

October, 2017

Excerpt from a letter written to a University of Minnesota participant who attended the Workshop in 2017

Stage Fright

What I would like to do is just “talk” with you about the issue, and perhaps give you some strategies to try with you and your students in performance. There is no magic cure and the problem manifests itself in very individual ways with every performer.

Allow me to say this at the beginning: first, you can and will solve the issue of Stage Fright for yourself and for your students. Stage Fright is a common and not insurmountable interruption to our performance moments. Secondly, it is not entirely your problem, but rather one that has been created by the lack of performance training in the musician’s education.

It is important to realize that Stage Fright, nervousness, at the anticipation of a performance, or within the performance, is not wholly a negative element. Being nervous means that what we are about to do is IMPORTANT to us. If we did not care, we would not be nervous. We are often “nervous” before important meetings or emotional social contacts. Indeed, we are sometimes “scared to death!” But we go to the meeting, and we get ready for our date, and as soon as the actual event begins, our “nervousness” often vanishes. Our anticipation manufactured a far more fearful atmosphere than the actual event created.

Here are a couple of questions for you and for your students...

First question; Are you nervous before AND during the performance, or does your nervousness lessen as the performance actually begins?

Can you define what you are afraid of as the performance or presentation draws closer?

When you play in public, is your focus on correctly playing the notes of the composition or on the emotions and images you are hoping to give and to share with your audience through the notes? (It can be both....)

Is there a difference in the above answers when you play in private for your own pleasure? Is there a difference when you play in private rehearsals in preparation for performance?

Are you nervous when you rehearse with an ensemble in preparation for a performance?

Take your time in answering these questions. Spend some time imaging and recalling the specific events and instances that will give you the answers.

It will assist you to have a healthy dose of exasperation at the situation and at an art form that has demanded perfection in notes as a standard, instead of the glowing life the performer is able to bring to the compositions. It is a life that is not perfect, but filled, as all our lives are filled, with good days and bad, strengths and weaknesses, positives and negatives. What makes a great recording great is not the perfection of note, as we find in the edited recordings of performances that never took place, but rather the astonishing life that pours out from older recordings. The imperfections of note do not

matter to the listener, who is moved deeply and profoundly by the emotion that pours out from every sound. There are great players whose ability to reach into the darkness and to touch our souls is a natural part of their personalities. But for those of us who did not have that ability naturally, there are easily learned concepts and skills to give music performers the missing piece of their education.

To begin, our senses are our conduit to memory and emotion, and what happens in nervousness and Stage Fright is that our senses shut down. Actually, our senses never really shut down; it is our awareness of the information our senses are taking in that we shut down. Our focus turns internal and we seem only aware of what is happening to us: our tensions, our shaking, our difficulty with breath. The effect increases our tensions and our nervousness, and finally interrupts our playing.

When that happens, we lose the connection to ourselves and our feelings, emotions and memories. We are no longer “ourselves.” We become aware of every small mistake of note and tempo in our playing and all desire to send ourselves outward to our audiences vanishes.

When our senses are fully operating with our complete awareness of the input they are receiving, then our minds are flooded with unspoken thoughts and realizations. It is just what happens in life: We are walking down a street, fully engaged in a conversation with our partner. We pass a stranger walking in the opposite direction, and a waft of aftershave or cologne enters our nostrils. It is the scent of a former partner, or a lost friend. Without any interruption to our current conversation, we are filled with images and memories of the past relationship. They dolphin to the surface of our consciousness and then retreat to the depths as our conversation continues with our current partner.

Through every sense and a thousand times a day, the same kind of moment occurs. Memory and image are touched off by some sensory response, without them stopping our current activity. It is what gives us our individual depth and our humanity. We are always operating on many levels of consciousness in the fullness of our lives.

With the tension of performance or audition, we shut down our awareness of our senses’ input. With our senses “shut down,” we feel ourselves becoming a mere one-level shadow of ourselves.

Soooo ... you have done your work. You know intimately the selection of music you are about to play. You need to stop thinking about it and trust that you will play the right notes when the time comes.

The easiest way to accomplish this is to concentrate on the other information your senses are responding to, and to push out that awareness. In other words, gently force yourself to concentrate on other thoughts and images and memories outside yourself.

Force your concentration outward to receive all the information your five senses are responding to. What do you see, hear, taste, smell and touch? Your instrument carries history and memories and emotions in its smell, the feel of it as you touch it, its history written in the surface that you can see and imagine or remember. Let your concentration focus there as you bring the instrument, your old friend, up to play. Push your sensory awareness outward as you begin to play and stay aware of all that surrounds you in the room, or on the stage. SEE the audience, notice the colors and shapes that surround you. LISTEN to the room, not just to your sounds, and hear how your notes resonate through the space. FEEL the bow in your fingers and how the vibrations of the strings can be felt in your fingertips. Notice the rings on your fingers and remember, REMEMBER the images and memories of where and when and from whom each item came into your life.

In other words, concentrate outward and not inward, and allow the music to soar into its own life.

Gently try this in rehearsal rooms, or your living room, or standing outside in the air where the images and space extend to the limits of your vision. Then walk onto the stage of your concert or audition with the same outward focus ... and play.

Everything will conspire to pull your concentration back inside yourself ... any wrong note, or missed beat, or imagined mistake, or predicted error, want you to give up the vulnerable life of your playing.

Do not talk about what you are doing or trying. Keep it as your secret. Having a "secret" is very positive for a performer!!!

And do not be concerned if you have trouble in your first attempts to widen your focus. Keep the secret and try again tomorrow, or later in the rehearsal. Be aware how often those other levels of your life are present as you go about in your daily existence.

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