

Reactions to fear — and hints for coping

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Taking Centre-Stage

Ruth Bonetti

Ruth@enjoyWordsAndMusic.com

<http://enjoyWordsAndMusic.com>

We all need some protective coping mechanisms sometimes for bare survival. However, these largely negative reactions do not allow us to develop our full potential, or our careers to forge ahead. Surely, there are positive reactions that we can utilise?

As much as we might like it to be otherwise, we all fail at times — even the best of us. American actor Harrison Ford has said: ‘Failures are inevitable. Unfortunately, in film, they live forever and they’re forty feet wide and twenty feet high.’² IBM founder Thomas Watson said, ‘In order to succeed, double your failure rate.’

✧ Some hints for reacting positively to fear

There are, fortunately, some positive strategies for coping with fear. Here are a few of them:

1. Confront fears

A most important initial step is to acknowledge the stress or tension and it will loosen its stranglehold on us. Face, confront and admit those fears. Free flow of expression is blocked if we do not do so. Many hope to jolly themselves out of their morass, to think away or throw off their fears — like the ostrich, they bury their heads in the sand until problems just go away. This is, of course, hardly a comfortable performance posture, besides limiting projection of their art to others.

2. Prepare

A first response from performers asked ‘How do you prevent stagefright?’ was ‘Prepare! Practise — thoroughly and with plenty of time!’ This warrants in-depth consideration and will be given it in chapter 5.

3. Be aware that experience breeds confidence

Forcing oneself into frequent performance opportunities develops confidence born from experience, and the knowledge that, ‘Hey, I survived! I got to the end! I did it!’ It is far harder to stoke oneself up for occasional performances than to face frequent, routine ones.

Singer Rhonda Bruce writes:

After a career of isolated solo performances a role in a long-running musical was a relief. As I became so used to going onstage every single night, it ceased to be a major event and became as easy as any familiar, routine job.

4. Reverse roles

Anxious performers feel exposed, vulnerable and on display. Try reversing the situation by imagining the audience or jury panel huddling in their underwear or naked, ourselves self-assured by comparison

Eloise Rusted, working with nervous musicians, used such humour to defuse the power of critics. She asked them to imagine in caricature the debilitating ‘judges’ of their minds and strip off their robes. They watched them scurry, naked, for cover. As they laughed them away judges lost much of their power.³

5. Shift the focus of attention

You can resolutely haul your attention elsewhere. Sit relaxed, comfortably, and visualise transferring all of your nervous energy away from the tense part of your body (for example, the jaw) down into your toes. In performance, think ‘toes, toes, toes’, and the jaw relaxes. Practise this in the weeks before a performance. When worried about tricky fingering, transfer attention to deep breathing and the fingers will flow with ease.

6. Physically relax and use breathing exercises

Chapter 7 deals with some of the many possibilities: relaxation and meditation techniques, yoga, Feldenkreis and breathing exercises — and more.

7. Become detached from the audience

We can try to pretend that the audience is not there, like our ostrich or the monkeys who see no evil. This may be a reasonable coping mechanism, but at the expense of scintillating performances, communicating empathy and rich imagination to an impressed audience. It might result in a bland, acceptable effort, at best. Besides, a cough or squirm will soon remind us of their existence. Instead, try facing them in the ways suggested below.

8. Focus on a benevolent stranger in the audience

This is a more exciting possibility than detachment, one which will draw a positive response from the audience.

Choose a pleasant face from the crowd and make that person’s day, by playing just for him or her.

9. Identify with the audience

Tell yourself: ‘If all these cultured/discerning/important people have come here tonight to hear me perform, then I must be really worth hearing.’ As success breeds success, so a positive attitude earns respect from a majority.

10. The paradoxical approach

Some performers consciously make their hands tremble, their knees shake, or their palms sweat as a way of trying to produce the symptom rather than to conceal it. Clarinettist and guitarist Karlin Love says:

Because I have so much mental energy going on in a performance, it helps me to focus on one finger as it's virtually impossible to think about all of them at once. In my case, I

concentrate on curving the left hand fourth finger. The result is that my fingers stop shaking or, at least the shaking doesn't interfere with my playing. I also find it helpful to practice slowly and correctly, feeling the passage through to form an accurate memory. In later performances, I remember how that felt...

This is surprisingly difficult! Others may deliberately commit a small mistake, thereby fulfilling that fear of a danger, thus heading off further anxiety. Now the mistake is over and done with, they cease to fear a total fiasco.

11. Self-program

Program yourself for a successful performance by visualising it in detail weeks before the event. Create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

12. Become absorbed in the performance

The more we love our work, and the more we invest in sharing the treasures of our art, the less we are aware of stage fright. The great acting teacher Stanislavski said, 'Love the art in yourself not yourself in the art.' Focussing on ourselves exacerbates our problems: we need to look outwards. Brett Dean says:

Performing in a large ensemble or a concerto is easier; there are a lot of people behind you to help. I find it helps me to look at the score before playing, to realise I'm just one of many other musicians. And eye-contact with my colleagues helps. I try to create contact, so I open out rather than close in on myself.

13. Use imagination

Shift your mind away from the worries. Infuse colour and vitality into your performance by inventing a storyline to fit the moods you project. Assign voices and characters to the parts, invent dialogues in your mind between, for example, a big-booted macho tenor and an eyelash-batting soprano. Or imagine the colours of various instruments a rich, deep cello in this phrase, a bright piccolo there. Such ideas improve focus, concentration, projection and enjoyment.

14. Give out

Giving out to others switches the spotlight off our own fears. Help someone else and your own nerves will seem less constricting.

15. Enjoy!

Much of my own teaching consists of encouraging students to enjoy their music. Our society and institutions, our performing arts centres are riddled with industrious, conscientious little ants, busily developing technique, practising fanatically and endlessly, taking themselves and their music/dance/acting so seriously. They are pushed on by their teachers' ego, high expectations and criticisms.

It is tragic that many lose the enjoyment of their art. Worse, in this great fog, they miss the moods, the emotions — even the humour — that the composer or playwright wanted expressed. Violinist Nigel Kennedy was scathing of one institution:

There is the stench of ambition, of ruthless professional people only too happy to conform to whatever is musically suitable to succeed. It must be heartbreaking for composers. Mr Great Composer sweated blood to get his feelings out and, centuries later, audiences make a conscious effort to try and recapture the fullness of that man's passion.

Is it some eccentricity that I see the funny side in many works where others don't? Composers like Malcolm Arnold, who scored his Grand, Grand Overture for soloists playing vacuum cleaners and floor polishers, certainly did not want us to take music so seriously. Together with Hoffnung, he staged the Hoffnung Festival, which hilariously parodied many styles and expectations.

Many composers had a wonderful sense of humour. I cannot play music by Franz Krommer with a straight face, for he frequently intersperses comic leaps like hiccups. I relish rather than blush for my performance of Weber's 1st Clarinet Concerto final movement (the theme to which unkind persons supply the words, 'Buggered it up again') which reduced a whole audience to convulsions.

Now *there* is a composer with a sense of fun! How could so many players be tangled up in mere notes and miss that? If so, what are we doing to our students?

Look for the beauty, the composer's craftsmanship, the wit and sparkle rather than for the difficulties. Then panic, tension, fear of criticism or of tripping will fade to manageable proportions. Enjoy the music — so will the listeners.