

# The Benefits of Accessible Music

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2009/12/the-benefits-of-accessible-music/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2009/12/the-benefits-of-accessible-music/)

Time and again, when I hear students audition, some will attempt to perform music that's beyond their capacities.

"This'll be impressive," they surmise, as they struggle through one phrase after another.

Such students seldom realize that their misguided choices of repertoire don't just fail to impress but also hamper their progress:



- *If students are habitually overwhelmed by technical challenges, they ingrain habits of tension that limit their fluency and increase the likelihood of injury.*
- *When musicians tackle compositions that are beyond their reach, they rely on rote learning strategies that lead to frustration and performance anxiety .*
- *Students who fumble through unattainable music acquire imprecise habits – their timing, intonation, tone, and so forth perpetually sound ragged. In the end, they miss out on learning how to shape exquisite phrases and present compelling performances.*

## Appropriate Challenges

Some of you might be thinking, "Doesn't challenging repertoire motivate students and extend their skills? Isn't it essential to musical development?"

Let me be clear: *appropriate* challenges inspire and educate; excessive ones don't.

As I explain in [The Musician's Way](#), exercises and etudes are ideal for stretching students' technical skills.

But when it comes to choosing repertoire for auditions and concerts, only accessible material enables students to acquire the habits of mastery that beget secure, artistic performances.

## Difficult vs. Accessible music

As an illustration, let's consider the differing demands that hard versus accessible music place on musicians' artistic, technical, and higher thinking abilities (we use higher thinking skills to direct and evaluate our execution).

When students take on overly difficult music, they toil to get the notes. Then, the overload on their technical and higher thinking powers obstructs their ability to express themselves:

With accessible repertoire – i.e., music that can be mastered in a day to a week – the technical and higher thinking requirements fall well within students' grasp, so they have ample capacity to perform artistically:

## Accessible Repertoire and Artistic Development

Accessible repertoire makes it possible for rising musicians to become true performing artists. It leaves them with the

mental and physical space they need to build performance skills and develop their interpretive voices.

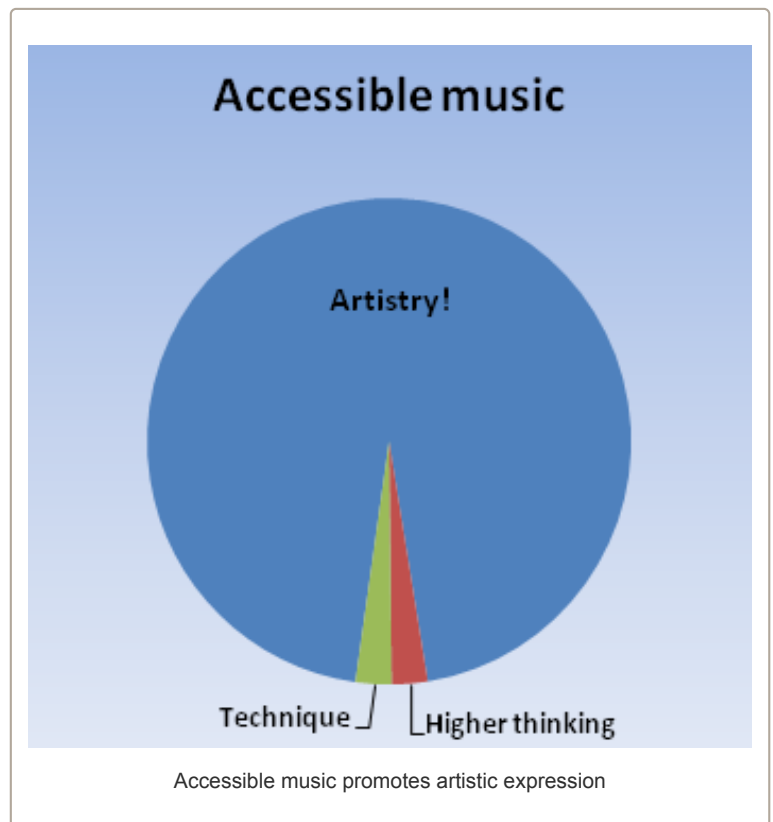
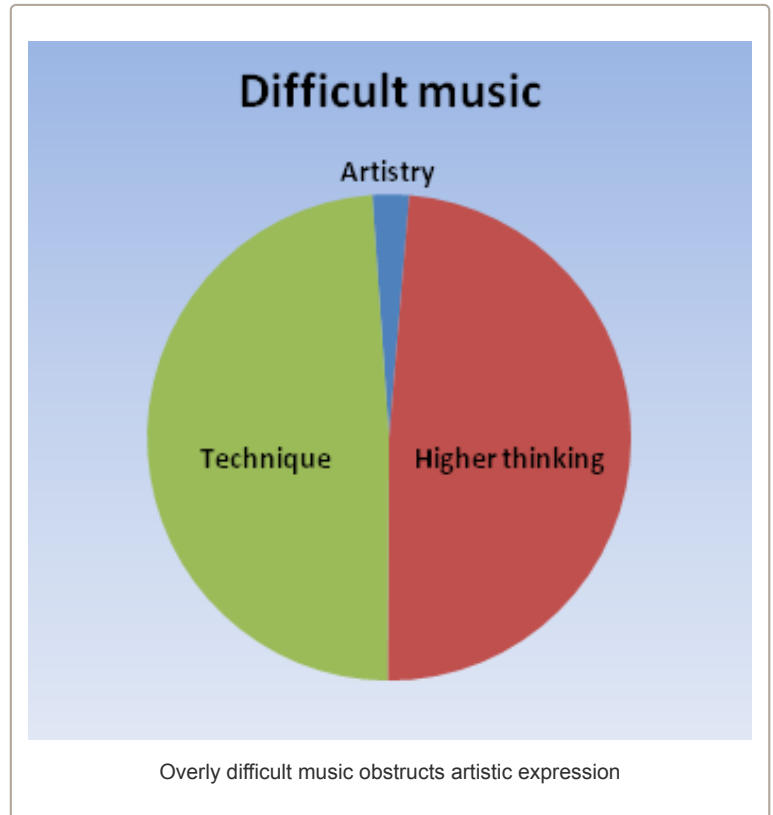
What's more, by assembling large caches of accessible pieces, students are able to perform without needing to practice at length, allowing them to appear in public frequently and steadily become ace performers.

At that point, with their fundamentals in place, students can confidently tackle tougher repertoire.


*Topics of practice and performance are discussed at length in [The Musician's Way](#), and matters of repertoire choice are explored in "Choosing New Material" (p. 14-16).*

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# The Four Stages of Memorization

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2010/05/the-four-stages-of-memorization/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2010/05/the-four-stages-of-memorization/)

*"I'm very mistrustful of tactile memory.*

*I think it's the first thing that goes."*

—André Watts, pianist (*The Musician's Way*, p. 82)

Have you ever been blindsided by a memory lapse? Maybe you felt secure in practice, but, during a performance, you blanked on a passage.

I suspect that every musician has felt the jolt of memory slips.

I also believe that memory glitches could be far less common because secure memorization involves concepts and skills that any musician can learn.

This post summarizes a 4-part framework that helps both singers and instrumentalists become masterful memorizers.

All of these ideas are fleshed out in Chapter 4 of *The Musician's Way*.



Andre Watts

## Stage 1: Perception

Deep perception makes for solid memory. When we grasp the inner workings of a composition as well as how we want to shape each phrase, those rich connections lead to steadfast recall.

In contrast, shallow perception – especially that rooted solely in muscle or tactile memory – readily falls apart under pressure. Here are strategies that deepen our perceptions of a piece.

- a. Clarify the compositional structure.** Identify where sections and phrases begin and end; look for rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic patterns.
- b. Fashion a vivid interpretive map.** Explore the emotional feel of every phrase; pinpoint where phrases peak and repose; write in dynamic and articulation signs.
- c. Form a robust technical map.** Before you begin to memorize, verify that fingerings, bowings, tonguings, diction, and so forth are unmistakable; ensure that you can easily execute from score. If you feel flooded, choose [easier music](#).

## Stage 2: Ingraining

Ingraining is the means whereby we lay down enduring memory tracks. But beware: ingrainings necessarily involves repetition, yet only [mindful repetitions](#) will do.

- a. Plan your practice.** Schedule frequent memorization sessions in which you restrict the amount of music that you memorize – if you exceed your limit, much of what you absorb could become scrambled. Also get ample sleep to allow your brain to consolidate what you've learned.
- b. Combine imaging with executing.** [Mentally image](#) a portion of music from memory before you attempt to play or sing it; if anything seems fuzzy, review with the score. In general, execute a portion securely from memory three times in a row, then steadily link portions.
- c. Employ diverse memory types.** Memory types include conceptual, aural, kinesthetic, and visual. To highlight

different types, you might play hands alone, re-examine chord progressions, sing bass lines, recite song text without singing, or write out tricky passages. Most of all, savor every phrase that you play or sing so that the music vibrates with meaning.

### Stage 3: Maintenance

Even if we ingrain deeply, unless we maintain our memory, the mental connections we form will gradually disintegrate. Here are strategies that keep memories strong.

- a. Rehearse mentally.** Periodically run through a section or complete composition in your mind. Instrumentalists might vocalize and mime playing motions; singers could mouth words and act out a song.
- b. Practice performing.** Record your practice performances and then re-ingrain any slippery passages.
- c. Review in detail.** Reinvigorate your interpretive-technical map by going over the components of a piece and its execution. You might revisit fingerings, do a fresh harmonic analysis, and so on.

### Stage 4: Recall

The following strategies help optimize our recall in performance situations.

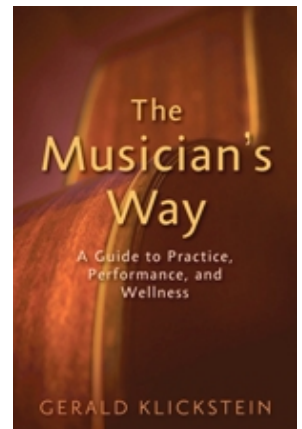
- a. Ready yourself.** Attain a performance-ready state using tactics such as [2-to-1 breathing](#) and the other backstage techniques described on pages 162-170 of [The Musician's Way](#).
- b. Feel ahead.** As you play or sing, direct your music making with soulful awareness. Avoid sliding into mindless execution.
- c. Be positive.** Trust in your preparation, and then play or sing your heart out. If slips occur, maintain the forward motion and improvise until you can regain the musical thread. To rehearse dealing with slips, simulate them in practice and ad-lib through them.

\* \* \*

As you experiment with these strategies, bear in mind that we all have distinct learning styles, so no single memorization routine will suit every musician. It's up to each of us to adapt these and other ideas according to our needs and personalities.

But whatever memorization strategies we opt for, we should energize our work with playfulness because when our practice is infused with spontaneity, our performances resound with that same expressive spirit.

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# Performance-Oriented Practice

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2010/09/performance-oriented-practice/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2010/09/performance-oriented-practice/)

Gerald Klickstein September 21, 2010

*“Our object is to minimize the contrast between studio practice and public performance.”*

—Philip Farkas, hornist ([The Musician's Way](#), p. 149)

When you start practicing an unfamiliar piece, does your learning process go smoothly and then culminate in secure, expressive performances?

I've found that many young musicians run into unwelcome surprises when they debut new repertoire.



All too often, they find out under the spotlights that their control isn't as solid as they thought. *Performance-oriented practice*, though, can ensure security on stage because it instills all the qualities we want in concerts.

Ease? Check. Expressiveness and accuracy? Check. Focused attention? You bet.

I distribute performance-oriented practice across three zones: *New Material*, *Developing Material*, and *Performance Material*. Each of these zones involves particular strategies, which I condense below. See Chapters 3 & 4 of [The Musician's Way](#) for detailed guidelines.

## New Material

- *Divide into sections.* After I get an overview of a piece, I carve it into digestible sections that facilitate learning. Such sections can be as short as a phrase or as long as several phrases, depending on the complexity of the material.
- *Establish a provisional interpretive/technical plan.* Next, I zero in on a section and make interpretive decisions, notating dynamics, articulations, fingerings and so forth on a score as needed.
- *Slow tempo.* As we execute, it's vital that we work with manageable chunks of music and at tempos that instill ease. Once we can play or sing an entire piece expressively at an easygoing tempo, it graduates to *Developing* status, and then we ratchet up the tempo.

## Developing Material

- *Refine interpretation.* To lift my interpretation of a piece to a higher level, I reconsider its compositional structure. I look for fresh ways to generate drama and bring out contrasts of dynamics, tone, and emotion.
- *Increase tempo.* The [problem-solving tactics](#) in Chapter 3 of [The Musician's Way](#) equip us to hike tempos and resolve difficulties – these tactics include working from the end of a passage, omitting then reinserting pitches, and modifying the rate of change. I also step up tempos by degrees as opposed to increasing them abruptly.
- *Memorize.* As soon as I can execute a solo piece securely at a slow tempo, I begin to [memorize](#) it. Some musicians memorize earlier in the learning process; others opt to wait until a piece matures.

## Performance Material

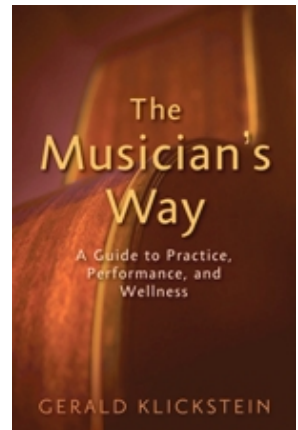
- *Practice performing.* When we can easily execute a whole piece at its final tempo, it reaches the *Performance material* zone. Then, one of our principal tasks is to [practice performing](#) the music. I advocate three formats for doing so: 1. alone for a recorder; 2. in front of friends and peers; 3. in low-stakes public settings.
- *Maintain memory.* Memorized music degrades in our minds unless we refresh our internal maps. Mental rehearsal and score study greatly help here.
- *Renew and innovate.* To retain my mastery of a piece and elevate my interpretive ideas, I review passages in detail while considering new expressive possibilities. I also go over self-recordings.

In sum, expert performers can pick up unfamiliar music and proceed through a mastering process that consistently results in expressive public performance.

If your practice strategies don't bring you comparable confidence, try the recommendations in [The Musician's Way](#), get feedback from teachers, and, most of all, enjoy the process of refining your practice.

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# Practicing Performance

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2009/10/practicing-performance/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2009/10/practicing-performance/)

Suppose that you're preparing to play or sing in public. How do you bridge the gulf between personal practice and public performance?

I've observed that many rising musicians underperform because they omit a crucial element from their preparatory routines: practice performances.

Here are 3 ways that instrumentalists and singers can practice performing and become masterful on stage.

All of these concepts are expanded on in Part II of [The Musician's Way](#).

## 1. Assemble a Performance-Development Group

The skills required to perform soulfully in public have to be practiced. All of us, therefore, need opportunities to try out our material, learn how to manage our nerves, and hone our stage presence.

I've found that the ideal setting for doing so is in a performance-development group.

To form such a group, you need two or more soloists or ensembles of comparable ability, a defined space such as a classroom or living room, and a mutually supportive attitude.

Your attitude is of utmost importance because your group must provide a safe, nonjudgmental setting where you can experiment freely as performers and grow from your experiences.

For instance, what if a rising musician wants to build her confidence on stage, test her memory, and explore ways to counter jitters? How does she find out without risking her reputation in a public setting?

A supportive performance-development group supplies her with what she needs. She can play or sing fearlessly in front of her colleagues, and they'll cheer her on in her quest for excellence.

It's vital, however, that you make your practice performances concert-like. So abide by concert protocol: performers should enter to applause and perform complete compositions; listeners should applaud afterward.

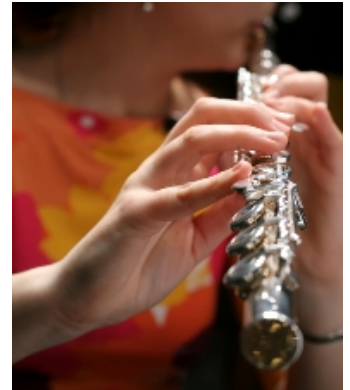
In addition, use a recorder so that you can review your work later (see "[Self-Recording in Practice](#)").

I also recommend that participants comment on each other's performances, but within strict boundaries:

- Keep your comments brief.
- Use courteous "I" statements.
- Offer at least three positive remarks for every criticism.

Here's an example of how one musician might comment on another's performance:

*"I really liked your choice of material and your stage presence. I also thought that your pitch and memory were right on. Toward the beginning, though, I wondered how it would have sounded*



*if you had stayed with a quieter volume for a while longer.”*

## **2. Schedule Private Run-Throughs**

In a private run-through, you perform without an audience, other than your recorder and maybe the cat.

Commit to doing run-throughs at set times, and implement your standard preconcert routines – arrange your meals and other preparations exactly as you would for a public show because preconcert routines need practice, too.

When you perform a run-through, visualize an audience, and play or sing your heart out.

At the same time, rehearse specific skills. If you tend to stiffen on stage, let’s say, practice releasing tension and transmitting warmth. To enliven your stage presence, employ a video recorder and explore various gestures.

The benefit you derive from any practice performance will hinge on how honestly you evaluate your work and the ways in which you practice in response. During your self-assessments, therefore, be objective and detached: treat glitches as useful information and never as personal shortcomings.

For example, after you run a solo, you might go over your recording, jot down notes, and rehearse improvements.

A few days later, following additional targeted practice and another run-through, you might opt to perform the music for your performance-development group.

## **3. Line Up Low-Stress Public Shows**

The above sorts of practice performances are invaluable, but public shows are going to be more intense, and we want them to be, but in positive ways.

Low-stress public shows give us chances to present our music in actual performance situations, but where the stakes are low.

So, although we take such performances seriously, we give ourselves permission to have fun on stage and not worry. As a result, we build our confidence and artistic prowess. We’re then primed to excel at high-stakes concerts.

Representative sites for such performances include coffee shops, house parties, and church or synagogue meeting halls, where we might invite congregants to hear us and donate to a charity.

Such performances enable us to build an audience, serve our communities, and lift our artistry and self-assurance to new heights.

\* \* \*

When we integrate these three types of practice performances into our creative process, we can erase any disconnection between our solitary practice and public presentations.

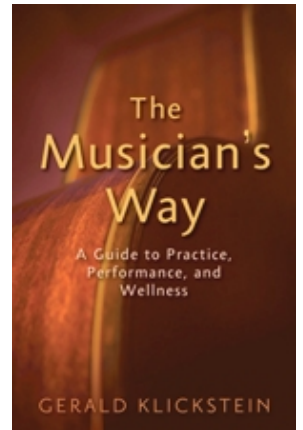
Of course, it takes time and effort to refine our craft, but let’s remember that performance, at its heart, is an act of beauty and generosity. In the words of singer-songwriter Dan Fogelberg, “I always try to give my songs as gifts.”

*Preview [The Musician’s Way](#) at [Amazon.com](#).*

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# Rebounding from Subpar Performances

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2011/06/rebounding-from-subpar-performances/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2011/06/rebounding-from-subpar-performances/)

Gerald Klickstein June 26, 2011

Tags: [Assessment](#), [creative process](#), [goal-setting](#), [how to overcome stage fright](#), [music performance](#), [music practice](#), [performance anxiety](#), [problem-solving](#), [resilience](#), [self-evaluation](#), [The Musician's Way](#)

*“The route to becoming an accomplished musician is seldom smooth and trouble free.”*

—[The Musician's Way](#), p. 202

We musicians may dream of performing brilliantly at every show, but, in reality, things don't always go as well as we'd like.

Especially for students, playing or singing in public can bring upsetting surprises: shakiness, memory slips, music wafting off the stand – you name it.



How can we learn from on-stage letdowns and bounce back stronger than before?

More than anything else, we develop resiliency by being able to objectively evaluate our work and devise solutions for problems. Then, with action plans in hand, we can head to the practice room empowered to progress.

Conversely, if we can't grasp why something went wrong and see what to do about it, we tend to feel helpless.

The following tool helps rising musicians transform on-stage problems into artistic insights.

## Performance Evaluation Tool

Use this tool immediately following a [practice performance](#) or on the day after a public show; preferably, [record](#) the performance you evaluate.

1. Note three or more aspects of your performance that went well.  
*E.g., “The rhythmic groove was solid; the dynamic contrasts rocked; the tone was rich.”*
2. Note specific things you'd like to improve before your next performance.  
*Be objective and precise: “Memory in second section; overall mental focus.”*
3. Determine the reasons for your successes.  
*Cite what you did in practice to achieve the results you noted under #1.*
4. Specify action plans to achieve improvements.  
*Determine your practice plan: e.g., “Apply [memorization strategies](#) in Ch. 4 of [The Musician's Way](#); then practice performing to enhance my ability to focus under pressure.”*

Psychologists Mitchell Robin and Rochelle Balter wrote, “One of the most difficult lessons that we must learn as humans is how to rate our behaviors and features without globally rating ourselves.” ([Performance Anxiety](#), p. 179)

Although it's challenging to size up our work objectively and not put ourselves down when we miss the mark, by

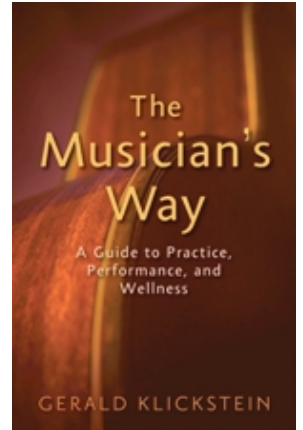
acquiring the skills to do so, we gain the means to conquer stage fright, overcome performance problems, and grow our artistry without end.

See p. 203 of [The Musician's Way](#) for a complete self-evaluation done by a student who used this tool.

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# Assessing Your Performance Skills

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2012/02/assessing-your-performance-skills/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2012/02/assessing-your-performance-skills/)

*"People have often said to me, 'You're so relaxed when you play.' Relaxed my elbow. It's practice."*

—Benny Goodman, clarinetist (*The Musician's Way*, p. 199)

It may seem that elite musicians like Benny Goodman excel on stage because of inborn traits.

But despite any genetic factors that might affect our musical potential, the mastery that experts display under pressure actually results from their having amassed specific performance skills.



## What Are Performance Skills?

Performance skills come into play before, during, and after an event; they encompass the strategies that I sum up in my earlier post, "[Becoming a Confident Performer](#)."

When we're adept with performance skills, we're able to:

- Practice such that we can execute securely even when we're nervous.
- Manage the stresses and logistics of performing.
- Present our music and ourselves in ways that appeal to audiences.
- Emote through our music regardless of the performance situation.
- Evaluate and improve on our work.

Bear in mind that musicians of diverse levels can acquire these skills and that without them aspiring artists are primed to be anxious performers.

For those reasons and more, savvy music educators emphasize performance skills throughout their students' training.

## Assessing Your Performance Skills

I've created the following assessment to help musicians weigh their facility with performance skills, confront any problems, and become fearless performing artists.

It's excerpted from Chapter 10 of *The Musician's Way*, and you can download a free pdf version of this and other [practice and performance aids](#) at MusiciansWay.com.

If you find that any of the 25 statements aren't true for you, see Part II of *The Musician's Way* for step-by-step guidelines to grow your stage power.

Assessing Your Performance Skills

**Assessing Your Performance Skills**

by Gerald Klickstein

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1. I understand how performance stress affects me before, during, and after a concert.

T  
or  
F

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2. I don't feel threatened by performance stress.

T  
or  
F

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3. I'm aware of the personal, task-related, and situational [causes of performance anxiety](#) in general and with me in particular.

T  
or  
F

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4. When I have trouble on stage, I always know [how to practice](#) to bring about improvements in my next performance.

T  
or  
F

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5. Of the [five facets of performance preparation](#) (artistic, technical, physical, mental/emotional, organizational), I know the areas in which I'm capable and any in which I need to make progress.

T  
or  
F

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6. In the areas of preparation in which I'm weakest, I have plans for how to advance.

T  
or  
F

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7. On the day of a concert, I know how to prepare myself and my things to minimize stress.

T  
or  
F

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8. Upon arrival at a venue, I'm capable of managing the backstage environment, supervising stage setup, and working with any staff.

T  
or  
F

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9. When I'm restless backstage, I use [specific techniques](#) to ease my discomfort and awaken my creativity.

T  
or  
F

10. I feel secure walking on stage, bowing, and carrying out all of the other aspects of [stage deportment](#).

T  
or  
F

11. I can project a [stage presence](#) that contributes to an audience's enjoyment of my performance.

T  
or  
F

12. I'm able to start and end pieces with consistent control.

T  
or  
F

13. During a performance, I know how to employ tactics—such as [deep breathing](#), [mental focus](#), and [positive self-talk](#)—that lessen the unwanted effects of arousal.

T  
or  
F

14. Even if I'm nervous, when performing [accessible material](#), I can still be sufficiently accurate and expressive.

T  
or  
F

15. Performing often stimulates me in constructive ways and helps me be creative.

T  
or  
F

16. When performing, I'm committed to giving my listeners the best possible experience; I don't give in to self-conscious worries.

T  
or  
F

17. I can speak to an audience in a personable way.

T  
or  
F



F

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18. I can handle [on-stage errors](#) to curtail their musical impact.

T  
or  
F

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19. While performing, I let errors go and seldom become distressed.

T  
or  
F

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20. After a concert, I'm able to [accept](#) my performance and not berate myself for slip-ups.

T  
or  
F

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21. Following a performance, I'm supportive of my colleagues and courteous to my listeners.

T  
or  
F

---

22. I deliberately [evaluate](#) my performances.

T  
or  
F

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23. I regularly [practice performance skills](#) by doing private run-throughs and performing for peers.

T  
or  
F

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24. I know where to find expert help for any performance problems that I can't solve on my own.

T  
or  
F

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25. I'm confident that my performance skills either suffice or are improving.

T  
or  
F

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*Related posts can be found under the [Music Performance](#) category. Preview [The Musician's Way](#) at Amazon.com.*

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# Overcome Nerves with Mastery Goals

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2011/01/overcome-nerves-with-mastery-goals/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2011/01/overcome-nerves-with-mastery-goals/)

*“Research has shown that people who adopt mastery goals experience the lowest levels of performance anxiety.”*

—*Music Educators Journal*, Dec. 2010.\*

When we step on stage, nothing affects our state of mind more than our goals.

Mastery goals inspire us to be artistic and fearless.

Avoidance and comparison goals, in contrast, sap our creativity and confidence.

## Mastery Goals

Also labeled ‘learning goals,’ mastery goals reflect a performer’s desire to increase personal or task mastery.

When mastery-oriented musicians step under the spotlights, they trust in their ability to perform and also to learn from whatever comes up – they view performing as an adventure through which they and their audiences grow.

Memory slips? No problem. They improvise through them to the delight of listeners. Then, prior to the next show, they practice in novel ways, grateful to have uncovered gaps in their memorization strategies.

Technical flubs? They saturate each phrase with emotion, and audience members don’t notice missteps. Later, they adjust their practice habits, triumphing over weaknesses.

“To make the most of a performance,” I wrote in *The Musician’s Way*, “the key is to be open to your experience and to discover new things in both the music and yourself.” (p. 208).

Mastery goals fuel artistic excellence because they stem from openness, curiosity, and belief in one’s potential to evolve (i.e., self-efficacy).

## Avoidance Goals

When we tell ourselves not to have memory slips, not to feel nervous, and so forth, we’re racking up avoidance goals. But aiming to avert things only magnifies our fear that they’ll occur.

Imagine, for instance, musicians telling themselves, “Don’t make mistakes; you’ll look foolish.” Then, any glitches will be blown out of proportion in the performers’ minds.

They’ll probably be timid on stage, and neither they nor their listeners will draw much pleasure from their efforts.

## Comparison Goals

Performers who take on comparison goals rank themselves against various criteria. They’ll strive to “do better than last time,” let’s say, outshine rivals, or score highly on exams.

Students who cleave to such goals focus more on grades and what other people think than on learning. For that



reason, these kinds of objectives are commonly termed 'performance goals' because they're epitomized by people who strive for favorable 'performance reviews' at work or school.

Worse still, some comparison-minded musicians aim for god-like perfection, ensuring that they'll be anxious about falling short in concerts. And they always fall short. Simply put, comparison goals can amplify fears and hinder creativity.

### **Cultivating a Mastery Orientation**

I've learned that musicians who opt for avoidance and comparison goals commonly do so owing to their limited knowledge of practice and performance skills; that is, they're deficient in some or all of the following:

- Strategies to choose suitable repertoire
- Practice routines that bolster self-assurance
- Backstage techniques that promote poise and creativity
- Maneuvers to counteract on-stage shakiness and other aspects of fight-or-flight activation
- Methods that enhance stage presence
- Tactics for handling errors
- Avenues to connect with listeners
- Ways to practice performing
- Procedures to evaluate performances

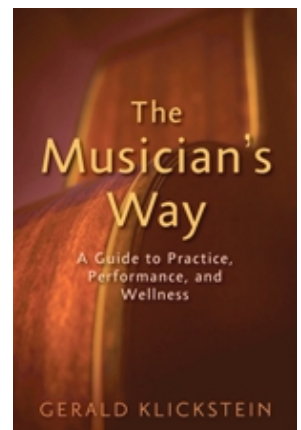
Without awareness of those sorts of skills and how to learn them, musicians can't set inclusive mastery goals.

Hence, I created [The Musician's Way](#) and this site so that aspiring performers would have access to far-reaching methods for attaining comprehensive abilities.

*\*Donald Robertson and Kevin Eisensmith, "Teaching Students about Performance Anxiety," [Music Educators Journal](#) 97/2, (Dec. 2010): 31-35.*

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# The 3 Roots of Performance Anxiety

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2012/01/the-3-roots-of-performance-anxiety/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2012/01/the-3-roots-of-performance-anxiety/)

*"No matter how much I rehearsed, I never felt ready for the stage. Instead, I felt like a deer stumbling into oncoming traffic on a dark road."*

—Shannon Sexton, singer & writer ([The Musician's Way](#), p. 140)

I expect that every performer knows what it's like to feel nervous at a show or an audition.

Still, whether we deal with mild uneasiness or debilitating fear, by taking steps to understand the causes of stage fright and acquire countermeasures, all of us can become more capable performers.



In this post, I sum up the three main roots of performance anxiety: 1. the individual person; 2. the task at hand; 3. the performance situation.

See my subsequent article, "[Becoming a Confident Performer](#)," for tactics that empower us to build security as performing artists. All of these concepts are covered in depth in [The Musician's Way](#).

## 1. Person

Our personalities and beliefs strongly affect our experiences on stage. That is, self-assured, extroverted people who view performing as a rewarding challenge are generally less jittery than those who dread being the center of attention. Our performance histories then multiply our natural tendencies.

For instance, introverted musicians who have endured episodes of shakes, dry mouth, and butterflies will probably worry before concerts; outgoing ones who have regularly enjoyed and succeeded at performing have reasons to look forward to making music for audiences.

The good news is that, with well-directed effort, even long-anxious musicians can replace negative thoughts and experiences with positive ones.

- *Take a moment to consider which of your personal qualities and past experiences enhance or interfere with your ability to perform; list them if you wish.*

## 2. Task

Needless to say, exceedingly difficult tasks are more stressful to perform than easy ones. Similarly, insufficient practice can leave us feeling on edge when we step under the lights.

Two less-obvious but vitally important factors that affect our security are our practice and performance skills. In particular, students who don't practice their music deeply but depend on automated types of learning will feel their control drain away under pressure. Likewise, when musicians aren't skilled at basic performance tasks such as speaking to audiences, then performing can be nerve-racking.

- *Make note of the task-related actions you've taken that have supported or undermined your success on stage. Supportive actions include selecting manageable music and practicing it regularly; conversely, opting for arduous music and avoiding practice undermine security.*

### 3. Situation

The greater our concern for the outcome of a performance, the greater the potential for stress and anxiety.

An out-of-town audition, for example, exerts more pressure than a casual gig at a local coffee shop. Correspondingly, a recording session at a pricey studio comes with higher stakes than a laid-back session at home. Unfamiliar or poorly run venues can also add to a performer's discomfort.

Plus, intense public scrutiny can be unsettling, especially when vast numbers of people hear us perform and then tweet, blog, and otherwise publish their reactions. But whatever the performance situation, when we know how to prepare, we can deliver thrilling performances.

- *Recall performance situations that have enhanced your creativity and ones that have fueled your nerves.*

\* \* \*

Read "[Becoming a Confident Performer](#)" and related posts in the [Performance Anxiety](#) category.


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# Becoming a Confident Performer

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2012/01/becoming-a-confident-performer/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2012/01/becoming-a-confident-performer/)

*“Your central tasks are finding inner peace and strength, on the one hand, and being very well-prepared for your performances, on the other.”*

Eric Maisel, author & psychologist ([The Musician's Way](#), p. 146)

In my previous post, [“The 3 Roots of Performance Anxiety,”](#) I classified the causes of stage nerves as *personal*, *task-related*, or *situational*.

Here, I point to ways in which we can address those causes and become joyful, artistic performers.



## What's a Performance?

First, let's clarify what a performance is: “In a performance situation, there are stakes involved in how well you play or sing” ([The Musician's Way](#), p. 146).

And the higher those stakes become, the greater the potential for anxiousness.

Whether we're on stage in front of thousands, auditioning for a prospective employer, trying to impress a friend, or recording in a studio, we're performing – the size of an audience or even the presence of an audience isn't what defines a performance.

Regardless, when we know how to employ smart strategies, we're set to defuse nerves and deliver heartfelt performances.

## 1. Personal Strategies

- *Develop positive responses to stress.* In and of itself, stress isn't a problem; it's how we *react* to stress that determines whether we excel or crack under pressure. The techniques described in Chapters 8 & 9 of [The Musician's Way](#) outfit performers to channel nervous energy into creative power.
- *Affirm meaning in performing.* Performing takes conviction. To play or sing confidently, we need to believe in the music we present and our missions as performing artists.
- *Refine your [self-evaluation](#) skills.* It takes experimentation for us to become adept on stage and in the studio. But to learn from our experiences, we have to honestly size up our strengths and weaknesses.

## 2. Task-Related Strategies

- *Choose [accessible repertoire](#).* Easy music leaves us with the inner capacity we need to focus in performance, counteract jitters, and build confidence.
- *Acquire comprehensive practice skills.* When we [learn music deeply](#), our command holds up even in trying circumstances.
- *Reinforce performance habits.* Performance skills become habitual only through steady practice, which is why it's essential that we emphasize [habits of excellence](#) whenever we play or sing.

### 3. Situational Strategies

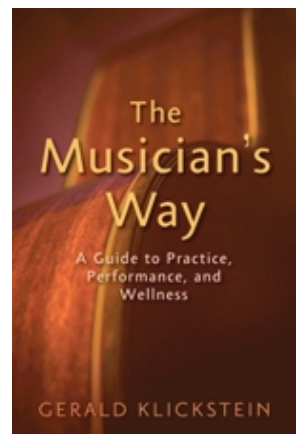
- *Acclimate to performance settings.* Alien situations can be tension-provoking. When we gain experience with diverse performance environments, though, we can feel at home wherever we perform.
- *Build up presentation skills.* [Practice performances](#) provide ideal opportunities for us to become adept with stage deportment and presence, speaking to audiences, and the like.
- *Learn performance-enhancing techniques.* When the pressure is on, it's natural for us to feel a surge of adrenaline. But techniques such as [2-to-1 breathing](#) and [mental imaging](#), in addition to thorough preconcert planning, help inoculate us to situational pressures.

See *Parts I & II* of [The Musician's Way](#) for inclusive performance-preparation guidelines. Also try the [free downloads](#) at [MusiciansWay.com](#) to help calibrate your practice.

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# The Growth Mindset

 [musiciansway.com/blog/2010/07/the-growth-mindset/](http://musiciansway.com/blog/2010/07/the-growth-mindset/)

*"We have something that is unique. We have our craft. We have our art. We have our desire."*

—Branford Marsalis, saxophonist

Craft, art, desire. Add persistent hard work, and what do you get?  
Artistic and professional success.

Why is it, then, that some students who are passionate about making music and have opportunities to refine their skills will practice intently yet others won't?

There can be many reasons, but Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University and author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, offers one compelling explanation.

Dr. Dweck identifies two basic mindsets: growth and fixed.



## The Growth Mindset

People with growth mindsets recognize that knowledge and skills arise from effort – they view intelligence and talent as products of work. They realize that our creative powers aren't genetically preset because the neurons in our brains can continually make fresh connections.

*Dr. Dweck finds that growth-mindset individuals tend to:*

1. Enjoy challenges
2. Be undaunted, even motivated by setbacks
3. Seek advice and criticism
4. Regard errors as instructive
5. Employ diverse learning strategies
6. Bounce back from disappointments
7. Draw inspiration from the successes of others

## The Fixed Mindset

Individuals who harbor fixed mindsets believe, often unconsciously, that people's abilities reflect their innate endowments. They might see themselves and others as either smart or dumb rather than acknowledging that skillfulness and intelligence are grown.

For instance, when fixed-mindset music students hear established artists perform, they might think, "They're more talented than me. I could never do that." Conversely, those with growth mindsets might inquire about the ways in which the artists acquired fluency and then apply what they learn in the practice room.

*Dr. Dweck observes that fixed-mindset individuals tend to:*

1. Shy away from challenges
2. Become easily frustrated
3. Seek praise rather than advice

4. Perceive errors as personal failures
5. Employ minimal learning strategies
6. Give up after being disappointed
7. Feel diminished by others' successes

### **Mindsets in Action**

Artists such as Branford Marsalis epitomize the growth mindset. Compared to them, people with fixed mindsets make for stark contrasts.

For example, check out this 1-minute [video](#) of Mr. Marsalis speaking about his students. He claims that they only want to be told “how good they are and how talented they are” and that most of them “aren’t really willing to work.” (Note: Mr. Marsalis uses some pungent language, so I’m not embedding the video here.)

It seems that Mr. Marsalis’ students are fraught with the fixed mindset.

Do such students benefit from coaching to transform their mindsets? Dr. Dweck has proven as much.

The abovementioned video also conveys the pernicious nature of the fixed mindset. As Dr. Dweck makes clear, when students deem that ability is determined by allotments of talent rather than incrementally grown, they typically look for validation that they ‘have it’ and fear that they might not.

In the case of music students, I’ve noticed that the fixed mindset also contributes to stage fright, partly because it “makes other people into judges instead of allies” ([Mindset](#), p. 67).

### **Fueling Growth**

Given the anticreative force of the fixed mindset, let’s foster the growth mindset in each other. Let’s affirm that every one of us has the potential to enjoy lifelong creative development.

If, for instance, I hear students in one of my classes using fixed-mindset language – perhaps labeling someone as more or less talented – I consider it a “mindset emergency.”

I then engage the students in a discussion about the relationship between effort and attainment, pointing to models of renowned high-achievers, such as Mr. Marsalis, and their years of intense practice.

*See my book [The Musician’s Way](#) for strategies that support the growth mindset and empower musicians to fearlessly pursue their dreams.*

Here’s a video of Dr. Dweck summarizing her research:

*The quote from Branford Marsalis that heads this post is extracted from a 1996 [interview](#) he gave for Ken Burns’ film entitled “Jazz.”*

Visit Carol Dweck’s Mindset [website](#).

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