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## **DEALING WITH NERVOUSNESS**

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines stage fright among musicians, and the reason that some musicians apparently never bother with this issue, while others suffer so much from nervousness that it is making them sick. I have tried to figure out how one can get control over the nerves and how to be able to live as a musician in spite of nervousness. Nervousness is often strongly connected with our personality and how we see ourselves, and the psychological aspects of stage fright is therefore devoted quite much attention. It is necessary to accept oneself and one's level when performing to be able to concentrate on the music. Acceptance also makes it is easier to have a non-judging attitude to oneself and to the performance.

This is a two-part thesis which consist of a thesis concert and a theoretical, written thesis. In this written part I have turned to psychology to find material, just because I have realized that personality and self-esteem is a considerable part of this subject. Thoughts about acceptance and living here and now are very up-to-date and very much discussed nowadays. Psychology is not anymore always about finding the illness – it can be as much about seeing the positive sides of a client, and to use those as a starting point when trying to heal the client. In the same way one should catch the problems around nervousness and stage fright, and one has to start to work with this issue from the very first performances. Stage fright should be seen as something as normal to be worked on as the music itself. It is not enough to practice only performance to overcome stage fright. Working with nervousness is mainly done by working mentally, and by learning to accept. That job has to be done in the practicing room as much as on stage.

Most people feel nervous in front of a performance, but it seems like sensitive persons might have bigger problems with nervousness than others. The fear of what other people might think about you must be replaced by trust in yourself.

Keywords: acceptance; improvisation; letting go; mental practice; self-esteem

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

We all probably know the feeling of being nervous, whether it is caused by playing a concert or holding a speech, taking part in a test, etc. We get sweaty hands, cold hands – or both at the same time, dry mouth, stomach cramps, shaking knees or arms. Many of us are suffering from stage fright already from our very first performances, and some of us are never getting rid of it, while others never really meet these problems. So why are we keeping on with this? We are voluntarily signing up for concerts, over and over again, even looking forward of playing there, and dreaming about the joy of showing this great piece of music to the audience. It is like we have totally forgotten about the shaking hands and the stomach cramps in between every concert. Why are we doing such things to ourselves? There are plenty of theories about how to get over the stage fright and to succeed on stage. In this thesis I want to dwell on how we can live as musicians with stage fright. What is the difference between those who manage to do a great performance in spite of their stage fright, and those who often fail?

Classical musicians are meeting hard demands due to precision and accuracy. Classical music is often very transparent, and possible mistakes during a concert will often be quite visible and audible. This is why some teachers have a strict philosophy about playing without mistakes, which can lead to the point where the fear of playing mistakes is getting too heavy. So instead of focusing on how to play as well as possible, the student is using the energy on how to avoid the mistakes. This tells us that the mental part of the music education is as important as the practical part, and that the teacher has a great responsibility for the students when it comes to concert activities. But does the stage fright come only from the teacher's method, or can it also be something which lies in our genes? As a teacher I have several students who suffer from stage fright, but only a few of them seem to really bother with that. One of my pupils, who had played piano for less than a year and never had performed in his life, claimed that he suffers from stage fright. When I asked him for the first time if he would like play a little piece in a small school concert he got tears in his eyes, and he didn't hesitate to say "no". I told him that I was not going to force him to play in a concert against his will, but that I wanted him to consider it at home and then give me the final answer on the next lesson. In this case it was enough for him to understand that it was his decision to make him change his mind.

One of the psychologists who have been working at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo, Knut Olseng, has told about several episodes of fainting during a year in connection with concerts, and that the use of beta blockers and similar pills is common among students. Of about 1000 musicians Olseng has found that half of the female students have had shorter or longer sick leaves during the year because of psychosomatic passions while studying. Such sufferings really threaten the self-esteem, and this can lead to the point where the student avoids situations with solo playing ((*Olseng 1989*) Bjørkvold 2001, 244).

The solo clarinetist of Gothenburg's Symphony orchestra has told that for fifteen years he has used beta blockers regularly in concert situations (Bjørkvold 2001, 245). Beta blockers is a heart medicine with the effect of lowering the blood pressure, and the results of using it is lower pulse and less trembling. The same medicine is listed on the international sports' anti-doping list. How can it be, that nervousness among musicians is seen almost as a taboo? How can it be so, when so many musicians are suffering from this problem? What has happened since our very first instrumental- or singing/voice lesson, free of worries and tensions? How can we start to enjoy our moment on the stage?

## 2 SELF CONFIDENCE

Stage fright is closely connected to our personality and how we feel about ourselves. It isn't easy to feel confident on stage or in any other situation in front of people, especially when one isn't confident in oneself. I think it is really important, when teaching, to start as early as possible to work against stage fright. We should teach our pupils, from the very first performances in childhood that a performance should not be about the musician but the music. We are there to bring out great music to the people, not to become stars. The audience doesn't usually come to a concert to count our mistakes. Nevertheless I have unfortunately heard about parents who have told their children after the concert, about how many mistakes they made during the performance. That is a crime and an infringement to the children, larger than we can ever imagine.

It requires a lot of work to overcome stage fright or at least to make it a smaller problem. Working on stage fright can often be about working on one's self confidence, but one cannot force oneself suddenly to think differently. It is possible though to learn to think realistically. We know, deepest inside, that the audience want nothing but the best for us as performers. We also know that the audience doesn't attend concerts to have something to laugh about afterwards. It is important to understand that our thoughts are not always connected to the true reality. "Thoughts will always stay as nothing else than thoughts, a kind of artificial communication tools" (Kåver 2009, 52). All kinds of thoughts we have concerning a performance must therefore be seen as thoughts only – they cannot be mixed with the truth. It will help the performer to make this clear, and fetch out the realistic thoughts based on the real world. Nobody cares more about the performance than the performer herself. It doesn't help though, to criticize oneself for being nervous and to hope that it will work out. That will, most likely, just make the problem worse; one will get more nervous. It could be compared with trying to force yourself to fall asleep, which is impossible - the more you try to fall asleep, the more awake you'll get. Trying to fall asleep is like fighting against it. The reason for this is that the sleep can occur only spontaneously, as a lengthening of relaxation (Øiestad 2009, 33). The sleep will come when you are able to accept being awake and trying to do something else, like reading, for a little while. To consciously stop fighting against sleep means to also change behavior. The same thing goes for self confidence. A change in how we

see ourselves requires that we stop trying to be perfect and instead use the energy to know ourselves as we are, right now (Øiestad 2009, 34).

The neurologist Endel Tulving claimed in an article from 1984 that the human long-term memory consists of three different systems: procedural memory, semantic memory and episodic memory. This theory has been confirmed over the years (Øiestad 2009, 45). Procedural memory is the part of the memory that lies in the body, like walking, eating, how we contact other people. We do a lot of things every day without thinking about how to do it. We have learned these procedures through experience. "The one who gets answers to his questions, learns how to ask, and the one who gets her smiles returned, gets a habit to smile" (Øiestad 2009, 46). The semantic memory is our general knowledge about the world. We are for instance able to imagine the picture of a rose without having the rose in front of us. The episodic memory is our own history, containing of happenings from our life. What do we want to remember? Which episodes do we like to remember about ourselves? The good histories from our childhood, told by our family, are very important, and they can help us in seeing ourselves as we want to see ourselves.

When working on self confidence it is mainly the procedural memory that needs to be worked on. How do we act with our body when meeting other people? Are we approaching them with our head and shoulders bending down? It can often be difficult to change a procedure, because it is so implicit and out of our awareness. But with a lot of practicing, however, it is possible to change it. The body and the brain need new patterns for how to work (Øiestad 2009, 47).

According to the American professor in neurology, Antonio Damasio, there is a little difference between emotions and feelings. Emotions are physical reactions, like blushing and trembling. Feelings are our own interpretation of the emotions (Øiestad 2009, 50). Different persons interpret the same kind of emotions in different ways. One of the problems for persons with low self-esteem is that they tend to interpret emotions in a negative way. They seem to forget that it is normal to feel nervous in many situations, and that everybody gets nervous reactions in the body, like increased pulse, blushing, cold sweating and the feeling of trembling. These are natural ways for the body to get ready for something challenging or frightening to come. People with low self-esteem who from the very beginning expects a defeat start to criticize themselves for having these reactions in the body. "Reactions on nervousness are interpreted as a sign that you will not



manage the situation or as an expression for all your shortcomings, “It’s typical of me, I’m always making a fool out of myself”, which again strengthen the nervousness” (Øiestad 2009, 51).

When performing we shouldn’t forbid our physical reactions, but “open the door” and accept the different “making-a-fool-out-of-yourself-scenarios” and uncomfortable feelings in the body (Kåver 2009, 52).

## 2.1 Acceptance

When we think of the word accept, we often relate it to something negative; that we have to learn to accept the weaknesses and shortcomings with ourselves. Self-esteem is however as much dependent on accepting all the good things in ourselves and in life. Meaning that we acknowledge our own abilities, that we dare to master and that we can put up with our own succeeds. We cannot use our abilities for real if we don’t understand that we have them (Øiestad 2009, 130). Acceptance is an important step to obtain the needed self-esteem at stage. Accepting something is not necessarily the same as liking something, but by acceptance we see the reality as it is without judging it as bad or good. We have to put away thoughts about how things should or must be (Kåver 2009, 36). From a performer’s point of view it means that one has to accept one’s level as it is - thinking about how skillful one should have been doesn’t make one better during a particular concert. Everyone has their own history, and it is almost impossible, not to say useless, to compare one’s skills with others’, at least in the very time of a performance. To succeed one needs to stop fighting against oneself and instead start to live with all the conditions one has here and now (Kåver 2009, 47). By accepting ourselves we are getting rid of the pressure of all the time trying to be perfect, which in itself is a never ending process. *Believing* in one’s own capacity and ability is more important than the *actual* abilities, because absence of faith is keeping us from trying. We don’t dare to use our abilities if we don’t trust that we have them (Øiestad 2009, 137 and 138).

All kind of inner resistance is felt as negative. Sometimes a small, insignificant situation creates intense negativity, like for instance fury, depression or deep sorrow. The reason is that the ego believes that through negativity it can obtain a desired state, and on the other hand to abolish one that is undesirable. But instead of attracting the desired condition the negativity is preventing that condition to come into being (Tolle 2004, 104). The smallest doubt and anger towards ourselves during a performance can make big destructions, in contrast to if we would just accept our actual level on that particular day. It is important to understand that in addition to our own level, there

are always different factors from outside which can influence on a performance. Examples of such factors can be that your audience is unfamiliar with classical concerts and where to applaud, or maybe someone's cell phone is calling. There can be noise outside the concert hall. Maybe you are playing on a strange instrument which is not in tune. Maybe you haven't got enough sleep the night before the performance. All these are factors are not always possible to prevent, and they can create a lot of negative feelings inside the musician who is performing. If the musician however is able to overlook these disturbing moments and just accept that this is happening, both the audience and the musician will in all probability have a much better concert experience.

## 2.2 Psychological aspects

I have already mentioned that the music, of course, is the most important thing in a performance. Still many tend to focus on everything else than exactly the music, and then especially on themselves and the situation. Many people often have a tendency of starting to focus on the audience; like "where is *he* sitting, and wonder what *she* might be thinking right now (...)". The thought about "what she might think" is totally meaningless, as one can never know what other people are thinking. The thought, and the energy by making the thought, are totally wasted, and at the same time one will lose valuable moments during the performance. One might get lost in the music, because one has forgotten to follow one's own playing with the brain. This is one of the reasons why it is of so big importance for a musician to practice how to keep the concentration up all the time, to let nothing else than the music take the attention.

When a musician or music teacher says "don't repeat the same mistake again" the result is probably that the musician increases the amount of mistakes – there are many negative consequences of using the words "do not". It is easier to experience what we are actively looking for (Wormnes, 2006). That means that it is easier to make a mistake when we are thinking about how the mistake is made. What would happen if we would think "don't play well!" or "don't enjoy!?" Would it make us play well and to enjoy the situation? – Maybe. Maybe the thought about not playing well would make one's pressure to oneself lower? To make one's pressure to oneself lower would probably anyway automatically lead one to enjoy one's moment at stage a little bit more.

Self-fulfilling prophecy is when you expect something from yourself so strongly that you make the expectations come real. Many musicians have probably experienced to struggle with some hard runs or phrases in the practicing room. Sometimes it is enough to have struggled with a particular part only for a few days, to make the musician believe that “she is not able to play this part.” Such thoughts can lead the musician to start expecting from herself that she will fail when playing this run or phrase, in the practicing room, in the class room or on the stage. These thoughts will most likely become true. Of course this is also a matter of practicing methods, but for a person who is used to always fail it can be easy to just accept that she is not able to play the run.

### **Positive psychology**

“Psychology after World War II became a science largely devoted to healing. It concentrated on repairing damage using a disease model of human functioning. This almost exclusive attention to pathology neglected the idea of a fulfilled individual and thriving community, and it neglected the possibility that building strength is the most potent weapon in the arsenal of therapy (...)” (Seligman 2002, 3). “Positive psychology at an individual level is about positive personal traits – the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, high talent, and wisdom (...)” (Seligman 2002, 3).

I realize that positive psychology has a lot of qualities which music education should borrow; instead of often having the main focus on fixing what the student does wrong in the lessons, as many teachers do, the teacher could try to identify and “feed” the strongest qualities of the student.

Seligman writes shortly in his article “*Positive Psychology, Positive Prevention, and Positive Therapy*” about “learned optimism” training programs, where they teach both children and adults to recognize their own catastrophic thinking, and to answer it with dispute and positive thinking. The point is to be able to know when to use the strength, the optimism, and from that to prevent depression and anxiety (Seligman 2002, 5).

Could we use “learned optimism” on stage, to be able to control the nervousness? I believe so. In the previous chapters I have written much about self confidence and acceptance, and I believe that a student who is learning to believe in herself, and learning to see also the positive things in her playing will have better chance to succeed in front of an audience. The concert arena would really be the place to need the use of strength.

### 3 PRACTICING

A good performance is connected with good and meaningful practice in front of it. The practicing methods are therefore highly connected with concert activities, and hence also the nervousness. Joseph Hofmann has given following advice when it comes to practice for a concert: “learn a new composition three times and put it away three times before playing it in public” (Neuhaus 1993, 205). Sviatoslav Richter once confirmed this advice when he told that it was only at his fourth public performance of Mozart’s Sonata in A minor that he achieved what he considered a satisfactory interpretation (Neuhaus 1993, 206).

The best musicians in the world have a meaning and a thought behind every single tone, and they know all the time exactly what to do when they are performing. That comes, among other things, from a lot of concentration in the practicing room. Many students don’t know how to practice in a good way, because they have never learned how to do so. There are even adult, professional musicians who don’t know better than to repeat the pieces over and over again while “practicing”. I will dare to claim that the most important keyword for good practicing is *thinking*. It is so easy to fall into the trap, for instance while playing the scales, to totally lose focus. If we assume that the fingers know the scales by themselves the scale practicing can become quite useless for anything else than warming up your fingers if the brain is not following. On the other hand the scale practicing can be of great value if we know what we want to obtain, which could increase technical skills like strength, fastness, evenness, sound, intonation, etc. But practicing without thinking doesn’t only occur while practicing scales – it happens all the time in the practicing room. Usually such moments of “brainless” practice occur when a musician has played a particular piece for a while. The fingers know what to play and the ears know the sound of the music, and you are almost able to play the music in sleep. That doesn’t necessarily mean that the playing and the interpretation are good, but at that stage it is dangerously easy to fall into this trap and forget to listen to oneself. Forgetting to think while practicing is the same as totally having wasted valuable time with the instrument. It is often then a good idea to record yourself while practicing.

I have already mentioned that thinking is the main key to a good practice. First, one has to know what to achieve during the practice, and then try to find the best ways to get there. Through years of studying one has probably found some good exercises for different techniques like runs, staccato, legato, power and so on. Many musicians have made up their own exercises, but in addition to that, there are a lot of great etudes, composed by great composers and instrumentalists. These exercises and etudes should be practiced well when needed in a certain piece. Other important aspects while practicing is to analyze the music; to get to know, for instance, how the harmonies are developing in the different places. It is important to be able to understand the architecture of a piece, and it helps a lot while trying to learn a piece by heart. I have learned from many teachers during my years of music study that learning to play from many different places in a piece is efficient when trying to learn the piece by heart. The more places you are able to play from, the better it is, and if this is practiced well, it can be a good insurance against getting totally out of the piece in a concert situation, if playing a mistake. Besides this method force the musician to not always start practicing from the beginning of the piece.

### **3.1 Mental practicing**

Mental practicing is a different, but well recommended way of practice. It means in short to put away the instrument for a while and to mentally go through the music, with or without the sheet music in front of you. This strengthens the brain's knowledge and understanding of the music, and so you get to know the piece better both physically and mentally. In the same time it is a good method of practicing when the muscles need to relax for a while. Usually it can be an advantage to know a piece quite well before starting the mental practicing, because it will then be easier to make a mental picture of how the piece should sound like and how it should be interpreted further. When trying to learn a piece by heart it can be very efficient to put the instrument away for a while and to go through the music mentally. It is a method which probably will help you to learn the music by heart, - much faster than if you would just play the music until it is known by heart (Jørgensen 2005, 13). Then the *brain* knows the music and your understanding of the piece is probably higher. In a concert situation it is always needed for the musician to understand the structure and, as I have already mentioned, the architecture of the music. The

better you know a piece the more you can trust yourself and your skills when you are performing, and so it might help reducing the nervousness.

Another great thing with mental practicing is that when you are going through a piece your muscles aren't totally unaware of what's happening. Science has shown that it is enough to *think* of specific muscles and physical movements, to activate these muscles. That means that although you are relaxing your muscles, they are able to learn what to do (Jørgensen 2005, 10). As already mentioned, it can often be an advantage to know a piece quite well before starting the mental practicing, but it is not at all pointless to start learning a piece by just reading the score. This of course requires that you are able to hear the music by just reading the notes. The intention by looking through the scores before starting to play is to prepare the playing with some mental and muscular imaginations. It means that you are making some sound imaginations – that you are hearing the music inside you. By such imaginations you will make some personal decisions about how the music should sound when you are playing it – already then you will have some meanings concerning the interpretation of the music. Experiments concerning how to learn music indicate that such a pre-study leads to quicker learning than if you just start playing a new piece immediately. In addition to be able to hear the music by reading it you also need some knowledge about music history and performing practice (Jørgensen 2005, 10).

### **3.2 Improvisation**

Classical musicians may have a lot to learn from jazz musicians and other musicians who are using improvisation and free accompaniment. We should learn sometimes just to have fun with the instrument – to search for new sounds, to find suiting harmonies to different written songs and ballads just by ear, and to make new rhythms fitting to the music. By learning to improvise you will learn to know the instrument in a different and maybe more “anatomically” way. This may as well improve your interpretation of classical music. Classical music has strict rules for how to play this and that, and I think it should stay like that. Improvisation, nevertheless, forces the musician to listen in a different way – and maybe in a more active way – and that could maybe help some classical musicians to feel freer.

Barry Green writes in *The inner game of music*:

I have found that when I experience and develop my ability to improvise, I strengthen my connection with my own musicality and can bring an increased spontaneity and freshness to my performance of written music. (Green and Gallway 1987, 228)

For a child improvisation often comes easily, as it is a part of the child's nature; to be spontaneous and curious about everything and to not be afraid of what's right and wrong. The child trusts herself and the world around her. As adults most of us have lost this spontaneity, and we have reservations about what's happening around us and what is expected from us. We are afraid of failing. Just a small disturbance from outside or just from our own thoughts can be enough to destroy a finally obtained flow. We can think about the distance between the expectations by reading and playing the notes correctly, with fear of playing mistakes, and the jazz music where the mistake doesn't need to be a mistake but rather a fresh seed to the jam session (Bjørkvold 1998, 110).

People outside the classical music environment take it for granted that a pianist should be able to play along to the Christmas carols without having the scores available, and why shouldn't they? Still the truth is, for many of us, that although we know how to sing the easiest carols we don't know how to play them, because we are not used to play something not prepared. Everything has to be practiced and everything has to be perfect. In my opinion we are too often afraid of making a fool out of ourselves.

It is not correct to say that the classical music is totally lacking improvisation. We know that great composers and musicians like Johann Sebastian Bach, Anton Bruckner and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart were also exceptional in improvisation. Every baroque organist had to master the general bass, a system which required that the musician could improvise over a foundation of a given bass line. The French organist Marcel Dupré (1886–1971) was famous for his organ improvisations, and his expectations to new organ students at the Paris-Conservatory was that they had to be able to improvise a three voiced fugue at the audition, based on a theme given at the moment of performance (Bjørkvold 2001, 208). The art of improvisation is still a requirement for organ students in the music academies, although maybe not at the same level as with Dupré.



## 4 NERVOUSNESS

Both human beings and animals are provided with a built-in pattern of reaction to be able to face danger. When a threatening situation arises, the body is getting ready to react in the most suitable way – by fighting or by running. When we are getting nervous, our body will immediately start to act by instinct. The pulse increases and the blood pressure rises. This gives more blood to the muscles and hence we are getting more enduring. These reactions will be helpful in a situation where we are standing in front of real danger like for instance in meeting with a bear. The body however does not differ between the anxiety for a bear and the anxiety for performing, and is therefore reacting the same way in both situations (Arentz-Hansen and Nordheim 09). Unfortunately these instinctive reactions often tend to do more harm than lend support when performing.

Most artists, and everybody who are going to do something in front of a crowd, are nervous in front of a performance. It is the natural way of the body to react to something new and unknown which is to come. This is a fact which can be good to remember from time to time. The truth is that nervousness is probably among the most normal state of feelings we have. Nervousness is not a sickness. It might be important to remember that performing is not dangerous whether you play well or badly. Since we know that even the best musicians in the world suffer from nervousness, we should maybe stop dwelling around being nervous or not, but instead ask the question about how to deal with it. It is rather interesting to see that nervousness can be a good thing, if you learn how to control the nerves. Controlled nervousness can help the artist to focus more concentrated on the task which is to be done, and it can help the artist to stay awake. The extra adrenalin which comes from nervousness helps the performer to bring out everything. With the little extra nerve a performance can get much more alive and interesting. A performer who is nervous in front of a concert shows that she cares about the music. On the other hand we can often experience a performing made by an artist who is not nervous at all as boring and dull. The point is that nervousness can also be a good thing; it is just a matter of the level of the nervousness. The big problem starts when we allow the nerves to take control over us so that we no longer have the power to make a good performance. Some people have bigger problems with nervousness than others. This can be due to sensitivity, and to a nerve system which easily react

to small issues. It can be a good method, especially for sensitive people, to try to rest as much as possible in front of the frightening task which is to come, and to do things which make you feel good and relaxed. Enough sleep is necessary for everybody who is going to perform. In addition to enough rest it is recommended to strengthen the body to get more power.

Most musicians have their problems with nervousness, and they all have different methods for how to handle it. One trumpet player told me that she in front of her last audition for an orchestra wrote down all the weaknesses of her competitors for the job, and then compared those to her own strengths (Eliassen 10). By that it came clear to her that she didn't have to worry about the other players because they had different qualities. She found that what she had to do was to make her own qualities clear to the jury. She got the job.

Willi Railo writes a lot of lists in his book *Best når det gjelder*, which are meant as mental practices. I have tried to use some of them in front of own my performances, and my experience with those lists is that my brain somehow believes in the sentences when reading them. Here is an example of such a list (Railo 1983, 39 and 40):

I feel totally calm  
I feel totally relaxed  
The whole body is relaxing  
The breath is deep and calm  
The muscles are without tension  
My inner tempo is slowing down  
The heart beats calmly and rhythmically  
The stomach feels safe and calm  
I feel safe  
I feel sure  
I take it easy

## 4.1 Concert training

It is obvious that it is important for people with stage fright to practice a lot on performance to feel comfortable with it, and big quantities of concerts might help the musician getting used to be on stage. Still the quantity of concerts is not enough in itself to make a person feel safe on stage. It can often happen after some good concert experiences in a row, that the next performance suddenly turns out badly. That means that there isn't any logical system in whether a concert is good or bad; there is not any linear curve. One of the reasons for this might be that when we start to get used to that the performances are going well, we expect the next ones to continue in the same level, and so we forget to concentrate. That makes it easy to fall off the music.

The main problem concerning nervousness and stage fright is often located in the head, and that means that we have to work mentally. A good and well-known exercise in front of a concert is to mentally go through the whole concert situation, with all the details, from the time just before entering the stage and throughout the concert. If this is done with full concentration, it can be of great help. The exercise should be done several times the days before the concert. Just the exercise in itself will make you nervous, and you will have the same symptoms as during the concert. It will simply feel like you have already done the concert a couple of times.

To play in different concert arenas can often help against nervousness. There are different kinds of audiences, and they are not all scary to play for. Musicians, and especially music students, can often be "the worst audience", since they might know the pieces quite well, and they all have their opinion about how it should be played. The students are also learning to be critical to what they hear, which is a good thing in itself, - but this fact makes it scary to play for them. On the other hand all musicians know, better than anybody else, how it feels to perform, and they know the feeling of being nervous and the possible consequences of that. The audience in a health care center for older people, or at a mass in church, might be more tolerant of what they hear. It seems like they are appreciating very much that somebody is sharing the music with them.

## 4.2 Letting go

Picture the following scenario at a performance: you are playing one mistake, and instead of thinking that such things happen you are starting to think that it is typical of you. The snow ball starts to roll and you continue the stream of thoughts in one direction; it's typical of you to play mistakes, you always play mistakes, you are a bad pianist, you are a bad musician, you are a bad human being. Now, most people are maybe not letting their stream of thoughts go this far, but for a person who is really suffering from stage fright and who is over and over again failing while performing, such thoughts might come naturally. The best thing to do when playing a mistake would be to let go, and just continue the playing without paying any bigger attention to the mistakes. That is a mental strength that we find in the very best musicians, because they also play mistakes from time to time, but they have learned how to focus on what's important. Again this is coming down to the fact that this is more about mental strength and trust of oneself than to instrumental skills.

When the first book about the Inner Game methods by Timothy Gallwey, *The inner game of tennis*, came out, "musicians were among the first to recognize that his techniques for overcoming self-consciousness and recapturing that youthful potential to learn could be applied in many areas – the playing of music among them" (Green and Gallwey 1987, 13).

The Inner Games is in short about how our mind is working and influencing our body. This means that the inner part of you, meaning everything inside your mind, pretty much decides the success or failure of the outer part, meaning the physical body. Gallwey says that "the basic truth is that our performance of any task depends as much on the extent to which we interfere with our abilities as it does on those abilities themselves" (Green and Gallwey 1987, 23). By this statement he is confirming Øiestad's statement which I have written about in chapter 2.1 (see page 9). Most of us are well acquainted with the voice inside our mind, which is telling us about how we are doing the performance or how we *should* do the performance. Gallwey is talking quite much about this voice and he refers to Self 1 and Self 2; "where Self 1 is the voice that's doing the talking and Self 2 is the person spoken to" (Green and Gallwey 1987, 28). The problem with the voice in our head is that it is seldom doing anything but harm to us. First of all it is disturbing us from concentrating on what we are supposed to do. Secondly it usually keeps focusing on all our shortcomings. It is typical for Self 1 to use words as *should* and *shouldn't* and "it often sees things

in terms of what *could have been*" (Green and Gallway 1987, 28). The voice in our head which is keeping a monologue about our playing is doing nothing else than disturbing the "correct" attention. Our attention should be placed in the very present time, all the time. It means that we cannot direct our attention to what we have already done, and neither to what is to come. It is not easy to be aware all the time, but it can be practiced. Barry Green writes about putting our attention to sight, that watching what we are doing on the instrument or watching the notes on the score (visualizing the score if you are playing by heart) is one way to focus your awareness in the present moment (Green and Gallway 1987, 53). Then the brain is occupied by reading or watching, and the disturbing thoughts are removed. Just let it happen.

Trust and letting go are maybe the most important things when we are performing. We have to trust ourselves, and we have to trust that the hours of work inside the practicing room have been valuable, and that we have done a good job. We have to trust that there is music inside us. A very common thought is the fear of what other people are thinking about us. When we start to worry about that, we stop trusting ourselves and we are putting all our attention to our awareness, and it becomes impossible to let go.

"The secret of getting past your worries about how you'll appear to others is to give yourself the character and emotions of the music. You become the music, not yourself" (Green and Gallway 1987, 94).

## 5 IN CONCLUSION

Through working with this thesis I have come to the conclusion that nervousness often is strongly connected with a person's personality. Sensitive persons might have a bigger tendency of being nervous than others. That does not mean that stronger people are free of nervousness, because the truth is that most people feel nervous in front of a performance. The main difference between those who manage to do great performances over and over again, in spite of their nerves, and those who always seem to fail, because of their nerves, might therefore lay in the degree of sensitiveness. Let me now underline that I am here trying to compare people of the same level when it comes to instrumental and musical skills.

It is always advisable to know the piece at least hundred-and-fifty percent, to at all consider performing it. That will make it easier to trust oneself at stage, but unfortunately that is still not enough to make a good performance for a person who is really suffering from stage fright. The main work lays in the brain and in the person's attitude toward herself and to the music. Getting a positive attitude toward oneself is something which is possible to learn through changing parts in the procedural memory (see page 8). This requires a lot of hard work from the person who wants to change, and it requires great support from a possible teacher or guide. I find it necessary that teachers begin to work on this issue already from the pupils' first performances.

To be able to overcome nervousness it is necessary to accept oneself and one's actual level in every performance. In the moment of performing the musician needs to be non-judging to her or his own playing, because the concentration has to be on the music. Evaluations of oneself have to come *after* the performance.

## 6 DISCUSSION

We understand that good instrumental and musical skills are needed to be able to do a good performance. What seems to be harder to understand is the mental strength of the performer. People can always claim that a person with a weaker mentality should find something else to do than music and performing, and maybe that would sometimes be the right thing to do. It is an easy way of solving the problem, but it is, however, not always the most correct conclusion. There are a lot of great musicians in the world who have managed to struggle through their nervousness and learned how to deal with it. The fact is that if these musicians had given up their musical career, the world would have lost a lot of great musicians.

We have to understand where the nervousness comes from, and how to use it to our advantage. I personally believe that nervousness underlines a deep wish from the musician to bring out the best in the music to the audience. In addition to that it often comes from low self-esteem, and the natural fact that most of us find it scary to stand in front of a crowd.

Throughout my working with this thesis I have been talking with other musicians about their methods in front of concerts, exams and auditions, and it has become clear to me that almost everybody has problems concerning nervousness. It is hard to find a musician who feels neutral when performing. Again it is all about the mental strength and the ability to control your nerves. I have realized that self-esteem and stage fright “walk hand in hand”; it is often two sides of the same case.

Being a teacher for about fifty piano pupils has helped me in my own way of thinking. They all have to perform once in every semester, which gives twice a year, and that makes some preparation work for me as a teacher as well.

I believe that it is necessary to be positive to oneself – to tell yourself that you are good and that you know what you are doing in front of a performance, and I believe that it is of great value to smile. All negative thoughts should be excluded, and the musician has to trust that her practicing for the performance has been valuable. The audience is there to enjoy the music.

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Oral source from a music colleague:

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