

“And Now I Shall Play...”

Adapted by Mike Carson from Dale Carnegie

You have been asked to play in a piano recital, and have some perplexing questions. I'll try to answer them.

“Shall I accept the invitation?” Yes. It will be a lot of fun, and prove one of the most thrilling experiences of your life. Indeed, if I were you, I wouldn't even wait for an invitation to play. For the good of my soul, I'd seize the first opportunity to play voluntarily—and every legitimate opportunity thereafter: school, church gathering, Scout court of honor, Young Women's night. Public performance is a sure way to leadership. I know many students who have created more prestige among peers and mentors by one four-minute performance than years of grinding work in school. Once, successfully master an audience with a short performance, and thereafter you'll be a better master of yourself.

You may not make a brilliant performance. But don't let that worry you. Few people do. If you doubt me, turn on the radio or TV and listen.

“But I never faced an audience in my life. I'm afraid I'll faint.” Oh, no, you won't faint. Of course you'll be nervous at first. Everyone is. Pavarotti was. So were Pablo Casals and Arthur Rubinstein. But there are certain things that will help you develop courage in advance. One is practice. Practice performing. Where? Anywhere where there is a piano and a warm body—even a beloved family pet. Call in the neighbors and practice on them. Play for any available person who will listen—including your little sister.

Don't imagine performing is going to be difficult. Remember, nothing is holding you back except your own thoughts. So stop thinking of yourself. Think of your subjects, your audience. “Do the thing you fear to,” said Emerson, “and the death of fear is absolutely certain.”

“How shall I prepare?” That question takes us right into the secret chambers of good public performance. Three-fourths of the success of your performance will depend on whether or not you are adequately prepared. Most performers who fail, do so because they couldn't take the time to prepare. A four-minute piece takes 40 hours of practice. An eight-minute piece takes 80.

If you want to get better at something, you need to practice regularly. No-one would argue with that. But regular practice alone isn't enough. There are good and bad ways to practice. Practice ineffectively, and you'll be putting in huge amounts of effort for very little reward. Practice effectively, and you can progress much faster than you would have thought possible with much less effort. I've come to the conclusion that effective practice is specific, focused, and deliberate. Ineffective practice is unfocused and meandering. It has no particular goal and because of that it achieves no particular goal.

“What gestures shall I make?” As far as the audience is concerned, it won't be necessary to make any gestures. But gestures will help you to let yourself go. I use lots of gestures while playing, especially when I am in the recording studio. I need them to help me warm up before the unresponsive microphone. In the same way, you can force yourself to play with enthusiasm before an audience by merely forcing yourself to make any sort of emphatic gestures. Remember, you are trying to make something happen in the other person's head and heart. If you can do that, it doesn't matter what you do with your torso, head, and hands.

“How shall I deliver my performance?” Play sincerely, from the heart. You may make blunders, but you can hardly fail to make an impression. The most difficult problem I face in training students is to blast them out of their shells and inspire them to play with genuine earnestness. That is probably the most important rule in delivery. Your audience must feel that you know what you are playing, that you mean it and have an intense desire to share it.

Play to the people in the back row. “Think” your tones into the rear of the room. Play with energy. You don't have to pound on the keys. Whispered tones, when made correctly, will carry to the back of a large hall.

Tips on Managing Performance Anxiety

When it comes to getting over the hump of performance anxiety, there are numerous ways to combat the fears and doubt that come with presentation. Below are five aspects of performing that a musician suffering from anxiety should take into consideration:

1) Self-Assessment

When you get to know the ins and outs of yourself as an individual, as well

as a musician, you are inching your way towards overcoming performance anxiety. Knowing what makes you tick both inside and outside musical circles will help you to better deal with the problems you face before, during, and after a performance. A musician should analyze their performance goals, personal capabilities, and limitations.

Musicians should also know that everyone has to start somewhere with infinite room for improvement. It is quite important for a musician to perform to the best of their abilities, as well as learn from mistakes and peer criticism.

2) Exposure: Baby Steps

Musicians should take the opportunity to gradually expose themselves to varying levels of performing. One moment a full-length mirror becomes a suitable audience, while the next could be a crowd of five friends. Testing low, medium, and high levels of stressful performance situations will help musicians slowly overcome the issues faced in regard to performing. Additional suggestions include practice performances in an empty theater, dress rehearsals with friends, and taping acts, then viewing them with family and friends.

3) Preparation

In anything that we do, preparation is an important component for achieving success. A good performance is one that has been thought out, thoroughly visualized and played over and over again in the mind. Once the mental preparation is complete, the physical part of the process involves sufficient practice and specific rehearsing for the particular venue you may perform at. Before a performance, a musician should enter this moment with a clear head. Meditation, yoga, and other muscle relaxation techniques can create the right state of mind.

4) During a Performance

Every musician at some point in their lives will feel the flutter of butterflies before, during, or after a performance. This is a normal occurrence, which just takes some performers longer to get over. When it comes to the audience, you shouldn't focus on blocking them out, but instead embrace them as support. If you go into a performance thinking that no one likes you

or during a presentation focus on scowling faces, you will surely surrender to your flight-or-fight performance anxiety tactics.

Try to put anxiety in the backseat and attempt to stay calm. If you make a mistake, such as tickle the wrong piano keys, simply move on and do not dwell on small imperfections that pale in comparison to the overall scheme of things. Sometimes, if you don't wear your disappointment or errors on your face, the audience is less apt to remember or care about mistakes. Breathing techniques will also come in handy once you get into the thick of performing and feel a touch of anxiety.

5) After the Performance

After each performance, take the time to assess yourself before relying on the approval or criticism of others. No one but you truly knows all of the hard work and preparation that went into your performance. Take the time to give yourself a mental pat on the back. Next, combine outside comments with your gut feeling to decide on what you can do better next time. Regardless, if you had the performance of your life or tanked on your first break, there are always aspects of your musical craft that you can still shape and mold for the future.

Play happy!

