

A Phenomenological Study: Forms, Causes, and Coping Strategies for Music Performance Anxiety Among Pianists

Nerilyn Beratio, Mariella Bugtai, Naryle Enerio, Yuhe Su, Brainy Bissil, Khristine Mendoza

Adventist University of the Philippines
neriberatio@gmail.com

Abstract: *This research study investigates the forms, causes, and coping strategies employed by pianists dealing with music performance anxiety, considering factors such as the demanding nature of performances, the scrutiny of audiences, and the cultivation of a constructive mindset. It articulates their experience of anxiety during piano performances, identifies perceived causes of music performance anxiety, and sheds light on the coping mechanisms employed by these musicians. This phenomenological study is anchored in Yerkes-Dodson Law by Yerkes and Dodson (1908), the study involves ten purposely selected participants and employs a phenomenological framework. Data collection involves semi-structured interviews, with subsequent verbatim transcription and translation, followed by thematic analysis. The results illuminate that participants encounter anxiety on cognitive, physical, and behavioral levels, stemming from factors such as inadequate preparation, self-imposed expectations, societal pressure, performance environments, and the complexity of the music performed. Furthermore, participants employ a range of coping strategies, including self-preparation, building self-esteem, seeking social affirmation, musical preparation and focus, self-motivation, and seeking spiritual assurance. These findings contribute valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of music performance anxiety and provide a foundation for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms for musicians facing such challenges. This research emphasizes the importance of addressing performance anxiety in different facets of the musical domain. For piano students, understanding and confronting the roots of anxiety are essential for effective preparation and personalized coping mechanisms.*

Keywords: *coping strategies, music performance anxiety, pianists*

I. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a mental health disorder characterized by feelings of fear, worry, and unease that can be persistent and excessive and can interfere with daily activities and relationships. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorder in the United States, affecting over 40 million adults every year (APA, 2017). Nobody is immune to anxiety; whether they are musicians or not, everyone has felt it occasionally. It is referred to as nervousness by some people.

Musicians commonly experience music performance anxiety (MPA), whether playing for a solo recital or accompanying a soloist or orchestra, a pianist has a significant probability of feeling anxious. When that emotion lingers, the musician's performance quality declines despite how many times they have practiced their pieces. No matter how much or how little experience they have the musicians will undoubtedly feel anxious. This situation may be due in part to the high stakes involved in professional performance, as well as the increased pressure to maintain a certain level of skill and proficiency. MPA is always present, even in highly

trained musicians. To perform music at the highest levels involves great competitiveness. When a performer goes through a major personal challenge, achievement is no longer dependent on a high-level technical mastery. Instead, the psychological aspect of the performer also has a factor in the performance (Philippe et al., 2022).

Musicians often exaggerate the negative aspects of social situations when performing in front of an audience because they are worried about getting negative criticism. The significant diagnostic signs for this condition include poor self-esteem, hypersensitivity to criticism and fear of performance situation. Although there are existing studies about anxiety coping strategies, there are few studies referring to pianists. Correspondingly, performance anxiety remains a significant problem for many pianists (Matei and Ginsborg, 2017).

Nevertheless, due to the lack of studies related to this concern, the researchers became interested in investigating how various pianists deal with performance anxiety. The study sought to identify the forms of performance anxiety experienced by the pianists and addressed the coping strategies of pianists' anxiety when they are performing and how they deal with the release of anxiety to guarantee the high quality of their performance. This study answered the following questions: 1) How do participants of the study describe their experience of anxiety when having piano performances? 2) What do the participants perceive as causes of their music performance anxiety? 3) How did the participants cope with music performance anxiety? The study focused on the experience of pianists with performance anxiety and their coping mechanisms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is a topic of interest in musicology, psychology, and neuroscience. It refers to the fear or apprehension musicians experience when performing in front of an audience, affecting performers of all ages, genders, and experience levels (Fernholz et al., 2019). MPA arises due to the high demands placed on musicians, impacting both their psychological and physical states (Thompson, 2017).

Symptoms of MPA

Symptoms of MPA are typically categorized into physiological, mental, and behavioral domains. Physiologically, musicians may experience shallow breathing, heart palpitations, shaking, sweating, dizziness, nausea, and digestive problems. Mentally, cognitive symptoms include narrowed attention, memory difficulties, distorted thoughts, and poor interpretation of the piece, while emotional symptoms encompass stress, worry, insecurity, and panic. Behaviorally, MPA can manifest muscle tension, technical errors, and difficulties maintaining posture during performance (Burin & Osorio, 2017; Derakhshan et al., 2019).

Key contributors to MPA

Several factors contribute to MPA, including insufficient preparation, self-imposed pressure, and social expectations. Lack of adequate practice increases discomfort and anxiety during performance, often creating a cycle of heightened nervousness (Ryan et al., 2021). Self-doubt, or a lack of confidence in one's abilities, further exacerbates anxiety (Stevenson, 2017). Social pressure from audiences can intensify these effects, linking MPA closely with social anxiety.

Coping Strategies

Effective coping strategies involve mindset management, self-preparation, and disciplined practice. Focusing on preparedness helps musicians handle nervousness and improve performance outcomes (Pecen et al., 2018). These strategies allow performers to manage thoughts, emotions, and stress during anxiety-inducing situations.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the Yerkes-Dodson Law, which suggests an optimal level of anxiety enhances performance (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Performance anxiety is influenced by individual characteristics, task difficulty, and context. Effective coping strategies include anxiety management training, attention focusing, cognitive systematic desensitization, exposure to performance situations, positive self-statements, and spiritual practices such as prayer. These approaches support musicians in maintaining composure and optimizing performance under pressure.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. **Research Design:** The study used **transcendental phenomenology** to explore the meaning of human experiences, specifically how piano performers cope with performance anxiety. It focused on understanding shared experiences and the sense participants make of their own and others' experiences (Qutoshi, 2018).
2. **Participants/Data Sources:** A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 10 piano majors from a faith-based institution who had experience with solo performances. Participants were chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the study (Nikolopoulou, 2022).
3. **Tools and Instruments:** The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to gather information on participants' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to performance anxiety.
4. **Procedures:** Participants were invited through a formal letter, informed about the study's purpose, and assured anonymity via pseudonyms. Interviews were scheduled at convenient times and locations, and audio-recorded for accuracy.
5. **Analysis Techniques:** Recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Researchers immersed themselves in the data through repeated readings, note-taking, and discussion to identify themes. Themes were categorized based on similarities and differences, with coping strategies analyzed for effectiveness and limitations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical considerations included member checks to validate participants' responses and ensure trustworthiness.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Music Performance Anxiety Experienced by Pianists

Cognitive Form of Anxiety

Cognitive anxiety among pianists' manifests in both mental and emotional aspects, including difficulty focusing, memory lapses, negative thoughts, self-doubt, overthinking, and anticipatory worry (Burin & Osorio, 2017). A subcategory, "scared," reflects stage fright that undermines self-esteem and confidence. Bell shared: "...it hasn't gotten to a point where I can't play. I have anxiety. I get ... I get scared of performing on stage, but eventually I overcome it."

Nervousness is another common experience, as May stated: "I'm always very nervous. I have these thoughts in my mind, *'What if I won't be able to play properly, what if I'll mess up. Oh no. What if I'll black out? Oh no!'*"

Questioning or doubting themselves reflects internal pressure and self-evaluation. Rocky described: "*Half of my thoughts are there. And then half of my thoughts is questioning myself if I'm fit to play the piano or if I deserve to be there playing the piano... something like that. Questioning myself and then questioning how others see me because I'm a music student. So, it's a lot of pressure.*"

Worry and tension were also prominent, with Zeki noting: "...*You have a lot of mixed feelings. Thinking wild, thinking west, east, north and south. You're happy, you're worried, tension, all at once...*"

Mind scattered or out of focus and overthinking were frequent, as Rocky explained, "*My mind was scattered... And I'm making terrible mistakes,*" and Oppa added, "*A few minutes, a few days, I would overthink a lot 'Oh my goodness, would I be able to play this passage perfectly or not?'*"

Mental block was reported as a severe form of cognitive interference. Tunia recalled: "*That was a mental block. I was just doing arpeggios for that part... I knew that the people knew I made a mistake.*"

Physical Form of Anxiety

Physical anxiety responses among pianists include shaky hands, cold extremities, sweating, elevated heart rate, and heavy breathing, consistent with the fight-or-flight response (Burin & Osorio, 2017; Irie et al., 2023). Bell said, "*Shaky hands and cold feet. I think that's all,*" while Oppa shared: "*My heart beats a lot faster than normal. I usually feel that every time. And yes, every time.*"

Behavioral Form of Anxiety

Behavioral anxiety manifests as technical errors, loss of notes, and improper posture during performances, often amplifying cognitive and physical anxiety (Burin & Osorio, 2017; Irie et al., 2023). Participants described the involuntary impact of anxiety on their performance quality. Oppa reported: "...*my voice would crack while talking before the performance or during.*" These behaviors reflect the observable impact of MPA on musical execution.

Causes of Music Performance Anxiety Among Pianists

Lack of Preparation

A primary cause of Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) among pianists is insufficient preparation, which encompasses readiness, physical appearance, practice routines, and familiarity with the performance environment. Participants noted that lack of physical fitness or excessive pre-performance practice affected their confidence and overall performance. Readiness is crucial, as proper preparation fosters growth and prevents burnout.

Restlessness from over-practice can cause anxiety on performance day. Concerns about appearance also contributed, as self-assurance influences performance quality. Participants highlighted the stress of last-minute preparation or "cramming", due to academic obligations and time management challenges. Oppa reflected on impromptu performances, describing them as feeling "*ambushed.*" Difficult musical pieces further heightened anxiety, as participants felt pressure to meet performance demands beyond their skills. Environmental

factors, such as performing in a new or cold venue, also increased discomfort, echoing LeBlanc's (2021) findings that physical comfort affects anxiety levels.

Self-Imposed Pressure

Another significant factor is self-imposed pressure, where pianists set high internal expectations and standards, leading to stress and anxiety. Participants described expectations and standards to self, where striving to meet lofty goals created ongoing mental pressure (Reschke, 2020). Self-deprecation and negative self-talk further exacerbated anxiety, resulting in low self-esteem (Plumptre, 2023). Lack of confidence or self-doubt was common; Mary shared: "*Yeah, I think I have no confidence in myself. That caused me fear.*"

Being out of focus and becoming overly conscious of one's performance, surroundings, and sound increased anxiety. Oppa stated: "*... But you're being too conscious of your own performance. Surroundings, conscious of how you sound... I would be conscious of what the conductor would tell me after the performance...*" Participants also reported pressure from being music majors, as Tunia said: "*...And pressure because you're a music major...*" Finally, negative thoughts and worries about making mistakes contributed to anticipatory anxiety, with Zeki commenting: "*... The negative feelings are, what if I make mistakes?*"

Social Pressure

Social pressure from teachers, audiences, peers, and family members also influenced MPA. Participants noted anxiety when teachers were present, anticipating more critical evaluation, which aligns with LeBlanc (2021). Audience presence, whether family or friends, could be supportive or create pressure, affecting performance (Papageorgi, 2020). Concerns about people's expectations and opinions contributed to stress, as participants worried about disappointing observers. Performing alongside high-level musicians created additional pressure, with participants comparing themselves and feeling nervous about meeting peers' standards, supporting MacAfee's (2021) findings on reduced self-efficacy from negative comparisons.

Coping Strategies of Pianists on Music Performance Anxiety

Mind Setting

Mind setting emerged as a crucial coping strategy for managing music performance anxiety (MPA), centering on the control of thoughts, emotions, and mental states. Participants emphasized avoiding overthinking, diverting focus, and using grounding techniques to maintain clarity. They also practiced changing perspectives, adopting humor or a positive mindset to cope with anxiety, as supported by Irie et al. (2023). Another sub-theme was acknowledging anxiety, accepting its presence even when immediate solutions are limited. Additionally, participants engaged in pre-meditation, visualizing themselves on stage to familiarize with performance conditions and reduce fear of mistakes.

Self-Preparation

Self-preparation involved practical measures to reduce anxiety, including consistent practice, breathing exercises, memorization, and sufficient rest. Participants emphasized adequate rest for physical well-being and breathing exercises to slow heart rate and calm nerves. They also focused on preparing things ahead, such as dress code and stage presentation, to enhance confidence and composure during performances (Pecen et al., 2018).

Building Self-Esteem

Enhancing self-esteem was another coping approach, where pianists actively worked on boosting their confidence before performances. Participants noted that dedicating time to practice and preparation helped strengthen self-assurance, aligning with Ryan (2021), who identified self-esteem as a significant predictor of MPA.

Social Affirmation

Social affirmation highlighted the role of external support in alleviating performance anxiety. Participants sought encouragement from family, peers, and mentors, noting that positive reinforcement reduced nervousness and enhanced confidence.

Musical Preparation and Focus

Participants underscored musical preparation and focus, encompassing technical and interpretative rehearsal. The sub-theme of extensive practice was critical for confidence, as Bell stated: "...because a way for me to overcome my performance anxiety is practicing a lot before the performance..." Another sub-theme was internalizing music understanding and interpretation, where participants, like Oppa, described reading and understanding song lyrics to reduce nervousness: "So what I do is I read the words of the song. And I try to understand what it means. It helps me because it's like internalizing the music. And it kind of somehow removes my nervousness." Finally, hiding mistakes or continuing despite errors was a common strategy to maintain performance flow.

Self-Motivation

Self-motivation involved intrinsic drive, personal goals, and passion for music. Participants emphasized positive thinking, maintaining a constructive mindset to avoid unnecessary stress, and self-reflection, viewing mistakes as learning opportunities. These strategies reinforced confidence and encouraged proactive improvement (Kaleńska-Rodzaj, 2021; Georgii-Hemming, 2020).

Spiritual Assurance

Spiritual assurance emerged as a coping mechanism through prayer, meditation, or belief in a higher purpose. Participants described asking God for guidance and protection during performances. Shell shared: "I just say a silent prayer and then I ask God to help me, to guide me, to help me not overthink." Oppa added: "I just breathe in and out slowly. And I pray, of course." Spiritual assurance provided inner peace and resilience, supporting Zyl's (2020) findings on prayer as an adaptive coping method.

V. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that pianists experience music performance anxiety in cognitive, physical, and behavioral forms, often triggered by insufficient preparation, self-imposed expectations, and social pressures. To manage this anxiety, they employed strategies such as mind setting, self-preparation, self-esteem building, social support, musical focus, self-motivation, and spiritual assurance. These findings directly answer the research questions and highlight practical implications for piano students, teachers, and future researchers. By integrating these coping mechanisms into training and instruction, musicians can better sustain their performance quality and well-recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the researchers proposed several recommendations tailored to different groups. Piano students are encouraged to understand the roots of performance anxiety to prepare effectively and develop coping mechanisms suited to their needs. Music majors are advised to recognize the importance of managing performance anxiety, not only for their own consistency as performers but also in preparation for their future roles as educators. Music teachers are urged to equip themselves with practical tools and strategies that can be incorporated into lessons and practice sessions to help students address anxiety during performances. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to expand on this study by employing quantitative methods and exploring additional variables, thereby building on the current findings to deepen understanding of coping strategies for music performance anxiety.

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