

THE Manifestations OF Music Performance Anxiety IN Relation TO College-Aged Music Students

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1 Abstract

I plan to determine which version of performance anxiety affects college-aged music students in a study similar to Leblanc, Jin, Obert, and Siivola [9]’s study on high schoolers. I will use a four-stage process that will determine how the increase of stress and pressure affects the musicians. It will start in a practice room and end in a mock jury. My study will differ from other studies in that I will be testing all four manifestations and adding the element of a jury, in addition to the heart rate monitor and surveys. Every music major who has lessons with a professor, regardless of whether it is their primary or secondary instrument, must have a jury at the end of each semester. Understanding how music students react in these scenarios can, eventually, lead to better performances and better ways to manage the anxiousness they may face.

Keywords– music performance anxiety, performing, music students, perfectionism, audience’s effect, music psychology, performing arts, musicians, anxiety

2 Introduction

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is a type of performance anxiety that is similar to being anxious when one takes tests. At best, it can be considered a small problem that can make one's hands a little sweaty, but for some, it is extremely similar to having a severe social phobia [6]. While Music Performance Anxiety is something that many musicians face, regardless of what genre they perform and regardless of how old or young they are, there is a distinct lack of research on how to alleviate these problems to make for not only better performances and performers but better people. In my study, I will attempt to figure out which manifestation of performance anxiety is most prevalent in music students, so steps can be taken to help people work through those specific problems [3].

3 Previous Research

3.1 Young Children

Performance anxiety has been found in third graders, children as young as eight years old [2]. Genes and how someone was raised can allow them to become predisposed to having performance anxiety, and more specifically, Music Performance Anxiety [7]. If anxiety is common in someone's family tree or the person has a more melancholic temperament, they will be more likely to have MPA. Their upbringing can, also, determine whether or not they have Music Performance Anxiety. Whether a parent praises their child for hard work or results in all aspects of their life, for instance, can greatly influence how children view themselves in reference to practicing and music as a whole. Those who were raised to believe that results are the most important part of life tend to become more anxious teens and adults than those who were raised to value hard work. This becomes more apparent as the child gets older, and they begin to practice music on their own terms.

3.2 Perfectionism

Sternbach [10] found that musicians in college, high, and even middle school can have similar levels of Music Performance Anxiety as professional musicians. Student musicians sometimes find practicing much less rewarding than professional ones do because they have yet to master their instrument, and there is much less immediate praise. This study theorized that excessive self-criticism and self-blame can, also, be the cause of these higher levels. Musicians often feel the need to prove that they are the best or, at the very least, better than they once were. This kind of thinking leads to very harsh critiques and opinions of oneself, and it has been construed as normal. Music lessons can worsen this ideology. While the point of a lesson is to be taught by someone older and better as a means of improving, it can sometimes be seen as a way to be told everything they are doing wrong and not what they are doing right. Because of this, they begin to practice not with the idea of getting better but with the idea of avoiding criticism. Furthermore, it was found that high levels of perfectionism usually indicate higher levels of debilitating anxiety, which can in turn lead to high levels of psychological strain and low levels of self-confidence and performance quality ([6], [7], [9]). All of this put together creates a vicious cycle that can feel near impossible to get out of.

3.3 Women are More Likely to Experience Higher Levels

Some of the studies found that females often had higher levels of Music Performance Anxiety than males did ([2][6], [7], [9]). Kenny, Davis, and Oates studied professional opera chorus artists, while Kenny and Osborne studied 12-19 year-old performing arts high school students. Despite the broad age gap, they found the same result. None of the studies posited a reason as to why this is the case as it was not the primary focus of their study, but it was found that these gender differences typically begin to occur in children around fifth grade and the beginning of puberty [2]. While there will, naturally, be differences between and even within genders, there should be further research done on how to decrease female levels of Music Performance Anxiety and how these levels change beyond the gender binary.

3.4 Younger Musicians and Musicians with Other Interests Typically Have Lower Levels

High levels of Music Performance Anxiety are not shown as often in musicians who have not trained as long or do not plan on having a career in music ([1], [9]). Music, and singing in particular, is linked to increasing mood and is thus used often with people who suffer from mental and physical health problems ([4], [5]). Amateurs tend to find more joy in a voice lesson than professionals do [1]. Furthermore, at the high school level, it was shown that those who did not have an interest in performing at a festival to showcase the piece they worked on showed lower signs of Music Performance Anxiety than those who were going to perform [9]. With those who are pursuing music, it is shown that the younger one is, the more stress affects them in a positive way [8].

3.5 The Effect of an Audience

The cycle of perfectionism and anxiety worsens when the musician has to perform for an audience or in a situation where they have to be evaluated for their performance. At a high school, musicians had to perform in front of researchers and peers [9]. While at two colleges, they had to perform in a jury, a final performance in front of faculty at the end of every semester to demonstrate what progress has been made ([3], [8]). On both the high school and college level, it was found that the addition of an audience significantly increased anxiety and heart rate. Brotons' study showed that musicians who had a double-blind jury (where the performer could not see the faculty and vice versa) were much less nervous than those who had a normal one. Double-blind juries, however, are not beneficial to the performer because learning how to perform while being able to see the audience is a vital part of any college of music process. As shown through the Yerkes-Dodson Law, one has to have some stress in order to grow and experience a concept called flow (a mental state where a person is fully immersed and engaged in what they are doing). Because of this, there need to be ways that one can learn to control their nerves and use them to their advantage.

4 Methodology

According to Ely (1991) and Salmon (1991), found in Brotons [3]’s literature review, there are four different manifestations of performance anxiety: behavioral (unnecessary movements), cognitive (mental processes), physiological (bodily changes), and psychological (emotions and feelings). I will measure each of these to see the most common one(s) that musicians struggle with through a four-stage process similar to LeBlanc, Jin, Obert, and Siivola [9]’s three-stage study. My four stages will consist of practicing in a practice room, a music lesson with their professor, a peer recital, and a mock jury. In order to do this, I will need a heart rate monitor (physiological), a self survey before and after each event (psychological and cognitive), and someone who will record the non-musical movements of the performer (behavioral). The faculty will be able to determine the overall musicality of the pieces, the lack of which is a cognitive problem. Furthermore, I will voice record each of these stages. In most of the studies, they only used heart rate monitors, but people can express fear in a multitude of ways. By using multiple result-collecting methods, I will be able to compare and contrast if that is the best way of collecting data and if an increased heart rate is really the biggest problem these musicians face. For my survey, I will use a revised version of the Music Performance Anxiety Inventory (MPAI). This was used often throughout the previous studies, and I will look at it and see if there are any questions I would like to ask in addition to or instead of.

For the practice room, I will use the self-surveys, in addition to having the musician voice record their practice. They will fill out part one of the survey, record themselves practicing for an hour, then fill out part two of the survey. Afterwards, they will send the recording and the surveys to me. The musicians will be allowed to do this within two to three days of being asked, so they can do it when it is most convenient for them. The main focus of this stage is the voice recording, and I will ask them to speak their thoughts aloud. I am very interested in seeing how people talk to themselves about something they are passionate about when no one is around to hear them. This is why I will have them record themselves rather than me or someone else doing it. For the music lesson, I will use a heart rate monitor, the surveys, and, if the professor allows it, a voice recording. During this stage, I want to see how the words of the professor affect the musician and if the musician sees these interactions as positive or negative. The heart rate monitor is used mainly for me to see if these lessons make the musician anxious, both even and especially so late in the semester. I will help with putting the heart rate monitor on, and then I will leave the room, so it feels more like a normal lesson. These two stages combined, also, serve as a way to test Sternbach ([10])’s idea of defensive practicing, which is practicing in the hopes of avoiding criticism and not of getting better.

For the peer recital, I will gather all of the participants and have them perform for each other. I will use the surveys, a heart rate monitor, a voice recording of the entire event, and I will have someone, most likely a faculty member or experienced performer, taking note of the performer’s actions or lack thereof. As this is the first time I will have someone recording movements, that will be the primary focus of this stage. The voice recording will be made, in case I need to go back and listen to anything over. For the final stage, the mock jury, I will, once again, be using all of the methods. I will make sure this is as similar to an actual jury as possible, so I will have them print off jury sheets and go through the entire

process. The main focus of this stage is simply to see how they react in what most consider an extremely stressful situation. I am, also, curious to see if some musicians think performing in front of their peers is more intimidating. I will be in the room, but in a corner, so I do not accidentally add an extra layer of stress. These two stages combined serve as a way to determine the performers' internal and external reactions to performing what they have worked on throughout the semester.

Most of my participants will probably be voice students, but I would like a variety of music majors of all different levels. I will have them go through this process on their primary instrument because that is the instrument they have spent the most time on and with. I would like about 45 to 60 people. I would prefer to have 15 to 20 females, 15 to 20 males, and 15 to 20 nonbinary/genderqueer people. All of the research I have seen focuses solely on males and females, and there is an entire group of people who have next to no information they can look at. Furthermore, females have consistently been found to have higher levels of anxiety than males. My study can hopefully allow researchers to see if Music Performance Anxiety is actually based mostly on genetics and a child's upbringing or if there is something else underlying these differences, like the need to prove oneself because of their gender, for instance. I believe I can get a good amount of participants because they would be getting to practice in front of an audience. Furthermore, I can ask the students during the peer review and the faculty on the mock jury panel to provide actual feedback, all of which will improve the musician's performance before their actual jury. Lastly, I expect that most people will experience parts of each manifestation and believe that the psychological aspect will have the highest levels within themselves. However, I think the behavioral aspect will have the highest levels overall because they are unconscious movements that one does not think about during or sometimes even after a performance.

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