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CONFRONTING AND DEALING WITH NERVES

BY JESSE HEETLAND

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CONFRONTING AND DEALING WITH NERVES

BY JESSE HEETLAND

How can we improve our skills in dealing with nerves? Here are a few thoughts to head you in the right direction.

Be adequately prepared. Be able to play all of your selections, musically, more than once in a row. When you prepare for a performance, do you practice performing your music without stopping? One way to do this is to “perform” with a recording device running. Keep going, even when you make a mistake. You will learn to allow mistakes to disappear into the past and not derail you. It is also a good idea to perform frequently in front of small, sympathetic audiences, where mistakes will not seem to be as disastrous as they could be in a more important performance. Focus on musicality while releasing your mental grip on “getting the right notes.” This will ultimately improve your accuracy and enjoyment of what you are doing.

An important part of learning to play musically is having an excellent mental image of what you want to sound like and then turning on that image as you play. How do you get that image in there? Listen to great players, both live and on recordings, and listen to your teacher’s example.

Confront mental chatter. When you perform, do you ever hear voices in your head telling you things like, “I hope I remembered to turn my cell phone off,” “If I don’t start taking a bigger breath, I’ll never make it through the next phrase,” or “Jimmy never would have made that mistake, why did I?”

The mental chatter goes on and on! There are really three categories of chatter mentioned above: stuff that’s completely unrelated, such as the cell phone thought; pedagogical thoughts like “take a big breath,” and judgments levied against you, such as “Boy, this isn’t as good as Jimmy makes it sound.”

The unrelated thoughts and pedagogical thoughts remove your concentration from what you should be focusing on, namely the music. Arnold Jacobs spoke of there being two instruments: the one in our hands, and the one in our head. The one in our head is what leads the one in our hand to make the sounds, not the other way around. This brings us to the mental chatter that doesn’t seem so positive: thoughts that compare us unfavorably to others, call into question our ability, and generally undermine our confidence. Adequate preparation is one important confidence-builder that has already been mentioned. But beyond that, we must directly face the voices that pass these judgments against us.

One way of dealing with the judgmental voices in our heads is to stop trying to avoid and ignore them, but rather to pay attention to them and discover their underlying positive purpose. Spend some time in introspection: What are the judgments telling us? Perhaps they are comparing us to better players. What do these better players sound like? We can take that judgment as motivation to become better musicians. Perhaps

they are telling us that we are doing something wrong. This gives us a chance step back and reexamine what we are doing in light of what we have been taught and what we know to be true, then redirect ourselves if we have gotten off the right path. Perhaps they are telling us that we are not adequately prepared. The underlying positive purpose in that case is to encourage us to practice more!

There comes a time, however, when we have to realize that these voices are nothing more than opinions, and as a result, they are certainly not always correct! If we have been practicing diligently, and practicing performing, a voice claiming that we’re not ready is just plain wrong. It then is our job to tell the voice that it is wrong, and that we are going to go ahead and succeed in spite of its claims. This is going to take patience, persistence, and creativity.

Find a place of inner stillness. Another long-term practice you may wish to try is meditation. One simple method is to sit quietly and pay attention to the rise and fall of your breath. Don’t try to control it, just sit and pay attention to it as it comes and goes. Your attention will probably wander onto something else, but once you realize your attention has strayed, patiently return it to the breath.

Practicing meditation has the potential to help you in at least a couple of ways. First, it can calm you down. Once you get used to being calm through meditation, you can use it before a performance to calm and focus yourself. Meditation also involves concentration on one thing (the breath, initially), and practicing this sort of single-mindedness can carry over directly into quieting your chattering mind and focusing it onto the sound of the music you are performing.

It’s all about the music. The reason we perform is to share the beauty of music with an audience. As you practice and perform, try taking the position of an observer enjoying your music. As you prepare for performance, try to delve deeply into the music’s meaning. Finding the life and beauty (or even the ugliness) in the music you are performing can help you to view the music as something greater than yourself in which you are participating, rather than having the spotlight shining just on you and your ego.

As you work toward dealing with your performance anxiety, remember these two things: It *is* possible to perform well even if you feel nervous, and the more you perform, the more you will get used to it. You can learn to work with your anxieties and even come to take joy in performing.

About the author: Jesse Heetland is a candidate for the DMA degree at the University of Oklahoma where he studies trumpet with Karl Sievers. Jesse is instructor of brass at Hocking College in Nelsonville, Ohio.

