



Fall 2015

Making a Great Performance: A Step-by-Step Guide

Diego A. Rocha
Gettysburg College

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Rocha, Diego A., "Making a Great Performance: A Step-by-Step Guide" (2015). *Student Publications*. 417.
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Making a Great Performance: A Step-by-Step Guide

Abstract

This project is meant to synthesize the body of knowledge I gained from my First-Year Seminar and my own research into a practical guide for excellence in performance. In it I address a number of stages and steps necessary for successful performance and various ways of going about those. While it focuses more heavily on the performance of music, due to my background and my intention to become a music educator, much of the text can be used in any field.

Keywords

Performance, Anxiety, Music, Stage, Goals

Disciplines

Music | Music Performance

Comments

This paper was written for Professor Jocelyn Swigger's First Year Seminar, *FYS-142 Flipping The Switch*, Fall 2015.

The poster was based on the work done in this first year seminar, and it was presented at the [CAFE Symposium](#) on January 28, 2016.

Making a Great Performance:
A step-by-step guide

Diego Rocha
Flipping the Switch
Dr. Jocelyn Swigger
17 December 2015

Making a Great Performance: A step-by-step guide

A lot of factors that go into a performance; the moment we start to learn our craft we are developing and refining our skills in order to perform well. And although the stage, camera, or spotlight might scare us, it can also help inspire us to greatness if we have the proper preparation and mindset. In this paper I'll talk about the many stages and steps that are involved with making a great performance- from before you even know what you want to perform, to moving onto your next performance.

An extremely important thing to keep in mind throughout reading all of this is that everything I say here is what worked *for me*. Not everything in the books I read worked for me, and I tended to not include those things. As such, I strongly suggest that you read any of the books I reference here that interest you. They are all great books that I think anyone can get at least something out of. To go along with this, I think it's also important to remember that everything here is also a suggestion- if it doesn't work, don't use it- these are ideas that I like, but that you may not work.

Preparing a Performance

This is about what you do before the performance. This is all about how you prepare for that thing you do in front of people, and I feel that it is the most important part of having a great performance. You can completely conquer your stage fright and have no fear up there, but without having your performance down pat it won't matter. There's a number points that I will address within this section that I feel are extremely important to the success of any performance.

Figuring out what you want to do

The absolute first thing you need to do, before you pick up your horn, or get a script, or really decide on anything is figuring out what you want to do. It doesn't have to be absolute at

this point, but you want some kind of framework of goals to work off of. In *Fight Your Fear and Win*, Don Greene addresses a number of ways in which you can establish your goals and desires. The method that I found the most success with is called the “bubble method.”

I’m going to give you my slightly modified version of the bubble method. Basically, you make a circle, and in it you place things that you *need*, not in the food, water and shelter sense, but things that you need to do in your life, your deepest and most personal desires and goals. Those are the things that you should strive at above all else. Then you make another circle and place things that you *really want*, these aren’t your needs in life, but they are things that are very important to you. And then you make another circle outside of that with the things that you *want* but that you wouldn’t sacrifice things in a more inner circle for. It’s very important to be stingy when making these bubbles. Don’t overestimate how much you want something, or put more than what is true in any of the bubbles. There probably shouldn’t be more than three things maximum in your most inner bubble (Greene, 28-30).

Now I want you to really consider the things you wrote down in each of your bubbles, especially the inner two. Don’t be afraid to make changes to them, the goal is to come up with the answers that are truest to reality, not what we want reality to be. Take these things and remember them as you move into this next phase.

Setting your goals

Goal setting is the next part of the process. You can’t go anywhere without aiming in that direction, and likewise, you can’t accomplish anything without setting your sights on accomplishing it. The process of setting goals is also important to motivation and commitment. As many of the books referenced point out, it is important to set reasonable and attainable short term goals because they help build your confidence by giving you tangible success. They also

keep you working towards something and focused at all times so that you know where you're going, what you're doing, and why you're doing it.

A goal of mine was to make playing the trombone as natural and relaxed of an activity as eating dinner or watching a movie. Stanislavsky writes in *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary* about setting tasks and working to complete them as well as the division of a journey into bits (135-139). I have a few different bits: there is relaxing my shoulders and chest so that I can take deeper breaths, the releasing of tension in my legs in order to promote better blood-flow and balance, and the relaxation of my aperture so that my tone would be clearer. Together, these encompass the task of playing in a relaxed fashion so that I can express things the way I want to through the horn.

There's also the obvious comparison between the bits and pieces and movements of a piece of music, or sections within movements, or even phrases within those sections. But we then have to consider the question, just as the main character of the novel did when walking up the stairs and considering if every step is a bit, of what is not worth the title of a bit. What is substantial enough? Is it a note? Perhaps a three note motif? I would say the main determining factor determining how much of an effect it has on the performance. Tasks and bits and goals and all of these words don't only apply to the notes on the page though, they're just as important to the performance of those notes. I have a task of putting emotion into my playing, transforming the written into the felt. And that task has bits too, I need to know what I want to impart to the audience, how to play the piece, and moreover how to play the piece in a way that does what I want it to do. In other words, as Stanislavsky wrote, the mistake would be to "think not about the action but the result" (144).

To help you in this process of goal setting I'm going to make a sort of outline to illustrate a "tree" of goal setting with various branches representing bits and pieces along the way (I'll only fill out a section for the sake of space, but this level of detail *can be applied to all of it*).

- I. My overall goal is to play my jury piece very well
 - a. I want to develop my technical skills
 - i. Legato playing
 1. Slurring
 - a. Being able to slur through m. 22-24
 - i. Slurring from low register to high register
 1. Slurring the four note motif in m. 23
 - a. Adding a two octave lip slur exercise to my warmup
 - b. Play the motif backwards
 - c. Practice it in two note chunks
 2. Add slurs jumping in fifths and octaves to warmup.
 - ii. Developing high register sustained slurring
 1. Slurring from the high F to Bb and back down smoothly.
 2. Slur scales in the upper register.
 - b. Sustained breath support while slurring
 - i. Long tone slurring
 1. Slur four bar phrases at mm = 70
 2. Extended breathing exercises (in for 2, out for 28, in for 2, out for 32, etc.)
 - ii. Always breath through the phrase
 2. Phrasing in connected patterns
 - ii. Fast note playing
 - iii. Control
 - iv. Tone
 - b. I want to develop my musical skills
 - c. I want to develop my knowledge of the music
 - d. I want to develop my performance ability
 - e. I want to develop my stage presence

I know it can be a lot to fill out, and I'm not saying you have to do this or you won't be able to succeed, but if you find yourself unable to figure out what you should be doing to improve and work towards bettering your performance, then make something like this and you won't run out of goals for quite a while.

Along with this, I'd suggest having even bigger overarching goals. I personally try to avoid having that point where I finish something I've been working on for a long time and then

sit around and wonder “now what?” for way too long a time. I’d suggest having those things in your inner circle from the bubble activity be your big overarching goals so you have guidance towards what your next level goal should be. For example, with the tree I made, after I finish my jury I may have a bit of time of “now what?” but I have an overarching goal of “conduct and teach music,” so I can establish a next level goal of “succeed in my own music education” and then see that my next goal should be to start working towards my Sophomore interview. By having these goals established we can allow ourselves to be always working towards improvement.

Practice and preparation

This is the big part of making a performance: practicing for it. No great performance was ever done without some form of preparation. Every great painter had spent years developing their skills, every great orator practiced their craft and worked to prepare their speech, and every great musician spent endless hours honing their playing. No matter how nice it may feel to get by without practicing, you will likely not have a great performance.

Before I get into specifics about techniques to help with your practicing, I want to say how important it is to stay positive with how you react to your practice. Yelling at yourself is almost always not the answer. While practicing piano, I often find myself extremely frustrated with my inability to do things that feel like they should be easy and that I know are easy and yet seem impossible for my poor fingers to accomplish. Even as I’m typing now, I’m noticing how quickly, and with what accuracy and agility, my fingers can move while typing, and yet, when sat in front of a keyboard, my wrists lock up and my fingers suddenly hold in rigid shape.

But I also remember how much more insurmountable the task of piano playing seemed when I first started. The very action reading two lines of music simultaneously on the grand staff,

no matter the simplicity of the notes themselves, felt like some awesome task. Playing a scale with both hands felt like some torture device made to have my hands twisted and my mind confused, but now it feels quite natural. I knew I was making progress, no matter how slowly or monotonously and that helped me to keep going; I even found myself actually excited to go practice piano, a feeling I didn't necessarily have with the trombone in 6th grade.

One technique of practice that I absolutely advocate is process where you set a goal that's attainable to you within the next 30-45 minutes, accomplishing it, and then taking a break of about 10 minutes. This will help keep your practice or work sustainable in almost any type of activity be it writing an essay, practicing an instrument, memorizing information, or exercising (intensity dependent). I feel that these breaks are critical to helping your brain and body get a break and splitting up the monotony of a task (Walter). As part of this, make sure that when you are in your "working" mode, you are actually working. Don't just look at your phone and check social media for 2 minutes blocks between every few reps; those minutes add up.

A method of practice, which hasn't worked for me, but which a lot of people I know had great success with is one where you plan out your practice session down to the minute beforehand, and then force yourself to follow that as you practice. An example would be planning out a 45 minute practice session in which I spend 15 minutes warming up, 5 minutes on three measures of this piece, 10 minutes working on this etude, and 10 minutes on this movement of my piece, and have the extra 5 minutes as a buffer/free practice. I personally don't find this the most helpful way to practice, but for people who have trouble figuring out what to work on next, or find themselves trapped in a loop of just practicing things they're already good at and not working on the stuff they need to hit, this can be a very helpful method towards effectively using your practice time.

Now I'll briefly talk about the actual biological process of practice. Whenever you perform an action you send an electrical signal through your nerves from your brain to your muscles that then make them move. Every time you perform a specific action, "myelin," a set of proteins, wraps around those specific nerve fibers in the brain and allows the signal to move through them faster and more consistently the next time you perform that action, this is what we are actually referring to when we say "muscle memory" (Coyle, 5-7). Therefore *nothing can replace the time spent practicing. There is absolutely no way to replace the act of practicing. None.* There are certainly other ways to improve such as listening to a piece, or dissecting the theory behind it, but you still need to practice it. To go along with this, myelin is a living tissue, and it does degrade, so if you don't use it, you lose it. There are a number of things that speed up this process as well, such as drinking too much alcohol, so another key part of effective practice is to keep your brain healthy (Samantaray). That means adequate sleep, adequate food and drink, and not doing a bunch of things that severely damage it, like excessive drinking or drug use.

Keeping your sanity

Don't overwork yourself; don't overcommit to things you don't have time for; learn to say no. There's only 24 hours in a day and you need time to sleep and time to cool down and let your brain and body take a break. Don't live on the breaking point. It's bad for you and might help in the short term but isn't sustainable. I know the stresses of life are difficult, and the pressures put on by the school system grow every year, but if you manage your time correctly, and you will be okay (*The Age of Stress: Children Under Pressure*).

If you feel like you absolutely cannot do anything, *take the day off* (Ristad, 179). It may feel like it's impossible to just not do anything for a day, but unless you have a specific thing that

needs to happen on a specific day, it's likely that you really can just take the day off (be responsible about it though. Tell people, and don't just not show up).

Doing a Performance

We're finally here, the part where you actually perform. You've spent the last few weeks practicing a piece of music, a speech, an interview, or whatever it may be and finally you're here. This section is about how to translate from practice to performance. The clock is on and time is ticking, it's now or never, this is the moment of truth, this is what we've all been waiting for, etc., etc., etc....

The day of the performance

You just woke up, and it's the big day, your (insert performance) is today. The first thing you should do is take a big breath, one that fills your lungs up and has your stomach sticking out, and then just sigh it all out. If you did the things in the "Preparing a Performance" section, then you have what it takes to make a great performance. Throughout the day, you should focus on what you want the performance to be (great). Don't think about what could go wrong or how failure will affect you. Concentrate on all the things that *will* go right, imagine a beautiful performance. One activity you could do would be to write a performance script (ahead of time, not actually on the day of), where you describe, in detail, a "perfect" performance, addressing every section of performing, from approaching the place, to warming up, to starting the performance, halfway through it, ending it (Moore, 16-20). Make sure that you don't use any negative words in writing this. Everything you describe should be good and positive. You should read this on the day of your performance, to remind you of exactly what you want to happen and how it will happen. Imagine this perfect performance in your mind, run through it a few times. And, most of all, just relax.

Starting your performance

You're now walking on stage, seeing the crowd, or juror, or anything in front of you. This is where nerves usually kick in, and that's a good thing, that adrenaline can help propel you towards an amazing performance, but you need to harness it. One way of doing it that I find helpful is an activity called "centering" from *Fight Your Fear and Win* by Don Greene. As an abbreviated version (I'm sure you can find the full, detailed instructions online), it is an activity where either standing or sitting up you should find a point to focus on that is below eye level. Then pick a specific thing you want to do ("I will perform this piece well in jury." "I will nail this interview"), be very specific with your wording, making sure you use active verbs (I will instead of I want) and avoiding negatives (I will do this good thing instead of I won't do this bad thing). Then close your eyes and focus on your breathing, go through and scan every part of your body looking for and then releasing tension. Then find your center of mass and feel it in your body (it will be a bit below the belly button and in the center of your abdomen). Then focus on your phrase that you picked earlier and feel your energy level rise up, then open your eyes and focus your energy on the focus point you chose earlier, letting the energy flow out of yourself and at that point (Greene, 53-58). This should help you to relax and calm your mind while also helping you focus on the goal you set. Then take a nice big breath, just like the one you took that morning, and begin.

Continuing your performance

You should periodically check in with yourself throughout your performance, plan ahead and pick specific spots where you will check yourself. You can do a quick centering in your performance, or just check for and release tension. At this point, *do not worry about mistakes*, in

fact, ***do not even think about mistakes***. I know it may be difficult, but it is crucial to performing beautifully in the moment.

There is a similar idea that is referenced in a number of the books I suggest of two different parts of your brain, one a critical part that yells at you for your mistakes and tries to forcibly control your movements, and another that actually does the actions when you're not thinking about them. I most prefer the way Gallwey, author of *The Inner Game of Tennis*, refers to them: Self 1, "the teller", and Self 2, "the doer" (10). It is important to not let Self 1 take control of you during your performance because it has no idea what it is doing, it may sound like it does because it's so good at finding your flaws and pointing them out to you, but it can't actually do the things. Self 2 on the other hand, is the part that controls our actions when we aren't thinking about them. It's the one in control when we feel like we're "in the zone." It's not easy to give up control to Self 2, especially in performance (Gallwey, 35-37). A good way to practice this is to try to place your focus on another activity while practicing. You could focus on saying the counts in your head (or out-loud depending on your instrument) while practicing, or getting a friend and throwing a tennis ball back and forth saying "bounce" the moment the ball hits the ground and "catch" when you catch the ball. You should work towards gaining better control and understanding of your "Selves" during your practice and preparation in order to be able to use it in your performance.

Another way of staying calm during a performance is by using "circles of attention" which is a concept that Stanislavsky (*An Actor's Work*) writes about. With this, you draw your active attention inwards, forming a small circle around yourself where you place all your active attention. After, you should work to expand it into bigger and bigger circles until you are able to have your attention in the whole room without being overwhelmed (98-102). A technique to

practice this is to have physical objects that outline your circles and then moving between them, noticing all the details of the things within them, and paying no attention to the things outside of them. This is a great technique for the stage where the dark emptiness that is the audience can often time be very frightening and make you nervous to perform.

No matter what technique or method you use, the key to performing is to stay relaxed throughout the performance. The moment you tense up and let the moment slip away is when you lose control. The performance should be the easy part, you already did all the work of building the myelin in your brain, making musical decisions, learning your instrument, planning the performance, etc.... All you need to do now is just do the thing one last time, but in front of some people.

Finishing your performance

You're at the end now, just a few notes away from being done, or on your last question of an interview, or the last paragraph of a speech. Don't let your mind get the better of you here. All the same things from "Continuing your performance" apply here as well. And then, after the last note, or your last word, take in a big, deep breath, just like before, and then sigh it all out.

Your performance is over. There is nothing you can do at this point to change what the performance was; however, your behavior at this point can still shape people's reactions to your performance. If you look angry at yourself, they'll probably think you did poorly, but if you look confident and happy, they'll probably think you did well (Cuddy). Keep this in mind as you inevitably run through every second of what you just did and don't let any mistakes that may have happened get the best of you. Bowing is important, you should practice bowing. The advice I have been given is to look (literally) at your shoes and say hippopotamus then stand back up. A good bow will make the audience like your performance more. Then leave and feel good about

what you just did. You (hopefully) put a lot of time and effort into this and now you will reap the benefits.

Moving on to the Next One

I'm going to briefly talk about what you do after a performance to transition into your next performance and how to learn and benefit from every performance so that you become better and better.

Reflecting on your performance

The day after the performance, run through it in your mind, and evaluate how it went, see where mistakes may have happened, but also think about all the moments that went great. One piece of advice I like is to count the notes you played right, not the ones you played wrong. Think and reflect on your performance. Were you happy with how it went? Why or why not? What did you do that caused you to be happy or not happy? What did you do two months ago that caused that to happen? These aren't rhetorical questions. Actually ask and answer them. Be honest with here, evaluate yourself and determine if you did well or if you did poorly and the reasons for that. If it wasn't a good performance, just say it out loud, you'll be surprised at how easy it is (Ristad, 173-178). But if it really was a great performance, then say that out loud too. If you don't honestly reflect on performances and what happened, it is very easy to spend way more time than necessary trying to fix the same problems over and over again.

Evaluating what you gained

Take a moment and evaluate everything you gained by doing this performance, whether you "won" or not. Think about the experience you gained through performance, and the skill you gained at your chosen method of performance, of the opportunities you may gain by the performance. Remember that even if you "failed," you still gained just as much as you had the

day before the performance. *The results of a performance don't diminish the work done before it* (Ristad 174).

Redirecting your focus

This is that stage I was talking about earlier, where you need to figure out what you want to do next. Find your next performance, the thing you should or need to do next to work towards your overarching needs and wants for your life. Decide what's important to you and commit to it and shift your focus to making it happen. Don't let mistakes you made in a performance haunt you (don't ignore them, you should figure out why they happened and work to resolve them, just don't let them take over your mind). You need to take the opportunity to make it better next time.

A Few Closing Remarks

Remember, everything I say in this is still a suggestion. You can find your own variations and spins on the things I talk about in here that work *for you*. There is nothing that is guaranteed to work for everyone so try stuff out, read other things, do your own research, and find your own way.

What I really want you to take away from this is a toolkit that you can use throughout your whole life in order to find success in any performance you may do. Take these things with you, use them, figure out what you like, share them with other people, and make great performances. *Go be awesome.*

HC: Diego Rocha

Suggested Reading

*A Soprano on Her Head: Right-side-up Reflections on Life and Other Performances**

Eloise Ristad

An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary

Konstantin Stanislavsky

*Fight Your Fear and Win: Seven Skills for Performing Your Best under Pressure— at Work, in Sports, on Stage**

Don Greene

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

The Inner Game of Tennis: The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance

Timothy Gallwey

*The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born: It's Grown, Here's How.**

Daniel Coyle

* - Denotes my personal favorites.

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