

Beyond Stage Fright

Addressing Music Performance Anxiety in Jazz Students

Thomas J. Johnson & John Britton *Saturday, January 10, 2026 | JEN Conference*

Understanding the Frameworks

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is not just "nerves." It is a multi-dimensional experience that affects how we play, think, and feel.

The Three Pillars of MPA

- **Somatic (Body):** Racing heart, shallow breathing, muscle tension, or dry mouth.
- **Cognitive (Mind):** Self-doubt, "imposter" thoughts, tunnel vision, or fear of judgment.
- **Behavioral (Action):** Playing "safe," avoiding solos, or freezing in the spotlight.

Learning the "Changes" of MPA

Navigate anxiety by balancing **Change** (using tools to regulate the body) and **Acceptance** (noticing thoughts without letting them stop the music). Use the "**Curious Scientist**" lens to view mistakes as data rather than personal failures.

Key Observations for Educators

- **Ensemble Oversight:** Anxiety often hides in the section or rhythm roles where students feel pressure to blend but aren't "exposed" as soloists.
- **The Selection Factor:** Be aware that talented students often silence themselves or leave jazz programs because they don't feel "chill" enough for the culture.
- **The Main Predictor: Trait anxiety** is one of the highest predictors of MPA. Normalizing this baseline anxiety helps students build resilience early.

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Pedagogical Toolkit: Classroom Interventions

Somatic Grounding (Body)

- **10 Mindful Breaths:** A 60-second centering exercise to down-regulate the nervous system before a performance or after high-stakes feedback.
- **The Posture Anchor:** Encourage "feet flat/shoulders down" as a physical reset to break the flight response during a rehearsal.

Cognitive Refocusing (Mind)

- **Mindful Listening:** Direct the student's focus to an external target (e.g., "listen only to the bass line") to quiet internal self-criticism.
- **Objective Observation:** Reframe judgments ("I sound bad") into data ("the articulation is heavy"). Focus on *what* happened, not *how* you feel about it.

Behavioral Steps (Action)

- **Graded Exposure:** Scale the risk. Move from trading 2-bar phrases in a "buddy session" to full choruses in a combo setting.
- **Values-Based Risk:** Pivot the goal from "Perfection" to "Connection." Ask the student: "Instead of being perfect, can you focus on locking in with the drummer?"

Resources & Research

Core Research Articles

- Martin-Gagnon, G., & Creech, A. (2019). Cool jazz: Music performance anxiety in jazz performance students. *Music Education Research*, 21(4), 414–425.
- Papageorgi, I., Creech, A., & Welch, G. F. (2013). Perceived performance anxiety in advanced musicians specializing in different musical genres. *Psychology of Music*, 41(1), 18–41.

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