

# Conquering performance anxiety from inside out

By Helen Spielman

**I**believe I have to suffer in order to perform well,' said Isabelle, a beautiful woman and professional singer who came to me for performance anxiety coaching. Although she passionately loved to perform, Isabelle often felt terrified, as though she was 'going to die' before walking on stage. She received great praise for her performances but thought of herself as 'not that good' and described her inner experience as 'being strangled, as though hands were twisting around my lungs'. Her pulse raced and she felt out of control, fearful of not singing perfectly and worried about what listeners thought of her. At age thirty-four, Isabelle believed she was too old to pursue her musical dreams. She kept herself overly busy doing other things 'to avoid the pain of not performing' as much as she wanted to. When she did perform, she felt unsatisfied with the results she achieved.

Isabelle is not alone. As a flute player, teacher and performance anxiety coach, I have heard similar stories from countless musicians and other performers who share this struggle. Almost all musicians experience performance anxiety at some time in their lives. A few exceptions, of course, are those natural entertainers who are at ease in front of audiences. Stage fright can develop early in life or later on. It can show up before, during or after a performance, and its effects can be physical or mental, or both. Sometimes performance anxiety is so debilitating that it can hurt or end a career. But its most harmful attribute is how it saps the joy from music making and devastates musicians who feel the real presence of music inside them but are unable to let it soar. The depth of their despair, confusion and frustration is profound.

Due to advances in the field of neuroscience, we now know how to address the problems of performance anxiety using specific techniques. By understanding and practising these techniques, you can gain more control of your performances than you ever thought possible. Before learning them, however, it is important to integrate into your understanding that you are not weak, sick or abnormal because you experience performance anxiety. Instead of punishing yourself with shame, criticism or hopelessness, recognise that most people do not have to live with these mysterious obstacles if they are willing to work on overcoming them.

Isabelle began the journey to overcome her performance anxiety by talking about her passion for music during her early upbringing, about her family and about her attempt to 'make it' in New York City. This was important for Isabelle, who, like some people, discovered the roots of her performance fears in her past experience. Because each person has his or her individual history, fears and needs, the most effective path toward confident performance is through looking inside ourselves rather than using mass formulas that claim to be suitable for all.

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## Self-talk: Listening to your inner voice

Central to this process of self discovery is an understanding of how our inner thoughts (our 'self talk') shape our feelings. Positive thoughts create a positive outlook; negative thoughts can stimulate the fear and self-doubt associated with performance anxiety. As human beings, we are unable to control our feelings, but we can control our thoughts. What you say to yourself, and how you say it, is an important factor that will determine how you perform under pressure.

We all have automatic thoughts that constantly pass through our minds, and research has shown that eighty percent of our daily thoughts are negative. For those with performance anxiety, the most common negative thought is: 'I'm not good enough'. Its many cousins include: 'I don't practise enough', 'I didn't start early enough', 'I have the world's worst vibrato (or technique, double tongue, or any other perceived flaw)' and 'I'm not as talented as everyone else'. What is your most frequent negative thought? If you can begin to 'hear' it inside your mind, you are on your way to being able to substitute a positive thought that will work for you rather than against you.

Isabelle discovered why she believed she had to suffer, and she began to understand that the more she repeated that idea to herself, the more it would become true in her life. Whatever we feed, grows. If a plant is watered, it thrives; otherwise it withers and dies. We live for years and often decades with beliefs that we may have acquired in childhood, beliefs about ourselves that may not be true. A mother may say, 'Oh, she's my shy child', or a teacher may tell you, 'You'll never be any good'. When we water these beliefs all our lives, they thrive and become true for us. Our job as adults is to take responsibility for our own lives and stop nourishing unproductive thoughts. We can choose what we want to be true for ourselves. We can change our thoughts as one way to move us in the direction of who and how we wish to be.

## Affirmations: Feed what you want to grow

Isabelle learned how to talk to herself, quietly inside her mind, to free herself from the opinions of others. Almost everyone worries about being judged. 'I am free from the need for other people's approval' or 'I look only to myself for joy and satisfaction' are examples of positive thoughts, or 'affirmations', that you might substitute for your negative thoughts. Work done by Aaron Beck and Gary Emery, Edmund J. Bourne, Shad Helmstetter and others, shows that replacing negative thoughts with positive thoughts reduces anxiety. By replacing the false beliefs that were not serving her well with more productive thoughts that would move her in the direction of her goals, Isabelle began to gain a more realistic, balanced, and optimistic view of her performance abilities.

Isabelle lives in Boston, and we worked together over the telephone on a weekly basis. She began reporting that she was more forgiving of herself and feeling more connected to her audiences. Like many of my clients, Isabelle tended to brush off compliments, failing to recognise the progressive steps she was making in becoming a more confident performer. Part of our work together was aimed at helping her perceive her accomplishments and own her talent. About seven months after

her first session, she opened one of our sessions by telling me that she had received an invitation to tour Europe with an opera company. 'One of my dreams has been to work with musicians in other cultures,' she said with excitement. Yet Isabelle still felt a need for further freedom in her performances.

Part of Isabelle's journey was to determine more specifically how she wanted to use her abilities. She started to see that she was overly busy with too many teaching jobs and other responsibilities. This left her hungry for practise time, and sometimes she was not fully prepared for performances, which resulted in panic and days that seemed out of control. No wonder

Isabelle continued to have moments of stage fright. Over time, Isabelle took a deep look at her priorities and finances and made some courageous choices. She rearranged her teaching schedule, hired a student helper to do errands and paperwork and dropped smaller gigs that no longer satisfied her. In your efforts to overcome performance anxiety, it is important to look inside your own heart and make sure that you are expressing your music in the way that is right for you and not in ways that your parents, teachers, or society tells you that you 'should' express it. When our musical expression is truly congruent with our most authentic inner selves, our inner strength, built upon self-assurance and security, cannot be easily shaken.

### Perfection: Free yourself from impossible goals

Isabelle still hung on to the belief that her music needed to be perfect in order to be acceptable. The need to be perfect is a topic that arises in every workshop I present and with most of my private clients. After all, musicians constantly strive to perfect their music, and that is a fine goal for the practice room. However, live performance always brings risk. As Jerry Lynch and Chungliang Al Huang say, 'To be perfect is inconsistent with being human.' To expect perfection of ourselves is to set ourselves up for failure. In fact, in the attempt to attain perfection, we create tension which is the very opposite of what we need to produce beauty in our art. Striving for excellence rather than perfection, or for an optimal performance rather than a perfect one, gives us an achievable goal that is compassionate and flexible rather than demoralizing. (The graph shows a way to think about optimal rather than perfect performance).

There are many different reasons for clinging to perfectionist goals. Isabelle came to see more clearly that her real fear about perfection was that she might



*Performance 9 by Amanda Jefferies.*

sing worse if she did not seek perfection. Gradually, she was able to release, deep inside herself, the misguided fear of falling short of her ideal. When she finally accepted the knowledge that ‘this is who I am and what I have to give, and it is fine’, she reported that her sense of relief and quiet happiness were amazing. It had taken just over a year to arrive at this breakthrough.

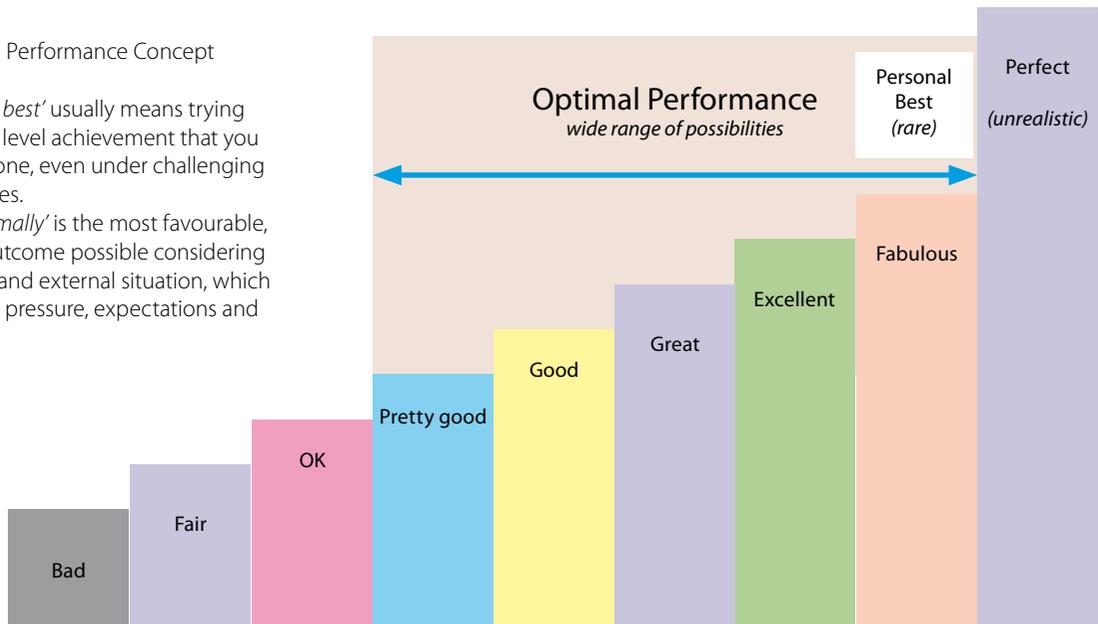
Gradually, Isabelle started to report that she was auditioning for more prominent roles. She decided to enter national level competitions, and with a new-found power and confidence she exclaimed, ‘If I’m too old, let them tell me!’ When she began to enjoy her performances, I knew that our work was coming to an end. And so it has.

Some musicians find the key to freedom, joy and confidence on stage in just one or two sessions, without the need or desire to work as deeply as did Isabelle. Another major technique uses progressive muscle relaxation together with mental visualisation. Musicians can learn this approach quickly, even over the phone. Visualisation is used successfully by athletes to train for sports competition and by business executives to prepare for high-stakes presentations. The scientific data say that in order for purposeful visualisation to be fully effective, it should be practised for four to six weeks prior to a recital or audition. I have witnessed significant progress in some flute players’ ability to gain control over their nerves in less than a week when they learned to visualise the performance they desired. Regardless of the length of time needed, incorporating their personal goals was essential to the effectiveness of their visualisation practice.

#### The Optimal Performance Concept

‘*Playing your best*’ usually means trying for the peak level achievement that you have ever done, even under challenging circumstances.

‘*Playing optimally*’ is the most favourable, desirable, outcome possible considering the internal and external situation, which may include pressure, expectations and distractions.



Best vs. Optimal. When you perform, what do you strive for? You would not be satisfied with a fair or OK performance; perfection is an unrealistic goal. Most of us strive ‘to do our best,’ but your *best* is very rare. When you set your sights on playing at your best, you are aiming at an extremely narrow target (the white box). Achieving it at a pinpoint in time, say at 6.47 p.m. on Thursday, is very unlikely. If you aim for an *optimal* performance, you have a much bigger target (the gold box) and a greater chance to succeed. An optimal performance stretches across a wide range of performance possibilities. Your playing might be pretty good or great or fabulous. For you, on that day in those circumstances, your performance was optimal.

## Visualisation: Practising optimal performance

Progressive muscle relaxation is done by consciously softening and releasing the tension from one part of the body at a time. Typically, you might start at the toes, progress to the feet, the ankles, the lower legs, and on until you reach the neck and head. At that point, the entire body is deeply relaxed. In deep relaxation, brain waves are in a different mode which induces more receptivity to creative imagery. The experience is just like daydreaming, although it has specific and goal-oriented intent. You picture yourself performing the way you wish to perform. You imagine the scene with great detail and clarity, incorporating colour, sound, emotions, thoughts, and other sensory input. You can visualise general scenes, such as staying focused on your music, and specific goals, such as playing through a difficult passage smoothly. You can choose to focus on any goal that is important to you: physical goals, such as keeping your breathing calm; emotional goals, such as focusing on the beauty of the music instead of winning the competition. The subconscious mind receives these pictures easily under deep relaxation, and in the subconscious, no difference exists between the imagery and reality. In effect, you are giving your optimal performance again and again. This is how athletes practise their sport while they are injured, and how musicians learn pieces without an instrument in their hands. This is why, after visualising your performance, the actual recital will feel like *déjà vu*.

If you combine the techniques of positive self-talk and purposeful visualisation, the likelihood that you will be able to control your performance is much higher. You will never go on stage thinking, 'I wonder what will happen? I'm afraid'. You will have specific knowledge of what to think and how to act. There are no guarantees, of course. Positive self-talk and visualisation take practise, and the mental and emotional preparation for performance requires as much attention as music preparation. The possibility that a random event will interfere never vanishes in live performance, but its negative impact will decrease significantly.

What can we do for the countless young people who desire a career in music but experience intense performance anxiety early in their training? I encounter these earnest, passionate students everywhere. They open their hearts to me and weep as they share their burdens of shame, fear, and frustration. As they question whether or not to pursue a career in music, stage fright should not be their primary reason for leaving. Performance anxiety is so common that it is a normal, natural part of the musician's world. Yet we keep it 'in the closet', a topic only shared on the surface. We tell our friends, 'Oh, I'm so nervous about my solo', when the deeper truth is 'I'm afraid that no one will respect me if I mess up', or 'I'm afraid my students will think I'm a fraud', or 'I'm too fat...too old...too untalented', and the list goes on. What we can do for our young people, and for ourselves, is to be authentic and talk with each other of our performance fears. We can open up this topic so that eventually it will become as much a part of musical training as how to breathe and articulate and phrase.

I tell the story of my own profound struggle with performance anxiety at every workshop I give. I talk about how I could neither play my flute nor speak in front of audiences, and about how I can now perform on my flute with joy and give presentations to hundreds of people without fear. Entering the music business in these times is enormously competitive and difficult; many factors ought to be considered

when committing to this choice, but fear of performance does not have to be, and should not be, the deciding factor. Students who experience it should get help and relief, and then decide if music is right for them. This was certainly true for a young college woman named Callie, who had severe performance anxiety. After practising the skills she had learned in a one-week performance anxiety workshop, Callie wrote to me about her changing perspective on music:

A couple of years ago, I could have never imagined getting an 'A' on a performance of that magnitude. Your class has shown me that I can do this, that I love to do this, and that I'm going to continue to do this. I am really happy. I have gained confidence and poise and I have discovered that I really do love performing. I've grown a lot in the past eight months...If you had asked me one year ago if I would be soloing in my ensembles at school, I probably would have laughed. I still have doubts. That insecurity is still there and I still battle it every day, but not as much as I used to. I am able to silence the voice of that teacher who used to scream at me. I believe in myself more now than I ever thought I could. I believe that new perspective (on myself and my playing) fostered all of these successes. I'm so glad I didn't give up music earlier in my studies.

There are other routes to controlling stage fright. Some performers use beta blockers (medicines commonly used for lowering blood pressure) to control symptoms of performance anxiety. My professional opinion is that if a performer uses them under a doctor's guidance and finds them to be effective, that is a valid choice. However, some musicians find that beta blockers dull their emotions or create other problems; others simply would rather not be dependent on drugs. Many performers have tossed away containers of beta blockers once they discovered how to use the powers of the mind to gain control of their physical symptoms.

What matters most is not how long it takes or which techniques work best. The important thing is that alleviating performance fear is possible and help is available. I did not seek to become a performance anxiety coach. I was a happy and successful flute teacher in my private studio. This new career found me, probably because of the compelling need that exists in our flute and music community to devote more attention, education and awareness to this issue. When we empower ourselves to find the unshakeable confidence, openhearted joy and boundless freedom to express our music in the way that is alive inside us, then our lives will be enriched with success, contentment, and beauty. Isabelle knows what that's all about now.

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