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C O N C E R T O R G A N I S T | O R G A N T U T O R

Performance Psychology: A brief summary

RSCM Organists' Courses: 2005 and 2008; Organists' Review, 2008, revised 2017 and 2018

1. BE MUSICALLY PREPARED

There's no substitute for 100% secure preparation! This includes fingering and pedalling markings and an inner sense that, all things being equal, we could deliver a totally secure and musical performance. Consider Murphy's law...!

2. LEARN SLOWLY AND CORRECT MENTALLY

Learn music slowly and accurately, and correct mistakes mentally before you correct them physically. It takes 7 repetitions to learn music correctly, 30 repetitions to correct a mistake.

3. CHALLENGE YOUR THINKING ERRORS

Monitor your thinking. It's vitally important that we practice "good psychology" – feeling confident and calm when we practice, and banishing negative thoughts immediately, replacing them with positive thoughts. If you think positively, your brain will literally rewire itself to give a good performance.

4. HEALTHY MIND = HEALTHY BODY

Good sleep and some moderate intensity exercise leading up to a potentially stressful situation is excellent preparation. Consider lifestyle issues approaching concerts/exams etc. (alcohol, diet, sleep, general exertion etc.).

5. BREATHE

Practice breathing as you prepare to perform, in for 4, holding for 2 and breathing out for 6. This will engage the parasympathetic nervous system that will calm your mind and body. Remember to breathe whilst you are performing, and if you can, try to time your breathing so that you are breathing out through any difficult passages. Picture your anxiety as a colour, and as you breathe out, visualise the colour getting paler and paler.

6. VISUALISE THE OCCASION

Sit somewhere quiet and undisturbed and picture the occasion in exact detail. You're the cameraman! If you revert to panic or lose control, stop, rewind and re-record! You want an imaginary video of you in 100% control, on top form, and feeling calm so that your brain incorporates the calm feelings in its memory template. Visualise difficult passages in slow motion, feeling every nuance of movement in your muscles. The brain cannot tell the difference between imagination and reality, and cannot tell the difference between slow motion and actual speed. It helps if you can experience the room when you practice this - could you do this undisturbed in your venue?

7. RECORD YOURSELF - REGULARLY!

For musical as well as psychological feedback! Don't stop when you record yourself; repeat, repeat, repeat the process. Are you starting to enjoy the music and worry less about your ego if there is a small slip or inconsistency? Good psychological practice – if done routinely!

8. RECORD THE VOICES IN YOUR HEAD

Play for 5 minutes, speaking out loud every thought that pops into your head and recording them. Ask yourself, is the voice in your head giving you positive encouragement or negative feedback? If it is negative, note how completely disproportionate it is, and turn each negative into a positive. 'Lucky I have spotted that mistake, so now I know exactly where to focus my corrections'.

9. CALL OUT WHAT YOU ARE FEELING

Speak out loud what you are feeling and experiencing. 'I am experiencing feeling anxious'. 'I am feeling my heart pound and my palms sweat'. This will objectify the feeling and the anxiety so it will be easier for you to detach yourself and leave your feelings to one side.

10. USE POINTS AND / OR ADJECTIVES

Give yourself a 95 or 90% etc. score to achieve. Whenever anything is not perfect and frustrates you, say "minus 1%"... you stop point scoring and end up focusing on the music – this should stop the "vicious circle" effect! Use adjectives listed at the top of your score, or over specific sections/phrases: focus on the adjectives, not the notes, if you're feeling unsettled or too mechanical (a danger which can affect us when under pressure).

11. VISUALISATIONS AND MINDFULNESS

Use visualisations to encourage the habit of mindfulness. Common ones include sailing boats; you sit on the river bank and watch the boats go by. If you have any anxious thoughts, watch them sail by in the boats whilst you stay on the bank. Imagine yourself as a chessboard – whilst the black and white pieces play out their never-ending game of anxiety and emotions, you are the chessboard, detached and observant.

12. THANK YOUR ANXIETY

Your anxiety response has developed over thousands of years, to help you survive. Imagine that your anxiety response is like a child who really wants to help you, but who has just not understood the whole picture. Thank your anxiety, just as you would thank a well-meaning but clumsy child who wants to help, but quietly explain that you are the adult, and you are going to take control. Just because your primal mind generates anxiety does not mean that you have to accept it; you are always free to choose a different response.

13. PRACTICE

Practice whichever ideas work for you - this should become as routine a part of your practice as technique and repertoire!

14. ENJOY your music-making

"...Performing freely is really a shift of mindset – from a desire to prove [oneself] to a desire to share something special..."

(McGrath, Hendricks & Smith, 2017 – op. cit.)

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Further reading

- Musical Excellence ed. Williamon, Aaron (O.U.P, 2004)
- The Inner Game of Music Green, Barry and Gallwey, W Timothy (Random House 1986) {also now a dvd!}
- Keeping your nerve Jones, Kate (Faber Music, 2000)
- Golf is Not a Game of Perfect Dr Bob Rotella (Pocket Books, 2004)
- Performance Anxiety Strategies McGrath, Hendricks & Smith (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017)