

MUSIC PERFORMANCE ANXIETY: DOCUMENTATION ON EFFECTIVE MUSIC PRACTICES

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Abstract

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is a negative emotional state of fear of what could happen during performance. Its anticipation can interfere with or even end the career of any musician. During music performance stress can interfere with the performance, thus affecting the individual in many different ways. However, proper documentation has not been done to address issues of music performance anxiety. This paper attempts to define music performance anxiety and how it can affect the musician, while paying attention to certain demographic and psychological factors that can encourage it. The paper also suggests possible ways of managing music performance anxiety. A qualitative research methodology using Kenny Music Performance Anxiety Inventory (K-MPAI) was adopted as a reference for the study. Findings showed that, music performance anxiety mostly occurs during performing in public than during rehearsals. MPA can be triggered due to individual personality or trait, and age and gender were significant factors in the occurrence of music performance anxiety. In addition, the nature of the performance determined the degree of the anxiety as the researcher observed that performers who performed either for auditioning or for examinations experienced the music performance anxiety than those who merely performed for entertainment purpose. In conclusion, prior to performance, musicians have to learn how to control the negative feelings which can be achieved through various techniques such as relaxation, preparation of practice and self-confidence.

Keywords: Documentation, Music Performance Anxiety, Fright,

Introduction

Music is a fundamental channel of communication that provides a means by which people can share emotions, intentions, feelings and meanings even though their spoken languages maybe mutually understanding. A successful musician must not only have excellent and technical skills but should also have the capacity to withstand the psychological and physical demands of performing before public. The stress of preparing and delivering a performance can often create high levels of anxiety. Music performance anxiety which is also referred to stage fright is experienced by a high percentage of professional musicians and music students (Kenny, 2004).

According to Osborne and Kenny (2005), Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is a condition in which a performer's response to stress goes beyond the normal arousal state, resulting in detrimental consequences. Dyce and O'Connor (1994) stated that sometimes a moderate amount

of anxiety can be perceived as a facilitator of performance. However, Wesner, Noyes and Davis (1990) viewed that a higher level of anxiety may increase significant debilitating effects. Determining the extent to which stressful performances may affect musicians is thus very important to better understand the MPA phenomenon.

Performance anxiety is generally understood as a combination of three separate but interacting systems: physiological arousal (including disturbances in breathing rate, perspiration, inhibition of saliva), behavioural responses (including difficulty maintaining posture and failures of technique) and fearful cognitions (concerning the probability of a performance catastrophe and the likelihood and consequences of negative evaluation) (Steptoe, 2001).

Very young children rarely experience the type of performance anxiety that afflicts older people. On the contrary, most young children love to perform, love an audience and seem blissfully unaware of any flaws in their “performance.” This transition is due to a combination of factors, the most important of which are our innate temperament; trait anxiety; increasing cognitive capacity, self-reflective function and capacity for perspective taking that develop through childhood and adolescence; the type of parenting and other interpersonal experiences that we have; our perception and interpretation of the world around us; technical skill and mastery, and specific performance experiences that may have positive or negative outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

The anxiety experienced during the music performance process is a real phenomenon which is prevalent among students and may have debilitating effects on students’ performances. Despite the existence of anxiety during the performance among music students, this phenomenon has yet to be documented among scholars in the Nigerian academic world. Hence, the rationale for this study on the need to document music performance anxiety for effective music practices among music performers in Nigeria. This paper attempts to define music performance anxiety and how it can affect the musician, while paying attention to certain demographic and psychological factors that can encourage it. The paper also attempts to suggest possible ways of managing music performance anxiety through some documentation and debriefing with a view to effectively containing this scourge *Stress*: Stress may be interpreted in various ways. Kasper, den Boer and Ad Sitsen (2003) state that stress is classically defined as a threatening of homeostasis¹ to which the organism, in order to survive, responds with a large number of adaptive responses.

¹ Homeostasis: the tendency towards a relatively stable equilibrium between interdependent elements, especially as maintained by physiological processes (Pearsall & Hanks, 2003)

Fear: Fear may be defined as being an adaptive response to threatening situations (Bear et al., 2007). It is inherently negative. As explained by Baars and Gage (2007), fear learning is a long lasting and stable kind of learning that is remarkably resistant to change and voluntary control. While fear learning is adaptive in that it allows us to avoid predictable dangers in the environment, it can become disabling if it is misplaced or exaggerated. This is also supported by Bear et al. (2007) who state that fear is not an appropriate or adaptive response in all circumstances. The inappropriate expression of fear characterizes anxiety disorders.

Anxiety: Anxiety is a response to stressors that have both a physiological (somatic) component and a psychological (cognitive and affective) component. It is derived from a Latin word, meaning a condition of agitation and distress. A current definition of anxiety comes from Barlow (2000):

Anxiety is a unique and coherent cognitive-affective structure within our defensive motivational system. At the heart of this structure is a sense of uncontrollability focused on future threat, danger, or potentially negative events... Accompanying this negative affective state is a strong physiological or somatic component that may reflect activation of distinct brain circuits such as the corticotrophin releasing factor system.

Anxiety comes with excessive worrying and avoidance behaviour. It is detrimental to social stance and affects productivity.

Arousal: Arousal is a general state of activation that goes from deep sleep to extreme excitement (Kenny, 2011). It is neither positive nor negative. As reported by Emmons and Thomas (2008), the term arousal represents the result of two types of anxiety, 'mental' and 'physical' interacting and producing a state of emotional readiness to perform. As everyone is different, there is not a right level of arousal common for all; the optimal level of arousal depends on individuals, and the nature of each situation (Emmons & Thomas, 2008). Some musicians may perform better when they feel up to the task, while others may give excellent performances only when they are relatively calm. Some may be overexcited to play alone in front of an audience, but will stay relaxed when they perform in groups. Emmons and Thomas (2008) explain that performers speak of an *Ideal Performing State*, one in which there is a feeling of being really ready, mentally and physically, to perform, that is, the state of arousal for correct and balanced performance.

Stage fright: Stage fright may be defined as a phenomenon that appears at the most inopportune and inappropriate times and, in its most severe form, can cripple and end a most talented and promising career. Stage fright is the term used when describing anxiety and blocked artistic expression, particularly when it is within the bounds of performing arts

(Rappoport, 1989). Powell (2004) states that stage fright is a form of debilitating anxiety similar to public-speaking anxiety and test-taking anxiety.

Music Performance Anxiety Theories

Lang's Three-System Model of Fear

Lang (1971) proposed a model in which three interactive, yet partially independent systems (behavioral, physiological, and verbal), describe the components of fear reactions (Craske & Craig, 1984). As explained by Salmon and Meyer (1998), the cognitive [or verbal] component is represented by thoughts and related mental images of risk or danger. The behavioral manifestation of anxiety is a tendency to avoid or escape from anything perceived as dangerous. The physiological component of anxiety involves the somatic reactions that accompany heightened arousal. It seems that the term verbal system may be used interchangeably with the terms cognitive component (Salmon, 1990) and affective reports (Lang, 1969). The three-system model of fear may be interpreted in two ways: (a) concordance/discordance, and (b) synchrony/desynchrony.

As summarized by Kenny (2011), concordance refers to the level of response equivalence between the three factors [behavioral, physiological, and verbal] at any given time; synchrony refers to the rate of change of the three factors. Desynchrony could take the form of independence or inverse relationships between the factors. Craske and Craig (1984) further explain that the degree of concordance depends upon the intensity of the emotional response and demand features of the situation. Under conditions which evoke strong emotional responses, fearful individuals will respond with comparably high levels of anxiety in each response system (i.e. concordance). In conditions that do not evoke strong emotional responses, the three-system model predicts discordance.

Even if Lang's model classically comes from psychological theories, it easily lends itself to be applied to MPA theories. Indeed, Craske and Craig (1984) tested this theory with 40 pianists using self-report measures (verbal system), judge ratings (behavioral system) and autonomic measures (physiological system). Their results provided support for the three-system model by showing that, there was greater synchrony among the behavioral, self-report and autonomic response systems in the relatively anxious group, whereas there was a greater tendency toward desynchrony in the relatively non-anxious group. These findings indicated that the three response systems can vary independently, particularly when the individual is only mildly stressed (Craske & Craig, 1984).

Epidemiology of Music Performance Anxiety

It is not difficult to imagine that most performers, by the very nature of their profession, would be affected by the 'general stresses related to having to perform under conditions of high adrenalin flow, anxiety, fatigue, social pressure, and financial insecurity' (Lehrer, Goldman, & Strommen, 1990). Powell (2004) estimated that approximately 2% of the US population suffers from debilitating performance anxiety (including public speaking, test taking, 'stage fright' in performing artists and athletes, and writer's block). About one-third of sufferers have other comorbid conditions, including another anxiety disorder (usually generalized anxiety disorder or social anxiety) (Sanderson *et al.*, 1990).

Powell (2004) acknowledges that some of those presenting with performance anxiety have underlying psychological conflicts that require psychotherapy, but estimates that about two thirds of those presenting with concerns about performance anxiety to his university's mental health clinic did not qualify for either Axis I or II diagnoses. He describes these cases as performance anxiety. Since not all performers suffer the same degree of music performance anxiety, or indeed report the same levels of occupational stress, individual differences in a range of psychological characteristics are likely to account for variations in the degree to which musicians experience symptoms. However, no category of performer is exempt from the experience of music performance anxiety. Whether a child, adolescent, or adult musician, whether amateur or professional, experienced or inexperienced, solo or ensemble, instrumentalist or singer, performers of all types and ages may suffer from music performance anxiety.

Unlike the anxiety disorders, the field of music performance anxiety has not yet developed universal, reliable, and valid assessment instruments for the assessment of music performance anxiety. Many of the available population studies of musicians have used instruments especially designed for a particular study. Few of these instruments have been published or validated and it is rare for scoring criteria or cut-off scores to have been developed. In such circumstances, we cannot be confident that each questionnaire is identifying the musicians with the same level of performance anxiety nor whether the proportions identified would be the same if another instrument had been used.

Causes of Music Performance Anxiety

Situational and Personal Sources of Stress: Evidence suggests that personal and environmental factors are associated with MPA (Esplen & Hodnett, 1999). As supported by Robson, Davidson and Snell (1995), this shows that anxiety may be caused by internal and external stimuli. Environmental factors (or situational sources of stress) refer to any circumstances surrounding a

performance that may have an impact on levels of MPA experienced by the musicians. Emmons and Thomas (2008) propose examples of environmental factors that may affect performers: (a) the presence of an audition panel; (b) another musician performing the same repertoire; (c) the presence of the voice or instrumentalist teacher during an audition or competition; (d) an opening night with press event; (e) an accompanist arriving late, etc.

Situational factors also include people on whom the performer depends. For instance, in music ensembles, conductors are known to induce MPA (Emmons & Thomas, 2008). In fact, they appear as the primary factor of anxiety induction in choral singers' experience of MPA (Ryan & Andrews, 2009).

There is a strong relationship between personality and performance anxiety (Arneson, 2010). Personality traits such as neuroticism, introversion, low self-esteem and perfectionism have been associated with MPA (Papageorgi et al., 2007). General trait anxiety has also been correlated positively with MPA (Cox & Kenardy, 1993). Abril (2007) explains that MPA may originate from past negative experiences. He claims that music teachers and family members exert a great influence regarding the singer's identity and his/her singing ability. This may shape the beliefs and may emotionally impact the individual for a long time (Abril, 2007). Meharg (1988) explains that parents and teachers contribute to performance anxiety by placing unrealistic expectations on music students. Musicians' previous experiences have thus the power to alter the subjective appraisal of forthcoming performances: bad experiences may create fear about performing again, while positive experiences may increase the performer's confidence (Papageorgi et al., 2007). Therefore, MPA may be perceived as facilitating or debilitating, depending on a variety of personality and situational factors (Kubzansky & Stewart, 1999).

Temporal occurrence of MPA: Salmon's studies (1989, 1990) showed that the anticipation of a performance may be more stressful than the actual performance. A performer's stress may increase while waiting for the performance to begin, or in anticipation of problems to occur during the performance (Salmon, 1990). It may also undermine the musician's confidence (Nagel, 1990). Emmons and Thomas (2008) explain that, pre-performance stress may occur anytime from weeks before the performance to seconds before walking on stage. It may also happen at the beginning of the performance (Emmons & Thomas, 2008).

As pointed out by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the temporal factor is an important parameter of stressful situations. This factor includes components of imminence and duration, which means that the levels of anxiety may be affected by the interval of time during which a musician anticipates a performance, and by the duration of the performance. The temporal factor may also influence threat and challenge appraisals. Yoshie *et al.*'s findings (2009) support that positive

appraisal helps pianists to improve their performance quality. Indeed, the appraisal may become more or less intense if musicians perceive their situation as harmful and dangerous, or as stimulating and challenging. The manner in which musicians interpret their situations allows them to manage stress through cognitive coping (challenging appraisal) or through more complex coping processes (threat appraisal) like hyper vigilance, obsessive thinking, avoidance, etc. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was introduced, using Kenny Music Performance Anxiety Inventory (K-MPAI) as a reference for the study. The researcher sampled all the student music performers in the Department of Music, University of Port Harcourt. Data for the study were gathered using document analysis, performance observation and individual interaction with the students.

Findings

The researcher observed that majority of music performing students experience some sort of music performance anxiety before and during their performance assessment or evaluation than during an entertaining performance show. The degree to which they experience the performance anxiety depends largely on individual personality traits and demographics such as age and gender.

As observed by the researcher, age is a factor that influences the degree of music performance anxiety. Here, the degree of performance anxiety a student experiences decreases as the age increases. This could be as a result of the student's self-awareness and development overtime on what is being required of him/her during a performance assessment session. Gender of the student was another factor the researcher observed. Female students experienced more music performance anxiety than the male students. The researcher observed that the high occurrence of music performance anxiety among the female students than the male students came from self-confidence due to a continuous affirmation among the male students than the female students. For instance, the male students tend to gather together more frequently to rehearse and encourage one another than the female students. The continual privately scheduled rehearsals among the male students helped boost their self-confidence which in turn reduces the amount of music performance anxiety they experience during their music performance assessment.

In addition, personality trait was also observed as a factor that triggers music performance anxiety. Students who are generally worried about everything experienced a high degree of music performance anxiety. For example, students who exhibit lively personalities were

observed to experience a lesser degree of music performance anxiety than those students who did not have lively personalities. The researcher believed that the underlying principle responsible for the personality trait behavior of the students was their cognitive status. However, due to the shortage of documentation on the music performance anxiety, the researcher could not establish the correlation between the cognitive status and the personality traits of the students.

Finally, the type and nature of the performance had an effect on the degree of performance anxiety that the student experienced. For instance, the researcher observed that music performing students experienced more anxiety during their examination assessment/auditioning sessions than during their rehearsal/preparation sessions for their assessment. The researcher believed that the nature of the anxiety was as a result of the students' self-perceptions of themselves and how they perceived their assessors to evaluate their performances. Students who believed that they would do well during their performance assessment felt less anxiety when compared to others who were not sure. However, the researcher believes that self-perception is not the only factor that may have influenced the degree of performance anxiety the students may have experienced.

Conclusion

The researcher observed that there is a dearth of publication and documentation on music performance anxiety among music performers in Nigerian institutions. This shortage on publication on the subject matter has made it difficult for music performers to understand why they feel the way they do before and during their performances. Relevant music education literature suggests that performance anxiety can be reduced through various pedagogical strategies, including appropriate preparation through cognitive strategies such as piece dissection and structural analysis to enhance music memorization (Haid, 1999). However, musical performance excellence involves the coordinated effort of numerous physical, psychological and general music skills (Williamon, 2004). This study makes the following suggestions towards efficient performance preparation programmes:

- Ensure that adverse consequences associated with early evaluative performances are minimized by offering frequent, low-stress opportunities to perform so that students earn that performance is an integral, enjoyable and manageable part of their musical education. In addition, the repertoire should be well within the technical capability of the student and the material should be learned to the point of automaticity before it is performed.
- Incorporate psychological skills' training in which students are encouraged to provide feedback on their own performance and taught how to prevent and manage MPA by

modifying any problematic cognitions that are articulated with more realistic and helpful alternatives (Kenny, 2004; Rae & McCambridge, 2004).

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