

Stagefright and Relaxation

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Problems with stagefright occur because of the performer's inappropriate attitudes toward the performing experience. These include: confusion about the proper attitude concerning preparation (practicing) and performance, misconceptions about how energy is used, the nature of the performers "work," and a hyperactive approach toward playing. Since the behaviorist theory, "attitude precedes action," suggests that all action are expressions of attitudes and in order to change one's behavior one must first change one's attitude, let us first examine this issue.

PRACTICING AND PERFORMING

Practicing and performing involve two different and distinct mind-sets. Practicing is a goal oriented, intellectual activity, while performing is holistic, process oriented and emotional and intuitional activity. Students often confuse the these two very different mind-sets.

In their early formative years, students tend to spend more time practicing than playing. Without realizing it they are developing a practicing attitude. Because they don't have much playing experience under their belts, they assume that the mind-set developed from practicing can be applied to the performing experience. It cannot. The result is a frustrating musical experience. Although the intellectual process is appropriate for practicing, it is too slow to use while playing.

A case in point that I'm sure every reader has encountered is when you've practiced a particular musical idea and tried to interject it into your solo during an improvisation. Notice how it stopped everything. The intuition, however, makes decisions at a speed 20,000 times faster than the speed of the intellect, often so fast that the performer is not even aware of it.

Students can become dependant upon their practicing attitude and feel secure in it because they have more experience with it. When they find that the practicing attitude doesn't work on the bandstand, that security becomes removed and they get nervous.

The only way to correct this problem is to acquire enough playing experience to develop a playing attitude that one feels secure with. A playing attitude can not be developed in a practice room playing by yourself. It can only be learned from years of playing on the bandstand with others.

The playing attitude is developed by getting on the bandstand, forgetting everything you've ever practiced, and just "going for it and hoping it comes out okay." "Going for it" is often defined as "Faking it." "Faking It" is a very sophisticated process that can only be learned from years of trial and error. The feeling of "Faking It" is often described by musicians as "going out there without a net." Getting used to this feeling can be, at first, unsettling. It takes time and experience to get comfortable with it. The only way to get good at this process is by doing it over and over until you get it right. There is no shortcut to this process. It can only be developed by practicing a "devil may care" attitude then bringing this attitude to the bandstand while not being concerned about being perfect or making mistakes.

All the great players started by "Faking It." In their early years it was obvious to the listener that they were trying to learn how to do this. Eventually their ability to fake it became so highly developed that the listener could not tell that the advanced player was faking it.

THE PLAYFUL STATE OF MIND

The state of mind most conducive to creativity is the playful state mind. All of us are born in this

state of mind and spend most of the early stages of our youth enjoying it's rewards. As we grow older and begin to take our place in "grown-up" society, this playfulness becomes discouraged and suppressed in varying degrees. One can't have a smoothly functioning society if everyone is playful all the time. We have to learn society's rules of behavior and become a contributing member. Although during this process of growing up, this playful state becomes suppressed, it is not gone! It is still in all of us and can be retrieved and relearned. Learning how to get back to that state of mind will be one of the major goals of any artistic career. Understanding stagefright is the first step toward achieving that goal.

THE STAGEFRIGHT CYCLE

Often, the first thought of the day about the upcoming performance sets the stagefright cycle in motion. This cycle is a slow-rising day-long curve that peaks near or during performance and then decreases rapidly after performance and accounts for the "crashing" that most performers experience. It is often helpful to take a nap before performing as one way to interrupt the stagefright curve.

The establishment of a creatively physical, emotional, social and musical environment which remains stable should be a major goal of any artist. Daily activities should be decided solely on the basis of whether they are going to enhance your ability to perform. Physical activity before and during performance should be minimized to avoid stress and fatigue. Mental activity should be kept light and unstudied (a sense of humor is always helpful). Emotional activity should be kept low-key.

Stagefright is a natural phenomenon. It is basically a drug overdose of the hormone Adrenalin. This over-production of Adrenalin is a result of a conditioned reflex that is universal throughout the animal kingdom, what is often called the "flight or fight response." This reflex becomes automatically activated when one's emotional and physical well-being is perceived is being threatened. As a result you experience physical, mental and emotional discomfort and a diminished capacity to perform.

It is this negative perception of the performance experience that sets off the "fight or flight response." This perception is generally created by the player having invested the performing experience with too much meaning or, taking it too seriously!

Society conditions us to take our endeavors seriously and teaches us to work hard to achieve our goals. This linear, "left brain: attitude is definitely appropriate to the study (practicing) of music and your instrument, but is inappropriate to creative performance (playing) which necessitates the development of an off-handed, carefree and playful "right brain" state of mind. Goal orientation will create the possibility that your goals may not be achieved which, in turn, is enough to strike fear in the heart of any performer and thus, creates the threat that sets off the stagefright cycle. Any attitude, apparently rational, that increases the tendency to make performance "important" should be considered negative and non-productive! Your goal will be to develop and practice mental exercises that can help you divest the playing experience of as much personal "meaning" as possible.

Some of the other elements that contribute to stagefright are:

Trying to analyse your playing while performing

The expectation of immediate rewards

Getting over-excited

Because of the way the ear works it is impossible to analyse the way you're playing while performing. The ear, like the brain, works in a linear fashion. Although the ear can hear many different ways, it can only hear one way at a time. Listening how you sound while you're playing (hearing "inside" the music) is one way of hearing, listening to how you sound on a tape (hearing "outside" the music) is another. When trying to analyse how you sound while playing, you're trying to hear two ways at the same time and one can't be hearing "inside" and "outside" the music at the same time. As soon as you try to hear "outside" while playing, you become excessively self-aware, which can then create apprehension. The desire to self-analyse comes from one source only, over-concern about "how do I sound?" You can't care how you sound and be involved in your

performance at the same time. When you become overly concerned with how well you are performing, the ego becomes involved and self-image become too important. While playing, one can only get "inside" the music and as mentioned earlier "hope it comes out okay."

Approaching performance with expectations of immediate rewards (such as physical-emotional excitement and audience approval) is another serious drawback to creativity. It is human nature to expect rewards from our efforts but quite often we settle for the gross, low-level rewards of physical and emotional excitement and deny ourselves the more sophisticated rewards of being able to play what you want to play, the way you want to play it, when you want to play it. Physical and emotional excitement are pleasurable and as such, are addictive but, are in themselves, nothing more than immediate gratification, about on the same level as masturbation. The student often gets "hooked" on these rewards and may not want to give them up. One can't achieve the higher rewards that performing can offer without giving up the lower ones.

The appropriate use of energy has a direct, causal relationship on the degree of relaxation you can achieve. Consequently, the amount of technique and control you lose is equal to the amount of excess energy you produce. Since excess energy and tension will have a debilitating effect on instrumental technique, physical endurance and emotional control, you jeopardize your ability to produce a musical performance at the highest level.

This production of excess energy often comes from a misunderstanding of the nature of the "work" a musician does while playing. The amount of work that a human being does is measured by calories burned. If one compares the amount of calories burned by a musician performing for three hours to those of a ditchdigger digging for eight hours, the calories burned by each would be nearly equal, although the amount of physical labor would not. The nature of the "work" that a musician does is concentration, not physical labor. The goal is to become physically and emotional "quite." Look at any videos of great performers and you'll notice how "quite" they are.

Over-excitement is also exhibited by the excess energy expended in "trying" to swing or "get into" the music. Students often translate this in their minds by thinking that in order to be able to successfully emote, one has to work oneself up into an emotional frenzy. Swinging has never been exactly defined, but an acceptable definition might be that one's playing has and "emotional" quality to it. That quality is a gift that one is born with; it cannot be acquired but it can be developed. You either swing or you don't. If you have determined that you have this quality of swing, then stop "trying" and begin to develop and control your swinging, not letting it control you. One must eventually learn to "disconnect" oneself from the emotion of the music as opposed to "getting in to it" and develop a dispassionate approach to playing. It is, of course, impossible to kill your emotions but you can, thru the ideas in this article, reduce them to a manageable degree.

It's also good to channel your excitement outwards. To avoid keeping all your energy on the stage, risking over-exciting yourself and your fellow players, understand that energy can be directed simply by conceiving of its direction as flowing out towards the listeners. It can be helpful practice to pick a person in the audience to play towards.

PRACTICING DIFFERENT MENTAL ATTITUDES

Many performers have found the technique called "psyching oneself" effective for divesting a performance of over-importance. These "psych-out" attitudes seem to work best within three hours preceding a performance. One example can be called the "I don't care" process. Start by convincing yourself that you don't care how you sound and you don't care what the other musicians in the band think of your playing. Extend that thought to the audience and the promoter. Recognize that you wouldn't be there in the first place if people didn't like your playing and use that thought as the basis for your self-confidence. After a period of practicing this attitude, you can then begin to approach the stage in a calmer state of mind. Other "psych-outs" you may choose include "the cosmic insignificance of it all" and "I'm bored with playing," or you can create an attitude to fit your particular personality. These "psych-outs" are "as-if" attitudes that you pit on like different colored glasses. For them to be eventually effective they must be practiced as diligently as one would one's scales and instrument.

The development of a calm, dispassionate and "playful" approach toward your instrument and performance will help in achieving a high degree of relaxation and creativity. The idea is to be "exciting, not excited."

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