

A Breathtaking Performance

yoga for stage fright

When I was studying opera in college, I would sneak into the music building at midnight to practice—just before the security guard whizzed up on her golf cart to lock the outside entrances. It was early fall in rural Ohio, and the building—which thomped and thudded and squeaked and wailed all day—was finally silent.

I was one of those paralyzed perfectionists—I didn't want a soul to hear me sing until I had everything right, and that, I believed, would take at least a decade. Ironically, I was told that I had a beautiful voice. I won a vocal scholarship with no previous training and starred in operettas, musicals, recitals—but mostly, I thought I was awful.

Every night, alone, I practiced my routine. But no matter how much I rehearsed, I never felt ready for the stage. Instead, I felt like a deer stumbling into oncoming traffic on a dark road. The scene is the same every time: I blink at the blinding spotlights, the sea of faces beyond them—then stage fright smashes into me like an 18-wheeler. My heart is a frantic drum; my belly, a riot of butterflies. My breath is caged and my mouth is full of sand. My limbs, on the other hand, tremble like leaves; my hands quiver and my knees begin to quake.

BY SHANNON SEXTON



Far away in a distant land, I hear the pianist launch into the introduction of my cheerful aria, so I fake a happy face. I'm afraid I'll forget the scripted movements, the music, the words (my God, the words!). But despite my fears, I switch into automatic pilot, unreeling line after line like a fax machine. But my voice, which can normally fill a large auditorium unmiked, becomes as breathless as a gust of summer wind, and I'm so overwhelmed by anxiety that I can't put my heart and soul into the song—I'm just trying to get to the end.

Although I had studied classical yoga for three years, I never thought to use any of the practices to calm my nerves before going on stage. And after a string of low-grade performances, I resigned myself to

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never performing as well as I rehearsed. Recently, however, I met music therapist Dr. Louise Montello and learned that the yoga tradition has a lot to offer anxious musicians. And because stage fright can hijack people from all walks of life—actors, athletes, teachers, public speakers—the various mind-body techniques of yoga can help anyone suffering from a bad case of nerves.

According to Montello, "Performance anxiety is a psychophysiological reaction triggered by a person's fear of being harshly evaluated during a performance. In the case of musicians, the performer's anxiety overwhelms the joy and pleasure in playing music, and that leads to scarier bodily sensations—pounding heart, dry mouth, sweaty palms, shaky hands. Those symptoms interfere with the performer's ability to play with confidence."

Do these symptoms sound familiar? According to Gail Stewart, the author of *Phobias*,

more than 50% of Americans suffer from glossophobia, the fear of public speaking, and many people rank this fear even higher than their fear of death. And in the music world, Montello points out, recent surveys conducted with musicians from around the world indicate that 75% have at least one performance-related medical problem, including stage fright; 25% experience severe performance anxiety; and approximately 20% take beta blockers to deal with their symptoms. (For string players, it's 50%.)

Performance anxiety has crippled musical legends like Barbra Streisand, who refused to give live concerts for twenty-seven years after once forgetting words at a concert in New York's Central Park. Carly Simon, Billy Joel, Alanis Morissette, and Mariah Carey have all admitted to struggling with it too.

"Although stage fright is normal and natural to a degree," says Montello, "when it becomes debilitating something must be done."

In her fifteen years of clinical research on the subject at New York University, Montello found that musicians "were significantly less anxious and more musical" after integrating systematic relaxation, pranayama, and meditation into their daily routine. "Most stressed-out musicians experience a mind-body split," she says, "where the mind is not aware of what the body is feeling and the body is not aware of what the mind is thinking. Yoga techniques help bridge the gap."

Montello has devoted her career to developing treatment and prevention programs for musicians with stage fright and other medical conditions, incorporating yoga practices into an eclectic program now known as Musicians' Wellness. Founded in 2000, this New York City-based non-profit corporation has helped hundreds of musicians become more resilient, healthy, centered performers, and to reconnect with the heart of their music, which is what drew them to the profession in the first place.

scientifically speaking

The first step to overcoming performance anxiety, says Montello, is to understand the autonomic nervous

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system (ANS) and how it responds to stress. Then, by practicing a few yoga techniques, performers and public speakers can foster a sense of peace and well-being before a show or a speech instead of wrestling with tension and fear.

The ANS is responsible for controlling the body's involuntary processes—heart and respiratory rates, blood pressure, body temperature, etc.—and has two components: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), commonly known as the fight-or-flight response, and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), often referred to as the relaxation response.

When our brain detects danger, the SNS shifts into high gear, unleashing a chain of physiological responses that prepare the body to fight or run: as adrenaline courses through our veins, our heart rate and blood pressure rise; our mind becomes hyperalert; our breathing, shallow; and our muscles, tense. Whether it's a shark attack or a piano audition, our nervous system flips the switch to the same survival response.

But in the case of performance anxiety, the “danger” is psychological—a perception that something crucial to us is threatened: our sense of self. The problem is that

the body and infuses us with a sense of well-being. “Yoga can keep the parasympathetic nervous system in control,” says Montello, “so there's no room for the

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instead of protecting us from a bad performance, the fight-or-flight reaction increases our chances of failure. Who can perform well when the body is on red alert?

The good news is that only one branch of the ANS can function at a time. When the PNS is activated, the heart rate drops; blood pressure falls; respiration slows and deepens. Blood flow returns to the core of

fight-or-flight reaction. It will rest the body, calm the mind, and integrate your energy.”

the breath

Montello says that breath work is the best way to overcome performance anxiety. “When a musician—or anyone facing an audience—learns that he can





A musician's story

modulate his thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations by working with his breath, he regains his sense of control over his body during a performance.”

Surprisingly, most people don't know that breathing slowly and deeply from the diaphragm is the easiest way to activate the relaxation response. “As long as you are breathing this way,” says Montello, “you can access a feeling of calm and balance even when you are confronted with an unpleasant situation. But if you allow your breath to become shallow, anxiety creeps in, your muscles tighten, and your mind begins to race and spin.” When this agitated breathing is prolonged and we're on stage, we defend against the audience instead of opening up to it.

Once her clients have mastered diaphragmatic breathing, Montello recommends three pranayamas to help calm performance anxiety.

2:1 breathing. This practice involves exhaling for twice as long as you inhale. According to

Rachel Nicolazzo (a.k.a. Rachel Z), a world-class jazz pianist who is currently blasting keyboards across the globe for rock icon Peter Gabriel, approached Musicians' Wellness in 2001 for help with her stage fright and severe tendonitis. At the time she was playing in legendary jazz saxophonist Wayne Shorter's band and had just participated in the recording of *Highlights*. Because the band hadn't played live together yet, she was extremely nervous—and she was injured.

As part of Montello's initial assessment, she observed Rachel perform at a Greenwich village club called The Bottom Line. “The music was loud, driving, and filled with tension,” Montello recalls, “and there was an air of competitiveness among the players. Rachel seemed to be playing defensively, pushing away the other musicians with her improvisations, as opposed to welcoming them in. She was pounding on the keyboards just to be heard.”

Montello saw that Rachel's tendonitis and stage fright were intimately linked; her body language gave away everything—Rachel's breath was locked, her facial expressions strained, her shoulders hiked up toward her ears, and her hands clenched like claws on the keyboard.

Montello's research, 2:1 breathing is the number one technique for stopping stage fright in its tracks. She recommends doing it for 2 to 4 minutes daily and for 5 minutes before a performance to ground and center

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yourself. This practice decreases nerve activity in the SNS and turns on the relaxation response. It quiets the nervous system, stabilizes the mind, and fosters a sense of serenity.

“Ten years ago,” Montello recalls, “I led performance wellness seminars for kids at Laguardia High School for Performing Arts (where the movie *Fame* was

shot). Today I run into my former students, who are now well-known performers around Manhattan. They tell me they still practice 2:1 breathing and that it has changed their life.”

Ronit Azoulay, a professional flutist, has practiced 2:1 breathing religiously for six years. Although she never had debilitating stage fright, she was always nervous during a performance. “Mentally I would feel okay,” she recalls, “but my body would freak out. I would sit down to play and think, ‘I hope that hand doesn’t start shaking!’ There was this weird, frustrating disconnect. Now I do 2:1 breathing before every performance and there are no surprises. I have no shakes, my body’s under control, and I enjoy my performances more.”

Brahmari. This technique produces a bee-like drone that resonates in the nasal cavity as the practi-

Although she was an elegant improviser, she performed like a stiff robot. Her eyes roved around the room, and it was clear that she couldn’t focus. “Technically she was amazing,” says Montello, “but creatively she was cut off from her music.” Rachel’s problems were fear and contraction, and they were taking a toll on her performance—and her body.

Over three months, Montello gave Rachel a series of exercises that fostered body-mind awareness so the pianist could reverse the holding patterns in her body and the anxiety in her mind. “For Rachel, it was all about breathing,” Montello says. “Deep diaphragmatic breathing helped her reconnect with her body, thoughts, and emotions, and play from a more connected place.” Montello also taught Rachel joints and glands exercises to relax her upper body; *nadi shodhanam* and *kapalabhati* for her anxiety and lack of concentration; and eventually, she taught her meditation.

Now, Rachel practices the pranayama techniques and hatha exercises at the piano every day before she rehearses. She also does them, along with meditation, before gigs. “Of all the training I received from Musicians’

Wellness,” says Rachel, “the breathing techniques have helped me the most when I’m preparing for shows. So when I’m going to a sound check at, say, the Montreaux Jazz Festival in Switzerland and I’m playing next to genius musicians like Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea, I have to get centered. I use the breathing techniques and the yoga stretches to help me relax. They help me be myself and complement the other musicians with my music instead of trying to compete with them.”

Nadi shodhanam and kapalabhati also keep her inner critic at bay. “There’s this critic that pops out and sits in the front row of my brain,” she says. “He’s like, ‘You should quit. You’ll never be as good as Keith Jarrett or Herbie Hancock.’ So rather than respond to him I have to relax. Alternate nostril breathing really helps, because it sets me up to feel confident. I started using it while rehearsing with the Wayne Shorter band, and I noticed a huge difference. And kapalabhati helps me calm down so I don’t feel like I’m going to explode. Now, when I’m playing with Peter Gabriel at huge venues like Madison Square Garden, I really don’t get nervous, and my inner critic is gone.” ●

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tioner breathes smoothly and deeply. According to various yoga scriptures, *brahmari* clears the mind and soothes the nervous system.

“The idea of using sound to relax the body-mind is very appealing to musicians,” says Montello. “Some musicians practice *brahmari* with their bands before rehearsals and performances as a way of attuning each other to a deeper musical pulse or vibration. *Brahmari* has a purifying effect on the atmosphere.”

Nadi shodhanam. Also known as alternate nostril breathing, this practice involves deliberately and rhythmically changing the flow of air from one nostril to another according to a specific formula. *Nadi shodhanam* calms, balances, and regulates energy, encourages the elimination of wastes, and cleanses the *nadis*, or subtle energy channels, making way for a more vital flow of energy.

Professional tuba player Marty Hodapp, who attended a Musicians’ Wellness seminar in 2002, practices *nadi shodhanam* (along with 2:1 breathing) in his car before he even steps foot into a venue. Hodapp suffered from stage fright for thirty years and tried all sorts of quick fixes, including beta blockers (which gave him chest pains) before finding relief through *pranayama*. “My wife said I was always on edge,” he remembers. “Now I’m more relaxed, and in a lot of ways I’m playing better than I ever have.”

the mind

Witnessing. An overactive inner critic feeds performance anxiety. The solution, Montello says, is to step back and witness your thoughts. “When you become the witness you start to gain control over your fears,” she adds. “You can consciously choose what you want to believe about yourself and your music [or speech or performance], so you’re no longer giving your power to internalized judges like your fourth-grade piano teacher or the scathing critic from *The New York Times*.”

Witnessing can help performers slowly discover and change their negative thinking patterns. Montello encourages us to remind ourselves that the audience is not going to tear us from limb to limb. At worst they might space out or doze. “The only danger,” she says, “is that we may not be perfect.”

Reframing. Once you recognize your negative thought patterns, Montello says, you can reframe them in a positive way by taking a *bhakti* (devotional) approach to your performance. As Montello explains, “This type of mental reframing will help musicians return to their original purpose for playing music—to commune with their spiritual nature, and to share that



answer: ‘I am here to uplift the audience and touch their hearts. This performance is not about me; it’s about my giving a creative gift to humanity.’ So instead of seeing the audience as a panel of scowling judges (even if you’re on an important audition and they *are* scowling!) mentally return to

your deeper purpose. This will change your anxiety into joy, hope, and faith in yourself.”

Practice 2:1 breathing for 3 to 5 minutes.

Say your mantra. Although it’s not practical to plop into a meditation pose backstage, you can silently repeat a mantra as you go about your business, touching up your makeup, fixing your clothes, or even pacing around. If you have a personal mantra, mentally hear it

“I am not fitted to give concerts. The audience intimidates me, I feel choked by its breath, paralyzed by its curious glances, struck dumb by all those strange faces.”

—Frederic Chopin

experience and joy with others. Performing from a *bhakti* perspective can derail the habitually negative thoughts, fears, bodily sensations that are responsible for stage fright.”

a backstage routine

Montello recommends that people with stage fright practice *asana*, *pranayama*, and meditation daily to lower their stress levels and make them less susceptible to an automatic fight-or-flight response. They can also try the following routine to activate the relaxation response before facing an audience.

Affirm your purpose. Montello says: “Ask yourself, ‘Why am I here?’ And give yourself a positive

for several minutes, or try the universal *so hum* mantra. On an inhalation, mentally hear the sound “soooo,” and on an exhalation, hear the sound “hummmm.”

According to the yoga tradition, *so hum* is the sound of the breath, the manifestation of vital energy. By deliberately allowing the mind, breath, and mantra to flow together, we create harmony at various levels of our being and disentangle ourselves from the trivial concerns of worldly affairs.

your turn

Can you see yourself performing under calmer circumstances? Picture it now: You step onto the stage and look out past the flood of lights into the sea of (friendly!) faces. You’ve established your purpose, you’ve practiced your 2:1 breathing, but you’re still feeling anxious. As you sit down at the piano or approach the podium, take a few deep, diaphragmatic breaths, say your mantra, and from that centered perspective, begin. ●

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To read instructions for practicing 2:1 breathing, *brahmari*, and *nadi shodhanam*, visit yiextra.org and click on “Pranayama for Your Stage Fright.”