



Articles

Musicians: Take Practical Steps To Performance Freedom

By MICHAEL SMOLENS

Who among us haven't been moved by a great performance? There is something that happens when a performer or group conveys their art so clearly and directly that we are just transfixed 'in the moment', where everything feels very slow and remarkably clear and present. Michael Smolens, recording artist, composer, teacher, and longtime OPEN EXCHANGE lister, [offers performance coaching](#) in our Music category.



REMEMBERING LIKE IT WAS YESTERDAY...

I've attended countless performances, some of which have left permanent impressions on me. Here are a few that I remember like they just happened: the late Nubian master Hamsa El Din in a house concert, Brad Mehldau's jazz trio at Zellerbach Auditorium, the Bach Collegium Japan, a solo song by the Brazilian composer Guinga at Yoshi's Jazz House, the premiere of Ligeti's second book of Piano Etudes at Hertz Hall, and the "end-of-an-era" concert by SoVoSo at the Noe Valley Ministry. Each one has uniquely shaped my vision about not only performing, but also composing, arranging, and bandleading.

PERFORMING, STRESSFUL?

And yet for most of us performing feels pretty stressful, especially at first. It's not surprising that most people in industrial countries find the specter of public speaking second only to death! And yet, somehow our culture has created the myth that performing is a simple, straightforward way of connecting with the different parts of ourselves and giving this gift to a receptive audience. This is a worthy goal to work towards, but for the vast majority of developing musicians performing at first feels more like an Afro-Haitian dance class in their chest! Even professional speakers (probably the least outwardly exertive performance art) experience real physical changes, like elevated blood pressure.

"PERFORMANCE LOSS"

I recall the first time I spoke to an audience as part of my band's very first performance in 1982. I was so nervous I thought the presenter would have to take me off stage on a stretcher! Now I find myself very comfortable relating to the audience in a relaxed, improvisational style — some have called it "stand-up band leading." This happened after many, performances and coaching sessions with highly skilled trainers.

There has been a parallel development with my playing and singing. I noticed that in the beginning I performed only about a third as well as I did in my best private sessions or group rehearsals. Over time I saw that gap becoming progressively smaller, and I remember joking to friends about my "performance loss" figures improving. (I also noticed that most of my students reported very similar experiences around their performing). I explained to them that a "performance loss" figure was the gap between my best rehearsal and a performance. It was only after many years of experience that my performances began to exceed what I was doing in rehearsals.

BEYOND THE MUSICAL ISSUES

There is a set of skills just as important (if not more important) as your musical preparation. It involves taking note of every non-musical variable that could (and often does) show up as an energy drain and distraction to your performing. Some common examples are:

- not allowing for travel delays
- not bringing some important item, like a set list or your music
- not knowing the stage dimensions or sound system set-up
- not preparing for unusual lighting on stage
- not having key spare parts of equipment in case of breakdowns
- not confirming a recent change of musical arrangement with other band members

The more responsibility an individual takes on in an ensemble, the greater impact these items will have. And for vocalists, the issue of a thorough sound check cannot be over emphasized.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT VENUES

Most people have the experience of going out to hear music at a club, festival, or even a benefit, and think, "Gee, wouldn't it be exciting to perform at a place like this?" Even though things may appear to be running smoothly, there are usually a host of problems beyond the ones mentioned above, that the performers are doing their best to manage.

For those who are just beginning to perform, I would strongly urge you to consider opportunities that are either: 1) more controlled, 2) more supportive, or 3) more forgiving, or some combination of two of these. By controlled I mean that you can hear your playing and/or singing easily without straining, be in clear visual contact with your partner(s), be performing reasonably close to the time promised by the venue, and have had at least one rehearsal with the other players. A supportive environment is usually created when most of the people are either participating as performers or they are there specifically to support their friend's musical efforts. For here, the audience would value the contribution you're making more than your degree of technical polish. And a forgiving situation means that the person knows that they are not commanding focused attention, i.e. fulfilling a more background function. Part of your development as a performer will include acquiring the wisdom to distinguish between these three general types of performance situations.

Here are some examples positive performing environments:

- a performance class — or any class that includes a performance option at the end
- a "potluck performance" — a pooled meal and opportunity to perform
- a gift to someone's landmark event — a birthday, wedding, graduation, or passing
- performing to help create ambience — a party, a dance class, or during a poetry reading
- a "non-performance" environment — a community-oriented festival or ritual

For many types of situations, having focused audience attention is essential for the

performer. It allows all of the preparation and intention "to bake" and reveal essential strengths and weaknesses about the piece, and the performer. It also allows the performer to be powerfully witnessed and acknowledged. Simultaneously, performing in a more forgiving environment can be immensely liberating from the pressure of perfectionism, and allow a new performer to acclimate to the shifting sensations and phases of being on stage. The key here is to clarify which type of situation is most appropriate for the piece, or the level of the performer. Hence, it is not always the novice who will benefit from a background type of event. Maybe an experienced performer is working on new material, a different type of ensemble set-up, or even playing a more challenging instrument.

What is ironic is that environments that are billed as "low key" can be much more stressful, and hence higher risk, than what most professionals would likely encounter. An example that comes to mind is the "open mic" format that is found in many jazz cafes or clubs where vocalists and instruments wait their turn to play one or two songs. Very often, there are many variables that are left to chance — monitor mix, quality of the instruments on stage, accuracy of the printed music, degree of listening and musical communication present, etc. This is an example of an environment that is usually high in support (2), but very low in control (1). For novice performers, this might be exciting, tolerable, or unacceptable --- only experience will clarify this for you.

"PERFORMANCE VICTORY"

What is most important at any phase of your development is choosing your focus and purpose for a performance. A "performance victory" is making a clear assessment about where you are, what you have to do in your continuing development, and then following through on that plan. By stepping outside of your 'box', it may appear at first that you are going backward, but a deep voice within you will invariably lead you to your next step.

For example, suppose someone has played keyboards for a long time in a Salsa band, and wants to broaden themselves by developing a more romantic approach to solo jazz piano. They might have been highly paid as an Afro-Cuban band member, but in order to act on their desire, they would do best to take a more forgiving (3) performance situation that would allow them to perform their new piano style for considerably less money. As their experience accrues, they become more confident and ready to apply for more high profile and (better paying) solo piano venues. This is an example of a "performance victory".

Any performer who wants to continue developing would routinely ask these two questions: "What do I need to do?" and "Where would be the best place for me to do it?" ...i.e., getting out of your comfort zone to "lay new track" as a performer.

THE PERFORMANCE TOOL KIT

Here are some valuable things to consider for your 'day of' preparations:

1. List ways that you could free up time on the day of your performance by limiting activities you would normally do, or by moving them to other days (e.g. working a partial day, doing errands on a different day).
2. List activities or practices that you might indulge in that would affect your ability to be relaxed and creative at your performance (e.g. receiving bodywork, meditation, going to the beach, getting a support call from a friend or lover, etc.).
3. List all the things you will need to do, and people to call, the day of the performance, including warming up on your instrument/voice. Make sure that only things that need to be done the day of the performance are listed here.
4. List all the items that you will need for your performance to run smoothly. These may include the following categories: Instrument Related, Amplification, Recording/Lighting Equipment, Outdoor/Clothing/Personal Needs, Logistics, Marketing Items, Merchandise, Needs.

SCHEDULING GUIDELINES

Effectively scheduling the things you need to do before your performance can make the difference between feeling relaxed and confident on stage, or being uncomfortably nervous and unable to put your music across convincingly. I recommend scheduling your performance day from when you get up to when you actually get on stage by "thinking backwards" (e.g. Performance Begins – 8:30pm/Band Meeting – 8:15pm/Sound Check – 7:00pm/pick up bass player – 6:00pm, etc.). Also include any appointments you've set up for the performance day, such as a massage. Allow more time than usual between your activities and appointments to ensure your performance day does not feel rushed and that it can absorb potential breakdowns and delays— they will happen!

Find a coach who can help bring these tools to work with your instrumental and/or vocal training. As soon as you bring these concepts into your awareness, you'll be amazed at how much more you will be able to give to your audience, and in turn, to yourself.

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