

Practicing Away from the Horn: Mental Preparation in Music-Making

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INGREDIENTS:

An upcoming performance challenge
An open, industrious, and creative mind

SERVES:

Anyone who wants to perform at the height of his or her ability, every time.

Whether we're preparing for an audition or solo recital, playing in a group in which we want to contribute our best, or teaching a master class, it is an extraordinary task to always mentally be in top form. Like athletes, a huge percentage of our success is mental. How well we channel our mental distractions, nervous energy, and performance anxiety helps determine how well we can portray the music we love and infuse it with our own emotions, excitement, and passion.

STEP 1: Ways to prepare in order to beat performance anxiety

Reading Materials

Do some research. Luckily, there is a plethora of literature and other resources about mental peak performance. Go to www.dongreene.com and take the performance tests. Check out the great books: *Soprano on Her Head*, *Zen and the Art of Archery*, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, *Psycho-Cybernetics*, *Peak Performance*, and others. To overcome nerves and distraction, one *must* spend time away from the instrument practicing mental toughness.

Tools and Mental Tricks

Part of my practice routine every day is devoted to concentration exercises. It is possible to learn to still the voices in our heads, recover quickly after mistakes, and beat stage fright and dry mouth. One tool I use is an imaginary locker that I fling distracting thoughts into when they arise. One can imagine talking back to the gremlin that is distracting you with its chatter. When I'm especially scared, I also imagine a one-way shield around me that locks out anyone else's thoughts about me, good or bad, and lets me focus entirely on letting the music out. Colleagues of mine use rings of fire, or a forest of protective trees. For difficult solos, I use Don Greene's "centering" exercise. For lyrical pieces, I imagine the musical line floating out of my forehead, up into the sky.

Before performances, I have a very basic meditation exercise consisting of deep breathing and getting into an alpha state by imagining myself slowly walking down a flight of stairs. I then imagine every aspect of “the big day,” up to the act of delivering a fantastic, inspiring performance. The exercise stops there; it is best to focus on the process, not the outcome. What we believe and imagine becomes so. The mental picture you create of yourself and your performances will always inevitably mirror the performances themselves.

Basics and Common Sense

Insisting on maintaining healthy brass playing habits will also improve your mental (not to mention your physical) performance. Require yourself to do some yoga or basic stretching every day before you play, both for the physical benefits and for mental calm and concentration. Vow to do 5 minutes of breathing exercises every morning before you pick up your horn. Web sites like www.breathinggym.com and www.home.columbus.rr.com/juliarose/ (click on the master classes link) are excellent resources. Take the opportunity to work with gurus like Jean Rife (*Yoga for Musicians*), Keith Underwood (excellent wind and brass teacher, NYC), Laurie Frink (Carmine Caruso method, NYC), Jim Thompson (*Buzzing Basics*), Sam Pilafian (breathing coach), and others. Let being a healthy brass player and a grounded human being be the foundation for the vocal, creative musicality we all strive for.

STEP 2: Using musical inspiration to keep your mind focused on the correct things

Training Your Musical Ear

Create in the back of your mind a musical library of favorites to remind yourself of why you work so hard: to share gorgeous music with an audience that may walk away inspired, moved, changed in some way. Learn and cherish all great music, classical or otherwise. Emulate beauty, creativity, rhythmic grooves, nuance, and passion wherever you find it. If I have a solo performance or a big orchestra piece coming up, I will research the composer, listen to his other works, or listen to some of the world’s most fantastic performers. For example, Jascha Heifitz and Fritz Wunderlich are perfect inspirations for solo works. Renee Fleming’s Strauss CD, especially the *Der Rosenkavalier* excerpts, helps me prepare for *Ein Heldenleben*. The Metropolitan Opera’s *Ring Cycle* challenges me to try and embody the sweeping, effortless soaring, combined with mysterious detail work, necessary for Mahler symphonies.

Using this Concept in Audition Preparation

For an audition, two months beforehand, I collect CDs of the pieces on the audition list and make a “master tape” (on an iPod, MiniDisc player, CD, or cassette tape) of all of the excerpts. I record not only the official “excerpt,” but the whole movement that it is in, or at least the 100 bars before and after it. I then listen to it *constantly*. Also, every few days, I play along with the recording blaring, to train my body and mind so that every time I play the piece, I feel like I am *in* the group, playing my heart out, having a total blast, hearing all the other parts around me, feeling the collective energy, being a part of intense musical conviction—energy, timing, sound, pitch, musical flair. I suggest trying to imagine: I am the third horn of the Cleveland Orchestra under Szell, or fifth horn in the Berlin Philharmonic. I am Dale Clevenger (or Joe Alessi or Bud Herseth . . .) leading his section, playing with incredible colleagues. I am Dennis Brain playing Mozart, I am Sylvia McNair *singing* Mozart. I am an oboe here, a heavy metal band there . . . then at the performance, be yourself, with the brilliance of others in surround sound underneath you, as an inspiration and guide.

STEP 3: Practice tips to tie it all together

Developing a “Mental Preparation Plan”

Practicing performing makes for great performances. I try to organize my practice sessions to train my body and mind to be a more focused and flamboyant performer. Before every excerpt or solo piece, I have a mental preparation plan that I follow every time I practice or perform that material. It is designed to replace nervous or distracting thoughts with productive ones. This is one sample plan that you can use:

1. While I empty my slides in between excerpts or passages, I let myself react: “Ugh, what was *that?!.*,” or “Ooh, that was actually okay!” or whatever else comes to mind. The judgment rolls onto the floor with the condensation, and I leave it in the past.
2. Next I use productive replacement thoughts. I sing in my head a predetermined twenty or so bars before the excerpt, or how another instrument played it, or the excerpt itself—hearing the group around me while tapping my toes and swaying my head to the beat. If it’s a powerful piece, really letting my body rock. If it’s lyrical, really swaying.
3. I then do my centering exercise, sing the same musical preparation again in my head, subdivide two bars before I start, breathe deeply for one bar before. . . then I just let go and trust in my preparation and talent.
4. I try not to worry about missing notes. I just try to breathe, subdivide, sing, and *enjoy!*

Practice your mental preparation for a piece every time you practice the piece itself. The key is to allow replacement thoughts and musical inspiration to free us from the paralyzing antics of our brains while performing. If we can make every concert a collaborative joy, every audition an opportunity to inspire and excite, and every time we pick up our instrument a moment we cherish, than we can truly be the luckiest people on earth. ➤