# Music Performance Anxiety and it's Affects on Music Students Performance Satisfaction

## By Casey Asaro

## Abstract:

Nearly everyone experiences some level of anxiety daily, from mild cases, such as double-checking that we remembered our phone before leaving the house, to severe ones, like anxiety or panic attacks. Anxiety is a primal emotion, meant to keep us alive and moving in times of danger. In general, a little bit of anxiety day-to-day is healthy. It becomes unhealthy, however, when we generalize our anxiety to non-threatening scenarios, such as standing up for a musical performance. According to the National Institute of Health, Music Performance Anxiety (MPA), which is classified by the DSM-5 as a subtype of Social Anxiety Disorder, affects 60-80% of musicians (Bystritsky et al., 2013). MPA is a phenomenon composed of three main components: Cognitions (the individual's thoughts); Autonomic Arousal (how the body responds); and Behaviors (how the individual responds). My study investigates the relationship between Music Students' Cognitions during MPA and their overall perspectives on music making.

## Methodology:

I sent out an anonymous survey asking students to designate their primary instruments, previous/current experiences with therapy, and their favorite/least favorite parts of performing their instrument and an en evaluation of their own level anxiety, rating from none to severe. Additionally, I included a Likert scale with 6 statements about performing and had students rate how much they agree with those statements. The statements on the likert scale were paired in themes of cognitions to see what had the greatest impact on students anxiety: their own thoughts (statements 1 & 4), the perceived thoughts of the audience (statements 2 & 5), or the perceived thoughts of their professor (statements 3 & 6). Statement #2 was inspired by the article "Cognitive Processes in Music Performance Anxiety" by Margaret S. Osborne and John Franklin of Macquarie University (Osborne & Franklin, 2002). The last two questions focused on understanding what students liked and disliked most about performing, which I later compared to their ratings of their own anxiety.

## Findings

In total I received 38 responses to the survey. I totaled up the ratings of students own anxiety and found that most claimed to have moderate (50%) anxiety, followed by mild (31.6%). People who ranked severe made up about 15.8% of respondents while only 1 person said they did not experience any performance anxiety (see figure 1).
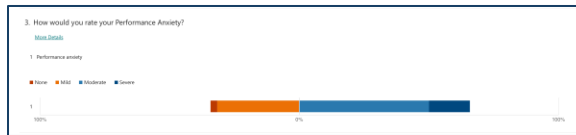


**Fig. 1** Performance anxiety rating

As I looked through student responses I began categorizing the likes and dislikes about performing into broader themes to see what students most commonly enjoyed and disliked about performing. What I found in doing so is that the most common likes involved Creative Expression (39.5%) and the Community (29%), and the most common dislikes involved mentions of Toxic/narrow Expectations (44.7%) as well very directly mentioning that the nerves and anxiety (29%) itself were the worst parts.

|  |  | Mild (12) | Moderate (19) | Severe (6) | None (1) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Favorite | Community (11) | 2 | 8 | 1 | 0 |
| Favorite | Creative expression (15) | 5 | 7 | 2 | 1 |
| Least Favorite | Anxiety (11) | 3 | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Least Favorite | Expectations (17) | 6 | 9 | 1 | 1 |

**Fig. 2** Perspectives on performance versus MPA rating

As for the Likert scale (figure 3), I found that the only statement that got unanimous agreement was #2, "I wonder what listeners will think of me. While perhaps unsurprising, it suggests that there is this universal expectation that our music is not solely for ourselves, at least not from the perspective of a music student at Crane. Of the others there were more disagreement and I found that the statements people disagreed with most frequently were " I don't believe my peers when they say I did well," (39.4%) and "I wont get a good ensemble placement if I don't do well" (31.5%).
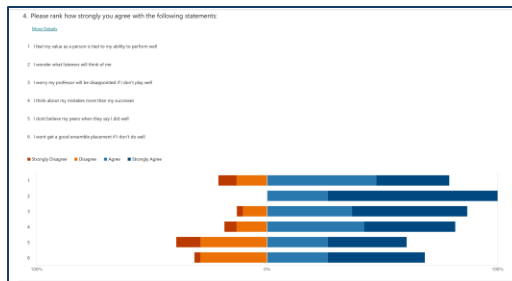


**Fig. 3** Cognitions Likert Scale

## Discussion

Given the results of my survey I found that there was very little evidence to suggest any correlation between MPA rating and students individual cognitions, suggesting that there are factors outside of cognitions that play a role in severity of MPA. I found, most interestingly, that there seems to be very little influence on motivations for and against performance, as well as very little variation in agreement with the statements in figure 3.

Looking back on the data I collected, If I were to research further I would look into attempting to obtain a more even sample of instrumental backgrounds. What I found in researching is that over half of respondents played wind instruments (brass/woodwind) and the vast majority were instrumentalists in general. For further research I would like to see if there is more variability in string players as well vocalist, as each of those groups make a significant part of the crane community.

## Conclusion

Given the data collected, I find it unlikely that there is any correlation between MPA, Cognitions, and any potential perspective on music performance. I believe it is reasonable to conclude that musicians as a whole have very similar goals as it pertains to creative expression and building community, and care about the output they share with others, on a very uniform level.

Sources
Bystritsky, A., Khalsa, S. S., Cameron, M. E., & Schiffman, J. (2013, January). Current diagnosis and treatment of anxiety disorders. P & T : a peer-reviewed journal for formulary management. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3628173/
Matei, R., & Ginsborg, J. (2017). Music performance anxiety in classical musicians - what we know about what works. BJPsych international, 14(2), 33–35. https://doi.org/10.1192/s2056474000001744
Osborne, M. S., & Franklin, J. (2002). Cognitive processes in music performance anxiety. Australian Journal of Psychology, 54(2), 86–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530210001706543