

It takes a village: An examination of how multiple environments interact to manipulate music  
performance anxiety

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“But I sounded so much better in the practice room!” is a phrase that has been heard echoing throughout music schools everywhere from students who may or may not have slaved tirelessly through the process of refining performance, only to watch it all crumble before them as they fall victim to trembling hands and racing hearts. When anxious feelings become overly pervasive and are characterized by mental and behavioral manifestations in relation to performance, musicians experience a phenomenon commonly known as performance anxiety. This happens as a result of the body perceiving a threat, prompting it to react with the “fight or flight” defense mechanism in which the brain activates the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, where the nerves then stimulate the release of adrenaline. Physical symptoms that result from the release of this increased adrenaline play critical roles in adapting the body’s organs to arousal, including rapid heartbeat, excessive sweating, muscle tension, hyperventilation, nausea, dry mouth, and trembling (Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007). As music performance often relies heavily on strong physiological functioning, stress responses from performance anxiety can seriously debilitate the overall experience for a performer.

For those outside the orbit of music performance, novice musicians, and even professionals who have never experienced this troubling issue, performance anxiety may seem to be only a minor setback or a mere afterthought. In reality, the severity of its symptoms can go further than one might think. Aside from the familiar symptoms like shortness of breath and “butterflies” in the stomach causing deterioration of performance quality, more extreme physiological reactions can develop from prolonged experiences with performance anxiety. In trying to attain optimal levels of task mastery in preparation for performance, many instrumental

musicians find themselves overly focused on hand position and embouchure in their practice sessions. In instances of this unconscious redistribution of attention to less ideal areas of support, it can create muscle tension and ultimately lead to issues like nerve damage and musculoskeletal problems that can have lifelong effects. For many musicians, this can terminate developing and already established careers.

In addition to negative physiological results, performance anxiety can affect the psychological wellness of individuals as well, leading to emotional disturbances that may influence them to avoid performance situations and ultimately gravitate away from continuing on with musical activities or careers, despite their personal enjoyment and mastery of their craft. Many musicians get caught up in their fear of negative evaluation and eagerness to impress their audiences. Such disruptive attitudes can transfer over to other areas of life, forming habits of apprehension towards any social and public contexts. One bad experience can alter the thought process of how a person views their self-efficacy, subsequently creating changes in behavior and decreasing quality of happiness in music and in life.

For musicians of all ages, many might find that that the responses elicited by performance anxiety and the subsequent problems that arise can hinder the retention of progress made in the practice room, further causing lack of enjoyment and attrition in continuing down the path of a musical career. Given that this is a rapidly growing problem among musicians in an age of incredibly high standards, the argument can be made that current approaches to understanding and dealing with this issue are either not successful or are not being practiced regularly within formal and informal learning settings.

One common pattern in research is the heavy emphasis on describing performance anxiety as a fixed trait. Many trends have been outlined, including evidence that points to

performance anxiety as more common in women than in men (Fehm & Schmidt, 2004), linkage to social anxiety disorder (Nicholson, Cody, & Beck, 2014), and correlations with personality types like introversion, neuroticism, and perfectionism. Although evidence of genetic predisposition and comorbidity plays an important role in identifying those who experience performance anxiety, the widespread suffering of those who do not fall into any of these categorical trends may indicate that situational influences might be the biggest factor in many cases. By pinning this issue on only the traits of the person experiencing this phenomenon, one might create a “victim blaming” scenario in which the person suffering is held accountable for their experience of this problem. Further, blaming performance anxiety on personal attributes can lead to lack of motivation and pessimism at the prospect of improving one’s situation. By shifting focus to outside influences, focus in understanding and coping with performance might be more successful. Through careful considerations, one might realize that musicians can work within their environments to change the severity or existence of performance anxiety.

### **Influential Environments**

#### **Family Values**

In many cases, attitudes about music and the development of performance anxiety often begin as a result of one’s upbringing. Parental figures in particular have the greatest influence; therefore, negative attitudes and active discouragement in musical involvement can put children at greater risk for developing anxiety. As there appears to be intergenerational trends in the extent to which families value music as worthwhile, some parents can be predisposed to neglect their child’s involvement in music (Conger, Belsky, & Capaldi, 2009).<sup>1</sup> In opposition, placing

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<sup>1</sup> Contribution by Giuliana Conte

extreme value on musical study can cause parents to unconsciously put pressure on their children to meet exacting standards. Both of these harmful attitudes enacted by parents can lead a child to inherit a warped sense of purpose for making music, create a sense of judgment or pressure that can hinder enjoyment, and trigger severe cases of performance anxiety as a result of trying desperately to prove music's worth or one's musical competence.

As there is often a disconnect between parents' impressions of their children's feelings, and how their children actually feel, there could be an increase in a child's anxiety level if they are feeling unsupported or misunderstood. It is inherently important that parents are receptive to their children's desires and needs, and that they offer encouragement and support in musical study despite personal attitudes and family beliefs towards its value.

### **Formal Music Instruction Climates**

A second source for potential cause is a student's experience within formal music instruction. Many students claim that their teachers elicit more performance anxiety than any other audience, causing extreme discomfort and lack of improvement within private lesson or classroom settings. Teachers must realize that their students often become intimidated by their level of professional knowledge and place high importance on their judgment, and take responsibility for the symptoms of anxiety that may arise in these situations.

In opposition, formal music instruction settings can be used to neutralize feelings of anxiousness and support students' capacity to better cope with those feelings in performance settings. To better prepare for helping students cope, teachers might consider seeking professional development seminars on performance preparation that can explain the signs of anxious behavior and suggestions for various age groups to overcome those concerns. One

example might be practicing the integration of yoga in the music classroom, which can address the extreme stress and musculoskeletal problems that may arise as a result of performance anxiety. Teachers might also receive training in a method of realigning posture to avoid unnecessary muscle tension called the Alexander Technique, which can moderate increased variability in the heart rate under stress.<sup>2</sup> With many options available to established teachers, it may be useful for professionals to have such training that can be implemented in real life teaching situations.

### **Social Settings**

Lack of social support systems and experience in group environments can also attribute to the development of performance anxiety. This can be best demonstrated through observations of how musicians feel more nervous in solo settings than in collaborative settings. In dealing with performance anxiety, one might consider that seeking social support and physically creating music with others can offer drastic improvements. This can be shown by examining the effects of oxytocin, which is a neurohormone commonly known for its role in social bonding, but is also released as part of the stress response. When released, it protects the cardiovascular system from any stress-induced damage. Because the body releases more of this hormone when a person reaches out for support, it is enhanced by social contact and social support, which can then help the body recover faster from stress (McGonigal, 2013). With this evidence, there exists a strong case that encouraging musicians to take part in ensemble work can greatly improve anxious behaviors. Even ensemble work on the smaller scale of duets can lessen the pressure of performing solo repertoire. For example, piano students may find comfort in sharing their

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<sup>2</sup> Contribution by Lisa Mansfield

instrument to form social bonds and to alleviate anxiety.<sup>3</sup> In choosing to perform with others to cope with anxiety, one can create resilience to this problem through human connection.

### **Personal Perspectives**

In considering how outside environments contribute to existence and severity, it is important to note that the mindset, although abstract, is a very real place in which performance anxiety dwells. In addition, personal attitudes and beliefs might exist as a result from influences of other environments. It is important to recognize how patterns of thought play a large role in how a musician is affected by this anxiety, and can be changed accordingly to neutralize unwanted symptoms.

The functional effects of the stress response are often overlooked, as attitudes can be clouded by the unpleasant symptoms that result. In reality, one might find it useful to utilize low stress levels to optimize performance. For example, it can be acknowledged that faster breathing means greater intake of oxygen to the brain, and increase in adrenaline can sharpen a performance by focusing attention. The most important factor in this is one's personal attitude. As people are not naturally fearful in performance, it must be noted that fear is a learned behavior, which presents the theory that the fear resulting from performance anxiety is essentially a choice. Current research is beginning to gravitate towards the idea that how one thinks and acts about anxiety can transform the experience of stress. In one study (Jamieson, Knock, & Mendes, 2011), participants who viewed stress as helpful showed a result in vasodilation of blood vessels, connecting similarities to what physiological responses to happiness might look like. By adapting one's attitude to and accepting the physiological results

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<sup>3</sup> Contribution by Monta Said

of anxiety, the body can be deceived and make the stress response healthier, lessening the severity of symptoms and utilizing them to increase performance quality.

### **Conclusion**

In the same way that “it takes a village to raise a child,” it takes a multitude of environments to foster musical growth and success free from performance anxiety. As these two things are heavily reliant on a musician’s reactions to and experiences with performance anxiety, the fact that these different environments collaborate to manipulate this phenomenon cannot be ignored. Further, limiting oneself to accepting predispositions and comorbidity of disorders as the only cause can ultimately create harmful personal attitudes and close one off to the possibility of receiving support from others. A musician’s experiences within family environments, formal music instruction settings, social and ensemble situations, and personal attitudes all play critical roles in manipulating a musician’s severity or existence of performance anxiety. An examination of these environments, as well as others, should be used to analyze possible causes and create positive changes for musicians with performance anxiety.



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