

The Psychology Of Performing – Part 1

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Introduction

Piping, Drumming or playing in a Pipe Band has long been dominated by competition. Actually performing in the presence of an informed audience also forms a large part of what we do. There are equally the same pressures on the performer when playing in front of ones peers as there is in competing. Many players fail to perform at their peak in front of an audience due to the distractions around them or those created in their own mind. Many performances also fall down when preparation is lacking. The most confident of performers will not play at their best on a poorly maintained instrument, or when their performance is inadequately prepared and rehearsed. On the other hand a well rehearsed performance on an immaculate instrument can crumble, due to the performer being nervous or inexperienced. Let's take a look at some of the basics of putting together a performance both physically and mentally.

Presentation

The goal is obviously to present yourself in a confident manner. Start by looking smart and gaining the attention of the audience and the judges. You look professional, your uniform is immaculate, you are groomed appropriately, you have good bearing. If you look good, you feel good about your appearance. Everything about you says that you know what you are doing. You look and feel confident. A good start.

Instrument

Well before the event, look at the maintenance of your instrument. It should look clean and be well set up. Your instrument should be able to sound great for the length of the performance and you should practice under similar conditions to the performance. (There is no point in having an instrument that goes great in a small heated room at home, but stops when you get into a cold hall) . If you have an instrument that is well set up, feels comfortable to play and sounds good your performance will be a lot better than one where you are worrying about unsteady drones, a squealing chanter, or a rattling snare.

Preparation

Before attending your competition or performance, have a good idea what you are going to play, and have the pieces thoroughly memorised. Be well rehearsed and have the stamina to perform at your peak. If you can only just get through an MSR before your lips start to go, your shoulder feels like it is coming out of it's socket or you feel like dropping your drum, you are hardly going to play at your best. When rehearsing, play more than you have to in the actual performance. Play your March twice, Strathspey twice into the Reel twice. For a half hour recital, tune up and practice for an hour. If you can't do it, you either have to look at your instrument set up, or improve your stamina. You will be a more confident performer if you know that you can do a lot more than required of you whilst actually performing. Play in the jacket you are going to use, there is no point rehearsing in a t-shirt, then putting on a jacket that causes your bag to slip, or catches your sticks. You are playing well, you are comfortable during the performance, your instrument is going well and you look and feel good. Something is still missing?

Experience

You haven't competed for two years, or played in public since the beer tent session after that Pipe Band competition last year and you are now starting the ground of your least favourite Piobaireachd in front of an audience and a judge you have never seen before. You have done all the preparation above, but so has the guy after you who has been competing all season, has been given his favourite tune and played in front of the same judge at last weeks contest. There is no substitute for experience. It is a lot easier if you feel comfortable about performing and can lean back and enjoy what you are doing and really put some music into your performance. Those who are experienced at performing at numerous venues, in front of different audiences obviously feel more comfortable at a new place than someone who plays just as frequently, but only at one venue.

Visualisation

There is no substitute for experience, but there are ways to make the psychological aspect of an unfamiliar place or experience a little easier. Gold Medallist Donald Bain once told me that he imagined he was competing at Inverness whenever he practiced (Complete with audience and judges). " I always seemed to play well there", he said. Well, is it a wonder, in his own mind he probably played there hundreds of times. Even if you take a look at the area where you are performing before you tune up, you will at least become more familiar with this environment, and then you can imagine playing in it when running through your tunes.

Some performers lie in bed imagining the venue, running through the performance perfectly in their mind, in a completely relaxed environment. This has to be backed up by some ability to actually do what you imagine, but does help to associate being relaxed with the actual performance and helps solidify what you are trying to achieve in your own mind.

Auto Suggestion

While imagining the performance in a quiet relaxed environment it is possible to make a few handy little suggestions to yourself. " I am calm and relaxed when performing", "I will concentrate during the entire performance", whatever you feel will help. You should repeat it daily, at least ten times each phrase, and keep it positive. " I will not get nervous" is nowhere near as effective as being "calm and relaxed", as the word nervous is reinforcing the negative emotion you wish to extract from the performance. "I will not make numerous mistakes", again is not as good as reinforcing your ability to concentrate. Self fulfilling prophecy I believe is a fact. "I always break down in this part", or " this is where I made that huge mistake last time", these types of negative reinforcements are hardly going to help, and should be overcome by positive suggestion. How many times do we hear someone say, " I talked myself out of that one"?

Destroying The Negative

So you do all the right stuff and you still break down. In fact it sticks in your memory and every time you play the same tune in public, your heart sinks at the same point, you remember how embarrassing it was and sure enough, it happens again. Your mind wandered, you lost concentration, you broke into a sweat and you fell into a screaming heap. You take the long walk out of the room, and if you had been playing cricket, there would be an angry duck following you on the bottom of the television screen.

In your relaxed environment, when you are going over the days performance, recall in detail what happened. You need to identify what went through your mind at the time and learn from it. Put that recollection onto paper in your mind, screw it up and imagine throwing it in a bin! (This can also be done physically). Write the negative details of the performance on paper, screw it up, tear it up, and throw it in a bin). You can also imagine the performance turning into a cloud and the sun coming out, making you warm and causing the cloud to evaporate into non-existence. This may sound silly to some, but it is a game to train your mind. Athletes and serious musicians have been doing this type of training for years.

Getting Set To Perform

You are all dressed up. You have your instrument tuned to perfection. You have fully planned and rehearsed your performance and your knees are shaking, you are sweating and your heart is pounding at a hundred miles an hour. You are not going to play well, you feel tight in the chest and hands and want to run through the nearest exit. What do you do? Imagine a number between 0 and 10 where you perform at your best. 0 is asleep and 10 is blind panic. Performing music needs an element of calmness and relaxation. You may select for example a four, whereas a 100m sprinter may select nine or ten. Now imagine what number represents how you currently feel. It might be eight for example. Well picture the eight in your own mind changing to a seven, then slowly to a six and so on until it gets to four. Your breathing slows, your heart rate slows, your mind is on the numbers and you feel ready to go on!

There are a number of breathing exercises that can help. Breathing out lowers your heart rate. Try taking a deep breath counting to three as you breath in, then breath out to the count of six and totally empty your lungs.

Remember that being calm and the effects of adrenaline are not opposites. Adrenaline gives you the energy to perform and can be harnessed to improve your performance. A few positive last minute suggestions, nice and relaxed and hopefully a great performance follows.

Conclusion

These are just a few points that I believe go to making up a solid, confident performance. The simple little psychological games that help you get your mind ready need to be practised and get better with time. Constant reinforcement of positive suggestions and frequent visualisation is required. You cannot make yourself play better than you are capable of, neither can you make up for lack of preparation. Know you can do a great performance by practising until you get it right and then use the above suggestions to ensure that you don't spoil your own good work.

No-one else makes the mistakes for you, no-one else loses concentration for you, no-one else causes your hands to clamp up tight. Remember you are totally in control of how well you are going to perform, and I hope the above suggestions help to bring out the best in your playing, when it is needed !