



Music Performance Anxiety for College Musicians

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What Is MPA?

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is the nervousness or fear musicians feel before or during a performance. It can lead to physical symptoms like a racing heart or sweaty hands, and mental challenges such as self-doubt. It affects musicians at all levels, from beginners to seasoned professionals, and can influence self-confidence, well-being, and career choices.

How Common Is It?

- **Prevalence Range:** Between 15% and 60% of musicians experience MPA at some point (Brugués, 2011).
- **Anticipatory Anxiety:** About 21% feel their anxiety spike days before performing (Papageorgi, 2020).
- **Music Students:** Research suggests that students in music programs often report higher levels of anxiety than their non-music peers.

Signs and Symptoms

- **Physical:** Racing heart, trembling, shortness of breath, dry mouth.
- **Emotional:** Worry, panic, or intense stress.
- **Cognitive:** Persistent self-doubt, fear of failing in front of an audience.
- **Behavioral:** Avoiding performances or using “safety behaviors” (e.g., relying on alcohol or other substances before performing).

What Causes MPA?

A range of factors can trigger or worsen MPA, although there is no single cause:

- **Personality:** High perfectionism or trait anxiety (Sadler & Miller, 2010).
- **Thought Patterns:** Negative self-talk, catastrophizing mistakes.
- **Environment:** Competitive or highly evaluative music programs; frequent auditions.
- **Early Training:** Those who start lessons very young may be more comfortable on stage, but this is not universal.

The Role of Your College Environment

- **High Expectations:** Intense pressure in music programs can heighten anxiety. Instructors can help by focusing on growth rather than flawlessness.
- **Performance Settings:** Larger venues or highly formal settings may add stress, but anxiety can happen in small recitals, too.
- **Solo vs. Ensemble:** MPA tends to be more common in solo or small group performances.

Treatment and Intervention Options

Seeking Help: Only around 15% of those with MPA get professional support (Brugués, 2011).

Psychological Therapies

1. **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**
 - a. Challenges negative thoughts and self-defeating beliefs.
 - b. Uses techniques like cognitive restructuring and systematic exposure to performing.
2. **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)**
 - a. Teaches mindful acceptance of anxiety-related thoughts, focusing on values and purpose in music-making.
3. **Music Therapy**
 - a. Combines relaxation techniques, guided music sessions, and improvisation to lower stress.

Medication

- **Beta-blockers** help control **physical symptoms** (e.g., shaky hands, racing heart) but must be prescribed and monitored by a healthcare professional, whereas **Buspirone** has **mixed results** for MPA and is often less popular than beta-blockers.

Group Therapy and Support

- Offers peer-based support and shared problem-solving.
- Normalizes the experience of MPA, which reduces isolation.

Combined Approaches

- **Integrating Methods**
 - Studies suggest that mixing CBT, music therapy, and group settings may produce stronger results than doing any single approach alone (Brugués, 2011; Khalsa et al., 2014).

Everyday Strategies for Managing MPA

1. Mindfulness & Meditation

- a. Deep breathing, body scanning, or guided imagery to keep anxiety in check.
- b. Practiced regularly, mindfulness helps break the cycle of racing thoughts.

2. Establish a Pre-Performance Routine

- a. Consistent warm-ups, mental prep, and positive affirmations can bring a sense of control.

3. Positive Self-Talk

- a. Swap out critical self-talk for supportive statements (“I’ve prepared well,” “I can handle mistakes”).
- b. Reinforces confidence in your abilities.

4. Regular Exercise

- a. Yoga, running, strength training—all can reduce stress and boost mental resilience.

5. Prioritize Sleep

- a. Adequate rest is key for mental clarity, emotional balance, and better overall performance.

Quick Calming Techniques

1. Deep Breathing (4-7-8)

- a. Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 7, exhale for 8. Calms the nervous system.

2. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- a. Tense each muscle group for a few seconds, then release. Notice the contrast in tension.

3. Visualization

- a. Mentally replay a successful performance, focusing on how it feels to perform confidently.

4. Grounding (5-4-3-2-1 Method)

- a. Engage your senses by listing what you see, hear, feel, smell, and taste in the moment.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Substance Use**
 - While it might bring short-term relief, it can create dependency and worsen anxiety in the long run.
- **Excessive Caffeine**
 - Heightened heart rate and jitters can amplify performance anxiety.
- **Complete Avoidance**
 - Skipping performances reinforces anxiety and robs you of the chance to build resilience.

Prevention: Looking Ahead

- **Educate Early**
 - Discuss MPA openly in music classes and workshops so it's seen as normal and manageable.
- **Frequent Low-Stakes Gigs**
 - Recitals or informal jam sessions build comfort with performing.
- **Coping Skills from the Start**
 - Simple techniques like mindfulness or guided relaxation can help students manage stress proactively.
- **Open Dialogue**
 - Encouraging conversations among peers and faculty reduces stigma and fosters peer support.

Resources

Finding Professional Help

- College Counseling Center
- APA Psychologist Locator: <https://locator.apa.org/>
- Music Therapy Association: <https://www.musictherapy.org/about/find/>

Online Information and Podcasts

- Bulletproof Musician: <https://www.bulletproofmusician.com>
- The Anxious Musician: <https://www.theanxiousmusician.com>
- *Performance Anxiety* ([Apple Podcasts](#))
- *Mind Over Finger* ([Podcast](#))

References

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