

TPO performance preparation

Hi all,

Below I have prepared some resources to help you prepare for performances. As musicians, one of the biggest challenges we face is bridging the gap between our practice room and the performance on stage. So often, we can successfully play our pieces in practice, but when we get on stage our rate of success can diminish as we are placed under pressure. For some this may be caused by performance nerves and for others it's a matter of focus, and having the right tools to draw the best performance out of ourselves when we get that 'one chance to get it right'. It's useful to understand the psychological principles at play when performing in order to unlock potential.

I find it useful to ask the following:

? What does it mean to be prepared and concert ready?

? Does being prepared mean being just technically ready or mentally ready too?

It takes a whole set of skills to perform – different to those required to 'just' play a piece of music. Often, we are told to simply practice until we are ready, however to perform under pressure requires many other areas of focus and a type of *deliberate* preparation - something just practicing can't create in itself - not if we are to be truly resilient and in control on stage.

Those of you who have spoken to me or attended one of my talks will already know what these areas of preparation are, however I'll jot them down below as a starting point. By engaging in these areas of preparation, they can help strengthen important focus points and form a type of resilience key for creating better success on stage - thereby putting you in peak condition and in your optimal functioning zone.

Here are some example areas to look into for your preparation:

- Emotional regulation
- Physical regulation
- Visualisation
- Focus training
- Relaxation training
- Goal setting and key words
- Positive/enabling mental attitudes - working towards these
- 'Proper' practice methods
- Pressure training
- Perfectionism and the role this plays (good and bad!)
- Self-talk - it's negative and positive effects
- Building self-confidence and self-trust
- Engaging your compassionate self (as musicians we are often relentlessly hard on ourselves)
- Recovering from mistakes
- Performance plans

Useful questions I find helpful which focus my mind:

- How is practice and performance different?
- What skills do I need to practice effectively?
- What skills do I need to perform effectively?
- How are you different in practice to performance?
- How are you different in performance to practice?
- Taking the knowledge of your mindset and skills in both contexts (practice vs performance), can you think of ways to positively affect either situation? i.e anything you can take from your practice to plant into your performance, and visa versa, using the performance to affect your practice?

As an example here, I use the knowledge of the 'one chance to play my piece' in the concert, and plant this into my practice, giving myself one chance in practice and dialling up the pressure and the conditions - so I am readying myself for the pressure. Conversely, I am aware that my focus is far healthier and musically 'enabling' in practice, so I try to mimic this focus in performance and work on way to keep my focus away from any unwanted triggers and on the aspects that encourage my best performance.

- Is there anything you could do differently to join the two contexts together?

What ifs:

As performers, we all get those 'what if' thoughts when preparing for a concert. These can sometimes cause concern or stress and we can see unwanted mental energy being spent as we ruminate over potential negatives. Often there are solutions to these concerns which can help the unknown feelings become less daunting – helping to put you in the driving seat.

A really useful tool, can be to write down your 'what ifs', then PLAN. By planning for that 'what if' and strategizing potential solutions, it can reduce unwanted negative thoughts - helping you to feel more in control and solution based.

What if?	Possible solution

Preparation checklist:

Preparing thoroughly and covering all areas ensures you create the 'best you' - ready to go on stage. I think of it as - doing all the things leading up to a concert that create my best self, because when I am in the best place possible (both mentally and physically), I stand more chance of performing well and staying resilient.

I find it helpful to ask the following questions:

? WHAT DO I NEED TO DO IN ORDER TO PLAY WELL?

? WHAT WILL PUT ME 'AT MY BEST' IN ORDER TO PERFORM?

Creating your own performance checklist can be helpful.

Here are some guiders:

Technical readiness:

- Have you fully prepared technically in a way that leaves you feeling deeply prepared? Have you done enough practice to feel prepared? Have you 'glossed' over a section that you struggle to play? *(Remember when preparing technically, any vulnerability through being under prepared can create a 'weak spot' where performing nerves creep in through. So, ensuring there is no technical weak spot is a great way to create resilience).*
- Have you prepared variable things like different speeds and therefore the different control this could require technically?
- Have you prepared with stamina in mind? Often when we practice at home, we practice in sections, we take breaks etc. Our home practice doesn't look much like the real thing. It's important to run through like you would in the concert so you get used to performing for the length and order that the concert will demand of you - mentally and physically.

Mental readiness:

- Have you pinpointed any areas that you would benefit from strengthening? *i.e. pressure resilience, recovering from mistakes, focus points – negative focus/distractions*
- Have you planned for your ‘what ifs’?
- Have you prepared for the pressure? *Our practice rooms have very low pressure, often we practice within a comfort zone that we’ve created. Inviting pressure into your practice however you can think, mixing up where you practice, finding ways to take yourself out of your comfort zone, playing to others, and visualising the pressure/the concert as you practice can all have hugely beneficial effects on practice.*
- Pressure training isn’t just about getting used to the pressure, it’s also finding ways to take any unnecessary pressure of yourself, learning how you apply pressure, if pressure is internal or external. Are you being realistic? Is your self-talk hijacking your thoughts and creating more pressure? Also reframing thoughts can be useful – for example an audience can feel like a ‘threat’ however when we remember that an audience is there to enjoy the music and essentially have a nice evening we reframe this reality and see a scenario with a potentially different light – thereby changing our focus and taking the pressure off.
- Have you planned for mistakes you might make and planned your response? *It’s a good idea to plan for this inevitability to ensure that making a mistake doesn’t throw you or detract from the performance thereafter.*
- Are you staying rational in your thoughts? *Often we try to over control in order not to make a mistake – clutching on to the concept of perfectionism. It’s important to stay realistic - live performance comes with risk, we can not ensure a perfect performance, but we CAN focus on helpful aspects which enable better performance. It’s worth asking: will trying not to make a mistake create your best performance?*
- Have you attended/tweaked any negative or unhelpful self-talk?
- Is your self-confidence and self-trust high? Could it be higher – to serve you better? Why and how?
- Are you in tune enough with yourself and your needs to pick up any unhelpful thoughts/triggers/behaviours that are blocking your best performance?

Physical readiness:

- Have you played in your concert clothes/shoes? *Don't forget this can make you feel uncomfortable as it can feel physically very different when playing in concert clothes. This can put you off on the day if the first time you play in your concert gear is when you walk out on stage! Think comfort zone – is this pulling you out of your comfort zone? Incorporating it into practice is a good way to attend to this.*
- Have you thought about the structure of your day? *How busy will you be (being too busy could put you in a less resilient mindset or conversely not being busy enough can allow you to ruminate on negative thoughts – knowing yourself is important to get this balance right. Have you planned down time, time on arrival to venue, removing any practical/logistical stress of things like parking, getting food in break before concert, even to what you will do in the break to 'put you in your best place'. Leave no stone unturned if you want to be deeply in tune with yourself, knowing the effects that these elements have on yourself and ultimately your performance.*
- Thinking about intake of food or drink that negatively or even positively impacts your performance. *i.e. you may want to avoid caffeine before you go on stage – again knowing your body is important*
- Have you planned in any important relaxation time you may need? *Sometimes it is easy to switch off to our deeper needs – we just keep going on the day of a concert, without considering our physical and mental needs. A little moment to gather thoughts, focus points and calm the body, can be deeply effective in dialling down the adrenaline response and staying resilient. The more resilient we are, the more stress we can withstand before negatively responding. Remember to be compassionate to yourself*

Use the above as a template to build your own preparation checklist / guide.

Confidence rating:

Understanding, acknowledging and addressing areas of low confidence can hugely help increase your success on stage.

What is your confidence rating for the concert?

Circle your current rating 0 = low, 10 = high

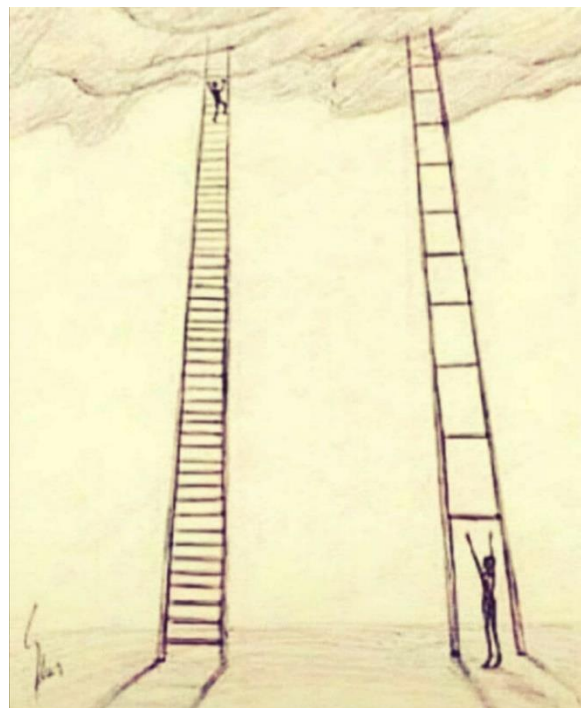
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Why have you chosen this rating?
- If your score is low, what might be affecting your self-confidence? *The more insightful you can be and the more information you can 'gather' the more power this gives you to generate meaningful change.*
- What steps could you take / what areas could you address in order to increase your current confidence rating?

List them below and devise a goal-based plan to help you achieve a higher rating.

*Remember even small goals have a hugely beneficial incremental effect.

The importance of small maneagable steps



Before the day lead up plan

Here you can list/plan anything you cite that would be useful to do, both directly before the concert and on stage once the concert starts. For example, before a concert, I don't socialise too much so that I can get my thoughts into a personally focused place, I have planned distractions at the ready in case my overthinking/worrying mind is taking over, and don't over-do the practice beforehand (i.e. no obsessive 'checking type practice' but I plan to play enough to helpfully warm up. My warm up is more about getting my mind into the right place – not just my body. I plan not to be last minute so to try to remain calm and deliberate.

On stage I then plan to take time before I start to play to ensure I don't rush and panic and I spot check any tension – particularly lowering my shoulders and attending to uptight posture. I also plan my key words/phrases that help keep me focused on helpful/enabling thoughts, serving to refocus me away from any destructive thoughts. I plan for scenarios where my focus might 'go' and I plan for what I will do if I make a mistake (*when* I make a mistake – let's stay realistic, it's likely I will. Always stay realistic!).

All these elements keep me focused on the helpful things, enabling me to feel prepared and better supported. Structuring these into preparation can help cover all corners and create a sense of organisation, control and better self-support.

5-30 mins before concert plan	On stage plan (during concert)

Performance bubbles:

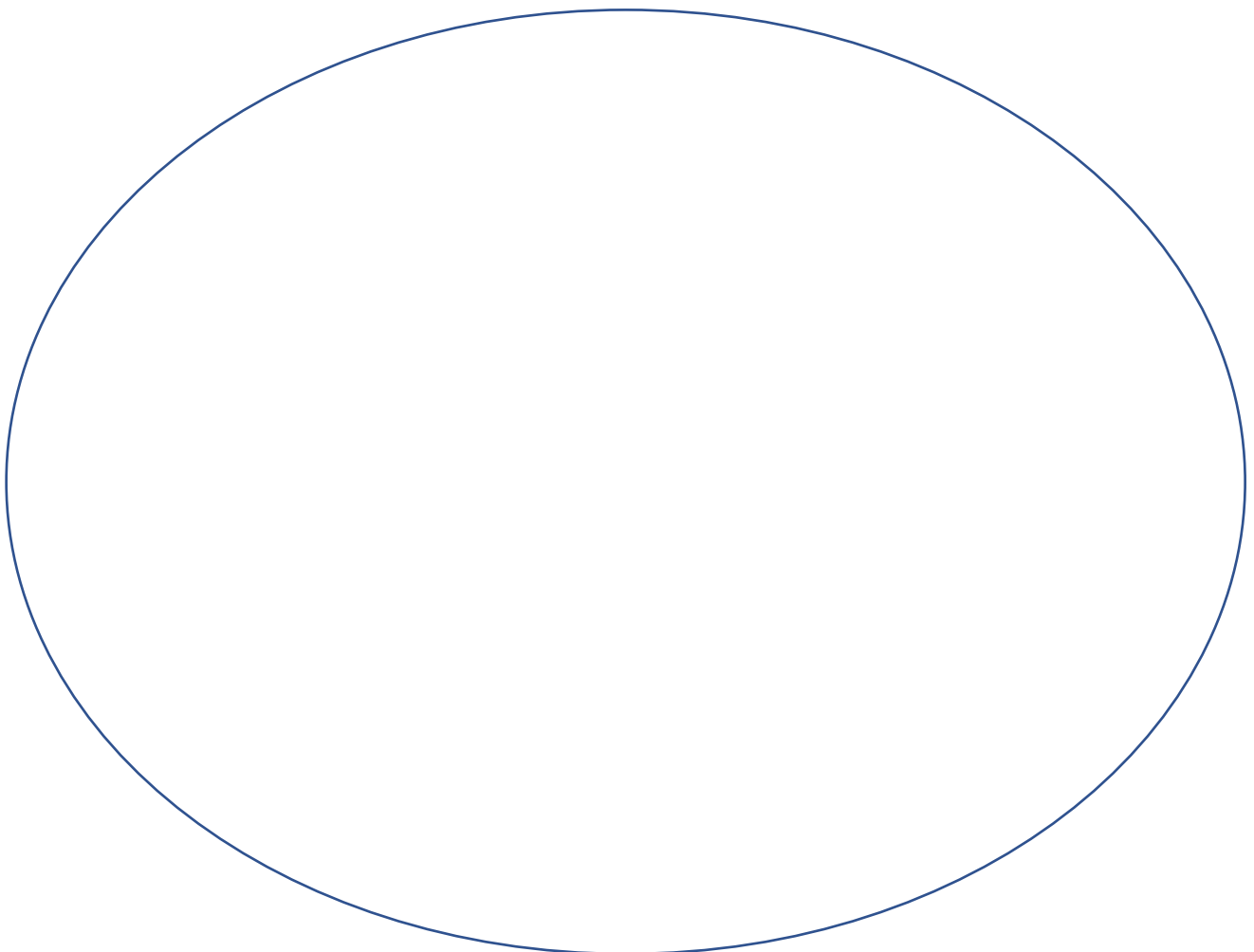
Another useful preparation tool is to visualise your performance in a bubble. Draw yourself in the middle: then jot down within 'bubble 1' all the elements you can think of that create your *unwanted performance*. Then in 'bubble 2', all the elements that you feel would contribute to your *ideal performance*. These elements can be anything that positively or negatively affect your performance:

- Thoughts
- People
- Fears
- Distractions
- Thought focus points
- Body focus points
- Musical elements
- Technical elements
- Awareness etc

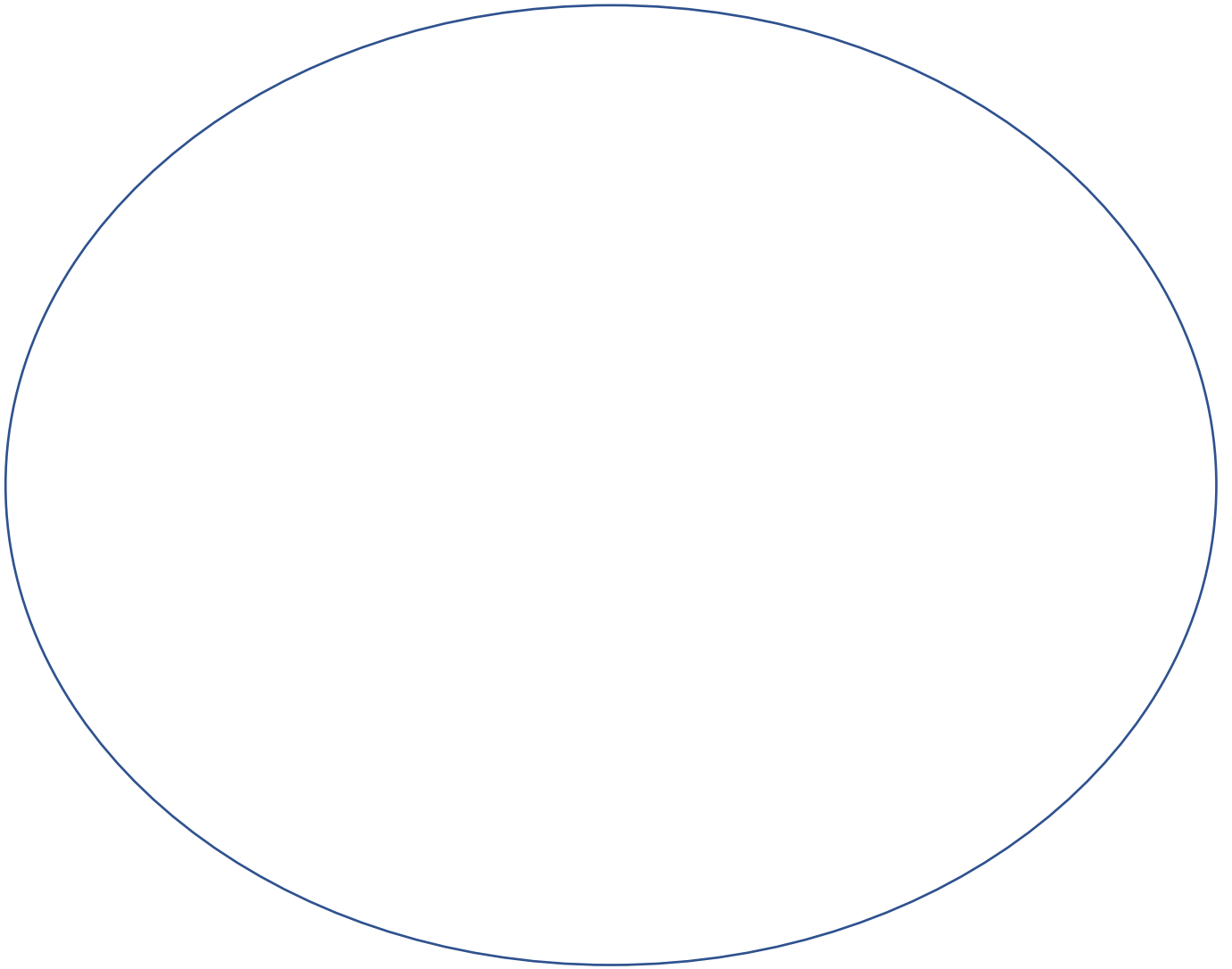
Think about:

- What or who is in your circle?
- Which elements are most prominent?
- Have you positioned certain elements closest to yourself in the middle? You may want to visually show the prominence of elements by 'ordering' them visually in relation to you and what feels to have most dominance.

Bubble 1) 'unwanted performance'



Bubble 2) 'ideal performance'



? What do you notice about these two bubbles?

? Is there anything you can learn from either bubble?

It's useful to write down any thoughts at this point as you see the two side by side.

List your thoughts here:

Now in this next bubble, consider creating a *realistic performance* bubble. You may include unwanted (but likely) thoughts, along with positive thoughts. You may for example include an audience that poses feelings of pressure, but you may also have useful focus points that refocus you away from those 'negatives' and on to more useful performance enhancing thoughts. So essentially your combining elements now.

This time when designing this bubble, position all these elements with a bias towards what you would *like* immediately surrounding you (i.e. certain helpful focus points) with perhaps accepted fears positioned to the back of your circle. Thinking about *what* would be better placed near you and *how* those nearer choices could send those negative elements to the back of your circle. See if you can design a 'working bubble' where *you* can manipulate what surrounds you – either physically or in thoughts.

Bubble 3) 'realistic performance'

