

The phenomenology of performance: Exploring musicians' perceptions and experiences

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The present study explored musicians' perceptions and experiences in performance. Specifically, four areas were investigated: (1) the different types of preparation and pre-performance routines in which musicians engage, (2) musicians' thoughts and perceptions of both themselves and their environment while performing, (3) the musical, psychological, and non-musical skills deemed essential for success, including the means by which such skills are acquired, and (4) the types of demands and stressors that musicians face, along with the strategies they employ to manage them. Thirteen student and professional musicians were interviewed. Content analysis was performed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis which elicited three general themes: motivation, preparation, and performance experiences. Differences emerged between experienced and less experienced musicians in terms of the breadth and scope of preparation activities for the more experienced musicians. Greater similarities between the participants were found when discussing factors surrounding successful and less successful performances. Successful performances were often connected with feelings of sufficient preparation, positive mindsets, and presented a high yet attainable level of challenge, while less successful performances appeared linked with inadequate preparation, negative mental outlooks, frustration, and lack of enjoyment during the performance itself.

Keywords: motivation; preparation; performance experiences; interpretive phenomenological analysis

Over the last three decades, researchers have studied systematically musicians' practice activities, exploring such topics as the quantity, quality, and content of practice, ways in which musicians structure their learning, and

their reasons for engaging in those activities (see Jørgensen 2004). Performances themselves, however, have received somewhat less attention. For example, while Partington (1995) noted that elite musicians employ a variety of clearly constructed pre-performance routines, few studies have actually explored these in any depth. Little is also known about musicians' thoughts and perceptions during performances. In two studies, self-efficacy was found to be a significant and reliable indicator of success in musical performance examinations (McCormick and McPherson 2003, McPherson and McCormick 2006). Research in other performance domains has found that performers' interpretations of their arousal symptoms can have a greater impact on performance outcomes than the actual manifestation of their symptoms (i.e. Hanton *et al.* 2004). Given the apparent relevance of self-beliefs and perceptions to musicians' success, it would appear prudent for researchers to explore musicians' *perceptions* of themselves and their skills, as well as how those perceptions influence practice behaviors and performance experiences.

Given the current state of understanding surrounding the phenomenology of musical performance, this study has sought to investigate the activities musicians engage in when preparing for performance, their thoughts and perceptions during performance, and the impact their evaluation of those thoughts and perceptions has on their subsequent musical activities.

METHOD

Participants

Thirteen musicians were recruited from the Royal College of Music. Of those, six were pianists (three undergraduates, three postgraduates), and seven were vocalists (four undergraduates, three professors). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 58 years (mean=29.0, SD=14.3). The students were training in classical music with aspirations of performing professionally and the professors were currently active professional performers.

Materials

A semi-structured interview approach was adopted to allow for an in-depth exploration of the aforementioned issues. In particular, an interview topic guide was created that addressed four main areas: (1) the different types of preparation methods and pre-performance routines in which musicians engage, (2) musicians' thoughts and perceptions of both themselves and their environment present while performing, (3) the musical, psychological, and

non-musical skills musicians deem essential for success, including the means by which such skills are acquired, and (4) the types of demands and stressors musicians that face, along with the strategies they employ to manage or cope with them.

Procedure

Prospective interviewees were contacted via email and provided with a brief description of the project. Those wishing to participate in the study replied to the first author, at which point the time and location for an interview were determined. The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. As the goal of this investigation was to establish a contextualized perspective of musicians' subjective experiences with performing, the transcripts were analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith and Osborn 2003). The analysis procedure involved identifying individual meaning units, or parts of text representing one particular idea, within the transcripts. These units were then grouped with others of similar meaning to form common themes.

RESULTS

From the analysis of the interview transcripts, three general themes emerged: (1) sources of motivation, (2) preparation activities in which musicians engage, including skills and abilities deemed necessary to facilitate successful performances, and (3) experiences during actual performances, including demands and stressors faced in connection with those performances. Although these themes were different from the structure of the interview topic guide, the semi-structured format allowed participants an opportunity to discuss relevant topics of concern to them that may not have previously occurred to the interviewer. For the purposes of this paper, the label "experienced" musician refers to professors (n=3) and postgraduate students (n=3), and "less experienced" refers to undergraduate students (n=7).

Motivation

When asked what attracted the musicians to performance, a number of common factors were identified. Almost all participants (n=6 of 6 experienced, n=5 of 7 less experienced) spoke of a strong love of performing. Other responses included the expressive or communicative aspect of performing (n=4 experienced, n=2 less), the challenge music performance presented (n=2 experienced, n=2 less), as well as the chance to be someone

else (n=2 experienced). A variety of personality characteristics also emerged. While many discussed high levels of self-confidence, determination, discipline, and the importance of keeping things in perspective, some of the less experienced musicians (n=3) also spoke of perfectionism and the extremely high self-standards they placed on themselves.

Preparation

Everyone spoke of the need to have music adequately prepared. Most participants reported that their practice activities were modified in the days leading up to a performance, with the focus more on run-throughs and less on technical work. On the day before, the students all cited practice as being of greatest concern. Some singers (n=3 less experienced) planned clothing and costume the night before, which helped them feel more at ease the next day. The more experienced musicians (n=6) all spoke of the need to ensure adequate rest and nutrition, which interestingly none of the students mentioned. On the day of, activities largely revolved around keeping the mind and body active yet still conserving energy. For many of the less experienced musicians (n=5), the aim of these activities was to distract themselves from worrying about the performance. The minutes before the performance were spent trying to stay relaxed and getting into the mood of the music. Some of the less experienced participants (n=4) reported engaging in relaxation exercises such as breathing, yoga, meditation, and prayer. Two students discussed employing elaborate imagery which was used to enhance expressivity, deal with nerves, develop confidence, and solidify memory.

Performance experiences

When discussing potentially contributing factors surrounding what they felt were successful performances, many of the participants (n=3 experienced, n=4 less experienced) explained how they felt adequately prepared and were experiencing high self-efficacy. A number of facilitative views were mentioned, such as a strong emotional connection and love for the music, a positive view of the audience, and general feelings of comfort and familiarity, either with the music, venue, other players, or the audience. The situation was often one presenting a high level of challenge as well (n=3 experienced, n=3 less). These challenges included new types of music, challenging but convincing opera productions, short preparation time, and even battling with injuries or illness. Overwhelmingly, the participants reported feeling relaxed, confident, determined, and happy in the minutes before going on stage. During the actual event, the participants described characteristics of peak

performances, such as complete control, trust, and heightened awareness. Focus was also discussed by many of the participants (n=4 experienced, n=6 less). Interestingly, while it could be presumed that a high level of concentration in which nothing non-musical enters the mind is desirable, two participants made a point of saying that they felt irrelevant thoughts would not necessarily hinder their performance.

When discussing what the participants felt were less successful performances, a lack of preparation was cited most often (n=3 experienced, n=7 less experienced). This related to the participants' own preparation of the music, as well as rehearsal with others. Other situational factors also appeared to be linked. A number of the participants talked about being uncomfortable with the demands of the situation (n=2 experienced, n=5 less), such as the music being too difficult or not suited to their voice type, demands placed on them by directors or other performers, high self-pressure, and high perceived expectations from the audience. Many of the participants described a negative mental state and outlook prior to the performance, coupled with low self-efficacy (n=3 experienced, n=4 less). During the performance, participants expressed a pervasive feeling that things could be going better (n=2 experienced, n=4 less experienced). They often felt frustrated and did not enjoy the experience. Some did acknowledge that they felt their thoughts and mood were inhibiting the quality of their performance (n=1 experienced, n=3 less).

DISCUSSION

The impact of accrued experience was well demonstrated, particularly in relation to the participants' preparation activities. The more experienced musicians discussed behaviors that were clearly planned and thought out, and they also possessed a better understanding as to why they engaged in such activities. Greater similarities between the participants were found, however, when discussing factors surrounding successful and less successful performances. Successful performances were often connected with feelings of sufficient preparation, positive mindsets, and presented a high but attainable level of challenge. Less successful performances, on the other hand, appeared linked with inadequate preparation, negative mental outlooks, frustration, and lack of enjoyment during the performance itself. It was interesting to observe such variability in the factors that the participants associated with successful performances though. Given that, the question is raised as to the extent to which such factors actually impact performance quality.

Despite generating a comprehensive body of data that would likely have been unattainable through other approaches, this method was not without concerns and potential limitations. Responses to interview questions are self-report; hence, they are inherently subjective in nature and as such would require further testing in order to be verified. One implication of this is that it is impossible to tell if the participants gave what they felt would be the *right* answers or were actual representations of their behaviors. It is also important to note that when the participants were asked to discuss a successful performance, there was no objective rating as to how *successful* those performances may have actually been. The participants chose a performance they were happy with, which may have been for any number of reasons. Lastly, any causal links that were mentioned were based solely on the participants' perception, not on empirical fact.

The present study has revealed a number of directions for future research. For instance, to what extent is it possible to teach less experienced musicians using the perceptions and understanding of seasoned performers, or must they come to this insight through their own means? The answer to this question (among others) will require further investigation, but the implications of this research promise significant outcomes for music learning, teaching, and performance.

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