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Music Performance Anxiety: Solving the Problem Before It Starts

**Abstract**

Managing music performance anxiety is a widely-discussed problem that most professional musicians encounter every day. Commonly, people fail to address this problem in amateur musicians. This lack of attention greatly affects the development of young musicians, which ultimately leads to more harmful consequences in the future and hinders the music industry. My paper addresses this issue with special attention to its negligence in school music programs. In my project, I will be looking at the causes of music performance anxiety as well as common coping methods. My project will also express the significance of music performance anxiety as well as explain why this topic should be taught earlier and be a more normalized topic in music education. I argue that in order to be a successful musician, you have to understand music performance anxiety. In order for this to happen, school music programs must address how to overcome this issue, thus approaching the issue proactively instead of reactively. By closely examining the effects of music performance anxiety and its (largely missing) place within formal music education, I hope to shed some light on this rarely addressed issue that affects the emotional lives of music students, their ability to enter into the music profession, and music culture.

Imagine a child musician who loves playing. She practices all the time. She plays beautifully. Her music instructors believe that she has the ability to perhaps one day play in a professional orchestra. At critical moments, however, her abilities falter. Not because she's not good enough, confident enough, or because she doesn't practice enough; but because of her seemingly unexplainable moments of anxiety that occur during a performance. Perhaps surprisingly, her situation is far from uncommon. A recent survey of 2,212 musicians, reported that 40% of participants experience anxiety while performing (Hoffman, 1). This sensation of anxiety hinders a musician’s potential and prevents them from reaching their professional goals. Wells states that a musician’s "inability to perform due to anxiety can lead to missed opportunities and loss of income" (1). Experiences of anxiety not only affect many musicians in the moment, but can also prevent them from succeeding in the future.

Even if a musician does not aspire to perform as a soloist, they still need to possess the ability to solo in situations such as auditions. One might completely deserve a position, but their inability to prove their ability will cause them to lose the opportunity. What is this enigmatic condition? Is it manageable? What is the field of music doing to help young musicians understand it, de-stigmatize it, and overcome it? What could the field improve upon? And how might improvements positively affect the profession? This research paper attempts to answer these essential questions, increase awareness and provide possible solutions to, this often-overlooked area of music education.

**What is Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)?**

As defined by the article, *What Is Performance Anxiety, Really?*, music performance anxiety, more commonly known as stage fright, is “a negative emotional state with feelings of nervousness, worry, and apprehension associated with activation or arousal of the body” (*What Is Performance Anxiety, Really?*)*.* According to researchers, the four levels of music performance anxiety consist of “emotional, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral” causes and effects (Langendörfer, 1) which I will elaborate on later. These causes and effects occur commonly to the point where almost all studies on this topic report that 25% to 50% of musicians suffer from music performance anxiety.

**Who suffers from MPA?**

This commonality has potential to impact any musician regardless of age or experience. In a study, researchers found that music performance anxiety occurs in children attending elementary school and junior high (Ryan 1999). The study also concluded that out of 313 elementary and middle school students, "the greatest number of high-anxiety students (50%) were in sixth grade" (Ryan). Despite the low-pressure situation of learning an instrument in grade school, young musicians commonly experience MPA. This also creates habits in which music performance anxiety will get worse until the student suffering from it receives help. A similar study stated that music performance anxiety affects 67% of high school musicians as well as 67% of college musicians. (Fehm and Schmidt 2006). Out of the college students surveyed, “12% considered it a severe problem” (Studer, 7). This demonstrates that MPA can reach the point in which the musician feels that they cannot even attempt to perform. Since performance anxiety affects musicians at an early age, they develop habits that will inhibit their music career later in life.

Some might infer that professional musicians, who have obtained a more extensive of knowledge and experience, would experience less anxiety while performing, but the statistics regarding professionals have not deviated from amateur musicians. According to one study, the prevalence of music performance anxiety in professionals vary from 15% to 59% (Wells, Outhred, Heathers, Kemp, and Fontenelle 2012). A similar study, (Fishbein 1998), concluded that out of a survey of 2,212 orchestral musicians, 16% said stage fright was a serious problem (Studer, 7). These statistics prove that the commonality of MPA remains the same from students to professionals. Failure to correct bad habits at an early age will cause most musicians to carry these habits with them throughout their professional career.

**What causes MPA?**

The causes of music performance anxiety vary from musician to musician. Here, I will discuss the most widespread causes, but because of a vast variety of cases, it is not possible to list every combination. Anxiety may stem from perfectionism, or unacceptance of any performance less than perfect. Disciplined from the very beginning, musicians often feel pressured to play flawlessly in tune, play rhythms precisely, or convey the musical message effortlessly. This enormous amount of pressure can come from a musician’s teacher’s high expectations, as well as within the musician. Langendörfer described self-oriented perfectionism as “the severe judgement of one's own performance and the prevention of mistakes, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism is the feeling that one has to meet the expectations of other important persons" (1). Self-oriented perfectionism, considerably more harmful due to its effects on self-esteem, leads to the belief that “one must be perfectly competent at musical performance to be a worthwhile person" (Perdomo-Guevara, 2). This ultimately results in negative mental symptoms, which I will address later.

Other causes similar to perfectionism include "catastrophic thinking," "post-performance rumination," and "unrealistic goal setting" (Kenny, 10). When a musician experiences all of these thoughts at once, how could they possibly focus on highly complex music too? The human mind is not designed to multitask, so the various thoughts that occur while performing can easily overwhelm the musician. Additionally, “when musicians practice/ learn a piece, over time, things become automatic. Their brain no longer focuses on the fingerings and the fingers just move out of muscle memory. Performing makes the musician more self-conscious so they start to think about the motions of their fingers and not trust their muscle memory. ‘This ‘trying-too-hard’ effect can be seen in many kinds of performance anxiety" (Fogle, 2). Perfectionism and anxious thinking puts an enormous amount of pressure on the musician which causes many negative effects.

**What are its effects on musicians?**

The ultimate goal of any performance is to experience the ‘flow state.’

"...to achieve a state of complex clarity and purpose, even euphoria, through the capacity to concentrate intensely. It entails the capacity to shut out irrelevant stimuli and focus at great depth on the task at hand, often causing a person to lose the normal sense of time and self in which one is both actor and observer" (Kenny, 213).

When a musician gets nervous, they focus on articulating everything perfectly to the point where they forget the musical and emotional aspect of performing. In other words, they cannot lose themselves the music and enter the much-desired flow state. As stated earlier, MPA has emotional, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral effects (Langendörfer).

The most prevalent emotional effect, low self-esteem, may lead the musician to believe that they are not good enough and quit music altogether. Physiological effects include trembling, shaking, sweating, and restlessness. All of these symptoms inhibit the musician from executing even the simplest motions necessary to perform the piece. Anxious thought processes also cause cognitive effects. Langendörfer provides an example that "Worrying about making mistakes and their potential consequences can result in a lapse of memory or concentration and even escalate to panic" (1). In many instances, musicians must perform a piece from memory, so this type of cognitive effect is very detrimental to their career in music. Lastly, a musician might change their behavior by turning to unhealthy coping methods such as drugs and alcohol. Wristen points out that musicians currently enrolled in a postsecondary school suffer from behavioral effects the most: "In addition to the stressors faced by all university students, music students face a number of challenges that may affect their mental health and well-being" (1). In addition to everyday stress, musicians have to deal with the negative effects of performance anxiety. If not dealt with correctly, the musician endangers their overall health and well-being.

**Treatments for MPA**

However, with proper treatment and coping methods, musicians can diminish the negative effects of music performance anxiety. Below is a list of approaches to controlled thinking that I find helpful:

*Simulations of performing/ performing more often*

You can participate in a simulated performance in a variety of ways. The first method consists of partaking in a dress rehearsal in the venue your performance will take place. Additionally, you could further immerse yourself by wearing the clothes you intend to perform in. Lastly, a friend or teacher could generate a variety of distractions so that unexpected noises would not seem as surprising. Mental simulations are another alternative. According to Kenny, “pre-performance imagery may assist in focusing the mind on a thought or sensation that the performer associates with confidence. Others focus on the breath to calm anxiety and reduce automatic stress-related responses. These strategies serve simultaneously to distract the performer from the inner monologue of self-doubting and catastrophizing thoughts that can impair a performance” (216). A young bassoonist described her preparation: "While I practice it, I imagine sitting in the hall doing the audition behind the screen and because I am doing it during my practice, I hope it won't feel like such a strange feeling when I get there" (Kenny, 216). Visualizing a performance before it happens allows you to feel more comfortable and prepared.

*Focus on the big picture*

The three things to focus on during a performance include: self, audience, and music. Shift your focus away from yourself and the audience and instead, direct your attention toward the music. If you only think about the music, you can’t think about messing up. In other words, think about the music itself, NOT yourself playing the music (Kenny, 185). Furthermore, stay within the present. Don’t worry about what happened in past performances or what people will say about your performance in the future.

*Connect with the audience*

Instead of focusing on notes, articulations or dynamics, pay more attention to the emotions you intend to express through the music. Researcher, Perdomo-Guevara, stated that “approaches to performance that include a concern for connectedness with others or the larger world promote more rewarding performance experiences than approaches that focus only on personal achievement" (8). The emotional effect the music has on the audience remains the most memorable aspect of a performance. A piece may sound perfect, but the audience will soon forget the performance if they do not feel an unexplainable sense of connectedness to the music.

Learning how to control your thoughts proves very helpful, but those who still struggle may seek out a counselor for help. Counselors develop strategies to help the musician overcome negative thought processes that cause anxiety before and during a performance. In contrast, some musicians resort to more harmful solutions including medications such as beta-blockers, drugs and alcohol. The variety of treatments available should provide hope to those struggling with MPA in which they feel like they do not have to resort to drugs and alcohol, but instead face the problem with the guidance of others.

**Flaws in educational integration**

Despite the availability of counseling programs and self-help books, this issue still affects the majority of musicians. Furthermore, this creates the problem that most musicians need to reach out for help on their own. Little to no evidence of music performance anxiety training exists in schools. The responsibility to reach out for help should not fall to the musician alone. Instead, the industry should work to normalize and destigmatize MPA. In fact, "Spahn, Richter, and Zschocke (2002) found that 12% of university music students experienced playing-related psychological problems, yet 79% of the participants who reported psychological problems had not sought professional help" (Wristen). Lack of treatment could lead to severe anxiety and depression, creating long term consequences. Therefore, “promoting awareness of indicators and potential impacts of depression and anxiety among music students and increasing cultural acceptability of seeking treatment for these conditions" serves necessary (Wristen). Moving forward, shouldn’t we develop more proactive solutions instead of reacting?

**Why MPA needs to be normalized in schools**

Many musicians who suffer from performance anxiety fail to see the negative effects of performance as a legitimate issue. They end up blaming themselves for not having enough confidence rather than ask for help. Raising awareness and normalizing this issue will allow most musicians to understand that there are strategies to overcome their fear of performing. As Ryan stated, "Given the large number of adult musicians who suffer from performance anxiety and the clear research interest in effective anxiety reduction treatments, it seems beneficial to examine this issue in younger musicians, for whom early intervention strategies might reduce the potential for developing debilitating anxiety as they mature" (2). Most musicians would feel more comfortable confronting this issue if MPA is more familiarized.

A logical start to approach this problem consists of improving the curriculum in middle school, high school, and college music programs. Since noticeable rates of music performance anxiety starts in sixth grade, this topic would preferably be integrated in music programs as early as middle school (Ryan). Wristen expresses, “Music educators can help prepare their junior high and high school-aged students…by helping them develop coping strategies, fostering awareness of anxiety and depression as common and treatable conditions, and promoting acceptability of seeking treatment when necessary" (1). Wristen then continues arguing that “a logical first step would be for music educators to simply promote awareness of depression and anxiety as treatable conditions. Music educators are often highly influential in the lives of their junior high and high school students. Simply acknowledging these mental disorders with the same level of concern given to physical injuries affecting musical participation might encourage students to seek treatment when needed” (1). Therefore, normalizing MPA in schools will allow students to feel more comfortable about the topic and consider help before their anxiety progresses to an unhealthy level.

Although more and more music programs are adding various courses to their curriculum (such as music theory, aural theory, music history, etc.), teachers commonly overlook the topic of music performance anxiety. This oversight may be due to the fact that very little solo performance opportunities in middle school or high school occur. Due to time constraints, most schools only offer large ensembles such as band, chorus, or orchestra instead of smaller ensembles or solo recitals. This lack of performance opportunity sets up future music majors for failure in which students rarely have the chance to get more comfortable with performing from experience, as well as not given the chance to experiment with coping methods to lower their anxiety. In the article, “Stage fright: its experience as a problem and coping with it,” the authors stated “that already at high-school level, the students feel a lack of public performance opportunities and particularly a lack of communication on the topic of stage fright" (Studer, 9). The same authors conducted a study in which they found "almost all students (95%) thought that the topic of stage fright should be discussed more in their education at the music university" (Studer, 7). Having more experience with performing during middle school and high school can lessen the anxiety a musician feels in their future career.

**Why MPA isn’t included in school curriculums**

Although strong evidence exists that teaching music performance anxiety in schools will significantly benefit musicians, hardly any schools actually integrate this in their curriculum due to a few minor setbacks. First, many music educators face the challenge that few large-scale studies exist to confirm a promising method to teach (Braden). Most of the studies I have found comprise of smaller sample sizes and shorter time periods. This implies that one specific technique does not appear more effective than the rest, so creating a standard curriculum of this topic would prove difficult.

Lastly, some may argue that just because a musician participates in a middle school or high school ensemble, they do not necessarily aspire to pursue a career in music. Although, most students who play an instrument in school do not pursue performance as a career, around this time, students start to find their profession. Anxiety may turn even the most hardworking and passionate music students off from this profession. This sad, but true statement reinforces the idea that methods to cope with performance anxiety needs more attention in early music education programs. Often, students will feel better prepared for their futures, and the music industry will benefit immensely.

**Conclusion**

As we can see, more steps must transpire to incorporate MPA into formal education so that all musicians fully understand its implications, its solutions, and its commonality. In part II of this essay, I will discuss this condition with a licensed therapist, and professors within the music dept. at a small, liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, in an effort to consider how we might, in a practical way, help to bring this condition out from the shadows and better integrate it into music education. While it makes sense, of course, to begin this "integration" at a much earlier level of education (e.g., K-12), my work here will attend to those students who are most immediately on a pathway to a career in music, but who might be impeded because of this common condition.

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**Part II**

In an effort to add the topic of music performance anxiety to school curriculums, I brainstormed ideas to integrate this subject in the music program of Lebanon Valley College, a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. I hope to start a project in which people reach out to musicians struggling with music performance anxiety instead of leaving musicians to seek help on their own. I met with Dr. Falk, an on-campus psychologist, and Dr. Norris, the head of the music department. Within these meetings, I explained my research paper and ideas for part II, as well as received suggestions on how to turn this idea into a successful and influential project.

**Meeting with Dr. Falk**

My meeting with Dr. Falk began with an overview of part I. The conversation focused on the causes, effects, and common treatments for music performance anxiety. Dr. Falk informed me of what she typically recommends students do to help cope with their anxiety. Her suggestions are as follows:

* Deep breathing: Imagine two balloons of your favorite color. Inhale to the point where the balloons are about to pop, then exhale and deflate the balloons. Do this three times.
* Imagery: Picture yourself performing on stage from start to finish. Imagine playing everything flawlessly.

She provides various techniques so musicians can choose what works best for them. She also expresses the importance of self-care to her patients. This consists of diet, sleep, and exercise. She said musicians tend to eat much less on the day of a performance due to nerves. This could lead to low blood sugar, ultimately causing the musician to be shaky, further contributing to the effect of MPA. She explained the importance of exercise by describing anxiety as something that builds up and gets caught in the body. Something as simple as going for a run expels some of that built-up energy, helping the body to calm down.

After exchanging information and perspectives on music performance anxiety, I shifted the topic by asking questions about its prevalence within Lebanon Valley College. First, I asked Dr. Falk how often musicians come to her for help involving MPA. She told me she does get frequent visits from musicians. She looked up her fall report and pointed out that out of all majors at the college, music majors are the third most common visitors. Digging deeper, I asked how common music performance anxiety is within the field of psychology as a whole, and she responded by explaining that psychologists broaden the term to “performance anxiety” since people from almost every career or major experience it. Other fields that experience performance anxiety include sports, physical therapy, and teaching. This information supports my claim about the commonality of music performance anxiety, yet the college lack programs to approach this specific issue proactively and normalize the matter among students.

Finally, we discussed the importance of incorporating MPA in the college’s music program. My initial idea involved the creation of a course on music performance anxiety. Dr. Falk pointed out that starting a class would require a professional teacher and a good textbook, neither of which exist yet. She then suggested integrating the subject into an already existing class as a unit of study, a much more practical idea that the college could achieve in the near future. We also came up with the idea to create an outside club or seminar in which musicians meet once a week to discuss and learn about MPA. More specifically, learn how to identify, discuss, and experiment with treatments, as well as vent and give emotional support. Dr. Falk said she supports this idea and would willingly help structure the unit or seminar.

**Meeting with Dr. Norris**

Later, I met with Dr. Norris, the head of the college’s music department, to hear her opinion on starting a project to integrate instruction on music performance anxiety into the curriculum. I explained my research paper and posed both ideas (unit of study within an already established class, and an extracurricular club/seminar). Dr. Norris believes that an extracurricular program would be more plausible. She said I should start a student initiated project that could demonstrate the importance of learning about MPA to the faculty.

Dr. Norris supports the normalization of performance anxiety among musicians and my upcoming project that will attempt to solve this issue. She offered to involve herself in this project and has already recommended ideas. One idea involves having a kick-off event in the beginning of the fall semester to promote my program, possibly by the showing of the movie, *Composed*, which is a documentary about music performance anxiety. She also suggested that I should make a presentation about MPA and the program at a music faculty meeting. This will provide music professors the opportunity to hear my ideas and possibly help establish the program. Lastly, Dr. Norris said she would create informal recitals for those who attend the program to experiment with different coping methods for MPA. She said she would offer recital attendance (a requirement for all music majors) as a way to promote the event.

Although I will have to wait until next semester to start this project, I can start planning and brainstorming more ideas by writing down subtopics as well as meeting with Dr. Falk and Dr. Norris frequently and stay in contact with them over summer break. I feel confident that sufficient promotion of this program will result in immense benefits for musicians at Lebanon Valley College. I believe that this could be the first step toward integrating the subject of music performance anxiety in the school’s curriculum as well as bringing recognition to an obstacle that hinders most musicians.