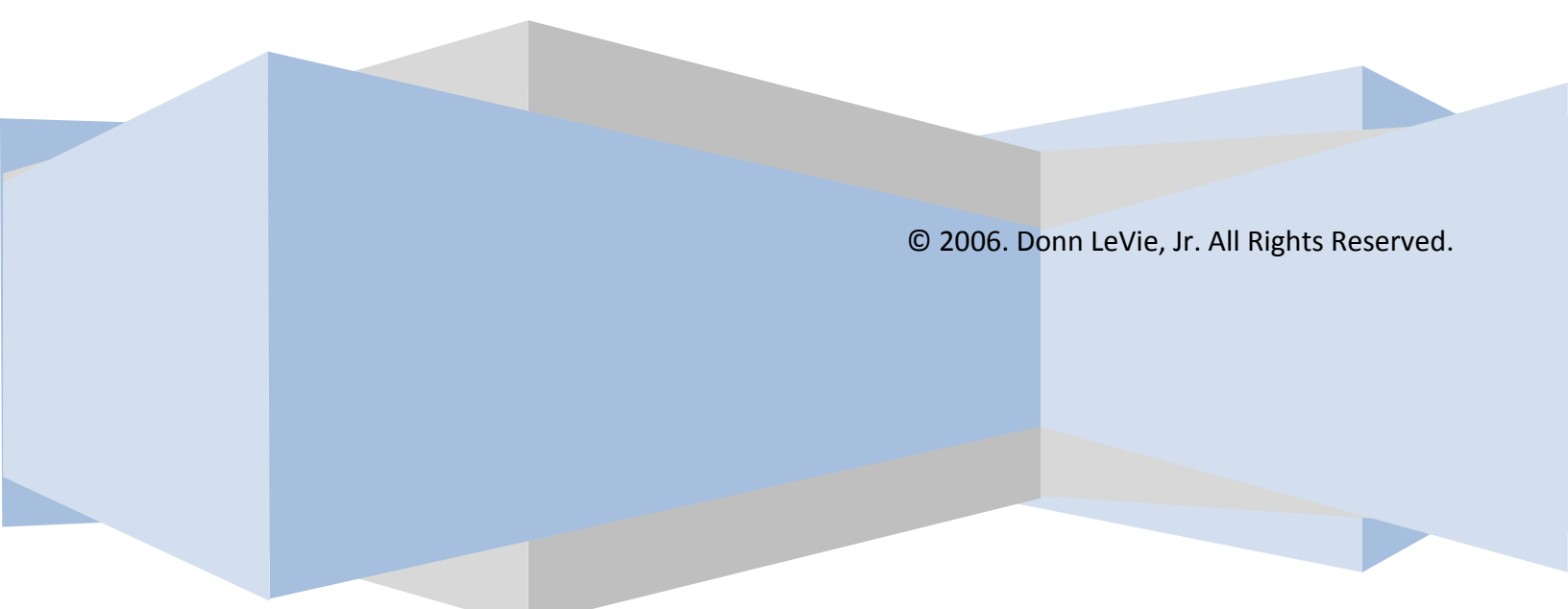


Overcoming Performance Anxiety for Solo Performers

Donn LeVie, Jr.



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"I'm not fitted to give concerts. The audience intimidates me, I feel choked by its breath, paralyzed by its curious glances, struck dumb by all those strange faces."

Frederic Chopin

It's time for your performance. You confidently walk out and take your place on stage. As you get settled in to your position with your instrument, you notice with your peripheral vision someone in the front row fidgeting in his chair. You begin thinking to yourself: *"What is his problem? Can't he sit still?"* Then, someone sitting off to the left of the room starts coughing as you begin playing, and your self-talk kicks in again: *"Great, someone with a phlegm problem decides NOT to stay home but show up here to bother everyone"*. As you start your next piece, you notice two people whispering to each other: *"Oh no...they probably hated that last interpretation...or maybe they heard those notes I missed..."* (by this time, you're missing a lot more). Oh, no doubt your teacher is really going to yell at you after this performance, and you'll be lucky if your girlfriend or boyfriend doesn't move out and your family doesn't disown you. Your students are going to be embarrassed for you because this is going so badly. Your hands are shaking or sweaty or cold; your mouth has gone bone dry. Then, fatalistic thoughts creep into your consciousness: *"Maybe I'm not cut out for this stuff after all..."*

If these scenarios sound familiar, it's because it happens to everyone. From the rank beginner to the most seasoned professional, performance anxiety strikes everyone to some degree at one time or another. Most seasoned performers have trained their anxiety levels to peak *just prior* to a performance. Inexperienced performers usually allow their anxiety to peak *during* a performance. Andres Segovia, who was undeniably one of classical guitar's greatest musical performers, throughout his very long performing career of some 70 years, was plagued with incredible performance anxiety, often shaking visibly before going on stage, and having the beginnings of concerts seriously impaired because of it. The classical guitar virtuoso Francisco Tarrega

¹ This article addresses the common issue of performance anxiety, sometimes referred to as "stagefright." For more serious disorders such as panic attacks that may require medical intervention, consult your physician.

preferred performing salon concerts for a small group of people instead of concertizing in large halls across Europe because of performance anxiety.

The Physical and Emotional Manifestations of Performance Anxiety

The psychological triggers of performance anxiety lead to the physical manifestations shown in Table 1 and emotional symptoms shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Physical Symptoms of Performance Anxiety

Muscle tension	Shaking of hands	Increased heart rate	Perspiration	Hot or cold flushes
Nausea	Dry mouth	“Butterflies”	Adrenalin rushes	Frequent trips to the bathroom

Table 2. Emotional Symptoms of Performance Anxiety

Negative thoughts	Distraction	Feelings of impending doom	Panic	Memory blanks
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It is amazing what scenarios we allow our minds to conjure up during performances in the absence of any evidence or proof, to snatch dejection from the jaws of exhilaration! And performance anxiety tends to “snowball” from a minor conjured-up incident to major imaginary life-size dramas that make us question the value of our very existence! Performance anxiety is not something that happens to us—it is something we do to ourselves.

Performance Anxiety and Solo Performers

Whether you’re performing solo as a musician, vocalist, or a speaker at a conference, performance anxiety can create imaginary difficulties that prevent you from being successful and effective. When I was in elementary and junior high school, I participated in school plays and talent shows. When I was in high school, I was an active member of the debate team and played in rock and blues bands. When I started working in the corporate world, I joined Toastmasters International to learn how to connect with audiences and control my “adult-onset” nervousness. Soon after joining, I began competing in Toastmaster speech contests all around Texas and speaking at conferences around the world as a presenter and trainer. I began to allow performance anxiety to work for me instead of against me as a speaker/presenter. But as a solo musician, performance anxiety comes in a different flavor and is still something I must work at from time to time to control.

Performance anxiety is different for solo performers than for musicians performing in an ensemble or band. As a former band member, performance anxiety for me eventually manifested itself more as nervous positive energy. I didn’t have to worry

about an audience watching just me (just one of seven musicians/vocalists) all the time. If you made a mistake, chances are no one else noticed or remembered (it helped that many of the venues served alcohol). Transitioning from the safety of near-anonymity to the vulnerability of being a solo performer elevates performance anxiety to new levels.

Performance anxiety begins when our attention becomes unfocused. Some distraction, usually minor, occurs, and it becomes more difficult to concentrate. Performance anxiety can manifest itself as nervousness, memory lapses, technical errors, and general discomfort with and, ultimately, fear of performing. This self-destructive thought process can be corrected, minimized, and even turned into positive, performance-enhancing energy.

A few years ago, after experiencing several unpleasant performances, I explored the kinds of thoughts and feelings that were distracting me in performance and what countermeasures I could use to offset their effect. I also consulted with several other performing musicians and instructors to obtain their experiences and advice. The result is these seven habits that summarize issues crucial to successful concentration in performance.

Controlling performance anxiety really starts in the practice room weeks or even months prior to a performance, so it's best to ramp up well in advance to get the maximum benefit from these suggestions.

I review these seven habits before every performance. Since incorporating these habits into my pre-performance routine, I have had fewer concentration lapses in performances and have found performing to be far more fun and satisfying than ever. And those mistakes or miscues that I notice? They don't even show up on the audience radar. In addition, all those with whom I have shared these ideas have had similar benefits, and have been happy with how quickly their performance anxiety dissolved.

Habit 1. Practice Faithfully So That You Know You Did All You Could to Prepare for the Moment

Overcoming performance anxiety requires different types of preparedness. First, you must ensure that you have honed your technical skill to the degree necessary for a successful performance. You may be able to manage anxiety prior to a performance, but if your technical skills are not developed adequately, not only will the performance suffer but the experience will affect your ability to deal with anxiety for the next performance—even if you have polished your technical skills.

You must remind yourself that you have practiced to the best of your ability up to the performance. You have applied your practicing skills in the most effective way you know at this time. This is a powerful affirmation but it only works if you believe you have practiced to the best of your ability. If you've spent the last few weeks skating through practices and not working on the difficult passages or the overall performance,

you're just not going to be able to convince yourself that you did the best you could. While your playing ability can always improve, given all the circumstances and conditions that have led to this moment, you have, in fact, prepared as best you can.

But when performance time is at hand, it is too late for practicing. You need to be in a *performance* mindset instead of a *practice* mindset. You are now going to use your muscle memory (some call it "automatic pilot") that you have been developing/training during practice sessions. For example, muscle memory is at work when you learn the fingering for a piece. When you repeat and reinforce the new patterns, the muscle memory retains them, so that when you go on to practicing dynamics, you don't have to think too hard about the fingering patterns.

The most comforting aspect of muscle memory is that it works all by itself. When guitarists memorize a *p-a-m-i-m-a* right-hand pattern, there's no need to "think" about it. At a performance, the muscle memory does most of the work, freeing the mind to focus on the dynamics and phrasing in the left hand that contribute to a great performance.

Habit 2. Have a "Safe Place" You Can Return to if You Become Distracted During a Performance

You may find yourself becoming distracted during the performance of a piece. Before things get out of control, take yourself to a "safe place" mentally where you can shut out the distractions and return to being in control of the performance. This "safe place" can be a special geographic location, in the company of another person, or a room in your house – wherever it is, it allows you to focus on the successful performance of the piece. Controlling performance anxiety is not about blocking out the audience; it's about controlling your response/reaction to internal and external distractions. The audience wants you to be successful; they are your allies, and as such, an audience does its best to help you achieve your objective (coughers, sneezers, and chatting kids aside).

Real example: At a recent performance, a young child sitting with her mother in the front row of a large church auditorium began climbing up and down in her seat and the child obviously was not taught the concept of the word, *whisper*. My focus was good until I allowed this child to compete for my attention. Once I realized that I was in danger of having my concentration go off course into the weeds, I immediately went to my safe place: my quiet recording studio where I had successfully performed the piece I was playing dozens and dozens of times. I finished the piece without any problems.

Depending on your experience level playing in front of audiences, you might want to put yourself in your safe place when you begin your performance. It can serve as a mental cocoon to allow you to focus on the start of the performance and not on what the audience is or is not doing.

Habit 3. Avoid Passing Judgment on Your Performance During Your Performance

Avoid passing judgment on the piece you just played or the one you are about to play. Self-judgment during a performance is destructive because it removes you from the present—what’s going on NOW—and places you in the past or future, changing or destroying the natural flow of your thoughts and physical actions. Whether the judgment is positive or negative, it introduces a verbal element (negative self-talk) into an activity that is most successful when it is *non-verbal*. Reserve judgment for after the performance, preferably after you have listened to **other** people’s reactions.

Instead of judging your own playing, simply observe it devoid of any verbal description, and motivate your intentions. For example, when you are about to perform a three-string arpeggiated run, do so with intent and then feel it, “experience” it as you are performing it. There is nothing verbal about this process—you are observing and experiencing a mechanical action in progress. You are, rather, putting intention into action and that is motivating.

Habit 4. Don't Second-Guess Audience Reaction While You Are Playing

It is useless to second-guess any audience member’s reaction *while you are playing*. Notice I did not say “to your playing.” During a performance, many of us think we know exactly the responses to our playing by our teachers or students or colleagues, boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse, critic, or some illustrious musician who happens to be in the audience. More often than not, these thoughts prove to be completely, ludicrously inaccurate and only serve to further remove us from the moment and the music.

I once read of an accomplished classical musician who once played an informal house concert, with about a dozen or so people in the audience. As soon as he came out to perform, he noticed one person who looked familiar, but whom he could not identify. For most of the first piece, he was not thinking about the music, but rather about who this individual was. Finally, he thought that this person was a respected music teacher and accompanist he once met briefly. He was undoubtedly going to listen to certain arrangements on the program with an acute perception of detail and, ultimately, he was sure, with disdain. Not only during these arrangements, but throughout the entire concert, this artist was obsessed with thoughts like these. Not surprisingly, the whole experience was quite unpleasant for him. Afterward, when the mystery audience member spoke to him, he remembered that this so-called “music teacher” was, in fact, a friend of a colleague, and thought the performance was superb!

What an incredible waste of mental energy! Trying to imagine what someone in the audience is thinking about your playing is useless and distracting 100% of the time; and

it's usually *wrong* 99% of the time! Please only yourself and you'll be satisfied 100% of the time.

At a recent performance for a church communion service, the two selections I performed were meant to create an atmosphere for reflection, contemplation, and prayer. The first service performance went very well, however, during the second service, I clearly missed several notes while trying to pace my playing with the distribution of the communion elements to the congregation. I was momentarily distracted (i.e., fingers in the wrong place on the fretboard) but quickly recovered. As I was packing up my gear after the second service, one person approached me at the front of the stage and commented: "The music beautifully enhanced the communion...it had me in tears.." My first thought was "It had me in tears, too...particularly when I missed those notes toward the end of the second piece..." but my inner critic was immediately silenced by this person's genuine heartfelt response to the piece.

You will always be your own worst critic as mistakes are rarely as bad or as noticeable as you think they are. But when someone does notice them, you simply ask: "So, are you telling me that you liked my jazz interpretation of that line?" (A similar jazz-related response I've heard is "Oh, so you liked my inside-outside runs in that piece...")

Habit 5. You Can't Be a Performer AND a Listener, so Focus on Being a Performer

You need to be present mentally on stage, not in the audience. As a performer, you are in a giving mode, not a receiving one. Be in the music, in the moment. No matter how many ways you say it, you cannot be a performer and a listener at the same time. Leave the response to the audience; your task is to communicate to the listener what you have practiced, thought about, and felt. The most effective way of accomplishing this is by being present in the moment and not by dwelling on any moment that is past or one that has not yet occurred. A good example of this is when you are reading a piece of familiar music and your eyes follow the notes at a natural, steady pace. The reading feels easy, and your music-making is accurate and relaxed. This is the kind of forward flow feeling that you want to create in a performance.

Habit 6. Select One Aspect of Your Playing to Remind Yourself to be Aware of

Single out one aspect of your playing that is the top priority among things you need to be reminded of at this time. Think about this not when you are performing, but before you go on stage, when you are thinking about the other rules. You may want to emphasize posture or perhaps play with less left-hand pressure. Maybe you need a reminder to play more boldly. The variety of issues to consider here is infinite, as they are specific to the individual and they may evolve over time, depending on what is top priority at the moment. Limit it to one aspect as choosing more than one item would only burden your abilities to concentrate.

Habit 7. Use the Performance to Enjoy Yourself

Don't forget that your performance is the time when you can finally share with your listeners what you have worked so hard to achieve in the practice room. This is a time of joy and not a time for correcting errors or other faults. Performers tend to be too self-critical in performance (I plead "guilty"). The practice room is the place for that. The concert hall or whatever venue in which you are performing is the place for celebrating the music. Let your emotions for the music be present. Don't allow minor details to obscure your feelings about the music. Let your excitement for the music be present. Let the adrenaline and your genuine lively passion for the music come through.

REVIEW BEFORE PERFORMING

Look at these seven habits before your performance. Think about what each one means to you as an individual. As you look at Habit 4, for instance, you might think about specific people who might be in the audience and, one by one, remind yourself that you are not going to second-guess their opinions about your playing.

Go over these seven habits for a few minutes and then get back to your warm-ups or stretching exercises or whatever you like to do just before playing. Don't give these ideas another thought. Then go give the best performance of your life.

- 1. Practice Faithfully So That You *Know* You Did All You Could to Prepare.** Trust your muscle memory to do most of your work for you.
- 2. Have a "Safe Place" You Can Return to if You Become Distracted During a Performance.** Mentally place yourself in an environment that helps focus your concentration; try a spot where you have successfully performed a piece many times.
- 3. Avoid Passing Judgment on Your Performance *During* Your Performance.** Only motivate and observe (non-verbally).
- 4. Don't Second-Guess Audience Reaction While You Are Playing.** Please yourself only; the rest will take care of itself.
- 5. You Can't Be a Performer AND a Listener, so Focus on Being a Performer.** Be in the giving mode, not the receiving one.
- 6. Select One Aspect of Your Playing to Remind Yourself to be Aware of.** Posture? Tempo of the first piece? Breathing? Pick one and focus on it.
- 7. Use the Performance to Enjoy Yourself.** Let your emotions and excitement for the music be present.

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Classical guitarist, church musician, and author Donn LeVie, Jr. has recently released ***It's All About HYMN: Essays on Reclaiming Sacred and Traditional Music for Worship*** (Kings Crown Publishing). Look for Donn's companion CD in 2011 entitled, ***For HYMN***, which will contain classical guitar arrangements of sacred music, traditional hymns, and inspired classical music. Contact Donn at donnleviejr@donnleviejr.com