

COPING MECHANISMS FOR PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IN COLLEGE MUSIC
STUDENTS

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MUSED 496 B: Psychology of Music Performance

March 13, 2017

Numerous musicians of all ability levels suffer from music performance anxiety (MPA). This type of anxiety can be caused from fear of failure, audience presence, audience opinion, stress, and more. Stephenson & Quarrier (2005) argued that, “At the undergraduate level, students in a college school of music face many challenges and continual public assessments of their abilities” (p 119). Performances could be, large or small ensembles, solo juries, ensemble auditions, or recitals. Students could experience music performance anxiety during any of these performance situations but we do not know if they can cope with it. Another major issue is whether professors, college administration, or even studio teachers know how to teach coping mechanisms to assist their students with music performance anxiety.

As a student who has suffered from MPA I found it difficult to cope with solo performances in college. My private horn instructor never discussed ways in which I could cope or deal with my anxiety. MPA is not a topic that educators discuss, that is why it is important to identify ways in which professors, college administrators, and studio teachers can incorporate strategies to cope with music performance anxiety. First, I will identify mind body wellness coping mechanisms such as, breathing activities, meditation, and yoga. I will present findings and recommendations in current research regarding methods in which college educators can incorporate these coping mechanisms into their everyday teaching. Researchers have shown, mind body wellness coping mechanisms can manage and prevent music performance anxiety when students have the opportunity to be exposed to it.

The objective is to assist our students with ways to cope with music performance anxiety on their own. “The main goal of interventions of music students during their university studies should be to improve performance quality” (Spahn, Walther & Nusseck, 2016, p. 893). Learning how to cope with performance anxiety will ultimately help the performer focus and channel their

anxiety into a positive experience and reduce anxiety before and even during their performances. As educators we need to focus on ways to reduce any factors that may impede on our students' overall success.

PRIVATE LESSON STRUCTURE:

Private music lessons can be structured in a variety of ways. There are many similarities between all of them. Lessons usually consist of warm up and technique exercises, prepared excerpts, prepared solos, and sight-reading. All the elements listed focus on teaching the technical elements of performing their instruments. There are also other physical and mental elements that as educators we need to address. Most importantly, we need to focus on the mental state in which our students enter into performance. Performance anxiety can affect our students both physically and cognitively. Performance anxiety can be seen as shaking or stiffness or it can be symptoms our students go through psychologically that can get in the way of their performance (Zakaria, Musib, & Shariff, 2013).

As educators we need think back and remember if our students have ever seemed tense or nervous in our lessons. We also need to reflect upon if we ever addressed this issue with our students. There are a few different ways that we can address and help our students cope with MPA. Researchers have shown that there are ways for us to help our students. Our role as educators is to provide real world experience, but in a positive and encouraging light (Riley, 2012). It is important to take the time to identify the issue (Riley, 2012), weigh our options, and create ways to incorporate the coping mechanisms into our lessons so that we can help our students have the best possible performance they could have.

BREATHING TECHNIQUES:

Breathing exercises is the easiest and cheapest way that we can assist our students with MPA. Su, Luh, Chen, Lin, Lio, & Chen (2010) conducted a study using breathing techniques to relax and reduce MPA in 3rd and 6th graders. They used relaxed breathing training (RBT), to reduce MPA. RBT uses deep abdominal breathing to support the students to relax by inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth (p. 83). The music students involved in this program started RBT two times a week for a total of two months before their performance examinations. A total of four tests were given to examine the success of the program. These tests were given, two months, one month, half an hour, and five minutes prior to the examination (p. 82). Their results showed that using RBT five to ten minutes prior to the performance, significantly reduced MPA in the students more than using RBT a half hour prior to the exam. The researchers showed that educators should consider RBT as a treatment for their students that have MPA (Su et al., 2010).

Wells, Outhred, Heathers, Quintana, & Kemp (2012) conducted a study to assess how slow breathing can affect anxiety and heart rate variability in musicians, using the heart rate variability biofeedback (HRV BF). HRV BF is a slow breathing exercise that focuses the individual on taking only six breaths per minute to help calm the psychological activity in their brain that may cause stress or anxiety. The training was ten-weeks long, with at-home practice, that focused on abdominal breathing. The researchers created three groups of participants, the HRV BF group (feedback), breathing group (no feedback), and a control group. The individuals were given musical tasks to complete, sight-sing a short passage and sight-reading on their instrument with accompaniment. Each participant was video taped and led to believe his or her taped performance was to be used as part of the assessment (Well et al., 2012).

Participants were screened prior to the exam. The three testing phases of the study were completed in separate rooms: anticipation phase, performance phase, and intervention phase. After the testing phase was complete, participants moved to the intervention phase where participants were either given HRV BF instructions with feedback, given breathing instructions with no feedback, or the control group, which was given nothing to do but to read. The results were assessed by a series of breathing tests and the state-trait anxiety inventory. They found that those who were given HRV BF and just HRV had reduced feelings of MPA, regardless of the feedback (Wells et al, 2012).

Both of these research articles present breathing activities that can easily lower MPA. Breathing activities are simple and cheap, so they can be easily incorporated into every lesson. All breathing activities need, is to be focused. This allows our students' bodies to relax and for their minds to stop racing. Taking their mind off the situation or clearing their heads' is the best way to relax our students with MPA. We can incorporate and practice this in our lessons by including these breathing exercises before students perform or when they seem nervous. With the addition of simple breathing exercises, we are teaching our students to focus and get in the right mindset for their performance.

MEDITATION TECHNIQUES:

Meditation is used to incorporate balance and relaxation so that the performer is free of tension and can focus on the task at hand (Chang, Midlarsky, & Lin, 2003). The goal of meditation is to create a sense of calmness and stability, by counting your breath in order to settle your mind. Meditation can provide, "... an optimal balance between relaxation and tension, wherein muscles not required for the task at hand are at rest, with others poised for action"

(Chang, Midlarsky, & Lin, 2003, p. 126). Learning how to meditate will help focus on mind body wellness. You can learn how to meditate with the assistance of an instructor or you can learn about it on your own by watching simple instructional videos or reading instructional books.

Chang, Midlarsky, and Lin (2003) conducted a study on the effect of meditation on music performance anxiety in college students. The students in the experimental group received eight weeks of meditation classes, while the control group was offered meditation classes after the experimental group received their classes. Both groups were asked to complete the Confidential Personal Information Questionnaire and the Performance Anxiety Inventory (PAI). In between the two eight-week sections, both groups of students participated in a solo concert performance that was open to the public. Announcement of the dates were posted two weeks prior to the concert and each participant performed a five to ten minute solo. All participants completed both pre-test and post-test assessments. They found that the students, who were involved in the meditation program, had reduced performance anxiety and were able to feel relaxation, as opposed to those who did not get to benefit from meditation. The overall results of their study showed that meditation should be considered as a means of reducing and coping with MPA (Chang et al., 2003).

In a similar study, Lin, Chang, Zemon, and Midlarsky (2008), conducted a study based on Chan meditation and its affects on MPA and performance quality. “Chan meditation is a disciplined practice that cultivates concentration and mindfulness” (p. 140). There were three means of measurement used in this study: State Anxiety Inventory (SAI), Performance Anxiety Inventory (PAI), and Music Performance Quality Rating Form (MPQ). The researchers randomly assigned students to either, an eight-week meditation program or to a waitlist group,

which did not receive any meditation prior to their solo performance. After the eight-week meditation classes were complete, all participants, regardless of their group assignment, had to perform on the solo concert that was open to the public. Following the performance each participant completed the SAI and PAI surveys. The waitlist group had poor performances and higher performance anxiety, while those in the meditation group still had performance anxiety but they had better concentration and higher levels of performance. They found that Chan meditation did not increase performance quality but it did decrease performance anxiety so that students had greater focus at the task at hand and could enjoy their performance more (Lin et al., 2008).

Meditation is another form of relaxation and breathing technique that can be used in our lessons to reduce MPA. Although it may be better to learn from a trained instructor, there are also short instructional videos that will teach you the beginnings of mindful meditation. We as educators can take five minutes out of our lessons to teach our students what meditation is and how it can help in relaxation and mindfulness of their bodies. Long term, this will help our students be self-sufficient in their preparations for their performances so that they may cope with their anxiety on their own.

YOGA TECHNIQUES:

Yoga is the last form of intervention that can be used to help our students cope with MPA. “Yoga, a holistic mind-body practice, is ideal for preventing or counteracting the psychological and physical stressors that professional musicians face” (Khalsa, Butzer, Shorter, Reinhardt, & Cope, 2013, pg. 35). It is another practice that focuses on breathing, with stretches and strength activities. It is considered “meditation in motion” (Khalsa et al., 2013, pg. 36).

Yoga is not a fast fix but a course of study that students can do on their own outside of lessons and it can be used towards long-term results in coping with MPA.

Stern, Khalsa, and Hofmann (2012) conducted a study that tested a yoga intervention program to assist conservatory students with MPA. This was a pilot study used to examine the effects of a nine-week long yoga intervention program. Pre and post-tests were administered to assess where the participants' MPA levels began and where they were at the end of the nine weeks. The researchers showed that yoga can reduce performance anxiety in addition to trait anxiety. A decrease in trait anxiety leads us to believe, that with continued yoga practice, general proneness to anxiety may be decreased. All the participants were sent a survey a year after the study was complete. The responses to this survey were all positive and some were even so satisfied with the results that they continued yoga practice after the study was complete (Stern et al., 2012).

Khalsa, Butzer, Shorter, Reinhardt, and Cope (2013) conducted a study focused on reducing performance anxiety in adolescent musicians through a six-week long yoga program. The musicians were broken up into two groups, the control group (no yoga), and the intervention group (yoga program). The participants involved were given a series of questionnaires to measure their levels of performance anxiety: State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, and Performance Related Musculoskeletal Disorders Questionnaire. The questionnaires were given to each participant in both groups prior to the start of the yoga program and towards then end of the yoga program. The questionnaires were compared between the intervention group and control group to see how the levels of MPA were affected. The researchers showed that the levels of MPA were lowered for those participants in the intervention group (yoga group). Overall, the

researchers showed the yoga program would be an affective way to reduce MPA in adolescent students.

Yoga may be difficult to include in our lessons but a program can be instituted to promote mind body wellness not just for our students but also for all the students at our schools. The researchers have shown that there are many positive short-term and long-term benefits of yoga. Not only is yoga relaxing but it can also be a great exercise to improve posture, breathing, and focus as well. There are however, some aspects of yoga that can be incorporated and should be instituted in our lessons such as, the breathing techniques, yoga postures, and meditation.

WHAT CAN WE DO:

What does all of this research have in common? All three focus on our mind body wellness, of breathing properly, having a relaxed approach to our playing, and having a focus to dedicate to the task at hand. As educators, we need to take the time to decide which one of these techniques we can appropriately fit into our lessons. It is vital to dedicate time in our lessons to teach our students how to relax and focus. We can do this by implementing some simple breathing techniques prior to rehearsing or running long excerpts. This will train our students to have a focused mind before any length of performance. We could also assist our students by decreasing their anxiety rather than adding to it. Changing the way in which we talk to our students in lessons could also add to an encouraging and stress free environment (Riley, 2012). We could even incorporate light stretching before performing so that our students could assess where they may be holding tension in their bodies (Riley, 2012).

Currently, there is no research on studio teachers teaching mind body wellness on an individual level to their students. However, researchers have shown that mind body wellness

coping mechanisms can manage and prevent music performance anxiety when students had the opportunity to be exposed to it in groups. By incorporating these programs into our students' lessons we are promoting success. Our students rely on us to create a well-balanced education to put them in the best mindset to have a successful performance. Teaching our students how to cope with MPA is a part of their education. "Ultimately, good performance quality is the goal of every musician, and performance anxiety is an obstacle one needs to overcome" (Lin, et. Al., 2008, p. 141).

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