it is important to remember that although performance anxiety may feel like an enormous problem at times, it is still quite **small compared to the grand scheme of things** and that there are much 'bigger things than ourselves' in this world.

5. Concrete Solutions to Enhance Live Performance

One key difference between practising alone and performing live is that practising alone allows for 'second chances' to repeat difficult passages whereas performing live only allows for one 'shot'. **Avoiding repetition** of passages during each run through can help simulate live performing. **Projecting a sense of assertiveness and positive attitude** and smiling while entering the stage inevitably makes the audience comfortable and naturally will enhance their overall response. Have you ever noticed how musicians with great bowing skills and stage presence often get thundering applause compared to the sheepish recitalist? Even though a musician can feel stressed or insecure, the motions of *acting* confident help alleviate those feelings and if this is done repeatedly, the feeling of confidence will become a reality. I find that **talking to the audience** during the performance (between pieces) not only helps to dissipate stress, it is always welcome by listeners. This transforms the event into a two-way experience rather than put all the weight onto the performer. Naturally, there is the undeniable fact that **the more we perform** the more we can eventually turn a stressful situation into a simple day to day 'this is my job' kind of affair.

Listen to your best recordings of performances. Listening to past performances that went well is a terrific way to build confidence and to gather clues on what we do best as musicians. Naturally, it is also a good way to assess our shortcomings; however this exercise is meant to highlight our best qualities to fuel our next performance.

Rotate and prepare a series of reeds. Needless to say, knowing that we are using a reliable and resonant reed will inevitably reduce our stress level on the concert day.

Clothes. Planning a concert outfit that makes us feel great is also an enjoyable way to build confidence.

Save your lip. It is important not to practise to the point of tiring our embouchure. Pace your practice so that you will not experience fatigue or pain in your lip on the day of the concert.

Attend other people's recitals. Sitting in various recital and concert settings is a good way to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. Invariably, you will find that you are mostly concentrating on the music rather than finding each and every flaw in the performance. Realising this will help you remember that the same is true during your own performance.

Drink plenty of water. Some people experience "dry mouth" during a performance. Drinking water on a regular

basis at least one day before the recital insures that the system is well hydrated and helps avoid problems during the performance. In any case, it is a good idea to install a glass of water on a stand onstage in case you need it. Better safe than sorry!

Eat a banana and drink Gatorade 30 minutes before the concert. Bananas are known to help calm nerves because they contain an amino acid called tryptophan that converts to serotonin, the body's natural 'feel good' chemical. Gatorade contains electrolytes, i.e. minerals such as magnesium, potassium, sodium and calcium, which help maintain hydration and energy levels while performing.

Warming up properly before a performance is crucial for proper blood oxygenation. We often overlook the fact that when we are out of breath it does not necessarily mean we are out of air, but out of oxygen. Blowing a clarinet or saxophone takes a lot of energy and we will feel out of breath if the system is starving oxygen. Warm up your body and also warm up by playing at least one half hour on and off before the performance.

Repeat the word Courage over and over in your mind. This word can be extremely powerful and helps reinforce self-confidence.

Mistakes are OK! When we attend other people's concerts and we hear mistakes, chances are we hardly notice them or even care about them. The same is true when it is our turn to perform. When an error appears, say to yourself: "ah, there it is, no big deal".

It takes more energy to practise and perform standing up so if your performance is a solo performance, **practise standing up** to get used to concert posture.

Bring one or more trusted friends along in the green room and have them chat with you and even **laugh**. Or, on the other hand, if you are more comfortable alone, use the pre-concert time to **meditate** and tend to the necessary details of preparation. **Deep breathing** is a sure way to help relax and oxygenate the blood generously. Stage fright can also be an indicator that the **performer cares** about the musical result on a deep level, which is a form of positive attitude that carries over onstage. View performing as a way to **share artistic ideas** rather than being judged for them.

Inspire someone. While performing, one never knows who might be sitting in the audience and be inspired from our musical message. Focusing on what the music can bring into people's lives is yet another way to help shift the focus away from one's self and toward other people.

Dedicate your work. Dedicating our performance as a gift to someone who matters can add meaning and purpose to our art, and helps us focus on the music rather than ourselves.

6. Understanding Musical Content

Understanding the musical content of a composition allows us to concentrate on the work rather than our own selves during the performance. If the right-brain is in charge and focuses on artistry and musical message rather than each note, our sense of self will become less important and this will allow the musical message to shine through. Understanding the compositional intricacies of a work makes us look forward to conveying a message to the audience, therefore alleviating stress and performance anxiety.

7. Recommended Books and Websites

Books are a great resource and can be our best friends when it comes to inspiration and guidance. Here is a list of recommended books:

The Inner Game of Music by Barry Green with W. Timothy Gallwey (Doubleday Publications, 1986). This book is a classic and is probably the best-known work on the subject. Former principal bassist of the Cincinnati Symphony, Green takes a very human (as opposed to clinical) approach to helping his fellow musicians. Visit: www.innergameofmusic.com. Green also authored *Performance Success: Performing Your Best Under Pressure*, and *Audition Success*.

Stage Fright in Music Performance by Michael I. Goode (Paperback, 2003). This is a short book that originates from a university dissertation. It is basic and describes interesting case studies and offers fundamental insights on how to overcome stage fright.

Managing Your Head and Body So You Can Become a Good Musician: The Psychology of Musical Competence – A Student-Musician's Field Guide for Performance and Freedom from Performance Anxiety by Dr. Richard Cox (Colorado School of Professional Psychology Press, 2006). Trumpeter Richard Cox is a well known author on performance psychology. This book is practical and informative.

Overcoming Stage Fright in Everyday Life by Joyce Ashley (Clarkson Potter Publications, 1997). This book includes exercises for overcoming all forms of everyday life performance anxieties, such as giving speeches and functioning at social events, which is a good first step before tackling live performance.

A Whole New Mind – Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future by Daniel H. Pink (Riverhead Books, 2006). Although this book does not discuss stage fright, it is a brilliant essay on how the virtues of right-brain thinking can increase chances for high quality employability in the future, and how

the 'MFA is the new MBA' (master of fine arts/master of business administration). It describes how artistic and intuitive individuals will become leaders in our workforce in this ever-changing conceptual age, as opposed to left-brain thinking that was imperative in the information age. Eye opening!

WEBSITES:

To measure the level of your stage fright, an online assessment tool is available at: www.changethatsrightnow.com/assess-fear-phobia-m.asp?SDID=130:1570

To test whether you are Right or Left brain dominant,

visit: <http://similarbrains.com/brain>

or: www.chatterbean.com/right_brain_thinker

or: <http://brain.web-us.com/brain/braindominance>

A helpful website to better understand the functions of both brain hemispheres is: www.funderstanding.com/right_left_brain.cfm

The website includes a list of characteristics for each brain hemisphere:

Left Brain	Right Brain
Logical	Random
Sequential	Intuitive
Rational	Holistic
Analytical	Synthesising
Objective	Subjective
Looks at parts	Looks at whole

8. Specialised Centres

The field of performing arts medicine has greatly expanded over the last decade or two. Some health care professionals now specialise in remedial solutions for repetitive motion or overuse injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis, as well as psychological issues inherent to performing artists such as stage fright. Discuss this with your GP.

9. Performers of the Future

Musicians can look forward to exciting new virtual performance venues such as the 'CAVE', invented at the University of Illinois. The Cave Automatic Virtual Environment space contains high definition projectors on multiple walls and allow users to be viewed and heard in real time globally. Stay tuned!

10. Predicting & Understanding Mental Concentration

In 2004, I published a book entitled *Clarinet Secrets – 52 Performance Strategies for the Advanced Clarinetist* (See 2006 Revised Edition at ScarecrowPress.com). One of the Secrets, *Secret 26*, offers suggestions related to performance anxiety:

PREDICTING MENTAL CONCENTRATION

SECRET 26

Often we find ourselves feeling completely ready to perform a piece of music after hours of practice and preparation. So why is it that once it is time to perform on stage, a passage might not come out exactly as it did in the practice room? The same could be said for all types of situations, such as lessons, recording sessions, or rehearsals.

The difference is the number of ears actually listening to us. Lone musicians in a practice space are heard by their own two ears. Ideally in this setting, mental concentration should be at a near maximum. Mental concentration should be focused, deliberate, and thorough, even though the performer's mind may well be too busy for a perfectly accurate evaluation.

Once an outside person enters the practice room, it is logical to say that two people are now listening to the performer. The performer might find that mental concentration suddenly becomes diluted by this new presence in the room. It is almost as if concentration is cut in half. Add a third person in the room, and one might theorise that another fraction of concentration is affected. Imagine playing in front of an audience of hundreds of people, and concentration might be reduced to a fraction in terms of effectiveness.

If we follow this hypothesis, it could be said that, potentially, for many of us:

1 performer alone = 100% mental concentration

2 people present = 50% concentration

3 people present = 25% concentration

Full audience = 1% concentration

Therefore, it is necessary to find a way to practise so that we are able to maintain 100% concentration in a concert or recording setting to retain the learned material in times of stress, pressure, or distraction.

If one prepares the material far beyond the usually accepted level, there is more of a guarantee that the live performance will match the accuracy seen in the practice room. Of course, many performers play their best in a concert setting, with adrenaline flowing and the audience's energy bouncing back at them, making the experience much more exciting and successful.

For many clarinetists, however, clever practice strategies can assure them of more secure results. A good technique is to use a recording device to record and review the recently played material, much as if an outside listener came in the room during practice time. After all, what better motivating tool is there than our own highly discerning and critical ears?

Intelligent practice involves understanding a particular passage, repeating it to increase the odds of flawless execution, as well as good listening skills and proper training. Even if the material is completely mastered and ready for performance, one should mentally go back to the drawing board and continue investigating ways to perfect the execution of the music.

A useful technique to increase mental concentration is to imagine that you are recording the material for a prestigious recording label, and that you only have one chance (or one take) for each passage. This manner of thinking naturally encourages concentrating in a much more focused way, and reminds us that careful mental preparation before playing a single note enhances the final result.

Another idea is to mentally prepare for the performance by practising the music in the actual concert hall. Imagine the audience, experiment with the room's acoustics, and invite musician friends to sit in the rehearsal. Remember to breathe adequately before playing. The increased amount of oxygen in the blood supplies nourishment to the brain, which is in turn energised to allow full concentration.

Our mathematical concept may conclude as follows:

100% preparation = 50% odds of flawless performance

150% preparation = 75% odds of flawless performance

200% preparation = 99% odds of flawless performance

And for the brave:

225% preparation = the best press review yet!

26