

HOW TO CONQUER PERFORMANCE SHAKES PERFORMANCE WITHOUT BETA BLOCKERS

© By Ruth Bonetti

Is there any aspect more dreaded by performers than the shakes? Shaky hands appear to rank highest, though some wind and brass players complain of lips quivering. These symptoms of nerves seem painfully obvious to the performer. That much of the audience is oblivious seems unbelievable and small comfort.

Most performers agree that the more we try to control shaking, the worse it gets. And that expecting or dreading shaky fingers or voice usually precipitates their reality.

The Medical Fix

A quick-fix is drugs like beta blockers, administered under medical supervision, but their side-effects often negate their usefulness. Beta blockers are drugs which may be prescribed by a doctor or psychiatrist to block the adrenalin reaction and anxiety symptoms. They slow the heart rate, reduce sweating and tremors, alleviate a dry mouth or the jitters that is, they do not stop nerves, but they lessen their symptoms.

Beta blockers are not addictive, although their use may become a habit if the sufferer comes to rely on them. They should only be taken on medical advice, adhering to the exact prescription as, if abused, they can be dangerous for people prone to diabetes, certain heart conditions, bronchitis, depression, hay fever and asthma.

But Beware the Down-Side

Some have noted side effects including: dizziness, light-headedness, nightmares, hallucinations, lethargy, insomnia, visual disturbances, diarrhoea, drowsiness, loss of appetite, cold hands and feet, and even loss of hair!

Try out their suitability well before a performance. It would be shattering to discover a previously unsuspected cardiac or asthma condition while onstage.

Pianist Carson Dron's experience with beta blockers backs this advice:

I had a terrible problem with the shakes while at university, so a doctor recommended that I try beta blockers. They did stop the shaking and gave me confidence to face performance again. They took me over my barrier and, after three or four months, I thought, 'I don't need to worry about my nerves – I don't need the beta blockers any more.' So I stopped taking them.

But I do know a lot of performers who rely on them and I would advise people to be very careful. I did find it more unpleasant playing when taking beta blockers, as they made me feel cold, detached from the audience. My mind wandered and

I had concentration lapses. But, yes, it was a positive experience in that I overcame my fear of shaking.

Australian violist and composer Brett Dean says:

I hear of students who take beta blockers before relatively minor stresses such as a music lesson. Our society tends to offer a pill for every problem. Thus, they tell the problem to be quiet rather than find a solution.

At one stage, I let the nerves grow too much, but what I learned will stand me in good stead. Now, I might still shake, but that doesn't matter. If I stop being nervous before a performance, then it is time to stop playing.

Swedish flautist Jan Westerlund makes a valid point:

When I used beta blockers, I played quite well technically, but my feelings were lost. Why should we play music without feelings?

Violinist/conductor Antoni Bonetti says:

At one stage I tried beta blockers. Physically, they improved my muscular control of the violin bow, though I also experienced cold sweats. I didn't feel particularly confident as my anxious thoughts were still with me. Eventually, I realised that on some of these occasions I had flu symptoms, which weakened my strength of mind. This caused me to dwell on negative past concert issues. The sickness exacerbated insecurities. I found that by maintaining good health, I was able to deal with the issues without the use of beta blockers.

Practical Alternatives

So, let's look for some positive, natural ways to combat the shakes. A paradoxical approach often works here. Rather than fight against shaking, allow yourself to do so. Give yourself permission to shake. Even, play with reverse psychology: try to increase the shaking by thinking: "So, you want to shake, fingers. Well, go on – shake! Lets get it over with."

Singer, Rhonda Bruce, based in Melbourne Australia, utilized this approach:

At my first appearance at Covent Garden I was so nervous that my knees were literally shaking. I conquered my fear by telling my knees: "You go right ahead and shake all you like - you can't stop me knowing I can sing." And in fact as soon as I started to sing, I was fine.

Jittery fingers may be a product of tense muscles or of too much energy as a result of the adrenalin rush. Before going on-stage, vigorously shake your fingers and jump or run on the spot to ease wobbly legs. Rub your hands together briskly. Similarly, squeeze your fingers into a tight fist then release.

Mind Power

Another solution is to direct your thoughts onto another aspect of your

performance. Our minds just cannot think of two things at once. We can deliberately choose to focus on our strengths instead of our weaknesses. Conversely, some performers consciously make their hands tremble, their knees shake or their palms sweat as a way of trying to *produce* the symptom rather than conceal it.

Because I have so much mental energy going on in performance it helps me to focus on one finger as it's virtually impossible to think about all of them at once. In my case I concentrate on curving the left-hand fourth finger. I also find it helpful to practice slowly and correctly, feeling the passage through to form an accurate memory. In later performances I remember how that felt.

Clarinetist and guitarist, Karlin Love

Diversionsary Tactics

Another tactic is to focus your attention elsewhere, away from the shaky fingers or arm. This was proved by a student at an American summer music program, John Allegar, a talented clarinetist and organist. In our coaching session he admitted to suffering every symptom possible when performing. Soon after his session, he performed creditably. I congratulated him on his poise and calm; if he experienced any jitters they certainly were not obvious to the audience. "Oh," he said, "I did have shaky hands in the beginning, then I remembered what you said and focused on my toes. But then they started to shake a little. So I brought my attention back onto my hands, and by then the piece was over."

And don't forget that wonderful cure for all forms of nerves; slow deep breathing before a performance works wonders!

© Ruth Bonetti, 2005

(Adapted from *Confident Music Performance*, © 2003, Words and Music)

About the Author

Ruth Bonetti's books *Confident Music Performance*; *Fix the fear of facing an audience* and *Practice is a Dirty Word; How to clean up your act* (Words and Music) are available via Allans Music or on-line at www.RuthBonetti.com Similar, practical advice for public speakers is in her *Don't Freak Out - Speak Out; Public Speaking with confidence*.

For developing clarinetists she has published *Enjoy Playing the Clarinet* (Oxford University Press) and was Editorial Consultant for the Australian Music Examinations Board Clarinet Grade Books.

A Music Performance M.Mus graduate of the University of Queensland, she taught clarinet and pedagogy at the Conservatorium of Music, Griffith University from 1982-1996, but is now a full time speaker and writer, travelling extensively to present her seminars and keynotes. Ruth's music and speaking career, helping performers to communicate with confidence, has taken her around Australia (at most leading universities and schools), Europe (speaking German, French and Swedish) and the United

States, where her seminars were repeated by popular demand, and she was invited to return the next year. Her Professional Development topics for music educators include “How to Motivate Students to Practice” and “Prepare for a Confident Performance.” Her articles have appeared in Britain, America and Australia, including The Australian, The Courier Mail, The Sunday Mail, Women’s Network Magazine; and numerous music journals (Music Teacher, Australian Music Teacher, Australian Clarinet and Saxophone, Australian Society for Music Education, The International Clarinet Society journal and Clarinet and Saxophone UK).

Ruth Bonetti writes a complimentary fortnightly E-Zine for teachers, *Music Educators’ Energiser* and the weekly *MusoMotivator* (nominal charge). Register at <http://ruthbonetti.com/ezines.php3> or email ruth@ruthbonetti.com
PO Box 422 The Gap Queensland 4061 Australia
Phone: +61 7 3300 2286
Mobile phone: 0411 782 404 Fax. +61 7 3300 5786

Reproduction available with permission

You are free to reproduce this for other publications, provided you:

- 1: Reproduce the article in full.
- 2: Acknowledge as the source of the article:

Ruth Bonetti- Creates Confidence

- 3: Include the above By-line
4. Include the ESN URL <http://www.ruthbonetti.com> as the reference.