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# **Psychological Challenges Affecting a Performer in Public Solo Recital: Strategy for Boosting Confidence**

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## **Abstract**

Performing in front of an audience can be a psychologically demanding activity for many music performers. Although there are many factors contributing to performance anxiety like the performer's personal disposition to stress and the performance conditions, performance anxiety is often seen as a sign of weakness and is therefore often not discussed openly. However, Performance anxiety is a problem that almost every musician suffers with in one way or another. The paper looked at the problem of psychological challenges affecting a performer in a public solo recital. The objective of this study is geared towards boosting the confidence of musical performers with the focus of restraining them from drug enhancement for a better society and good health. This study used qualitative research methods to gather data through the review of relative literature and interviews for this paper. The paper revealed that most performers suffered psychological challenges like anxiety, nerve, and unbalance before and during performance resulting in drug inducement to boost their confidence. This occurs to instrumental, vocal, and dance performers as well. The study concludes that though performance anxiety cannot be completely ruled out, training on how to manage and interact with the audience during a performance may increase the confidence of a performance, and prevent the self-indulgence of drugs that is prevented among artists.

**Keywords:** Psychological, Performer, Public Solo Recital, Confidence.

## **Introduction**

When I started performing as a soloist in the choir, my usual experience was the shaking of hands and uncontrollable breathing a few minutes before and during the performance. One was so obvious when I performed in a crusade hosted at Mogoh in the Gokana Local Government Area sometime during my secondary school days. In that city-wide crusade, I held the microphone to minister with others as a lead soloist and suffered tremendously nervously. The unfortunate situation is that this was captured on camera. It was the talk of the crusade within members during and after the crusade. Sad enough, no one sympathized with me or taught me how to overcome this menace.

Performing in front of an audience can be a psychologically demanding activity for many music performers. Research has shown that on average, anxiety is higher during a public music performance compared to a private performance without an audience. Public recitals are characterized by enhanced physiological arousal in music performance. This is sometimes the cause-effect of soloists and choirs moving out of tone during most public performances. Haven performed in some public concerts, recitals, and special events. I have experienced physical symptoms of anxiety that made me shiver even when I have not climbed the stage. I became unsure of the work that I knew very well. These feelings are caused by the anxiety one experiences in a performance situation. According to Krüger (1993), Performance anxiety is a fear of life that can mean either a depressing burden or a heightened tingle of the nerves. Except in certain extreme cases, it is a healthy reaction to situations fraught with risk because, in every situation in which we expose ourselves, we run the risk of making

ourselves ridiculous or of failing. It is then merely an understandable reaction to situations in which we lay open to the judgment of those around us. A challenge for which hardly any of us has ever been prepared. (P. 17).

Besides the physical symptoms that pose psychological challenges to a performer, the emotional factor is also a damaging challenge to the performer, because it creates feelings of insecurity and a sense of lack of control. These physical and emotional displays under pressured circumstances and are detrimental to a satisfactory performance. As one grows older and more experienced in performance, one learns how to be more in control of these physical and emotional symptoms or psychological challenges. While some practice as much as possible, and undergo certain therapy or even take enhancers to scale through a public performance state, some are undergoing the troubles of nervousness. Elizabeth (2002) sees performance anxiety as:

*The experience of persisting, distressful apprehension about and actual impairment of, performance skills in a public context, to a degree unwarranted given the individual's musical aptitude, training, and level of preparation. (P.168).*

Elizabeth (1997) Affirms that" it can either creep up on a player or hit one suddenly with a shock when it accompanies some other trauma. It is no respecter of age, ability, success, or experience". (P.155). Brotons (1994) says 'performance anxiety is the ailment that is most often experienced by musicians. It functionally impairs musicians and they cannot perform on the level that they would like to' (P.64). The reoccurrence of performance anxiety can be related to Pavlov's experiments with dogs and their food. He used a bell whenever it was time to feed the dogs and when the bell was rung, they would start salivating even before the food was prepared. A musician often starts feeling nervous for a performance hours or days before the actual event. The musician will also know what emotions are waiting ahead in the actual performance. Just the mere thought of playing a piece in front of an imagined audience can cause symptoms similar to those anxieties experienced during performance. However, tension in a musical performance does not always have to be negative. As seen in Krüger's definition of performance anxiety, anxiety can either be beneficial or detrimental to performance. Andrews (1997) states that: "Many musicians experience a degree of tension and stress (adaptive anxiety), which is a positive point (p.159). There is a natural excitement when one performs, which is a celebration of the musician's love and ability for music. Brotons (1994) affirms that: "To reach peak performances, some stress is needed. However, there is a point where the stress and tension become harmful rather than helpful and this is where performance anxiety originates. (P. 64).

Kemp (1996) describes two types of anxiety: trait and state anxiety. "Trait anxiety is the particular person's tendency to be anxious, while state anxiety is influenced by a particular situation. These two types of anxiety are linked to each other and there is not always a clear distinction between them" (p. 85).

## **The Study Problem**

The paper looked at the problem of psychological challenges affecting performers in public solo recitals.

## **Objectives**

*To boost the confidence of musical performers on stage.*  
*To free the performer from nervousness on stage.*  
*To discuss the basic challenges faced by a solo performer.*  
*To find out other means solo performers used in curbing nervousness*

## **The Research Question**

*How confident are you when performing on stage*  
*Do you experience nervousness before and during a performance?*  
*What psychological challenges do you face as a solo performer?*  
*Have you used any enhancer before you mount on stage?*

## **Methodology**

This study used qualitative research methods to gather data through the review of relative literature and interviews. The interview is between vocal solo performers, solo instrumentalists, and solo dancers.

## **Conceptual Clarification Psychological**

The Cambridge Dictionary (2023) says "Psychological is relating to the human mind and feeling". The feeling

of a performer in a public recital goes a long to help or destroy the outcome of the performance. The performer must put all psychological issues under control before mounting on stage to perform.

## **Challenges**

The situation of being faced with. Something that needs great mental and or physical effort to be done successfully and therefore tests a person's ability. (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Challenges are situations we are faced with daily. These challenges cut across health issues, financial, emotional social, etc. Some of these situations may be light and others difficult to bear. One may decide to overcome each daily challenge or choose to remain in it and carry them about, making them come in between them and their profession. Some challenges may also require therapy to move forward and be active again. In any case, a performer must fight to control the challenges they face for better outings and seek professional help where applicable.

## **Affecting**

Many things may affect a performer before, during, and after performance. Things like a delay in the scheduled time of performance, improper arrangement of arrival and departure from organizers, failure of the host to fulfill their financial agreement, poor sound system, etc., may affect a performer thereby resulting in cancellation of performance or sadness. Affecting is seen as "Causing a strong emotion, especially sadness". (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

## **Performer**

Performance cut across several fields of study. However, the performer in this research is solely related to music. Kenedy and Bourne (1996) say:

*The way in which music is performed, especially as it relates to the quest for the authentic style of performing the music of previous generations and eras. Its study covers notation, ornamentation, instruments, voice production, tuning and pitch, and the size of ensembles and choruses. (p. 555)*

## **Public**

The research discussed psychological performance challenges that are displayed outside before an audience. People that you know or hardly know. The mind functions differently when one is alone or practicing with a few related groups of people than when one is faced with a large crowd with different expectations. Public hence is "Relating to or involving people in general, rather than being limited to a particular group of people". (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

## **Solo**

There are different appearances of performance. The solo, duet, trio, quartet, etc., and chorus are all different appearances in performance. This research looked at the psychological challenges faced by a solo performer to that of the others. Solo is "Alone. A vocal or instrumental piece or passage performed by a performer". (Kenedy and Bourne, 1996, p. 555)

## **Recital**

"A performance of music or poetry, usually given by one person or a small group of people". (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

## **Strategy**

"A detailed plan for achieving success in situations such as war, politics, business, industry, or sport, or the skill of planning for such situation". (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). It is very important to devise a plan for achieving a goal or overcoming a challenge. When a performer is faced with psychological challenges, there is a need to strategize on ways of overcoming them. Those strategies are listed below.

## **Confidence**

A lack of confidence can end the career of an artist. Confidence, however, is not just achieved from the cloud; it

comes through training, practice, and experience. It is “the quality of being certain of your abilities or having trust in people or the future”. (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

## Findings

The findings in this research are discussed under the interview questions.

### Category A: Vocal Solo Performers

*How confident are you when performing on stage*

*Sodienye O'Malley: Well, very confident because I have beaten that a long time ago through serious rehearsal and other practices.*

*Jessica Jacob: I am 100% confident when I know the song very well.*

*Ahiakwo Laz: Very confident.*

*Mr. Kingsley Ofoegbu: I am very confident.*

*Do you experience nervousness before and during a performance?*

*Sodienye O'Malley: No. I overcame that long ago.*

*Jessica Jacob: Yes, I do experience nervousness before and during performance especially when I do not know the song I am performing.*

*Ahiakwo Laz: Before, but, not now anymore.*

*Mr. Kingsley Ofoegbu: At first when I started ministrations, I was nervous when I wanted to perform. Just seeing the crowd alone brought nervousness, but that is no more.*

*If yes, how do you handle them?*

*Sodienye O'Malley: Like I said, I have overcome this.*

*Jessica Jacob: I look for my area of strength in the song I am performing and present it right.*

*Ahiakwo Laz: I handled it at rehearsals and dress rehearsal sessions. There, I assumed I was performing to the audience.*

*Mr. Kingsley Ofoegbu: I did consistent rehearsals and watched videos of how ministers entered very large performances and ministered effortlessly. I studied their stagecraft and asked the Spirit of God to take control. I did my performances without looking at the audience. I also study my stage art very well and how to communicate with my audience.*

*What psychological challenges do you face as a solo performer?*

*Sodienye O'Malley: None. I can perform on any stage. Even when I have emotional issues and other challenges, I put them behind me when I want to perform.*

*Jessica Jacob: Right now, I am faced with so much stress because of the hyperactive nature of my children. Sometimes, I lose my voice. Talking, and thinking about what my children shall eat the next day because of the economic challenge of the country, will just keep me in a place thinking and hindering my chances of rehearsal thereby causing some challenges when performing.*

*Ahiakwo Laz: I fought stage fright to the limbo.*

*Mr. Kingsley Ofoegbu: Before the presence of great artists made me ask myself if I could do as great as them, however, I learned I have performed without being affected by their presence.*

*Have you used any enhancer before you mount on stage?*

*Sodienye O'Malley: I do not think it is necessary. Just eat well, relax, and take away stress. I do not need to take any alcohol during was performance.*

*Jessica Jacob: before and now, I have not used any enhancer to boost my confidence on stage. I do not need them also.*

*Ahiakwo Laz: No.*

*What advice do you have for performers generally on psychological challenges?*

*Sodienye O'Malley: make good studies of your song very well, rehearse it properly, practice it right, and with that, I think you will have no problem. Cultivate the habit of rehearsing always.*

*Jessica Jacob: Life generally is in stages, the stage of nervousness will come and go, therefore, the strong when you are facing psychological challenges as a performer. Also, be encouraged through the faces of your emotional challenge. Do not live a life of comparing yourself with others, jealousy, and otherwise. Practice your music and improve every day. Do a self-evaluation of each of your performances and study other great artists to*

*improve. Avoid issues that shall stress you up and pay attention to every detail of the music you are about to perform.*

*Ahiakwo Laz: Irrespective of the pedigrees of your audience, they are human beings. All you need to do is study your music adequately, and interpret every part of it during rehearsals, then rest, come to the performance venue on time, do a meditation, and perform.*

*Mr. Kingsley Ofoegbu: Be spiritually fortified. Hand over everything to the leading of the Holy Spirit after your skillful rehearsals. Secondly, it is not a competition. Do not envy anyone, have a liberal heart to accommodate people's craft, and have your skill and creativity on stage, not just copying artist styles of performance.*

### **Category B: Instrumental / Dance Solo Performers**

*How confident are you when performing on stage*

*Alele Kuluje: Very confident especially when I am sure of the song.*

*Bright B. Kpalap: Very confident*

*Ubong E. David: Depends on the preparedness. Confidence to me increases when you are very conversant with your art.*

*Do you experience nervousness before and during a performance?*

*Alele Kuluje: Well, as humans, it does happen.*

*Bright B. Kpalap: Mostly, during a performance.*

*Ubong E. David: At the initial stage of my career, yes, I was always nervous but that faded out with time and experience.*

*If yes, how do you handle them?*

*Alele Kuluje: When I experience nervousness on stage, I try to avoid eye contact with my audience.*

*Bright B. Kpalap: I focussed on the next line of the score rather than thinking about the feelings of people.*

*Ubong E. David: Age in performance helps a lot.*

*What psychological challenges do you face as a solo performer?*

*Alele Kuluje: Although, I am not a solo performer, because I performed in the orchestra. However, as a director of the orchestra, I am faced with daily psychological challenges. Disappointment at the time of performance by co-instrumentalist, lateness, sudden illnesses of either the instrumentalist, parents or siblings, and many others often come up.*

*Bright B. Kpalap: The feeling of having a more professional audience than amateurs triggered some psychological imbalance.*

*Ubong E. David: Meeting up bills and family issues have a lot of psychological influence on a singer's mood and attitude to performance.*

*Have you used any enhancer before you mount on stage?*

*Alele Kuluje: None.*

*Bright B. Kpalap: No.*

*Ubong E. David: No*

*What advice do you have for performers generally on psychological challenges?*

*Alele Kuluje: Identify your challenges and work on them. As a performer, you must identify where you are having issues and work on it.*

*Bright B. Kpalap: Practice your music (piano pieces) in sections, observing all the dynamics, tempo, and phrasing with empathy. Study how virtuoso pianists played and learn from them.*

*Ubong E. David: Try as much as possible to work on the underlying causes.*

### **Symptoms of Performance Anxiety**

The symptoms associated with performance anxiety are divided into four categories by this study:

*Physical symptoms,*

*Cognitive symptoms,*

*Emotional symptoms, and*

*Behavioural symptoms.*

## Physical Symptoms

The physical (bodily) symptoms experienced during performance anxiety are similar to those experienced in any stressful situation. A few of the physical symptoms described by Wilson and Roland (2002) are:

- Increased heart rate
- Short, shallow breathing
- A racing heart
- Cold, sweaty hands
- Shaking
- Loss of feeling, seeing, hearing
- Muscular tension and sickness; and
- Loss of concentration.

## Cognitive Symptoms

The cognitive symptoms are thoughts that are processed and experienced as a result of performance anxiety, generated while a performer performs. Krüger (1993) affirms that:

*In our private performances without an audience, we are free of performance anxiety because evaluation from outside is missing. Persons who do not 'put their light under a bushel' and show themselves in public expose themselves to situations that can be psychologically explosive. (p. 23).*

Krüger describes what it feels like to perform by oneself, and how it is different to performing in front of an audience. When musicians perform in a concert, they are exposed to an audience of a large number of people. Which is different from when musicians sit alone in a room and perform for his/herself. There is a huge difference between these two types of performances. Krüger points out that it can be “psychologically explosive” to perform for an audience.

## Emotional Symptoms

Emotional and cognitive symptoms are very much interlinked, because negative thoughts lead to negative emotions, and, this in turn affects the performer’s anxiety. Uncontrol emotions can destroy the performance of an individual. The display of anger, bitterness, or excessive happiness as a result of overconfidence or trust before a performance may also cause an unwelcome ending to the performance. Worries, of any kind and troubles from the host and logistic issues can bring an ugly performance. Eagle (1996) states a few emotional symptoms associated with performance anxiety as “fear of failure, irritability, inflated feelings of fearfulness, and comprehensive panic”. (p. 35).

## Behavioral Symptoms

Just as emotional symptoms are closely related to cognitive symptoms, the behavioral symptoms of performance anxiety are closely linked to the physical symptoms but are also influenced by cognitive symptoms as these changes in behavior are associated with the negative thought processes present in the cognitive symptoms. Valentine (2002), states that: “the behavioural symptoms of performance anxiety can either take the role of the signs of anxiety (shaking, trembling, stiffness and a dead-pan expression) or of impairment of the performance itself” (p.168). The behavioural measures of performance anxiety have to do with the quality of performance involved. Performance anxiety can become a phobia. This is because the performer will associate the fear of anxiety with the fear of performing, and in turn a phobia is developed. One of the behavioural approaches to dealing with performance anxiety is systematic desensitization. This is a method of training muscular relaxation combined with having the performer imagine the conditions of the performance. It trains the musician to relax their muscles while in a performing situation.

## Factors that Influence Performance Anxiety in a Performer Negatively or Positively

The musical factors are; lack of rehearsal or practicing, sight-reading, and memorizing of music. Although many factors contribute to performance anxiety (like the performer’s personal disposition to stress and the performance conditions), improving musical factors that are present in performance will be beneficial to the performer and may even help reduce performance anxiety. The most important feature of a successful performance is when musicians connect with their audience, through their personal musical language or body movements. According to Sloboda (1985), three main stages of practice to overcome numerosness are:

**Unpremeditated performance:** *This is sight-reading. It is what the musician can do with the piece when seeing it for the first time.*

**Practicing:** *A musician practices and plays a piece of music over and over to achieve the desired results.*

**Finished product:** *This is the professional rendition of the piece of music and is often memorized (especially with pianists). This is also known as expert performance.*

These three points differ with each musician. Some musicians' sight-reading is better than others and some need more time to practice a composition. It all depends on the musicians' skill, ability, and personality (p. 65).

### **Things a Performer must do to Overcome Nervousness**

**Practicing effectively:** *This has to do with learning how to practice correctly.*

**Manage nerves:** *Learn how to control your body's response to adrenaline*

**Build confidence:** *Learn how to build confidence*

**Become fearless:** *Learn how to play with confidence.*

**Resilience:** *Learn how to stay motivated, become mentally tougher, and recover quickly from mistakes and setbacks.*

Once you develop these skills, you will no longer be quite as concerned about stage fright or performance anxiety. Arlin (2009) affirms that "a persistent, irrational fear of exposure to scrutiny in certain situations, particularly public speaking, musical, drama, or other types of performances". Barry & Hallam (2002), affirm that "If I don't practice for one day, I know it; if I don't practice for two days, the critics know it; if I don't practice for three days, the audience knows it" (p. 151). This quote reflects the need for daily performance. Sloboda (1994) points out that what is done during practicing is just as important, if not more, than the amount of time spent practicing (p.162).

The result of practicing will be to know during performance. Practicing techniques contributes to helping eliminate performance anxiety. The better a performer practices and understands his/her pieces, the better the performance becomes.

### **Sight-Reading**

Although sight-reading is not directly related to performance anxiety, it is still a method of preparing for a performance.

### **Memorizing**

There are three main ways to memorize music according to Williamon (2002).

*Aurally (auditory memory) – imagining the sound of the piece, anticipating upcoming events in the score, and simultaneous observance of a performance's progress.*

*visually – images of the written page and other elements of the playing Environment.*

*Kinaesthetically (finger, muscular, or tactile memory) – allows musicians to perform motor sequences automatically.*

It is widely known that performing a piece from memory is stressful and tricky. However, many musicians have musical reasons for performing from memory. An example is easier communication with the audience. It allows performers more freedom in their expressive ideas. In a study conducted by Williamon, he found that audiences rated memorized performances higher than ones that were not memorized, because of the communication that was intensified during memorized performances.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Psychological challenges like anxiety, emotional outbursts and unbalance before and during performance from internal and external factors can destroy the career of an artist if not handled properly. As such. There is need for artists to undergo serious training musically, mentally, socially, and emotionally to defend against all ungodly psychological issues that may arise before, during, and after public performances to keep their careers alive. Drug inducement and other enhancers to boost the confidence of performance in public recitals is a short way to destructive happiness. A good music performer does not only excel in playing musical instruments or singing, but also needs to possess and demonstrate strong inner confidence, mental strength, and good musical showmanship in other to enjoy the performance of the musical pieces while ensuring that the audience is well entertained by his/her craft.

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### Aural Interview

S/N	Name	Age	Status	Occupation	Place of Work	Date of Interview
1	Sodienye O'Malley	Adult	Married	Artist	Lagos	
2	Jessica Jacob	Adult	Married	Artist	Port Harcourt	
3	Ahiakwo Laz	Adult	Married	Civil servant	R/S HOA	
4	Mr. Kingsley Ofoegbu	Adult	Married	Artist	Port Harcourt	
5	Alele Kuluje	Adult	Married	Teacher/Director	Port Harcourt	
6	Bright B. Kpalap	Adult	Married	Teacher/Performer	MUSON	
7	Ubong E. David	Adult	Married	Civil servant	Ajaji Crowther University, Oyo.	