

THE PERFORMANCE WELLNESS SEMINAR

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For those of us working in the field of Music Medicine, as well as those of us who are performing musicians, it is quite clear that performance anxiety is a ubiquitous and highly disturbing phenomena. According to a survey conducted by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians in 1988, performance anxiety, and its concomitant stress symptoms, is the most prevalent medical problem among professional orchestra musicians. Dr. Jake Kella, a violist with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, found in a national survey of orchestral string players that 50% of the musicians surveyed had used or were using betablockers to deal with debilitating performance anxiety. Whenever I teach my seminars at conservatories, both in the States and abroad, I am always surprised at the numbers of students who are plagued by performance anxiety and who have lost the joy and wonder of playing music so early in their lives. It is imperative for us as teachers, mentors, and mental health professionals to not only prepare our budding musicians to master the art of playing music, but to also prepare them to master the art of performance. An actor does not just memorize lines to a play and then go out on stage and deliver them. He or she spends many hours working on self - learning to understand the depth of human emotion and self-expression; understanding the body and its unique way of communicating; fine-tuning his or her ability to be intimate with scene partners. Typically, musicians do not receive any training of this sort. In my Performance Wellness Seminar, I try to address these issues primarily through body-mind awareness techniques and through the use of music itself as a self-reflecting and transformational tool. What follows is a very brief description of the major focus points of my Performance Wellness Seminar which I am currently teaching regularly at the Manhattan School of Music and the Mannes College of Music in New York City, Berklee College of Music in Boston, and on occasion at music conservatories in Europe, Scandinavia, and Asia.

In our first session, I delineate and address the underlying causes of performance stress. These include technical/musical problems, cognitive/emotional problems related to the one's "inner critic", trauma-related issues such as physical and/or sexual abuse by parents and/or teachers, and psycho-spiritual issues involving conflicts between one's ego and Self orientations. Next I talk about the importance of understanding the body/mind connection as it relates to performing music. We discuss the physical symptoms which occur during an attack of stage fright and relate the physical changes to changes in thoughts and feelings. I usually present a detailed description of the fight-or-flight response with diagrams so that students can understand the intricate workings of the autonomic nervous system and how to achieve homeostasis. Much time is spent working with the concept of breath as creative energy - the invisible, life-giving force which connects mind and body. I teach students a series of exercises which help them to breath diaphragmatically, to activate the relaxation response through 2-1 breathing (doubling the length of the exhalation), and to balance the sympathetic and parasympathetic energies of the autonomic nervous system through alternate-nostril breathing. The idea of creating a

strong life pulse through rhythmic breathing which is impervious to the permutations of daily life is a long-range goal for students. When American comedian Henny Youngman, while celebrating his 91st birthday, was asked the secret of his longevity, he replied simply - breathing. George Leonard, in his book, *The Silent Pulse*, expounds on the importance of the breath/pulse,

"At the heart of each of us, whatever our imperfections, there exists a silent pulse of perfect rhythm, a complex of wave forms and resonances, which is absolutely individual and unique, and yet which connects us to everything in the universe. The act of getting in touch with this pulse can transform our personal experience and in some way alter the world around us."

I stress the importance of practicing these exercises twice daily in order to strengthen the diaphragm and to maintain a sense of balance throughout the day, especially during practice periods, as opposed to just doing the exercises prior to a performance. I tell my students that the only true way to transform performance anxiety is through transforming one's life from one of aggressive striving, to one of harmonic flow. And one can achieve this through breath awareness, right purpose, and meditation. To look within is to ultimately find one's essential self which is imbued with love, harmony, and beauty. Most music students are too busy looking for external direction and approval to even consider that they have an inner life.

This brings me to my next point of focus - the "inner critic." Here students become acquainted with the aphorism that one's thoughts and beliefs create one's reality - and that our reality can be altered by changing our thoughts. We also explore the relationship between thoughts and feelings; how thoughts can fuel the emergence of feelings and how feelings can trigger thoughts. My purpose is to empower students to know that they can have a sense of control over their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations - that they are not victims to their "unconscious" minds. Often, however, when there is trauma underlying the musician's performance anxiety, there is also dissociation, which prevents the individual from actually remembering the thoughts and feelings which create the overwhelming sense of dread associated with the performance experience. To address this particular dilemma, I lead students on a guided inner journey focusing on their earliest memory/experience of music through their musical development, early performance experiences, family experiences with music, conservatory experiences and professional experiences up to the present time. As they travel through their memories (firmly grounded in their bodies), I ask the students to become aware of anything that may have disturbed the flow of their love of music - a time when their love of music was thwarted in some way. Before ending the meditative journey, I ask the students to become aware of their relationship to music in this very moment - whether it is one of joy and connectedness, or whether there is any doubt, pain, and/or confusion in their hearts. When back in ordinary consciousness, we then discuss their findings. Most students remember their early experiences of music as being joyful and wondrous. Most students also remember a time when this experience of music changed. Usually it had to do with severe judgment and/or criticism from teachers and/or parents; not being able to play the instruments of their choice; family problems; illness; abuse; shame and/or embarrassment related to giving one's "gift". Unresolved early trauma is usually at the root of most severe occurrences of performance anxiety. Here is where I empower my students to use their own music in exploring and transforming traumatic feeling states. Canadian pianist, Anton Kuerti, writes,

"It is only the warmth of the music itself that will thaw out cold fingers. It is only by entering wholeheartedly into the mood of the piece with the mind, that the body and the fingers can be coaxed into expressing this mood and obeying their nearly subconscious instructions without apprehension or undesired tension."

Clinical improvisation is a music therapy technique in which an individual is asked to express the energy of a bodily symptom musically (through spontaneous improvisation), in order to give voice to feelings that may have been suppressed or dissociated. Usually upon hearing his or her own "inner music", the musician will remember the original impetus for the feelings, and will then be able to process verbally the memories which were at one time so overwhelming and unacceptable. Music therapy becomes a safe and non-threatening way of exploring painful blocked areas of the psyche. Clinical improvisation also offers the musician an entree into to compositional realm where emotion and meaning in music are evoked. When the musician begins to personally experience the elements of music, both viscerally and emotionally, his or her experience of playing music begins to change. In my early research on the use of group music therapy in treating musical performance stress, I found that not only did the music therapy intervention significantly reduce performance anxiety in stressed musicians, but it also significantly enhanced their musicality as judged by non-partial raters. The musicians received two important benefits from the treatment for the price of one.

I have also conducted research on the effects of stress on the immune system of professional musicians and found that the musicians who worked through their anxieties through their own musical expression actually had an increase in immunity after performing as compared to those musicians who suppressed "negative" feelings prior to performance. Those musicians experienced a decrease in immune function. So I stress the importance of self-exploration through musical improvisation for all my students/clients. The musician does not judge feeling states while playing a piece of composed music. Why should they judge and therefore suppress their own feeling states? Understanding and accepting their own emotions will also lead to an experience of comfort and joy in interpreting and expressing their performance pieces and possibly bring back the sense of joy and wonder of playing music.

And finally, in the Performance Wellness Seminar, we discuss the issue of one's inner destiny in life - one's sense of purpose. For many musicians, the stress of performance is related to one's need to be seen, to be perfect, to compete, and to win. These are attributes of the ego which are necessary but not the means to an end. We talk about the possibility of surrendering to the higher voice within which knows one's unique purpose and contribution in life. It is difficult to tune into this voice when one is so busy practicing, competing, judging, engaging in compulsive behaviors, etc. It is at this point that I teach the rudiments of contemplation and meditation which can provide the tools for the young musician bridge his or her inner and outer lives. When we approach this level during the workshop, many students will admit for the first time that they do not really want to be professional musicians, that there are other endeavors which actually appeal to them more. Many are pursuing music because of pressure from parents and/or teachers, or because they think that there are no other options. When they realize that they can be released from the pressures of performing music, these individuals can finally allow themselves to become true amateurs (lovers of music) and begin to play music to their heart's content while pursuing other career goals.

References

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