

Ask Mike!

Stressed about an upcoming gig? Work got you singing the blues? Columnist Michael Goode can help!



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In my last column, in November, we talked about how to deal with a new conductor and what to do if a career-changing opportunity beckons. Today, we are going to talk about stage fright and how to help your students if they have the condition. We are also going to talk about the mindset of playing when you are sick and how to use it to your advantage when you are feeling well again.

Q: Hi Mike, I've been reading your column and have heard that you are a stage fright expert. What is stage fright and how can I help my private students that I teach if they have it?

A: Stage fright, also known as performance anxiety, is "a nervous and physiological condition in which normally competent functioning necessary for successful completion of the situation is impaired." This is my definition from my book, and what it means is that if you don't get the

playing result that you want, it could be stage fright. Being ill or sick and trying to play is not stage fright. We will talk more about what happens when playing sick in the question below.

If your students are suffering from stage fright, here are some things that you can observe and do to help them. The first thing you should do is make sure that they know their material well and still can't win at auditions, it is probably because of stage fright issues. You should then ask them questions about the times when they get nervous. Also ask them what makes them the most anxious or nervous when they play. Usually, they are worried about making mistakes, or they are worried about letting their parents and teachers down, and they are forgetting to focus on the music because of these fears.

At this point you should give them a musical storyline and/or an emotion to express when they play the music in front of them. If you haven't gotten them into that habit, now is the time to do it. Most of the time when a student focuses on expressing an emotion or telling a musical story on the piece they are playing, their stage fright goes away because the part of the brain that creates the stage fright mindset shuts off. For example, for a young student, you can give them a very simple exercise, of slurred mid-range quarter notes and half-notes to play and tell them to remember a time when they were the most happy like on a vacation. Tell them to tell you how happy they were through the notes they are playing now, as if they were back at that happy time. At this point, most students will get completely lost in the

music doing this, and their stage fright will go away altogether.

If this doesn't work, then you will have to have the student write an anger letter about how they felt the last time they had stage fright and couldn't play their best. Give them a sheet of paper and a pencil, and tell them to describe on paper how they felt the last time they had stage fright and why it made them so angry to have it. Have the student use the word anger or angry in the letter. Tell them that you are going to leave the room until they have finished their letter, have torn it up, and thrown the pieces out in the wastebasket. Tell them to tell you when they are done with this. Once they tell you they are done with these steps, return to the room. This process of writing an anger letter and then destroying it usually calms their mind completely and they have a huge smile on their face immediately afterwards.

Since the letters should always be private and uncensored, do not ask them what the content was. It is enough to have them write the letter. Some of the causes of anger that turn into stage fright are abusive band directors, parents, or relatives. We so easily forget how much influence adults can have on very talented students' sense of confidence and cause them to go into a stage fright condition not of their own making!

Normally with elementary and high school students, one anger letter quickly cures the problem. For fourth and fifth graders you can have them draw anger pictures instead of letters about how angry they were the last time they had stage fright and then tear them up instead of writing a letter if their writing skills are not as developed yet. Younger players from

elementary through high school do not have the entrenched issues that we adults usually have so the letters release any blockages much more quickly and the students are able to move on to learn a new approach to playing quite easily.

Q: Dear Mr. Goode, I noticed that recently when I was very sick and was forced to play a job, I played the best I have ever played in a long time! Why does this happen? Is this a fluke?

A: No, it's not a fluke at all!!! When you are sick, you kick automatically into your deep unconscious, into your Person A, what we call "the zone." Being ill shuts off all the mental noise that usually gets in the way of playing great. It is very helpful to remember this mental and emotional state of being in "the zone" when you are feeling better again and try to use your imagination to recreate it every time you play no matter how you feel. The goal in all of our playing should be to play with an entirely clear and relaxed mind so that we can order up a musical product free of any distractions except the musical message we are trying to convey. This is what gets us and the audience truly excited when we perform music!

Send your questions to: Ask Mike!, Trumpetworks Press, P.O. Box 11574, Marina del Rey, CA 90295 or you can check out my website at www.trumpetworkspress.com and see information on my book, "Stage Fright in Music Performance and Its Relationship to the Unconscious." All names are confidential and will not be published.

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