

Get Real

by Tom Poore

Years ago I studied with a teacher who tried to drill this into every student: never do anything during practice that you don't want to happen in a performance. And I always tried to follow his advice. But lately I've realized that my practice sessions barely scratch the surface in living up to my teacher's ideal.

Most of us are extremely nervous during a performance. But we're seldom as nervous during a practice session. Why? There are many reasons. But here's the big one: during performance, everything is magnified. Our attention is sharper. We're more aware of every little mistake. We're more aware of our weaknesses. We're more aware of when a mistake might happen.

We all know this, of course. But what's missing is a crucial insight: why are we less aware during practice than we are during a performance? Shouldn't we be equally aware during practice?

Think about it. How well do routine practice sessions prepare us for performance? In practice sessions, we're comfortable. We have a familiar chair. We're in a familiar room. There are no distractions. No one stares at us. It's quiet. If we make a mistake, we're the only one who hears it. There are no scary consequences. So really, a mistake during practice is the proverbial tree falling in the forest. Since no one else hears it, it's not emotionally devastating.

Performance, however, is vastly different. We're sitting on an unfamiliar chair. We're in an unfamiliar room. There are distractions. People stare at us. If we make a mistake, lots of people hear it. If we make too many mistakes, there are scary consequences. And unlike practice, we can't stop and work on a problem. We have to keep going. Thus, every mistake is now a knife in the gut. The thing we never replicated in the practice room—a "one and done" performance—is suddenly an intense and emotionally fraught imperative.

So in a nutshell, here's our situation. In performance, we're hyperaware and every mistake upsets us. Yet we prepare for it with practice sessions in which we're less aware and every mistake doesn't really upset us, at least not as much as it would during a performance.

Look at it this way, and you start to understand why so many of us fail under the pressure of performance. We fail because of a flawed dichotomy between practice and performance: during practice, mistakes are tolerable—during performance, mistakes are intolerable. In essence, we prepare for an emotionally fraught performance by practicing in emotionally calm practice sessions.

This makes no sense.

Instead, we should design practice sessions to closely mimic the reality of performance. Every rep should be done with an imaginary audience at hand. Every mistake should matter. By the time we take the stage, we should be intimately familiar with the heightened awareness of performance. It's familiar because we faced it during every minute of practice.

This is something great athletes take to heart. Speaking of his attitude toward practice, NBA hall of famer Michael Jordan had this to say: "Every day in practice was like that for me—it was a competition. So when the game comes, it's nothing that I haven't already practiced. It's a routine. Whatever happens in the game now, okay, I've done this before."

Good musicians also share this attitude. John Williams wasn't an accurate performer merely because he was talented. He was an accurate performer because he tolerated nothing less than accuracy in the practice room. He learned to perform under pressure by practicing under pressure. The practice room is the best place to do this—not the stage.

So let's get real. Here are ways to bring a performance mindset into the practice room:

- During practice, don't make mistakes. I'm serious—zero mistakes. (After all, mistakes are unacceptable during performance. So why accept them during practice?) If you're making mistakes, slow down. If you slow down and are still making mistakes, then slow down some more. Keep slowing down until you can play perfectly. If that's glacially slow, then so be it. Increase tempo only when you're playing error-free with utter confidence.
- When running reps, never move on until you can do five reps in a row perfectly. Not almost perfect. Perfect.
- When running reps, always imagine you're in front of an audience. Never mindlessly run reps—this doesn't prepare you for the heightened awareness of an actual performance.
- Find things that, though they initially make you uncomfortable, will bolster your ability and confidence if you master them. Does playing with your eyes closed make you nervous? How about playing with a metronome? Or recording yourself. Whatever it is, embrace it and master it. Then find something new.
- Devote practice time to learning how to recover from mistakes. You're human, and inevitably you'll make mistakes when performing. So hone your ability to recover quickly and professionally.

Learning to handle the stress of performance is the bedrock of effective practice. We ignore it at our peril. And I'm not saying that adopting a zero tolerance attitude toward mistakes will instantly improve things. Indeed, at first it'll probably make things worse. But an enduring commitment to error-free practice gradually creates its own solutions. We learn things about performance, memorization, technique—really, everything—that we can't learn any other way. In fact, if we do practice sessions right, we may come to find that our anxiety during performance pales in comparison to the pressures we daily simulate in practice. Performance will become a pleasant reward for the intense work we've done in practice.

Now wouldn't that be a nice change?