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Performing Arts / Music

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Stage Fright

– ways to alleviate the anxiety of a performing musician



Bachelor's Thesis | Abstract

Turku University of Applied Sciences

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Stage Fright

– ways to alleviate the anxiety of a performing musician

This two-part thesis consists of an artistic and written part. The artistic part is a recording of the Thesis concert held on 28 April 2023 in the Crichton Hall of the Arts Academy in Turku, Finland.

The thesis concert is the weighted part of the thesis. The link to the concert recording and the program of the concert are attached to this thesis. In the written part of the thesis, the stage fright which often appears among classical music performers, is explored. Also, its causes and the ways in which it can be alleviated are searched.

The aim of the thesis is to increase the author's knowledge and understanding about the subject in question, so that as a future music pedagogue, she could relate to stage fright better than before and have more tools when teaching her own students in performing.

In the thesis, source literature has been used as a data collection method, in addition to which three different people have been interviewed. As a result of the interview, there has been confirmation of the prevalence of fear of performing.

A few concrete ways to alleviate stage fright have been listed. The author can make use of the information she has collected in her own career as a musician and music pedagogue hoping also that many of the readers of this thesis can benefit from the information presented in the thesis.

Keywords:

stage fright, performance anxiety, anxiety

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Esiintymispelko

- keinoja lievittää esiintyvän muusikon ahdistusta

Tämä kaksiosainen opinnäytetyö koostuu taiteellisesta ja kirjallisesta osasta. Taiteellinen osio on tallenne 28.4.2023, Taideakatemia Crichton-salissa pidetystä opinnäytetyökonsertista Suomen Turussa.

Opinnäytetyökonsertti on opinnäytetyön painotettu osa. Konsertin ohjelma ja linkki konserttitalenteeseen ovat tämän opinnäytetyön liitteenä. Opinnäytetyön kirjallisessa osassa tutkitaan esiintymispelkoa, joka on yleistä klassisen musiikin esittäjien keskuudessa. Myös sen syitä ja tapoja, joilla sitä voidaan lievittää, etsitään.

Opinnäytetyön tavoitteena on lisätä kirjoittajan tietämystä ja ymmärrystä kyseisestä aiheesta, jotta hän voisi muusikkona ja tulevana musiikkipedagogina suhtautua esiintymispelkoon entistä paremmin ja saada aiempaa enemmän työkaluja opettaessaan omia oppilaitaan esiintymään.

Tiedonkeräysmenetelmänä opinnäytetyössä on käytetty lähdekirjallisuutta, minkä lisäksi on haastateltu kolmea eri henkilöä. Haastattelun tuloksena on saatu vahvistus esiintymispelon yleisyydestä.

Opinnäytetyössä on lueteltu muutamia konkreettisia keinoja esiintymispelon lievittämiseksi. Kirjoittaja voi hyödyntää keräämänsä tietoa omalla urallaan muusikkona ja musiikkipedagogina toivoen, että myös monet opinnäytetyön lukijoista voivat hyötyä tässä opinnäytetyössä esitellystä tiedosta.

Asiasanat:

ahdistus, esiintymispelko, lavakammo

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1 Introduction

This thesis consists of two parts, the artistic and the written part. The Artistic part is the main part. It is a recording of the thesis concert, which took place in Crichton Concert Hall, Turku Finland, on 28th April 2023.

In the written part, stage fright situation and the ways to alleviate it will be examined. The main object of this thesis is that the author would even better than before understand the reasons that can cause stage fright to occur and to find out how to alleviate it.

Performing is a big part of a musician's profession. However, it may make musicians feel anxious. Many students and those who perform music professionally feel anxiety. A healthy amount of anxiety is good for musicians and it can even improve their performance to some extent. Excessively high amounts of anxiety, however, can disturb the musician's performance — and that is when stage fright can become a problem.

The purpose of this thesis is to share my personal experiences on outgrowing from stage fright as a viola student and thus to increase the musicians' and the music pedagogues' awareness of this problem. I wish they would be able to help themselves and their students who suffer from stage fright.

In addition to my own experiences and the written sources, this thesis consists interviews with three different musicians from different backgrounds:

The purpose of the interviews is to open up different levels of the stage fright situation on music professionals of different kinds and music students.

2 Stage Fright

It is very common to experience stage fright among classical musicians.

2.1 What is Stage Fright?

Stage Fright is a state of nervousness prior to or during the performance in front of an audience (What Is Performance Anxiety? Causes, Symptoms & Exercises). It is important for musicians and music pedagogues to understand that the levels of stage fright can vary significantly between different kind of people.

Generally, experiencing slight nervousness in connection with the performing music is perfectly normal. Where stage fright can become a problem is when the symptoms escalate to the degree that the quality of the performance suffers and the mental, emotional, or physical health of the musician are threatened (Overcoming Stage Fright: A Complete Guide.)

Therefore, it is very important to understand the big difference between those people who experience typical butterflies in their stomach and those who feel threatened at the thought of performing in front of others.

Janet E. Esposito describes that good preparation for a performance does not reduce the intense fear for those people who experience intensive levels of stage fright. For them, the fear goes much deeper and it is a feeling of being emotionally unsafe when being exposed and vulnerable in front of others. These people are not used to trusting themselves because of the loss of control of the situation experienced in their mind and body while performing. Fear often gets worse rather than better over time, even if one speaks more of it or performs music more. The old advice of “Just be well-prepared and you will do fine” does not work for people who experience stage fright. It makes them feel even more alone and misunderstood. (Esposito 2000, 8)

2.2 What are the symptoms of Stage Fright?

Stage fright is a result of thinking of the performance situation as a threat. In life-threatening or challenging situations of this kind, nervousness serves a necessary biological function to increase the chance of survival. It is important to feel nervous when escaping from a house fire. However, when the brain starts to process the performance situation on the stage in the same way it processes the physical danger, the results can be undesirable.

Several researchers have found that high amount of nervousness results in physiological, psychological, behavioural symptoms such as: increased heart rate, sweating, shortness of breath, muscle tension, shaking, numb fingers, dry mouth, upset stomach, headache, dizziness, nausea, and diarrhoea, fear of failure, irritability, loss of confidence, lack of concentration, memory lapses and panic (McGrath 2017,2).

2.3 What causes Stage Fright?

When speaking of the causes of stage fright, it is very important to keep in mind that there is not a single correct answer to this question. Just like all the other psychological matters, stage fright is also very personal. Therefore, it is possible to say that there might be different reasons underlying it for different people.

The most common reasons among those people who experience stage fright are for example:

- to be an anxious person or a perfectionist
- who have low self-esteem or low self-confidence
- who feel the fear of loss or fear of failure (Performance Anxiety.)

As Janet E. Esposito also explains in her book, these feelings are often not within the person`s conscious awareness. The feelings that one is more aware of are the intense discomfort and self-consciousness at being the focus of attention and the fear that others will be able to see through you and see all your fears and perceived inadequacies. (Esposito 2000, 11)

3 How to alleviate Stage Fright?

3.1 Techniques to alleviate Stage Fright

There are many different techniques one can benefit from when it comes to alleviating stage fright. Therefore, it is recommended for musicians to try different methods to find out what would be the best way for each to alleviate stage fright.

Like all the other psychological matters, stage fright also has underlying reasons. It is essential for each to uncover these reasons, as this will help the performer to alleviate anxiety more efficiently. As a long-term technique, it might be necessary to discuss the stage fright situation with a professional. However, depending on one's anxiety levels it is possible to handle the stage fright situation with shorter-term techniques as well.

Good preparation

According to psychology, performers are less likely to feel anxious if they are familiar enough with what they are doing. Therefore, it is important for a performer to feel well-prepared for the situation one is feeling anxious about.

Some might consider that being well-prepared means playing a piece of music without making any mistakes. In reality, stage fright is more complex and more comprehensive than that. Preparing a piece of music as well as possible is a very important part of alleviating the unfamiliarity of the performance situation, however it is not the only solution when it comes to being well-prepared.

A very useful exercise for the performers to be well-prepared is to imagine themselves performing. When doing this exercise, it is important to be very detailed as in the following example:

Start by focusing on your breathing. Imagine yourself backstage, how do you prepare yourself for the performance both mentally and physically? Try to imagine the moment you are walking to the stage, bowing, tuning your instrument, and playing your piece of music.

During the exercise, it is normal for some anxious thoughts to occur. If happening so, a performer should not ignore these thoughts, but be aware of them, and try to bring herself / himself back to the exercise from a positive perspective. If these anxious thoughts were about a certain thing that a performer can fix or work on, then it might be helpful to do so. Otherwise, a performer should remember that she / he did the best she / he could, and her /his thoughts are the result of the brain processing the performing situation as a danger.

Another useful exercise is practising performing music. Most of the time when musicians are learning a piece of music, they divide the music piece into small parts and focus on each of those separately. This can be a good practice technique when a musician is in the learning stage of the piece. However, in a performance situation, a musician is required to play the piece as a whole. Therefore, it is very helpful to practice performing music just like one would be on the stage to get used to playing continuously.

If possible, it can be very beneficial for one to visit the performance area before the performance to become familiar with playing in that environment.

Have a positive inner language

A person`s thoughts play a big role in the stage fright situation. Most of the musicians suffering from stage fright, reports that they are starting to feel anxiousness days, weeks or even months before the actual performance day. The reason for this is simple: it is the thought of the performance making them anxious — not the actual performing situation.

It is impossible to stop the brain from creating thoughts, but this does not mean that the brain has the control over one`s thoughts. Performers can learn to shape their thoughts to be able to have a positive inner language.

Anxious inner language might look for example like as these to be seen below, when the brain has the control over the thoughts:

What if I make a mistake on the stage? What if I embarrassed myself in front of my friends / family / teacher? Am I good enough? Did I practice enough?

In these examples, the brain is trying to protect the performer from the “dangerous” performing situation. Which means that at some point, the brain has learned that performing is a threat and now it is sending “danger signals” to protect the performer. This is a healthy reaction of the brain. However, when it comes to alleviate the stage fright situation, it is essential for the brain to be taught the opposite way of thinking. Here are some examples of shaped and possibly helpful inner language for the brain:

My friends, family and teacher are here to support me. They are not judging me. They are aware that performing can be challenging, and they are here to have a good time with me.

I did the best I could. This is my current level. This performance ahead of me is not the end of my journey. Regardless of my current level there is always more to learn and practice.

Search for something reassuring

Admitting one`s anxiety is the first step towards to the healing but admitting it too much will not be helpful either. When anxiety is present, finding something reassuring is therefore very important. It can be anything as long as it takes the mind away from the anxious thoughts. Exercising, meditation, cooking or baking, reading a book and solving a puzzle are some good examples of activities that can distract attention from the anxious thoughts.

Have a healthy lifestyle

Healthy body equals healthy mind. Having a healthy lifestyle will increase a person`s life quality overall. It is very important to sleep well, exercise regularly and have a healthy diet. All these aspects will support the mental health, increase energy levels, and help to focus better (Performance Anxiety.)

4 Interviews

During my thesis process, I interviewed three different musicians from different backgrounds:

1. NLP (neurolinguistic programming) coach, a professional orchestra musician
2. Violin player, a music student
3. Double bass player, a music student.

4.1 Interview with an NLP coach

What is NLP and how does it work?

NLP (neurolinguistic programming) is a set of different technique exercises by which one can teach the brain. It is based on the fact that everything a person does is first an idea in his / her mind.

NLP is used in a way to shape thoughts with inner language. Human processes ideas with thoughts. No matter what the thoughts include, they can always be refined and directed to a certain direction when learned how to do it.

Even the most difficult thoughts created in the mind can be shaped in a more useful direction. By learning to change a person`s own thoughts, one can change the emotional states, get rid of fears and tensions, old beliefs, limitations that have held the person back in the past, and create new empowering beliefs that enable him to achieve his goals.

Why do people experience stage fright?

When it comes to stage fright, there are always several reasons that underlie and affect it. The reasons can come from completely different surroundings. It might be that no connections can be found between the reasons and the fear.

With the help of NLP, the reasons underlying the fear can be discovered and thus to be learned how to reshape them in a better way.

According to NLP, is it possible to say that the stage fright is something individual? Is that why the level of stage fright can be so different for each and every one?

Yes, and for example even with the same person, one day it can be so that the anxiety is not there at all but the other day it is very high and there is no clear reason why it happened. It might be some kind of trigger that comes from an unconscious or completely insignificant source. With the help of NLP, it is possible to learn how to be more aware of these, so the performer does not have to suffer when there is no need to suffer.

Can you share some techniques or strategies you used in your NLP sessions for people to be able to manage their stage fright?

Quite often, when a person`s mind feels stuck, it is useful to analyse what happens in the body when he / she gets anxious. For example, very often the breathing starts to feel fast and short on the upper part of the lungs, the muscles get tense, sweating increases, the hands get cold and sweaty...

Then the opposite. What happens when a person is calm? Breathing is slow and peaceful, muscles are relaxed, movements are smooth and easy, a person feels light and powerful.

A performer should start to concentrate on physical things of this kind. Usually when a person is anxious, he / she starts to think about what is coming up tomorrow (a gig or an audition) but when he / she brings the consciousness to the very moment, there is normally not so much to worry. Therefore, it is very helpful for a performer to find a peaceful place to be and really try to root himself / herself where he / she is at that moment, breathe very deep, stretch his /her muscles, sometimes it might be helpful to sing or hum, and search for feelings from when he / she has very relaxed body and mind because when he /she gets these feelings into his / her body, that is helping his /her mind to also settle down.

What is your opinion about the instruction of “being well-prepared” when it comes to stage fright?

It is good to be well-prepared always when it is possible. However, sometimes we might find ourselves in a situation that it is not possible to be well-prepared, for example, becoming a substitute of someone who got sick, getting a gig in a short notice...

One very important thing for a performer is to accept how much he / she has worked with the repertoire. It might be helpful to think that I have done as much as I could, and it is good enough at this point.

Also, setting a realistic goal for the performance is very important. Being aware of one`s current level and not expecting to play better on the stage than in the practice room. For example, a realistic goal for the performance can be reaching 80% of a performer`s maximum. If one reaches 90% of the maximum, it is a reason to celebrate but not a reason to think that it had to be 100%. Remember that performers are human beings, not machines.

Another very important thing is to not to compare yourself with others. When preparing for a performance, it is not worthwhile to compare oneself with other performers. There are only two ways of useful comparisons:

1. One way is to compare yourself with the past version of yours. What is your situation now when you compare it with the situation two years ago? There is always improvement.
2. The second way is to analyse some very skillful performers and try to learn something useful from them.

Stage fright is very common between classical musicians. 99% of the musicians suffer from the stage fright at some point in their life. So, there is no reason to try to hide it. Ask other musicians how they take care of the stage fright situation. From different people coming from different backgrounds, you might get very good ideas about how they help themselves. Be careful whom you are sharing your own problems with. It is good to keep in mind that there might be some

people who can reflect their experiences in negative ways because they do not know themselves how to act with their stage fright.

Secondly, search, get information and collect your own toolbox little by little in order to ease stage fright. There is much you can learn from other musicians, performers, and teachers. Be curious about trying different things. Try to organize performances for yourself regularly. These performances do not have to be big. It can be just as simple as playing your instrument to your family in a family gathering, playing your repertoire at kindergarten, or even playing it on the street.

It is recommendable to have at least one performance every month. That is how it becomes a routine to perform.

4.2 Interview with music performance student A

Have you ever experienced performance anxiety? If so, how did you overcome it?

Yes, I experience performance anxiety almost without exception every single time I perform. It does not even have to be a real performance situation; it can also happen during a regular lesson with the instrument teacher. For instance, if I feel like I have done much work with a piece of music and have not played the piece to my teacher for a while, and I am scared of his reaction to my practice.

In these cases, the feeling of stage fright takes over me and I no longer can fully control for example my bow hand, and I may hit the wrong notes with my left hand because of the stiffness stage fright brings me.

In order to overcome stage fright, I think a person should be expecting to experience stage fright. If a person is not mentally prepared for experiencing stage fright, it is not as easy to overcome it. I think I should still create some mental surviving methods for these kinds of unexpected stage fright situations.

On stage, if I experience stage fright, I find that the best way for me is to try to lead my focus to the music instead of the performance situation.

I think one cannot even “overcome stage fright” entirely. I am sure at least I never will. Nevertheless, one must get used to it and find different ways of taking a view to it. One can also try to find good things about it and should explore it.

What techniques or strategies you normally use to manage performance anxiety before and during a performance?

I do some exercises to calm my body before going on stage. Here is a breathing exercise: I breathe in for four seconds, then I breathe out for eight seconds. This can be repeated a few times, but if I do it too many times, I might get dizzy.

Before going on the stage, I may do some physical exercises as well that combine movement and breathing. Because my stage fright affects mostly my arms and back, I swing my hands above my head while breathing in and as I breathe out, I drop my hands and my whole upper body down in order to relax my muscles from tension.

I may also do some stretching before going on stage and maybe do some focusing exercises with different senses. I can try to find three small details near me to look at in turn for some time: first a bigger detail, then a middle-sized sized detail and finally a tiny one. This can be done by listening as well: I can close my eyes and find three different sounds I hear, some of them should be more apparent and some more silent. I can also do this by sensing three different feelings within my body.

Sometimes it helps if I am able to practice in the backstage until the very last minute. On stage, it depends on my feelings how I manage stage fright during a performance. If my hands start shaking, I try to relax my hands a bit whenever I have breaks. Also, concentrating on music instead of myself and my feelings, is helpful.

In order to help me concentrate on music, I make a deeper study of the piece I am playing with the help of a narrative. Then I think what is happening in the piece at this point, what is the main character of the piece of music doing or

experiencing that I should express with my playing. For example, Mozart concertos can be so operatic, that it is easy to focus on the story.

Also, if I really know my performance piece / pieces, it can save me on stage when the stage fright hits. The time and work I have spent with a piece of music will pay back at this point.

How do you prepare yourself mentally and physically for a performance to minimize the effects of performance anxiety?

Before the performance (not just before the performance, but during the days leading to the performance) I think about how I feel when I am experiencing stage fright. How do I feel in my hands, is my heart pumping very fast or do I stop breathing, any other physical symptoms? Then I think about what I think before going on stage and when I am on stage: are my thoughts also positive or only negative? I try to create some positive phrases for the situation that I can use when the concert really takes place.

I go through the whole event in my mind and vision myself to the backstage, walking to the stage, bowing, and tuning my instrument. I also go through what goes on in my head before I start playing and try to find thoughts that calm me down in the situation. I think over the pieces as well, imagine myself playing them to the audience, also the difficult parts.

Like I said earlier, I also have some physical exercises too. I have also noticed that it is better if the whole day is quite calm: if I have a full day of running around it is difficult to calm down for the performance in the evening. Then again, it might be nice to go for a walk maybe an hour before the performance, if possible.

How do you act with the pressure of performing in front of a live audience, and what advice would you give to others who suffer from stage fright?

In the end, I always feel how stupid it was to be scared in the first place, because I am not in any kind of real danger. It might help me think that the audience wants me to do well, no one wants to see me fail on stage, and people understand

mostly if something happens. It might be helpful to have a friend in the audience that I can imagine playing to.

I advise anyone who struggles with stage fright to accept it. In order to find the best ways for oneself to overcome stage fright, one should recognize one's own physical and mental state during experiencing stage fright. What are my physical or mental symptoms? Am I too active or too inactive when I get nervous? If I am inactive, I need to prepare myself with more activating exercises, and vice versa.

So yes, overcoming stage fright needs practice. One has to practice performing mentally and simply by performing as much as possible. One should also take "easier" performances with "easier" pieces of music and build one's own performance identity on top of successful performances not dwelling on those that have been stained in one's memory as those that failed.

In addition, one should also set realistic goals for the performances. If the piece is not played perfectly when practising in the practice room, why should the piece then be perfect when performed in front of the audience? A realistic goal might be just to "concentrate on music as much as possible".

4.3 Interview with music performance student B

Have you ever experienced performance anxiety? If so, how did you overcome it?

Yes, I have experienced very bad stage fright. I believe the reason for it was that I did not grow up in a conservatory environment. I was in a local music school's youth department (,) and I remember not having the coping skills to be able to reduce my anxiety.

What helped me much was visualizing exercises. For example, I practised in my concert clothes, I imagined myself performing, I tried to imagine the concert hall and who might be listening me in the audience.

One thing I used to do was visiting the concert halls before the performance day if I had never been there before. All these helped me to feel more comfortable with the performance. Therefore, it reduced my performance anxiety.

What techniques or strategies you use to manage performance anxiety before and during a performance?

As I mentioned earlier, visualizing is one of the techniques that I am using to be able to manage my performance anxiety before the performance. Something that I have tried recently is to practice playing my pieces through like I would be performing them. Also, I like to play to my family and friends to get some performance experience.

To manage stage fright during the performance, I try to slow down. When I am anxious / nervous, I tend to rush. Therefore, I try to take my time when walking to the stage and when tuning my instrument. This gives me some more time to get used to the environment before I start to play, and it reduces my performance anxiety.

What advice would you give to others who suffer from stage fright?

I would suggest seeing a therapist or a coach if performance anxiety is at a level that affects life quality. If possible, it would be good to get help from someone specialized in musicians who are suffering from stage fright.

If performance anxiety is at a normal / healthy level, I would recommend being curious, research and explore different methods to find something that works. This is a very personal topic and there is not only one correct solution.

Also, I would recommend performing regularly. It might be scary at first, especially for someone who is experiencing performance anxiety, but I would say, the more you perform music the more you get used to it.

5 Conclusion

The aim of my thesis was to raise my awareness of the stage fright, that is common among musicians and music pedagogues. The results of my interviews and my own experiences confirm how common it is for classical music performers to suffer from stage fright.

The people I interviewed told me how personal stage fright is and how it varies for each performer. That is why it is important for performing musicians and music pedagogues to be aware of and understand the different levels of stage fright and anxiety so that they themselves can benefit from this awareness, and so that they can also speak of them and teach them to their students.

The responses of the interviews also show that there are many concrete ways to alleviate stage fright. Each performer has to figure out what would help them best and what methods would be the most useful to them to alleviate stage fright. This requires effort and exercising.

Depending on the severity of the problem, a performer may sometimes need professional help in coping with stage fright and be able to continue and develop as a performing musician and even learn to enjoy performing.

I believe that after I got to know the manifestations of stage fright and the means of alleviation in my thesis, I can better than before address with this phenomenon when performing as a musician and acting as a music pedagogue. Also, as a future music pedagogue, I am more able to handle stage fright with my students as I teach them to perform and prepare for it. I also hope that my thesis will be useful to other musicians and music pedagogues when they encounter this phenomenon in their own work.

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Program of the Thesis Concert

Merin ja Gizemin opinnäyttekonsertti

28.4.2023 klo 12 Crichton-salissa

Y. Bowen: Phantasy alttoviululle ja pianolle, op. 54

Gizem Güllü, alttoviulu

Esa Moilanen, piano

W. A. Mozart: Sonaatti pianolle ja viululle nro 21

e-molli, KV 304:

1. Allegro

2. Tempo di Menuetto

Meri Vuorisalo, viulu

Anni Collan, piano

A. Dvořák: Jousikvartetto nro 12 F-duuri, op. 96:

1. Allegro ma non troppo

2. Lento

3. Molto vivace

4. Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

Venla Suni, viulu

Meri Vuorisalo, viulu

Gizem Güllü, alttoviulu

Ida Kiiskinen, sello

Appendix 2

Recording of the Thesis Concert

Part 1 is available at: <https://youtu.be/RN4P2op1aQ4>

Part 2 is available at: <https://youtu.be/jMwu130rpSE>

