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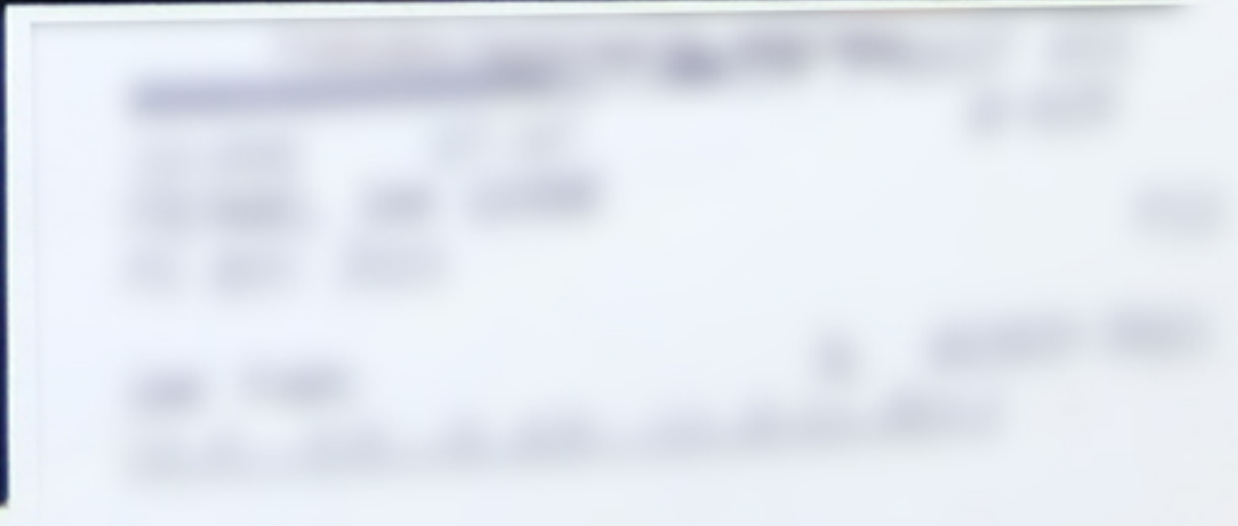
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Stage Fright: The Role of Unresolved Anger

by Michael I. Goode, Local 10-208 (Chicago, IL)

You've seen it, heard about it, and perhaps experienced it yourself—stage fright, or performance anxiety. Why do some musicians get it and others don't, and why are some self-conscious about talking about it?

We live and work in a demanding business. I say "live" because we take our work home with us, forming a very personal relationship with it that is the foundation for performance. Some of us get a thrill every time we perform and can't wait to do it again. For some, performance is filled with dread, and for others, it is a living nightmare.

In many business situations, you can redo a memo or a document if it is done incorrectly; not so with musical performance—once the performance is over, you cannot take it back. The same is true for orchestral auditions. There is no room for error. Who ever heard of an all-star musician making only 40% of the notes and keeping his or her job? Yet a professional baseball player hitting 40% of the time is considered outstanding—he's hitting a .400!

Our stress level is unlike most professions. As a result, we must be very confident when we work. When that confidence is not there, we are suffering from stage fright.

I define stage fright as any obstacle that prevents a musician from meeting the artistic and musical goals he or she has set. These obstacles are under our control, but somehow they have gotten out of control. As these obstacles become greater, it becomes increasingly difficult to perform at even the most basic level.

What causes stage fright? On a physiological level, stage fright is characterized by a chemical imbalance in the nervous system that transmits nerve signals throughout the body. Neurotransmitters send signals between nerve cells at every location in the body and govern every function of our bodies, including emotion, thought, and movement.

When the nervous system is sending highly efficient and effective signals, it is said that the neurotransmitting chemicals are on "Recipe A." In other words, the musician is in the "zone," performing optimally, with body and mind totally relaxed yet completely alert at the same time. In this state, a musician is focused not in a stressful way; instead, he or she is paying attention to every musical event and cue. The musician is making great art and, most of all, he or she is connecting with the audience in a deep, energetic way.

The distinction between those who play in the zone and those who play mechanically and suffer from stage fright is quite obvious. Playing in the zone means the body and the mind are not questioning what they are doing; they are working together, totally focused on the goal of making great art. To achieve this focus takes great training, discipline, and, most of all, courage. But why does this wonderful process break down and become stage fright?

Neurotransmitters that govern the processes needed to make great music—emotional centers in the brain, physiological centers in the muscles, and more primitive functions related to respiration and movement—can betray us when the chemical recipe changes due to emotional and physical stress.

If the stress is moderate, it is called "Recipe B," but as the level of stress rises, the recipe can go to C, D, and E. The worst case scenario is "Recipe F," in which the musician is totally incapacitated and completely unable to perform.

The common symptoms of stage fright begin to appear and increase in intensity as the situation becomes progressively worse. Sweating, confused thinking, rapid heart rate, tremor, shallow breathing, and dry mouth are some of the most common symptoms. Of course any one of these symptoms can be disastrous, as they will not only distract from a highly focused and relaxed performance but also will start a negative momentum. Once stage fright begins, it is very difficult to stop it from worsening, and the musician feels as if he or she is holding on for dear life in order to finish the gig.

My own stage fright was so severe more than eight years ago that I had to make a decision to either solve the problem or stop performing. Research at the University of Chicago and the tremendous models provided by my teachers Adolph Herseth and William Scarlett, both of Local 10-208 (Chicago, IL), and Arnold Jacobs went a long way toward curing the problem. In particular, the work of Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs was crucial to my understanding that so many dysfunctional behaviors, including stage fright, are based on unresolved anger that can be written off and reprogrammed literally through the process of writing what is called an "anger letter."

I have worked with and spoken to many musicians around the world in the past two-and-a-half years, and I have found that in almost all cases, their stage fright was caused by suppressed anger issues from childhood relating to music. Those musicians who identified and wrote about their anger in private, anonymous letters, which were then destroyed, immediately began to get relief from stage fright. The results I have seen have been dramatic, both for myself and for other musicians.

Many are very uncomfortable talking about stage fright, fearing that if a contractor or conductor finds out, they will lose work. But if a musician confronts the issue of stage fright, he or she will become mentally tougher and more focused and will ultimately become a better musician, with the deep emotional resources that lead to great artistry.

Michael I. Goode is author of *Stage Fright in Music Performance and Its Relationship to the Unconscious*. His second book, *Your True Self*, will be published in October 2007. For more information visit www.trumpetworkspress.com.

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