



Dazzled by the lights

Stage fright is a taboo subject among musicians, although there are some simple ways to overcome the problem. **Charlotte Tomlinson** tells us more

Stage fright is more common than we would like to think. An enormous number of people suffer from it silently, unable to own up to it. Even professional musicians backstage at a world-class concert hall wouldn't share their anxieties with each other for fear of losing their credibility and, more significantly, their employability. Stage fright is considered taboo, even shameful.

Stage fright happens as a result of an overdose of the body's production of adrenalin from a perceived threat. The body interprets walking onstage to perform as the equivalent of coming across a sabre-toothed tiger in the jungle. A small dose of adrenalin can be an advantage, as it keeps you alert and ready to perform at your best, but too much can have a crippling effect. The perceived threat could be too much pressure, fear of looking a fool, thinking everyone will criticise you or not being adequately prepared. It may only be a perceived threat, but its effects are very real and it can cause enormous distress.

Understanding and acknowledging the fact that many people – even professionals – suffer from stage fright can be the first step towards letting go of its hold on your life. Here are a few of my tips for managing stage fright and beginning the journey towards healthy, enjoyable performing.

Know the music. This is one of the most important aspects of keeping stage fright at bay. Don't kid yourself that you can wing it. Whatever you are performing, get to know it inside out and back to front. What this does is twofold. You build it into your system so well that if your nerves make you get lost during the performance, a form of autopilot can kick in while you recover. It also gives you enormous confidence if you know a piece well and that in itself helps with stage fright.

Become familiar with how your nerves show themselves. Almost everybody has some form of nerves before a performance and it's helpful to get to know your own individual symptoms so you can then start managing them. When you can understand your own physical response to performing you are in a much better position to give yourself what you need.

Eating: before or after? Some musicians eat after a performance because food makes them sleepy or upsets their ability to concentrate. Some have to eat before they play and often during the interval, as they need the fuel that comes in the form of food. Find what works best for you.

Be well rested. Energy can't effectively flow through a tired body, and this will inhibit your performance. You may need to find somewhere to lie down before a concert or give yourself time and space to be quiet, so that you are more able to focus when you are performing. If possible, try doing less on the day of the performance and avoid other stresses just before going on.

Remember to breathe! Breathing is a simple yet powerful way of dealing with stage fright. Take slow, deep breaths as you are waiting, as this calms the nervous system and helps oxygenate your body. Don't forget to breathe when you are performing as well. It's all too easy to hold your breath when you're dealing with something complicated, but breathing helps relax your body.

Members can read the full version of this article at bit.ly/15UAMpo. Charlotte's book, *Music from the Inside Out*, is available to buy from her website. Her series of 14 online videos, *Secrets of Piano Technique to Prevent Injury*, will be published this month. www.charlottetomlinson.com

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