Managing performance anxiety: lessons from masterclasses, mountains and molehills

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Master musicians travel across the globe performing often to huge audiences but pause occasionally to give masterclasses - a high status and costly staple of the conservatoire curriculum. A masterclass is essentially a one-off music lesson given in the presence of an audience, usually comprising students, teachers and perhaps members of the public. The conventional, but by no means typical format of a masterclass begins with a performance given by the student, followed by the master musician’s observations; finally, another performance is given by the student incorporating the master’s teaching.

Anecdotally, the interactions between the audience, the master and the student tend to be highly varied. Accounts of positive experiences abound, but equally, reports of public humiliation contribute to the intense debate and controversy surrounding this form of teaching. To address these concerns and to explore innovative ways of presenting masterclasses, Susan Hallam (IOE) Andrea Creech (IOE), Helena Gaunt (GSMD) and Linnhe Robertson (GSMD) are investigating students’ perceptions of the value and purpose of masterclasses at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. The project links with additional research at the Norwegian Academy of Music, focussing on masterclasses from masters’ points of view.

A recent survey of the students at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama indicated that opportunities for learning in masterclasses are highly valued at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The majority of students described masterclasses as beneficial because of the opportunity to obtain relevant expert advice relating directly to their instrument or voice type. A large proportion of the students valued masterclasses as providing a useful performance opportunity while others noted the importance of engaging with ideas about interpretation or style. Most students found masterclasses to be motivating and inspiring, but accounts of intimidating experiences in front of peers and the public also featured in a small number of the responses.

The students described their awareness of barriers to learning in masterclasses. More than one fifth of the total number of participating students described performance anxiety. They also explained that their difficulty with concentration during the masterclass was caused by nerves. In some instrument types, difficulties relating to feeling nervous were particularly noticeable. For example, nearly 30 per cent of brass and wind players in the survey reported these problems, while less than 15 per cent of singers reported difficulties with nerves (see figure 1).
Fig. 1: Performance anxiety and loss of concentration due to nerves is a barrier to learning in masterclasses.

The survey also showed that the students who performed in masterclasses particularly enjoyed being able to learn directly from the master’s comments as these specifically addressed their musical development and learning through an individually tailored approach. During the moments when these students were not performing, they described their learning as involving hearing other students’ performances in terms of considering what worked well and what did not work so well. However, the students that had never performed in a masterclass preferred to learn by listening to the master’s comments. In doing this, they tried to develop their personal understanding of the music by attempting to assimilate the highly experienced and advanced knowledge and understanding of the master musician.

In terms of the psychological impact of the non-performing students’ approach, the degree of contrast between the level of knowledge of the master and the student would generate a steep slope, or gradient in terms of mapping their differences in musical expertise. In adopting this subordinate role, the non-performer would maintain a weak sense of musical competence during the entire masterclass. On the other hand, the confident students with experience of performing in masterclasses learned about performing by observing the experiences of their fellow students. The peer-oriented yardstick generated a minimal gradient of expertise, allowing the confident students to maintain a strong sense of competency during the masterclass.

The difference in approach between the two types of student is important because the non-performers indicated that the masterclass situation intimidated them to such an extent that they would be too nervous to ever consider performing. The confident performers on the other hand were less intimidated by the master. They were aware that the master’s
comments may not be favourable, but typically regarded the master’s comments as representing no more than one person’s subjective opinion.

These contrasts in students’ approaches to learning in masterclasses showed that confident student performers focussed on attainable models, whereas the non-performers adopted unattainable ideals to learn from. This difference in the position of the individual in relation to the attainability of the target, the ideal or the model impacted on the students’ overall sense of confidence to manage challenging performance situations such as masterclasses.

So how can this research inform us about performing in music examinations? There are no obvious similarities between graded music exams and masterclasses, except that is, for the steep gradient of expertise between the performer and the person assessing the performance. The steep gradient of expertise is what makes both situations so very challenging for the performers. This is because psychological gradients involve unequal power relationships. This means that one person may feel intimidated by the knowledge and experience of the other person which equates to the perception of a threat on the radar of our primitive nervous system. Might this explain why music exams are more challenging for some candidates? Interestingly these research findings showed that among the advanced music students, the confident performers appeared to focus on what the master could teach them, though they did not focus specifically on the master’s superior expertise. However, the non-performers deliberately focused on the master’s expertise and in doing so, they became too intimidated to consider themselves as performers in masterclasses in the future.

When the students that had performed in masterclasses were interviewed, they explained that failure to prepare thoroughly or simply a lack of time to prepare adequately for the performance increased their temporary levels of performance anxiety. However, the response of the non-performers who claimed that they would always feel too intimidated to perform in a masterclass, suggested that a social factor may account for their long-term state of performance anxiety. By focusing on the expertise of the master and trying to assimilate this into their own comparatively under-developed knowledge and experience of musical performance, the non-performers unwisely magnified the master in relation to themselves and managed to perceive the learning opportunity as threatening rather than enjoyable.

The psychological process of magnification seems to be key to understanding the difference between the two types of student. Magnification is a type of exaggerated response. It is relevant to our findings because as the responses of the non-performers showed, it is simply the process of constructing mountains out of molehills. Indeed there are many cultural and social factors that subliminally encourage us all to magnify a cultural difference as threatening rather than fascinating or enjoyable. Interestingly, very few social factors seem to achieve the opposite effect! So in certain situations such as masterclasses and music
examinations we are faced with the challenge of coping with a primitive physiological response, fuelled by subliminal responses to cultural and social differences.

So to conclude, this research showed that in learning how to cope strategically with these challenges, the most confident students adopted three useful mindsets. Firstly, they focussed on the reality of the masterclass event as simply being another small part of their overall learning process. Secondly, they gave their full attention to the manageable and real-life-sized aspects of the situation. Lastly, they allowed a rapport to develop between the master and themselves and aimed to enjoy their brief encounter with the expert!