

PERFORMANCE PREPARATION

The following article (written by Debra Gilmore, from Sydney Boys High School) discusses techniques for performance preparation and includes strategies for overcoming performance anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Why do we play music?

What are we trying to achieve?

What are we trying to communicate?

How do we do communicate with the audience?

These are a few of the questions you will ask yourself as you approach the year ahead and the music performances you will be participating in.

Many of you will feel anxious about how you will achieve the best possible performance in Music in your HSC. However some students will be far more anxious than they need be. With thoughtful and constructive preparation, you can approach your performance with confidence and just a healthy dose of anxiety. Remember that the anxiety that a musician feels before a performance is natural. It would be a rare individual who did not experience it.

PREPARING FOR A PERFORMANCE

There are three areas that need to be considered in preparing for a performance: the physical, the mental, and the emotional or affective.

1. PHYSICAL PREPARATION

TIME

Firstly, recognise that you need preparation time. You cannot successfully throw together a performance in a few days or weeks.

Set yourself some long-term and some short-term goals. The obvious long-term goal is the HSC performance in September. In order to be adequately prepared for this long-term goal you will need to establish a series of short-term personal time frame.

PRACTICE

There is a plethora of advice on effective practice techniques available in journals and music magazines. Your teacher will also have techniques and methods that will work for you.

One of the most accessible articles for students is "How to Work Smart" by Ruth Bonetti in the Music Student Magazine (Vol. 1, No.1, 2000). Read this and other articles, and apply the techniques that work for you.

A regular practice schedule and a routine that you can sustain are essential. During your practice time you need to maintain concentration and ensure that all elements of your performance (notes, tempo, dynamics,

phrasing, style etc.) are consistent. Everyone has a different concentration span. Work out how long you can really focus on your music and try to improve on it each day.

Once you have established this routine, consider the following:

- Don't waste your time playing over the easy bits and avoiding the awkward or difficult parts of a piece.
- Remember, don't leave a note or section of the music to chance. Use the three-times-over rule and make yourself play a passage three times perfectly before you allow yourself to believe that you have it learned.
- Try practising while in a distracting place, where there are uncontrolled distractions and noise.
- When you have mastered the difficult passages, record your performance. However, remember to focus all of your attention on performing and think about the evaluation when it is over.

SOLVE THE RIDDLE

What is the overall structure of the work?

Where are the key changes, time signature changes and sudden changes of dynamics or tempo?

How many times is the melody played?

Just how are you going to create variety?

Does the harmony or accompaniment change or is it consistent with each melodic statement?

As a performer you must develop a plan to solve the musical riddle. Set priorities in your practice to solve the musical riddle.

Listen to recordings of other works by the same composer to develop your understanding of style, and develop confidence in your interpretations.

FIND PERFORMANCE OPPORTUNITIES

Just get out there and do it. You will be surprised at the interest taken by others in your playing, and yes, people really do want to hear you! Look for opportunities to play, particularly when the audience is positive and the music suits them and the occasion.

Create some performance opportunities by:

- asking friends and family to listen and critique your playing
- organising small lunchtime concerts in the music room with an audience of supporters
- offering to give a lunchtime concert to staff
- progressing to larger venues and audiences, such as year assemblies or whole-school assemblies

The more you perform, and the more successful you are at it, the more you will find you enjoy it.

CRITICALLY EVALUATE YOUR OWN PERFORMANCES

Record your playing at regular intervals. Be tough on yourself and compare professional recordings of performers with your own. Mark in the places where you still have trouble and resolve to work on them.

Video your performances and view your performance with a critical eye.

Ask yourself:

Am I communicating my musical intent to the audience?

Am I projecting my phrasing, dynamics, fluidity and confidence beyond the music stand?

Does my performance have a sense of energy and passion?

If the answer is "no" to any of these questions, watch again and decide how you are going to communicate these things.

Video yourself again a week later. Are you improving? If you are, keep up the routine so that you are at ease in a performance situation and able to do your best.

Evaluate your progress regularly in the practice room, but try to ensure that you leave the evaluation there. If you are constantly in a state of evaluation while performing, your mind and focus are not on the music.

Listen to yourself, and learn to be inspired by your own playing.

Trust that your efforts in the practice room will show during a performance.

2. MENTAL PREPARATION

Mental preparation for a performance is not separate from the physical, but it does need some extra consideration.

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Performance anxiety is a part of everyone's life at some point. Musicians are particularly susceptible to performance anxiety because we are often required to perform in stressful situations.

You may have found yourself saying things like "I played so much better in the practice room," or "I was so nervous that I just couldn't play anything right."

To increase the probability of presenting an outstanding musical performance, you need to find ways of controlling the effects of anxiety.

Ask yourself why you are performing. It's not just for exams! Think about the pressures you feel about performance. Are your responses physiological (shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, rapid adrenalin rush) or psychological (fear of the situation, worry what others think if something goes wrong, worry about personal appearance)?

Keep things in perspective. Remember that, even if you give a performance that does not reflect your musical skills, it is nothing more than a temporary setback. Your attitude and insight will determine whether or not you are able to overcome negative experiences.

It is all right to be anxious. If you do not feel excited and challenged by performing, your music will suffer. A healthy amount of anxiety indicates that you are preparing for something special and it brings to a performance an added intensity and energy.

Learn relaxation methods. With practice your mind can control and fool the reactions of your body. The ability to relax is an essential skill that must be learned.

Use practice time wisely. Learn your music well. Over-learning is one way to compensate for poor coping skills. Practise relaxed playing and try imagining yourself on stage while practising. This can make the transition from practice room to concert stage less stressful.

Be realistic about your abilities. Choose music that is within your grasp, but that is rewarding to practise and perform. Do not put unrealistic expectations upon yourself as this can be a major contributor to anxiety. Over-extension can lead to discouragement.

Warm-up properly. Make this time as relaxing, concentrated and trouble-free as possible.

TAKE CARE OF NON-MUSICAL MATTERS BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE

Take care of non-musical matters associated with the performance well in advance.

Choose something appropriate to wear for the performance.

Make certain your performance space is organised and that you have your music and music stand ready.

Position yourself so that you can easily see and interact with your accompanist.

Choose a comfortable space between you and the examiners. If you are too close to the examiners, it makes everyone uncomfortable, and if you are too far away it is more difficult for you to communicate musically with them.

Make certain that your instrument is in good condition.

Once these matters have been taken care of, you can concentrate on the musical performance.

THINK POSITIVELY

Train yourself to think positively. We all approach music from our own experiences. We can choose between success and failure simply by putting in successful and positive thoughts in place of those that encourage doubt or fear. Rehearse thoughts such as "I know I will do well because I have prepared thoroughly for this performance". This idea relates to the self-fulfilling prophecy that is commonly associated with success. If you think you will succeed, you probably will.

Performance anxiety begins as a state of mind: we respond emotionally to our perceptions of a fearful situation. These emotions can lead to physiological changes that inhibit musical performance. But we are not helpless against these effects. If we learn ways to overcome the factors that affect us negatively, we are well on the way to improved musical performances.

There are many articles and books published on this topic. Some are listed at the end of this article.

3. EMOTIONAL (AFFECTIVE) PREPARATION

So, you have the notes and rhythms and phrasing down. You have the style and dynamics under control. But how do you prepare for the affective, the emotional communication?

When we play music, we are trying to communicate and express the intangible. This applies to everyone who picks up an instrument and performs in front of an audience. It applies because music is not just about the notes and marks on the page; it is a living, dynamic, exciting expression that is as individual and complex as you are.

The performer has a responsibility to bring out the passion of the music in a performance. Both performer and audience will get only as much from a performance as the performer has chosen to put into the preparation, physical, mental and affective.

There is more to preparation than the physical aspects that we discussed above. You need to develop an understanding of the intent of the composer. Start your research on the composer and the work early in your preparation period.

Think about the style that is required. Is it a song? Should it be smooth and lyrical, or metrical and more like a dance? Experiment with playing the same phrase in different ways to bring the right quality to your sound.

What emotion are you attempting to communicate to the listener? Think about the emotional development of the piece. Find the moment of absolute intensity in your piece (the climax). Determine how you reached that moment and how long it lasts. Then find the lowest level of intensity in the piece. Compare the beginning of each section with these moments. How do they fit in? How is intensity achieved in each section?

Draw a diagram of the development of intensity within each section and across the whole piece. Use broad sweeps of lines to trace it rather than a detailed diagram.

The most effective way to achieve the emotional intent of the music is by playing each section and movement differently, until you find the most effective way for you. It might not be the same for every performer, and this opens up the path for individual interpretation in music. Just remember that physical and emotional interpretation rely on a depth of knowledge of the music.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abel, Jennifer and Larkin, Kevin. Anticipation of Performance Among Musicians: Physiological Arousal, Confidence, and State-Anxiety. *Psychology of Music*, 18(2), 1990, pp. 171-182.

Blakeslee, Michael, ed. Helping Students Deal with Stage Fright. *Music Educators Journal/Teaching Music*, 1(4), February 1994, p. 36.

Dews, C.L. Barney and Williams, Martha S. Student Musicians' Personality Styles, Stresses, and Coping Patterns. *Psychology of Music*, 17(1), 1989, pp. 37-47.

Ely, Mark C. Stop Performance Anxiety!. *Music Educators Journal*, 78(2), October 1991, p. 35.

Meehan, Jack. The Joy of Success. *Instrumentalist*. 39(4), November 1984, p. 66.

Meharg, Stephen S. Help for the Anxious Performer. *Music Educators Journal*, 75(2), October 1988, pp. 34-37.

Miklaszewski, Kacper. A Case Study of a Pianist Preparing a Musical Performance. *Psychology of Music*, 17(2), 1989, pp. 95-109.

Nielzén, Sören and Cesarec, Zvonimir. On the Perception of Emotional Meaning in Music. *Psychology of Music*, 9(2), 1981, pp.17-31.

Steptoe, Andrew. Stress, Coping and Stage Fright in Professional Musicians. *Psychology of Music*, 17(1), 1989, pp. 3-11.

Wolverton, Vance D. Conveying Music's Emotional Qualities. *Music Educators Journal*, 75(5), January 1989, pp. 31-34