



# Sound Off

How can musicians manage performance anxiety?

BY BRIAN WISE

Ellen L. Wright, Ph.D.

*Psychologist, Curtis mental health team*

→ **Ellen Wright recommends that students with performance anxiety seek help early on, and not waste time dabbling in untested methods.** “When I meet the first-year students, I say, ‘Listen, I know you want to solve everything by yourselves, but please do not struggle between September and February or March trying to solve this.’” Dr. Wright emphasizes a combination of techniques, some of which were developed by the noted sports psychologist Don Greene.

“Don Greene does two things: He uses a process called grounding, where he asks people to focus on their breath and locate an area, usually in their abdominal area, where they are breathing. What we find is that breathing can compete with anxiety. Then, he uses visualization. I ask them to go back to a performance where they felt they really played well, and I’ll say, ‘Your body has a memory of that performance, and the anxiety has just covered that over. So, I’d like you to think about a performance where you felt you played the way you want to play.’ And I have them describe it in exquisite detail using all their senses. Part of what I’m going to do is ask them to practice retrieving those [sensations].

Then, I say to them, ‘I’d like you to pick two words—process cues—that describe what playing that way is like.’ I ask them to go through bringing up that memory, feeling it in every possible way, then saying the process words and starting to play. Go through the process of breathing and grounding themselves physically and then say those words when they are warming up, before going on stage. The more they use that, the more accessible that positive experience will be. What you’re really doing is reminding them that in their past, they have successful performances, and all they must do is access them. And there’s a relationship between your past successes and your future successes.”

Daniel Matsukawa ('92)

*Curtis bassoon faculty*  
*Principal Bassoon,*  
*Philadelphia Orchestra*

→ **Bassoonist Daniel Matsukawa has sought out wisdom from other disciplines when it comes to performance anxiety**, whether it's the race car-driving protagonist in Garth Stein's novel *The Art of Racing in the Rain* (i.e., don't worry about that last turn you made), or an online video by actor Bryan Cranston, about focusing on one's character. Most of all, Mr. Matsukawa emphasizes constant, detailed preparation.

"You know how they always say

knowledge is power? It's all about preparation. And I know that sounds so simplistic but sometimes it's the simple things. I'm an over-thinker, and that's where we sometimes get into trouble. I feel prepared when I've done the studying; I've done the practicing. The voices of doubt always love to sneak in. I love saying to myself, 'Just trust it will be there, and whatever happens, happens. You've done the preparation so, in a way, you just let the chips fall.' But if I feel at all like I'm winging it, it's not going to happen.

I do like visualization. That's enormously powerful. As I

practice, I sometimes visualize myself walking out on that stage. And if it's an audition, I visualize a screen or a committee. I also do an Affirmantia meditation. You breathe in slowly for five seconds, pause for two seconds, and exhale slowly for five seconds. You're supposed to breathe in and say the words 'I am.' You pause and exhale slowly and say whatever you want. For example, 'I am... a great musician.' And I would repeat that a few times. I encourage my students to say, 'I can't wait... to get out there.' The worst would be, 'I can't wait... for it to be over!'" →



Ray Chen (10)

*Violinist*

→ **A charismatic presence on YouTube and social media, Ray Chen hardly seems like a poster child for stage fright.** But he also recognizes that many musicians spend considerable mental energy in “bulletproofing” themselves—that is, striving to tune out their audiences in a kind of self-preservation. This, he says, can get in the way of a free exchange between performers and listeners.

In 2023, Mr. Chen co-founded Tonic, an app that lets musicians livestream their practice sessions, receive feedback, and accumulate rewards on a personalized dashboard. The goal is to share your practicing and inspire others while getting used to playing before a (remote) audience. He talks about two common strategies for addressing nerves: beta blockers\* and therapy.

“We often say, ‘Let’s make talking about beta blockers a thing. Let’s open it up for discussion.’ Sure, that’s okay. But then, that really sucks, doesn’t it? You’re a musician and you can’t even do the thing you love doing the most, which is sharing music. I don’t believe beta blockers lead to a true connection between yourself and the people listening. It’s creating a numbing effect so that you can play all the notes and you can imagine the feeling of it, but it will not be yourself living in the feeling itself.

Therapy, on the other hand, is the idea of addressing the core of it: Why are you nervous? I think therapy is getting a coach. Instead of a coach for bodybuilding, it’s a coach for mind-building, because it forces you to address yourself and find out why you are the person you are: your flaws, your strengths. The therapy sets you up to be able to undo the knots in your mind. But, practicing in front of people—before playing in front of a larger crowd—is what I feel has been missing.”



JOHN MAC



## Nathan Cole ('00)

*Concertmaster,  
Boston Symphony Orchestra  
Faculty, Colburn School*

→ **Nathan Cole says that virtually every student who comes to him asks about eliminating performance anxiety.** “I think it’s a fruitless quest, unfortunately,” he says. Still, he firmly believes it can be managed, and his website, [natesviolin.com](http://natesviolin.com), contains several articles and videos addressing the topic. He shares some of his findings.

“Understand, as much as possible, the situation you’re going into and then be as prepared as you can be for that situation. Try out repertoire in smaller performances. I’ve known people who have set up ten or 20 of those [informal performances] before they do a competition. Then, understand that some days are just going to feel different than others, and there may not

be a big explanation for it.

I do a basic centering process right before I play anything important. It comes from the world of sports. Once you’ve practiced it, you can center in ten or 15 seconds. The centering process is you know exactly what you are aiming to do. In the case of archery, it would be the arrow hitting the center of the bullseye. You pick a visual focal point, close your eyes, relax your muscles, do proper breathing, you hear and feel the thing you are about to do. Then you open your eyes, focus on that visual focal point, and then do it.

Beta blockers\* have been useful for me in those first couple of minutes of a piece. For violinists, we hate it when our hands shake, because that affects intonation, vibrato, and bow control, which are all things you’d like to have. If I know that I’m going into an unfamiliar situation, maybe it’s the first time playing something, I might like to have that insurance.”

\*Please consult your doctor before taking any medications discussed in this article.

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.