

PERFORMANCE PREPARATION FOR MUSICIANS

Good Morning Musicians.

I have discovered that it is possible to enjoy performing and to find it an inspiring and joyful experience. Also I have read some literature, consulted with a psychologist and some performers and found that there is much agreement among us, my personal experiences, other people's discoveries and what has been found by methodical research.

How many of you have had the experience of surprising yourself and playing better for an audience than you had ever played before or much better than you had expected? Aha, a few of you. It happens sooner or later. That happy coincidence of preparation and a stimulating opportunity.

WHY DO WE PLAY THE FLUTE IN PUBLIC?

We play the flute because we love music. We like the sound of the flute. We like the sound we make. We like making melodies. We enjoy the physical experience of playing the flute, of taking a deep breathe, putting the instrument to our lips and letting this melody flow out in the way that we shape it. Maybe we play better than some. Maybe our interpretations are similar or different from others. It really doesn't matter. We are making music. We are sharing in that great human endeavour and expression - which is making and sharing music.

Sometimes we have only ourselves as an audience, ourselves and the composer. Sometimes there are others present.

What do we feel when there are others present? A lot of things. One thing that I have noticed and delighted in is that expectant hush just before I make a sound. I look at the faces of those people, many strangers or a few friends, and see trust and expectation. As I play those first few notes, I start to feel the emotions of the audience carrying me. I feel a warmth and supportive trust. Then I feel free to play with them, to dare to be a little more expressive. Because I feel that I owe it to them and together we are enjoying the experience and we are playing together. I really do. They carry me and I play for them. It's quite lovely.

Sometimes, I just play my stuff, feeling quite focussed but in my own world.

Sometimes, I have known great fear and tension, and ran into difficulties. I didn't like that. I did not want to have those experiences again, and so I began to pay very close attention to what would make performing work for me and for the listener. I decided to learn to rise more consistently to the occasion for my own dignity and for the sake of the audience.

Many things are learned by instinct, by trial and error, through experience. There are, in addition, some methods that have been found through methodical investigation to be very effective and helpful. We will look at those methods and examine the arousal response and learn how to keep it at an optimal level.

METHODS OF PREPARATION - Musical, Physical, Psychological

General Musical Preparation

Muscle memory

You have learned the pieces or pieces that you will perform. Your teacher has coached you and you are ready. You have been declared ready to perform or face an examining board.

You have developed muscle memory. Your body responds to the dots on the page with the appropriate note. This is conditioning. You don't have to think about it, it becomes almost automatic. This will carry you along, and a long way, but this is only one aspect.

Photographic recall

It is also helpful to put the music in your conscious mind. Allow yourself to visualize the score without looking at it. See the music in your mind's eye. Maybe not the whole score from beginning to end, though that would be great, but the opening notes, some middle parts, and certainly the ending phrase. Then not only is muscle memory engaged, so is part of your mind.

Auditory recall

Hear the pieces in your head both while reading the score and just from memory. Hum or sing parts of it. That puts more into your mind and your basis for knowing the music becomes greater.

When imaging the brain of musicians it has been found that the brain areas are firing before the movement has started. In some ways, you are hearing the sound before you make it. Become aware of this and hear the music before you play it. I call it playing with your ears. If you can pre-hear it, you can play it much better. You have probably noticed this yourselves many times.

Kinesthetic Practice

Kinesthetic practice is practicing without moving. You play your pieces in your head, you feel your fingers moving, you feel yourself taking in a breathe, you hear the music in your head. It is imaginary practicing and it works very well, as well, as "real" practicing. It saves you from repetitive strain and most importantly it puts the whole experience in your mind and then your mind is in charge.

Musical structure

The notes are not a random assortment, they are there in an organized way. By understanding the structure, you know where you are in it. Start with simple awareness, the key signature, the time signature, the modulations, the themes, the thematic repetitions, motifs, the transitions, the climax point of the piece. Then, as you are playing it, you are not merely on the 22nd note in line 30, but you are in the second repetition of the theme but this time in the dominant key. Isn't that cool to realize? This is not difficult, believe me. By knowing the structure you become more comfortable with the playing of the piece. You get more into your mind and your basis become broader.

Get to know what type of piece you are playing. Is it a Baroque dance suite each with its characteristic mood. Is it a Classical sonata with its themes and needs to be played with a light, smooth precision. Is it Russian neo-Romanticism with its passion and tonal and dynamic range. Is it French impressionism with its airy, mystical quality? Get to know a little about the style of the piece. Then you are more intimate with it and can play it with greater awareness and conviction.

Now the music is in your muscles and in your mind, in your visual memory, in your ears, in your aware brain. You have a much broader basis to draw on when you are performing. Good.

Physical Preparation

Fitness

It helps to be in reasonable shape, to have tone in your large muscles, to be stretched, to have aerobic capacity. Music playing is, after all, a very physical activity, almost athletic. We tend to focus on the small, precise muscles, in our fingers, our faces, sometimes our arms. We have a whole body. If your whole body is stronger, it holds you up to the rigours of sitting or standing for long hours and refining your fine muscle movements. You learn faster, and stress rolls off you like water off a duck. You know why? Because when you have muscle tone, your muscles are always slightly firing, ready to go. So when you experience a stressful situation, this resilient muscle tone absorbs the stress and does not get into a knot. And when your muscles don't tense up, your mind doesn't worry as much.

Stretching, the yogis believe, releases your vital energy. It gets rid of the knots of tension that we have created. Getting rid of the knots reduces pain due to tension and makes your motions smoother and more graceful. Stretching makes you feel a whole lot better and is easy to do.

Plus you've got to get out the house and get some air and see the world. So build those muscles, stretch them, fill your lungs with air. You'll be a calmer, happier person and a better musician for it.

Chanting OM

Strangely enough this works on several levels. The yogis say that it is getting you in tune with the resonance of the universe. It is certainly getting you aware of your own resonance. The vibrating hum is soothing. When you chant “OM” you open up the back of your throat and relax your neck muscles. This facilitates getting a better tone on the flute since your body is part of the resonating chamber for the sound. Let’s try it for a few seconds and see how you feel. All together, “OM”. Neat eh?

Muscle relaxation

Muscle tensing and relaxation sequences teach you to be aware of your body. You tense all of your muscles, then you let them all go. Or you tense your muscles progressively from toe to head and then relax them in reverse order. This helps you to notice when you do have tension in your body and to be able to deal with it immediately.

Take Care of Yourself

This is very simple. Get enough sleep. A performance takes a lot of mental and emotional energy. Get some rest on the day of your performance. Eat lightly and healthily before playing and have a big meal afterwards. Go easy on the caffeine. Treat yourself with gentleness and respect. You deserve it and the listeners deserve it.

Breathing

Your breath is your life force. Breathing cleans out your blood through oxygen-carbon dioxide exchange in the tiny sacs in your lungs.

How you breathe affects how you feel and think. The yogis have made a whole science of breathing techniques for different purposes.

Let’s do a breathing exercise and see what happens. First of all, let’s take our resting pulse. Find your pulse on your throat between the voice box and the sinews using your two first fingers, like so. Some people can also feel their pulse on the inside of their wrists, about an inch below the thumb. You can use your thumb. Have you all found your pulse? We’ll count our pulse for 10 seconds and write that number down. Starting now. OK, write down your count. Now let’s do a simple breathing exercise. We will slowing inhale, using a big, belly breathe, expand your bellies, fill your lungs, to the count of 5, then slowly exhale to the count of 7, the repeat it more times. Afterwards we’ll count our heartbeats. Ready? In 2,3,4 5, Out, 2,3,4,5,6,7, etc. more times. OK, count your pulse starting now. OK, write down your count. Did it change? Which way did it go? Aha, when you multiply that by 6 and you get the change in the beats per minute that is pretty significant. By your breathing pattern, you can deliberately slow down your heart rate. Pretty cool, eh?

Let's try something else. Let's hold our breaths. Let's take a big gulp of air and hold it for about 45 seconds. OK, count your pulse starting now. OK, write down your count. Did it change? Which way did it go? Aha, multiply that by 6 and you get the change in beats per minute. Your breathing pattern affects your heart rate.

Fortunately for us, we breathe deeply using belly breathes to play the flute so when we we're warming up we're already doing something significant to bring our heart rate under control. When you're warming up for a performance, warm up slowly, with a metronome. The tendency is to rush which increases your feelings of anxiety. Warm up slowly and get yourself under control.

THE AROUSAL RESPONSE

When you think about going out in front of an audience, it causes a hormonal and neurological response in your body and in your perceptions. The result is increased heart rate, shallow breathing, dry mouth, sweaty palms, butterflies in stomach, shaky limbs because your muscles are all fired up for action, your senses are hyper-alert, there is difficulty in sustaining concentration. This is controlled by what is called the "sympathetic nervous system". Doesn't seem very sympathetic does it? The sympathetic nervous is designed to prepare you for action or danger, a tiger in the woods. It makes you ready to fight or run away. It prepares you for physical danger. However, what we are facing with an audience is not a physical danger, usually, but we perceive a social threat. We perceive a threat to our dignity, our social standing, our acceptance. We feel an excitement or even fear.

For most people, this feeling vanishes as soon as they start playing and then they go into their familiar music playing mode.

This arousal response is almost universal, normal and is the excitement of performing, of ski racing, of tennis competition.

How we interpret this arousal response, how we monitor it, control it, use it, determines the outcome.

Of course, you can chicken out, be overwhelmed and run away. That is a perfectly valid response. It is your choice.

You can choose to see benefits of this heightened state of arousal. It fires you up. It gives you energy. It heightens your senses which is why performers say that it is a necessary component of a good performance. You have to learn to balance this emotional excitement with the fluidity of your technique using the coping strategies that we are discussing here today.

If you believe that you have a choice and a method for dealing with things, it makes it a lot

easier. You can choose to rise to the occasion. Get on top of this arousal response and treat it like a surfer treats a wave, ride it to glory. Ride it like a surfer rides a wave. It is yours, it is inevitable and it is very useful. Accept it and use it.

You need an optimal level of arousal to perform well. If you were acting in a play that ran every night for months or years, there would be some times that you would have to get psyched up for it, to have sparkle. You need that sparkle, that sense of importance of what you are doing. If, on the other hand, you let that excitement escalate and overwhelm you, then you can run into difficulties. It is important to notice it and guide it like a fast motorcycle or racehorse.

Dealing with the arousal response usual involves keeping it at a certain level or bringing it down a notch and not letting it escalate.

Chemical methods include alcohol or tranquilizers, beta-blockers, as they are known nowadays. Alcohol has the drawback of making you less sensitive and less coordinated and eventually wearing off. Drugs may help by reducing the effects of the adrenalin rush but sometimes they make people feel numb and sleepy, and drugs too wear off. In both cases, you have learned nothing and are left as helpless as before.

We have already started to look at ways that help us. We have learned the music and become familiar with it in many ways. Physically we are in reasonable shape. We have stretched and gotten rid of knots and released tension. we have taken long, slow, deep breathes to bring down our heart rate. We have chanted OM. We will now look at the all powerful psychological ways.

Psychological Preparation - Cognitive and Behavioural

Cognitive - that is what you think

Your mind is your governor. How you think affects every part of you, your hormonal level, your nerves, your muscles, your memory. Cognitive methods of performance preparation have been found to be the most effective and long lasting.

The arousal response happened because we viewed the situation as a bit of a threat or a thrill. It is in the perception, first of all, that the response occurred. And we are right to do this. Now we just have to monitor it and use for our benefit.

Let's do a little mental exercise. Let us think about someone or something that really makes us mad, someone or something really outrageous and infuriating. Think on it very vividly for a few seconds while you close your eyes. OK, now look at each others facial expressions. You're a pretty fierce group. How does your body feel on the inside? Tight? How does your back feel, your shoulders, your arms? It's just a thought and it produced a somatic, bodily response.

Let's think about something else now. Let's think about someone that we love or feel tenderly about. It could be your boyfriend or girlfriend, your parents who protect you, a little baby, a kitten, anything. Think on it really vividly for a few seconds while you close your eyes. OK, now look at each others facial expressions. You're a much nicer group now. How does your body feel on the inside? Softer? How do your muscles feel? A little looser? It's just a thought and it has an effect on our bodies.

Perspective on Reality *

You may have doubts about your abilities. But you know and I know that the reality is that you can play the piece very well and you have done so many times. Remember that.

You may think that you don't play as well as James Galway, yet. And you may be right. But you are not being set up to be compared to James Galway. You are set up to play your piece at your level, today. That's the realistic perspective. Be happy with what you can do today.

Performance, like everything else, is unpredictable. Think about the worst thing that can happen and its probability, the best thing that can happen and its probability, and then the most likely thing that will happen. Once you've faced the worst and the best concretely, they lose power over you because you have less uncertainty. Think about the most likely scenario. You will play well, you may make a few mistakes. No one will mind a bit. They will enjoy your playing. That's the reality of it.

You have probably survived performing before, enjoyed it enough to do it again. Remember that. Many people have survived and enjoyed performing. Remember that.

Visualizing Success

By visualizing the whole performance scene you become familiar with it and this allows you to focus on the music making. Picture yourself walking onto the stage, putting your music on the stand, tuning your flute with the piano, lifting your flute, taking a deep breath and playing your pieces beautifully. Then see yourself smiling, bowing and walking off the stage. Now you have laid down some tracks in your memory and the whole experience will be more familiar.

Imaging Success

This is a whole body exercise whereby you feel yourself as being inside yourself, walking, moving, breathing, hearing the music sounding beautifully, sensing the audience, hearing the applause and finally walking off stage. At each point you feel your body's muscles, see with your eyes, hear with your ears, sense with your being all aspects of performing. As you do this you will feel that excitement and you will be practicing controlling it. This is an intense way to prepare yourself. When you finally do come up to perform, you are on familiar ground, there are less unknowns, and you can concentrate on the music and not be distracted by all the unfamiliar

sensations.

If you can physically go to the performance area and walk around the stage and look around, that would be helpful too. It lays down tracks in your brain and removes uncertainty and surprise.

Positive Self-talk and Auto-suggestion **

Auto-suggestion doesn't just mean that you want a fancy, new car. Auto-suggestion is noticing and deciding what it is that you are telling yourself. If you are nervous, most probably, you are having thoughts, subtle worries that are predisposing you to having those feelings. You can listen for that voice in your head and you will become more aware.

Indulge in some positive self-talk. Positive self-talk will improve your mood, calm you down, help you to focus and strongly predispose you to fulfilling those words.

Repeat these phrases to yourself many, many times and often. Repeat after me. *I am a capable musician. I play well. I enjoy playing. I am calm and confident. I am safe. It is going well.*

Fill yourself with helpful thoughts and suggestions. You are the only one completely in charge of your mind. No one else is. Not the people you talked to yesterday, not the people around you, not even your parents and teachers. Only you can decide what you want in your mind. So fill your mind with what you want and you will be driven to fulfill it. It's inescapable.

Positive thoughts overpower negative thoughts.

Focus *

Focus on the here and now. Draw yourself into the immediate present. Focussing is a great tool that simplifies your life and amplifies your performance. When you are focussed, you shut out worries or distractions. You don't need them, now. You can focus on the music, on your breathe, on a visual aspect of your environment. Remember how it feels to play well and go back to that feeling.

The most effective cognitive methods are perspective, positive self-talk and focus.

Behavioural methods - that is what you actually do

I was surprised to learn that what you actually do, your behaviour, does not have as much effect on improving your performance preparation as the cognitive ones do. But I will mention them just for completeness.

Relaxation response

You can teach yourself to relax on cue. Think vividly of something that you enjoy; a beautiful,

peaceful, serene, and pleasant scene. This vision produces feelings of well being and calm and clarity of mind. Combined with rhythmical, deep breathing and auto-suggestion you can teach yourself to relax on command. It's easier done than said. We have already demonstrated the effectiveness of a thought with our anger, loving exercises.

It was found that combining this relaxation response with positive self-talk and focus produced the best results for improved performance.

Desensitization

Sounds grim, no? Desensitization is a program whereby you combine the relaxed state with incremental visions of frightening states, like getting closer to a spider, or learning not to fear the water, etc. We can use this as a performance preparation also by successive imaginings of the audience getting closer or becoming larger in number. For example, you are playing in the safety of your own home and someone is outside and up the street. Then you imagine them walking past your house and maybe hearing you through the window. Then you can let them in to sit and listen. Then they bring another friend, till you have a small audience in the safety of your home. Or imagine yourself in a hall and play to an empty hall. Then one person comes in, then more people. Pretty soon the hall is filled and you are still imagining yourself playing away happily. This becomes a groove in your neural pathways.

Experience

The more you play in public, the more familiar it becomes and you learn what works best for you. It is necessary to get experience BUT experience alone doesn't teach you everything that you need to know. Learn from all the sources available to you.

Summary

In summary, we have learned the music in all of its aspects, we have treated our bodies well, built some muscle tone, stretched out the knots, breathed for control, chanted OM for resonance, imagined and seen ourselves playing well, gotten a healthy perspective, developed positive attitudes and learned to focus on what we're doing. We have learned to relax ourselves on cue. We have gained an understanding of the arousal response and how to use it for our benefit.

INSPIRATION

Ah, divine inspiration. Like taking a deep breathe. We take a deep breathe. We facilitate inspiration.

You get an opportunity to play for an audience. You have earned this privilege. You have worked hard on your technique and thought about the music and what you want to convey. You have used the commonly helpful tools. You have psyched yourself up and you are ready.

This is your moment in the sun, your reward, your chance to shine. Everything else falls away. Enjoy it, thoroughly.

Play and play freely.

You already have the technique down pat. Now you can play freely.

You will have your very own individual ways of looking at the performing experience, your own insights, your own particular and personal joys.

Trust yourself. Trust in the experience.

The music is eternal and you are here for the moment like a transparent vehicle.

Let the music play itself. You can do it.

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