

Master Your Adrenalin...

*Are your students prepared **mentally** for their performance?*

To be anxious is to be human. Recently I watched Michael Parkinson interview Matthew Perry and Hugh Jackman – both accomplished, successful Hollywood stars. They both confessed that they feel nervous before a show.

Many music teachers are required to perform. It may be a solo, as part of an ensemble, or accompanying a soloist. The likelihood is that those who choose to go on with music professionally don't experience crippling levels of 'performance anxiety.' Music teachers are self-selecting. Those who do suffer from excessive stage-fright drop out of music. If you like, we are the ones who have survived the traumas of performance.

Whatever your own experience, the students we teach experience performance anxiety in a range of intensities. Some of our students will drop out of music altogether, rather than face up to regular concerts. Even if children perform regularly from an early age, they experience increased nerves through the teenage years. From adulthood on, fears reach an all-time high. Adult students will often be terrified at the prospect of performing. As teachers, are we ensuring that our students are adequately prepared **mentally** as well as technically and musically?

The good news is that for most people, these fears can be overcome. Most music teachers feel ill-equipped to help their students overcome performance anxiety. Help is available. Music teachers should be aware of the resources available and direct their students toward that help where necessary. There may even be teachers that could benefit from this training too.

Years ago I attended a lecture on performance anxiety. I was in the middle of a series of accreditation performances, and I was severely inhibited by my nerves. I had the classic dry mouth, total distraction, sweaty palms, loss of memory, loss of concentration, loss of fine motor control, inability to sleep or focus. In short, I was a wreck. I viewed my assessors as a pride of hungry lions, waiting to devour. I exaggerated the results of possible failure and replayed over and over in my head, images and words of doom. The lecturer told us that it is possible to learn to control nerves – to arrive at a point where we are free to perform to the best of our ability. In my ignorance, arrogance and mainly fear, I did not believe her.

Later I got so desperate about my lack of control, that I examined the facts. There is overwhelming evidence testifying to thousands who have learned to control anxiety. I set about my own research and after months of practise and training, proved to myself that control is possible. Control of this kind is not learned overnight, but like anything, comes with practise.

Our aim is not to banish nerves completely. In fact, research supports the notion that some anxiety is helpful to an artist. There is an optimum level of anxiety which enhances our performance. If we can control the amount of adrenalin pumping

through our bodies to this optimal level, adrenalin becomes a wonderful servant. Adrenalin is a terrible master. Under its control anxiety levels soar out of control. Performance in this state is near impossible.

Anxiety is displayed in 3 responses; mental, behavioural and physiological.

First we address our thoughts – the verbal messages we give ourselves – both in silent self-talk and the words we speak out loud. We must discipline ourselves to replace the self-destructive, negative text with positive ones. We can choose the way we think about performance. We can choose to see it as a threat. Our body translates this as danger and the fight/flight response is triggered. Alternatively, we can learn to view performance as a challenge and opportunity. In addition, we must replace the negative pictures we replay of failure, with helpful images. As we watch these movies in the theatre of our mind, they become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Second, we address behavioural responses. Our natural inclination when stressed is to talk fast, eat fast and surrender to hyperactivity. We tighten up unnecessary muscle groups, for example in the hands, shoulders and face, which hinders our performance. The art of fine performance is the ability to turn off excess muscle activity. This applies as much to an infant learning to walk as to the concert pianist. Awareness of excess muscle activity associated with nerves enables us to learn to relax those muscles. Putting on ‘calm’ behaviour is an effective precursor to feeling calm. Techniques such as progressive muscular relaxation help us replace a panicky response with controlled behaviours. Generally performers learn this technique away from the platform months before a gig. Then, the learned relaxation is practised in performance situations of increasing difficulty, until the artist is able to relax all unnecessary muscles at will even in the most stressful environment.

And third we address physiological responses. Deep breathing can break the escalating loop of increased heart rate, respiratory rate and rising blood pressure. I am constantly amazed at the control available to us through use of deep breathing. Since discovering its benefits, I have used it to get through a variety of challenging events. When persuaded to ride a giant roller coaster by my teenage son (against my better judgement), I have ‘breathed’ my way through the 100 second ride of terror! When called upon to speak in public, I no longer blanch and duck for cover, but enjoy the challenge. With a full tool kit, there is no need for debilitating fear.

Of course all this assumes that adequate physical and technical preparation has been done. No amount of mental preparation is a substitute for hours of careful practise. As teachers we should be aware of the range of responses our students have to performance. Some of our pupils will need extra help to prepare mentally to enable them to face performances with ease. Let’s be on the look out for these pupils lest they become another ‘drop-out’ statistic. Instead let us help them, through successful and confident performance of music, to learn valuable life skills that they can apply to other endeavours.

Profile

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