

Performance Success Under Pressure

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PREFACE

Learning how to play well under extreme circumstances in music performance was not a matter of curiosity until my second year of graduate school at Indiana University. It was an important time in my development as a performer as I aspired to become a professional musician. There I took weekly trombone lessons and participated in weekly master classes in the trombone department. This program gave me the opportunity to see other students, both inside and outside the trombone department, perform regularly. What captivated my attention most was observing performances during Monday Night Master Class. This gave students an opportunity to listen to their peers play solos, etudes, and orchestral excerpts for one another. Often times, a student would perform for as many as fifty other trombone students. The three trombone professors would rotate each week to lead class and critique individual performances. As I observed a number of friends perform, my attention was drawn to the way each teacher addressed their playing issues. In this process, I found myself keenly observing the various actions/behaviors/responses in performing and the effectiveness of the instruction the students received. Many students who participated in playing would demonstrate a variety of behavioral characteristics as they performed. These would range from extreme anxiety within certain individuals to those exhibiting no emotion or energy at all. Each student's various emotions/actions would impact the quality of their performance. The greatest benefit of this experience was the exchange of feedback from teacher to student. Specifically, the professors would diagnose fundamental playing deficiencies that were apparent in the performance. Over time, it became clear

to me that the inferior qualities they observed were a direct result of what resonated from the bell and were linked to larger problems. In my research, I will address these various difficulties in relation to performing live for a public audience. This focus is designed to help aspiring college musicians who want to develop skills in recital and audition preparation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Knowing what it takes to play well under pressure is important when it comes to playing live auditions/recitals. I will address a variety of strategies the performer can use before/during performance to create optimal success in the performing environment.

BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH

As a performer aspiring to make a career as a recitalist/orchestral/military band musician, one must be able to play to their potential in live performances/auditions. People new to this experience may not be aware of how they respond in this environment. As a result, the person will prepare for the audition/recital without developing habits that allow for peak performance according to their individual needs. This could result in an undesirable outcome during the actual performance of the audition or recital. The information in this document will provide performers with the proper techniques needed to prepare for a recital or audition effectively without a directionless approach.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Inexperienced musicians often prepare for auditions and recitals in a way that involves very limited planning or methodology as to anticipate how they react under pressure. Musicians practice on a daily basis, focusing on fundamental aspects of performing the music. This includes any aspect of what aesthetically is written in the music, including articulation, dynamics, tempo/expression markings, as well as aesthetic

and expressive elements. These critical areas must be addressed in practicing repertoire for auditions/recitals, as the audience or committee will observe details behind the performance. There are other factors beyond these fundamental qualities that impact how efficiently a musician will perform. Often times an individual will play in the practice room with optimal success, but have poorer outcomes in their performance in the recital/audition setting. It is this quality gap which must be removed from the experience of performing.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of this document is to investigate and identify methods to enable the performer to play at an optimal level in performance settings.

The following questions will serve as the basis of application for the research within chapter 3:

1. How does travel planning play into the outcome?
2. How important is punctuality to playing an audition?
3. What meaningful approach to preparing audition repertoire can a musician take on a week to week basis leading up to the audition?
4. What is the right balance between over practicing and too little practice?
5. How will getting enough rest/sleep factor into optimal performing?
6. What is "Centering Down?"
7. What is "Centering Up?"
8. What are the benefits of visualization?

9. Can Beta Blockers assist in optimal performance?

10. How should a performer react to making a mistake in the live performance?

How can one get over mistakes?

11. Post audition/recital analysis?

The discussion of the above questions will lead to a detailed approach for confidently preparing for an audition/recital. The solutions suggested here will further enable the performer to have a greater sense of control over themselves as well as their environment. The choices he or she makes leading up to a performance will have an impact on the success of the performance.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

Given the understanding that no two musicians have the same needs in performing, this document will explore a variety of strategies an individual can use in performing recitals/auditions. More specifically, the information contained in this paper will help shape an objective process for planning an audition/recital. This includes aspects of planning that are logistical, functional, and mental within the preparation process. The goal is to arm the performer with as many practical tools as possible, applying the various suggested methods to their performance according to their personal needs. This information is a culmination of source material I have used in my own preparation of performing recitals/auditions.

CHAPTER 2

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH

The following is a discussion of research which is significant to the subject of performing music under pressure in auditions and recitals. This chapter will discuss the following issues:

- Travel Planning
- Punctuality
- Progress Tracking
- Awareness of Overtraining
- Rest/Recovery
- Centering
- Visualization
- Beta Blockers
- Reactions to Mistakes
- Post Audition/Recital Analysis.

These areas will be elaborated upon based on my own experience in performing, the challenges I encountered and observed in each area, and the resources I have referred to.

TRAVEL PLANNING

Traveling often becomes a part of the experience of performing when playing auditions or recitals. It took several auditions for me to figure out that not arriving several days before the audition would negatively impact my playing ability. I soon discovered that allowing only a day or half a day before performing was too small a window of time to adjust to the new environment. Differences in temperature, elevation, moisture of air, etc. among other environmental factors impact how easily the trombone will respond. When I arrived to my playing location two days early my

body could adjust to the new environment and was rested enough to perform to the best of my ability.

PUNCUATUALITY

Punctuality is an area of organization that everyone should be able to exhibit when arriving for any form of an interview. This area was important to me because being able to sit down in the warm up room, focus my mind, warm up on the trombone, and solidify last minute details gave me control over my product. There was one experience where I auditioned twice for the U.S. Air Force Band in 2009. I noticed the same individual that was a runner-up for the position in January of 2009 was also present for the audition in May of 2009. As I sat in the warm up room that day in May, this individual arrived right before they called his number. In January when he advanced, he arrived to the warm up room early. In May 2009, he had only played a few notes on the trombone and was then escorted into the audition room. The experience this time was much more different for him, as he did not play well and did not advance.

PROGRESS TRACKING

Planning out exactly how to practice for a recital/audition is essential for steady progress from the first day of practice to the day of performance. This form of organization was introduced to me in the fall of 2010 at Texas Tech University during a trombone pedagogy course with James Decker. It was there that I learned to structure a weekly approach of progress leading up to the performance. This manner of preparation was beneficial, as it forced me to evaluate exactly what I wanted to accomplish within

the weeks/months given in practice. Most important, this phase of planning created a sense of purpose through the training process and avoids a directionless approach. As I practiced from one week to the next I made goals consisting of acquiring music for the performance, acquiring and listening to recordings of the music, marking difficult sections within the passagework to fragment in practice, and planning mock performances for friends.

AWARENESS OF OVERTRAINING

It is easy to spend countless hours in a practice room when a musician has a large quantity of repertoire to master for a recital/audition. I was not aware of how over-practicing impacted my trombone playing until September of 2010. During that time I began to experience spasms in my bottom lower lip that would occur in and out of practice sessions. These spasms could take place even in the midst of blowing into the trombone and would impact the stability of tone from the instrument. As this happened I took greater notice of the quantity of time I spent in the practice room. I eventually realized that I was not being realistic about the hours I invested into my practice sessions. I began to prioritize a consistent pattern of practicing that would be spread out within the day. The purpose of this was to avoid cramming practice into one giant session and allow for durations of recovery throughout the day.

REST/RECOVERY

Allowing for enough rest/recovery is significant to allow the mind/body to function at peak levels. This is especially important as a musician approaches the day of

their recital/audition. I learned after taking several auditions that if I practiced too hard the night before I was extremely fatigued in the performance. Over time, I became wiser about how I managed the amount of sleep and practice recovery allowed leading into the performance day. This made for greater responsiveness and expression in the communication of ideas as I played for the audience. Willingness to accept the consistency and progress of work in the practice room dispelled any last minute questioning I had before the audition.

CENTERING

Performing an audition or recital can be a difficult task when the performer has to contend with potential distractions. I needed a way to focus more effectively on what I was doing without allowing external/internal distractions to get in the way. These distractions would pervade my thinking and prevent me from concentrating on the music. In my own experience of performing, I learned to manage the anxiety of distractions by the practice and application of centering. In Don Greene's book, *Performance Success*, he encourages the use of centering as a way to develop focus and channel nervous energy productively in performance.¹ Over time, the process of centering enabled me to set reasonable performing goals, focus better, and play expressively through distraction.

¹ Don Greene, *Performance Success* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40.

VISUALIZATION

Visualization is a powerful tool to utilize within the performance environment. The strategy of visualization empowers the performer to gain mastery over how he or she expects the performance to be. With practice, I learned to create a mental image of how I felt the atmosphere in which I would perform would look like. I also worked to develop an ideal sound for each selection of music I played. Furthermore, I would picture myself playing in the exact location, on the precise day, with my ideal sound. The more I rehearsed mentally, the more predictable everything in the performance environment became. This method of practice allowed for a greater sense of peace as I approached the recital/audition.

BETA BLOCKERS

The use of Beta Blockers has been widely discussed in terms of music performance. The purpose of a Beta Blocker in performing is to block symptoms of trembling, perspiring, faintness, heavy pulse, and any typical symptoms of stage fright in performance.² I was not aware of this type of drug until my second year of graduate school at Indiana University during a master class lecture. One of my trombone teachers had explained the benefits of its purpose after taking it for several years. He described that it helped him feel more control over his environment, less analytical, more relaxed, and less nervous as he performed the trombone. After trying Inderol in February of 2012, I came to the same conclusion in my own experience. At this point in my career I

² Irmtraud Kruger, *Performance Power* (Tempe: Summit Books, 1993), 101.

feel that the decision to take a Beta Blocker before an audition/recital is an individual matter. Some people are comfortable enough so that they do not require it. Other people will have to take it because they are much too physically nervous to cope without it. I find that Inderol works best when taken only before the actual performance. If I try to take the pill every time/day I practice then my body becomes tolerant of its effects. Overall, I believe Beta Blockers, if prescribed by a doctor and used for performances, help allow for optimal playing in the performance atmosphere.

REACTIONS TO MISTAKES

When preparing for an audition/recital, performers do their best to practice regularly to reduce the effect of error. Early in my college career I believed that great performances would solely consist of error-free music. As I became exposed to professionals in the music industry perform in live capacities, I understood there is no such thing as perfect. In observing professional orchestral musicians perform, I came to understand that it is their reaction to mistakes that defines their professionalism. In other words, they don't let mistakes bother them in a way that inhibits the rest of the music. As I've become more mature in my growth as a musician, I focus first on expression of the music instead of playing to avoid making mistakes.³

POST AUDITION/RECITAL ANALYSIS

It is easy to walk away from a performance with the approach of leaving everything behind analytically. Some people may experience an off day in their playing

³ William Westney, *The Perfect Wrong Note* (Pompton Plains: Amadeus Press, 2003), 54-57.

while others may simply not want to think about it. In my experience, it helps to take a day or two to settle my thoughts as well as to recover from the experience. After that down time, I make note of anything that went well in the performance and anything that I felt could be improved. This is essential for tracking progress and setting goals for improvement between each performance. In this process, I realized that I am my own worst critic. If I am not pleased with the performance, it does not matter what anyone else thinks. I try to evaluate myself fairly with the idea that I am always a learning/developing musician and that no live performance is note-perfect.

CHAPTER 3

PERFORMANCE SUCCESS UNDER PRESSURE

OVERVIEW

Many people are in a state of curiosity over how they can work/play their best under extreme circumstances. In an atmosphere that allows only one chance to play well, a person cannot afford to allow any extreme internal/external distractions to effect their performance level. The stress produced from life's internal and external distractions can often be related to personal issues with friends or family as well as pressure of success concerning the approaching performance. Nervousness or performance anxiety can often be a product of the issues encountered with our personal social problems in life as well as pressure we apply to ourselves in performing. In the world of music and performing we are surrounded by many people who suffer from this form of distress. Overall, if one cannot manage this properly, the stress/lack of focus can weigh down the performer, resulting in poor performance.

My goal in this chapter is to identify solutions to each of the eleven questions listed from chapter 1 and to create ideal process cues for the performer as solutions are explained. Each of these areas will be expanded upon with the support of the sources such as: Buddy Baker: *Tenor Trombone Handbook*, Shakti Gawain: *Creative Visualization*, Don Greene: *Performance Success*, Burton Kaplan: *Practicing for Artistic Success: The Musician's Guide to Self Empowerment*, Irmtraud Kruger: *Performance Power*, James

Loehr: *The New Toughness Training for Sports*, William Westney: *The Perfect Wrong Note*, and Bernie Williams: *Rhythms of the Game*.

IDENTIFICATION/SYMPTOMS OF PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

In order to combat performance anxiety it is important to understand the symptoms which add to this overwhelming issue. More specifically, the manner in how often or how little one thinks as well as what one thinks about is critical to what contributes to nervousness and lack of control. For instance, if all a person dwells on before or during the audition is, "Don't miss that note", or, "I hope I don't get lost in this transition", or thinking about recent stressful life issues, it is easier for things to go wrong. Performers also struggle when distracted by the physical atmosphere in while they play. This can be a result of the audition committee talking amongst themselves between pieces and being distracted as well as by any noise or visual distraction within the environment. Certain performers will also experience feeling too relaxed before or during a performance and cannot play with the vitality and control they desire. Overall, the most significant aspect to consider is lack of control, as this is the overlying contributor to nerves and anxiety during performance. The following information will serve as a guide to plan/prepare for auditions/recitals and will explore a variety of solutions to gain control of how to function inside and outside the performance environment.⁴

⁴ Don Greene, *Performance Success* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 71.

PART I: PREPARATION PHASE

The first part of this chapter will identify how to prepare for an audition/recital performance through effective organization with regard to travel maintenance as well as creating an ideal training regimen. This portion of subject matter will deal with key aspects of what to address in the preparation phase of planning and practicing for an audition/recital.

TRAVEL PLANNING

If one is required to travel to take an audition or travel to play a recital it is crucial to organize traveling in advance. In doing so, one should make sure to make any/all travel arrangements so that the individual arrives at least two days early to adjust to the time change and difference in environment. Given this consideration, if something goes unplanned with a flight, one is likely to be rescheduled and still arrive to the destination with time to spare. Allowing an additional day or two will give one the opportunity to settle into the location and solidify last minute details before the performance day. Nothing is worse than scheduling a flight before an audition where one is supposed to fly in at 6pm the day before and arrives instead at 2am the morning of the audition. Due to the unpredictability of flight arrivals/departures, individuals may miss the entire performance if they do not structure travel properly.

In addition, it helps to prioritize the significance/timing of any unaddressed work/school responsibilities surrounding long distance travel to the performance. Students enrolled in classes should make all of their teachers aware of their travels and

deal with any responsibilities outside of traveling/performing. Furthermore, be disciplined enough to complete school work before travel, or complete your work after the performance. Avoid bringing school/administrative work with you to address through your stay/during your trip. This approach prevents the individual from being distracted by anything that would interfere with concentrating on the performance.

Prioritizing work/school objectives and allowing extra time in your travel will create a proper adjustment to the new environment, allow enough rest the night before the performance, and create greater control in the performance.

PUNCTUALITY

Punctuality plays a vital role in the ability to settle ones nerves leading into a performance. The discipline of punctuality is often taken for granted when it comes to arriving to the performance location. Furthermore, performers fall into the trap of only allowing “enough” time to get from the hotel to the audition/performance site. What can happen is that upon arrival the individual is immediately called upon to perform with little to no warm up time after arrival. This can result in a poor/weak performance simply based on rushing to get to the audition/performance location. Other symptoms of late arrival involve the individual being extremely out of breath, solely based on the fact they were rushing to get there. Lateness takes away from the person being able to arrive promptly and think through how they want to play. Running behind also accelerates one’s pulse and prevents the body from being able to remain in an ideal relaxed state. (The technique of Centering is later addressed in this chapter to cope

with severe anxiety of this kind). In terms of punctuality, one will better cope/manage anxiety simply by observing/researching the time, distance, and awareness of the location to where they drive. The individual will also cope better in this area by accepting that it is better for them to be early. Early arrival will allow one to settle one's thoughts and refresh in one's mind any final details for the product.

Most often, the best solution to this issue is to drive from the hotel to the performance location a day before to know exactly how/where the location is and drive time involved. Allowing a half hour window of early arrival time is just enough to find the warm up room, draw numbers for your audition order, and warm up. It also helps to navigate the GPS locations the day before to have a definitive window of time and to allow any extra time while driving.

PROGRESS TRACKING

To function well in the audition/performance setting, the time of preparation to train should be several weeks in advance to the audition/performance. It is an individual matter regarding the specific window of time a musician practices, though enough time should be given to maintain a feeling of control. The goal is to make the performer as ready as possible within a reasonable/logical time frame, fully understanding how they function under stress. This involves creating a "Game Plan" from the start of one's practicing to the day of the actual audition. Each day will entail the performer tracking their progress on a regular basis, noting improvements they have made and adjustments they seek. The goal is not necessarily to have a spot-perfect performance,

but to play at the peak of one’s level despite certain technical playing difficulties. A great method of preparation before an orchestral audition is to use four weeks before the audition to prepare the excerpt list (given that the individual actually has four weeks to prepare the excerpts). Each week can focus on a different area of concentration and become more direct the closer one gets to the audition. This table will describe how to address practicing for an audition.

<p>Week 1</p>	<p>-Collect all necessary music. -Learn any material less familiar.</p>
<p>Week 2</p>	<p>-Take the most difficult excerpts and practice with a metronome 30 clicks slower. -Do this with a recording device and listen for consistency of articulation, tone, tuning, and rhythm.</p>
<p>Week 3</p>	<p>-Repeat the process from Week 2 and include excerpts that are easiest to play.</p>
<p>Week 4</p>	<p>-Perform the list of excerpts for an audience. Perform exactly as you would in context. The audience could involve family or friends.</p>

Week 1 can involve collecting all parts as well as listening to all works and learn any material with which one is less familiar. The purpose of this is to listen to how the part fits in with the ensemble and to gain awareness of various stylistic interpretations of each piece/excerpt. Week 2 can involve taking all of the most difficult excerpts and play them 30 clicks slower with a metronome/recording device, focusing solely on fundamentals while building to the standard tempo. This involves playing each excerpt at a controllable pace without tension as well as identifying the pitch center of each note. Week 3 could involve continuing partially what occurred in week 2 while also refreshing the excerpts that are easiest to play with metronome and recording device work. Lastly, week 4 could involve performing the material from the audition list in front of a group of peers as is done in the actual audition. In this way of preparation it is good to have all materials, including the music set in place and to visualize the actual atmosphere during practice. One also should seek to understand how aurally one wants to sound/play as though under the audition/performance. This is accomplished by taking five or ten seconds to hear and feel mentally what it is like to successfully play the beginning of each excerpt before actually performing them. This skill will create the type of direction/focus needed when tasked with preparing for an audition.⁵

AWARENESS OF OVERTRAINING

Overtraining and over-practicing are both contributors that lead to weaker playing and anxiety, especially for wind instrumentalists. Based on heavy playing

⁵ Don Greene, *Performance Success* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 106.

demands of today's musicians, it is difficult to avoid days off in regard to rehearsal schedules, sectionals, gigs, and practicing on your own. Despite these circumstances, one must manage the amount of time allowed for playing and recovery. In terms of playing, it can be best described that the individual when practicing/performing, is applying "stress" to the body. The objective is to create a goal of "toughness" for whatever the individual is to achieve during performance. The first thing a performer must determine is their current state of endurance at the given time and build from there. In doing so, it is vital to add more playing time in smaller doses and avoid putting on larger playing time to what one already tolerates. For instance, this can be done by allowing for the same exact practice time over four days (an hour and a half per day) and then gradually increase an extra fifteen minutes the fifth day. Overall, avoid adding larger quantities of practice to what is already established. Excessive practice in a day with too many additional hours makes it easier for necessary muscles to collapse. Once one reaches this limit they have overused the proper muscles needed to make a sound on the instrument, as too much stress was applied. "Overuse" is also a result of simply not allowing enough recovery time away from playing and practicing the instrument.

In order to function at the highest level, the muscles involved in playing an instrument need time to relax to allow for adequate responsiveness and flexibility. When any/all necessary muscles are given enough relaxation time, the person will then be capable of adding more stress to those muscles. It is crucial to balance and plan out exactly the time you wish to spend playing the instrument and the time away from it. By

following through with this kind of game plan one prevents worse circumstances from happening such as hands cramping, lips collapsing (brass players), muscles twitching, etc. Furthermore, whether athlete or musician, it is good to take time to slow down one's approach to their habits in practice outside of performance. By slowing things down, the performer can further create greater awareness of inefficiency behind how they function within the music. Keep in mind that we are merely human beings that are in a constant state of change, growth, and restoration. ^{6, 7}

REST/RECOVERY

Allowing for enough rest/recovery is critical to actively prevent anxiety from happening in a performance atmosphere. This is a significant subject which is a basis for optimal playing before/during a big performance. In this sense, it is vital that the performer is caring enough to allow for sufficient rest leading up to the big day. Lack of sufficient sleep over time can alter the body and mind in terms of its ability to function physically as well as mentally. Nothing contributes more to nerves than knowing the feeling the instrument will not respond when you try to play on a given day. On the day of performance, one must feel assured and refreshed to have a healthy mental attitude toward any kind of uncontrolled variables before or through the performance. Allowing for enough sleep will assist the individual in case something goes unexpected. Enough sleep will also ensure one will have enough recovery to cope with whatever comes their

⁶ Bernie Williams, *Rhythms of the Game* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Books, 2011), 127.

⁷ James Loehr, *The New Toughness Training for Sports* (New York: Plume, 1995), 87-89.

way. Furthermore, one should get up to around 7-8 hours of sleep on a daily basis at least a month before the performance date. It is also critical leading into any big performance that one allows for a day of rest without hard practice the day before performing. At that point in time the collective of what one accomplishes from accumulated practicing should be enough to stabilize consistency when it counts. Use the day before to solidify last minute details, but avoid running through everything. Enough rest will ensure the person has sufficient energy and stimulation needed to complete the task at hand.⁸

PART II: PRACTICE STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS IN AUDITION/RECITAL PERFORMANCE

The second part of this chapter will explore how to prepare for an audition/recital with regard to ideal focus as well as how to function during performance. This portion of subject matter will deal with strategies a musician can use to create better focus as well as how to respond in the audition/recital.

CENTERING DOWN

When one approaches a recital/audition, it is critical to arm oneself with as many tools as possible before playing. In a matter of speaking, these tools are not physical tools, but mental ones. These mental tools consist of a variety of specific ideas one sets in place for the performer to utilize. Often, the best approach one can take is to utilize the technique of centering.

⁸James Loehr, *The New Toughness Training for Sports* (New York: Plume, 1995), 95-99.

Centering Down is a strategy that helps performer's direct energy productively through extreme conditions. This technique is designed for people who experience high levels of stress in performance situations such as rapid breathing, shaking upper body, or fast heart rate. When properly developed, the process of Centering Down will allow the performer the ability to be in their ideal performance state and eliminate the physical levels of stress. From a contextual perspective, the individual will activate efficiently into a Zen state of focus from this technique.

In this strategy, there are **seven steps** that can be used successively before playing to better gauge attention span. **Step 1** involves forming a clear intention behind what is to be accomplished within the performance. This can entail a statement such as, "I plan to play with a ringing resonant tone from beginning to end". **Step 2** deals with locating a direct visual object or focus point of reference for the performance. In this case, the sheet music on the stand is a wonderful object to direct one's sight and focus. The goal with this is to practice drawing one's attention to the actual sheet music so much that one cannot think or be distracted by anything else. Over time, the performer will learn to adjust how much or little they need to focus on the actual object, depending on the situation. **Step 3** simply entails attention to breathing and doing so efficiently. In this exercise one simply allows oneself to breathe in deeply through one's mouth as the rest of the upper body remains stable and loose. The goal here is to allow for an uninhibited exchange of inhale and exhale without additional/additive bodily gestures. **Step 4** involves the release of any undesired tension or additional body

movement that can inhibit the breathing and blowing process of air. **Step 5** includes locating one's literal center within the body, which is usually about 2 inches below the naval and 2 inches into the body. All of the energy in performing should be emphasized from this direct point of reference. **Step 6** involves repeating one's intention of process from step 1 until it is second nature. Lastly, **Step 7** entails one beginning the performing process, all while directing one's energy to the focus point. This is to be done from beginning to end of the recital, audition, or performance.

Keep in mind that the objective of Centering Down is to go in with a clear concept of what one intends to do and come out of the performance achieving that concept. The more each of these steps are practiced, the more automatic they become. Ideally, the performer will be so automatic with Centering that all steps can be processed within a matter of seconds.⁹

CENTERING UP

Centering Up is a significant tool to rely upon for individuals that experience low levels of energy before and during a performance situation. In this procedure, the performer will walk out of the performance having achieved one's clear intention(s). The performer will also produce a higher energy level within and maintain it throughout the entirety of the performance. As with Centering Down, the individual will be able to activate efficiently into their ideal/Zen state of focus from this technique.

⁹ Don Greene, *Performance Success* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40-45.

The steps involved in this process are very similar to the steps involved in Centering Down. **Step 1** involves forming a clear intention of what one intends to accomplish as they play. This intention could involve saying, “tonight I will play an energetic and invigorating recital”. In **Step 2**, the idea is to locate an adequate focus point and direct all visual/mental energy to that point. Again, the object of visual focus could be anything as simple as the sheet music or the stand on which it is placed. **Step 3** requires rapidly closing and opening your fists while breathing air in and out rapidly through the mouth. This exercise is done consistently over the duration of several seconds to achieve a higher feeling of energy within the upper body. **Step 4** will require the release of any excessive tension/tightness in the upper body from Step 2. In this step, focus on allowing the limbs, neck, and upper body to gradually go limp over several seconds. **Step 5** simply entails finding one’s center, which is 2 inches below the naval and 2 inches inside the body. All energy should be felt from this direct point of reference. **Step 6** requires repeating one’s intention from step 1 to maintain as a goal throughout the entire performance. Lastly, **Step 7** requires the performer to direct all energy to the focus point.

Like Centering Down, a musician should apply these steps often in a practice room outside the performance, so the process becomes second nature. With practice, centering should be an efficient exercise that takes only a few seconds before performance.¹⁰

¹⁰ Don Greene, *Performance Success* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 98-100.

VISUALIZATION

Visualization is another powerful tool to utilize throughout the whole performance. Furthermore, visualization can be accomplished based on what one writes as well as what one visualizes. Visualization is designed to engage focus through distraction as well as engage the individual into the ideal performance character. In her book, *Creative Visualization*, Shakti Gawain describes visualization as, “learning to use your natural creative imagination in a more conscious way, as a technique to create what you truly want-love, fulfillment, enjoyment, satisfying relationships, rewarding work, self-expression, health, beauty, prosperity, inner peace, and harmony...whatever your heart desires”.¹¹ That is the ultimate goal behind this strategy; to allow your musical product to materialize exactly the way you want it. In this section, visualization will be further explored from the perspective of what one imagines as well as what one writes.

In terms of visualization through imagery, pretend you (the performer) are surrounded by an invisible fence. The idea is to use that invisible fence to separate you from other physical and mental distractions present in the performance atmosphere. In other words, this invisible fence acts as a barrier that cannot allow you to be deterred from anything going on in your head or around you. This barrier is your own invisible private place no one can penetrate. In terms of visualization through writing, it helps to create a written list of professionals you watched play live who had past successes and

¹¹ Shakti Gawain, *Creative Visualization: Use the Power of Your Imagination to Create What You Want in Your Life* (Novato: Nataraj Publishing, 2002), 4.

mistakes. Write their names down and do your best to try to play the role they had in their success to your audition/performance. As a trombonist I rely upon individuals who I watched perform live in recitals and master classes over the years. While these are polished players, the live performance experience can allow for subtle error or unplanned occurrences even in their case. Some of these trombonists include Gerry Pagano (St. Louis Symphony), Jay Evans (Alabama Symphony), Ko-ichirio Yamamoto (Seattle Symphony), James Decker (former member Honolulu Symphony), Peter Ellefson (former member Seattle Symphony) and many others. Watching these masters perform live and using their approach to live playing further empower me as I perform. What is most impressive is the control of their focus in the midst of unexpected error and mistakes. In terms of commonality, these individuals have performed with a determined heart which they kept from the beginning to end of their program. They continually remain in my mind inspirationally as I play live for audiences. Furthermore, it is useful to bring an inspirational list as one goes forward into the performance situation. It is important the performer utilize these performance techniques from the very beginning of their practice sessions.

Visualization should be a regular part of a musician's practice sessions, so it becomes automatic during performance. Practicing this way will better enable one to develop into the proper character of how they want to perform/play/sound under intense situations.¹²

¹²Don Greene, *Performance Success* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 71.

BETA BLOCKERS

The use of Beta Blockers in performance is a topic widely discussed with regard to its potency in performance. The drug is designed to regulate the escalation of one's pulse, perspiration, trembling/shaking of hands, and typical symptoms of fear in performing. Researchers have concluded that anxiety in performing would decrease if one were to block beta receptors of the nerve cells. Overall, these conclusions are generally true. However, the drug only serves to further dampen the above symptoms of performance anxiety and not completely eliminate them.

In terms of disadvantages, habitual/chronic use of inderol can become habit-forming when the individual is dependent on use for everyday activity such as practicing. This type of drug responds best when taken only before a major audition or recital. If used daily, the performer can gradually become tolerant of the pill and the effects/purpose of the drug will dull.

In her book, *Performance Power*, Dr. Irmtraud Kruger states of beta blockers, "It only gives us the illusion that there is a practical solution for everything, a solution which, apart from the physical effects, does not allow any growth of our healthy self-knowledge".¹³

REACTIONS TO MISTAKES

One area of performing that is not always addressed is the manner in which we react to mistakes. When it comes to playing a live performance this can often be a

¹³ Irmtraud Kruger, *Performance Power* (Tempe: Summit Books, 1993), 101.

debilitating issue for musicians because we all want a flawless performance. In auditions, mistakes can be costly as committees usually dismiss candidates who are unable to play the “Perfect” audition. In general, with any live performance it is most important for the performer to understand that there is only one chance to play the material and not everything will come out exactly as planned. One of the best methods to alleviate mistakes is to record oneself on a regular basis and to circle in the music the areas that are most inferior.

In terms of identifying mistakes, one should circle in pencil any inferior areas and repeat those figures until consistency is achieved. These could include any areas that involve inferior resonance, tuning, chipped notes, etc. Again, the goal is to play the specific music the first time without error and without concern about what could go wrong.

In relevance to mistakes, Author Burton Kaplan states, “You must produce a satisfying performance on the first try, at a prearranged moment, on a prearranged day”.¹⁴ Here, Kaplan conveys (through the Technique of the First Try) that despite any technically weaker areas in the music, you must be able to perform the music optimally the first time. This includes the practice of performing for one’s peers on a planned day and time. This exercise forces one to develop within oneself the ability to perform in a live atmosphere the first time without starting over because of a mistake.

¹⁴ Burton Kaplan, *Practicing for Artistic Success: The Musician’s Guide to Self Empowerment* (New York: Perception Development Techniques, 2004), 43.

It also helps to watch live performances of players/musicians in the recital setting. This is useful in that many of these professionals experience the same feelings and challenges when they get up to play. Realize, like anyone else, seasoned performers only get one chance to play and make it right. There are always going to be variables we want to go back and make better or improve from the first time.

Realize also that if there is a mistake, the missed/chipped note often serves as an indication of where one's ability level stands. In music it is best to consider where to push one's limits and where one should not. In areas where an error can occur, it is best to avoid executing anything spectacular beyond your level of training. In this situation the goal is to play through the passagework concentrating on the basic fundamentals of sound quality, resonance, and rhythmical stability. Trying to attempt to decorate erroneous passagework with extremities of excessive vibrato, extreme dynamics, or other similar methods will only make matters difficult.

Furthermore, the best thing to do when something unusual takes place is to accept the error. In other words, limits should be explored in preparation and one should stay within those limits during performance. Dwelling on error(s) will not make it better and can distract one from moving on to concentrate on the material ahead. Author William Westney explains, "to make the particular mistake fully, without scorning it (if the mistake was "juicy," how could it be bad?)".¹⁵ In other words, Westney

¹⁵William Westney, *The Perfect Wrong Note* (Pompton Plains: Amadeus Press, 2003), 56.

encourages approaching the music without fear of what might go wrong. He goes on to specify five basic concepts:

-“Relax the controlling ego”.

-“Enjoy the physicality of what you are doing”.

-“Notice everything without guilt”.

-“Focus with honesty on a small part (master one thing at a time)”.

-“Let the body figure it out in its own way”.¹⁶

The goal is to simply remain in the present as well as thinking in the present while avoiding as analysis of what caused the mistake. Analysis can take place after performance when a more singular focus is available. It is also beneficial to maintain relaxation/freeness of the body and avoid any excessive tightness/tension in the muscles/joints if mistakes happen. Professor Emeritus of Trombone at Northern Colorado Buddy Baker states, “Work to counter physical manifestations of fear: Have a cup of water for dry mouth, rest your instrument on the floor-let arms hang and shake out hands if necessary, relax chest and take a couple of deep breaths to relax the “support mechanism”- much of this can be done before you come on stage”.¹⁷ By allowing for this, one continues to make music without the interference of a tense body.

When all else fails, focus simply on performing at a reasonable level and avoid any “high” expectations of “Golden Notes”. Trying to play with ideas or techniques

¹⁶William Westney, *The Perfect Wrong Note* (Pompton Plains: Amadeus Press, 2003), 57.

¹⁷ Buddy Baker, *The Buddy Baker Tenor Trombone Handbook* (San Antonio: International Trombone Association Manuscript Press, 2001), 79.

beyond those established from the practice room will overwhelm the mind with expectations and result in further error. Following a performance, it helps to understand that everyone can go back and make whatever they played better, no matter who they are. The human body can do amazing things, but it is not perfect and is not made for perfection. Comprehending this will allow one to see that error is part of life and music is in a continual state of perfection.

PART III: POST AUDITION/RECITAL REFLECTION/ANALYSIS

The last part of this chapter will concentrate on how to evaluate oneself following the recital/audition performance. The goal of this area is to make note of any progress from consistency built through practice in the performance as well as aspects to improve.

AUDITION/RECITAL ANALYSIS

Getting comfortable with live performances/auditions takes time to develop and requires a great deal of patience and determination. Each time one experiences an event like this it helps to reflect on how one did as well as any improvements that could be made. One of the best things to do in a recorded live performance (recital) is to listen to what one did and observe any positive and negative qualities of the performance. I have taken auditions where candidates were allowed to record their performance. Upon listening/examination it is good to make a written record of the aspects that went well during the performance and what could have been better. In this phase, it is important to be objective about any good or bad aspects observed from the performance. With

this in mind, use the information gathered as a measuring stick to gauge one's goals of improvement for the next recital/audition.

Another possibility would be to ask for comments from the individual or committee responsible for evaluating your product. This material can be extremely valuable in terms of what they observe. These are comments from experienced musicians, and what they observe will often be no different from what the performer noticed. Often a committee will strive to identify any flaws as well as provide solutions for future opportunities.

The most important aspect to take away from this process is to KEEP TRYING and KEEP PERFORMING. There is no substitute for experience in the music field, and continuing to allow oneself to get up and play/audition regularly allows the individual to become used to the environment. With experience in auditions/recitals, the individual will gradually reduce the amount of nerves/fear that may result before playing. Remember, great musicians/athletes arrived at where they are because they had a persistent/insistent attitude and would not accept anything less. It is vital that one continue to pursue their dreams and to never give up if one expects to achieve them.

CHAPTER 4

FINAL THOUGHTS

When practicing for recitals and auditions I have learned to incorporate all the techniques listed in this document. Of these techniques, the one that is most effective in my performing is Centering Down. This exercise has enabled me to remain in a relaxed state as I perform and reduces the amount of tension in my body during performance. The other benefit of Centering Down is that it focuses the attention to individual functionally in the performance and away from internal and external distractions. As I have experienced the use of Centering Down, I now look at the exercise as more of a concept than a series of steps. More specifically, this is a process where I literally practice acting the way I want to feel as I perform. In this process, I practice getting into a zen state for five to ten seconds and then play the music. As I practice I literally feel what it is like to be relaxed and take several deep breaths. This is what Centering Down has taught me in terms of getting to an ideal/relaxed state. The idea for me in using this technique is to simplify the steps into an efficient exercise which reduces the anxiety I experience mentally and physically in performing the trombone. Anyone who struggles severely with physical symptoms of stage fright (profuse sweating, scattered thinking, extreme tension, lack of focus) will benefit most from the application of Centering Down.¹⁸

¹⁸Don Greene, *Performance Success* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41-45.

Being able to inform others about various methodologies to help musicians to perform publicly with a definitive approach to planning and practicing is the goal of this document. As I look back on my early experiences of performing auditions and recitals, I wish that I would have been aware of this information. When performing I would often lack control of my mind, body, and emotions. For me this involved dry mouth, scattered thinking, and rapid breathing. As I learned of the information within this document and applied it, I have gained a better sense of trust and ease going into a performance situation. I now have greater control over my mind (my thoughts), body (what my muscles and nerves experience), and emotions (my feelings) as I perform. I have learned to apply this material to experience sharing music with others and avoid placing too much pressure on myself and the situation. I hope this document helps inspire musicians to develop confidence the same way that it did for me.¹⁹

¹⁹William Westney, *The Perfect Wrong Note* (Pompton Plains: Amadeus Press, 2003), 73.

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