



VIOLIN

Embracing our Sweaty Palms: Advice for Practicing Performance

by Ian Snyder

Who among us hasn't stood in the practice room, proud of the brilliant performance we've crafted, only to later walk offstage feeling as though a bomb has exploded in our hands? Some degree of this is universal, and we enter into this series of risks from a young age. Hopefully we encounter support and encouragement along the way, but there is inevitably disappointment, criticism, or even simply the uncertainty that comes from leaving a room with a judge saying, "Thank you for playing today." I spent a lot of time seeing myself as someone who was cursed with a strong nervous reaction, and it took until my professional years, observing both myself and students, to take a longer view of what it means to feel nervous onstage and what we can do to work with it.

Reimagine what it means when we become nervous. I strongly recommend reading *The Upside of Stress* by Stanford University Professor Kelly McGonigal (you can search for her TED talk too). We have been sold the "fight or flight" model of nerves, but McGonigal shares a lot of wonderful research showing the benefits to our body's stress response: increased circulation to the brain, increased observation and focus, and an uptick in physical energy. We need these things to perform. Furthermore, McGonigal found that educating study participants about these benefits of the stress response created further improvements on tests or public speaking. Participants showed higher levels of beneficial stress hormones and dopamine, and exhibited decreased anxiety and better concentration. It's encouraging to think that a revised *attitude* toward nerves can get us get better results as we work through them.

Some of us may have held onto one view of performance anxiety as a destructive force for a long time. It can be challenging as adults to let go of those preconceptions. But as teachers, we are in a position to give children their first understanding of nerves (and hopefully to enlist parents as collaborators!). We can still offer a child sensitivity by

acknowledging that getting nervous can feel uncomfortable. But we can still offer sound coaching advice that it is not something destructive. We can also acknowledge that this encouragement may only cover part of the gap. A violinist may play the *Magic Flute* excerpt in an orchestra audition and be frustrated by how their adrenal response affects their spiccato. At this point, the player may need to be creative about developing a pressure-proof spiccato, but at least the player doesn't have layers of panic on top of a slightly stiffened right arm.

Acknowledge performing as a unique skill requiring practice. As musicians, we tend to have very diligent attitudes toward practicing shifts, string crossings, or bowing patterns. (Or at least as teachers we nag about these things!) And yet I do not hear a lot of discussion of "performance" as a category of work unto itself. When we do discuss it, it is often about interventions like breathing exercises or medications, but not a true "practice." I think the trick is to embrace a certain number of repetitions and to carefully graduate the level of pressure. Small children can perform for stuffed animals. Students might choose a comfortable family member or a friendly neighbor to play for. Perhaps in the middle would be an ear from a school orchestra teacher whom the student is eager to impress but who has a supportive attitude. I look for opportunities to congregate students outside of formal recitals. I find that playing for peers tends to generate pressure, but the chance to exchange compliments and constructive feedback anchors the emotional intensity, so that there is yet another step before a formal recital or an audition. These steps are not one-and-done. They need to be repeated. The student has the opportunity to practice centering their focus and experiencing the music in a unique flow. Burt Hara, who many of us remember as Minnesota Orchestra Principal Clarinet, said that the unique difficulty in performing is that good practice always involves con-

stant looking over our shoulder to evaluate what we have just done. In performing, we can only be in the present and look forward. That is a unique headspace that needs its hours like everything else.

Create concrete plans to address "discoveries" during performance. I understand that performance anxiety can cause problems that are unique to high-pressure occasions. But there is another (and I would argue much bigger) subset of problems that were *latent* and are discovered under the hyperfocus of performance. They were not created by nerves, and so we can make plans in order to inoculate ourselves against them. I try to be very specific about bow distribution in my teaching, and as a consequence, I tend not to see many problems with my students using tight, compressed bows in recitals. I also spend a lot of time asking students about difficult shifts—the positions involved, which finger does the shift, perhaps the intervals involved. I can't claim that my students play with foolproof intonation all the time, but I tend not to see shifts that just fly off the rails. Even at an advanced level, planning a certain sensation can counteract the physical discomfort of nerves—perhaps memorizing a sinking feeling in the right shoulder as we start the first note of awkward concerto beginnings like Mendelssohn or Sibelius. (Really the first note of any piece!)

Record yourself often in order to stay anchored in your concrete artistic product. Recording and listening back to oneself remains an underrated strategy considering how easily it can be done with technology. How often is our initial shock at a performance gone wrong simply that our practice room fantasy has encountered cold, hard reality for the first time? We can't attribute this to performance anxiety. Rather, we can experience this cycle in a safer environment—either alone or with a teacher. Our listening becomes more and more observant and faithful as we go back

and forth between live practice and hearing ourselves recorded. We have the opportunity to make some of those adjustments I alluded to earlier. And we begin to know what we can expect to hear, so that we are not wishing for a result that transcends our current level of achievement, nor worrying that it will all fall apart.

Don't disassociate. Performing and nerves remain uncomfortable. And we are only human—we are going to have voices of concern: Did the other boy who played *Praeludium and Allegro* sound better than me? What happens if I don't get into this

college? It is tempting to let muscle memory take over while we just zone out. I try to encourage students to “turn their ears into microphones” and really notice everything as it happens. This too can be practiced. I might take a section of music, have a student play it, and ask them to tell me literally anything they notice. Sometimes we'll do this a few times in a row. I don't start a discussion about any of the things they notice. We just let them be. I think this is wise preparation for performance, where your only choice is to let go of what has just passed you and turn your listening to what is coming next!

Ian Snyder teaches privately in Southwest Minneapolis and has served on the faculty of the University of Minnesota Bravo! Institute for Keyboard and Strings. He has performed with the Minnesota Orchestra and Minnesota Opera, as well as a variety of freelance projects, including a recording for Prince. As a teacher, he is particularly interested in developing natural physical motions in playing, enhancing students' awareness of tone, and in integrating musical style from the earliest levels. †