

A Look at Stage Fright

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Introduction

The subject of anxiety, and in particular performance anxiety, has interested me greatly for, literally, decades. I've studied it academically, observed it clinically, treated it and suffered from it. Anxiety is, and has been for some time, the most common of the diagnosable psychological "disorders." If you suffer from it, you are not alone. You are, in fact, part of a large, and growing club, that few, if any, want to be members of.

Here are some statistics, specifically regarding performance anxiety:

Wilson (1997) conducted a study with orchestra musicians and found a quarter to a half suffered from some form of performance anxiety. My guess is half is more like it, probably more. This study was done a decade ago and anxiety provoking circumstances don't seem to be lessening. Also, despite how common the phenomenon is, there continues to be a stigma associated with it and I doubt Wilson (or anyone) would be able to get the truth out of everyone. So, too, for the use of beta-blockers, a subject dealt with more thoroughly later in this article.

Despite the need and my own interest in the territory, I've never previously written about it. Perhaps because I knew so many others had done so; plus other matters pressed for my attention. Ironically though, it is because of a continued and rapid growth of information on performance anxiety (not any lessening of it) that I write now. How is that an impetus?

These days, many people have ready access to the Internet, itself both marvel and menace, and the largest body of currently circulating information on performance anxiety certainly can be found there. Some of this information is clearly valid and useful; a great deal more of it is misleading, judgmental and potentially dangerous. So, how did that happen?

At this point in information's history, it's no secret that authorship on the subject of stage fright and just about any topic can, and often does, fall to just about anyone. Just type and send. Inevitably, a mind-boggling number of people, with lots to virtually no solid reference, have written about it - whether in a book, article or entry in an online discussion group. Everyone has an opinion about what it is and what fixes it. Curiously, as far as I can tell, few of these people are mental health professionals who have actually dealt with it therapeutically.

Do I think someone has to be a mental health professional to have a valid take on performance anxiety? No. All credit to anyone out there who has put out information with the intention of helping others (and maybe themselves) address

and come to terms with this increasingly common and, sometimes, devastating problem. I've seen some excellent ideas put forward by experienced professional musicians and I am sure they have assisted many people with what they've recommended. But I also think it's possible for any one of us at any given time to do (to some degree) more harm than good, despite our best intentions.

Having said all that, what can I offer? I guess that remains to be seen. But maybe, given I am a clinical psychologist and have been for a very long time, given I have a subspecialty in neuropsychology and worked in that area for a number of years, given I currently work extensively with professional and advanced student musicians and have for almost two decades, and given I have had my own first hand encounters with performance anxiety more than once, perhaps some who might otherwise be skeptical about what's helpful, or hesitant to seek help at all, might find reassurance in where I come from and have confidence in what I have to say. More importantly, perhaps they will find, in a way they haven't found before (for whatever reason), comfort and help and a way through to being again more whole and happy, in their music making and their lives. If this is true for one person, then writing this was worth it.

Where possible, I've included research findings from the various sub-specialties in psychology and the neurosciences, along with select medical references, vs. reference to popular books or articles on the subject of stage fright (which, by the way, I am not suggesting are not useful; rather, most of you reading this have easy access to that material, whereas you might not have ready access to references mentioned here). Further, overall views presented are my own and should be taken as such.

Another thing: Having worked with performing artists for a long time, I know that many don't like to read a lot of words. Many just want to "shut up and play!" Well, as I tell people I work with, sometimes you can't afford not to talk. Still, for those of you who want it brief, I've included in each section a "bottom line" paragraph that summarizes the main points discussed in that section.

PART ONE

What is "stage fright" and who has it?

While some who have written on this subject distinguish between "performance anxiety" and "stage fright," we use the terms interchangeably, because most people do just that (including researchers, clinicians, musicians and the general public). So, we prefer to proceed with that common language and understanding.

What stage fright is is not limited to its symptoms, but let's look at symptoms first, since it's an easy and accessible entry point. If you've ever had it, you already know that stage fright or performance anxiety is a heightened (sometimes debilitating) fear response associated with performing in public. It can manifest at several levels--often, but not always, concurrently: mental (e.g.,

negative thoughts), emotional (feelings of being tense, upset, etc.), physical (physiological; such as impaired breathing, rapid heartbeat, trembling, sweating, etc.) and behavioral (what you then can or cannot do).

Also, the “performance” situations that trigger this response, in musicians, tend to involve concerts. However, in my experience (and contrary to what is sometimes stated), for many individuals, it also can include rehearsals, classes, auditions or even a private lesson or playing for your family or friends. It is not necessarily limited to being “on stage.” The key common ingredient among those who suffer performance anxiety is “public” vs. being alone in a practice room or other private space.

For some people, the sensation is relatively mild and many of these folks typically find ways to manage it reasonably well. They may even embrace it as offering a welcomed performance “edge.” For other people, it can be much more extreme and not assistive to their playing at all, frequently quite the opposite. I believe this is an extremely important distinction often missed.

Frequently found, in the information circulating on stage fright, is the mistaken notion that one person’s experience is the same as another’s. I often have heard it said, “We all get ‘nerves’ at some point. But I perform better under that kind of pressure. You just got to know how to use it.” Well intentioned advice perhaps, but it assumes everyone feels ‘nerves’ the same. That simply is not the case. There is a wide range of individual difference and, therefore, in my opinion, any one-size-fits-all approach to the problem is deficient and possibly misleading, even though it might prove useful to some (even many) individuals. Furthermore, the same individual can experience it differently in different circumstances.

So, it does concern me (and I hope by mentioning it, it will begin to concern others of you who might not have considered it in this way before) when someone who themselves likely experiences only mild stage fright (or none at all), tells someone else (who can barely function because their experience is so severe), “Man, just use it to give you that edge!” More likely, it will push that person over-the-edge and out of the music business (or at least into a bummed out state) if they think they “should” be able to do this and meanwhile, can hardly hold their instrument. Which brings me to another point....

If you are frequently a wreck from stage fright but you love music and somebody tells you that if you were meant to be a musician you wouldn’t have this problem and maybe you should consider another job, before you throw in the towel (or you axe), you may wish to consider the company you are in and what the music world would be like if these other fellow sufferers before you had followed that advice—because among the musical greats who suffered from stage fright (and there are plenty more, including people in jazz, pop and other genres of music) are: Vladimir Horowitz, Pablo Casals, Andres Segovia and Glenn Gould.

If you need any further confirmation that stage fright is not just for wimps, here’s another interesting story:

The late “participatory” journalist, George Plimpton, who tried perilous activities such as trapeze-flying, boxing, hockey and football (quarterbacking for the Detroit Lions), simply for the sake of the experience, reported that the most terrifying thing he ever did was play triangle in the New York Philharmonic.

Bottom line summary:

At this point, we’ve discussed, in a general way, what stage fright looks and feels like (a heightened fear response with often unpleasant physical, mental, emotional and behavioral symptoms, triggered by performing in front of others), including how it differs in severity person to person (it is not the same for everyone but ranges from a mild, sometimes welcomed, adrenaline rush for some to debilitating anxiety for others), and who gets it (just about everybody, in one form or another, at one time or another).

PART TWO

Why do people get stage fright and what are some simple ways to begin addressing it?

One might think that if a musician loves music and loves to play and share it, playing in public should be the most enjoyable thing he or she could do. For some, this is true, but why is it not true for so many others?

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