

The Effects of Stress on Music Performance

by Tracy Temple

Stress seems to be a very common affliction these days, and musicians are certainly not immune to its negative effects. But, unlike most professions, musicians have the added pressure of public performance, and all that it entails. Professions that are specifically performance-oriented, such as music, dance, acting, and athletics bring with them both physical and psychological demands that are rarely found in the same degrees in other professions. There are, of course, any number of other sources of stress in our lives, such as family matters, financial concerns, poor health, or just finding enough time to get things done. However, this paper will focus on those things that make a performance profession, in this case, music, particularly stressful. The three main sources of musician's stress to be discussed are performance anxiety, the psychological and physical effects of competition, and the physical demands of playing a musical instrument.

Performance anxiety, or stage fright, as it is more commonly called, is perhaps the most obvious source of stress for anyone in the performing arts. This particular phenomenon is not by any means exclusively related to music, but rather affects most people at one time or another when placed in situations where they must address some forum. This could be in any number of instances, whether it be giving a presentation at work, proposing a toast at a friend's wedding, making a plea for support at a church or charity event, or virtually any other occasion requiring public speaking. However, for a musician, the stage fright is far more serious, since it may prevent one from performing her job well, or, at the very least, may inhibit her enjoyment of creating music, which is her chosen profession.

The foundation of stage fright is based on the fear of losing face while under the eye of public scrutiny (Triplett 3). There is a certain element of frustration in failing privately, while practicing alone at home, but it can in no way compare to the devastation of public humiliation caused by performing badly in front of an audience, and the intense feelings of shame that linger long after the performance is over.

It has been said that performance anxiety is composed of at least two elements: worry, and emotionality. Worry would include concern about one's performance, such as the fear of forgetting the notes when playing from memory, or not being able to play a difficult passage in the performance setting, even though one could play it at home. Worry also includes that dread of public failure and subsequent shame mentioned above. Emotionality is the perception of one's own somatic state, which may be exaggerated, and can lead to further worry about its effect on one's performance (Steptoe 5). The somatic symptoms associated with stage fright include a variety of physical signs, such as nausea, dizziness, trembling, dry mouth, excessive muscle tension, sweating, increases in heart and respiration rate, and coldness in the extremities. These responses indicate that the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is activated. However, it is important to note that these symptoms are not specific indicators of anxiety, but rather may simply be indicative of a state of activation, or arousal. Stage fright comes into play when the performer begins to concentrate on the symptoms, and translate those feelings into worry that they will cause problems during the performance itself, such as a shaky bow arm, or sweaty fingers that slip on the finger board (Steptoe 3,4). Perhaps the key to overcoming stage fright, then, lies at least partially in changing one's perceptions of her own somatic state, or at the very least, learning to accept the symptoms when they occur, without increasing the worry over whether they will affect the performance.

Another self-defeating practice that many musicians who suffer from stage fright are guilty of is "catastrophising", or having cognition which predict the absolute worst possible outcome of the performance (Steptoe 5). These would include thoughts such as "I don't think that I can get through the piece without messing up", or "I feel so out of control; anything could happen." Not only are these thoughts clearly detrimental to the performers's mental preparation, they also serve to distract the player from the task at hand by disrupting her concentration, and thereby increasing the possibility of making mistakes.

A second source of stress for people in music, or other performance-based professions, is competition. Competition is an inherent element in the life of a musician, even from very early on in the performer's training. Musicians are subjected to adjudication time and time again, in order to win a place in select ensembles at school, advance in placement within an orchestral section, earn the opportunity to play a solo, win scholarships for advanced musical training at the university level, and eventually gain employment as a performer. Every performer wants to be the best at what she does, and this desire has both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It is natural to want to excel at something that you love, and have dedicated years of your life trying to perfect. But in more practical terms, musicians learn very early on that, in the music business, one's livelihood depends almost entirely on one's skill, and one's success as a performer. This reality can often produce stage fright, when the performer worries before each concert because of her perception that if the performance goes poorly, it may mean an end to her career. But the competition in the music business can also produce a more general form of job stress that is more cumulative in nature than stage fright, which tends to be more intense, but short-lived, anxiety.

Many experts would agree that one of the best remedies for stress is exercise. David S. Holmes., professor of psychology at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, has spent the greater part of his career studying stress and ways of managing it. He claims, "...I have never run across any stress-relief method as strong as aerobic fitness." Dr Holmes maintains that counteracting stress by improving the cardiovascular system and stimulating certain chemicals in the brain through exercise has much more impact than psychotherapy, meditation, stress management and biofeedback (Feinstein 306). Aerobic exercise relieves stress in several ways. First, when you exercise, your breath deepens, which alters the quick, shallow breathing pattern that is characteristic of the stress response. Even some non-aerobic activities, such as yoga or weight circuit-training, will succeed in deepening the breathing and thus counteract stress. Vigorous exercise also relaxes muscles by helping to eliminate any tension-causing stress hormones that may be surging through the blood stream. Also, exercise helps to replenish brain levels of norepinephrine, which is an important emotion-stabilizing hormone that is lowered by stress (Feinstein 307).

Of course, aerobic exercise may not be the best solution to combat stage fright, since it would be impractical to exercise vigorously immediately before a performance when the symptoms tend to occur. In this situation, methods such as deep breathing exercises, meditation, deep relaxation techniques, and positive mental imaging may be the best bet for restoring some sense of control to the overly anxious performer. It is important to make these techniques a part of one's daily routine and practice them regularly in order to maximize their benefit during times of high stress response (Jaffe 170).

Regular exercise and the relaxation techniques mentioned above are also excellent remedies for one last source of musician's stress: pain. Playing a musical instrument for extended periods of time over a number of year's is bound to result in some pain, whether it be from excessive tension in the muscles, poor posture, or simply from over-use (or more likely, improper use over an extended period period of time). But, sometimes simple relaxation is not enough to ward off the pain of an injury, and a musician must seek out other alternatives. Probably the best route to take is physical therapy. A trained physical therapist can often pinpoint the injury itself, and prescribe a course of stretching and strengthening exercises to correct the problem. Physical therapists also may use such techniques as biofeedback, ultra sound therapy, electric muscle stimulation, and massage to alleviate pain and restore proper muscle function. Physical therapy is far superior to the quick-fixes that some musicians turn to, such as drugs or weekly massages, since its goal is to fix the underlying physical problem, rather than simply mask its symptoms.

Performance anxiety, competition and pain are more often than not important factors in the life of a professional musician. However, they need not be debilitation. Regular aerobic exercise and effective stress management techniques such as deep breathing and positive imaging, when employed regularly, can cut stress down to a manageable level, and restore enjoyment of the musical experience. Stress is a natural part of life, and a healthy body, as well as a healthy attitude, can ensure that it does not inhibit a musician's performance, and enjoyment of her art.

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