

Some Helpful Advice About Performing

By Happy Traum

If you are studying an instrument or learning to sing, sooner or later you will want to try out your music on an audience. It may be in a living room for family and friends, at an "open mike" night at a coffee house or local club, or at a professional engagement. No matter how large or small the audience, as soon as you come before them with your instrument in your hand or a song on your lips you are performing and there are some basic things you should know to help you do your best, and give the maximum pleasure to your listeners.

Since most inexperienced performers need help in professional-type situations, let's assume that you are going to be performing at a club or concert. What steps can you take to assure that you will play your best, and get the maximum response from your listeners? Here are a few ideas.

1. **Be prepared!** Before starting, be sure you have all your equipment in good working order, and take an inventory of everything you'll need: new strings on your instrument, picks, capo, amp, electric guitar lead, electronic tuner, etc. Tune up carefully before going on. Have a set list ready, and know exactly what you'll be playing. Choose a set of songs that you know well. These are things you should not have to think about once you are ready to go on.

2. Relax! Every performer gets the jitters, and to some extent the nervous excitement can add spark and intensity to your music. But you don't want to be so frightened that it hampers your music or your performance. Take a few quiet moments alone before you go on and try to consciously relax. Psych yourself by thinking positive thoughts, meditate, or just to get your head together. If you get stage fright, keep in mind that the audience is there not to judge you but to hear what you have to offer, to be entertained, and will be on your side from the start.

3. Start your set with something easy. You want to catch the attention of the audience immediately (it's always harder to win them back after they've lost interest) so start with something interesting, up-tempo, or in some way engaging. (Unless you are supremely sure of yourself, it's not advisable to open a set with a long, slow ballad.) More important, your opening number should be something that's easy for you, something you know you can play flawlessly. Resist the impulse to start with your hottest licks in order to impress the pickers in the audience. Give yourself time to get used to the stage, the lights, the mics, and to calm down before finding yourself on a tightrope from which you might fall.

I can remember one of the first times I ever played in public, entertaining patients at a New York hospital. I had worked out a guitar solo and launched into it in my first song. The problem was that my hands were shaking so badly I could barely find the strings, much less play in time! As it turned out, the audience didn't seem to notice, but I was so mortified I could barely finish the set.

4. Plan your set carefully. Whether you are doing two, three, or a dozen songs in your set, it should be planned out to have the maximum impact. Starting with something up-tempo and easy is the first step. After that, there are a few other rules to keep in mind. You want your set to be varied, smooth flowing, and like any good dramatic performance, it must have peaks and valleys, and build to a climax. Avoid doing consecutive songs in the same key, or at the same tempo. If it's a long set, place some surprises, such as a humorous song or an ear-catching instrumental, strategically in the set to maintain interest. Save your strongest, most audience-engaging song for last. And of course, remember the old maxim "Leave them wanting more." It's better to do one song less than overstay your welcome and find your audience getting restless. You can always do an encore if they want more.

5. Be in touch with your material. Choose songs to perform that you can relate to in some personal way. Whether the music is melancholic or up-beat, fast or slow, know what you are singing about and why you are singing it. Like a good actor, find something in the words or music that touches your life, and work on communicating that to the audience. In this way your performance will be real, and have a greater impact on your listeners. At the same time, focusing on the meaning of the song will direct your energy and your mind set away from your fears of failure and rejection that develop into nervousness and stage fright.

6. Try to develop an air of confidence. The more comfortable you are, the more comfortable the audience will be. Present yourself to people as someone who is confident, who knows what you are doing. Keep in mind that when you have

control of the stage and the microphone, you are the person in charge. The people in the audience are listening to you with the expectation that they will be having a good experience. Psych yourself to understand that you have something to offer. Most people don't come to a performance with the expectation that it will be bad, they come expecting to have a good time. Establish mutual support by projecting a sense of enjoyment in what you're doing, with the expectation that your audience will give back a certain amount of feedback in response.

7. Make eye contact with your audience. When insecure, many performers close their eyes. It's a natural way to hide, as if to say "I'm not really here, I'm not really playing a song I'm unsure of." When you close your eyes you're cutting off a very big part of your communication apparatus, and performance is communication above all else. When I watch a performer sing or play with eyes always closed, I feel cut off from that person. There are certainly exceptions to this; many great performers close their eyes and they communicate through the intensity of their personality or the sheer power of their music. Sightless musicians often overcome this by using body language and other ways to communicate with their audience - Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder are great examples of this.

8. Confront your audience. Go on stage knowing who you are, and that both you and the audience are going to have a good time, and will share an experience together. Look confident, and put them at ease by showing them that you know what you're doing. Nothing is more deadly to a performance than embarrassing the audience by making them uneasy because you look like you're going to fall to

pieces in front of their eyes. Tell yourself that if they don't have a good time, or if they don't have an emotional experience from your performance, it's their problem, not yours.

9. Don't apologise for yourself! One of the frequent mistakes of an inexperienced performer is making excuses before he/she starts. Don't tell people that you usually sound better but you have a cold today, your fingers are sore, you just learned the song and don't really know the words, etc. Along the same lines, if you make a mistake on your instrument, or sing the wrong verse to a song, let it go by. Chances are no one will notice anyway, and bringing it to everyone's attention by a grimace or a remark will only throw you and your audience into doubt about your abilities.

10. Think about your appearance: Throughout the years, musical performers have worn everything from black tie and tails to torn blue jeans - and a vast variety in between. When determining your own stage clothes, decide what's comfortable for you, and what image you want to present. Show your audience the respect they deserve by giving some thought to how you want to be seen. Regardless of whether it's a dressed-down, scruffy look or uptown glitz, make it your own, and think of it as a costume. The audience is there to see a show, and your appearance is the first impression they get. It also makes you feel more confident to know that you look good (or in some cases appropriately bad), and appear to have your act together. You'll do a better show, and the audience will appreciate it.

11. **Don't bring your outside problems on stage with you.** Once you're on stage, forget everything else in your life. If you just had a fight with your lover, or you're worried about the rent payments, or you don't like the promoter of the show, or the pizza you just ate is taking its revenge, forget it. The audience doesn't care about these things, and they don't want to know about it, unless you can communicate these emotions through your music in a way that transcends the specific problem and reaches people on a universal level that they can respond to in their own lives.

12. **Deal with a "bad" audience:** There are some who will say, "There's no such thing as a bad audience - only a bad performer," and they're right - at least in theory. A good performer should be able to win over any audience, no matter how initially hostile, disinterested, or noisy they may be. Unfortunately, I've been in too many situations throughout the years - frat parties, noisy bars, shopping malls or (a fate worse than death) holding an acoustic guitar and opening for a hard rock act - that were just about hopeless. Those are the rare times that I've stood on a stage and played only for myself until the allotted time was up, then took my check (it wasn't worth it) and left - in a hurry.

Most of the time, though you can make the best of a less-than-perfect situation. In fact, you'll come out way ahead - and feel great about it. Most of the problems I have come across take place in a club, restaurant or bar in which the audience comes to talk and drink first, and listen to music second. If it is understood that you are providing background music, there is nothing you can do but play your best

and hope some folks are listening. If, however, you are a featured entertainer and it is expected that people have come to hear you, then you need a different approach.

One technique that I have found helpful in these situations is to pick out those few people in the audience whom I know are listening, and play my heart out for them. I do my best show, and block out everyone but that table of three people in the front, or the party in back, who are listening. Very often, those people start to tell the talkers around them to quiet down, and the attention gradually falls on the performer, where it belongs. When the opposite is true - a room full of listeners with one noisy table oblivious to the performance taking place - I gently chide them for their insensitivity, or ask the others what they think of the noise versus the music, or occasionally resort to a good-humored put-down. ("Yeah, I remember the first time I had a drink, too. Kinda goes to your head, doesn't it?") Getting nasty, though, can backfire, making you seem mean-spirited while putting the "good" audience on edge and uncomfortable.

The best situation is when you can come to an understanding with the management before the show, making it their responsibility to let the patrons know in no uncertain terms that there will be no talking during a performance. When things get out of hand, a waiter or manager should be willing to speak quietly to the troublemakers, or, as last resort, throw them out.

No matter what happens, do the best show you possibly can. It'll make you feel good to know that at least you did your best - and you never know who is out there listening.

One more thing: Don't get insecure if the audience isn't responding the way you hoped they would. Maybe the room sound isn't conducive to your hearing the feedback from the audience. If there are only a few people, the applause may sound thin and the audience can be inhibited and less demonstrative. Convince yourself that they're quietly enjoying the show. Avoid pushing too hard to get a response, or speeding up a song out of insecurity. When that happens, your performance suffers, and your perceived lack of audience response may become real. Try to center your thoughts, slow down and relax into the music.

13. Dealing with the sound system. The best of all possible worlds is the one in which you can afford your own sound system and engineer, and can transport them to wherever you're performing. Unfortunately, not many of us live in that world, and we are at the mercy of whatever (and whoever) is available for the gig. The problem is that the sound you produce is directly related to the quality of your performance, and that is often out of your control. It's as if a painter has to use pallets, paints and canvas supplied by someone who knows as much about art as a lamp post - maybe less. Can the painter control the quality of his work?

A sound check an hour or two before the performance is always a good idea, not only for you but for the sound man. (He takes pride in his performance too.) This

will enable you to get the optimum sound, balance the various instruments if you've got a group, and set the monitor mix so you're comfortable with what you can hear of yourself and the other band members. The First Law Of Sound Checks is: They always take longer than you expect them to. Don't start too close to show time and expect it to be done right. You'll find yourself still testing the mics while the doors open and the audience starts getting seated. Not a very professional start to a show.

A word about monitors: In any large venue (and the better small ones as well) stage monitors are essential for a good performance. These are small speakers placed at the front of the stage which give you a separate sound mix from the one the audience hears. In most professional concerts and festivals there is a completely separate mixing board and engineer assigned just to your monitors, so you can arrange exactly what you want to hear coming back at you during a performance. When I am playing solo I always want to hear lots of acoustic guitar - it gives me the confidence not to play too hard - and it takes a good engineer not to get feedback, the bane of acoustic players. In a band I'll want to hear the other acoustic instruments and vocals, but usually not bass and drums, as they're loud enough and tend to muddy the monitor mix. Everyone works differently, though, and experience will be the only way to really understand what's best for your situation.

Under the best of circumstances, the sound you get from the monitors will enhance your playing and, in a larger venue, give you the confidence (false at times) that the sound is good in the house, too. If, as often happens, you don't get the right amount

of monitor sound on stage, it doesn't necessarily mean the audience can't hear. Since by that time there's nothing you can do about the sound anyway, trust that you are being heard, and do your best.

Of course, in many instances there will be a poor sound system, or none at all, and there won't be anything you can do under the circumstances. Good positive energy and the willingness to go out on a limb can't hurt. If the situation is right, and you aren't tethered to an amp or a grand piano, you might try getting right into the crowd, or at least closer to them. I've occasionally gone to the edge of the stage, or jumped off in front of it, to make better contact with the audience when the sound system is inadequate. Get lots of participation through hand clapping, foot pounding, or sing-along material. Everyone will appreciate your efforts, and will enjoy getting into the act.

14. **Reach out and touch your audience.** Previously, I wrote about the importance of making eye contact with some members of the audience, while trying to make everyone feel you're performing for them. One of the hardest things to do (especially in a small group) is to really reach out and touch your listeners. It's often embarrassing to look right at a person when you're performing, it feels too intimate, there's too much emotion flowing. In a large auditorium, with a spotlight in your eyes, it's hard to make eye contact, but you can still look at the audience in a way that makes them feel you're in touch with them. Remember that every crowd is made up of individuals, and you should try to perform as if you are singing or

playing to special people in the audience. This feeling comes across, and even in a room full of strangers individuals feel the difference with this attitude.

Performance techniques can be used for many things besides playing at Carnegie Hall or your local roadhouse. Think of all the times you are asked to address a business meeting, make a speech to the PTA, present an oral paper in college, sing lead in your church choir, or perform at your child's birthday party. These hints, ideas, and suggestions have widespread applications that will be useful in many areas of your life.

I hope this has helped shed some light on a few of the situations that arise when you decide to be a performer. I realize in writing this that I could probably fill a book (maybe I should...) so I'd better stop here. I hope this was helpful to you. These are just a few of many ideas that have been learned the hard way, through nearly a half-century of public performances. No matter what I tell you, the bottom line for any performer is experience. The more you do it the better you'll get!

Good luck!

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