

Coping with Musical Performance Anxiety: Problem-focused and Emotion-focused Strategies

Mary L. Wolfe, Ph.D.

Abstract—A total of 193 performing musicians, both amateur and professional, were asked to describe strategies they had found effective in coping with performance anxiety. Information on age, gender, professional experience, years of private study, major instrument (voice, string, wind, keyboard, percussion), and usual performing mode (solo, small ensemble, large ensemble) was also obtained, along with several measures of state and trait anxiety. Use of at least one coping strategy was reported by 162 musicians. By means of content analysis, strategies were first identified as either problem-focused or emotion-focused; within these categories, subcategories were then identified. Of the 478 strategies offered, 63% were emotion-focused and 37% were problem-focused. Coping strategies most often reported were “deep breathing/relaxation/physical activity” and “thorough preparation/practice/coaching.” Musicians whose predominant coping style was emotion-focused reported feeling generally more confidence and competence while performing, and less self-consciousness, distractibility, and disruptive cognitive activity than those with a problem-focused orientation. Although women were more likely than men to use emotion-focused coping, there were no significant relationships between coping style and major instrument, performing mode, professional status, years of study, or age. Study findings suggest that stress-reduction be made part of the musician’s daily practice routine. *Med Probl Perform Art* 5:33–36, 1990.

Performance anxiety is a disabling health problem for the performing musician, often resulting in the premature termination of studies or careers in music. In a survey of over 2,000 professional opera and symphony musicians, stage fright was the most frequent complaint.¹ Although musical performance anxiety has only recently engaged the interest of researchers in the health and behavioral sciences, a framework for its study has begun to develop from general and specific anxiety theory, especially test anxiety theory.²⁻⁵

Many musicians, both classical and popular, attempt to relieve symptoms of performance anxiety with drugs and/

or alcohol. Beta blockers have been found to alleviate anxiety without impairing performance.⁶ However, given the risks of undesirable side effects and dependency associated with the prolonged use of any drug, nondrug interventions may offer safer alternatives for the management of performance anxiety. However, few published studies have reported interventions that do not involve medication. Kendrick et al. found that cognitive-behavioral therapy and behavioral rehearsal reduced performance anxiety and improved performance quality.

Correlational studies have examined performance anxiety and methods used by musicians to cope with it.⁸ These studies focused primarily on full-time professional musicians or students preparing for careers in music. However, music is an absorbing avocation or part-time profession for a much larger population. These musicians perform regularly in public, often aspiring to near-professional standards; hence, they suffer many of the same stresses as full-time professional musicians. As a consequence, their enjoyment of musical performance is diminished. They are also at risk, to some extent, for the same chemical dependencies as full-time professional musicians. The present study examined performance anxiety and strategies for coping with it in that larger population.

PRELIMINARY STUDY

A survey of 193 musicians⁵ examined the relationships between several measures of musical performance anxiety and selected personal factors: age, gender, professional playing experience, number of years of private study, major instrument, and usual performing mode (solo, small ensemble, or large ensemble). Data were collected using the following measures of musical performance anxiety (internal consistency reliabilities are given in parentheses):

1. **Adaptive Anxiety Scale.** This scale consisted of eight items based on the prototype: “Anxiety helps me to do better during a musical performance” (0.73).

2. **Maladaptive Anxiety Scale.** This scale consisted of

Mary L. Wolfe, Ph.D., is Associate Professor, School of Nursing, University of Maryland at Baltimore. Address correspondence to Mary L. Wolfe, Ph.D., 655 W. Lombard St., Baltimore, Maryland, 21201.

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10 items based on the prototype: "Anxiety interferes with my musical performance" (0.81).

Scales 1 and 2 were measures of trait anxiety adapted from Alpert and Haber's⁹ Achievement Anxiety Test, with the wording revised to apply to a musical performance rather than an academic examination. The two scales were combined into a single inventory, with the items randomly mixed. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a five-point scale, the extent to which each statement typically applied to them.

3. Musical Performance Anxiety (MPA) Scale. This scale, a measure of state anxiety adapted from Sweeney and Horan's² Piano Performance Anxiety Scale, consisted of two subscales, an 11-item Cognitive-Attentional Subscale (0.79) and a 44-item Emotional-Autonomic Subscale (0.85). The first subscale sampled disruptive cognitive activity ("I thought about being the center of attention"). The second subscale tapped feelings of autonomic arousal ("I could feel my heart beating fast"). Respondents were asked to recall, to the best of their ability, their thoughts and feelings during their most recent public performance. Each statement was rated on a scale from 1 ("hardly at all") to 5 ("nearly all the time"). Major findings were as follows:

Factor analysis of the combined trait anxiety scales yielded four factors, or subscales: (1) Nervousness/Apprehension, (2) Confidence/Competence, (3) Self-Consciousness/Distractibility, and (4) Arousal/Intensity. This result suggested that musical performance anxiety may be fairly complex, consisting of both positive (adaptive) and negative (maladaptive) components.

Musicians with some professional playing experience reported more adaptive anxiety and less maladaptive anxiety than musicians without such experience.

The disabling effects of symptoms of autonomic arousal (e.g., dry mouth, finger tremor) appeared to be instrument-specific.

In addition, an open-ended item asked respondents to describe strategies they had found effective in coping with performance anxiety. Of the original sample of 193 musicians, 162 (84%) responded with at least one strategy. The present study reports the results of analyses of the relationships among coping strategies, personal factors, and scores on the trait and state measures of musical performance anxiety, using the data from this subsample.

Table 1 shows the number of musicians in the subsample by predominant performing medium and mode and by gender. Thirty (18%) were soloists, 113 (70%) were small-ensemble players, and 19 (12%) were large-ensemble players. Forty-five (28%) were vocalists, 12 (7%) were string players, 88 (54%) were wind players, and 17 (11%) were keyboard or percussion players. Sixty-three (39%) were male; 99 (61%) were female.

Respondents ranged in age from 14 to 80 years, with a mean of 47.0 and a mode of 46 years. A majority (59%) reported having some professional playing experience. Most respondents (150 or 93%) had studied music privately; the mean length of time was 9.7 years, with a mode of 6. When

TABLE 1. Number of Musicians in Sample by Gender, Predominant Performing Mode, and Predominant Performing Medium

<i>Performing Mode and Medium</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Total</i>
Solo	9	21	30
Voice	2	12	14
String	0	1	1
Wind	5	4	9
Keyboard/percussion	2	4	6
Small ensemble	45	68	113
Voice	10	11	21
String	3	6	9
Wind	30	45	75
Keyboard/percussion	2	6	8
Large ensemble	9	10	19
Voice	5	5	10
String	1	1	2
Wind	2	2	4
Keyboard/percussion	1	2	3
Totals	63	99	162

respondents in this subsample were compared with respondents who did not offer any suggestions for coping with performance anxiety ($n = 31$), the two groups did not differ significantly on any of the demographic or personal variables or any of the anxiety measures.

PROCEDURES

The contents of the response to the open-ended questions were coded using a modification of a scheme outlined by Fox.¹⁰ The unit of analysis was the individual coping strategy. Each strategy was first identified as reflecting either problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping.¹¹ Within these two broad categories, subcategories were then identified. Table 2 displays the content categories, along with the frequencies with which each one occurred in the sample. Examples of emotion-focused coping strategies were: "I try to sit quietly and pray for calmness before I sing," and "Smile, take deep breaths, and think light and loose." Examples of problem-focused strategies were: "Much like an athlete, I stay in shape and have a regular warm-up routine. Therefore I can rely on my body to do what it has to do to operate my instrument," and "Be well-prepared—have no unmastered technical difficulties in music."

RESULTS

A total of 478 strategies was offered; 63% (301) were identified as emotion-focused, whereas 37% (177) were identified as problem-focused. The subcategories most frequently reported by respondents were "deep breathing/relaxation/physical activity" (15.5% of the total) and "thorough preparation/practice/coaching" (24.3% of the total). Categories least often reported were "engaging in distracting

TABLE 2. Strategies for Coping with Musical Performance Anxiety

Category and Subcategory	Frequency
Emotion-focused	
1. Deep breathing/relaxation/physical activity	74
2. Immersion/concentration on music	48
3. Minimizing the importance of the performance	43
4. Positive self-talk/self-acceptance	39
5. Prayer/meditation/imagery/visualization	35
6. Communication with audience/giving gift to audience	27
7. Seeking/giving support within the ensemble	15
8. Using drugs/alcohol before performance	11
9. Engaging in distracting activity before performance	9
Total	301
Problem-focused	
1. Thorough preparation/practice/coaching	116
2. Logistics of performance (e.g., making sure that music, stands, chairs, instruments are properly arranged and easily accessible)	32
3. Attention to performance hygiene (e.g., diet, clothing, rest, fitness)	24
4. Appropriate selection of music (i.e., within capability of performers)	5
Total	177
Grand Total	478

activity before performance" (1.8% of the total) and "appropriate selection of music" (1.0% of the total). Together, the two categories "deep breathing/relaxation/physical activity" and "thorough preparation/practice/coaching" accounted for nearly 40% of the total number of coping strategies.

Respondents were next divided into three groups according to whether they employed strategies that were predominantly emotion-focused, predominantly problem-focused, or a balanced mixture of the two. Stepwise discriminant analysis was then performed, using age, gender, professional status, years of private study, and the measures of trait and state performance anxiety described in the introduction as discriminating variables. Five significant discriminating variables were identified (chi-square = 24.30, $df = 10$). The first variable to enter the analysis was gender. Women comprised 68.8% of the emotion-focused group, 50.0% of the balanced group, and 45.2% of the problem-

focused group. Means and standard deviations for the remaining discriminating variables are shown in Table 3, in order of their entry into the analysis.

The second variable to enter the analysis was the Confidence/Competence subscale of the trait anxiety inventory. The emotion-focused group showed the highest mean score, the balanced group the lowest, and the problem-focused group's mean score occupied an intermediate position.

The third variable to enter the analysis was the Self-Consciousness/Distractibility subscale of the trait anxiety inventory. The emotion-focused group had the lowest mean score, the balanced group the highest, and the problem-focused group's mean score lay between the two.

The fourth variable to enter the analysis was the cognitive-attentional subscale of the MPA, a retrospective measure of state anxiety. The problem-focused group had the highest mean score, the balanced group the lowest, and the emotion-focused group's mean score lay between the two.

The last variable to enter the analysis was years of private study. The problem-focused and emotion-focused groups' mean scores were very close together and were higher than those of the balanced group.

DISCUSSION

The importance of emotion-focused coping strategies in reducing musical performance anxiety should not be overlooked. Musicians whose predominant coping style is emotion-focused report feeling greater confidence and competence, and less self-consciousness and distractibility than those employing balanced or predominantly problem-focused styles. Additionally, although they recalled experiencing greater disruptive cognitive activity during their most recent performance than the balanced-strategy group, their mean scores were somewhat lower than those of the problem-focused group. Although thorough preparation and practice and attention to the pragmatic details of performance are surely important, it is possible that learning to keep one's emotions under control before and during a musical performance makes the crucial difference between success and failure. This observation is supported by the fact that the total number of emotion-focused coping strategies reported by this sample was nearly twice the number of problem-focused strategies. It is of further interest that the five significant discriminating variables correctly pre-

TABLE 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Significant Discriminating Variables (in Order of Entry into the Analysis)

Variables	Emotion-focused		Balanced		Problem-focused	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Confidence/Competence	8.60	2.73	7.69	2.24	7.87	2.78
Self-consciousness/Distractibility	15.21	4.43	16.65	3.77	16.13	3.53
Disruptive Cognitive Activity	23.86	7.48	21.58	6.74	24.32	7.39
Years of Private Study	9.71	9.26	6.58	3.55	9.61	8.44

TABLE 4. Classification of Respondents into Groups Based on Scores on Discriminating Variables

Actual Group	Predicted Group Membership		
	1	2	3
1. Emotion-focused	90.5%	9.5%	0.0%
2. Balanced	61.3%	38.7%	0.0%
3. Problem-focused	84.8%	15.2%	0.0%
Percent of cases correctly classified: 59.46%			

dicted membership in the emotion-focused group 90.5% of the time, 38.7% of the time in the balanced group, and 0.0% of the time in the problem-focused group (Table 4). Overall, 59.46% of the respondents were correctly classified.

Musicians whose predominant coping style is emotion-focused report feeling greater confidence and competence, and less self-consciousness and distractibility.

Although certainly not conclusive, the results of this study suggest that musicians and music teachers may wish to consider adding basic stress-reduction techniques to their daily practice and teaching routines, along with long tones, scales, arpeggios, and études.

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