

The lights dim and silence falls. You walk out on to the stage, head up, confident. You bow to the audience and start to play. Everything seems to be going according to plan. Then suddenly your body is wildly out of control. Your hands are cold and wet, your knees are shaking. The pounding in your chest drowns out all other sounds and the world around you begins to swim out of focus. All the nerves you have felt over the last week condense into one feeling—panic.

A familiar story? Well, you are not alone. These are the classic signs of performance nerves. There is, however, something you can do about it. It is possible to use those same nerves to your advantage. Interested? Then read on.

When I started to write this book, I had a horrible recollection of being fourteen again. I can remember so vividly all those dreadful feelings before a concert or an exam. In my case, my performance nerves were so bad that I gave up on my dream of being a professional flautist half-way through university. I am now an active amateur musician and, although I still get nervous, I know better how to work with my nerves and, more importantly, how to enjoy myself when playing or singing. This book, therefore, is for all amateur musicians. It is also for teachers and parents in their role as a support to those performing.

One of the most important things I have learned over the years is that I am not alone. When I was in my teens there was so much pressure to succeed that I never told anyone how I was feeling. If only I had been able to talk to someone, I could have understood why I was getting so nervous. And if we

I speak an awful lot lower than I sing. So if I speak a lot before going on stage my voice becomes pitched in a totally different way.'

Many musicians have talked about the all-important moment as you walk on stage. And the advice is always this: before you go into the exam room or on to the stage, take two deep breaths and then smile as you start walking. You'll be amazed at the difference this makes.

It is also important to make eye contact with the examiner or audience. People become much less frightening when you actually see them. Why else are we so afraid of the dark? Remember that audiences are human beings too. As Elvis Costello and Gillian Weir point out, they are on your side, otherwise they wouldn't be there.



Before you go on stage take two deep breaths and smile ...

So we've got a few things straight: performance nerves are normal, most people suffer from them in some form, they can be deeply unpleasant, but they do get better with experience—or at least we can become better at coping with them. One question still remains. Why do we put ourselves through all this misery? Answer: because making music is fun. It's rewarding, it's stimulating, it's part of life and it's what we have chosen to do. And, as we have seen, nerves can also be useful and give our performance an edge; in fact, in some ways they are vital to the essence of performing.

In this final chapter I will try to pull together some of the ideas we have looked at about the sources of performance nerves and learning how to deal with them, even turning those nerves to our advantage. Much of this can be done by understanding why we have decided to make music or become performers, ensuring that we have put ourselves in this potentially stressful situation for the right reasons.

General preparation for enjoying yourself

It is important to understand that the ideas in this book are not a prescription for curing performance nerves, they are only suggestions. It is not a simple matter of saying, 'Oh, I feel nervous therefore I will do x, y or z', it is much more about understanding what it is that makes us feel nervous and how we might help ourselves.

1. Appreciating the importance of what you are doing is a good step. Music plays an important part in most people's lives. When people are asked to list their hobbies or