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Fear, and success, onstage
By Keith Powers

Any musician who has waited in the wings before going onstage has experienced that delicious, terrifying feeling that immediately precedes performance. For some, it motivates. For others, it results in paralyzing blankness.

But what does really happen in the mind of a musician, once onstage? Dr. Terry Clark, currently a lecturer at the Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in England, has published a paper analyzing the in-performance psychology of more than two dozen musicians.

The study, published in the June 2014 issue of *Research Studies in Music Education* (and available at <http://rsm.sagepub.com/content/36/1/19.short>), is Clark's first attempt at describing the volatile mental mix at the moment of performance, and perhaps, through further studies, will create a complete pedagogy to help musicians channel all their energies into improved onstage behaviors.

"The results of this study were used to develop a psychological skills training program," Clark says. Clark did the research, which was published with co-authors Tânia Lisboa and Aaron Williamson, both from the Royal College of Music, while he was on the faculty of medicine at the University of Calgary.

Twenty-nine student and professional musicians were the subjects—string players, pianists and vocalists. They were interviewed post-performance, and asked to describe their experiences prior to taking stage, during the performances, and their subsequent perceptions of the success or failure of the performance. There was a mix of student performers and professionals.

Successful performances—no surprise here—were linked to thorough preparation, goals that were challenging yet attainable, and an enjoyment of the performance itself. Vocalists often cited the suitability of the music to their instruments.

Less successful performances were linked to inadequate rehearsal, but also to what Clark calls "facilitative versus debilitating perfectionism"; that is, the self-imposed standards of achievement that the musicians used to evaluate themselves.

Although the anxiety of performing—for good or ill—lies at the heart of Clark's study, he avoided the topic of beta-blockers, which some musicians use to quell the nerves before going onstage. "My idea was to provide students with performance enhancement skills of the non-pharmaceutical variety," he says.

Future work will focus on turning these findings and others into a practical teaching model. "My primary intention with this work was to see if it was possible to 'package' musicians' performance experiences," he says. "It is possible, or must musicians come to these perceptions through accrued experience? I do think that by encouraging task mastery, as opposed to competition, teachers can support the well-being and performance quality of their students."

Five Keys for Successful Performance

Although this study is only the first along the way toward establishing a pedagogy, Dr. Clark already has some simple tips for improving students' outlook toward performance. In general, Clark suggests musicians view performances as part of the process, not the end goal—and most importantly, to enjoy the moment.

View performing as an opportunity for learning, as opposed to a final statement on a piece of music

Strive to develop facilitative, healthy perceptions of the performance environment

Use your anxiety/arousal symptoms to elevate your performance

Try to focus on the intrinsic joy of performing, rather than competitive or evaluative aspects

Focus on elements you can control. Let go of those that you cannot.