

# *Research on Music Performance Anxiety from the Perspective of Music Education*

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**Abstract:** This study and experimentation focus on understanding the origin of Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) and the relationship between music education and alleviating MPA. It reveals the crucial role of music education in inhibiting and mitigating Music Performance Anxiety. Both domestic and international research indicate that various psychological therapies can alleviate MPA, and these therapeutic approaches can be integrated into music education. This implies an inseparable connection between the occurrence and alleviation of Music Performance Anxiety in music classrooms.

**Keywords:** Music Performance Anxiety (MPA), psychological therapy, music education, Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (IZOF)

## 1. Introduction

Anxiety is a widely encompassing concept, often associated with real-life stimuli, including stress, urgency, sorrow, apprehension, concern, tension, and unease. It represents an unpleasant emotional experience characterized by uncertainty and difficulties in coping with the past, present, and future, disrupting normal life and proving challenging to control. Anxiety is a normal human emotional response, and Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) falls under the category of a specific anxiety disorder, often more pronounced than generalized anxiety disorders. Also known as stage anxiety, MPA is distinct from general anxiety, unease, apprehension, and tension. Currently, MPA is prevalent, with Britsch's research revealing that up to 75% of students learning musical instruments in schools exhibit anxious emotions. Various methods can be employed in music education to guide students in overcoming MPA, and students, compared to medical professionals, express a stronger desire for psychological support from their teachers.

## 2. Manifestations of Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) manifests in several symptoms, including:

- (1) Emotional reactions: Nervousness, fear of failure, irritability, etc.
- (2) Cognitive responses: Negative self-evaluation, pessimistic anticipation, etc.
- (3) Behavioral reactions: Suboptimal technical performance, muscle stiffness, etc.
- (4) Physiological responses: Forgetting musical scores, mental blankness, rapid breathing, and, in severe cases, vomiting, increased heart rate, cold sweats in the hands, etc.

### **3. Causes of Anxiety Psychology**

#### **3.1. Intrinsic Causes**

##### **3.1.1. Skill and Technique Factors**

Performers lacking a solid foundation in professional skills may experience Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) on stage. When performers have excessively high expectations for the perfection of their performance, anxiety arises due to insufficient skill training or failure to meet skill requirements. A lack of confidence in their professional level leads to fear of making mistakes during the performance, creating a sense of unease and giving rise to MPA. Sweeney pointed out, "Insufficient performance preparation is more likely to cause anxiety than anxiety during performance itself" [1].

##### **3.1.2. Personality and Mental State Factors**

Individuals who are overly concerned about how others perceive them, such as the live auditory reactions of the audience or others' evaluations, often have a strong sense of self-esteem. They tend to excessively focus on the outcome of the performance, making them prone to psychological phenomena of "anxiety" during the performance. Conversely, extroverted performers typically exhibit lively, cheerful, sunny, and confident behaviors during performances. They enjoy the feeling of being on stage, engage in effective communication with the audience, and authentically express emotions, which can be infectious and increase the likelihood of successful performances. Ryan and Hallam both discovered that performance anxiety has already emerged in young piano students at the age of 12 [2]. They found that among musicians aged 9 to 12, 45% of participants experienced Music Performance Anxiety (MPA), with 31% believing it had a negative impact on their performances, and 18% feeling powerless in coping with MPA. Many researchers have also observed its prevalence among higher education students and professional performers [3].

##### **3.1.3. Physical Fitness Factors**

The performer's physical condition is also a contributing factor. For example, insufficient sleep before a performance, inadequate winter warmth measures leading to colds and fever, excessive practice causing finger fatigue and triggering tenosynovitis. Additionally, factors such as the monthly physiological cycle in females or consuming spicy and stimulating foods before a performance are crucial elements causing Music Performance Anxiety (MPA).

#### **3.2. External Causes**

##### **3.2.1. Environmental Factors**

Performers encounter various environments and venues, and the changes in these settings require performers to have strong adaptability. Performances often take place under concentrated lighting on the stage. The high brightness of the lights can create psychological pressure for performers, especially in solo instrumental or vocal performances, which differ from the group performances of choirs or orchestras where the presence of more individuals helps alleviate pressure. Solo performances, whether vocal or instrumental, demand that performers complete a piece on their own, requiring a certain level of stage control. The focus of the audience is concentrated on the stage, and occasional movements in the audience area can also induce Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) in performers.

### 3.2.2. Experience Factors

The extent of a performer's stage experience is also a significant factor. Some individuals may have limited performance experience confined to classrooms or practice rooms, lacking sufficient stage performance experience. Once on stage, with the changes in environment and atmosphere, the gaze of the audience converges onto the stage, creating considerable psychological pressure. Performers who are on stage for the first time or have limited performance experience may experience stage fright when faced with an entirely unfamiliar stage environment. Due to a lack of stage presence, adaptability, and performance experience, they may become mentally disoriented, psychologically tense, struggle to adapt to the situation, and thus experience MPA, significantly compromising the outcome of their performance.

Of course, factors contributing to MPA go beyond these, with personal factors primarily arising internally, such as individual personality, self-efficacy, sensitivity to evaluation, cognitive developmental stage, etc. External factors also play a role, including family environment, audience size, performance environment, stage setup, seat height and comfort, solo or ensemble situations, etc. Among these, factors influencing performers' work efficiency, including preparation, educational background, learning level, and the evaluation of task difficulty, are relevant to both internal and external aspects.

## 4. Relationship between Music Education and Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)

In summary, the study of Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is a comprehensive interdisciplinary field involving various subjects, with the main focus being MPA patients. The disciplines encompassed in the research include music, psychology, medicine, sports, and others. The objective is to alleviate the impact of MPA on music performers, enabling them to present their works more effectively. Some studies indicate that the frequency of MPA is higher among students in higher music education institutions compared to professional musicians[4]. This is because university students are at the beginning of their musical careers, facing criticism from the public and judges, while musicians have already completed this stage and achieved certain accomplishments, leading to a more balanced mindset.

### 4.1. Influence of Music Education on Music Performance Anxiety

There is an inseparable connection between music education and MPA, as music education fundamentally influences and determines the formation of Music Performance Anxiety (MPA). One-on-one mentors can better help students alleviate MPA [5]. They understand students' backgrounds and emotions, establishing emotional connections and discussing psychological issues such as MPA [6]. Educators, in their daily music education practices, subtly influence the psychology of music performers. When educators use appropriate and positive teaching methods, such as encouragement and praise, performers, after receiving repeated positive feedback, are more likely to enhance their confidence. Many students express that receiving positive language from teachers significantly boosts their confidence in performances and competitions. Recognition from the person who understands their playing level the most increases psychological self-assurance, making them believe in the success of their works. In the teaching process, selecting pieces with difficulty levels higher than students' abilities, leading to suboptimal performance results, can increase performers' psychological pressure. This can result in negative self-evaluations, making performers believe they are incapable, leading to fear, nervousness, and a higher likelihood of mistakes—a vicious cycle. Research reveals that 73% of undergraduate students hope to receive assistance from psychological experts in the field, but over half of them prefer to seek help from their own teachers [7].

## 4.2. Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (IZOF)

The concept of the Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) was introduced by the former Soviet scholar Hanin, who continually refined his conclusions based on the Inverted-U Hypothesis. This psychological model has been extensively researched and applied to quantify athlete anxiety and predict their sports performance. Due to the similarity in the causes of anxiety between athletes and music performers, it is equally applicable to Music Performance Anxiety (MPA). However, an increasing number of clinical reports indicate that some performers need to experience a certain level of Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) to achieve their optimal performance state [8]. Therefore, a certain level of MPA has a positive emotional effect on music performers [9]. Studies reveal that each performer has their own IZOF region, and there are variations in performance scores among individuals. The IZOF model provides each performer with intuitive access to their physiological information, aiding in assessing their anxiety levels and, to some extent, predicting their performance outcomes [10].

## 5. Alleviating Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) from the Perspective of Music Education

Dumont summarized the "anxiety system": anxiety-negative emotions-powerlessness-rejection-avoidance, each link interlinked with its own triggering factors. For college music students, based on Erikson's eight-stage theory of personality development, this stage of adolescence is characterized by the pursuit of industriousness and self-identity, overcoming feelings of inferiority, and preventing confusion in self-identity. Evaluations from others, especially teachers, parents, and peers, play a crucial role in students' search for self-affirmation and self-worth. However, some educators may not be aware of their role in supporting students in managing MPA. Instead, they support their students in a teaching manner, as these methods have become ingrained in their daily teaching processes. For example, preparation, such as technical training, mastering specific phrases, slow-paced practice, and repetition [11], is often prioritized by teachers. Teachers frequently aim to enhance students' confidence by focusing on mastering technical challenges.

Common methods for alleviating MPA include simulated performances, positive viewpoints, preparation, and breathing. Literature provides evidence that teachers have a responsibility to address MPA issues alongside students. While some students believe this requires support from psychological experts, support and assistance from teachers are still essential. Although some teachers express the need for additional training in MPA, perhaps with professional development support, music educators may find it easier to address performers' MPA issues within their scope of duties [12]. For instance, multiple simulated performances before actual performances, practice performances in front of friends/family, and receiving feedback such as "you did well," "good job," "a few mistakes, but it's okay," and "you did great" are considered positive reinforcements. After receiving such positive feedback, performers gain confidence to face upcoming performances. With this positive psychological reinforcement, their performance becomes more effective. Teachers can conduct multiple simulated performances or organize concerts, increasing the frequency of onstage performances to accumulate stage performance experience. This helps performers find a relaxed state of mind, making it easier to interpret music. Short-term methods include exposure therapy, involving frequent and repeated onstage performances over a period of time to stabilize the performer's mindset. Smooth body movements and controlled breathing are essential elements that blend with music. Using breath-driven movements to synchronize with the music is an important performance technique, helping performers find a sense of relaxation. In cases of severe MPA, performers' muscles are highly tense and strained. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to students' posture, breath, and mood during class, incorporating positive and active teaching methods to integrate relaxation content into daily teaching. This approach helps performers find a balance between the stage and themselves,

resulting in a better interpretation of the music.

## 6. Conclusion

In the course of regular learning and performances, it is crucial not only to continually strengthen foundational training but also to pay sufficient attention to one's mental and physical well-being. Accumulating practical experience is also a significant measure in overcoming Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) psychologically. Currently, MPA is not simply attributed to the performer's individual abilities but is the result of multiple factors working in conjunction. Performers should not resort to avoidance; instead, they should face the challenge actively. Finding their Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) through repeated simulated performances or exposure to the stage is essential. Performers can control MPA within their IZOF, ensuring it does not impede musical performances and, in turn, igniting enthusiasm on stage. Teachers play a crucial role not only in providing technical support but also in offering psychological support to performers. Rational teaching methods are vital, and teachers should assist performers in managing MPA through various means. With support from professional development, music educators may find it easier to help students address MPA issues within their scope of responsibilities.

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