

Stage-Fright Workshop

By Snake Davis

Stage-fright. Extreme nerves. Exam or audition tension.
Building confidence. Finding career and musical direction.

Some of you will immediately recognise the above as areas needing help. Others may be more confident and think it not relevant to them, but I think and hope that there will be something of use for everyone here. I think you'll see later how the 'finding direction' bit links in with the 'developing confidence' bit!

THE SYMPTOMS

They can manifest themselves in different ways;

Sickness

Terror

Butterflies

The shakes

Despondency

Depression

A bit of apprehension before a show/interview/exam is natural and not problematic, but full on terror can really hamper our ability to play well/express ourselves well, and may well kill the enjoyment.

I can assure you that if you do suffer from nerves you are not alone. Many of the stars you guys look up to are quivering jellies under their cool exteriors.

What is it that causes this fear and anxiety? Looking back to when we first got interested in music, surely it was because it made us happy to listen to and looked like fun to do, so what changed along the way?

CAUSES

Negative and destructive thoughts in our conscious mind are the main culprits.

If we can picture ourselves as extensions of the instruments we play, as tubes that air must pass through or strings which must vibrate, or like river channels along which water must pass, or arteries through which blood flows, then obviously the clearer we keep these vessels the better everything flows.

What happens (goes wrong) is that our musical selves get clogged up with obstacles restricting this flow, like kinks in a hosepipe, negative thoughts such as:-

“People are going to look at me, thinking I look stupid”

“I'll get embarrassed”

“They'll think I'm not very good”

“I’m going to fail/go wrong/forget my parts”
“My sound will be weak”
“My solos won’t be very good”
“I’ll never be as good as X”
“I wish I’d practiced more”
“Aaah, I’m in the wrong job!”
“I wish I wasn’t here”
“There’s so much to learn I don’t know where to start”
“I’ll never get it together”
“I won’t be able to think what to say”

What is happening here? The “I”, the ego, conscious mind, is putting up all these obstacles and hurdles, doing our heads in and stopping us getting on with having fun and playing well.

I’m guessing most of you will recognise some of the above symptoms?

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

So! What can we do about it?

Some of us naturally tend towards performance more than others anyway, some of us genuinely would rather stay out of the spotlight, but for those who are kept from performing more by this kind of terror there *are* solutions.

Experience, getting older and doing loads of gigs usually helps, but there is a lot that can be done to improve matters along the way, for all of us.

On this note I want to slip some very good news in here for you guys; the small intimate performances that you have to give at this stage in your education/careers are/will definitely be some of the most scary/nerve-wracking experiences you’ll ever have. When you get out into the “real” world it actually gets easier.

Playing in front of fellow students/examiners is a useful, necessary, but un-natural situation, playing in front of family and close friends is only a little bit better. When you wind up at The Albert Hall with an exposed solo and TV cameras you’ll actually find it’s all a bit easier and more real. People have paid to be there, they expect you to deliver the goods, they want to be entertained and they will NOT be scrutinising every note. Therefore they give you a much more positive energy than you can expect in these necessarily more un-natural environments. There is more distance between you and them.

Still true for me now, 30 years in. I have played Tokyo Dome with Ekichi Yazawa, Japans biggest Rock Star, biggest gig in Japan, 50,000 seater, exposed solos and TV cameras, it’s a little nerve-wracking for sure, but not as much as accompanying my daughter on keyboards when she sang at her mums 50th, not as much as unaccompanied sax in the local church for my neighbours wedding.

Some of the solutions I will suggest are based on, or similar to, spiritual or religious philosophies, some of them may sound a bit new-agey. Along the way I’ll be dropping in some of my favourite quotes.

We have established that what we need to do to free us up is to suppress the constant niggling thoughts of our conscious minds, but how??

Here are some Snake-ish suggestions, not in any particular order of importance. Even if just one of these sounds good to you it could really help you enormously.

1. We could, or should perhaps, attempt to re-ignite/re-establish the feelings that attracted us to music in the first place. Music almost definitely filled us with passion, joy, excitement. We then get gradually distorted by fear and somehow lose the plot. It's always best to listen like an audience member rather than like a musician. I like the notion of seeing the world as through a child's eyes, wide-eyed and fresh-eared.

I remember my daughter, talking about singer/guitarist John Meyer saying "I listen on my way to school, between lessons, during dinner hour, and while I'm going to sleep. One of his songs made me cry this morning." I *had* heard and enjoyed John Meyer in the past but listening afresh with her brought me immediately SO close to the music, it did the above, I listened with a child, with a child's passion.

"Listen with love not fear."

"Don't *try* to listen, *let* yourself listen"

2. Check out great masters on dvd or on you-tube, like Miles Davis, Vladimir Horowitz, Count Basie, see how they centre themselves and have an audience transfixed before a note is played.

3. Try to shift the emphasis, or obsession, from ourselves to the music, that's what the audience is primarily here for, so maybe we can let it flow through us and wash away all those crazy niggling thoughts and doubts.

If playing in an ensemble we must consciously shift the attention and energy from our own performance to that of the collective performance. We'll experience the band sounding better for it, we'll realize that any individual mistakes don't matter so much, and anyway we'll be happier and more relaxed, so probably won't make any anyway.

This is particularly important and relevant and useful when accompanying a singer. Once we realize that our job is to make them feel strong and secure we are miraculously freed from self-obsession and nasty "I" thoughts.

This can be achieved with attention to dynamics and space in the music, also with smiles and with the eyes.

So - We started maybe with a list or pile of stuff with the "I" the "Me" at the top. Now we've reversed it, put the music at the top followed by the audience and the other musicians with ourselves at the bottom. Progress!

4. Relaxation Techniques. I suppose it is obvious that the more relaxed and floppy we can make our bodies and minds, the better the music will flow. I encourage my sax students not to just reach for a horn and start blowing but to start their day or practice session like this:-

Loosen the body, find the centre of gravity, take some full breaths, possibly some yoga breathing exercises and do a couple of stretches. This will almost definitely calm the mind as well as the body, and is a brilliant start whether you're a blower or not.

Then I encourage everyone to play as lightly and gracefully as possible, always being on the lookout for, and trying to banish, tension. This de-crunching process can take years, but the main thing at first is to become aware of it. A major step for me was to stop tapping my foot all the time, and I'd been playing 20 years or more before I cracked that one! What we hope to do is banish trapped energy.

Anything that calms the body will help to calm the mind and vice versa.

We all sort of know this. "Come on now, take a deep breath, roll your shoulders a few times" etc.

I have taken this principle to extremes and based a long note exercise on it. (Heading for the door or starting to doze off at the mention of long notes? Don't, they can be fun and exciting! There's another workshop there for sometime in the future.)

This is a technique of mine, which some students have found incredibly useful. I came up with it in 2008 and you can also find it on my "Make it Sing" DVD it's called THE ZEN NOTEbreath-note creeps in-crescendo-back down to breath.

On keys or guitar it works like this...

Take simple short sequence e.g. A fl-Bfl-C maj7s. 60-80 bpm, bar/bar/2 bars. Play once. OK now have a stretch and a balancing settle, deep full breath, play again observing and checking body for trapped energy. Release it. For me first time it was arms shoulders and abdomen/breathing, tightness in all areas. Repeat a few times getting musically fancier but keeping zen check going.

As well as being great for your playing this is a wonderful calmer-downer, it will actually slow your pulse and stop the shaky butterflies. You almost always have a period of time to warm up before an audition/exam/performance, include a Zen Note or two.

This same process can be applied to other aspects of your playing such as scales/studies, in fact to other aspects of your life, try the zen walk, or the zen teeth-clean!

The following techniques might also be useful.

Breathing exercises. There are loads, but lets try a simple one.

Big breath over 1 second. Slow out breath, hiss it, over about 5 seconds, relaxing whole body as we exhale.

Meditation (you can learn from a book or tape or see my postscript)

Yoga (book possible, teacher better)

Tai chi (book possible, teacher better)

Alexander technique (need a teacher)

Reflexology (rolling hand balls, foot massagers or session with a practitioner)

Ok, just to remind you, we're looking for ways to keep the nerves and tension at bay. Here is another suggestion.

5. Moderation of goals. It can be the case that our ambitions are so great that they seem utterly unattainable, stuff like:-

"I must be the best"

"It's all or nothing"

"I must master all styles"

Our list of things we think we have to do may be so long we never get started, and our fear that we'll never become great players may turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. "Fear of not becoming great has kept you from becoming great"¹

I've lowered my sights on many occasions, notably by giving up clarinet and by ceasing to feel I need to play jazz like Michael Brecker, but I'm still very happy with what I've achieved.

SO We may need to lower our expectations and re-program our minds in order to get on with becoming great.

6. Some musical suggestions.

Don't skip the basics.

Don't move on from one thing until you've mastered it, or at least made excellent progress.

Practice slowly positively and patiently.

Be WELL PREPARED before a performance, by knowing the pieces, by knowing what order you're going to play them in. The presence of the audience and/or TV cameras or indeed an examiner, can sometimes make us realise we weren't quite as well prepared as we thought. Do that bit extra.

Arrive for your gig/session/rehearsal/exam/audition in good time. Leave home early, sit in the car or the park, practice or collect your thoughts, have a coffee, anything rather than rushing in late.

Have an idea of what you're going to say to the audience in between pieces, if you're the one doing the talking. Some of us use a prepared script, some are lucky enough to be complete naturals with the mic, some like myself have little tales or jokes ready to fall back on if nothing else comes to mind. I write little prompts on my set list.

If improvising, or starting to, remember; there's no such thing as a wrong note.

Improvisation is "just having the courage to move from one note to another"² without fear or consideration.

7. Other highs. This is a bit more to do with finding your way as musicians, finding the right slot. It is easy to get blinkered and obsessed with our music. Take a break sometimes. Get to know and experience other great highs and deep experiences outside music. For example, mountain climbing, parachuting, sailing... be a sponge for the beauty that's all around us, have a spirit of adventure. Go out and look at the stars. Lie on your back and watch the clouds go by from time to time.

And within music, expand the experience by, for example- playing your instrument outside or playing in total darkness. If you're an instrumentalist, start singing more. If you're a singer, pick up an instrument more.

8. Smile more to the audience, to the other performers, to yourselves. Smiles are encouraging, warming and energy-giving. Smile through any non-intended notes instead of grimacing and they become insignificant, not mistakes any more. I don't mean an imitation of a Cheshire cat, specially if you're not naturally smiley, but even a half-smile or occasional flash of the eyes can work wonders, relaxing the crowd and spurring on other musicians.

¹ Werner "Effortless Mastery"

² Bobby McFerrin workshop

If we're enjoying ourselves, and the music is working, let the audience know, they'll relax more and feed their energy back to you. Then it starts to happen and you become aware of the power at your fingertips.

9. Act Ok, so sometimes you're not feeling like smiling, you don't want to be here, you would have prepared but it wasn't possible, the piano is out of tune or the stage sound is appalling. Well, the audience have paid their money, you still have to send them away as happy as possible, so act the part of yourself on a good night when everything is going right. This will help you struggle through a bad gig. There is an element of acting in performance anyway, especially in big halls and arenas where we ought to make everything a bit bigger, exaggerating slightly to ensure that every note carries to the very back of the hall.

10. Detach Yourself - Some advice given to me by the record producer Richard Niles. If struggling in a sticky, difficult or nerve-racking situation, on a recording session or when preparing a difficult piece, do this:-
Jump out of your skin, leave your body then take a look back at yourself from across the room and ask "What advice can I offer this poor sucker?" It may well be as simple as:-
"Take a break for 10 minutes"
"Take a deep breath, roll your shoulders, open the window"
"Its not that bad, not life and death, what's the worst that can happen?"

11. Waiting Most of us find that when the time comes to DO whatever we were nervous about doing things aren't so bad. We're in the zone, absorbed, probably doing what we do best. Anticipation, waiting, that was the worst bit. Experiencing this and remembering that this is what happens can help.

12. Maintain a decent well balanced diet and keep consumption of sugary foods caffeine and alcohol low if possible.

13. Exercise regularly

14. Get good sleep if you can! Don't revise or practise right up to bedtime, allow at least half an hour of fun/reading/stretching/walking/bathing.

15. Write stuff down. This can often help to deal with any tricky situation. List things that are worrying you. Then try to counter all the negative stuff with positive stuff. Try this with the statements listed under "causes", page 1

CONCLUSION

I'm going to leave you with some of my favourite thoughts and sayings on these subjects.

Do not fear mistakes. There are none. (Miles Davis)

Say to yourself "I am a master, I am great", put your hands on your instrument, trust them, and eventually it will be so. (Kenny Werner)

The ultimate security we're looking for can only be found within.

Learn to love yourself.

A person who is not afraid to die knows how to live.

A person who is not afraid to fail succeeds.

A musician who is not afraid to sound terrible will sound great.

Aim to cultivate a quiet mind, a super-consciousness, a self-less state, the opposite of self-consciousness.

Finally, going right back to the beginning; Dispense with the notions of success or failure and just get on with it, music can and will become the joyous celebration of who you are, as you once dreamed it would.

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P.S.

A simple way to try meditation.

Sit comfortably, turn the phones off, set an alarm for 20 minutes time if you need to. Close your eyes.

Take some deep breaths with one hand on your stomach, feeling the air filling your lungs from the bottom up.

Go through every part of your body bit by bit, relaxing your muscles and releasing tension. Don't forget your face muscles, tummy muscles, shoulders, feet...

Then just BE, drift, chill, watch thoughts come and go like clouds passing across the sky but don't pay any attention to them, send them scurrying off.

When you finally open your eyes, take some more deep breaths, smile to yourself, just sit for a minute and remind yourself that life is great and the world is beautiful.

Sources and inspiration.

Kenny Werner "Effortless Mastery" (book and cd)