

## ARTICLE



### **A NEW VIEW OF PERFORMANCE ANXIETY - Part 2**

by Laurie Riley

(This article is a continuation of Part 1, [which can be found here](#)) As a performer, your demeanor signals audiences how to react; it affects how they feel about you, about your music, and about your instrument, and even how they feel about themselves! The audience will take its cues from you. If you look serious, they will be serious. If you are witty, they will laugh. If you are confident, they will be supportive. Whatever you do, you can count on your audience to feed back to you in greater measure whatever you give to them.

Your audience wants to like you and enjoy your music; they would not be there otherwise. They are there to make you feel good, and vice versa. Let your audience be your support system!

When we forget that our audience is our best source of energy and confidence, we may begin to think they are sitting in judgment of us and are planning to hate us. This is insanely silly, but such fear is all too common among performers!

What are we afraid of? That we might mess up. Have you noticed that a confident performer seems to make very few errors, and a nervous one many? That's because nervousness causes errors; not the other way around. The syndrome we call "stage fright" is actually self-sabotage. We create it, and we give it power. "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." The confident performer knows that mistakes account for very little, and so is not much concerned about them.

The physical reaction we feel as stage fright is actually "fight-or-flight" syndrome: when the brain recognizes a situation it interprets as a threat, it orders the adrenals to flood the system with adrenaline, which, if you really were in a threatening situation, could be very helpful. Adrenaline can make you stronger, faster, and more clear-headed. But too much adrenaline when it isn't needed can make you confused, sweaty-palmed, and shaky-handed. (And it can make you play too fast.)

Why is it so threatening to get on a stage, be in a competition, or sit in front of a teacher? Because someone told us it would be. If you observe children, they are great hams. A three-year-old will readily perform ("Watch me!"). It is only when someone says "Weren't you scared?" or describes being scared, or they see someone else being scared, that they begin to think that if someone said they ought to be, it must be true. Stage fright is a learned response, not a natural one. How unfortunate.

I find that stage fright is exacerbated if I have not practiced adequately. If there is any question at all about whether I can play a piece of music well in front of an audience, I don't play it in formal performance.

To assure that you will perform as well as you know you can, here are some guidelines:

- Practice very, very well. Then practice some more. Make sure you have played each piece well *many more times* than you've played it badly. It should feel natural and easy to play. If it feels difficult, you are not ready to perform it.
- About 2 weeks before a performance, start pretending you're in front of an audience as you practice. Visualize the venue and the people as you play.
- Act confident even if you're not.
- Don't take yourself too seriously.
- Don't have any alcoholic drinks or use non-prescribed drugs before performing.
- Put feeling into your music. When your mind is thus occupied, it forgets to be afraid.
- When you can, put yourself in situations that are challenging beyond your comfort zone - that makes everything else seem easy.
- Always arrive at a gig in plenty of time to relax, have a snack, tune more than once, do a lighting and sound check, and practice a bit before the audience arrives.
- Then, sit where you can unobtrusively watch the audience for a while - they will then seem more familiar when you're playing for them.
- Before a performance, sit meditatively for several minutes and think of all the reasons you're grateful for the opportunity to play music. (You'll be surprised how much this helps!)
- Hear each part of the music in your head a split second before it's played, and hear it played beautifully - that way you're choosing how it will sound, instead of waiting to see how it comes out.
- When a difficult passage is coming up, take a deep breath and then exhale as you play it. You'll wonder how it got so easy!

Those of us who have stage fright are in good company; Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, Lawrence Olivier, and many other "stars" report being severely impacted by it. There is a story about Pablo Casals who, upon injuring his hand, was relieved to think he might never have to perform again. (His hand healed, and his career continued.)

There are prescription drugs for stage fright, which are potent and can be dangerous if used incorrectly. Beta-blockers were developed to slow the heart, so you can imagine what they could do to you if used irresponsibly. Only a doctor

can advise you about them. If your career is at stake and you obtain a prescription, there is nothing immoral about using them. Why ruin a career because you refused to use something that could help?

The best cure for stage fright, however, is experience. Once you see that people aren't going to throw anything at you or stampede the stage, it will become easier and easier.

There is more perspective on stage fright in my book *Body, Mind and Music* and in the book *A Soprano on Her Head* by the late Eloise Ristad.

Whether stage fright affects you or not, remember that you took up music for the joy of it, so have fun with it and don't let anything seem scarier than it really is. If you truly want to share your gift with others, nothing can stop you.

Laurie Riley - Reprinted with permission from [Laurie Riley's Music Blog](#)