The career demands on professional musicians are high. In order to develop and sustain expertise, they need to be physically, emotionally and mentally fit. One of the most debilitating and frequently-reported problems they face is musical performance anxiety (MPA). The Investigating Musical Performance (IMP) project has investigated the presence, causes, contributory factors and effects of anxiety, and the coping strategies employed by musicians in four different genres: Western classical, popular, jazz, and Scottish traditional music.

Musical performance anxiety (MPA) is a common experience amongst performing musicians. Female and Western classical performers report higher distress levels. Musicians experience higher levels of anxiety in contexts where they feel more exposed, for example in solo or small group performances, irrespective of their musical genre. Levels of MPA tend to be higher immediately prior to a performance, but reduce once it begins. The impacts of MPA relate to its perceived severity during performance but are mediated by musicians’ performance experience, their susceptibility to anxiety and their coping strategies.

Higher Education Institutions have a responsibility to prepare musicians for the demands of professional musicianship, and challenge the conception that successful musicians do not experience performance anxiety. Strategies for coping with the demands of performance should be person- and performance-specific. Individuals’ performance anxiety thresholds will vary between different performance contexts. MPA is a normal experience for musicians. What matters is how individuals learn to deal with it. Performance expertise develops in a community of practice alongside peer support. Techniques focusing on modifying people’s perceptions and facilitating a positive mindset, such as cognitive behavioural therapy and neuro-linguistic programming, can be particularly useful for musicians.
Musicians’ perceptions of the effects of anxiety on the quality of their performance were explored separately in each musical genre. Western classical, jazz and popular musicians referred to positive effects more frequently, in contrast to Scottish traditional musicians who more frequently referred to negative ones. Analyses also revealed that the same musicians have a tendency to experience the same type of anxiety (adaptive or maladaptive) in both solo and group performances. Having performance experience appears to relate to the perceptive-biased influence of experiencing anxiety. This may be because seasoned performers learn to control physiological arousal so that it peaks just before a performance and decreases during it (Salmon et al., 1989). Another explanation is that they see pre-performance arousal as something to be expected, not as a threat to their performance (Salmon and Meyer, 1998). A low overall tendency to being anxious protected musicians from a fear of failure and negative evaluation. These fears may contribute to ‘over the top’ arousal that is difficult to control during performance.

Coping strategies for performance anxiety

This study has established that performance anxiety can have positive connotations of experiencing anxiety. For others it can create significant problems. It impairs their ability to cope with the demands of performance and reduces the quality of the performance they eventually give. As one musician said in the survey:

‘Many musicians develop their love of music and passion for an instrument before considering how equipped they are for dealing with public performance. Other musicians grow up in an environment where they have many opportunities to display their skills in public at an early age. Regardless of environment, those who suffer detrimental effects usually carry on suffering until they take a step.’ (Classical)

It is important for musicians to develop strategies for dealing with pre-performance nerves. Our thematic analyses showed that these strategies could be categorised as being ‘emotion focused’ or ‘problem focused.’ Emotion focused strategies concentrated on alleviating or moderating distressing emotions, and included approaches such as:

- Accepting oneself
- Drinking alcohol or using beta-blockers
- Avoiding performance
- Being more realistic about performance
- Using herbal aids
- Investing in techniques such as hypnotherapy or neuro-linguistic programming
- Maintaining a positive mental attitude and self-image
- Reading self-help books
- Doing activities to reduce pressure or take one’s mind off
- Deep breathing
- Exercising
- Employing mental rehearsal
- Investing in healthy nutrition
- Warning up before performance

Problem focused strategies concentrated on finding ways to cope with the demands of performance and deal with the negative effects of anxiety. These included:

- Practising and being well-prepared
- Being proactive about performance
- Deep breathing
- Exercising
- Using preventative techniques and programming
- Hypnotherapy or neuro-linguistic programming
- Seeking support from others
- Being under-prepared in an effort to reduce the pressure of performance
- Problem focused techniques such as cognitive behavioural therapy and neuro-linguistic programming are particularly promising for musicians who suffer from negative performance anxiety, as these methods focus on modifying people’s perceptions of an event/the situation and facilitate a more positive mindset.

A variety of personal factors are likely to interact in influencing how a performance event is perceived by the performer. This means that more specialised techniques may be appropriate for people who, for instance, have high trait anxiety as a result of other life events. Specific performance factors (type of performance, context and musical style) also add to the range of responses which a musician may have to the demands of a particular performance. Successful strategies for coping with the demands of performance should be person- and performance-specific. Techniques that work for one person may not work for another. Previous research has demonstrated differences between subjective and objective measurements of anxiety, suggesting that there are variations in the performance anxiety thresholds of individuals (Abel and Larkin, 1990; LeBlanc et al., 1997; Papageorgi, 2007) that may influence how musicians perceive and respond to physiological arousal. Musicians reported a variety of coping strategies to deal with maladaptive performance anxiety, most of which were self-devised. Few musicians reported seeking advice or support from psychologists, other professionals or peers. This suggests that for many musicians admitting that performance anxiety is a problem may still be a taboo and considered best to be dealt in private.

Some tentative variations between the ways in which musicians from different musical genres conceptualised and dealt with performance anxiety were observed in the qualitative data. These indicate that the specific performance context may influence their perceptions of the demands of performance and their ability to cope with them. Further research is needed to investigate how genre-specific contexts might influence musical performance anxiety so that strategies to deal with the demands of performance can be adapted accordingly.
The research

The study reported here formed part of the Investigating Musical Performance (IMP): Comparative Studies in Advanced Musical Learning research project, a two-year comparative study devised to investigate how classical, popular, jazz and Scottish traditional musicians deepen and develop their learning about performance in undergraduate, postgraduate and wider music community contexts.

Included in the research methodology was a specially devised, web-based questionnaire survey, comprising 57 questions and linked electronically to a 623-field database. The questionnaire was distributed on two separate occasions and served to provide a comprehensive, short-term, longitudinal comparison of participants’ backgrounds, attitudes and approaches to advanced performance learning over a twelve-month period. Complementary data were obtained from semi-structured interviews, individual case studies, focus groups, participant email diaries and observations of studio-based HEI instrumental lessons.

The presence of performance anxiety

The findings indicate that musicians, irrespective of musical genre, experienced higher levels of performance anxiety in contexts where they felt more exposed (such as in solo playing), and suggest that female musicians tend to be likely to report high levels of anxiety, corroborating earlier research with classical musicians. The difference in performance anxiety between female and male musicians was larger in the more experienced group than female and male musicians was reported high levels of anxiety, corroborating earlier research with classical musicians. The difference in performance anxiety between female and male musicians was larger in the more experienced group than female and male musicians was reported high levels of anxiety, corroborating earlier research with classical musicians. 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The timeline of anxiety in performance

Reported anxiety levels increased as solo and group performances approached. These followed a pattern described in previous literature as being important in facilitating optimal performance (e.g. Salmon et al., 1989; Wilson, 2002), as anxiety provides the energy required for performance and decreases significantly during the event. No significant differences were found between musical genres before and during solo performances, but some variations between genres were observed prior to group performances. Popular musicians were the most anxious group immediately before performance and jazz musicians reporting the most anxiety one hour before. Levels of anxiety during group performance were similar across the four musical genres (see Figure 2).

The causes of anxiety in musical performance

The perceived causes of performance anxiety were examined by a thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Four key variables were identified: fear of failure, the quality of the performance context, a personal assessment of an event’s value, and lack of confidence. Fear of failure and the quality of the performance context were the factors more frequently mentioned. Classical and jazz musicians in particular tended to comment on increased anxiety arising from the formality of the classical context and playing improvised music respectively, as well as having a large audience and playing solo. A contrasting positive influence was the presence of co-performers in reducing the pressure of performance. Popular and Scottish traditional musicians made more frequent references to factors signifying fear of failure. These include being assessed, playing with highly-esteemed performers, high expectations, attributing high status to the audience, perceiving an imbalance between ideal and actual ability, expecting negative outcomes and feeling under pressure to succeed.

The impact of performance anxiety on performance

When participants were asked to report the extent to which their performance was impaired or improved as a result of performance anxiety, a different response pattern emerged for solo and group performances. The largest percentage of respondents reported that their solo performance was impaired by anxiety, but most musicians felt that their group performance improved.

‘During a solo performance, the anxiety turns to fear for me. In a group performance it turns into excitement.’ (Classical)

A number of themes were identified concerning the positive effects of anxiety on musical performance:

• Improving concentration and stamina
  “Good nerves can help elevate a performance. An amount of adrenaline increases focus and awareness, and increases stamina.” (Classical)

• Making performance special
  “It all gets channelled into making a good sound. It gives me that extra sparkle.” (Classical)

• Confirming motivation to do well
  “It isn’t a bad thing to get nervous before a performance. It can show that you care about what you are about to do and can often help you concentrate on what you are doing.” (Popular)

• Improving performance quality
  “If anxiety is used positively it can easily be turned into adrenaline to fuel a good performance.” (Jazz)

• Signifying a passion for music
  “If there are no nerves before a performance then you’ve lost your passion for performing.” (Popular)

• Being beneficial if approached in the right way
  “Personally, I find that if you channel your nerves and anxiety before a performance, you can make them work for you - like a rush of adrenaline to kickstart the performance!” (Scottish traditional)

In discussing negative performance anxiety, participants mentioned a number of common factors:

• Decreasing the quality of playing
  “Oh, it definitely decreases the quality. And I never perform to the standard I know I can perform to, because I’m so nervous.” (Scottish traditional)

• Reducing the enjoyment of playing
  “The anxiety that I associate with performing (especially solos) is the single, most powerful factor that has significantly impaired my enjoyment of music and performing.” (Classical)

• Increasing tension
  “Since the age of forty, I have experienced muscle pains and weakness caused by tension affecting...
Further information

Further information about the project, journal publications and conference papers is available at http://www.tlrp.org/proj/Welch.html

Key project publications:


The project was conceived as a multi-site, multi-methods study that draws equally on the strengths and expertise of four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): the Institute of Education, University of London; University of York; Leeds College of Music; and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Glasgow.

An innovative, web-based, PDF survey instrument was designed, which allowed data from participants at remote sites to be sent automatically to a central server for collation. The online survey instrument was piloted and refined before the main data collection. The contents of the questionnaire survey included 57 questions that embraced a wide range of perspectives on musical performance that built on diverse literature sources. Respondents were 244 musicians, 55 per cent of whom were male and 45 per cent female. More in-depth information was obtained from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 27 selected case studies (13 undergraduates and 14 portfolio musicians) and qualitative comments related to performance anxiety provided in the survey by 65 musicians.

The project has produced new evidence relating to the processes that underpin teaching and learning within higher education music contexts. Findings from the IMP project have so far been published in key Higher Education, Music Psychology and Music Education journals, such as Research Papers in Education, Psychology of Music, Music Education Research and the British Journal of Music Education. We have also presented our findings in a number of international conferences (31 up to March 2009) in the fields of Higher Education, Music Education and Psychology of Music.

TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

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The TLRP is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), with contributions from each of the four Higher Education Institutions that make up the project. The TLRP programme is managed by the TLRP Programme Office in the Institute of Education, University of London.