

Music performance anxiety among full-time music students

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Introduction

Music performance anxiety (MPA, often referred to as “stage fright”) is one of the leading severe medical problems among musicians. For about 15-25% of musicians MPA is a serious problem. Particularly high levels of MPA are observed among music students. Musical performance can induce negative emotions, including anxiety, which in some individuals can approach extreme levels of terror and take the form of panic attack, impair the quality of the performance, lead to avoidance of performance situations, and consequently have debilitating effects on the career. Coping efforts used by musicians in their attempts to manage MPA, such as sedatives, alcohol, and β -blockers can have deleterious health side-effects. Music ranks high in the cultural and economic life of Switzerland. In ten university music schools, students from all around the world are educated to become professional musicians. Despite the importance of musical education in Switzerland, data concerning the phenomenon of MPA are largely lacking.

Goal and Methods

The main goal of this research was to survey the occurrence, experience, and management of MPA among full-time music students in French Swiss conservatories. A questionnaire was developed based on the literature and interviews with music students and teachers and distributed to all the students of the conservatories of Fribourg, Geneva, Lausanne, and Neuchâtel in the spring 2007. 194 students (61% women) returned the questionnaire.

Results

The size of the problem: MPA is a major problem for 1/3 of the students (ranks 3 and 4).

MPA is not a problem for me	0	1	2	3	4	MPA is a major problem for me
	4%	24%	41%	19%	12%	

The consequences of MPA: 22% and 35% of the students think that they have failed exams and auditions, respectively, because of MPA. Further, 25% of the students have already avoided performing and 11% have interrupted public performances because of MPA.

Coping with MPA: 90% of the students have never used alcohol prior to performing, whereas 97% and 81%, respectively, have never used recreational drugs and medication. The majority of students use relaxation exercises, respiratory exercises, and meditation techniques to prepare themselves. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the students think that the use of alcohol and recreational drugs to manage MPA is never justified. 53% of the students think that the use of medication is justified on some occasions.

Need for information and support: 66% of the students would like to receive more support and help to cope with music performance situations. This support should mainly come from their teachers and specialists. 53% of the students know nothing or little about possible means for the management of MPA. About 50% consider themselves not at all or little informed about the possible risks associated with the consumption of alcohol, recreational drugs, and medication for the management of performance situations. 89% would like to know more about MPA and 94% think that this topic should be discussed much more in their musical education at the conservatory.

Conclusions

The results of this survey indicate that MPA is a major problem for 1/3 of the students with serious consequences on their career. There is a huge need for more information and support on how to manage the stress due to performance situations. The use of alcohol, recreational drugs, and medication is modest but the students are poorly informed about possible side-effects of these coping strategies. It seems clear that more should be done in the French Swiss conservatories about music performance anxiety to inform, educate, and prepare the students for their future professional career.



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