

# **CMP EXPLORED**

## **Introduction**

In over forty years as a professional pianist, teacher and examiner worldwide for ABRSM (the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music), I have frequently pondered the question of anxiety in relation to musical and other artistic performance, both for myself and also for the hundreds of students and exam candidates with whom I have come into contact. It is a question that frequently arises when I have to address teachers' meetings while on overseas examining tours, where I have witnessed many performances that, because of this problem, have fallen well below the standard that those particular students have had the musical and technical potential to achieve.

Over the years I have experimented with many techniques and methods for coming to terms with this problem with a view to solving, dispersing or lessening it, and in this short article would like to offer a very simple introductory insight into these areas.

I have found the journey of exploration into many different avenues of psychological and physical awareness absolutely fascinating, and this eventually led me to undertake and complete a six year professional training in psychotherapy and also a postgraduate diploma in Indirect Ericksonian Hypnotherapy with Neuro Linguistic Programming. These qualifications, coupled with my musical skills, enable me to offer to all those beset by these kind of problems a personalised programme including psychological techniques, awareness training and NLP, using indirect hypnosis rather like a glue to help improved patterns of behaviour take root in the unconscious.

In such a short and basic article, I cannot go into great depth, but briefly as I see it, the causes of excessive nervousness fall broadly into three categories, some of which are easier to address than others. There are practical matters surrounding the performance, practising methods and habits, and also psychological issues. Often the problem is caused by a combination of all three.

### **The body's response to stress**

I want first to write simply a little about the body chemistry that usually manifests in performance situations. (If you are already familiar with this you could skip the following paragraph).

When we perform an activity that requires us to be extra alert, or to rise successfully above our average day to day capabilities, the body has the potential to flood with various hormonal substances including a substance known as adrenaline, in order to help us to achieve more than we would under normal circumstances. This is a good thing, especially in serious or life threatening situations, as it gives us the strength to stand our ground and fight, or if the danger is perceived as too great and powerful for us, the ability to run away and survive. It is the thing that enables us to perform amazing feats that would under normal circumstances not be possible, such as when a person exceeds their strength capabilities by lifting an exceptionally heavy object to save someone trapped underneath. So ideally, with the production of these hormones we should actually naturally perform those activities better than we ever have before. These are the substances that also get produced when we perform artistically, because of the stress element and our wish to do our very best in a situation where there may well be judgement either from oneself or others. While this is not strictly a life threatening

situation, for various reasons it can virtually seem so for many people, especially if we are not feeling quite adequate to the task.

There are some people who have a purely natural response to these situations and produce the right amount of these substances which allows their performance to reach a higher level than ever before. However, for many, an overproduction of these things, and the difficulty of absorbing them fully and easily into the bodily system can cause and produce symptoms such as inappropriate physical tension, shaking, instability and the lack of the needed mental clarity, either by making us freeze mentally and physically, or by causing us to become so hyper that we become unable to focus, and so are distracted from the task in hand. These substances, once produced need to be absorbed by the body fully and then unconsciously discharged into activity to be of most use to us. This can be why for some people, including some great artists, although they feel very nervous beforehand, once they start to play they are able to unconsciously harness the adrenaline, focus well and produce a good performance. Often before a concert an artist will feel the need to move and may well pace up and down while waiting to go onto the platform – this is often an unconscious productive way to get these hormones moving around and absorbed by the body. As a rule it is never a good idea to sit down for a long period of time just before performing, as the adrenaline will build up and be unable to discharge into activity. It is far better to go for a walk, do a little physical exercise or climb some stairs to keep things gently on the move round the body until a few minutes before going on platform.

### **Practical and peripheral aspects**

First of all there are indeed some very simple practical things that may help reduce the feeling of excess nervousness. Most people will

already know about these, but they are worth mentioning for those who may not yet have considered them.

It is advisable before performance to avoid drinks such as coffee, tea and many fizzy drinks such as colas as they are all caffeine based, and as caffeine stimulates the adrenals, this is like pouring fat on the flames. Also avoid alcohol, too much sugar or eating a heavy meal just before performing – we want the blood and oxygen to be circulating to the brain, hands and fingers, and not to be diverted to our digestive system. However, although often people do not feel especially like eating before a performance it is foolish to not eat at all, in case the blood sugar drops to the point where we do not have sufficient energy for the task and begin to feel faint, unable to focus and become ungrounded. A small, light nutritious meal, or perhaps a couple of bananas could be taken not later than an hour before one is due to play.

Small external matters such as lighting, room temperature, size of the hall, a different acoustic, the presence of listeners and also being dressed differently can make us feel less comfortable. It is important to be warm when one plays as this will encourage physical flexibility. For pianists a different instrument that needs adjusting to, and maybe an unfamiliar or unsuitable stool can be unsettling. All these things can add up and distract us on some level while we are trying to focus. And of course with the presence of an audience we may have the uncomfortable feeling that we are being judged and assessed, which is indeed the case in an exam or competition, although here usually the assessor is on the side of the candidates, appreciating the stressful nature of the situation and hoping they will do well.

## Preparation

Secondly, of course, excellent preparation is vital for a successful performance and while much could be written here, it is important at least to take the following few factors into account when one starts to work. They are written with pianists in mind, but most of the ideas are suitable for all instruments. First we have to remember that all learning is state dependent and it is always advisable to work in a calm unhurried state without anxiety or pressure concerning dates or sufficient practise time. The state in which we practise always gets locked into the way we own the piece, so if we practise in a state of agitation, foreboding or lack of confidence, that is what will be cemented in and carried into the performance.

Is the piece, even the most challenging parts well within our present musical and technical abilities? We need to learn slowly and carefully without being over-concerned about ultimate speeds. In this way we will teach the piece carefully to the unconscious mind so that in time it will have absorbed it in detail and be able to reproduce all of the physical movements automatically, which then will allow the conscious mind to be free to simply follow the line of the music.

Many repetitions of each correct phrase are needed, not just repetition until it is correct, as then we have still practised assiduously more of what we don't want to happen than what we do. We learn and assimilate best in small units, (as an example a passport number is more easily memorised in three groups of three numbers, than one group of nine. Also we remember telephone numbers in small groups), so it is best to take small fragments at first, although initially it is also a good idea to listen to some fine performances of the work in order to have some overall concept. If, after several considered repetitions of a musical phrase there are still

errors, this can usually be solved by taking still smaller fragments and maybe going even more slowly.

Ideally it is better never to allow oneself to make an error in the early stages, although this is a very high, often unattainable ideal. Yet, even if not fully achieved it is something to which we can aspire. So it is well to remember that an error made and learned will always be in the unconscious, (unless we have taken specific steps with various psychological techniques to remove it) even if we reinforce the correct thing afterwards. When we are feeling a little unfamiliar or stressed, as often happens in performance, it is just the time, despite our good work, the old error may pop out and surprise us.

It is also important to play at the speed at which one can hear and feel every sound, then we will be 'in' or 'behind' what we are playing and it will communicate. This means that in the early stages of learning the speed will be slow, and it is important to resist playing faster until things are really secure at the slow tempo.

The importance of slow practice cannot be overemphasised, but frequently this is not as productive as it should be. For real success here it is essential to practise the piece only slowly for several days so that the good habits you wish to establish are allowed to take root and grow. To play slow and then fast within the same practise session is rather like pulling the plant out of the pot every day to seeing how it is growing, or like opening the oven door to see how a soufflé is rising! It is much more profitable to leave things slow for several days and then gradually speed up over the next few days, never going faster than you can hear and feel every sound. The unconscious habits need time to establish and set.

The auditory and kinaesthetic senses are more important in playing than the visual one. Often if one watches great artists playing, when

they are at their most inspired, the eyes are closed or they look way into the distance rather than down at the keyboard. An excessive reliance on the visual sense can at worst lead to playing that is jerky and lacks flow as one is unable to let go and trust the hands to find their way with security. A useful way to improve this is to practise with a blindfold, or closed eyes, or else in a darkened room. By temporarily taking away the sense of sight, the other senses become heightened and will develop more acuity. Needless to say at first this can be very frustrating and a very slow tempo will be needed to enable the hands and ear to move along together.

As I have already said, a general rule for feeling in control, which will breed confidence, is to never play faster than you can hear and feel every sound. Last, but not least it is well to remember that the best learning happens when one is in a calm, happy and relaxed state and obtaining some pleasure and satisfaction from the learning process.

It goes without saying that it is important to develop a secure technique as this builds confidence, and also to develop one that enables us to play as naturally and freely as possible. There are quite a number of approaches that can do this, and it is always good to find one that focuses on tone production, suppleness, flexibility and unfixed positions. For the piano, as an example, the playing approach needs to be that the whole playing apparatus from the back through shoulders, elbows wrists and hands should be in a state of freedom to enable the fingertip to move rapidly and unimpeded to wherever it needs to be on the keys to produce the most controlled sound. The fingertip is the sensor of the key and we need to treat these very delicate and perceptive parts of us with much awareness and not use them to hit the key like little hammers as then we can only play as we have practised, lacking spontaneity, and will find it difficult to adapt to an instrument where the touch is somewhat different.

A flexible technique with flexible music making arises from within us, and is not something that can be superimposed from without. The concept of 'putting in' the expression belies the fact that the musical expression is already there, simply waiting to be drawn out! It is inherent in the musical composition, as the rose is inherent in the bush. We do not pin the roses on in the summer!

The only 'correct' hand position there can be eventually is one that can be altered most quickly and easily to serve the demands of the music. This is not really a position, but a muscular and nervous condition. As a matter of interest 'position' tells us little as the same 'position' can be attained by a number of different muscular coordinations, only one of which will allow full freedom.

### **Psychological reasons**

Thirdly, for some people there can be quite deeply embedded psychological reasons that can impede successful performance. Often people know their anxiety is out of proportion to the situation, but can do little to stop it. After all, playing a musical instrument is not a life threatening situation, so why do we attach to it the feelings we might have if we were faced with a hungry man-eating tiger?

Frequently these reasons may be caused by unresolved trauma held in the body. This can happen when there has been earlier in life a stressful experience, possibly forgotten, but maybe connected with some personally challenging event that has been unsuccessfully dealt with, and the energetic aspects connected with the fight/flight triggered as a response remain undischarged in the body. Modern thinking on trauma is that this will mean that the stimulus to produce adrenaline is continuously circulating without resolution at a deep level in the body and can be triggered to a conscious level by a

similarly demanding situation, thereby flooding the body in performance situations.

It may also be caused by issues around early experiences with achievement, fear of failure, desire for approval, low self-esteem etc. and these can often be traced back to inappropriate verbal or non-verbal messages from parents or teachers that may have almost become like unconscious mantras, influencing the way we conduct our whole life.

The big question is why are we unable to prevent it occurring - and the simple answer is that we are unable to prevent this occurring consciously because it is being triggered at an unconscious level, and it is not possible, however hard you try, to solve an unconscious problem with the conscious mind, otherwise most people would do so. This is why 'trying hard', that well known and much used exhortation, is usually unproductive, as it generally means doing more of what did not work the first time, and possibly reinforcing the problem. This is rather like putting the bucket again and again down an empty well because there is a belief that water should be there.

Sometimes when these problems are so deep rooted it can take much time and patience to change the situation, and maybe things will never be fully resolved. However improvement is nearly always possible, and maybe quite fast, if the desire for change is great enough and is coupled with an appropriate way of working.

### **How this can be helped**

This leads me into psychological ways to help oneself and to the main purpose of this web site which is to deal with these problems through indirect hypnosis, NLP and other awareness methods.

When we perform any activity, whether it is washing dishes, driving the car, or playing a Mozart sonata, in order to perform the task successfully we enter into a particular state of consciousness that makes us focus intently on some things and not on others. In hypnosis this would be called a trance state, and often people who go for hypnotherapy are surprised that a trance state is something that we all experience regularly many times on a daily basis rather than some strange rather sinister unfamiliar state involving loss of control and induced by the hypnotherapist. In hypnosis the trance state can be cultivated and deepened to relax the client to such a level that the unconscious mind can be addressed directly and new ways of perceiving and behaving that will benefit the client can be suggested at a deep level. The conscious mind can be diverted, or 'tied up' with another task to prevent it interfering or sabotaging what is being addressed directly to the unconscious mind, for this is the place that important changes can be made.

### **The Power of the Unconscious**

The power of the unconscious mind is vast – while with our prized conscious mind we can only deal with a few pieces of information at a time, the scientists tell us that the unconscious can deal with thousands. To make this point, just imagine what it would be like if we had to control with our conscious mind the multitude of simultaneous functions that keep us alive and balanced in our bodies. How do we know how to grow, to heal ourselves, to breathe when we are asleep, to digest food etc. etc.? All this goes on at a deeper level within us than our conscious mind. Just think of the many thousands of individual small movements that have to be made just to play a simple piece of music – how on earth do we know in which order to make them all and with what strength and at what time? It would be a super human task to detail each of these

movements consciously – and yet in performance they all just happen in the pre-ordained order by some means within us. This can point to the futility of trying to ‘rescue’ a performance when it gets into difficulty by using our very limited conscious mind. We have to be trusting enough to let go to the unconscious that knows far better than the conscious how to rectify things. Just think about tying a shoelace. At first, as a child we struggle with this and there are a lot of knots and then gradually we are able to do it faster and with greater efficiency. Today almost all of us can do this effortlessly - but think how it would be to have to explain all those detailed movements consciously to someone else.. This would take a much longer time- and the shoelace would probably end up in a knot once again!

If we practise properly for a sufficient amount of time, the movements of playing will be taken over by the unconscious mind and leave the conscious mind free to interpret. The great pianist Nikita Magaloff said of the Liszt Sonata ‘So many pianists get busy with a work like this – here come the octaves, now for the big chords etc. - I simply follow the line of the music’. The unconscious works best unaided, and if we try to interfere with it, things can go wrong. An interesting experiment to see how well musical patterns have been taught to and embedded in the unconscious can be made with getting students to play scales and arpeggios while distracting the conscious mind by reciting nursery rhymes in their own independent rhythm. This soon shows how well the unconscious has been taught and absorbed the patterns, for surely as adults we would have no problem reciting them while we tied our shoelaces!

The importance of following the line of the music cannot be overstressed –when we perform we need almost to be an observer, or our own audience, receiving our playing in a relaxed yet alert state – just hearing it come about in the most ideal way possible, but not

feeling that we are in there 'doing it'. By remaining thus we are able to be more in the moment of our playing and therefore present in each sound, which will give the performance personal authority, which will aid communication. The playing will then be creative and spontaneous, rather than reproductive.

### **Presence and performance**

The more present one is in the playing, the less anxiety there will be. This is because fear is only connected with the future 'what if...' and grief and guilt (other aspects that can wreck a performance) only with the past - 'if only'. If we focus firmly on the present moment and stay with our sound, there is no space to acknowledge any of these unwanted emotions that can limit us –and yet we are still alive and breathing (which is vital for good relaxation), coping and surviving on a moment to moment basis.

This is where the great problem arises in that our practising trance state is usually very different from our ideal performing trance state, and the former is usually much more firmly embedded within us. Because many of us do not experience the performing trance state very often, when it occurs it can feel very unfamiliar to us, and because both are connected to the same pieces of music and same physical activities it is very easy to fall from the performing state back into the judgemental practising state, or to find oneself straddling them both, often with disastrous consequences. The practising state of necessity involves planning and assessment, activities that take us into the past and future in our minds, but in the performing state we need to be able simply to focus on the line of music as it unfolds and to be free enough to be one with what we are creating. We all have an over voice in our head that is like an inner critic that can at times be very destructive and there are ways

that its power over us can be lessened. The Golden Rule for the inner critic is 'before or after, but never during'.

It is often the unfamiliarity of the performing trance state that causes the problem. It feels unfamiliar, because we usually are 'trying' to reproduce exactly what we have achieved in the practising state, which, in any case, is not really a very good idea, as spontaneity will be lacking - and also it is actually impossible!

For many people, for every one time they experience the performing trance state, they have had hundreds of experiences of the practising trance state, and so it is not surprising that as both are connected with playing our instrument that the more familiar one will try to kick in when we start to feel different, and upset the free flow needed in the performing state.

Most of us do not get enough performing experience, and sadly many performances are 'one offs'. Yet, Richter said that it was only after performing the Mozart A minor Sonata a few dozen times that he started to feel that he really knew it!

So a practical way to help oneself is to recreate the performing state as many times as possible before the actual event and in that way this state will not be so unfamiliar when it arises. This can be done by frequently playing to others in the weeks before the performance (it is important to be ready well in time), and not just once at the pre-performance teachers run through. One can also record oneself frequently as the microphone can perform the function of an ear to a certain extent (better for rhythm than tone) and audience. Practise the whole occasion – dress up, walk on, take a bow and play the pieces through in the order of the programme acknowledging imagined applause at the end of each piece. If there are no people to listen, just line up the cushions or teddy bears and play to them. Only

when you have finished do you begin to assess the event, and this should be solely from the point of view of colour, communication and how much you felt connected in the pieces. Schedule exact date and times to do this.

### **Extra help - and how I can help.**

The various techniques from awareness methods such as, gestalt, mindfulness, Neuro Linguistic Programming etc. are all very useful here but are all enhanced when experienced in a state of hypnosis. Hypnosis acts rather like a glue that will embed the ideas from these techniques more firmly within. It is quite possible to break up or change very fixed mind sets and substitute more healthy and productive ones, sometimes over a very short space of time. While this is never a substitute for learning and practise nor will it turn you into a genius, it will enable you to play to your maximum potential for the work you have put in, in any stressful situation.

I can offer personal individual sessions for this in Glasgow, and also offer an on-line service where following an hour long session via Skype or phone I am able to provide you with a personalised hypnosis CD specific to your needs, and should you wish, for a specific occasion. To gain full benefit from this you will need to listen to this on a daily basis for several weeks before the event in a relaxed state, either sitting comfortably or lying down to allow the suggestions to be fully absorbed by the unconscious. You do not have to focus on the words on the CD but just be aware of the sound of my voice. After all I will not be talking to your conscious mind, so it is best if it does not pay much attention otherwise there is the potential for sabotage.

I would add that this is suitable for most people, but should there be a history of mental illness it is probably not for you. Also since a

degree of self-responsibility and intention is needed for success, it is also not suitable for young children.

By listening to your CD over time, you may find that gradually it affects the way in which you work, how much work you do, how you feel about performance etc. etc. Sometimes benefits are dramatic, sometimes they seep in slowly. It is not possible to predict how your unconscious will work for you. Because the changes can happen gradually on a daily basis, you may not be aware of them until quite a lot later, rather like the way in which you are unaware of your hair growing or of gaining height. Because this is happening on an unconscious level, you may not understand how or why the changes have occurred, but just that there has been an improvement, all, or much of the problem has disappeared and you have, without understanding how or why, become in some ways a different person.

Bernard King – [www.confidentmusicalperformance.co.uk](http://www.confidentmusicalperformance.co.uk)