

STAGE FRIGHT MANAGEMENT

Waiting, the familiar symptoms return. The palms moisten, the stomach becomes queasy, the heart beats harder and faster, breathing becomes more shallow, the knees feel weak. "Here we go again," you think to yourself, disgusted that the cycle is seemingly beyond your control. Is it possible to overcome the body's natural defense mechanisms? To use the surge of adrenalin in a positive way to enhance instead of hinder a performance? Of course it is. It just takes some understanding and practice.

Fight or Flight: The Human Body in Survival Mode

Those familiar feelings are caused by the production of adrenalin. Your brain receives those primal impulses and your body goes into "fight or flight" survival mode. Your body is reacting to perceived danger - it is primed for anything. Response time is quickened; senses are fine-tuned. You can jump higher, run faster and play daunting technical passages. Although your body is telling you to run, you must stay and complete a performance. So how do you minimize the negative effects of adrenalin? By changing your perception, by viewing the physical changes as excitement, not panic. By learning to slow down, breathe deeply and focus that additional energy into a passionate and exciting performance. This takes practice.



Prepare! Prepare! Prepare Again!

Lack of preparation is a leading cause of stage fright. If a performer is unsure of his or her technical ability to pull off a successful performance, that adds even more pressure and jitters. Especially in the public school setting, there is rarely enough time to fully prepare students for performance.

Some suggestions:

1. Pick music within your technical range.
2. If there is a recording of the work, listen, study, and "air play" as you follow your part.
3. Address all of the difficult rhythmic passages. Clap or speak (counting out loud is always good) these passages before attempting them on the instrument. After the rhythm is solid, attempt the passage with pitches.
4. Divide your piece into small sections, rehearsing only one section at a time for accuracy. Point out where sections repeat. This makes the task of learning a longer work less overwhelming.
5. Practice slowly. An assault at full speed on a difficult passage rarely spawns confidence and courage.
6. During your rehearsal time, be sure to schedule a sure success. Also practice items that you know you do well!
7. Schedule "dry run" performances well in advance of the actual performance. The more you go through the motions of performing, the better the performance will be, with much less stress.

Internal Pressure

We've all heard those negative, self-defeating voices in our heads. The fear of failure, fear of embarrassment, the performance of music is such a personal experience. We feed ourselves negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Replace the negatives by feeding your brain positives, practicing that all-important skill of ignoring the mistakes while delivering an exciting performance. One question to ask yourself: Is pretty good, good enough? Should we not strive for excellence in a performance? Make sure that the work being performed is at the "pretty good" stage at least two weeks before the performance, so that the last 5 percent of the learning process may be achieved easily. This will quiet the voice inside, calm the fears and allow a more confident performance. We are not striving for perfection; excellence and perfection are quite different. As musicians, our goal is to entertain, to share the love of our art with others, to move people emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. Perfection is not our goal and the failure to achieve it is not a punishable offense. Relax and enjoy the music making process.

External Pressure

Sometimes it may be a good thing to keep parents and even teachers separate from students at festivals and auditions, as they may add expectations and pressure. Your performance is unique and special; comparisons to more advanced peers is another source of stress. Don't allow 10 minutes out of a lifetime to become a life or death experience.

Some Stage Fright Solutions

Act the Part. Performing is as much "acting" a part as it is executing a technical feat. A tool you may use is to attend a live performance featuring a professional artist on your instrument. Pay attention not only to the "music" being performed, but the "music" being portrayed - paying attention to the body language, posture, and breathing of the person on stage. Amazingly, the body becomes more relaxed, the breathing deeper, posture is better.

Visualization.

1. Potential memory slips are often a source of anxiety for performers. To remove this internal pressure, write a story about the work to be performed, putting specific feelings, actions and pictures with each section. Have them close their eyes and "run" the story in their heads like a movie. The more detailed the story, the more important communicating that story to the audience becomes. Another version of this is to picture the actual music running through the mind, visualizing the rise and fall of the notes.
2. Anxiety tends to build in situations where waiting is involved, such as for an audition or festival performance. You can imagine going to a safe place (i.e. a mountain meadow, a deserted beach). Before the performance, go off (alone), close your eyes and imagine playing the piece they are performing in that safe place. Hopefully the peaceful "residue" of this meditation exercise will follow them into the audition room. This takes weeks of practice to be done successfully.
3. Simulate performance and allow several "practice" performances. The more "real time" performance practice the student has, the less frightening the actual performance will be.

Diet, Sleep and Other Management Skills.

1. Avoid caffeine, weaning yourself as early as two weeks prior to a performance. Increased adrenalin flow only compounds the effects of stimulants already present in your system; thus the tremors and increased heart rate will be much harder to control.
2. Avoid processed sugars (i.e., candy, soft drinks). Natural sugars aid the body in converting stored energy to action. Processed sugars provide a brief high, but the overall effect is depressive.
3. Eat a good meal, high in complex carbohydrates, low in sugars and fats. Pasta is an excellent choice, along with fresh vegetables and fruit.
4. Arrive at the performance as rested as possible, establishing a consistent sleep pattern two weeks before a performance.
5. Avoid listening to other performers in an audition situation. It only leads to playing the comparison game, which can lead to negative dialogue.
6. Try to remember to breathe deeply before beginning any music-making. This sounds very elementary, but breathing is the first thing affected by the adrenalin rush, and good oxygen flow to muscles will steady nerves.
7. Provide a quiet, safe place for students to relax before performances.
8. Laughter is a wonderful tension release; come prepared with a few good jokes.