

Living With Performance Anxiety: Nurturing Confident Performing in Ourselves and Our Students

International Clarinet Association Presentation, July 2021

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I. Know Yourself

- What do you do right now to structure your practicing for a particular stressful audition/performance?
- What specifically happens to you physically when you get nervous?
- What goes on in your head when you're nervous? (your self-talk)

Use your answers to the above questions to help you decide **how you want to improve your ability to perform with nerves**. We must **live with performance anxiety**, not try to get rid of it!

II. Mental Preparation for a Stressful Performance

- Most important – **PRACTICE PERFORMING!**
 - Two different mindsets: “practicing” mindset, and “performance” mindset
 - **Practicing:** being critical of yourself, studying the music, fixing issues, improving
 - **Performance:** NOT being critical of yourself, trusting your preparation, focusing on playing musically, not letting mistakes affect your performance
 - *The Inner Game of Tennis* basic concept is performance mindset, and we CAN **practice using the performance mindset** and improve our ability to be in it.
- Work to gradually increase your successful, good experiences with your personal goal of getting into the performance mindset – start at the first step, and repeat it (don't go on to the next one) until you feel progress with performance anxiety affecting you less
 - A run-through by yourself in your practice room
 - A run-through by yourself, but with a recording device on
 - A run-through for a good friend
 - A run-through for someone you don't know at all, or that you're scared of
 - A “mock performance” for a group of people. Create every detail of the real performance – scheduling a certain time, warming up in a separate room, walking in, any spoken element, etc.
- **Example of a possible way to pace yourself before a stressful performance/audition**
 - 5-6 weeks before – working hard on details, getting all of the piece up to tempo (90% practice mindset, 10% performance mindset)
 - 4 weeks before – record yourself, take notes, practice using those notes. Focus on improving the problems from your notes

- 2-3 weeks before – Improve ability to get into the “performance mindset” and gradually increase good experiences (see below)
- The week before – Continue daily run-throughs of entire piece/audition, but keep critical practicing to a minimum (10% practice mindset, 90% performance mindset). Focus on the positive aspects of your playing and work to always feeling confident and positive while you are in the “performance mindset.”

III. Other Tips and Notes

- Guiding our students: making these concepts an integral part of lessons, and coming up with an individualized plan for confidence growth with each student
- Practicing visualization of a stressful performance can be very helpful. Imagine every little detail – warming up, walking into the room, who is there, etc. Even imagine some problems coming up (fire alarm going off, people you don’t like being there, etc.) and that those problems don’t get in the way
 - If you decide to try visualization, commit to doing it daily for 2-3 weeks prior to the performance/audition
- Acceptance of nervous energy – it WILL be there at a performance, don’t let that scare you! It can be a good thing, and it means you care about music
 - Remember that the goal is always to perform the best we can with the natural performance anxiety, not to get rid of that anxiety
- Set reasonable goals for a performance/audition; this is one of the biggest issues with students.
 - In my opinion, a healthy goal for a performance is “I won’t play perfectly, but I will play my best, and show off my strengths.” Unhealthy goals are things like “I need to win this competition” or “I need a perfect score” or “I need to impress Prof. _____”
 - Shoot for 90% in a performance! Not “110%”. We are humans, and mistakes are inevitable.
- Understanding diaphragmatic breathing and its effects on the nervous system
 - Learning to make your “inhalations” become more like “relaxations”
 - Awareness of “holding tension” in the stomach, even when not playing
- Very useful resource for tips and tricks for dealing with performance anxiety, and also practicing: <http://www.bulletproofmusician.com/> (look for the free blog)