When I first met Lisa, a talented pianist in her second year at a prestigious conservatory, she sat down in my office and burst into tears. “I knew that Bach cold and don’t know what happened to me.”

At 18, Lisa was no stranger to performance—she’d been playing for audiences, whether friends, family, or perfect strangers since she was six. Over the past several months, she had worked hard on a Beethoven Sonata, the Brahms Handel Variations, and a Bach Partita. “I could have played this in my sleep,” she said. I was sure she could have, but during her recital something alarming had happened: she felt unaccountably nervous a few hours before the performance and, as it drew near, she became aware of a sense of dread. She had no idea what she was anxious about—after all, she could play it all flawlessly in the studio—but when she finally walked out on stage and looked out at the audience, she might as well have come face to face with a lion. Her heart raced, her mouth was cotton-dry and she felt tremulous. Worst of all, her hands felt rubbery.

Welcome to performance anxiety, a very common anxiety response that has afflicted performers of all levels and ages ever since humans invented the ritual of artistic performance. As you have already guessed, it doesn’t really have much to do with actual artistic skill or knowledge. It has hobbled the pre-eminent as well as the novice. It is an equal-opportunity anxiety that doesn’t discriminate.

Vladimir Horowitz, Maria Callas, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and even the great Chopin were all said to have been plagued by performance anxiety. The legendary actor Laurence Olivier said in an interview on 60 Minutes that well into middle-age, when he was at the apogee of his career, he reached a point where he could not go out on stage because of paralyzing anxiety. During a run of Othello, he once asked a fellow actor to stand in the wings during a soliloquy so that he didn’t feel so alone on stage.

What, exactly, are performers with this anxiety so fearful of? What danger lurks in the audience that could provoke such panic and dread? Very little, in reality. Performance anxiety is fundamentally a hard-wired fight-or-flight response that we share with virtually all other animals and that evolved over millions of years to protect us from life-threatening dangers. Faced with a potential predator or feared enemy, we get a surge of adrenaline and the stress hormone cortisol. Our heart rate spikes, our muscles are supercharged and we are ready to flee—or fight. It is a marvelous feat of evolutionary engineering that saved our ancestors from saber-toothed tigers and the like. The problem is that we are still hard-wired for high-risk life in a
world that, for most of us, no longer exists.

Ask people with performance anxiety what they fear and they will tell you that they worry they will humiliate or embarrass themselves in front of other people. It doesn’t take much imagination to see that the experience of being intensely scrutinized is exactly what prey experience—just before a predator pounces and makes dinner of them. In other words, people with performance anxiety are reacting as if they were still living on the savanna facing a mortal threat, when they are simply on stage facing a group of largely harmless strangers. Sure, there might be the occasional critic sharpening his knife in the audience, but there is little mortal risk to performing. This is not to say that the stakes aren’t high for musicians in today’s super-competitive environment. Of course they are, but musicians with performance anxiety experience disabling anxiety at every performance—even when the stakes are low.

It is not that anxiety per se is a bad thing. In fact, in small doses, it is beneficial. There is a well-known relationship between anxiety and performance that takes the shape of an inverted “U” curve. As anxiety and arousal rise, performance of all types improves—up to a certain point. Once you reach a critical level of anxiety—and that inflection point varies tremendously among individuals—there is a steady deterioration in performance.

When you are anxious, your neurons release norepinephrine (a chemical relative of adrenaline) in your brain and this in turn enhances learning and memory. That is why we learn best when we are a little excited or anxious.

While we all come equipped with a fight-or-flight reflex, performance is not sufficient to set off this panic alarm in most people. Still, it is a real problem for many musicians. The largest study to date, the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians survey, found that 16 percent of the nearly two thousand musicians surveyed reported that performance anxiety was a serious problem for them. But many smaller studies done in the past few years show higher rates of performance anxiety among musicians, in the range of 40 to 50 percent. Not surprisingly, subjects indicated that they were more distressed giving solo performance than when playing chamber music.

Performance anxiety is not a universal experience. As with other anxiety states (such as panic attacks and social phobia), genetic factors increase susceptibility. Some people are temperamentally more reactive than others and are hard-wired to be more socially anxious. Developmental and psychological factors play a role as well. It is not hard to imagine how overly critical or perfectionistic parents or teachers might make an individual feel inhibited or anxious about performing.

Curiously, children rarely suffer from performance anxiety. Young kids are typically unconscious and supremely confident performers. With the teen years comes peer pressure and much greater self-awareness; social acceptance by one’s peer group is critically important to teens, and that generates greater social anxiety, of which performance anxiety is just a special type. What was effortless in childhood is now filtered through self-doubt. Perhaps the great pianist Artur Schnabel had this in mind when he said that “Mozart is too easy for children and too difficult for artists.”

Much can be done to help people who suffer with performance anxiety. In the medical world, there are two effective treatment strategies—biological and psychological—that target different aspects of performance anxiety.

The class of drugs known as beta-blockers can dramatically blunt the physical symptoms brought about by the surge of adrenaline. Propranolol (also called Inderal) is the most commonly used beta-blocker, though there are several others. All block the adrenaline receptors in the body, preventing rapid heart rate, sweaty palms, dry mouth, and tremulousness. These drugs generally do not make a person feel calmer at baseline, but kick in when a person is stressed. Beta-blockers are also used to treat high blood pressure and cardiac arrhythmias, though at much higher dosages than we use for performance anxiety. In low doses, these drugs rarely have adverse side-effects. But that doesn’t mean you should take your friend’s medication. It should be prescribed by a physician who knows your medical history and has examined you to be sure that these usually safe drugs do not cause a problem for you. For example, some people with very low heart rates or low blood pressure can still take low-dose beta-blockers, but their blood pressure needs to be monitored.

Contrary to popular intuition, anti-anxiety medications, such as Valium and Klonopin—so-called benzodiazepines—are a very bad idea for performance anxiety. Sure, they will lower anxiety levels, but they are sedating and can impair reflexes and motor function. You might feel calm—and give a truly bad performance. Then you’ll really have something to worry about.

But there is more to performance anxiety than just physical symptoms. Perpetuating the anxiety is a set of negative thoughts that people with performance anxiety commonly develop about themselves and the world: polarized thinking (everything is all good or all bad); overgeneralizing (one bad performance is equated with the person’s entire capability); catastrophizing (small mistakes seen as disastrous and career-ending); and personalizing (everything is seen as a reflection of a person’s self-worth, with no separation between the person and the task). This pattern can be changed through cognitive therapy.

In cognitive therapy, the performer and therapist work together to examine,
challenge, and correct these dysfunctional thoughts, a process that lowers the stakes of each performance and reduces anxiety generally.

But that is not all. Performance anxiety is very much like any phobia; people naturally want to avoid things and situations that make them anxious. It is counterintuitive, but the most effective treatment for phobia is the very thing people want to avoid: more of the feared situation. In other words, exposure and desensitization.

The more an artist performs—and sees there is no catastrophic outcome—the more comfortable she feels performing. With exposure, you become desensitized to the anxiety of performance and come to feel what you intellectually have always known: there is no real danger on the stage.

Ironically, musicians tend to learn music in a way that probably increases the chance of performance anxiety; they practice alone and achieve mastery in a sound-proof room. This does not prepare them for their goal, which is to perform in front of a crowd. Obviously, if you master a piece during practice and mess up during performance, the problem is not a technical one—it’s emotional. The better approach is to practice performance. Be willing to play what you are working on for your friends or class at the drop of a hat. Desensitize yourself by making performance a common and routine part of your life.

The goal is not to vanquish anxiety. That is not possible or even desirable; a little anxiety is critical to a good performance. But there is no good reason to let performance anxiety get in your way. The truth is that performance anxiety is common, painful—and treatable.

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MEET DON GREENE

Sports psychology had the jump on other fields in dealing with performance anxiety. Here’s an alternative to the medical model.

by ELLEN GOLDENSON

The idea that a professional musician’s performance anxiety is a disorder, or a phobia like a fear of heights, offends performance psychologist Don Greene. “I don’t work with exceptional people,” he says. “There’s nothing wrong with them; they are not afflicted. If your heart is racing, that’s a normal reaction—normal for elite performers facing severe consequences.”

Greene, who is 64, deals with focus and concentration—and the factors that interfere with them. He has been thinking about the subject on and off ever since high school, when a Bronx chiropractor/trainer called Doc Goldenberg used hypnosis to help him improve his performance as a competitive diver.

Greene has written three books on handling performance-related fears, and explains that performance psychology practice was well established in the sports world long before he began adapting its methods for musicians.

Educated at West Point in the 1960s, Greene spent the Vietnam Era in the military as a Green Beret. After the war he got a master’s in forensic science at George Washington University and worked for a time in D.C. and in Illinois as a special investigator. Next was southern California, where he went on the strength of an employment offer—but it fizzled after he’d already moved. Temporarily jobless, he was playing volleyball on the beach one day, when his teammate, “an old guy with a PhD in psychic regulation,” started analyzing why some of the other players were missing their shots. The man gave him a book on the subject of consciousness.

Fascinated, Greene began immersing himself on the subject of mental focus—reading more books and writing down his own thoughts. After stints teaching phys. ed. to 3rd and 5th graders and working as a forensic psychologist for the county District Attorney, Greene decided to enroll in the doctoral program at U.S. International University in San Diego (“They had the best sports psychologists in the country”).

As soon as he had his Ph.D., a faculty mentor offered him a chance to work with Olympic-level divers in Mission Viejo and, subsequently, in Florida. In the ensuing years—in Florida and then in Vail, Colorado—he developed a clientele that included such pressured folk as skiers, Grand Prix drivers, and female professional golfers.

Just as he was getting bored and deciding he’d already “done it all,” musicians discovered Greene—and Greene discovered music. An amateur golfer he’d helped happened to also be the principal bassist of the Syracuse Symphony. The bassist wanted Greene to present some classes for the orchestra members on “how to quiet their minds.”
He threw away his notes and adopted a different approach—channeling and controlling the anxiety-producing energy rush that precedes musical performance. “It’s all about power and focus, about getting in touch with their power.” That’s why Greene maintains that beta blockers aren’t a good idea. “They reduce the heart rate and try to shoot between speeding and relaxation. But beta blockers can make you both unpredictable and lethargic, like driving a car at 95 miles an hour with the brake on. I have [the musicians] going with the energy; that’s why sports psychology works.” Well-regulated performance energy, explains Greene, is like driving well at 70–75 mph; audition energy has to be even higher.

Though action-oriented, the Greene method, which can be explored on his website (www.dongreene.com), is not without introspective aspects. Clients first take his Performance Inventory, a questionnaire that asks them to identify all the factors that interfere with concentration on the task at hand, producing a profile that is the basis of future work. A musicians’ workbook, 11 Strategies for Audition and Performance Success, is a step-by-step guide to Greene’s practical approaches.

The meat of the method is “Centering,” a seven-step strategy that yields conscious control over breathing and silences one’s “hypercritical inner voices,” the negative thinking that Greene says emanates from the brain’s left hemisphere. Most important, the strategies are designed to build qualities most musicians probably haven’t acquired: courage, confidence, resilience, and toughness.

These, according to Greene, are the character traits that affect performance, as opposed to the technical mastery that affects musicianship. Under his supervision, musicians simulate the performance situation—complete with tension-producing factors. While the piece they are to perform sits on the music stand, they leave the room and do something vigorous, such as climbing stairs, that will raise their heart rate to 110 or so. Then, with energy still high, they come back into the room, pick up their instrument, center themselves according to Greene’s technique, and begin to play.

“It’s not about playing well in the practice room” says Greene, “it’s about doing well under pressure. Musicians spend too much time practicing practice. They should be practicing performing.”

As you might expect, Greene has kept moving. His success with musicians led to work with Wall Street traders, offering counseling after the trauma of 9/11 and helping them stay calm when making huge financial decisions under pressure. Next was Honolulu, where he worked at the city’s largest private school (President Obama went there, says Greene), coaching both athletes and musicians.

But Greene missed New York and returned to teach at Juilliard for another year, during which he wrote Fight Your Fear and Win. In Phoenix, his next stop, he “made a ton of money working with professional golfers.” Greene didn’t like the Arizona heat, though. Now he’s back in San Diego again and writing a book. This time it’s his memoirs.

So far there are 714 pages.
Diane Monroe is a Philadelphia-based violinist who has had an active career for the past thirty years. In her case, great teachers—not MDs or psychologists—helped her handle performance fears. Recently, crossing over from classical to jazz created a new set of challenges.

How young were you when you first experienced performance anxiety?
I think from the very beginning—my first piano recital when I was four years old. My knees shook and my hands were unsteady. I'd played freely by ear before that, but when I had lessons I started worrying that I was going to make a mistake.

When did you start violin, and when did your anxiety peak?
I was eight years old when I moved to the violin. The anxiety was worst when I was in my 20s.

How did you deal with it?
So, in the end, what helped you?
Some amazing violin teachers got me out of all that, especially Karen Tuttle, who was my chamber music coach at Philadelphia Music Academy and later at Curtis, and Inda Howland and Rachel Adonaylo, chamber music and aural skills coaches. They helped me to get rid of my technical focus. The whole point is letting go and focusing on the music.

I also played the guitar. When I was about 18, Karen Tuttle came to hear one of my guitar concerts, where I just played and sang songs that I'd written. She saw how relaxed I was and said, “You've got to play the violin the way you play the guitar.” I thought, “How do I do this?” But KT had some tools for getting me to become aware of what was happening in my muscles and my body, and then to let go. There were also some breathing techniques.

Then one day on stage, I actually felt myself transform. I still felt all the nerves—but now the point was to allow it all in, instead of pushing it away. I felt all of those things that made me crazy before—and then I became relaxed.

So, in the end, what helped you?
In the 1970s and 80s there was a trend to beta blockers. I only took them once—I was so curious. It blocked out my whole emotional sense. I wasn't able to express.

How does your classical training affect your jazz performance?
I am about to change course—I have changed course. To date, I feel I haven't been able to improvise as well as I'd like because of my response to my training. The violin was just learning and learning and learning—not playing. But with the guitar, I just played.

Now, with the violin, I am devoting myself to listening, closing my eyes and seeing what’s happening.

Pieces like David Baker’s Violin Concerto include improvisation. When I premiered it last year, I played from the music. I was under the impression that I could read the written sections and use my ear for the improv sections. This led to a less refined, less expressive performance in the written sections. On stage, my ears naturally want to take control while performing, but I often panic when that instinct kicks in, because I have practiced only in “eye” mode.

I am a musician who was trained early on that to play by ear was inferior to reading the same notes on a page.