

Performance Anxiety: Resolving the Conflicts

by
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Most saxophonists have experienced *performance anxiety* at one time or another. This malady is known by many names (such as stage fright, nerves, and “the shakes”), but it always leads to errors in performance. Larry Teal, noted pedagogue and professor of saxophone at the University of Michigan, once told me, “If you have prepared properly, there is no reason to be nervous.” These simple words convey much truth, but nervousness can be caused by more than just lack of preparation. This article will describe some of the common symptoms and suggested cures for this debilitating condition.

Symptoms

The actual symptoms of performance anxiety may be different for each individual. Symptoms may include “dry mouth” (lack of saliva), shallow breathing, uncontrollable shaking (especially of the arms and legs), “voices” (mental conversations with yourself), excessive saliva, lack of concentration (your mind wanders aimlessly), self-doubt (lack of confidence), and the “uh-oh, here it comes” syndrome (irrational sense of impending doom). There can be even more severe symptoms, such as diarrhea and fainting, which can affect some people.

Causes

The causes of performance anxiety can be numerous, but the most frequent cause is *fear of failure*. All musicians want to do their best when performing, whether it is for a teacher, in front of parents or peers, or in a concert. Performers need to have a well established ego, or sense of self-worth and importance, to be successful. When the fear of failure gets in the way of the ego, that is when trouble strikes.

As Larry Teal suggested, lack of preparation can lead to nervousness during a performance. If a saxophonist does not prepare properly, there is good reason to have self-doubt and a fear of failing. Rushing around before a concert or lesson can also lead to nervousness. Poor concentration skills can have devastating effects during a performance. Self-doubt or a weak self-image is a major cause of “stage fright.” Lack of proper nutrition and hydration can also be contributing factors. Poor body position (tightness or raised shoulders, excess finger motion, tight hands

and arms, etc.) is a leading cause of anxiety. Learning ways to control these problems can lead to a more stress-free performance.

Cures

These are more *suggestions* than actual *cures*. Once the symptoms and causes are identified, a saxophonist must prescribe his or her own cure to fight individual performance anxieties. Use these ideas as a basis for finding your own cures.

Symptom	Cures
<i>“Dry Mouth”</i>	Lightly chew on the tongue during rests. This will cause the body to produce more saliva. On-stage water can also be helpful.
<i>Shallow Breathing</i>	Sit quietly, relax, and breathe deeply for at least five minutes before a performance. Make your body fall into a pattern of slow, full breaths, rather than numerous, shallow ones. Maintain this breathing pattern while walking on stage and during the minutes before the performance begins.
<i>Uncontrollable Shaking</i>	Get into the mental and physical “zone” with your body; be sure that you are at ease and in control of yourself. (Following the suggested relaxation technique listed above will be of great help.) Think of the word “relax” as you mentally prepare yourself just before the concert and clear your mind of all doubt.
<i>Voices</i>	Try practicing with earphones and quiet music playing, especially a style totally opposite of what you are playing. Learn to “tune out” the outside music and just concentrate on what you are playing. This will help you learn to ignore those inner voices during a performance.
<i>Excessive Saliva</i>	Some people just produce more saliva when playing. Clear the mouthpiece frequently to avoid a “spitty” sound when playing. A clean sound will lead to more confidence and less distractions for you during a performance.

<i>Lack of Concentration</i>	Use your sight-reading skills and really look ahead of what you are actually playing. Listen carefully to other parts to hear how yours fits into the whole piece. Pay attention to intonation, musicality, and other nuances to keep your mind free of other thoughts. Mentally “slap” yourself back to focus every time you sense your concentration slipping.
<i>Weak Self-Image</i>	Program compositions that you can play <i>very well</i> . Don’t try to perform the hardest pieces you can play, but perform ones that are a bit below your highest level. Gain confidence that <i>you can play well</i> and share your fine performance with your audience. Remember that each performance demonstrates your current ability level; don’t compare yourself with performers who are much more advanced.
<i>Nutritional and Water Deficiencies</i>	<p>Learn what and how much to eat before a concert. Don’t eat too much or you will have trouble breathing, which can lead to nervousness. Be sure to eat something or your blood sugar level could be low, leading to dizziness or even fainting. Avoid spicy, overly rich foods, and experiment to find what works best for you.</p> <p>Be sure to drink plenty of water the day before a performance and during the hours leading up to it. It is important to be well hydrated, just like an athlete.</p>
<i>Poor Body Position</i>	Use a mirror to help find a relaxed and natural playing position for your body. Keep the shoulders down and level, and the elbows in toward the body. Make the finger motion as small as possible. Practice the art of relaxation while you practice and you can relax better when you perform.
<i>“Uh-oh”</i>	Prepare difficult passages slowly and methodically to gain confidence. (Play each passage five times in a row <i>perfectly</i> to make the patterns automatic.) Stay mentally focused (and relaxed) when that difficult passage approaches and don’t begin to doubt your ability. You have prepared well, so <i>you can play it</i> .

A bit of nervousness is normal during a performance. Learn how to use this “edge” to keep your playing fresh and exciting. By dealing with the causes of performance anxiety *before* the performance, you will learn how to control your nerves and present more confident, polished performances.