Performance anxiety in piano playing

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Abstract: - This paper analyzes the performance anxiety of pianists, from the point of view of a teacher and performer. It underlines the idea that this kind of stress is mostly in the performer’s mind, in the way he perceives a certain situation. One should try to be prepared at his very best and try to control his thoughts about the situation he is facing. Positive thoughts and self-esteem help you to defeat performance anxiety.

Key-Words: - piano playing, anxiety, coping strategies

1 Introduction

Most pianists or instrumentalists in general have had to deal once or more often with music performance anxiety. This kind of anxiety can occur in many settings, not just on the stage. It appears to be more a consequence of the evaluative nature of the situation, not depending primarily on the presence of an audience. This is a phenomenon which doesn’t occur suddenly, but it develops gradually over a longer period of time before an important event, like a piano recital or a piano concert with a well known orchestra. Thinking about performance anxiety, most people tend to believe that it refers to a negative kind of emotion. But performance anxiety can be divided into two types: positive and negative.

2 Positive performance anxiety

Sang-Hie Lee in “Musician’s Performance Anxiety and Coping Strategies” says “Psychologists have labeled a type of heightened state of arousal as a biologically based, motivating force. D L. Hamman’s studies showed that musicians with the highest level of formal training were able to use the anxiety factor for positive performance effect. Wolfe similarly learned that professional musicians used the positive anxiety components, such as arousal and intensity, to promote performance rather than letting the negative elements, like apprehension and distractibility, diminish performance quality” (38-39).

Positive performance anxiety derives from the knowledge that something extraordinary might happen between the performer and the audience during the act of performing, where, without any doubt, “making beautiful music” plays the most important role. But there is never a guarantee that this kind of situation with a positive result will really happen. So this is the reason of feeling this type of nervousness, and there is nothing anybody can do to eradicate it. Actually, this positive performance anxiety shouldn’t be a subject of worrying, because it tends to improve rather than diminish the quality of one’s performance. The energy and excitement it brings upon plays an important role in the degree of inspiration which the musician experiences and puts into their repertoire during the performance, helping also to maintain their concentration on the task for a longer period of time.

3 Negative performance anxiety

Negative performance anxiety is very debilitating for pianists or any kind of performing musician, because very often it may represent the reason why many promising instrumentalists quit a career as a soloist or an orchestra player. The biggest problem of performance anxiety is that musicians fear that it will have a negative effect on the quality of their performance and on their ability to play the program accurately till the end. And the big concern is that this kind of negative thinking about themselves can only lead to a negative result, which in our case would mean playing under their normal capabilities. Pianists who suffer from performance anxiety complain about different experiences like: fear, trembling, dry mouth, a rapid heart beat. Other symptoms can be sweating or cold hands, muscle tension, paleness, loss of concentration. And there is a strong belief among musicians that this anxiety will affect their playing in a negative way. You can compare musical performance
performance anxiety, and this leads to losing performance to the acoustics of the hall, to adjust their phrasing, harmonic changes, rhythmic nuances, different touches and sound colours. They have to adjust their performance to the acoustics of the hall, to adjust their way of playing to a new instrument, which is different from the one they are used to play on every day, they must concentrate on remembering the music and so on.

If you are used to practicing in a very concentrated way, it will be easier for you to train the mind to remain focused on the music during a performance, rather than allowing other thoughts to invade your mind. You have to stay concentrated on the sound and on the process of music making. But the fact is that detachment of task-orientated thinking is a characteristic of musical performance anxiety, and this leads to loosing concentration during playing. The most two important problems are that instead of remaining focused on your target, you are preoccupied with exaggerating in your imagination the proportions of what can happen if there are some unwanted mistakes during your playing and you give too much importance to the evaluation of others. Many instrumentalists believe that little errors will destroy their entire recital/concert, or will conduct to the loss of control over the situation, which of course is not true. Pianists should try to understand why those errors occurred and learn something from them. Understanding a mistake can teach performers how to avoid it and what to do in order to play better next time.

Worrying about the reaction of others is also correlated to anxiety. These are normally coupled with very high internal standards and occur very often in individuals with a perfectionist attitude. One possible solution could be that of diminishing the importance of other persons. The problem is that while experiencing performance anxiety, musicians have a distorted view of the power of the audience. They often seem to believe that the evaluation of the people who are listening will affect them. But the fact is that whatever the public might say, if the pianist is self-confident and accepts his playing with all the good parts and the faults, it will not really matter what other people think. Instead of fearing the people who are listening, pianists or instrumentalists in general should try to appreciate the audience, and to start from the idea that the reason why the audience is there is to hear some beautiful pieces, not to look for every little mistake. So performing artists should try to play for their own pleasure, for the fun of making music and offering and sharing emotions with others. It really helps to concentrate on the enjoyable aspect of the process.

Otherwise, the result of these worrying thoughts is that the musician looses his concentration towards the task itself, and this fact will naturally lead to an increase of the risk of errors in one’s playing. Performers should try to interpret a rapidly beating heart as a sign of excitement and involvement in the task, because then it would have a positive effect on the performance. They shouldn’t think in a negative way. Thoughts about failure during playing in public mean almost always playing worse than you are capable in other situations. Anyone who suffers from performance anxiety should eliminate the imagination of negative possibilities. In any situation, not only when performing in public, there is the possibility of a negative result. But there is also the possibility of a positive result. And since nobody can predict the future, nobody should remain focused on a negative result before it occurs. The best way is to concentrate on the performance and to try to share your music with the public.

4 Coping strategies

There is a variety of coping strategies that can be developed by the anxious performer in order to create some methods which he or she can practice and develop in order to decrease the effects of performance anxiety. The next suggestions for how to deal with performance anxiety are from my own experience. Negative performance anxiety derives from a sense of insecurity. The less prepared you feel, the more nervous you will be. Not enough practice means anxiety. You have to really prepare, to know your pieces inside out. You have to give yourself enough time to learn the music properly, not to do it one month before or even less at times. You must be serious about learning and memorising the repertoire from the beginning, not only when there is little time remaining until you have to play in public. From my own experience as a teacher and as a performer, I can say that a musical piece needs time and a lot of practice for you to be self-confident while performing it in front of an audience. The worst possible thing you can do is to memorize it very quickly and then to play it in public or in a competition. From my experience, this is the most direct way if you want to make sure that you will play really bad.

A musical piece must be learned step by step, studying it very slowly, first separately, then with both hands, being aware of the key and trying to understand the
harmonic structure, the form and the characteristic style of the piece properly. You have to find out where the imitations, sequences and repetitions are, in order to have a certain logical structure to follow during the hours of practice. It is recommended to listen to different recordings and to learn about the composer and the time he lived in. All these will give you the feeling of being in control, of being able to master all musical and technical challenges without any problems. This knowledge will empower you with a sense of control over yourself in stressful situations like public performances. In order to attain this kind of confidence you have to approach studying your repertoire in a relaxed manner, by giving it time, patience and many hours of intense concentration in front of the instrument. In the end, if you have a real basis to feel confident, then you will not experience that kind of nervousness. The problem is that you may think you feel sure, when in fact there are still some unsolved problems which you are not aware of. But after you have really created the physical and musical basis for successfully performing a piece, you will feel emotionally more secure.

Positive thinking is also a must. You must tell yourself that you have practiced enough and the result will be positive. Negative thinking, messages like: “I am afraid of playing in public”, will only increase your state of anxiety. A good piece of advice is also to be more tolerant to yourself and to accept that everybody makes mistakes. Even the most famous pianists make them, and a missed note or a passage which didn’t turn out very well will for sure not ruin their entire performance. It seems that people who tend to be perfectionists also in their normal life experience a greater anxiety performance. The explanation for this would be that being a perfectionist makes you feel more responsible of how you play, you think more deeply about what the audience thinks about your performance as a pianist and you have the impression that everybody expects you to play perfectly. But one must understand that instrumentalists are not robots, and that making mistakes is a part of being human. If you still think you must play perfectly, remind yourself that even famous pianists make little mistakes. And yet, after listening to their performance, I think that only somebody who does not understand music at all could say that they played badly (because of missing a few notes). Most of us, (if not all of us) would agree on the fact that they listened to a great performance of that particular piece, one of a high degree of expressive quality and with communicating sounds.

So the most important thing for any instrumentalist should not be just technical perfection, but making music that says something and touches sensitive cords in people. Other important recommendations you should take into consideration in order to be better prepared before playing in front of an audience are to be relaxed, to eat healthy food, to sleep well the night before the big event (to go to bed early), to do things that make you feel good about yourself. It is very important not to play for too many hours right before the concert and also a few days before, because otherwise you will be overtired and the chances for you to concentrate at your maximum possibilities will decrease. The last days before the recital, it is recommended to study with a clear head, slowly, focusing more on listening to yourself, making small changes in your interpretation in order to obtain the most expressive performance which could render the composer’s ideas in the most appropriate way. At that point all technical aspects should have already been solved, and you should not have any concerns about memorization, technique or increasing tempo, because it would be too late anyway to cope with them.

Some might expect that performance anxiety will decrease with age, because it seems logical that you become more experienced and accustomed with audience and different challenges. But on the other hand, when you experience success, you also feel a greater amount of responsibility which refers to the quality of your performance. You think that the audience has higher expectations on you, and this fact may add some more difficulty to the task. “The greater the commitment to music, the greater will be the expectation from self and others regarding performance standard and quality”. (Kenny and Osborne, 2006). Anyway, musicians who play more often claim to be gaining a feeling of security because they get more accustomed to the public.

Another suggestion for defeating performance anxiety is to start playing in front of smaller groups of people and then gradually play for bigger and bigger audiences. It is also important to perform pieces you fully understand and also like very much and to start the recital with an easier piece of music. This will give you a sense of security and control, which will help you overcome your anxiety, because this kind of approach will make you be more concerned with the expression of all those musical ideas you like so much rather than with your fear.

5 Conclusion

You have to remind yourself that stress is only in your mind, in the way you interpret a certain situation. Ultimately the way we look at things creates stress, fear or anxiety and not the actual situation. So you should try to control your thoughts about the situation you are facing. If you succeed in having only positive thoughts about the coming event, about yourself, about you being a gifted pianist, then most of your problems are solved.
References: