



VIOLA

Overcoming Performance Anxiety: A Violist's Journey

by Justin Knoepfel

It is an all too common scenario. A teacher or student worked for months and months on their music, ready to perform. When the day of the performance came, it was finally time to present all that they had prepared. Their heart starts to race, palms get sweaty, shifting becomes tight, the bow arm and hand start to pinch and seize up, everything is falling apart. Failure. Has this happened to you or your students?

Undoubtedly, these situations have plagued us all (or still do) to some degree or another. And for some reason it is always a surprise come performance time. We know it is going to happen, but instead of trying to address the problem, we ignore it and continue on with mastering our repertoire. There is comfort and satisfaction knowing our music inside and out at a high level, yet we do not seem to work on the actual delivery in a high-stakes performance setting.

I have taught in the collegiate setting for over nine years and have had many students who seem to face the same “practice room vs. concert hall” syndrome. So, over time I have developed some ideas that have helped me and my students acknowledge and maybe just begin the process of overcoming performance anxiety. Some of them you or your student are likely already implementing. This is far from an exhaustive list, but I hope these five thoughts will help us all in presenting/teaching our craft to others.

Heart Rate Simulation

Our heart rates increase when we get nervous and excited, but for some reason we think we can dupe ourselves into believing that this time we will not get nervous or anxious. Inevitably, we deceive ourselves. To counteract this, a fun (and healthy) way to increase our heart rate and simulate this nervous/excited feeling is to run up and down the halls, around the house, down the street etc. Come back to your practice space and then play. My students have found this to be one of the most effective tricks in

helping acknowledge their own stage fear symptoms.

Playing for an Audience

This is perhaps one of the most essential and basic ways that I have found to be helpful in calming one's nerves. I encourage my students to invite their friends, peers, and family to listen to them play in low-, mid-, and high-stakes scenarios. These scenarios can range from public practice sessions, informal performances at a church or place of worship, even playing at a nursing home (I have a story about this, but I will save that for a future installment.) This is likely weeks before the performance, but they are wonderful opportunities to play for an audience that is forgiving and complimentary. Playing for your peers can be an incredibly humbling experience. However, the more often that we play for each other the better we can adjust to our nervous tendencies.

Develop a Routine

Are you a sports fan? Even if not, you know that many athletes develop a routine that helps in their ability to be successful in high pressure situations. This routine is personal, but can be formed through the guidance of teachers if needed. For myself, I have a silly yet fun “revving up the engines” routine before I head out on stage. As the doors open I move my right foot back and forth on the floor like a bull charging a matador. It is admittedly strange, but it channels my nerves into excitement and anticipation.

Hearing the Music

What do you expect the music to sound like? What do the first notes sound like in your head? As part of developing a routine, a checklist if you will, consider imagining what your first entrance will sound like. Take a breath, take a moment. What will it feel like to pull the bow across the string? All too often the impulse is to “wing it” while not having a routine to help us

channel our excitement and energy. Take your time. The audience will appreciate that you did.

Additional Prep

It is funny to think that the only real place to practice overcoming our performance stress comes from the actual performance itself, in front of a live audience, with lights hot white and audience in anticipation. So, what about leading up to the day? Have you ever practiced in your performance attire? All too often I complain about my tie being too tight, or my suit coat restricting my movements, and so on. Why not practice this ahead of time?

As part of the heart increase simulator, I will walk into my studio as if walking out on stage (when the stage is not available), take a bow to my bookshelf (or most likely my coffee maker), and then start my routine to begin the “performance.” It is interesting how this feels as if I am about to play for an audience. If you are fortunate enough to reserve a hall for your students or yourself, practice the same routine as if it is really the final performance. You could even recruit some individuals to act as a stage crew.

Last Thoughts

The point of all of this is to make our preparation the most realistic and authentic as possible. It is foolish for us to think that we can succeed practicing our music without rehearsing in the environment in which we will present ourselves. Now there are some who have the innate ability to get up in front of an audience without much prep and succeed mightily. The rest of us are mere mortals.

Future Reading

Here are several articles that provide additional insight in the psychology of music performance anxiety. I hope you find them enjoyable and helpful.

Cox, David, *It'll be alright on the night:*

how musicians cope with performance stress, The Guardian (Sep. 8, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/sep/08/how-classical-musicians-cope-with-performance-stress>

Stossel, Scott, *Performance Anxiety in Great Performers: What Hugh Grant, Gandhi, and Thomas Jefferson Have in Common*, The Atlantic (Jan/Feb 2014), [\[hugh-grant-gandhi-and-thomas-jefferson-have-common/355853/\]\(https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/01/what-hugh-grant-gandhi-and-thomas-jefferson-have-common/355853/\)](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/01/what-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Sullivan, Patrick, *Scare Tactics: Tips on How Musicians Can Overcome Stage Fright*, Strings Magazine (Dec. 6, 2017), <http://stringsmagazine.com/scare-tactics-tips-on-how-musicians-can-overcome-stage-fright/>

Justin Knoepfel is Assistant Professor of Music

at Gustavus Adolphus College. He studied under Korey Konkol at the University of Minnesota and Spencer Martin at Luther College. At Gustavus he conducts the Gustavus Philharmonic Orchestra and primarily teaches studio viola, music theory and chamber music. As a violist he performs frequently with the Minnesota Opera, South Dakota Symphony and Mankato Symphony. †