Let Yourself Perform: Confidence Building Tips

Lynn Harting

Music Educators Journal, Vol. 72, No. 1. (Sep., 1985), pp. 46-48.

LET YOURSELF PERFORM: CONFID

Photograph courtesy of Northern Virginia Community College

In the Western musical tradition, the art of musical expression is believed to develop out of an intellectual understanding of styles, periods, composers, and musical forms. While this knowledge is essential to classical performers, it is not the sole contributing factor in musical expression. Alan P. Merriam, in his book *The Anthropology of Music*, identifies the making of music as an extremely physical activity. Sound production, according to Western tastes, necessarily requires a definite, physically imposed technique. Therefore, factors such as muscle control, the release of muscular tension, and relaxation have also become critical elements in the projection of musicality.

Lynn Harting is a classical guitarist, teacher, and free-lance writer in Toronto, Canada.

Photograph by Ann Bachtel-Nash

ENCE-BUILDING TIPS

by Lynn Harting

Recently, a surge of books and articles have focused on these and related issues. They may deal generally with the channeling of nervous energy into positive results or, perhaps, mental control over the body. More specifically, they deal with stage fright and relaxation techniques.

Regardless of the libraries full of this good advice, players still battle a variety of nervous manifestations. Why? The answer is two-fold. First, most Western musicians have spent years cultivating attitudes about success and creating unbelievable expectations for themselves. Second, every note played is subject to a highly judgmental evaluation and every piece has a supplemental set of verbal directions.

Most of the published relaxation methods and other related ideologies call for changes in these conceptions and practices: changes in thinking patterns, in psychological associations, and in the perception of musical life and performance in general. In adopting the new mental strategy, a certain amount of relearning or re-education is required. Although it is not as simple as merely reading about a relaxation strategy, it is possible to change an attitude and alter forthcoming perceptions. It is important to realize that a new idea or enlightenment cannot erase previously formed associations, but it can reshape them. The process demands a constant awareness and considerable time as it develops on a course of its own.

Hazardous judgment

In his book *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Timothy Gallwey stresses the ability to "let go" of all judgments or to dismiss them totally from any activity. They are detrimental to the action itself and may account for a significant amount of muscle tension. Something cannot be seen as positive or well done unless it stands out distinguishably from something less positive, not as well done, and thus as a negative. By eliminating the judgment process, an evaluation is not made. Theoretically, while a person is still performing, he or she is not subjected to the emotional responses to what has passed. In relation to musical performance, a critical analysis of every note and phrase does not contribute anything to the aesthetic mood or expressivity of the performer. When the mind is busy evaluating, it cannot be concentrating on the music. Judgment becomes a hazardous distraction.

Another such self-inflicted distraction is the practice of giving

When complete attention is focused on the music, the mind does not worry about the audience.

verbal directions. Performers may habitually coach themselves, thinking: "louder here" or "slow down" or even "sit up" and "shoulders back." Gallwey calls this inner voice "Self 1," setting it apart from "Self 2," which actually does all the work. This constantly monitoring voice (Self 1) is a performer's greatest detriment. It often insults and verbally punishes the performer while he is trying to get through the experience. Self 1, also responsible for the judgment process described, has the ability to jump ahead of the action and anticipate future outcomes. One such conversation might be: "It's coming up. I always lose control here. I hate this piece."

Frank P. Jones, in *The Alexander Technique—Body Awareness*, similarly concludes that verbal directions are not "the equivalent of thinking in activity" and that words "can get in the way of observation and act as a substitute for thought."[1] In connection with this, Jones discusses how words themselves have associations from previous experiences and may prevent the possibility of having new experiences.

Thinking along these lines, verbal directions obviously have no use in a musical performance. When the mind is engaged in this process, it is either behind or ahead of the fingers or bow. In order to be sensitive to the music and openly expressive, a performer's mind must stay in exact step with the music and its physical execution. Consequently, when complete attention is focused on the music, the mind does not worry about the audience, what peers think, or if out-of-town relatives have managed to find the concert hall. Nervous tension is reduced and muscular relaxation becomes possible. In regard to the art of performing, Tim Gallwey makes a wonderful statement: "Letting it happen is not making it happen. It is not trying hard. It is not controlling your shots."[2]

Knowing what to think

After considering what *is not* to be thought during a performance, it is just as essential to identify specifically what *is* to be thought. For a musician, performing from memory requires a visual and intellectual memorization of the score. A player or singer must be able to progress through the piece mentally, accounting for every pitch, rhythm, dynamic, and articulation. The mind is free to enter states of nonthinking, but will always have a definite place to return at any given moment. Many performers often mistakenly rely on muscle memory or motor memory. While hand positions and sensations may be recalled, this is not enough to guarantee that all the notes will be there. It is quite common for the muscle memory to decide to wait backstage until the performance is over. The mind must take over. If there is uncertainty about notes, there will undoubtedly be muscular tension, loss of control, and much nervous trauma. Knowing the music well is a significant part of having self-confidence. Thereafter, with some concentration in the right direction, success is attainable and musical expression can reach new peaks.

As we cleanse our minds of judgments and verbal directions and then try to replace them with purely musical thoughts, there may still seem to be plenty of legitimate reasons to experience nervous tension. Yes, there are memory slips that occur every day in Bach fugues, and a cold hall is an uncomfortable setback. Nevertheless, "the show goes on." The mental process and concentration that are needed during a performance must be practiced just as the notes in a piece are practiced. Once or twice a year in a recital is not enough. Once a month may not be enough. If there are not ready-made opportunities for performing, create them. Play for anyone and everyone who will listen. This is the only foolproof way to see development and progress as a performer. You are dedicated to an instrument and have something special to say through the music, so communicate that to people. Letting them know is invaluable because it helps you realize your already outstanding contribution to society.

1. Frank P. Jones, *The Alexander Technique—Body Awareness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 157.

2. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (New York: Bantam Book, 1974), 48.