

# Playing it cool

How can musicians combat pre-performance nerves? Performance coach **Charlotte Tomlinson** explains the physiological background to performance anxiety and shares her strategies for dealing with it

The thorny issue of performance anxiety has only recently started to be discussed more openly in the music sector. Students and younger musicians worldwide are willing to talk about their experiences, with the intention of finding ways to manage their anxiety, but in professional circles the taboo remains mostly intact. This is completely understandable: if a professional musician shows that they suffer from performance anxiety, they can appear vulnerable and unreliable. There is the very real fear of losing work.

Almost all musicians have to deal with performance nerves one way or another, and for some, it can be devastating. Walking on stage can feel dangerous. It may not be the same as the fear of being mugged when walking down a dark alleyway late at night, but the body can't tell the difference. A *perceived* threat of danger triggers the same response as a *real* threat of danger. Perceived or real, when we feel in danger, a primal set of physiological responses kicks in which we know as 'fight-flight-freeze'. Our heart beats faster, muscles tense, digestion slows down, breathing becomes more rapid and shallow, and adrenaline shoots round the body – all designed to help us survive. We either fight the danger, run from the danger or freeze in a form of paralysis.

For a musician, freezing is a common way of dealing with perceived danger. A musician can't hit the conductor or run from the stage, but locking down physically is a more manageable, even socially acceptable way of coping. Our muscles tense, sometimes imperceptibly, and articulating a trill or a fast, tricky passage on the piano can become more difficult than in practice. The creative part of our brain also shuts down and we may find that our phrasing in the second movement of a Beethoven sonata is less free and expressive, our tempo inconsistent: the primal part of us is dealing with something much more threatening.

But a musician wants to do far more than *survive* the stage. We want to love performing

and to play with freedom and expression. A small dose of adrenaline can be an advantage when performing, heightening our senses, keeping us alert and ready to perform at our best. It's when it gets out of hand that it becomes so distressing.

The psychological and emotional roots of this distress stem in part from characteristics that make a good musician – acute sensitivity and a desire for the highest of standards – within a musical culture that demands the absolute best no matter the cost to the musician themselves.

Musicians almost always have a deeply embedded 'Inner Critic'. While it is essential to critique our practice and performance, we need to do this in non-judgmental and non-emotional ways. If we beat ourselves up whenever we make a mistake or slip momentarily from our own high standards, we are setting ourselves up for horrible nerves when performing. Judgment and criticism offer a perfect breeding ground for out-of-control performance nerves because we simply don't feel emotionally safe on stage.

Self-critique without self-sabotage is possible, however. We can learn over time to be more objective, first in practice and then in performance. It's the difference between, 'I played a wrong note again... that was rubbish... I'll never be able to play this well,' and 'I played



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*Charlotte Tomlinson: 'The fear of being judged by audiences and colleagues can loom large'*

a wrong note there... I wonder why I did that... maybe I need a better fingering!'

We also project our Inner Critic onto the audience: 'If I think I am playing really badly, they must also think I'm playing really badly.' The fear of being judged by audience and colleagues can loom large. We walk out on stage feeling exposed and vulnerable, waiting for a perceived attack and leaving us wide open to the worst of fight-flight-freeze responses. This is simply terrifying to contend with and doesn't support us playing freely and with expression.

The fear of making mistakes sustains the Inner Critic's stronghold over us too. But allowing mistakes to be a natural part of learning can help us, ironically, to be more accurate and less stressed when we perform. We free up physically and mentally without that pressure of perfection, which both improves our accuracy and freedom, lessening the stranglehold of out-of-control nerves.



*'Allowing mistakes to be a natural part of learning can help us be more accurate and less stressed when we perform'*

To start reducing performance anxiety, we need to do whatever we can to enable us to feel *emotionally safe* on stage. A few basic things need to be in place to support us.

First, good preparation. Without it we can feel exposed and vulnerable. Adrenalin can only enhance performing if the building blocks are in place, otherwise it can be destructive. Second, looking after our physical needs. Food, water, physical warm-ups, quiet time to focus and lots of long, deep, calming breaths on and off stage can all help enormously. Third, experience of performing. This is becoming familiar with and understanding the different levels of stress from the practice room to the performing space. It can also mean being aware of when we simply have too many stress factors kicking in at one time, as the following story illustrates.

A few years ago, I was taking a series of masterclasses at the International Piano Academy in Konz, Germany. When I arrived, I was alerted to a student who had played in a concert and was so paralysed with nerves that she had stopped in the middle of a piece and walked off stage. A musician's worst nightmare!

It became evident that it was the result of a combination of too many stress factors piling up simultaneously, without her having the performing experience to manage them. She arrived in Germany not knowing anyone (her best friend who was due to come with her pulled out at the last moment); she wasn't psychologically ready to play in public so soon after arriving; the piece she was performing was difficult and she didn't feel completely prepared, especially in terms of memory; and

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she didn't feel confident enough to let the director know how anxious she was before she agreed to perform.

Over the next few days, we worked together to help her find a more positive route back to performing. We decided that she would play an easy, manageable piece in the next concert with the score because of her memory concerns. She practised until she was really happy with it. We also worked to ensure she could walk out and bow with confidence so as to own the stage for that one piece. Her performance went well, and she was thrilled. They were simple, easy steps to take; steps she felt comfortable with and which enabled her to move through a traumatic experience, rediscover her joy of music and learn how to manage performing in an emotionally healthy way.

When we pay as much attention to managing our emotional safety on stage as we do to learning the notes, we give ourselves a far better chance of managing performance anxiety. We find a way of progressing from surviving to thriving, to a place where creativity and expression has room to flourish. **IP**



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*'Managing your Performance Nerves' is available free at [beyondstagefright.com](http://beyondstagefright.com)*

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