

A Brief Discussion on the Impact and Coping Strategies of Performance Anxiety in Music Major College Students

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Abstract

Music performance anxiety is the stress musicians experience during stage performances. This study employs literature analysis to reveal the manifestations of music performance anxiety, the primary factors causing it, its impacts, and specific measures for improvement. Given that performance anxiety is commonly experienced by music major students, it is primarily caused by factors such as perfectionistic personality traits, social anxiety, past performance experiences, and personal musicality. Music performance anxiety can directly or indirectly affect performers both physiologically and psychologically. Physiologically, it is mainly manifested through symptoms such as muscle tension, trembling hands and feet, nausea, and increased heart rate. Psychologically, it often results in diminished self-esteem, memory loss, and feelings of repression and depression. To alleviate performance anxiety in music major students, this paper proposes strategies such as cultivating a positive performance attitude, accumulating stage experience, and preparing adequately before performances. Additionally, external methods such as professional treatment and teacher support and encouragement can assist students in overcoming performance anxiety, enhancing their stage confidence, and achieving better performance outcomes.

Keywords: music education, music psychology, music performance, performance anxiety

1. Introduction

Music performance anxiety refers to the negative emotions, such as tension, fear, and worry, experienced by performers during the music performance process. To some extent, such emotions can hinder the ability to complete a performance or to showcase the performer's true level of skill. While music performance anxiety is a symptom specific to certain music professionals, studies indicate that the primary group affected by performance anxiety is music major students. According to Britsch (2005), music performance anxiety is widespread, with up to 75% of music students exhibiting symptoms of anxiety. Wesner, Moyes, and Davis (1990) conducted a study targeting music faculty and students in the United States, revealing that 21% of both faculty and students experienced music performance anxiety with severe symptoms, 40% reported moderate anxiety, and 17% felt moderately impacted by the anxiety. Furthermore, 9% of faculty and students stated that performance anxiety often led them to avoid performing music, and 13% reported that their actual performances were at least once interrupted by performance anxiety. Zhang (2020) also conducted a similar survey and found that 12.7% of students reported severe music performance anxiety, 29% reported moderate anxiety, and 42% reported mild anxiety. Only 3.2% of students claimed to have no performance anxiety at all. This data shows that a significant number of students report experiencing performance anxiety, though the severity varies, with over 40% reporting severe or moderate cases. Among the various forms of performance, solo performances were perceived as the most anxiety-inducing, with 93.6% of respondents indicating higher levels of anxiety during solo or soloist performances, while only 6.4% of respondents found choral or ensemble performances to induce greater anxiety. This highlights that music major students tend to experience the highest levels of anxiety when performing solo.

Music performance anxiety is closely associated with situational anxiety and manifests as persistent anxiety. It is triggered by specific anxiety-inducing conditions and is accompanied by emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral symptoms. Different researchers hold varying views on the nature of music performance anxiety. Regarding the phenomenon of performance anxiety, researchers have proposed several suggestions for improvement. Ba (2017) suggests that educators should adopt a supportive, encouragement-based educational philosophy, as the attitude of the teacher has a significant impact on the students. Encouragement from teachers can help students form positive self-perceptions and alleviate anxiety, thereby enhancing the performance

experience. Xu (2017) argues that Orff group counseling significantly alleviates the stage performance anxiety of music performers. The Orff music therapy method, which uses effective musical media such as sound perception, bodily movement, performance experience, and verbal expression, strengthens normal psychological defense mechanisms, promotes the development of correct behavioral control, and supports the generation of healthy emotions and thoughts, ultimately helping to mitigate music performance anxiety.

Music performance anxiety (MPA) has a significant impact on musicians' careers and mental health, which cannot be overlooked. Kenny (2011) pointed out in his research that long-term anxiety not only triggers physical symptoms such as muscle tension and fatigue, affecting performance abilities, but MPA may also reduce job satisfaction, further shortening career longevity. Additionally, MPA is closely associated with mental health issues such as anxiety disorders and depression, and in more severe cases, it may develop into chronic psychological conditions.

In summary, anxiety is a natural physiological response of the human body and a specific form of emotional expression. Music performance anxiety is widespread among music professionals and music major students. Although many studies have proposed various interventions for performance anxiety, further understanding of the causes of music performance anxiety is still required. This study aims to analyze the factors and impacts of performance anxiety among music major college students through literature analysis, and to propose relevant improvement strategies, with the goal of providing a theoretical foundation for further research in this area.

Therefore, this study proposes the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the main factors influencing performance anxiety among music major college students?

Research Question 2: How should music major college students cope with performance anxiety?

2. Main Factors Contributing to Performance Anxiety in Music Major College Students

Anxiety is a unique and coherent cognitive-emotional structure within our defensive motivation system, centered around an uncontrollable feeling focused on future threats, dangers, or other potential negative events (Barlow, 2000). There are various definitions of anxiety among different researchers. For instance, Yan (2022) defines anxiety as always being associated with discomfort, threats, harm, and even abnormal or destructive feelings. People instinctively become vigilant and avoid anxiety, as severe anxiety negatively impacts physical and mental health. However, anxiety also serves as a self-protection mechanism, helping individuals avoid potential harm, and is an important regulatory process related to human evolution, which has adapted to defense mechanisms against natural enemies and environmental challenges. Sullivan (1948), through numerous psychological therapy experiments, concluded that while anxiety is a painful experience, if individuals can effectively handle the anxiety within their personality, it may become an essential support for their personal growth.

Performance anxiety is a subtype of anxiety, characterized by stage fright. It refers to the excessive anxiety or even fear experienced by performers before and during performances. It is influenced by multiple factors, including personality traits and psychological health (Zheng, 2009). Ely (1991) defined performance anxiety as involving four types of symptoms: physiological changes, emotional changes, cognitive issues, and behavioral changes. Physiological changes include symptoms such as accelerated heartbeat, cold sweats, shortness of breath, nausea, blurred vision, and numbness in the fingers. Emotional changes mainly involve excessive fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of failure. Cognitive issues refer to a loss of self-confidence, difficulty focusing, avoidance of social situations, and a lack of vitality and expressiveness in musical performance. Behavioral changes may manifest as excessive sweating, trembling knees, etc. These changes further increase psychological pressure and fear of the stage, leading to more severe stage fright, thus creating a vicious cycle that worsens the performance state (Lockwood, 1989).

Music performance anxiety is a widely existing emotion in the field of music performance, with various factors inducing this emotion. Previous studies have categorized the main causes of music performance anxiety into several key factors. The highest proportion is respectively perfectionistic personality traits, social anxiety, past performance experiences, and personal musicality factors.

2.1 Perfectionistic Personality Traits

Perfectionistic personality refers to an individual who sets high goals for themselves and strives to achieve them with utmost precision (Li, Song, Li, 2007). Burns (1983) considered perfectionism to be a negative, unidimensional personality trait, where individuals compulsively pursue unrealistic high standards and measure their self-worth by how well they meet those standards. Jia (2023) highlighted that perfectionism, as a personality trait, is closely linked to anxiety emotions, with extreme self-requirements, fear of failure, and harsh self-criticism being the root

causes of test anxiety. This suggests a strong connection between perfectionism and anxiety disorders. Kenny (2004) found that perfectionism is closely tied to high levels of performance anxiety in music students, with perfectionists having higher levels of anxiety during performances. The reason for this is that perfectionists place excessive expectations on themselves, focus too much on small mistakes during performances, and tend to overlook their successes (Wang, 2014). Unlike anxiety triggered by perfectionist personality, performance anxiety caused by social anxiety stems more from excessive concern about others' evaluations, which is worthy of further exploration.

2.2 Social Anxiety

Social anxiety can generally be divided into two categories: general social anxiety, where individuals fear being the center of attention in any social situation and therefore avoid social settings, and specific social anxiety, which is fear experienced only in particular situations, such as those faced by salespeople, teachers, actors, and musicians. Music performance anxiety is a specific manifestation of this type of social anxiety. Music performances are public events where feedback and evaluation from others are crucial to the performer. Tong and Jiang (2023) noted that individuals with social anxiety often experience excessive fear regarding negative evaluations from others, leading them to avoid social interactions and experience self-deprecating anxiety. Zhao (2018) proposed that many performers feel more anxious when an audience is present compared to when they are simply practicing alone. They tend to focus excessively on the potential outcomes of the performance, which leads to immense pressure and can result in performance failure. In addition to the impact of social anxiety, past performance experiences are also one of the significant sources of music performance anxiety.

2.3 Past Performance Experiences

Studies have shown (Salmon, Schrod, Wright, 1989) that experienced performers are better at controlling their anxiety because they have accumulated more performance experience and view anxiety as a normal part of performing, rather than as a threat. Performers with extensive piano experience typically maintain a stable state during performances and can regulate their anxiety in a positive manner. In contrast, music major students with limited experience often feel helpless when faced with anxiety (Lv, 2015). As Spielberg (1978) suggested, past similar experiences and the current situation often trigger the performer's memories and directly influence their performance.

The phenomenon of music performance anxiety triggered by past performance experiences is widespread, and even highly skilled musicians can be deeply affected by it. The renowned soprano Maria Callas, in the early stages of her career, experienced prolonged performance anxiety after a mistake during one of her performances, which caused her significant distress. However, Callas did not succumb to this pressure. She devoted extensive time to refining her vocal techniques and sought professional psychological guidance to rebuild her confidence. Ultimately, she overcame her anxiety and, through her exceptional artistry and expressive power, became a legendary figure in the history of opera.

Based on research on musical performance anxiety triggered by past performance experiences, the impact of personal musicality factors on performance anxiety is also worthy of in - depth exploration.

2.4 Personal Musicality Factors

The level of music performance anxiety in college students is also influenced by certain musicality factors. Chen (2023) stated that the more thoroughly a student prepares a piece, the more comfortable they will feel during the performance. Conversely, inadequate preparation increases anxiety levels, leading to memory lapses and forgetting parts of the music, which impacts their ability to perform effectively. After long periods of piano training, performers develop conditioned reflexes that ensure the continuity and integrity of the performance, even in stressful situations (Zhang, 2013). Yang (2017) pointed out that for any music enthusiast or learner, memorizing the music is an essential part of musicality. Only by memorizing the piece can a performer thoroughly understand the work and identify flaws they might not have noticed while reading the music, gradually improving their performance.

In summary, music performance anxiety in college students is influenced by various factors, including personality traits such as perfectionism, social anxiety, past performance experiences, and personal musicality. Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective interventions to help students manage and overcome performance anxiety.

3. The Impact of Music Performance Anxiety on Music Major College Students

Music performance anxiety is not a rare phenomenon; it exists to varying degrees among performers at all levels. The impact of music performance anxiety can be broadly categorized into physiological and psychological effects.

3.1 Physiological Impact

On the physiological level, Liu (2022) observed that the most common physiological symptoms experienced by performers before a performance include dizziness, trembling hands, dry mouth, muscle tension, sweaty palms, and dry heaving. When individuals are in a highly tense state, muscle tightness is one of the most common reactions, which can lead to performance mistakes. Among professionals, string and percussion musicians are particularly vulnerable to these effects. Additionally, in high-pressure performance situations, performers may experience an accelerated heart rate, which alters their perception of tempo and leads them to play faster than usual, making errors more likely (Lehmann, 2007). Performers may also experience self-doubt, over- or under-evaluation of their performance, distracted attention, and memory loss. These symptoms can make it difficult for performers to concentrate, leading to forgetfulness of lyrics or music notation (Liu, 2024).

3.2 Psychological Impact

Music performance anxiety also has a profound impact on the performer's psychological state. Psychological symptoms often include excessive worry, fear of failure, and generalized feelings of unidentifiable panic. These worries and concerns can lead to a loss of confidence in the performance, lack of focus, memory failure, and mental blankness (Ely, 1991). Performers may also experience negative emotions such as frustration, anger, self-deprecation, sadness, depression, hopelessness, and an inability to initiate change in their emotional state (Ren, 2008). The psychological pressure caused by performance anxiety can lead to significant performance failures during the actual event, severely diminishing the quality of the performance.

In summary, music performance anxiety has significant effects on both the physiological and psychological well-being of performers. Physiologically, it can trigger autonomic nervous responses such as increased heart rate, muscle tension, and trembling hands, which may lead to forgetfulness and overall performance failure. Psychologically, performers may lose confidence, experience self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, and struggle to perform effectively, which in turn can affect their daily life. Music performance anxiety is a negative psychological state that arises during public performances and requires attention from music performers. Actively addressing and overcoming these negative emotions is crucial for approaching each performance with the best possible mental state.

4. Coping Strategies for Performance Anxiety

Based on the causes of performance anxiety, including perfectionistic personality traits, past performance experiences, and personal musicality factors, corresponding strategies can be applied to alleviate performance anxiety. These strategies are aimed at addressing the identified factors that contribute to the anxiety experienced by music performers.

4.1 Addressing Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a commonly mentioned and widely recognized factor in performance anxiety. On one hand, perfectionism can drive performers to improve continually, providing motivation for progress; however, on the other hand, it often leads to heightened anxiety, which negatively impacts both the performer's performance and daily life. To mitigate the negative anxiety associated with perfectionism, several effective methods can be employed.

First, it is important to understand and accept perfectionism as a natural tendency, which everyone may experience to some extent. Rather than worrying excessively about it, performers should focus on leveraging the benefits of perfectionism—such as motivation and attention to detail—while avoiding letting it hinder their overall performance. Second, cultivating a proper attitude towards performances and setting realistic goals are essential. Performers should not set overly stringent expectations for themselves during a performance. Instead, they should approach each performance with seriousness and dedication, allowing them to focus entirely on the music rather than being overwhelmed by anxiety. By maintaining a balanced perspective on performance expectations, performers can reduce the impact of anxiety and engage more fully with the music.

4.2 Gaining Stage Experience

Stage experience plays a crucial role in the success of a performance. Zhang (2021) observed that performers lacking sufficient experience often experience intense anxiety in the final stages of a performance. One of the most effective ways to manage this anxiety is to practice in an environment that promotes calmness, such as in rehearsal spaces, professional concert halls, or backstage rooms of music venues. Additionally, previous stage experience not only helps performers understand their physical responses and emotional fluctuations but also boosts their confidence. By observing and documenting their experiences of anxiety in different performances, performers can build a positive self-image through successful performances, thus increasing their self-assurance. This growing

confidence allows them to handle nervousness more effectively in future performances, enabling them to express their talents more fully (Liu, 2024). Therefore, participating in smaller performances, music competitions, and organizing musical events can provide invaluable experience that helps prepare performers for larger stage events.

4.3 Improving Musical Skills and Technique

Overcoming performance anxiety is closely tied to performers confronting their own technical proficiency. Xu (2017) emphasized that a performer's skill level significantly impacts their psychological state. To perform with ease during music performances, it is essential to improve through diversified technical training, mastering the techniques and methods of musical performance. This approach will help performers address the more challenging aspects of music performance, enhancing their control and expressiveness. Additionally, strong musical memory is essential for a successful performance. Learning to memorize music properly helps performers establish a positive self-feedback mechanism, which enables them to recognize weaknesses and adjust promptly. Gradually, this process builds confidence, allowing performers to deliver a smoother, more confident performance on stage, which can greatly reduce performance anxiety. Although music performance anxiety is a common psychological barrier for performers, the application of effective coping strategies can alleviate the anxiety, enabling performers to perform with confidence and achieve their ideal performance outcomes. While MPA remains a challenge for many students, with proper training, mental strategies, and support, performers can learn to channel their anxiety into artistic expression rather than fear.

5. Conclusion

Future research on performance anxiety (MPA) among music - major college students can integrate cross - cultural comparisons, neuroscience, and technology - assisted interventions to explore the physiological mechanisms and long - term impacts of anxiety. Meanwhile, efforts should be made to promote early prevention and interdisciplinary collaboration, translate research findings into practical policies, provide comprehensive mental health support for music - major students, and facilitate their career development and artistic growth. Despite the insights gained in this study, there are some limitations. First, this research relies on a literature analysis method, which may restrict the scope of the findings. Second, the theoretical framework of the study is limited, as most existing research on music performance anxiety is grounded in common psychological theories, such as behavioral cognitive theory and psychology. However, the causes of performance anxiety may span across various disciplines, such as medicine and neuroscience. Therefore, future studies could adopt survey analysis methods or incorporate interdisciplinary approaches to explore the causes of music performance anxiety more comprehensively. This would enhance the applicability and generalizability of research findings.

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