

Performance Jitters

by Mark Thomas

One of the most frequently asked questions I receive during a masterclass or clinic is, “how do you handle stage fright?” This question is posed not only by junior and senior high school flutists, but also by conservatory and university flute majors as well. It is a topic that many players have been afraid to ask in the past, for fear that others might consider it to be a sign of weakness, or simply laugh, causing embarrassment to the individual seeking assistance. Today the fear of asking has lessened as more and more players realize that they are not alone with this “disease.”

All too often a flutist will say, “I can play this piece perfectly at home, but just can’t get through it during my lesson [or concert] without making mistakes.” The fact that the flutist can play it perfectly at home alerts us to the probability that some external pressure is causing the mishap at the lesson or performance.

A few years ago Jean-Pierre Rampal and I were discussing this subject during a relaxed evening. He queried, “Mark, do you ever get...what do you call it...‘butterflies’ in your stomach before a concert?” I responded that I thought all performers get nervous before a performance from time to time. He responded, “Yes, me too. Sometimes it is not as bad as other times.” He added that it was not always the packed hall in a big city that seemed to precipitate performance jitters; a performance before a small crowd in a rural town could easily be the culprit.

What I am suggesting is that nearly all performers experience some form of “heightened awareness” before a performance. A little heightened awareness can actually be helpful, as it keeps one focused on the event and the job at hand. Without it, concentration might wander, causing potentially negative results. However, when the heightened awareness turns into nerves, physical manifestations such as sweaty palms, dry mouth, weakness, trembling, nausea, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, and shortness of breath can threaten to ruin an otherwise good performance. Why does some external, hidden pressure appear as a lesson or concert time nears? What invisible force attempts to take control of our performance—more importantly, why do we allow it? Nearly all performers will tell you that a case of “good” nerves before a performance is helpful. When the case of nerves reaches an uncontrollable level, performance quality suffers as nerves become the dictator.

While teaching in Washington, D.C., I had as a student a well-known psychiatrist who enjoyed the flute and the diversion from his professional duties that it provided. We frequently chatted about happenings in both music and medicine. One day the conversation turned to the problems of nerves and stage fright. It was during this discussion that an entirely new focus of this occupational problem came to light. I began to understand how uncontrolled nerves can ruin a lesson or performance and what causes them to get into an uncon-

trolled state in the first place.

The mind, especially the subconscious mind, is a very powerful force. We are told that as much as ninety percent of the mind is controlled by the subconscious, leaving only ten percent in an awake state. As this noted doctor explained, the worst possible emotion a person can feel is the sensation of not knowing where he stands as an individual as far as another is concerned. A person can react to being told he is loved or even despised by a parent, friend, or spouse because he can feel and deal with the emotion, whether pleasant or painful. However, not knowing where one stands leaves no emotion with which to deal. Anxiety replaces the pleasure or pain.

Given a choice, most of us would much rather be liked than disliked. That is simple, basic human nature. However, according to the good doctor, that is much more difficult to achieve than it appears. As he suggested, it is not possible for a person to *make* someone like or dislike another. That decision belongs only to the individual. Nothing *you* do or say can make someone like you—the decision is his. Likewise, only *you* can decide whether or not you care for another person, regardless of what that person does. The final decision is yours alone.

Realizing these facts, imagine yourself walking into your teacher's studio or onto the concert stage. Naturally, you want to please your teacher by playing well; it goes without saying that you want the audience and music critic to like your playing. What most of us fail to realize is that we cannot make the teacher like us, no matter how we play.... That choice can only be made by the teacher. We cannot make the audience or music critic like us, either, no matter how well we play...that choice can only be made by the individuals who make up the audience. The more we attempt to please the teacher or audience, the more anxious we become, until nerves gain control and destroy our performance. The harder we try to please, the worse the situation becomes...the mouth gets dry, hands sweat, fingers tremble, etc.

By eliminating from our thoughts the desire/need to please the teacher or audience, we free ourselves from the anxiety that can ruin our performance. With the negative pressure released or dismissed, we are free to play the way we did in the privacy of the music room, and the entire problem of being liked or disliked is left completely up to the listener. It is no longer your problem. In other words, if they like your playing—fine; if they don't like it, that is their problem as well. Don't make it your problem. Stop trying to please them...please yourself, just as you did in the practice room.

This approach may sound a bit arrogant at first. Let me assure you it is not. It is a thought blueprint for stage survival and a performance for which you are capable, provided, of course you have perfected the music. Since that discussion with my former student, I have shared these thoughts with literally hundreds of flutists, professional and nonprofessional alike. The long-term results have been profound, as players from around the world have told me what a positive difference it has made in their performances. They have told me that they, not stage fright, control the artistic elements of their concerts.

Remember...if your audience likes the way you play, be grateful. If they don't like the way you play, remember that it is their choice, not yours. Don't take on the burden for them, and don't let their choice bother you one bit. Simply give the best performance you can, and have fun while doing it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK THOMAS, Founder and Honorary Life President of the NFA, is Professor of Flute at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he directs the university flute choir. A recitalist, soloist, conductor, and clinician, he has appeared in twenty foreign countries and forty-nine states. He has served on the faculties of The American University, George Washington University, The University of Notre Dame, Indiana University at South Bend, National Music Camp at Interlochen and The Sewanee Summer Music Center, and has lectured at many universities and conservatories. Mr. Thomas has numerous published flute works, including the *Mark Thomas Flute Method* series. He has served as a board member of National Public Radio, Board President of the Elkhart County Symphony Association, and as artistic design consultant to several leading flute manufacturers. Mr. Thomas can be heard on Golden Crest and Columbia Records. His teachers were Emil Opava, Britton Johnson, and William Kincaid.