



LionWhale Music's Performance Workshop

Performing music for a live audience shouldn't be a gut-wrenching, panic-inducing experience. On the contrary, it should be fun! Here are a few strategies to help take the stagefright out of performance.

Be prepared...

Everything you read in this handout can be condensed to this piece of advice: be prepared for your performance. Know your music front and back. Know the fingering. Know what key your music is in, what the time signature is, on which beat the piece begins — *everything*. Before you perform anything, it should be extremely well-practiced.

...in advance.

Having, say, three months until your next performance doesn't mean you have three months to practice. Working up to the last minute to prepare your music is just going to make you feel insecure and stage-frightened on the day of your performance.

Put it in your mind that you need to have your music completely ready ___ week(s) in advance, and practice with that deadline in mind. Depending on your own capabilities and the difficulty of your piece, you might decide to be prepared a week ahead of time, two weeks ahead, or even a month or more. Once your music is ready, you can spend the remaining time practicing for performance (as we'll discuss later). Your teacher can help you assess just how far in advance you should aim to be ready.

Practice starting from different places in the music

If you make a mistake or lose your place, do you have to start all over from the beginning of the piece? If so, get out of this habit. Even if you're playing a wonderful piece of music, nobody wants to hear you start all over again after getting halfway

through. It's tedious, and it makes you look unprofessional. Fortunately, there's an easy fix: practice starting from different places in the music.

At first, you can practice starting from the beginning of each section. Then practice starting from the beginning of each phrase. Later, try starting from random measures, and then from a random beat within a measure. Great performers can make a mistake, then pick up exactly where they left off—even if that's the third quarter of the second beat of the forty-fifth measure.

With your teacher: You'll need a partner for this exercise. (It need not be your teacher, but he or she would be a great cohort if you're trying this for the first time.) Begin by marking your score. Draw a sun or a smiley face or something at the beginning of each phrase or section—wherever you think you should be able to start from if you were to get distracted or lost your place during a performance.

First run-through: Start playing from the beginning. Your partner will randomly snap his fingers. Whenever you hear the snap, instantly jump backward to the most recent smiley face in your score and begin again from there.

Second run-through: Start playing from the beginning. This time, when you hear your partner snap his fingers, you'll instantly jump forward to the *next* smiley face in your score.

Try this exercise over and over until you could skip immediately to any spot in your music if some sort of distraction were to happen during your actual performance.

Simulate performance conditions...

Only you know what it's like to be you during a performance. Perhaps your hands get really cold, or you sweat a lot, or your heart pounds as if you just ran a mile. Once your music has been thoroughly practiced, start practicing under performance conditions. For example, if your heart pounds like a bass drum when you're in front of an audience, try playing your piece right after having played with your friends outside or run around the block.

...and practice performing.

All the simulation in the world can't compare to actually performing for an audience of people listening to every note you play. Practicing performing is probably the most effective thing you can do to combat stagefright. Set up a few chairs and ask your family to sit in while you play your piece(s). If you have friends over to your house, ask *them* to sit and listen. Play for your neighbors, your classmates, anybody.

The more you practice *performing*, the more comfortable you'll be on the actual performance day.

If you can't find someone to play for: Set up a camera, a smartphone, a laptop, or anything else that you can set to RECORD your performance. This may sound silly, but try it. You'll be surprised how nervous you can get when a camera is watching you can recording your every move.

Do some “distraction practice.”

Distractions during a performance come in two flavors: external and internal. External distractions include things like: the baby that starts crying, or the family that walks in late, or the cell phone that starts ringing. Internal distractions include: being nervous, thinking about where you're going for lunch after the recital, or worrying about what everyone thinks of your dress. With the help of a partner, you can practice concentrating through any distraction.

External distraction practice: (Make sure you've marked your score with smiley faces or spirals or whatever so you know where you'll jump to in case your focus really gets knocked off balance.) Start playing from the beginning of your piece. Your partner's job is simply to distract you. She might...

...wave her hands in front of your face.

...say your name repeatedly.

...sing a random song.

...move your sheet music around.

...tap on your shoulder.

...tap on your head.

...clap a random rhythm.

...say “Don't get distracted. Don't get distracted. Don't get distracted.”

Your job is to stay focused. And if you do get distracted, you need to jump instantly to one of those places you marked in your score.

Internal distraction practice: Your partner can't really make you nervous or hungry, but he can simulate internal distractions. As before, you'll start playing your piece from the beginning. This time, your partner will ask you questions—and you cannot ignore him! While playing, you must answer his questions. He might ask you things like...

...What's your mom's middle name?

...What's four times two?

...How old are you?

...Spell your name.

...What's your favorite color?

As before, if you get distracted, you must jump to the nearest place in your music that you can start from.

If you get completely lost: If you do get hopelessly distracted and you can't pick it up from the beginning of a phrase or section, you need to have an emergency back-up plan. That plan is this: play the final chord. The final chord is nearly always in the tonic key, so if you simply can't carry on, just jump to the last chord. This is definitely a last resort, but it sure beats just stopping in the middle of your piece.

Improvise.

One more thing you can do to safeguard against any performance mishaps is to practice improvising in the key your piece is in. Most of the music we play has a clear chord progression, and if you play pop music, then it's probably the same three or four chords repeated over and over. There's too much to say about improvisation to include it all here, but a good start would be to get used to playing the chord progression for your piece, and then slowly build up the complexity (e.g., play blocked chords, then broken chords, then broken chords with more interesting rhythm, then chords plus a simple melody, &c.).

Turn nerves into excitement!

No matter how well-prepared you are, you're likely to feel some nervous energy before a performance. This energy is **not** your enemy, so don't try to get rid of it. Instead, use it to your advantage.

Stagefright happens when we take that nervous energy and add to it feelings of dread and aversion. The good news is that we can choose to do something else with the energy—we can turn it into excitement. And why *shouldn't* you be excited? You're surrounded by people who know and love you, people who are rooting for your success. You're about to show everyone the fruits of all your hard work. You've been given the gift of learning a piece of music that you like, and you're about to play it for everybody. Who knows—maybe your performance of “Stairway to Heaven” will be the very first time some little kid ever hears that song. There's really nothing to be nervous about but **a lot** to be excited about, so get excited!

HAVE FUN