

The Benefits of Meditation on Music Performance Anxiety – Francesca Leo

A consistent meditation practice can reward significant health benefits into one's life. Several studies have demonstrated that consistent meditation practice can actually change the brain's structure and function over time by enlarging the prefrontal cortex (area responsible for rational decision-making), shrinking the amygdala (key brain structure known as the emotional or fear center of the brain) and improving emotional control, thickening the hippocampus (key for learning and memory), and increasing overall grey matter (brain cell bodies important for processing power and linked to intelligence). Additional studies have demonstrated that one may begin to experience improvements in their overall health and well-being in as little as just three weeks with a commitment to consistent meditation practice. Short-term benefits of meditation can include an improvement in focus, mood, and sleep; a reduction of anxiety and stress symptoms, chronic pain, and negative emotions; an increase in patience and tolerance, and the potential to gain a new perspective on stressful situations. If one meditates consistently for several years, studies have also demonstrated that a consistent meditation practice over a long period of time actually changes the brain pathways, improving memory, focus, mood regulation, and increasing grey matter in the brain which can help reduce and reverse the aging process of the mind.

Meditation can be a truly lifechanging practice for those who experience chronic anxiety or stress. Musicians are used to being "on" at all times; always preparing for the next performance, audition, or competition. They are also used to facing constant criticism about their work, spending many hours alone in the practice room, and constantly in preparation mode for their next event. There is also a stigma around rest in the classical music world. Resting is often viewed as weakness or laziness, and musicians are taught from a very young age that when they are resting, someone else is working harder and will be more successful. Musicians are also taught to constantly compare themselves to one another, viewing each other as competition instead of colleagues, and are used to receiving the "no pain, no gain" message. It comes as no surprise that, as a result of this toxic environment and lack of rest, the majority of professional musicians have experienced a lifetime prevalence of performance-related injury or chronic pain (Kok et al., 2015). Several studies have also demonstrated that in addition to performance-related pain, a majority of professional musicians also suffer from performance and trait anxiety, depression, and chronic stress. According to a systematic review, the prevalence of music performance anxiety experienced by musicians of all age groups was between 16.5-60% (Fernholz et al., 2019). The mind-body connection is incredibly strong, and engaging in practices that activate the body's relaxation response can have a profound impact on the mind, and vice versa.

Because meditation is an effective method of activating the relaxation response, it can be especially beneficial in reducing physical and mental symptoms of performance anxiety. A study

conducted in 2003 compared two groups of music students from major conservatories across an eight-week span, one group without any meditation instruction and one group enrolled in eight consecutive weekly meditation classes. After the eight-week period, all students involved performed in a concert, receiving pretests and post-tests of music performance anxiety and anxiety and performance concentration. In the control group that received consistent meditation instruction, performance anxiety decreased indicating that meditation may be a useful tool for aiding performers to combat performance anxiety. An additional benefit of meditation was a reported increase in relaxation pleasure even in the period immediately before the performance (Chang et al., 2003).

In an introductory overview on *Current Approaches for Management of Music Performance Anxiety*, deep breathing exercises, yoga, and meditation were listed as the most popular approaches for managing the physical symptoms of performance anxiety. Since meditation can also serve as a helpful tool to learn to manage the mind, musicians who maintain a consistent practice in conjunction with therapy and thought work may also be able to learn to reframe negative thoughts that are often associated with performance anxiety. Negative thoughts can intensify physical symptoms of performance anxiety and often occur before, during, and after a performance. This combination of thoughts and physical symptoms can be detrimental to both a performance and to the performer. Establishing a consistent meditation practice for musicians is essential, because over time it will enable them to implement the relaxation and mindfulness benefits into their daily lives, eventually learning to achieve a calmer physical and mental state before performances (Zhukov, 2019).

An additional study demonstrated consistent yoga practice as a promising intervention for music performance anxiety in conservatory students after examining the effectiveness of a 9-week yoga practice on reducing music performance anxiety in a group of music students. Participants showed a large decrease in both performance anxiety and trait anxiety after the 9-week yoga program, and these improvements demonstrated long-term benefits in a follow-up assessment between 7-14 months after the practice (Stern et al., 2012). With meditation and breath practice being part of the eight limbs of yoga, the combination of asana, pranayama, and dhyana are demonstrated to have profound benefits on the reduction of symptoms of music performance anxiety.

Additional research supports the claim that incorporating mindfulness meditation strategies to the act of music-making may lead to a transformative experience in allowing performers to break the cycle of constant self-criticism and self-doubt, improving confidence in performance and allowing a deeper and more genuine connection to the music. Performers understand the importance of personal connection to their music and to their audience but are trained throughout school to put their emotional experiences away to focus on improving their technique and trying to reach the unattainable goal of perfection, a performance without any

mistakes. This can lead to a depersonalization of their craft and a fixation on external motivation such as winning an audition or receiving praise from their teacher. Consistent mindfulness meditation practice can encourage and foster the engagement of oneself as an embodied person: feeling comfortable in their body, having the ability to experience full emotional expression, and engaging with their fear of not being “perfect”. This practice can help reconnect musicians to their authentic selves. “Musicians who are able to cultivate an evolving relationship with themselves that is not dependent upon external clauses or conditions – praises or criticisms – offer a vision of musical practice that can progressively lead to performances that not only transform themselves but their listeners as well.” (Steinfeld et al., 2015). Connecting to one’s own authenticity can perhaps be the greatest antidote to the stressors and anxiety of modern life, and meditation can serve as a vessel for musicians to achieve fulfillment and wholeness, leaving self-doubt and self-criticism behind for good.

References

Chang J, Midlarsky E, Lin P. The effects of meditation on music performance anxiety. *Medical Probl Perform Art* 2003 September;18(3):126-130.

Fernholz I, Mumm JLM, Plag J, Noeres K, Rotter G, Willich SN, Ströhle A, Berghöfer A, Schmidt A. Performance anxiety in professional musicians: a systematic review on prevalence, risk factors and clinical treatment effects. *Psychol Med*. 2019 Oct;49(14):2287-2306. doi: 10.1017/S0033291719001910. Epub 2019 Sep 2. PMID: 31474244.

Kok LM, Huisstede BM, Voorn VM, Schoones JW, Nelissen RG. The occurrence of musculoskeletal complaints among professional musicians: a systematic review. *Int Arch Occup Environ Health*. 2016 Apr;89(3):373-96. doi: 10.1007/s00420-015-1090-6. Epub 2015 Nov 12. PMID: 26563718; PMCID: PMC4786597.

Steinfeld M, Brewer J. The Psychological Benefits from Reconceptualizing Music-Making as Mindfulness Practice. *Medical Probl Perform Art* 2015 April;30(2):84-89

Stern J, Khalsa S, Hofmann S. A Yoga Intervention for Music Performance Anxiety in Conservatory Students. *Medical Probl Perform Art* 2012 September;27(3):123-128.

Zhukov K. Current Approaches for Management of Music Performance Anxiety: An Introductory Overview. *Medical Probl Perform Art* 2019 March;34(1):53-60