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MUSIC PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

by

Author of Thesis Allison Custer

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Music Education
at
Lindenwood University

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MUSIC PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Art and Design Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
at
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By

Allison Custer

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Music Performance Anxiety in the Middle School Classroom

Allison Custer, Master of Arts/Music Education, 2020

Thesis Directed by: Dr.Katherine Herrell, Associate Professor, Music
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This project analyzes Music Performance Anxiety, including who it affects, symptoms and techniques to reduce symptoms. The task is to focus on activities that can be used in the middle school ensemble classroom, to help students who suffer from Music Performance Anxiety.

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Introduction

Performances are opportunities for musicians to showcase their abilities and musicianship, after numerous hours spent perfecting and honing their craft. Performances allow an audience to appreciate a musician's hard work and skill. Performances offer a chance for a musician to turn a page full of black ink into an emotional musical experience that is shared with many. A performance should be an exciting experience for any musician, but sadly, many musicians fear performing. The fear of missing notes, forgetting passages, and especially, the recollection of previous performances that did not go as planned, can stir up a tremendous uneasy feeling, known as Music Performance Anxiety. Music Performance Anxiety can affect musicians at every ability level and age group. Music performance anxiety can ultimately drain the performance of enjoyment and provoke a sense of dread. A musician can experience a strong sense of anxiety that can culminate physically, emotionally, and chiefly, psychologically.

Being a violinist myself, I have performed in a number of concerts, musicals, competitions, and recitals. In spite of performing in a multitude of environments and practicing numerous hours on end, I have always had difficulty controlling my performance anxiety. The experience is never something I enjoy until the performance is over. I experience physical symptoms of being sick, with palpable signs and symptoms, including illness, such as a queasy stomach, sweaty palms, and shaky hands. Symptoms not only affect a musician physically, but also, mentally. These symptoms can be very detrimental to a performance that was well-prepared for.

Music Performance Anxiety can make a performer feel like they have zero control of their performance, when symptoms manifest themselves to a point that they are completely uncontrolled. For many performers, a certain degree of nerves is normal, and it may even add

energy to the performance due to a rush of adrenaline. However, many musicians experience the symptoms of musical performance anxiety, and have, in turn, created ways to cope. Some musicians practice for their performances as much as possible, while others opt to undergo numerous types of therapy. Others have even resorted to medication. Music Performance Anxiety affects students in the music classroom, by hindering a musician's ability to play their instrument, or sing. This type of anxiety affects a performer, both physically and mentally, to the extent that the musician can no longer play to their highest abilities. Music Performance Anxiety hinders a musician's abilities of physically being able to play their instrument, and plagues many. By incorporating preparation techniques, and performance strategies one's anxiety can often be overcome.

Literature Review

There has been a great amount of research over Music Performance Anxiety and what can cause it to happen. Music Performance Anxiety affects a wide range of people from children to adults and even professional musicians. According to Dianna Kenny and Margeret Osborne (2006) performance anxiety is a group of disorders that affect individuals in a range of endeavors from test-taking, math performance, public speaking, sport, and the performing arts in dance, acting, and music. Tim Patston (2013) points out that Music Performance Anxiety affects individuals in a broad variety of musical endeavors. Professionals and amateurs alike are known to be affected by Music Performance Anxiety. According to Dianna Kenny (2016) her new definition of Music Performance Anxiety is the experience of marked and persistent anxious apprehension related to musical performance that has arisen through specific anxiety conditioning experiences and which is manifested through combinations of affective, cognitive, somatic and behavioral symptoms. It may occur in a range of performance settings but is usually more severe in settings involving high ego investment and evaluate threat. "It may be focal or occur comorbidly with other anxiety disorders in particular social phobia. It affects musicians across the lifespan and is at least partially independent of years of training, practice level or musical accomplishment" (Kenny, 2016). If a musician is affected by Music Performance Anxiety it can ruin an entire performance and also make performing an overall bad experience.

According to John Hipple (1997), Music Performance Anxiety is generally defended as the experience of persisting, distressful apprehension about a forthcoming performance (Hipple 1997). Performance anxiety, however, occurs when the cognitive and mental components involved with performing get mixed with the physical excitement to the create an uncomfortable level of tension (Edwards 2013). Contrary to what many would think, "Music performance

anxiety is less related to preparation and more to their ability to manage heightened emotional states,” (McGrath, 2017). For a musician, Music Performance Anxiety has three components or three main responses of the body. Performance anxiety is generally understood as a combination of three separate but interacting systems: physiological arousal, behavioral response and fearful cognitions (Osborne & Kenny 2008). The three components of Music Performance Anxiety are cognitive, somatic and behavioral. According to Lynn Holding (2016), examples of cognitive symptoms might include racing thoughts or an inability to remember texts or scale passages. Examples of somatic symptoms might include physical symptoms, such as queasy stomach, sweaty hands and faintness. Examples of behavioral symptoms account for what the previous symptoms engender in the anxious musician’s actual behavior.

Music Performance Anxiety can affect all musicians from different ages. Music Performance Anxiety occurs in musicians from amateurs to professionals, from children to adults. There is some research that says performance anxiety is a “learned reaction” that usually manifests in adolescence (Edwards, 2013). According to J. Nagel (2017), demanding expectations from studio teachers, school directors, or other music mentors, unhealthy home experiences in early childhood have also shown to be significant predictors of Music Performance Anxiety later on. A series of studies has explored Music Performance Anxiety in children. They found that many children, including 3-4-year-olds, display similar constellations of physical and physiological symptoms of Music Performance Anxiety as adult musicians and that performance anxiety is negatively correlated with self-esteem and performance quality (Kenny, 2011).

Those who have experienced stress over music lessons or competitions could also suffer from post-traumatic stress. In a study of composers and musicians, Inette Swart suggested that

unresolved trauma may lead to acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. In these cases, trauma is encoded in the brain and nervous system, causing an interference in healthy functioning and stress response that distracts from the quality and level of music performance. (Swart, 2014). Classical musicians are always competing and keeping score of how their performances went. Competitions in the music field starts at an early age. The stress of competing at such high levels can take a toll on the musician leading to symptoms of Music Performance Anxiety. According to McGrath (2017):

The longer you have been in this type of stressful environment the larger the toll it takes on the musician. Working in such a pervasively competitive classical performance environment, it is no wonder that large percentages of professional classical musicians have reported performance anxiety severe enough to interfere with both their careers and personal lives, and some have sadly even turned to alcohol or drug abuse in attempt to cope with the symptoms.

Since Music Performance Anxiety affects a wide array of musicians there are treatments that can help to alleviate symptoms. According to Lynn Holding, there are three main approaches when it comes to treatment: Standard Therapy, Non-Western and other alternative methods, and Pharmacological Treatments (Holding, 2016). A main type of therapy that is used when treating Music Performance Anxiety is cognitive-behavioral therapies. The goal of cognitive-behavioral therapy is to address dysfunctional emotions behaviors and thought processes through a goal-oriented, directional approach much grounded in science (McGrath, 2017).

Non-Western and other alternative methods to prevent the symptoms of Music Performance Anxiety include exercise, yoga, meditation, music therapy, hypnotherapy, Alexander Technique and biofeedback just to name a few.

Exercising and keeping a healthy diet have been proven to be a treatment for anxiety. “The anxiety reducing effects of exercise are well known, and research suggests that aerobic exercise may even be as effective as anti- anxiety medications” (A. Byrne & D.G Byrne, 1993) As music

performance is largely dependent on the execution of motor skills, yoga offers a particularly applicable mode of therapy for those with Music Performance Anxiety due to its emphasis on physical balance and stretching. Yoga is a practice that was developed over 5000 years ago in India that has grown in popularity across the world. The use of yoga to help with Music Performance Anxiety helps to alleviate stress, anxiety and musculoskeletal issues. As music performance is largely dependent on the execution of motor skills, yoga offers a particular applicable mode of therapy for those with Music Performance Anxiety due to its emphasis on physical balance and stretching (Khalsa & Shorter, 2009). Yoga can help train the body to stay relaxed during a performance allowing the musician to play freely.

Meditation works by empowering the mind to manage intrusions spanning from trivial distraction to anxiety, fear, panic, and anything that may compromise our inner peace (McGrath, 2017). The idea of meditation is to self-regulate one's mind and enhance one's overall well-being by promoting relaxation, creating a spiritual balance. Just as progressive muscular relaxation trains us to proactively identify and mediate physical tension, meditation works in a comparable way by empowering the mind to manage intrusions spanning from trivial distraction to anxiety, fear, panic and anything that may compromise our inner peace (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

The Alexander Technique is a therapeutic method used by many orchestra musicians. This therapy is offered at universities across the world as a way to control Music Performance Anxiety. The Alexander technique advocates, economy of effort and balance, helping participants to replace common practices of muscle tightness and restriction with more efficient and liberating habits, which can then be more easily channeled when under stress (Valentine, 2004). The Alexander Technique teaches musicians how to control muscle tightness under the

pressures of performing. The aim is to cultivate a more natural alignment of head, neck, and spine that has associated with qualities of balance, strength, and coordination. The method aims to teach conscious and voluntary control over posture and movement and to undo involuntary muscle tension (Kenny, 2011).

Biofeedback is a technique using electromyographic feedback to assist anxious performers to reduce their muscle tension. EMG measures the strength of electrical impulses occurring in muscles and produces traces of these impulses on a printout that can be easily visualized (Kenny, 2011). According to Hipple, Biofeedback can be used to assist the learning of deep muscle relaxation techniques. Being able to relax one's body during times of stress and anxiety can provide a performer with some degree of relief (Hipple, 1997).

Finally, there are also pharmaceuticals that can be used to help Music Performance Anxiety such as beta blockers. In an article by James Papsdorf, Brantigan, Brantigan and Joseph 1982 reported that beta blockers were effective in controlling performance anxiety, but they should be combined with psychological coping strategies (Nagel & Papsdorf, 1989). Most musicians who report using beta-blockers use them for auditions, solo recitals, concerto performances and difficult orchestral performances (Kenny, 2011)

Music Performance Anxiety occurs in musicians from amateurs to professionals, from children to adults. There is some research that says performance anxiety is a "learned reaction" that usually manifests in adolescence (Edwards, 2013). There are strategies that can be implemented into the ensemble classroom that can students who are struggling with Music Performance Anxiety over come it such as goal setting, practice, pre-performance routines, imagery in performance preparation and mental practice, just to name a few.

Goal setting theory states that the setting of specific challenging goals enhances performance (Kenny, 2011). There are three different types of performance goals; skill based, interpersonal and process oriented. Goal setting and goal type are associated with performance outcome and students need to be introduced early in their training into thinking about their goals for each performance so that it becomes an integral part of their performance preparation (Kenny, 2016).

Having good practice habits can increase one's self efficacy and ensure students are ready to perform. "Louis Spohr, an eminent violin teacher, was one of the first to advocate that beginners should avoid unsupervised practice at commencement of training and recommended daily lessons with a teacher for the first few months to establish correct techniques and to avoid cultivation of bad habits, but this is unrealistic. However, the point is that it is easier to create good habits from the beginning than to undo bad habits once established" (Kenny, 2011 pg. 203). Effective practice is a foundational skill to both prevent and manage performance anxiety. Regardless of the performer's degree of skill and confidence, without practice, that skill cannot be expressed to its full potential and confidence will be eroded with successive experiences of sub-optimal performances (Kenny, 2016).

Another concept that could be translated to the classroom is establishing pre-performance routines. Individuals take cues from the environment and from their own movements to aid their performance. Preparing all aspects of the performance is helpful because performers have a finite capacity to attend to all the relevant cues in the performance setting (Kenny, 2011). Performance routines are sequences of mental operations and behavioral actions that assist in the development of optimal mental state for skill execution and maintenance of attentional control during performance. These routines encourage the performer to remain grounded in the performance

moment in order to prevent the switch of attention to consciously monitoring skills that may interfere with automatic performance (Kenny, 2016).

Methodology

This project maintained an applied action-based method, in which readers developed an understanding of underlying reasons why Music Performance Anxiety can affect musicians within the ensemble classroom. This applied research method aims to find a solution to a direct problem. To begin my research, I first approached the definition of Music Performance Anxiety. This specific definition will help create focus over any symptoms that could occur. My emphasis was over the symptoms that can arise from the anxiety that musicians experience during a performance. These symptoms could include a vast array of physical and mental factors that could debilitate a musician's ability to perform to the best of their capabilities. These symptoms could ruin a performance for a musician thereby causing them to dread any public performance and ultimately cause them to never perform.

In my research I discovered ways that can help musicians overcome the symptoms of Music Performance Anxiety. These symptoms can cause a musician to have uncontrollable thoughts and movements that can distract from a performance. These techniques could subdue the symptoms of Music Performance Anxiety benefitting the musician tremendously. The type of techniques that I completed more research over include types of therapy, non-western techniques and doctor prescribed prescription medication.

I completed research on what age groups Music Performance Anxiety affects. My research states that Music Performance Anxiety can start in adolescence, my goal was to use the

techniques to alleviate the symptoms and create activities that could be used in the ensemble classroom.

Another emphasis for my project was coming up with ways to combat Music Performance Anxiety that could be intergraded into an ensemble classroom which includes any band, orchestra, or choir ensembles. Students who suffer from Music Performance Anxiety could experience an overwhelming sense of anxiety that could, in the long run, stop a child from becoming a musician. Examples that could be included in the classroom would include non-western and alternative ways to ease the symptoms of Music Performance Anxiety such as yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, goal setting, practice habits, pre-performance routines and performance rehearsal. The goal of incorporating these techniques into the classroom is to instill a sense of confidence in students who suffer from Music Performance Anxiety.

My research included compiling twelve weekly activities that could be incorporated into an ensemble classroom. These activities are be based on the research that I completed to find the most appropriate ways to deal with Music Performance Anxiety. These activities included different ways to cope with Music Performance Anxiety in the hope that students will be able to use these methods to gain control over their performances.

The goal of creating these activities is that students gain confidence in their musical abilities and in their own personal way to handle Music Performance Anxiety and they will be able to become more successful musicians.

Production and Analysis

Although there are copious studies that have researched Music Performance Anxiety and its symptoms, before this project there was not a comprehensive analysis that combined the existing research and progress into a resource that is oriented towards relieving Music Performance Anxiety in the classroom. Throughout the years, there has been research on ways to cope with Music Performance Anxiety, but there has not been one specific resource that is geared towards the ensemble classroom.

This analysis consists of a booklet that was created using the previously described research. This booklet contains multiple ways that can help alleviate symptoms of Music Performance Anxiety. These activities focus on using Non-Western techniques that have been proven to relieve stress such as yoga and meditation. The use of yoga to help with Music Performance Anxiety helps to alleviate stress, anxiety and musculoskeletal issues (Khalsa & Shorter, 2009). Meditation is also another useful way to relieve stress. Meditation works by empowering the mind to manage intrusions spanning from trivial distraction to anxiety, fear, panic, and anything that may compromise our inner peace (McGrath, 2017).

When Music Performance Anxiety is presented in the ensemble classroom the following activities can be used; progressive muscle relaxation, box breathing, yoga, meditation, positive affirmations, practice habits, proper nutrition, proper sleep, performance rehearsal, impromptu performances, self-reflection and goal setting.

The booklet initially introduces reasons why this topic is important to me, reason being I have struggled with Music Performance Anxiety and I often see it in my students as well. Next, the book is organized into twelve sections that include the different techniques that can be used

in a classroom to help reduce or cope with anxiety. The book discusses what each activity consists of and gives ideas on how best to implement them in the classroom.

Conclusions

This project offered an opportunity to place Music Performance Anxiety under a microscope to better examine how it affects people differently and the many methods used to overcome it. With a collection of anxiety relieving activities at their disposal, teachers learn to utilize various tools to help students who may be struggling to show their full musical potential. While this project did not provide a full spectrum look at Music Performance Anxiety, it did create a template for procedures teachers and private music lesson instructors can incorporate into lessons to help students who may be overwhelmed in performance situations.

Upon completing my project over Music Performance Anxiety, I have come to the realization that there are a few things that could be developed further. There are many different ways to treat anxiety in general. That being said, there are opportunities for me to include more activities that could be used in a classroom.

While there is research available concerning Music Performance Anxiety there are many factors that contribute to how a person is affected. A musician's age range and ability may not always indicate if they are going to experience Music Performance Anxiety.

Additionally, placing a greater focus on creating multiple lessons or guided activities for each section of the booklet would have given the reader more insight on how to apply it to the classroom.

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