

Dealing with performance nerves

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

Performing is considered by most teachers to be an integral part of playing a musical instrument. But it can create immense stress, especially for students who are shy or anxious. Performing has both physical and mental challenges. When body and mind work together harmoniously to produce a dazzling performance, there are few better feelings. But most musicians are likely to experience the humiliation of abject failure at some point in their careers.

There are no easy solutions to performance nerves – indeed, they can blight the careers of many professional players – but following on from an earlier resource on improving students' confidence (*Music Teacher*, December 2024), we'll look at some ways in which we can ease students into the joy of performing while minimising their worries.

Why perform?

Performing is an opportunity to share our love of music and show off our skills. It's the natural culmination of the huge amount of time that we spend honing our craft. In the process, we can get a huge buzz: performing at the top of our game; receiving adulation from an audience; perhaps even reading a glowing review in a school newsletter or local newspaper.

Visual artists and writers usually want to share their work, and they're often nervous about how it will be received. However, their work is normally pre-prepared. For musicians, there's an added level of jeopardy: we deliver our performances live. The possibilities for it to go wrong, and potentially end in ignominy, are far higher. Performing can, quite literally, be like a rollercoaster ride – our bodies can release the same chemicals, such as adrenaline, dopamine and endorphins, which can lead to feelings of excitement, exhilaration and euphoria. But it can also trigger a fight or flight response (discussed in more detail in the earlier resource on improving students' confidence, December 2024).

Things we learn

There are many life skills we develop from performing. These include:

- ▶ Verbal and non-verbal communication, including public speaking.
- ▶ Working to a deadline – the day of the concert.
- ▶ Performing under pressure – giving an appearance of calm authority even if under the surface we feel wracked with self-doubt.
- ▶ Adapting and improvising – things may not go according to plan, and we may have to work 'on the fly' or 'wing it' at times.
- ▶ Entrepreneurship, organisational skills and marketing – if it's a self-promoted concert.

What if students don't want to perform?

For some students, learning music is a very personal pursuit that can be enjoyed in a relaxed and sometimes solitary environment. Doing something creative on your own, without any pressure or judgement, can be a wonderful way to unwind and improve your mental health. Perhaps they just want to learn to play an instrument without feeling the need to share their talents with an audience or examiner. Is there anything wrong with this? While some parents are ambitious and want an exam certificate or public performance as validation for the tuition fees they pay, others recognise the less public benefits of learning music and want it to provide an antidote to the pressures of life.

It's important to negotiate clear expectations with both students and parents, balancing a student's wellbeing within the wider context of exams and the performing culture that may be prevalent in a school. Digital exams can offer a low-stress alternative to get a grade certificate, and many schools offer 'informal' concerts to build up performing confidence in a friendly, non-threatening environment.

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Why do we feel nervous?

Like it or not, a performance is judged, regardless of the context. This judgement may not be spoken or explicit, but in putting yourself forward, the harsh reality is that you'll be compared to other performers.

We all make judgements as audience members – we might be captivated by one performance and cringe at another. In the car on the way home from a concert, we might discuss which were the best and worst performances. Some people thrive under this pressure – they love being in the spotlight and want to show off. Others, however, crumble. Performing can induce all sorts of negative thoughts, where we catastrophise about the shame of messing up our performance.

Physical symptoms of nerves

Anxiety, fear of failure and self-doubt can create many physical effects: tension, shaking, sweating, shallow breathing, a dry mouth, an inability to hear properly, and fingers losing sensitivity.

Consider how these issues affect your particular instrument, and think of ways to alleviate them in your students. As a trumpet player, my 'chops' (embouchure) sometimes feel terrible just because that's a sensitive area and is the point of contact with the instrument. In fact, the root of the problem is usually in the breathing: reminding myself to take deep breaths and support with the diaphragm goes some way to solving the problem.

Simulating a performance

If students deliberately try to put themselves under pressure, this can help to develop coping strategies.

- ▶ Recording themselves, even if they're alone, can add pressure to a performance. They can up the stakes by giving themselves a reward if they play something perfectly.
- ▶ They could try playing something a bit too fast, or making deliberate mistakes to see how well they can recover. Of course, we don't want to risk ingraining mistakes by practising them, but it can be a useful exercise, giving reassurance that it's possible to keep on track even if things don't quite go as planned.
- ▶ Ask them to run up and down stairs and then try to play.
- ▶ Imagine they're playing a solo to a packed Royal Albert Hall or doing a live TV broadcast.

Preparation

Choice of repertoire

A performer's job is to 'sell' the piece they're playing. In order to give a convincing, and nerve-free, performance, they need to be able to express themselves through the music (and also possibly with a spoken introduction).

- ▶ Does your student actually like the piece, or has it been imposed on them?
- ▶ Do they understand the genre?
- ▶ Can they use the piece to tell a story?
- ▶ Can they play it fluently with complete technical security?

Students can entertain and educate their audience in equal measure. I remember one particular school concert where a student played an atonal piece. The audience of parents – most of whom were not seasoned concert-goers – were clearly somewhat baffled initially, but it was a spellbinding and mesmerising performance, full of interesting textures, contrasts and colours. The audience was won over. It was far more memorable than yet another rendition of a well-known tune.

Once a piece has been chosen, it's imperative that a passable performance can be given even on a student's very worst day. On their best day, however, it can really sparkle with energy or move the audience to tears with its pathos. If having the stamina to play through their piece is a concern, they should make sure that they can play it twice or even three times in a row in practice. This will give them the reassurance that they can play it once under pressure.

Playing exam pieces in concerts

I frequently see students walking on stage clutching their latest book of Associated Board pieces and playing one that they're working on for their next exam. It will often start fluently and then become increasingly fragmentary as they get to sections, towards the end, that they haven't practised so much. This leaves me wondering why on earth they volunteered to perform, in the full knowledge that they couldn't play their piece fluently all the way through. A faltering performance can be detrimental to a student's confidence, and lead to a reluctance to play in future concerts.

Many teachers, often under pressure from parents, rush students through exams far too quickly. I have, on several occasions, taken on a student who has somehow scraped through Grade 3, but whose technique and musical understanding are only what I consider to be Grade 1 standard. Students can usually bluff their way through an exam with a very scratchy performance. Examiners have a low bar and are reluctant to fail all but the very worst of performances. Indeed, students can fulfil the marking criteria and get a good score while still not sounding particularly good. (I memorably had a student who was awarded a Grade 8 distinction with a very sketchy performance.)

A public performance, on the other hand, is an opportunity to showcase the very best a student can offer. Rather than choosing an exam piece that is at, or slightly beyond, their technical limits, choose an easy piece through which they can give a scintillating performance. An exam piece from a couple of grades ago might seem insulting to a student, but a Grade 3 piece played effortlessly and beautifully will make a much better impression than a Grade 6 piece littered with mistakes.

Always have ‘party pieces’ outside the grade syllabuses up your sleeve that students can play at a moment’s notice.

On the day

Students should try to adopt a relaxed mental state, and perform their daily routines slowly and calmly. They might do some exercise – going for a walk, for example, can help to clear the mind. They should try to override any negative thoughts by focusing on anything they find relaxing – the clouds, the trees, the wildlife.

They may want to mentally prepare by thinking through their performance. They can rehearse in their minds what they’re going to do:

- ▶ How are they going to play?
- ▶ What story will they tell through the music?
- ▶ What mood will they create?
- ▶ They should think through their spoken introduction, if they’re planning on doing one. It’s best delivered from memory rather than reading from a piece of paper.
- ▶ They should anticipate a triumphant performance – negative thoughts can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Knowing you’re fully prepared can help you to relax and remove some pre-performance nerves.

- ▶ It may sound like an obvious piece of advice, but allow plenty of time to get to the venue. If they’re travelling by rail, allow for train delays. Check Google maps for traffic jams on the roads.
- ▶ They should try to force some food down, even if they don’t feel hungry, and avoid caffeinated drinks – they can make you feel jittery.
- ▶ Even more obviously, check that they’ve got their instrument and music. (Who’d be stupid enough to forget their instrument? Guilty as charged.)
- ▶ Have they got spare reeds, strings, valve oil or any accessories they need? (Brass players – have you got your mouthpiece? Yes, I’ve forgotten that too.)
- ▶ Are they dressed comfortably? Do their shoes promote a good posture? It’s probably best to avoid high heels, for example. They shouldn’t add to their stress by wearing something that might fall down, rip or reveal too much.

They should warm up thoroughly, but also be careful to pace themselves – don’t overdo it, especially if playing an instrument where stamina can be a problem. There can be a delicate balance between being fully warmed up and tiring yourself out. If they need to rehearse on the day, take it easy. ‘Top and tail’, leaving bits out or putting things down an octave (if you’re a brass player).

The performance

As you’re waiting to go onstage, take deep breaths. As you breathe in, feel your body *expanding* right down to your waist (your stomach shouldn’t go in – that’s a sign of a shallow breath). Breathe out slowly and force yourself to relax – imagine your tension is disappearing down your arms and legs, and make sure your shoulders are relaxed. If you think a dry mouth may affect your performance, have a drink just before you go on and take a bottle of water on stage.

They should walk onto the stage positively and try to give off a confident air, even if that’s the last thing they’re feeling. A spoken introduction, delivered with a smile, can break the ice with the audience and make them feel more relaxed. If they can crack a joke and make the audience laugh, so much the better – they will have won them over before they’ve even played a note.

Students should take time to set themselves up: make sure their music stand is the right height and their music is in the correct order, and take time to tune up, even if they used a tuning machine before they went on stage. Playing a few notes before they start their piece will allow them to get the feel of the acoustic – and remind them that they really can play their instrument.

They should focus on relieving any physical tension. If they're standing up, make sure their weight is spread evenly between both legs. Try to relax their knees so they aren't locked stiffly. When they play, they should allow themselves to move freely – this helps them physically attune to the flow and shape of the music. Being absorbed in the music will help to dispel nerves.

Being in the zone

I recently heard cricketer Joe Root (England's all-time leading run scorer) talking about his state of mind when batting. He described being on 'autopilot' and feeling as if he was 'outside his body'. This isn't to say that he merely daydreams through his innings, wondering what he'll have to eat at the close of play. Quite the reverse: he's in a hyper-focused state, completely absorbed by the next ball he'll face. He filters out any external noise and any internal dialogue. He doesn't worry about the previous ball – that's gone and he can't change it – but he stays completely in the present. He's highly alert, picking up the smallest cues from the bowler's posture, run-up and even his grip on the ball. The tens of thousands of hours' practice, during which time he will have faced millions of balls, allow him to *instinctively* know what to do, despite having only a fraction of a second to respond. At some point, he'll almost certainly get out, but he is fearless: the element of risk is part of the game, but the trade-off is exhilarating – hitting a glorious four or six; getting a century and helping your team to victory.

Speaking as a trumpet player, there's a clear parallel. There's plenty of potential jeopardy in a performance. A mistake by a trumpet player is normally far more obvious than one made by someone sitting at the back of the viola section, but it's exhilarating when you nail that exposed high note, or when your solo soars gloriously over the orchestra. You'll be more successful if you cast aside any doubts and fully commit. If you think to yourself 'I'll probably mess this up', you probably will. Trust the process you've practised countless times before: hear the pitch in your head before you play it, take a deep breath, support, and *go for it*.

As musicians, we need to adopt Joe Root's approach. It's easy to overthink every last detail that we normally take for granted, and then become overwhelmed with all the information we have to process. Our internal dialogue can go into overdrive with an annoying running commentary. Even a *positive* internal commentary can be distracting – how many times do we mentally congratulate ourselves on getting a tricky bit right, only to mess up the easy bit straight afterwards?

We need to find the sweet spot of concentration, where we filter out irrelevant things that may be detrimental to our performance but stay very focused on the useful stuff.

Our practice should have built up the ability to play instinctively on our instrument, so we don't need to think about every note. Pick on some salient technical or musical features without swamping yourself with unnecessary information and, importantly, nerves.

Here are some examples:

- **Counting:** keep counting as you're playing and count all your bars' rest, even if you're completely confident that you know your place. This keeps you focused on the music and stops your mind wandering.
- **Breathing:** if you're a wind player, taking deep breaths and using lots of breath support will help to produce a focused sound and mitigate potential wobbles from shallow breathing (and possible hyperventilation) and nervous shaking.
- **Tricky passages:** often the key to nailing a whole passage is a single note or fingering. Get that right and everything else slots into place. Rather than worrying about every note in a tricky passage – and risking mental overload – focus on nailing that note.

When you're not prepared

Paradoxically, performers sometimes feel less nervous if they're unprepared, tired or feeling ill. Not that I'm suggesting that your students adopt this approach, but if they're thrown in at the deep end – perhaps being offered a last-minute opportunity – they might find the challenge an unexpectedly positive experience.

On several occasions, I've had to sightread a difficult trumpet part in a show, as a last-minute replacement. While this should have been extremely nerve-wracking, in reality all my brain's reserves felt devoted to reading the music and playing the part. I was so focused that it felt as if I had no room for nerves. I also felt as if I had nothing to lose – the band wouldn't judge me if I made a mistake, thus mitigating my sense of potential failure. Logically, of course, the audience had no idea that I was sightreading, so they would judge my mistakes just as much.

Feedback

The performer themselves is often the least reliable person to provide useful feedback. How a performance *feels* is often very different from how it is *projected*. I've done concerts where I have felt a complete bag of nerves, but have been complimented afterwards on my calm and confident presentation. I've done recordings where I've been convinced that I've played a wrong note because it hasn't *felt* right, yet the recording sounds flawless. Even what we consider to be a disaster is not necessarily as bad as we think: there's a tendency ignore the good bits and vastly exaggerate the errors. (For the over-confident performer, the reverse is true.)

Teachers and parents need to give honest feedback to your students, but should try to frame this in a positive light.

Recording concerts

One of my pet hates is parents who only get to see their children performing through the screen of their phone, rather than just enjoying the moment in real life. Videoing a concert can add extra pressure to the performer – with the added stress that a bad performance might be shared online. Furthermore, a video often doesn't capture the atmosphere and ambience of the performance: when viewed back on a screen it can appear flat and lifeless. Encourage your students' parents or guardians to put the phone down and live in the moment.

Building confidence

Build performing experience in comfortable steps:

- ▶ Playing to family and friends.
- ▶ Ensemble playing – which, as you progress through the ensemble, may include small solos.
- ▶ Solos in informal or class concerts.
- ▶ Playing in a school assemblies.
- ▶ Playing in music festivals.
- ▶ Playing in your local community, for example in church.
- ▶ Playing in larger, more formal concerts.

The more students do it, the more they'll get used to it. They may still feel nervous, but they'll learn to manage this effectively.

Moving on from bad experiences

Everyone makes mistakes, and everyone has felt some sense of public humiliation (whether it's tripping over in an embarrassing way or misunderstanding a social situation). Mistakes don't define us. Think of all the footballers who have ignominiously missed penalties (notably playing for England), or petulantly got themselves sent off, in front of a global audience of millions. Yet, after their brief moment of public shame, these same players continue their glittering careers and are loved by millions of fans. It's a horrible feeling when things go wrong, but we can earn a lot of sympathy and respect for how we handle these difficult situations.

Unfortunately, it's often our bad performances that stick in our own minds far longer than our good ones. As I write this, numerous disastrous concerts from the dim and distant past are flooding back to me. Do you think anyone remembers them apart from me? Why do they continue to haunt me, instilling a sense of negativity and doubt into future concerts? We can't rewrite the past, so let's try to permanently expel them from our thoughts and, instead, think warmly about our *best* performances.

Summary

- ▶ Playing an easy piece well is far more impressive than giving a mediocre performance of a hard one. Playing with assured technical control and musical fluency will fill you with confidence.
- ▶ *Perform* rather than merely *play*. Focus on the *music* rather than the *notes*. How can you present it in an engaging way? This is the *x-factor* in a performance.
- ▶ Focus on the story, mood or emotion rather than the technique – the notes should take care of themselves if you've practised sufficiently.
- ▶ Performance nerves are normal – remember that the physical feelings of fear and excitement are similar. Try to persuade yourself that you're excited, not scared.

- ▶ Your thoughts can be a self-fulfilling prophesy, so try to force yourself to think and act positively. You *can* do this!
- ▶ Stay in the present and try to shut off the running commentary in your head by focusing on particular aspects of your playing or the musical narrative.
- ▶ The hours of practice will have built up instinct and intuition. Having faith in this allows your performance to feel natural and flowing, and not awkward and stilted.
- ▶ Don't overthink.
- ▶ Remember that everyone makes mistakes. Be brave and don't worry about taking risks.
- ▶ Take deep breaths.
- ▶ Try to enjoy it!