



May E-Newsletter from the Music School

Parent's Corner: Preparing for a Performance or Competition by Dr. Timothy Schwarz

Preparing for a performance demands a complete commitment physically, mentally and emotionally. Here are some tips to a successful performance:

1. Listen carefully to yourself. Have you ever performed a piece and suddenly heard things you never heard before? Most of the time it is not your performance that has changed but the intensity with which you are listening. Performing for an audience tends to make us much more aware of how we sound. Cultivate that intensity of listening during your practice time. Record yourself frequently and listen to yourself practice and play for friends or colleagues- even if it is just a segment of a piece or a work in progress. It is a great way to gauge where you are in the process of learning a piece.
2. Never underestimate the time it takes to really learn a piece. When I add a new major concerto to my repertoire, I allow a full year to prepare, especially if the work must be memorized. Developing your own style and interpretation will ultimately make the piece your own, making the most of your musical abilities.
3. Make sure your technique is solid. Without a solid technique, performance and competition are not possible. The most important musical foundations are good intonation, rhythm and sound. Always allow time in your practice to work on technique.
4. Have some trial performance runs. Don't make the competition or major performance the first time you perform a piece. Find a retirement home, church, synagogue, or school to run your pieces at least two weeks before the main event.
5. Pick your repertoire carefully. Always plan a balance between challenging and less demanding music. Be realistic about your strengths and weaknesses. A performance at a small venue might be a good opportunity to try out your most difficult repertoire. Still, it is important to mix difficult and easier pieces; otherwise, it is possible to become overwhelmed and to revert back to some bad habits and mental thoughts (see stage fright).

6. Dress appropriately. A performance is both a listening and a visual experience. The first impression someone has of you will be visual. On numerous occasions I have marked contestants down for wearing jeans, flip-flops, and T shirts to a competition. It is a sign of disrespect to the music and the event. Older judges are particularly sensitive to this. Dressing for the occasion also gives you confidence in yourself.

7. Say something unique. When your technique is solid, your stage presence is good, and you look the part, what distinguishes you from other contestants who also have those qualities? The answer is your commitment to the piece and your own interpretation. Be 100% present to every note you play, and be focused and in the groove from the moment you walk on stage until the moment you leave. Ultimately this is why we all spend the hours and hours preparing for a concert or competition. When everything comes together there is nothing else like a great performance.

About Stage Fright

Most musicians have experienced some degree of stage fright. There is nothing more frustrating than a performance that doesn't reflect your preparation. Most of the time, stage fright feels the worst within the first 4 or 5 minutes of a performance. In planning a full recital, make sure the first piece or movement is something you are very comfortable with. If you don't have that luxury, try to make note of what physically happens when you get nervous. Let's say you tend to use less bow and force the sound when you are nervous. In that case, pay special attention to your bowing in first 4 or 5 minutes of the repertoire you are preparing. When I am nervous, I tend to rush the tempo and lock up my bow-arm. Because of this, I pay special attention to how I practice the first 5 minutes of the piece I am preparing, not allowing any rushing or tension. Otherwise, both are bound to affect my performance.

It is important to have as many good experiences performing as possible. But even if you prepare well and pick repertoire well within your reach, you might not be happy with your performance. If someone tells you how much they enjoyed your performance, believe them. Chances are they really did enjoy it and were listening in a different way than most performers do. Most audience members are not looking for total perfection, they are interested in what you have to say. If you look at it with that perspective, then whatever you say is what the audience wants to hear.