

IS IT ALL IN THE MIND? MUSIC PERFORMANCE ANXIETY AND THE INTERRELATION BETWEEN THE PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS

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ABSTRACT

The article below explores several factors that contribute to music performance anxiety (MPA) such as fear of mistakes, high expectations, evaluation and perfectionism. Moreover, the study aims to explore the symptoms of music performance anxiety, what category of age they apply to, as well as the level of training. Brain developmental stages in children and the psychosocial development theories by Piaget and Erikson are a significant discovery in psychology which explicates how they influence the overall life experience for children and adults alike. Furthermore, the personal experience of the great performers such as Menuhin and Havas is an invaluable resource in transmitting their methods of coping with MPA. Finally, thoughts for educators with practical implications are presented.

Keywords:

Music; Performance anxiety; Brain developmental stages; Psychosocial development; Piaget; Erikson and Havas.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages, the topic of fear fascinated the common man and great thinkers, philosophers and psychologists alike. Great minds such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Freud and Jung studied and endeavored to understand fear. The last decades brought forth great discoveries and new understandings regarding the mind and the human brain. The evolution of psychology alongside the advancements achieved in the field of the brain scanning technologies help paint a clearer picture of how the brain operates and what are the functions of its different areas.

In terms of human psychology, Freud was the first to make a clear distinction between fear (German "Furcht"), fright ("Schreck") and anxiety ("Angst") (Freud, 1920). Although, the general term used in music performance is stage-fright, G. Gabbard (1979) states this is a misnomer. He makes references to the distinction underlined by

Freud and points out that fear, fright and anxiety have different definitions in the context of the different triggers. Consequently and in accordance to the psychological research conducted in the field of music performance, the accurate terminology is “anxiety” or “music performance anxiety” (MPA). This conclusion leads to the following question: “What is music performance anxiety”?

MUSIC PERFORMANCE ANXIETY: DEFINITION

MPA is understood as being “the experience of persisting, distressful apprehension and/or actual impairment of, performance skills in a public context, to a degree unwarranted given the individual’s musical aptitude, training and level of preparation” (Salmon, 1990, p. 3). From a performer’s perspective, MPA is a disheartening experience which can significantly diminish the interpretative quality of the performance and the positive emotional engagement. Furthermore, this “impairment” can affect not only the performer but the listeners. This is significant in the context of a public performance where the performer and listeners complete each other’s musical experience.

OCCURENCE OF MPA

Available research in the field reveals a very high prevalence of MPA among musicians (Fishbein et al., 1988; Wesner et al., 1990; van Kemenade et al., 1995; Yoshie et al., 2011). A self-reported study examined the similarities found in sport, written tests and music in nine-to fourteen-years old (Simon & Martens, 1979), and anxiety performance was at its highest in music. Although MPA is widespread among adult musicians, similar physical and psychological symptoms were found in children in a piece of research about twelve-year old pianists (Ryan, 1998). As awareness of and interests in MPA increases, surveys indicated that MPA is present in all ages, from beginner students to experienced professional musicians (Kemenade et al., 1995; Yoshie et al., 2011; Kaspersen&Gotestam 2002; Fehm& Schmidt, 2006; Papageorgi, Hallam & Welch, 2007; Kenny & Osbourne, 2006; Osborne, Kenny & Cooksey, 2007). Additionally, studies have shown that the first occurrence of MPA could take place with the first public performance among children as young as three years old, increasing through adolescence, and decreasing into adulthood (Boucher & Ryan, 2011; Maroon, 2002).

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON MPA

When observing MPA, brain developmental stages in young children as well as parenting methods should be taken into consideration as both have significant impact on the levels of MPA by improving or exacerbating the symptoms and the effects (McPherson et al., 2012; Givertz&Segrin, 2014). The art of music as well as dance and theatre alike, integrate the performer and performance in an intimate relationship. The

music performer develops over time the ability to make the interpretation, technique, physical movement and the emotional expression inseparable from the composition itself. However, MPA with its debilitating effects makes the journey of achieving this goal significantly difficult.

BRAIN DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES AND THE PIAGET-ERIKSON CONNECTION

When coaching young musicians, it is essential to be aware of the brain development stages at which they are at the given time, in order to assess their overall evolution and to alleviate MPA.

Piaget's cognitive developmental stages in children theory, emphasizes how their knowledge evolves and improves related to a specific stage (Piaget, 1964). This theory proposes four stages of cognitive development: (1) the sensorimotor stage, from birth to age two, (2) the preoperational stage, from age two to seven years old, (3) the concrete operational stage, from age seven until eleven, (4) the formal operational stage, from eleven years old and up. For a music coach it is vitally important to employ from the first lesson methods that attend to the brain developmental stage of the student. Equally important is to accommodate the psychological facets of a performance by making use of educational psychology.

Moreover, in tandem, the work of Erikson on psychosocial development contributes to the frame of human evolution (Erikson, 1950). This particular theory presents one's personality development throughout their life as divided into eight distinct stages. Stages four and five which Erikson referred to as *Industry vs. Inferiority and Identity vs. Role confusion*, are particularly important when discussing MPA, as they demonstrate how concepts like self-esteem are affecting the child's personality. Stage four begins at six years old- the time when children enter school and learn the appropriate norms in a classroom. In this setting children seek out approval from their teacher and peers. Self-esteem is now directly proportioned with the success they achieve in the form of grades, social intelligence within the classroom and obedience to the rules. Stage five which starts at thirteen years old is the "critical period" according to Erikson (Erikson, 1950). This stage brings forward all the complexities of puberty and self-esteem is in great decline for most adolescents, but mostly for female adolescents. Consequently, research shows that female performers present higher levels of MPA symptoms as opposed to males (Dobos et al., 2019; Iusca&Dafinoiu, 2012). Thus, the overall MPA experience will vary, depending on the brain and personality development stage at which the music performers find themselves.

ADAPTIVE VS. MALADAPTIVE MPA

It is generally accepted in the field of music performance that is impossible to eradicate the anxiety that comes with it. Music is the form of art which, by excellence, makes use

of the performers' and the listeners' emotional palettes. Greatest performers of the past decades such as Rubinstein, Heifetz, Pavarotti, Casals, Bocelli, to name just a few, were tormented by music performance anxiety (McGinnis & Mililng, 2005; Salmon, 1990). Researchers name the psychological effects of MPA as both positive and negative (Sarikaya&Kurtaslan 2018; Spahn et al., 2021). The most frequent symptoms manifest themselves at physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral levels. The severity varies from mild nervousness to debilitating anxiety. However, depending on at what stage the performance is, the symptoms differ. For instance, from the moment a performance is scheduled for a public appearance, MPA manifests as cognitive and emotional symptoms such as fear of failure, self-doubt, over thinking, catastrophic thinking, low self-esteem, irritability. During the days close to the performance the behavioral symptoms that appear are social withdrawal, eye contact avoidance, and substance abuse. In children the MPA symptoms can involve crying or refusing to perform, complaining of stomach aches, and acting overly perfectionistic. On performance day, the physical symptoms of MPA are at their highest, and can include high heart rate, shortness of breath, sweating, trembling, muscle tension, dry mouth, gastrointestinal discomfort, dizziness (Kenny, D. T., Driscoll, T.R. & Akermann, B. 2014, 2016). The main difference between children and adults who perform better and those who succumb to MPA, is the ability to channel the symptoms towards a more focused attitude, to engage at a higher emotional level than usual, and embrace the challenge as an opportunity to improve the performance. According to research, these are identified as positive symptoms of adaptive MPA (Guyon et al., 2020). Music coaches can normalize MPA to children and help them adapt to it. By making use of students' centered pedagogy, early exposure to public performances, eliminating as much as possible the evaluative factors, coach in concordance with the developmental stage, and impart coping techniques, a teacher can guide a performer toward overcoming MPA. Additionally, the fear of making mistakes is by far the most widespread negative MPA factor with the focus on imperfections/ perfectionism (Damian et al., 2017; Patson& Osbourne, 2016; Stoeber&Eismann, 2007). Perfectionism can occur due to the fact that precision is an important aspect of music. Furthermore, unrealistic high standards can be the cause for focusing on mistakes. All things considered, maladaptive MPA is considered to be a strong factor in dismissing musical careers.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore and present the experiences of young music students dealing with MPA from their different perspectives and contexts. A semi-structured interview format was used, with open-

ended questions to provide rich, in-depth descriptions of their experiences. Codes derived based on the data and clear themes surfaced. (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

The participants for the case study are five music students, four females and one male, of ages varying from nine to sixteen years old. They are all studying classical music, and are part of the viola class where I currently teach at “Queen Mary Art School” in Alba-Iulia, Romania. They were contacted in person at their viola lessons and agreed to participate in the case study. The interview was a great opportunity for the participants to evaluate their level of MPA and to give a deeper thought to this important issue.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were asked to present parental consent and were ensured anonymity of the answers in order to protect the sensitive emotional content.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a one-on-one semi-structured interview. The interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes consisting of predetermined open-ended questions in the form of a verbal questionnaire. The questions were developed based on existing literature on MPA with the focus on the physical, mental and social aspects. (The full interview guide is available in the [Appendix](#).)

Results

Performance anxiety symptoms emerged as interplay of cognitive patterns, physiological reactions, and emotional responses, all triggered by the performer’s perception of threat. Predominantly negative thoughts and emotions characterized the experience, diminishing the performer’s self-confidence. Furthermore, the performer’s identity was shaped both by self-perception and by how they believed others perceived them. All participants reported feeling anxious before performances. For younger students, anxiety is still not a clear concept; however, they mainly manifested physical symptoms and “bad mood”.

- *“The day of the performance is like doomsday”* (participant number 1; 9 years old).
- *“I feel like everyone is watching for me to mess up”* (participant number 2; 14 years old).

Students frequently mentioned how teachers, parents, and peers influenced their confidence.

- *“My mom always claps loud. That helps”* (participant number 3; 12 years old).

While younger students relied more on external encouragement, older students began developing coping strategies, such as breathing techniques and self-talk.

- *“Before a recital, I imagine I’m just playing in my room.”* (participant number 4; 16 years old).
- *“I just pray a lot!”* (participant number 5; 16 years old).

A thematic analysis was conducted, and the coding process brought forth five overarching themes. The themes and their associated codes are summarized below.

Theme 1: Nature and Onset of MPA

Participants described their initial encounters with MPA, often tied to specific performances or social pressure. Most students reported becoming aware of their anxiety symptoms particularly when soloing or being evaluated.

Theme 2: Contextual Influences on Anxiety This theme captures the impact of the performance context. Audience composition played an important role, as well as playing for peers or judges, which intensified anxiety more than those for family members.

Theme 3: Psychological and Physical Responses to MPA The participants shared common physiological and emotional responses to performance situations. The symptoms were reported as having a notable impact on focus and control of the execution.

Theme 4: Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems Most students found informal strategies such as breathing, visualization, and meditating more accessible and none of the participants had experience with formal support.

Theme 5: Long-Term Impact of MPA This theme explores the evolving nature of MPA and its influence on musical development. Several participants expressed that coping with anxiety had contributed to personal and musical growth.

Reflections

Educators and parents must recognize the emotional complexity young musicians navigate through. Supporting musical identity formation and providing tools to manage anxiety can foster confidence, resilience, and a lasting relationship with music. Furthermore, the necessity of holistic and student-centered approach to music education that incorporates emotional wellbeing is a core component of performance training.

Limitations

The findings of the case study conducted on the five viola students are very valuable and offer deep insights into their specific lived experiences. Their personal symptoms of MPA align with the literature in the field and confirm the common problems professional musicians and music students have. However, due to the small number of participants these findings may not apply to all music students. A larger number of participants could bring forward more unique symptoms.

COPING TECHNIQUES

The solid foundation of a very good performance is undoubtedly the extensive and thorough preparation that takes place prior the event. However, the present work exhibits the presence of MPA with its dual outcome as an undeniable partner of the performer. As a consequence, the technical aspects and the coping mechanisms for MPA should be inextricably intertwined in the daily preparation. Because precision is very important in music performance, the majority of time and effort spent in practice hours are mainly focusing on the music score itself, rather than constantly integrating a “performance like attitude”. Great performers, who themselves suffered from MPA, give us their empirical observations for better performing under pressure (Havas, 1973; Menuhin, 1976). Developing behaviors which promote the overall wellbeing of the performer such as: breathing, meditating, prayer, mindfulness, yoga, Zen, physical exercises, positive affirmations, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), relaxation, posture techniques, performing for family and peers prior to the public performance, are the most common recommendations.

Furthermore, Havas (1973) and Menuhin (1976) emphasize focusing on the body and its tension release as a means of overcoming MPA in relation to violin playing or any other musical instrument. Menuhin advocates for using the body as a whole as well for coordinating the movement and balance. He makes an extensive presentation and clarifies the role of each body part together with its role and function. He finds that the most common problem is the tightness of hold, be it in the arms, fingers, neck, head or any other part of the body; this issue coincides with one of the physical symptoms of MPA. In his opinion this could derive from “dietary deficiencies, bad posture, and poor circulation, over eating, stress, fear, tension and bad violonistic habits” (Menuhin, 1976). In addition, Havas’ own experience with “Stage fright” (Havas, 1973), distinguish her by others due to her approach to physical self-confidence.

Related to sport and dancing, physical self-confidence is the ingredient that is most commonly overlooked. In the quest to understand how our own body functions and responds, Havas came to the conclusion that the release of the physical tension leads to the release of mental tension. Havas’ approach of stage fright is unique in the way she exhibits some specific fears in violin playing. She identifies these fears as being physical: the fear of dropping the violin, the fear of the trembling bowing arm, the fear of being out of tune, and the fear of high positions and shifts. The mental fears are: the fear of not being loud enough, the fear of not being fast enough, and the fear of memory lapse. The social fear is the fear of not being good enough. Equally important to the mental and physical aspect of MPA is the social aspect.

Moreover, Havas exposes a system of examinations, auditions and competitions that is implemented in the music performing field which aggravates

greatly MPA due to its evaluative factor and focuses on technical accomplishments rather than artistic creativity. Next, she suggests a change of attitude and mentality rather than the change of the system. In her opinion, in order to eliminate social fear, the teacher-pupil relationship should be eliminated. In exchange the goal is to build a partnership between the two, and to empower the student with critical thinking and control. She then further presents the interrelation between the physical, mental and social aspects of stage fright and insists on the strong body-mind connection. She clarifies the causes and provides solutions. The end result through a systematic method is a “feeling of freedom and confidence” (Havas, 1973).

CONCLUSIONS AND THOUGHTS FOR MUSIC EDUCATORS

Taking a close look at the training of the performers in the specialized music schools, we observe that the curriculums are not complete. They lack courses such as emotion regulation, imaginative, suggestion and altered states, interpersonal relations, time management, physical functioning and sensing. This leads to a heavy load and much responsibility for the teacher to play the “orchestra man” in order to fill in the gaps and provide the support for the becoming performing artist. In order to alleviate the symptoms of MPA, the teacher can implement a system of keeping track of the level and intensity of the symptoms and the frequency of occurrence. This could materialize in a chart based on the questions in the case study presented here. The chart would be for weekly/monthly use of the teacher and the student to be able to follow the evolution of the symptoms. This would ensure a more efficient way of complementing the musical training with the mental training. In addition, with the access to the abundance of information via internet, master-classes, books, training courses in regard to the psychological aspects, spiritual practices, the teacher can find the so much needed resources to pass on to the student.

Sourcing information from books such as: “Learn Better, Perform Better”, “The Inner Game of Music”, “Performance Success”, and “A Soprano on her head”, and use the methods for overcoming these universal psychological barriers comprised in such books could be a transformative way of integrating the mental aspects into a performance. Lastly, another method that teachers can make use of during the school year is to create as many public performance opportunities as possible, in order to ensure a frequent exposure of the student to the stressful situations. Furthermore, the teacher himself should consider completing his teaching formation through additional courses in psychology, physiology and others. Music performance anxiety is the component of the performance that if controlled and channeled towards the positive aspects with techniques and methods can be embraced as a normal behavior.

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Appendix

Full Interview Guide

The following questions were used as part of the semi-structured interviews. All questions were asked verbatim; follow-up and probing questions were used as necessary to encourage elaboration. The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed the interviews to flow naturally while covering core topics.

Section 1: Experience of Anxiety

Can you describe your experience with music performance anxiety?

When did you first become aware of this anxiety?

Section 2: Triggers and Situational Context

Are there specific performance types or settings that intensify your anxiety?

How does the type of audience (e.g., peers, judges, public) influence your anxiety?

Section 3: Symptoms and Impacts

What physical or emotional symptoms do you experience before or during performances?

In what ways does anxiety affect your preparation, focus, or execution during performance?

Section 4: Cultural and Social Influences

How do you think cultural or educational background influences your experience with performance anxiety?

Do you feel supported by your teachers, peers, or family in dealing with anxiety?

Section 5: Coping and Support

What strategies have you used to manage or reduce your performance anxiety?

Have you sought formal support (e.g., therapy, performance coaching)? Was it helpful?

Section 6: Long-Term Perspective

Has your anxiety changed over time? If so, how?

Has your experience with anxiety influenced your long-term musical goals or motivation?

Section 7: Personal Insight

Has anxiety impacted your identity as a musician?

Do you think this experience has taught you something valuable?