



FIGHT THE FRIGHT

Charlotte Tomlinson shares her expertise in helping students to have a positive performance experience

Over the last few years, I have given many talks to teenagers at schools about how to deal with stage fright when giving recitals that will be assessed as part of their final year exams. When I ask how many of them feel nervous when they are about to perform, hands go up slowly and tentatively until every hand has gone up, including my own. They look around, amazed. They have no idea that anybody else goes through the same experience as them and the relief in the room is palpable.

This discovery is important for any musician, but particularly those who are studying. Being overly nervous when performing can be an isolating feeling.

Musical children can feel that no one else suffers like this, and they might even feel ashamed, worried that telling their friends will expose them as not being quite good enough.

Performance nerves happen as a result of an overdose of adrenaline, produced by the body because of a perceived threat. The body interprets walking on to a stage to give a concert as the equivalent of coming across a sabre toothed tiger in the jungle. A small dose of adrenaline can be an advantage when you're performing. It heightens everything, keeps you alert, ready to perform at your best. But too much can have a crippling effect. The perceived threat can come from so many different directions: too much pressure;

fear of looking a fool; thinking everyone will criticise you; not feeling good enough; not preparing adequately. It may be only a perceived threat, but it is very real and can cause enormous distress.

KNOW THE MUSIC REALLY WELL

It may sound obvious, but one of the most important aspects of keeping stage fright at bay is to know what you are performing, and to know it really well. A large number of pupils don't fully grasp the importance of this. They kid themselves that they can wing it, but most of the time they can't and it is wise to help them realise they can't. They can also be unaware that even the people who give the impression that they just get up there and do it have invariably done a lot more preparation than it might appear.

It is the *quality* of practice that makes the difference here. It's all too easy for a pupil to think they're practising when what they are



“ BREATHING IS SO SIMPLE AND YET AMAZINGLY POWERFUL WHEN DEALING WITH NERVES ”

in fact doing is mindlessly playing the same bits over and over again. They need to learn focused and effective practice. When they do, the benefits are twofold. Focused practice builds the music into the system so well that if nerves get out of control in the performance, a form of autopilot can kick in while the pupil recovers themselves and finds their feet again. It also gives them enormous confidence and reassurance that they know the music well, and that in itself helps with stage fright.

One of the most powerful ways of dispelling nerves is to help your pupils to change their negative self-talk into positive self-talk and this is best nurtured when they are practising. Young musicians with bad nerves can have a lot of negative inner talk going on in their heads. If it is there when they practice, it will certainly be there in performance. If they are negatively judgmental and critical of themselves, they are also likely to project that outwards in performance, seeing the audience as judgmental and critical, and comparing themselves unfavorably to

other performers. This creates an unsafe performing environment for them, and feeling unsafe can be disastrous for nerves.

Here is an example of the kind of commentary a pupil might have running when they are practising: ‘I’m such an idiot ... I messed up ... it’s supposed to be an F# not a G.’ And if the negative inner talk has got really embedded, it might continue: ‘Oh no, not again ... that was really bad ... I’ll definitely fail if I do that ... I’m such a bad player.’

Instead of a judgmental, negatively critical voice that rips everything to pieces, they need to find a voice that is non-judgmental and unemotional, a voice that simply observes what needs to be done: ‘Oops – that was a G instead of an F#. Why did I do that? I don’t really know how to play that bit. Maybe I need help with my fingering.’

A caring teacher can work wonders with a pupil who is facing these inner demons. With a bit of listening and sensitive handling, a pupil might own up to some of their fears, which gives you the opportunity to offer

encouragement and support when they are most needed. Bringing out the good qualities in an overly self-critical pupil, helping the pupil feel good about the music and identifying what they love about it can make a big difference in helping them to let go of nerves and enjoy the performance.

WORKING WITH A PIANIST

Dealing with the more obvious practical considerations before a performance can be just as important as dealing with inner demons. For example, pupils who are not pianists themselves need to be shown the importance of working with a pianist well in advance of their concert or exam. The music sounds so different with the piano part and inexperienced players will need to get used to that. Simply allocating time for them to practise with a pianist, not just once but a few times, will give them a chance to feel secure and comfortable with what they’re doing. »

'Pupils need to know that the audience is on their side': Charlotte Tomlinson works with a student at the piano



“ In a recent master class I gave on the topic of nerves at a prestigious British university, a student pianist admitted to feeling terrified of what the audience would think of her ‘terrible playing, full of mistakes.’ She was shocked and amazed when the audience, full of music students from all years and none of whom she really knew, told her that even though they had noticed her mistakes, their enjoyment of her performance wasn’t in any way affected by them. She wrote later in her feedback form: ‘I now know that I no longer need to struggle through a performance feeling the audience is against me. I’m starting to see light at the end of the tunnel and know that one day it will be possible for me to really enjoy the whole business of performing.’ ”

DOING SEVERAL DRESS-REHEARSALS

Giving a pupil an opportunity to try out the performing venue in advance is very valuable. They can hear the different acoustic, get used to the size of the room and discover where to stand and where to look. You can also encourage them to learn what to do if the piano stool or music stand is at the wrong height and generally show them how to settle themselves. All this builds confidence and helps a pupil know what they’re dealing with. The more experience they have of a performing situation, the more they will feel able to deal with any nerves they have.

REMEMBER TO BREATHE

Breathing is so simple and yet amazingly powerful when dealing with nerves. Encouraging pupils to take slow, deep breaths as they are waiting calms the nervous system

and helps oxygenate the body, which is essential for performing well. Encouraging them to breathe when they are actually performing is also important. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of breath-holding when you are nervous, trying too hard or playing something complicated. Controlled breathing allows the body to relax, calms nerves and helps both the technical and expressive elements of performance.

THE PERFORMANCE ITSELF

Some performance etiquette can really help. Encouraging students to smile, stand tall and look confident as they walk on stage or into the examining room – even if they don’t feel it inside – can help them to get into a better place. It can work wonders with a self-conscious teenager. Pupils need to feel that they are in charge of the performance and that they can enjoy it even if they make

mistakes. If disasters happen, encourage them to take deep, slow breaths to calm themselves and to carry on as if nothing has happened.

Most importantly, pupils need to know that the audience or examiner is not there to pick them to pieces, but is on their side. Encouraging them to imagine a really warm, supportive audience or examiner will help them relax and feel less judged. If they then really embody this and practise it, they are in a much better position to let go of their nerves and actually start enjoying the whole experience of performing music. **MT**

»» KEEP YOUR COOL

- » Know what you are performing, and know it really well
- » Persevere with focused and effective practice
- » Change their negative self-talk into positive self-talk
- » Give yourself plenty of time with your accompanist
- » Get used to the performance space in advance
- » Remember to breathe!
- » Know your stagecraft and own your performance