

**STAGE-FRIGHT:
TURNING WIMPS INTO WIZARDS
OR
THE AUDIENCE AS CREATIVE
INSPIRATION**

Stage-fright can mean many different things. It can be fear of criticism. It can be fear of rejection. It can be fear of failure (whether by your own or by someone else's standards). It can be fear of people. There are probably other possibilities as well.

However, the most prevalent cause of stage-fright is LACK OF ADEQUATE PREPARATION! Not having studied a piece properly, and not having practiced it enough can cause a lot of stage-fright. In that case the feeling called stage-fright is probably a message to yourself which reads: YOU ARE NOT PREPARED FOR THIS PERFORMANCE, DO NOT EXPOSE YOURSELF! It's actually the good old fight or flight syndrome, in this case FLIGHT! Your body wants to run away from the whole thing, therefore the feeling of fright.

So the first step in avoiding stage fright is to be adequately prepared. Really knowing a piece well is the most fundamental security against stage-fright. Not being open to the possibility that you are afraid because you know deep down that your preparation has not been wholly adequate, could lead to a lot of wasted time and energy spent on fighting stage fright in doomed ways. First things must be first: nothing can be substituted for proper preparation. Once that is in place, and debilitating stage-fright persists, one can go on to work on other ways of solving the problem.

Actually, “stage-fright” is a nominalization, i.e. a verb which has been changed to function like a noun, thus changing an ongoing process into a static event/object. Once a process has been nominalized, it is often regarded as an unchangeable event or object instead of as a changeable process. *I am suffering from acute stage-fright* sounds like the complainant is overwhelmed by something, similar to *I am suffering from acute measles*. The process elements that are deleted in the nominalization “stage-fright” are:

- Who is being afraid?
- What is he/she afraid of?
- Being afraid when?
- Being afraid where?
- How specifically being afraid?

Denominalizing the word stage-fright allows the person to own it on a process-level where it can be changed. *I am afraid of failure/criticism/people/etc. when I am standing in front of/thinking about/etc. the audience in a formal concert/recording setting, and I specifically experience a rapid heart-beat, sweaty palms, trembling knees, shortness of breath and cold feet especially around my little toes, while I am seeing visual images in my mind’s eye of myself failing horribly and telling myself in a harsh tone of voice that I can never do anything right and should never have been born, curse my parents* [!] is the kind of specific process information we are after in order to take control and make a change.

To repeat, the feeling of fear serves as a valuable signal telling you that you need to do something different from your current behavioral patterns, either in terms of musical and technical preparation, or in terms of the processes of being afraid, or of both.

Incidentally, just think what a tremendous learning achievement “stage-fright” actually is. Your brain has learned to run exactly the same very powerful internal process sequence every single time you face or think about a performance! It knows how to scare the living daylights out of you, and it knows exactly when to do it. That is no small achievement. Imagine being resourceful in the same powerful, predictable way! Well, it’s the same brain, your brain, and you now know what it is capable of. All you have to do is to learn how to run your own brain. If you don’t run it, it won’t stop functioning, it will just keep on doing all kinds of creative and interesting things in ways that you might not like. After all, how is it to know what you want if you don’t let it know in the “language” it can immediately understand: internal visual, auditory, kinesthetic (physiological sensations), olfactory and gustatory elements — in other words, process terms.

Just telling your brain in words what you want is obviously insufficient. The fact that you have wished for certain things and not gotten them could be an indication that your brain doesn’t know what the words you use when asking for those things mean, or mean in a particular context. Words need to be translated into sensory terms for your nervous system to understand, and we all know that things get lost, or distorted or over-generalized in translation, unless we deliberately make sure that the translation is what we mean. Your brain may have less than useful or incomplete associations with certain words, and you may not even be aware of it.

You have to explain the meaning of “confidence” or “relaxation” or “inspiration” or whatever you want in terms that your nervous system can understand. For example, what would *confidence* to you in a particular performance context look like,

sound like, feel like and perhaps even smell like and taste like? That is the kind of information needed to get an outcome.

There are basically three ways to change stage-fright (or I should say *being afraid of, or in, performance situations*):

- prepare (study and practice) in a more adequate way;
- change your perception (internal model) of the audience;
- change your reaction to the performance situation.

Concerning the first possibility, little needs to be said here since a lot of useful information is available about practice and study methods in readily available sources, not least of which is your own brain — experiment, try different ways and find out what works for you!

Suffice it to say here that the last step in your sequence of preparation should be similar to the performance situation. That means that you should consolidate and conclude your study and practice with activities that are like the eventual performance. As the last phase of your preparation, get used to playing the piece(s) through from beginning to end without stopping, in front of people who act as your audience. If you cannot actually do it in the venue where your eventual performance is to take place, imagine in sensory detail what it is like to perform there and perform for your audience as if it is the eventual performance.

This serves at least two purposes: it is a test of your preparation to determine what needs to be in place for you to deliver your best under the specific conditions of the performance situation; and it contextualizes the information gathered and organized during preparation so that your brain knows what information to associate with what situation. It makes a connection between your preparation and the concert situation so that

your brain will activate processes at the right time that are commensurate with your preparation.

The so-called “blanks” that performers sometimes experience on-stage indicate that the right contextualizing process hasn’t taken place during preparation. It is as if the concert situation is suddenly so strange or foreign that the brain doesn’t know “where” to retrieve the requisite information from. The information may be there somewhere in the brain, but a strong association with the external situation where it is needed is missing, so that the brain doesn’t know where to fetch the information, and starts to panic.

So, let’s move on to the second way of changing the process of being afraid on stage: changing your perception (internal model) of the audience.

CHANGING YOUR PERCEPTION OF THE AUDIENCE

The audience. That intimidating mass of faceless people that makes you feel alienated and vulnerable. Or does it? Maybe you think of the audience as a panel of unforgivingly stern critics who have come to condemn you to a life of shame and guilt. Or perhaps the audience is to you a hearty group of friends-in-music who are keenly enthusiastic to share their love of music. It could even be that you conceive of the audience as a bunch of ignorant know-nothings whom you are going to impress with your superior skills.

There are certainly still other possibilities, but the message must already be clear: how performers think about an audience, or represent the audience to themselves determines what feelings they have about the people on the other side of the footlights.

This is borne out by many famous performers, some of whom are known for their ability to be in top form in front of an audience while others complain of intense stage-fright which prevents them from being their best.

The pianist Krystian Zimerman professes a need for an audience in order to deliver his best. He actually desires an audience and thinks of playing for them as if for his most intimate friends. In fact, it is precisely because he thinks of his audience as if they were a group of intimate friends that he desires their presence: his internal representation of the audience determines his reaction.

Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, obviously has lots of fun performing, sharing jokes, musical and otherwise, with his fellow musicians on stage as well as the audience. He probably has an internal representation of his audience as a group of people who want and deserve entertainment. Such a representation then serves as the framework for his reaction to the audience.

Performers consider their audiences variously as spectators to be dazzled, critics to be feared, fans to be entertained and impressed, strangers to be ignored, friends to be loved, music lovers to be served, and even worshippers to be blessed. And each of these conceptions of the character of an audience has its own internal structure which carries a set of feelings which may either empower or debilitate the performer.

What is meant by internal structure? It refers to the sensory model that people carry around inside their heads: the configuration of pictures, sounds, feelings, smells and tastes that form our memories and imaginings. Each configuration or structure of internal sensory components carries a meaning unique to the person holding it. By changing the structure of the sensory components its meaning is changed, thus allowing for a

different set of messages to be transmitted by the nervous system, culminating in a different overall reaction.

To put it in plain English, the pictures, sounds, feelings, smells and tastes that we make inside our heads when we “think” of something have specific characteristics like size, distance, brightness, still/moving, loudness, direction, timbre, pitch, temperature, texture, pressure, intensity and it is the specific configuration of these characteristics more than just the content (what the pictures, sounds, feelings, etc. are about) that determines the meaning which our nervous system receives from our mental processes.

Our internal sensory systems are called modalities and the process-characteristics within these modalities are called sub-modalities. So, internal senses (sight, sound, feeling, smell, taste) = *modalities*; the process-characteristics within each sensory system = *sub-modalities*; the stuff that one is thinking about = content; and the particular configuration of content, modalities and sub-modalities is called the *internal representation*.

It follows then that attempting to change one’s reaction to a particular situation by simply changing the content of thinking is insufficient (like many “positive thinking” formulas that are only randomly successful). Fundamental change occurs quickly when modalities and sub-modalities are restructured for desired results. Structure determines meaning: changing the structure changes the meaning.

To change an internal representation entails first eliciting its structure and then changing it to a more resourceful structure. The internal structure of a positive performing experience (or something similar) is then used as a blue-print for change. In other words, an example of the desired internal state, in terms of resources, is found, either in memory or in

imagination or in an outside example, and its internal structure is then elicited and used as a model for changing the unresourceful experience.

The performer elicits the internal structure of his unresourceful reaction involving an audience, finds an example of the internal structure of the desired reaction, either remembering a positive performing experience, or imagining what it would be like, or if necessary, thinking of some-one else's experience which could serve as a model, and changes the unresourceful experience to match the desired resourceful experience.

The steps are as follows:

1. Think of a performing experience with an audience to which you react with anxiety.
2. Become aware of how you think of the audience (internal representation). Do you see the audience in your mind's eye? Do you hear something in your imagination to which you react with anxiety? Is there a particular body sensation that you associate with the thought?
3. Become aware of the sub-modalities of your internal representation. If you have a visual image in your mind, what is the size of the image itself? What is the location in your mind's eye of the image? And the distance in your mind's eye? Is the image in color or is it in black and white? Is it a still picture or is there movement like a movie? If your internal representation of the audience includes sound elements, from what direction in your mind do you experience the sound? How loud is it? What is the pitch like? And the timbre of the sound? And how about feelings? Where in your body do you experience it? Does the sensation have a particular form? And texture? Temperature? How intense is it? And are you aware of its weight?

These are the kinds of questions one asks to elicit submodalities. Be sure to remember the specific sub-modalities (you might even want to write them down). It is vital to remain in the experience, as if it is happening right now, while eliciting the sub-modalities. Otherwise the mind might get too busy with the experience of eliciting sub-modalities and actually move away from the experience of audience-anxiety, in which case it would be difficult to find the true sub-modalities of the experience in question.

Here is a more complete list of sub-modalities:

visual

size	how big is the image?
location	where is the image located?
brightness	is it bright, dim, or dark?
color	is it in color or black & white
focus	how clear is the focus?
frame/panorama	does it have a frame or is it a panorama?
2D/3D	is it two- or three-dimensional?
still/movie	is it a still frame or a movie?
viewpoint	do you see it from the side, above or below?
proximity	how close is the image to you?
associated/dissociated	do you see through your own eyes or do you see yourself from the outside?

auditory

loudness	how loud are the sounds?
direction	from where do you here the sounds?
pitch	is the pitch high, low or in the

rhythm	middle range? is there a regular rhythm to the sound or not?
tempo	how fast are the sounds happening?
duration	how long do the sounds last?
uniqueness	what is unique about the sounds?

kinesthetic

location	where in your body do you feel it?
shape	does the sensation have a particular shape?
pressure	is there pressure that increases or decreases?
texture	rough, smooth, or otherwise?
temperature	hot or cold, and is there any change?
weight	heavy, light or in between, any change?
intensity	how intense is it? any change?
breathing	where, how much, how fast?
movement	any movement in the sensation?
vibration	is there any vibration?

This list is by no means complete. Is there anything else that you become aware of that you could add to it? Have fun finding out what is unique to your experience and gives it meaning!

4. Now, think of a positive performing experience. If you cannot remember any such experience, imagine what it would

be like, or think of some-one that you know who has such experiences and go ask them if you could model their experience.

5. Do the same sub-modality eliciting process as with the negative experience.
6. Then, when you have a complete set of sub-modalities, systematically change the sub-modalities of the negative experience so that it becomes precisely like those of the positive example.
7. Having made the change, imagine how the new way of coding your thinking will work for you in the future and enjoy the control that you now have over how you think of an audience!

Summary of steps:

1. Think of an audience that you feel afraid of.
2. Become aware of the internal sensory components of your thought. Do you see an image in your mind's eye when you think of being afraid of an audience? Do you hear sounds? Do you say anything to yourself? What sensations do you feel as part of the thought?
3. Become aware of the sub-modalities of your internal experience.
4. Think of a positive reaction to an audience.
5. Do the same sub-modality elicitation process as with the negative experience.
6. Systematically change the sub-modalities of the negative experience to become precisely like those of the positive experience.
7. Imagine how the change will empower you in the future.

The third way of changing your experience of being afraid to perform is to change your reaction to a performance situation

directly. It is simply a matter of connecting (associating) a resourceful state to the performance situation in such a way that the situation itself automatically triggers a positive response in you.

That is done by first having a complete internal representation of the reaction that you want instead of fear, and then organizing a way for it to be “switched on” when it is needed.

THE “MAGIC CIRCLE”

Think how you want to react to an audience. What would you look like? Your body posture, your body language, the expression on your face, your gait? What would you see around you? What would you sound like? Your voice tone, tempo of speech, loudness of speech? What kinds of things would you be saying to yourself and to other people? What else would you hear? What would the musical sounds you produce be like? How would you experience musical time? What would you hear around you? How would you feel? What specifically are those feelings like? What sensations in your body go with those feelings? What is your breathing like? Its tempo, rhythm, depth?

Now, given the above information, think again of how you would like to react “on stage”, as if it is happening now, and make the memory as vivid and complete as possible.

The next step is to decide what you would like to name your resourceful reaction. “Confidence” or “magic” or “power” or “greatness” or “excellence” come to mind as examples. Choose a word or description that really sums it up for you, that “says it all”.

Now imagine an area in front of you that you can comfortably step into. It could be a circular area (or any other shape that feels appropriate) on the floor. It could be a three-dimen-

sional “cocoon” or “cylinder” that will enclose you, whatever works for you. Give it your favorite color, or whatever color you associate with your desired state. Perhaps a particular texture and temperature as well. Whatever works to let you feel very attracted to your “magic circle” or “confidence cocoon” or “power spot”.

As before, think again of your desired experience as if it is happening now, and as you approach its high point or climax, physically step into your resource-area and feel how your positive internal experience becomes part of that area and infuses it with positive energy and potential. As soon as your experience is complete and satisfying, step out of your resource area.

Repeat the process once or twice by again imagining your desired experience as if it is happening now, and step into your resource area as you approach the high-point or point of greatest intensity in your experience. Feel it infusing your resource area with its goodness and power. Step out of your resource area as soon as your experience is completed.

Feel free at any time to go back to previous steps in the process if you want to add or change anything to make it more appropriate or powerful.

To contextualize your new resource and link it to appropriate triggers, simply imagine using it in particular situations in the future. Think of a few specific representative situations where you would want to use it, and imagine what you would experience in those situations that would remind you to use your “magic circle”. Imagine how it works for you in those performance situations in the future.

Summary of steps

1. Imagine what you want to experience.
2. Imagine a magic circle in front of you.

3. Imagine your desired experience as if it is happening now.
4. As the experience reaches its climax, step into your circle.
5. Imagine you circle becoming infused with your new experience (enjoy it to the full).
6. As soon as your experience has completed itself, step out.
7. Repeat once or twice.
8. Imagine it working in future situations.

NOTE: only use it in the kind of situations where you imagined it to avoid contamination or dilution by other experiences.

THE “SWISH”-PATTERN

This is a technique for connecting (*anchoring*) a desired behavior to the situation where it is needed in a way that allows for sensory stimuli in the situation to trigger the desired behavior automatically. Its power comes from the fact that the very same set of stimuli which triggered the old unwanted response now triggers a new resourceful response, and it happens automatically.

Steps to do:

1. Elicit the submodalities of the problem reaction.
2. Elicit the submodalities of the desired reaction. Make it as complete as possible.
3. Think of what triggers the problem reaction. It helps to imagine what usually precedes the problem response (*What is the last thing/event that you are aware of just before the problem reaction occurs?*).
4. Think of the situation where the problem reaction occurs, and as soon as you become aware of the trigger, let your problem representation be replaced very quickly (as quick as the word “swish!”) by your representation of your desired response. In the case of internal pictures, let the un-

wanted one(s) move away (“swish!”) and disappear into the distance, from where the wanted one(s) should come back with the greatest speed to settle where it was when elicited.

5. Repeat approximately five times, increasing the tempo of the “swish”.
6. Imagine how your new behavior works for you in future situations.

Your new behavioral pattern should now be triggered automatically by the situation where it is needed.

SIX-STEP REFRAMING

Sometimes people experience problem reactions because their capabilities are not properly contextualized. It means that their brains know how to be “confident” or “creative” or “resourceful”, but don’t know when to do it. The result is that people are confident or creative in one situation, but not in another. In the same way, their brains know how to be afraid (which is very useful in the right context!) but switches it on in the “wrong” situation, as in “stage-fright” where it isn’t useful.

It can also be that a particular response has become frozen in time, outliving its usefulness or appropriateness. The behavior then becomes a problem which can be solved by updating the information the nervous system uses to support it. The fact that one reacted with fear once upon a time doesn’t mean that it is appropriate to continue doing so. The situation may have changed, and the person may have changed, making the response inappropriate.

Presupposing that the intent behind all behavior is positive, it follows that if the intent and the behavior it generates is separated, other more appropriate behaviors can be found that satisfy the same intent. Very often when a behavior “resists” change it

is because the positive intent which it serves is not recognized and satisfied.

To contextualize capabilities, which means having them available when needed, one needs to reframe them, which means placing them in the contexts where they are useful. This can be done by literally negotiating with internal parts responsible for different behaviors so that each part accepts the intentions and contributions of other parts and knows exactly when to make its own contribution to the overall well-being. The process is called six-step reframing and is as follows:

1. Identify the behavior that you would like to change.
2. Establish communication with the part responsible for the behavior. Be polite at all times. Go inside and ask the part responsible for the behavior that you would like to change (behavior X) if it is willing to communicate with you on a conscious level. Be attentive to any signal that you might get spontaneously in the form of internal pictures, sounds or words, feelings, smells, or tastes. If you are not sure about any signal, test it by asking the part to intensify it for “yes” and to diminish it for “no”.
3. Separate the positive intention from the behavior. Thank the part for being there for you. Ask if it's willing to let you know what it's trying to do for you. If it is not willing, that's all-right, you needn't know for the process to continue. (Sometimes it is better for your conscious mind not to know).
4. Ask your creative part to generate at least three new behaviors that will satisfy the same intention. You can use the signal system established at the beginning of the process to let you know when the work is done. It doesn't matter whether you are consciously aware of the content of the new behaviors. You may become aware, or you may not.

Either way, the process can continue as soon as you know that new behaviors have been designed.

5. Ask the part responsible for behavior X if it will take responsibility for the new behaviors to try them out over the next few weeks or months. Make sure that the part knows that you will return to this process should the behaviors prove unsatisfactory.
6. Ecology check. Ask if there are any other parts which object to your new behavioral choices. Be attentive to any signal that might arise. If there is any objection, recycle back to step two and go through the whole process again with the objecting part. Thank all parts for their cooperation.

THE FAST PHOBIA CURE

For stage-fright that is really very intense, like a phobia, there is an interesting technique that can have amazing results.

Imagine yourself sitting in a big movie theater all by yourself, looking at the screen in front of you.

Now float out of your body and into the projection room from where you can see yourself in the theater looking at the screen.

Choose a representative example of your frightful experiences on stage.

While in the projection room looking at yourself in the theater watching the screen, project the frightful event like a movie on the screen in black and white and watch it as an outside observer from just before it started to when it was over and you knew you were okay again, and freeze the “movie” on the screen at that point.

Float back into your body where you are sitting in the theater and from there become part of the event (associate into it) where it is frozen on the screen.

Once an integral part of the event at that point, turn the color back on and very quickly experience the event from the inside happening in reverse from the end to the beginning. Feel the sensations in your body of experiencing everything happening backwards, in reverse, as quickly as possible.

Repeat the reverse experience a couple of times (as many as is needed), faster each time. If this is not sufficient to change your intense stage-fright, do the same process with additional memories of frightful stage experiences, one at a time.

If you have difficulty watching the event from the projection room as an outside observer because of re-experiencing the feelings of fright, you could try some or all of the following: Imagine a thick Plexiglas screen, roof to floor, wall to wall, between yourself in the projection room and the rest of the theater in front of you. Move the theater screen back to a comfortable distance. While in the projection room, watch the “movie” playing faster than it happened in real life.

You may be able to come up with variations of this technique, keeping the basic process the same, that will work wonders for you. Be imaginative and experiment until you find what works best for you.

USING THE AUDIENCE AS CREATIVE INSPIRATION

What a performer needs then is control over the structure of his internal experience as it relates to an audience. In addition, resourceful representations of different types of audiences are essential for eliciting the full range of a performer’s behavioral

options, as well as for congruent communication (in the widest sense) with any given audience.

That is called “pacing” an audience, which means performing in a way that is congruent with the character and expectations of an audience. There are different types of listeners: professional experts, critics, music lovers, intimate friends, skeptical cynics, uninterested parties, competitors, colleagues etc. Of course, they are not necessarily exclusive: any given audience may contain several different types of listener.

By imagining what each type of listener will be focusing on in a performance, the performer can realize how to best perform to satisfy such a listener. By “perform” is meant the whole range of communication exhibited by the performer: musical, non-verbal (i.e. “body-language”) and sometimes even verbal communication.

Imagining different types of audiences and their expectations and preferences unlocks the performer’s full range of behavior options, some of which might have remained unavailable without such a mental exercise.

We react differently to different expectations, at least when we want peoples’ continued positive interest. For example, we talk in different ways to different kinds of people. To get the same message across to a small child, we may speak quite differently than to an adult. Likewise, the same message would be delivered in a very different way to our most intimate friend than to a complete stranger. The same goes for different audiences.

Imagine a panel of professional experts or “judges”, lets say at a competition. What would they pay attention to? What would they listen for? What would they look at? What would they want to feel? If you were on the panel, what would you pay attention to, listen for, look at, want to feel, evaluate? An-

other way to phrase the question might be *What would be important to the judges at a competition?*

Now, imagine performing for a group of your most intimate friends. What would be important to them in your performance? What would they pay attention to? What would they look for in order to be affected by your performance in the way that you would like them to be affected? What would they want to feel? What would you want them to feel, or hear, or see? Would it make a difference to your experience if you thought of “playing” for them instead of “performing” in front of them?

What words would allow you to have the most positive and resourceful experience when thinking about your audience? What would you name the audience: friends, judges, music-lovers, strangers, competitors? How would you describe your action: are you “performing” or “playing” or “making music” (like making love, perhaps) or “showing off”? And what about your feelings: are you “anxious” or “terrified” or “worried” or “excited”? The words we use to describe and think about an experience very often reinforce the feelings we have or had.

For example, by continuously labeling an experience as terrifying, whether saying it out loud or thinking the words “terrifying” or “terrified” we oblige ourselves to feel terrified, because after all that’s what we have been calling it and thus literally “calling” up the experience of being terrified!

By keeping on using the same emotionally loaded word to describe something we may be, in a sense, artificially sustaining the emotional character of the experience by blocking off any changes that might occur spontaneously. The situation where we initially reacted with terror may have changed, or we may have had the opportunity for new insight or growth or new perspective, but missed it because our word

for the experience, which mind you isn't the experience itself, has blocked our perception!

Now imagine a group of music-lovers as your audience. What is important to them about a performance? What do they pay attention to? What do they want or need to hear? And see? How do they want to feel to know that they have really enjoyed and loved a performance? How would you "perform" or "play" so that they can have such an experience?

The same kinds of questions can be asked about all the different kinds of listeners or audiences. The important point is to imagine what they would expect, or want, or find important, or pay attention to, or evaluate, and then to imagine how you would perform or play (choosing an appropriate word to describe your action) to satisfy them. To make it specific enough, one should ask yourself: *Given what I now imagine the audience finds important in a performance, what do they need to hear, see and feel to know that they are experiencing it? And how will I perform in order to provide it?*

It goes without saying that this process does not imply going against your musical or personal integrity at any time! We are only concerned with how to communicate your message for desired effect. How to package your message so that it comes through in the way you intended. Remember, the meaning of your communication is the response you get, meaning that you must be flexible enough and have sufficient behavioral options so that you can choose the best way to get through to an audience.

If you perform a particular composition in a way that doesn't allow for your intended musical message to come across, or be understood by the audience, then the meaning that the audience takes away from the performance is "wrong" and it is your responsibility to vary your communication patterns so

that your message is received. After all, you the performer are the active one in the concert situation, not the audience: your communication determines the outcome of your performance in terms of audience reaction.

So, to recapitulate, in terms of using audiences as creative inspiration, a performer needs control over his internal representation of any given audience and his reactions to it, and he needs to have resourceful representations of different types of audiences so that he can vary his behavior to suit his listeners.