

A Brief Discussion on Improving Stage Performance Quality for Music Major Students: Dealing with Performance Anxiety

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Keywords: Music performance; Performance anxiety; Anxiety effects; Anxiety

Abstract: This paper, through an analysis of relevant literature, explores the causes and effects of performance anxiety and proposes comprehensive coping strategies for performance anxiety in university music students. Performance anxiety in music primarily stems from the performer's perfectionist tendencies, negative self-suggestions, and insufficient personal performance skills. This anxiety not only affects the performer's psychological state but may also lead to physiological stress reactions, thereby impacting their technical execution and stage performance. Therefore, music major students need to avoid excessive perfectionism, recognize the imperfections of performance, and develop a belief in imperfect perfectionism. Secondly, building confidence is key to overcoming anxiety; students need to actively build confidence and acknowledge their efforts and time invested. Additionally, thorough preparation is essential; anxiety can be alleviated through repeated practice and simulated performances to gradually adapt to the performance environment. Through these analyses, it is hoped that the impact of anxiety on music major students' learning can be improved, promoting the healthy development of music performance art.

1. Introduction

Anxiety is a common psychological state triggered when individuals face stress, unfamiliar environments, or potential threats, and prolonged anxiety can become a psychological disorder. Gross and Hen (2004) define anxiety as a psychological state caused by the perception of threat or potential threat, typically accompanied by a series of physiological and behavioral reactions such as alertness, heightened arousal, and avoidance[1]. Salmon (1990) suggests that anxiety accompanies feelings of unease about present or future states, leading to corresponding behavioral manifestations that affect individuals' daily lives[2]. Symptoms of anxiety, as indicated by Zhao (2018), include trembling, sweating, palpitations, and accelerated heart rate, resulting in heightened emotional discomfort in individuals' lives[3].

Anxiety is classified into state anxiety and trait anxiety[4], analyzing different anxiety factors. State anxiety is described as a transient negative emotional state accompanying changes in time and mood, while trait anxiety refers to relatively stable, overall personality traits. Spielberger (1996)

views state anxiety as an observable response, a temporary state of unease induced by specific situations and stressors. Trait anxiety, also known as anxiety neurosis, primarily refers to inherent characteristics of an individual[5]. However, the occurrence of excessive state anxiety and trait anxiety phenomena can negatively impact individuals' decision-making, cognition, behavior, among others[6]. Leal, Goes, Da (2017), among others, suggest a positive correlation between state anxiety and interpersonal issues[7]. When state anxiety is triggered, individuals perceive uncertain information in the situation as negative stimuli, resulting in behaviors and responses detrimental to interpersonal communication quality [8]. High levels of trait anxiety have a significant negative impact on cognitive abilities[9], as individuals with high trait anxiety tend to react to external stimuli with negative cognition. In the research by Spielberger, Gorsuch (1983), trait anxiety is regarded as a tendency towards negative evaluation, even in routine situations, individuals with trait anxiety are still prone to tension and fear[10]. As Endler and Kocovski (2001) point out, individuals with high trait anxiety are more likely to perceive external environmental stimuli as threatening and crisis-ridden, thus exhibiting negative cognitive beliefs towards difficult challenges[11]. However, when anxiety issues persist, individuals constantly engage in negative anxious thoughts, making it difficult to focus attention, and the things they worry about may worsen and possibly become uncontrollable. Anxiety will increase with the potential to attract attention, the size of the audience, and the perceived threat value[12].

Performance anxiety mainly refers to the sustained sense of fear experienced during public performances[2]. Lazarus (2004) suggests that fear of public speaking is the most common form of performance anxiety, which can affect performance outcomes, and behavioral evaluations may reveal different underlying issues[13]. Lee (2002) proposes that performance anxiety typically occurs in anticipation of performances, with anxious thoughts arising in the performer's mind. That is, during the anticipation process, performers tend to anticipate the performance scene and its effects in advance. In this situation, performers may anticipate various factors leading to performance errors, thereby generating feelings of unease and experiencing performance anxiety[14]. Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) falls within the scope of performance anxiety, also referred to as "stage fright," "performance anxiety," and "stage panic." Kenny (2009) defines Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) as the significant and sustained anxiety experience related to music performance under specific anxiety-inducing conditions[15]. Salmon (1990) suggests that performance anxiety is a concern for sustained experiences, real performance skills in public settings, occurring in all aspects related to performance, especially triggering more frequently in performance situations with threatening evaluations, which can lead to a series of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional symptoms in performers[2]. Although music performance anxiety is sometimes seen as an occupational hazard, it is not limited to professional musicians; amateur enthusiasts and students may also be affected. Music, as an art form, undoubtedly possesses expressive power and emotional communication. However, when individuals prepare to showcase their skills to an audience, feelings of pressure and uncertainty arising from various factors can lead to anxiety.

For college students, the university stage is a critical period for personal development, where both mind and body are maturing, and various aspects such as self-emotional management and regulation are still in development[16]. Performance anxiety encountered by music majors becomes an object they frequently encounter in their professional studies, touching upon profound influences on personal artistic development, career paths, and psychological health[17] Given the pervasive impact of music performance anxiety on individuals, this paper aims to explore the causes, effects, and coping strategies for performance anxiety. Through a comprehensive review and analysis of relevant theories, recommendations are provided to music major students to enhance stage performance quality.

2. Factors Contributing to Performance Anxiety

There are various factors influencing performance anxiety, among which perfectionism tends to lead to high levels of music performance anxiety[18]. Liu (2022) suggests that music performers with perfectionist traits occupy a significant proportion in the severity of music performance anxiety. They hold excessively high and unrealistic expectations for themselves and others, causing potential impacts when reality deviates from their expectations. Therefore, there is a high correlation between perfectionism and performance anxiety[19]. According to Lv (2015), perfectionists possess an inherent impulsive trait, focusing on perfecting every detail of performance, which becomes contradictory when faced with the reality of performance, making it difficult for performers to meet their psychological expectations for performance outcomes[16]. Yondem (2007) analyzed music performance anxiety among performers with different personality trait types and found a significant correlation between instrumental students, professional musicians, and the dimension of perfectionism, further confirming the results that perfectionism is prone to generate anxiety[20].

Secondly, negative self-suggestions are also among the factors contributing to performance anxiety. Sun (2020) points out that fear, inferiority, and negative psychological suggestions about performance are significant factors leading to performance anxiety[21]. Shen, Cai (2007) mention that individuals with low self-esteem tend to depreciate their abilities, occupying a significant portion of their mental space with negative self-imaginings when facing the performance stage[22]. Negative self-conceptions of performers further trigger their fear of the stage, audience, and concern about performance outcomes[23]. Liu (2022) suggests that critical and negative self-evaluations lead to performance outcomes lower than one's abilities[19]. When students feel confused and anxious about the unknown outcome of their performance, they tend to hold negative affirmations about their abilities, which subsequently affect their behavior during performance [16].

Some studies also indicate that performers' technical skills are a primary source of performance anxiety. Lv (2015) states that proficiency in performance technique plays a crucial role in performance quality. Insufficient technical practice or lack of experience may not only lead to performance errors but also induce psychological anxiety[16]. Luo (2020) similarly suggests that the mastery of performance pieces contributes to stage performance anxiety[24]. Liu (2022) points out that the emergence of music performance anxiety is due to performers' inadequate ability to play certain musical passages. If performers are not adequately prepared before the performance, the probability of mistakes during performance increases, leading to feelings of frustration[19]. For college students, even after long hours of practice, they may still encounter technical difficulties that cannot be fully overcome. However, excessive pressure and anxiety exacerbate the potential threat of performance errors for students [25].

In addition to these internal factors, external factors such as unfamiliarity with the environment and past experiences also contribute to performance anxiety to varying degrees. Steptoe and Fidler (1987) demonstrate that as the frequency of performances increases, the level of anxiety decreases[26]. Conversely, performers who feel unfamiliar with the performance environment are more prone to performance anxiety[27]. Spielberg (1978) suggests that the probability of being afraid of performance is determined by the stimuli of the performance situation; past experiences will re-stimulate individual memories and directly influence performance[28]. Ryan (2009) found that experienced performers have lower levels of music performance anxiety and believes that experience is an important variable affecting performance anxiety, not just age differences[29].

3. Effects of Performance Anxiety

Moderate anxiety can promote individuals to cope with challenges. Albert Ellis and Windy Dryden (2007) suggests that there are many types of anxiety, including healthy anxiety and

unhealthy anxiety. Healthy anxiety, such as worry, vigilance, and caution, are normal symptoms that can help individuals achieve their goals to some extent[30]. Davison (2008) found that moderate pressure and anxiety before performances can enhance memory and learning abilities, driving performers to prepare more diligently for their performances[31]. In other words, moderate symptoms of anxiety can make performers value their performances more, approach them with a more focused attitude, and thus improve their actual performance level. Hamann (1982) suggests that moderate anxiety can physiologically activate individuals and produce positive effects by increasing alertness and concentration[32]. For experienced performers, moderate anxiety can facilitate smooth performances, help them better demonstrate their abilities during performances, and generate excitement and focus during the execution of performances [33].

Excessive anxiety, on the other hand, can have negative effects on individuals. Seng (2013) suggests that prolonged performance anxiety can lead to frequent mistakes, resulting in a paralyzing or fragile psychological state[34]. Zeidner (1998) proposed in his research on test anxiety that anxious test-takers are more likely to exhibit negative emotional responses when faced with evaluations or test situations[35]. Similarly, in music performances, anxious performers are more prone to negative emotional responses when facing the stage or other evaluative situations, which can lead to a vicious cycle. Performers often experience a tremendous invisible pressure due to negative emotional responses, which is detrimental to the smooth progress of music performances and may ruin an otherwise good performance. Ely (1991) mentions that string players tend to experience excessive tension in finger muscles before performances, especially in the left hand; woodwind players tend to have highly tense facial muscles and tongue areas; and singers often experience symptoms of stiff neck[36]. Furthermore, performance anxiety often occurs during performers' practice sessions, and imagining or simulating performances in front of the public can also pose threats or pressure, resulting in unstable rhythms, fingers, and limbs during practice sessions. Severe anxiety may force performers to exhibit characteristics of avoidance, such as deliberately lowering their voice volume during singing or directly avoiding practice to engage in other activities to seek psychological comfort[37].

4. Coping Strategies

In the field of music performance, anxiety is a prevalent issue, particularly for music majors, as performance anxiety can affect their performance levels and psychological well-being. This article discusses the causes and effects of music performance anxiety and proposes some coping strategies.

Firstly, perfectionist tendencies often accompany unrealistic pursuit of high standards and intense fear of making mistakes. To reduce performance anxiety, students need to distinguish between perfection and excellence, recognize the need to improve perfectionism into a belief in excellence, focus on the process rather than the outcome, reduce the fixation on achieving perfect results, and alleviate anxiety caused by unmet expectations. Additionally, music majors should set realistic goals, ensure that goals are realistic and achievable, break down goals into detailed and executable plans to accomplish them gradually, which can facilitate progress comparison and stress reduction. When perfectionism significantly impacts students' lives negatively, seeking teacher's strategic assistance to manage perfectionist tendencies healthily and adopting a forgiving attitude towards one's abilities to enjoy the performance process may be considered.

Secondly, psychological suggestions are hints to one's subconscious mind, where music majors repeatedly reinforce certain thoughts, and over time, the subconscious accepts these suggestions. Students need to learn to observe their inner states, identify the root causes of their lack of confidence, and address them to improve negative states. As Huang (2016) suggests, positive psychological suggestions are based on understanding the triggers of one's tension and anxiety and

addressing one's existing problems[23]. For instance, during performances, if students worry about making mistakes or fear the presence of expert judges, constant psychological suggestions of fear may occur, affecting their performance. In such cases, music majors should use positive suggestions to interpret this aspect positively or recall positive inner experiences to eliminate nervousness and anxiety, such as remembering past successful performances and experiencing the confidence and joy of those moments, participating in performances with this confident and joyful state of mind.

Lastly, enhancing performance skills is one of the essential coping strategies. Continuous practice is the core of improving performance skills. Students can develop practical and feasible performance practice plans, accumulate stage experience through repeated practice in real performance environments, record and review their performance processes, objectively evaluate their performance, identify problematic areas in their performances, focus on these areas, and engage in detailed skill training. Stage adaptation will improve after quantitative stage performances. Seeking appropriate music skills mentors for professional feedback and analysis, providing strategies to enhance performance skills and alleviate performance anxiety based on stage performance situations, and increasing mastery of performance aspects are also considerations.

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