

Performance Anxiety

by Daniel Sturm

The good news about the subject of performance anxiety is that each of us suffers from this malady in one form or another.

What adds fuel to the fire though is that there are many reasons for becoming anxious before or during a musical performance. Yet, no matter the reason, the symptoms are always the same: a sensation of fear comes to us that ranges from mild fear to grave fear, and some performance disaster occurs.

I am not a physician or psychologist, yet I am able to offer many years of performance, teaching, and observational experience regarding performance anxiety. I want to stress that a two-page article is not going to be the cure-all for this most unwelcome affair, but it can serve as a stepping-stone to a more relaxed performance situation.

Let's begin in the thick of the matter where a guitarist experiences the worst: Everything is wrong. Nothing or very little can be remembered. The performance nose-dives to a fiery crash, or the piece is played from beginning to end with little resemblance to what the composer wrote. This is a horrible point of arrival for someone who has worked so hard on mastering a piece of music. However, it can be a good point of arrival when the performance occurs under a different guise. I'll return to that "good point of arrival" soon, but before I do let's look at fear.

Performance fear is an overwhelming experience because, more often than not, we are rendered unable to predict any part of the near future, be that future a few seconds ahead in time or several minutes ahead in time. Nothing seems to make the situation better because we have absolutely no idea of what is going on. The best remedy then would be to not get in this particular situation.

Become used to the habit of playing your pieces before an audience.

What if we turn the tables on fate and have our performance anxiety occur in a controlled situation, such as at an MGS OpenStage event, playing for a few trusted friends, or simply videotaping ourselves performing pieces that make us anxious? Odd as it sounds, it would be a wonderful learning experience to crash a musical performance in front of trusted friends and colleagues. One could immediately record what went wrong or one could receive guidance from other players. Then the piece could be performed once again, and again so that the guitarist can begin to feel "I have been here before. I crash-landed a piece of music, yet no one hates me, and no one died. In the future, if this happens again, I will have been there before, and just maybe this knowledge will permit me to land the piece safely."

Learn to listen and begin to stop the *fear* thoughts.

While we spend countless hours perfecting a piece of music by practicing the most difficult parts, very often we forget the importance of rehearsing the opening notes of a work. What goes on in your mind the instant before you begin to play a public performance?

Take a piece of music you have been working on, sit and tune, get in a ready position by checking both the right and the left hand, then stop, and with either eyes open or closed "hear" the very first sound that will soon occur. Now breathe in, then as you exhale play that sound, whether it be just a note, a chord, or a few notes—

nothing more than that, then stop. Wait. Stand up, walk slowly around the chair, sit, and repeat the above ten times.

Are you able to consistently produce a very beautiful opening and are you consistent, each time, in sound, tone, and musicality, ten times out of ten times? If you can't then your new bit of homework is to work toward ten out of ten times, in the practice room, each time producing a beautiful sound, tone, and achieving a musically consistent phrasing, and the ability to maintain tempo. Later, up the ante to fifteen out of fifteen times.

When you have found success there move on to the next small bit of music and apply the ten out of ten rule. (Standing and walking around your playing chair is only needed for the very opening bit of the piece.) Ultimately you will have a patchwork quilt, so to speak, and in time you will most likely be able to perform any selected measure of the work quite well. The next task would be to play the piece through, yet play as though you were walking through a museum and enjoying separate lovely works of art. You will quickly begin to stop thinking about the audience, stop thinking "terrible" thoughts, and you'll find yourself mostly thinking of nothing at all yet feeling very lucky to be only the person in the room that gets to hold such a lovely wooden box that is producing such enchanting vibrations, timbres, and tones.

Fear breeds very strange thoughts.

Often fear goads us into thinking such things as, "They think I am a terrible guitarist..." or, "Why did I ever program this piece..." or worse yet, "Who am I kidding?" The worst part of this situation is that the performer has made themselves the single most important person in the room by their own choosing, and this is not a good ego dynamic to be a part of. It is a selfish choice we have all, at some performance time, decided to make.

Take a mundane situation: Have you ever felt nervous or anxious purchasing a jug of milk at the grocery store? Most likely you have not—because you weren't in competition with anyone. You didn't make yourself to be the most important person in the store.

I mentioned feeling "very lucky to be only the person in the room that gets to hold such a lovely wooden box..." At a performance everyone in the room is there to share in their own particular way. Some are there to listen to what will be a very enjoyable performance, some are there to learn and enjoy, all are there sharing a common sense of community, and one is there to hold the guitar for everyone. The next time you go on stage think of the experience as being around a cozy campfire that belongs to everyone.

What have we come to know about a piece of music?

Motor memory allows us, at any given moment, to slam out a chord, some notes, or a splendid little riff. It's good to have this ability, but in fear-based mode even the simplest of musical passages can be forgotten.

Visual motor memory is nearly the same as the above, except here our eyes also help us, yet failure may also occur here in a fear-based mode.

A consistent right- and left-hand fingering, developed in the practice room, aided by motor memory, is a most welcome backup

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when we get nervous. In fact, when a passage is flubbed in live performance, nine times out of ten it is because we have never learned one and only one fingering for that passage. In the case of the right hand, we most likely have unknowingly learned at least two different fingerings for any given passage, or worse yet we may have, again unknowingly, learned to repeat a finger where finger alternation would be the common sense rule. In the case of the left hand, we may have been so busy watching the right hand that we are not even aware of left hand fingering consistency.

Always knowing where you are on the fret board.

Take the first octave of, say, Segovia's fingering for the C Major scale. Sit and tune, get in a ready position by checking both the right and the left hand, then stop, and while looking up to the ceiling "hear" and "see" that very first octave being played by you. Wait. Relax. Breathe in, then, as you exhale, play, in a slow tempo, that first octave while looking up to the ceiling. Repeat this exercise, but now look to the wall on your left, and another time while looking at the wall to your right, or another time looking straight ahead of you. Can you now do the same with the complete two-octave scale, up and back down?

Eventually you will want to do this with fragments of the pieces you already know and the ones you are learning. The point is not to do this in performance, for now it is a feat to be accomplished only in the practice room, so that one day during a live performance your eyes can dreamily watch the fingers of the one "very lucky to be only the person in the room that gets to hold such a lovely wooden box..." Relax. In your study you have properly learned the correct right hand and left hand fingerings and you have taught yourself to navigate the fret board with a "third eye," your mind.

Using a safety net by flagging certain measures.

Go through a piece that you are currently learning or one you intend to play in public in the future (far enough ahead in the future for this project to be learned). Using Post-It Notes, Post-It flags, or whatever, place a "flag" about every 15 to 20 measures. If the piece is complex and in running-sixteenth notes, you may want to "flag" by smaller sections, say, every 5 to 10 measures.

Now memorize these "flagged" areas. Your goal, over the period of one week, will be to be able to "begin" the piece from any of these "flag" points. You could number or name these "flagged" areas, write those names/numbers on small pieces of paper, toss them into a bag, chose one, then begin playing the piece from that "flag" point to the end. Learn the piece this way now, rather than learning this memory device on stage in real time.

A common mistake some performers make is that of repeating and replaying a "botched" measure, or section, several times during a live performance. Repeating the "botched" figure seems to make sense to us, on stage, because we possibly have not dealt with this issue while in the practice room.

Now that we are safe in our own personal practice area and we have no fear, let us look at the issue of mishandled passages during a future live performance. First, let's change our attitude, opinion, and belief about "wrong notes." Let's rename those spots something less venomous, such as, mishandled passages or mismanaged passages. You don't have to tell a soul about this if you feel you are being prudishly politically correct, yet I don't feel it that way at all.

The American guitar virtuoso Benjamin Verdery, at the 2008 Suzuki National Conference, gave a one-hour talk on, "I played a wrong note—now everyone hates me." He opened the talk by asking, "What's the problem with wrong notes? I think we're being too hard on them." He made a very strong case and well demonstrated the negativity we put upon ourselves when we say, "I completely blew that passage."

Sure, everyone desires to play a flawless performance; however, most likely, it won't happen now. But, to get to the point of playing extremely well in public, do not negatively judge the "wrong" notes you play. Make note of them and work on them as soon as possible. Feel good about what you played well.

Today learn to let "wrong notes" go by when test-running a piece of music. Immediately withdraw any negative thoughts you may have when "wrong notes" occur. Fix those notes during the proper practicing moment, and know that no one is going to die because of the way you play. Learn to know exactly how you play "at this moment in time" and walk out on stage with that knowledge. If you can do this, then one day you will find yourself in a live performance thinking only about "how fun it is to play this piece" and I am "very lucky to be only the person in the room that gets to hold such a lovely wooden box..." Relax.

Choose a program of pieces you play well in public and perform it at OpenStage, in church, at your community center, or for relatives, and play that program often.

Thoroughly knowing a piece of music.

Put your guitar in its case, set all your sheet music aside, take out a blank sheet of staff paper and get a pencil. Take, for example, one of your old warhorse pieces, one you can always play, and see how much of it you can write out from memory. Include right and left hand fingerings—even include string and position numbers. If you can do that move up the scale of difficulty until you can accurately write out fragments, especially problem areas, of pieces you are working on.

No one has the time for writing out every note, fingering, string number, etc., for every piece they know or are working on, and that is not the point. The point is to be able to write out any given measure of a piece you play or are learning.

Be there yourself.

Unless a physician has recommended that you need medication for your nerves never take anything, such as beta blockers or similar medications that slow pulse, blood pressure, or heartbeat. While it may seem logical to take such medication, one risks the problem of "becoming the most important one in the room," and that means risking a loss of the calm we have been so patiently training ourselves to achieve.

Come to view live musical performance as a true gift, for indeed a true gift it is. Think of all the people you personally know and how many of them cannot or do not play a musical instrument. Consider yourself honored to be the one "very lucky to be only the person in the room that gets to hold such a lovely wooden box that is producing such enchanting vibrations, timbres, and tones."

EXTRA: Do a Goggle search for "music performance anxiety" and "free online music paper."

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