

Strategies for Successful Solo Performances

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Practice Strategies

These ideas are meant to help you as you prepare solos, but they can be applied to all types of literature (etudes, large ensemble music, etc.).

1) Play through the solo from beginning to end S-L-O-W-L-Y. Use a metronome, and pick a tempo that will allow you to play every note, rhythm, articulation, and dynamic precisely. If the solo is very technical, this initial first reading will go extremely slowly. Avoid the temptation to race through the easy parts and slow down in the difficult passages. If you find yourself losing concentration, it is OK to stop and regroup during this first reading. I highly recommend listening to a recording of the solo by a competent soloist and pianist before beginning to work on the piece.

2) As you sight-read, take note of the areas that give you the most trouble, perhaps even stopping to put a star or check by those places.

3) After the first reading, begin your practicing by systematically working through those passages that gave you problems. Here are some guidelines as you work these passages.

a) Practice slowly, then gradually speed up the metronome towards your target tempo. This method really works!

b) Pay special attention to unusual intervals, rhythms, and dynamics. These are the places where judges will be most critical. (Avoid neglecting the rest of the solo though!)

c) Other strategies include changing the rhythm of a difficult passage, working backwards through a passage measure by measure, adding one note at a time as you practice, and many more. Be creative in your practicing!

d) No matter what practice strategies you use, make sure that you can play each difficult passage correctly *many* times (at least 3 in a row) before going on to another passage or speeding up the tempo.

4) Once you have worked out the difficult passages, you can then integrate them with the rest of the solo. Continue to take note of problem areas, and stop to work on them if they continue to cause you difficulty.

5) When preparing for a performance (i.e. solo/ensemble, All-State audition), play for as many people as will listen; your band director, your friends, your brother/sister, mom/dad, etc. Playing in front of people will help you feel more comfortable in the actual performance.

6) Record yourself, even if it's on a cheap tape recorder. Listening to recordings of yourself will help you spot faulty rhythm and intonation, as well as many other issues you may not notice while you are playing.

7) Above all, be kind to yourself and have fun. Avoid "inner monologues" that tear down your confidence. Be critical of your playing, but be supportive and constructive as well.

Practice Strategies Example: Lowell Shaw, "Just Desserts," No. 12, mm. 39-40



Suggested Timetable for Preparing a Solo Performance

Three to six months before the performance: Pick repertoire (see below for tips/recommendations), find a capable pianist to work with, and give him/her the music. Begin your practice routine (see above) and work out the technical and musical challenges of your part completely before rehearsing with piano. Study both the solo and piano parts by listening to a recording with a copy of the score in front of you.

One month to two months before the performance: Plan a rehearsal schedule with your pianist so that you have ample time to work on any ensemble problems together. Good pianists are usually extremely busy, so be respectful of their time by being as prepared as possible when you walk into the first rehearsal. Get help from your band/orchestra directors, private music teachers, and anyone else who is willing to listen. If possible, rehearse as often as possible in the space where the actual performance will occur.

Two weeks before the performance: By now any ensemble and/or technical problems should be resolved, and you have arrived at a convincing musical interpretation. You are now ready to practice performing the piece! Perform complete runs (no stopping) of your piece (with or without accompaniment) for as many people who will listen. Practice the art of performing away from your instrument by visualizing your ideal performance right down the last detail - even the clothes you'll be wearing! If you haven't already, make sure you are getting plenty of sleep each night (7-8 hours) and are drinking plenty of water everyday. It's also a good idea to lay off the caffeine - no Starbucks or Coca-Cola!

One day before the performance: Avoid over practicing. Be confident that all the work you've done to this point has prepared you well for the next day. Relax by watching a movie, taking a walk, reading a book, hanging out with friends, etc. Go to bed early!

Day of the performance: Warm up well using your regular routine, but avoid playing too much - over playing on a performance day can give you a stiff lip. Make sure you establish a meeting time with your pianist that is well before the scheduled time for your performance. Relax, take big breaths, and have fun!

Repertoire Recommendations/Guidelines

When choosing a solo, pick something that shows off what you do well, but that still provides enough musical and technical challenges to keep you interested. Consult with your band director or private instructor *before* beginning to work on a particular solo. See the list below for some important areas to consider.

- 1) Difficulty of piano accompaniment/availability of accompanist
- 2) Range
- 3) Rhythmic complexity
- 4) Duration
- 5) Equipment (single/double horn)
- 6) Compliance with specified solo/ensemble repertoire lists
- 7) Student interest/motivation

- 1) Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Perennial, 1990.
- 2) Farkas, Philip. *The Art of Musicianship*. Rochester, NY: Wind Music Publications, 1976.
- 3) Gallwey, W. Timothy. *The Inner Game of Tennis*. Random House, 1974.

Stage Presence

Consider stage presence as a tool for creating more effective performances.

Because we spend a tremendous amount of time and effort perfecting the audible part of our craft, we often neglect the visual component of a performance. Performances not only need to sound good, they need to *look* good. One activity that I find useful is to think of every action on stage as part of the performance. This is something singers seem to do more naturally than brass players, and I think we can learn a great deal from studying not only vocalists' phrasing, but their body language as well. Try to cut down on extraneous motion, and instead try to channel that excess energy into the performance. This can prove quite difficult, especially if certain mannerisms and other idiosyncrasies have become habitually ingrained. Ask friends and colleagues to watch your own performing and evaluate it based not on what they hear, but what they see instead. This can be a very beneficial, if somewhat humbling, process.

Let your stage presence be an outward representation of your highest artistic goals.

We've all experienced performances where we didn't feel our best, and maybe even would rather have been doing something else at the time. But the bottom line is that the audience – especially a paying audience – doesn't care. They are there to be inspired, entertained, and otherwise lifted out of the humdrum of daily life. Our body language on stage should present our best side to the audience – the part of us that is engaged, energetic, and feels privileged to be there. It may not be how we actually feel at the time, but changing our physical actions often has a positive effect on our emotions. Try this activity sometime when you aren't feeling at your best about a performance – imagine that you are a world-famous soloist (take your pick) about to perform on stage in a famous concert hall. What would your body language be? How would you walk out onto that stage in front of thousands of adoring fans? Our brains respond very powerfully to imagery, both positive and negative, and going through a simple exercise like the above can do wonders for our mood and stage presence.

Explore some type of study in movement.

One trait that both gifted performers and athletes seem to have is an uncanny awareness of their own bodies and those around them. I highly recommend some kind of movement study for all performers, as it helps us become more aware of our physical actions. I have rarely heard anyone say that studying the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Creative Motion, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, etc. had a negative effect on their performing.

Observe other artists and their stage presence.

We listen to recordings of great artists for inspiration and ideas, so why shouldn't we try to learn from their stage presence as well? I wouldn't suggest that someone try to copy the stage presence of a well-known soloist anymore than I would suggest that they try to sound exactly like that soloist, but I think it is incredibly important to take note of those things we would like to emulate in our own performances. There is no need to name names – there are plenty of amazing performers out there to watch – and with YouTube, streaming concert videos, and DVD recordings, we can review performances as many times as we want.

Use autogenic phrases prior to going on stage.

The moments right before we walk on stage can be very powerful, depending on how we use them. Try coming up with a few words or some short phrases which sum up the excitement and joy of performing for you, and say them out loud right before you walk out on stage. If you don't feel like saying them out loud just write or type them on a card and look at them before you enter the stage. If you don't think it will break your concentration too much, you can also experiment with thinking of a humorous moment or word to help lighten the mood. We take what we do very seriously – as we should – but the reality is that playing the horn isn't brain surgery or rocket

science. Sometimes it's nice to have a brief reminder that the fate of the world doesn't hinge on our performances.

Tips on Rehearsing with Piano Accompaniment

Learn every note and rhythm to the best of your ability before the first rehearsal with your accompanist.

Rehearsals with your accompanist are best spent working on ensemble and musical issues, not learning your own solo part.

When tuning, sound the horn's pitch first.

If the piano plays first, most good horn players will simply adjust at the embouchure to match the pitch. Sounding the horn note first will give a more accurate idea of the instrument's pitch so that the player can make any necessary adjustments with the tuning slides. Suggested tuning pitches are the second line "G" and third space "C" for horn in F.

Establish good communication with your accompanist.

Eye contact, small gestures, and well-timed breaths are all excellent ways to stay in communication with your pianist before and during a performance. Though they are always important, these cues are absolutely crucial at the beginning of a piece and at transitions. Small annotations in both the solo and piano part can also serve as reminders of what the other half of the ensemble is playing.

Experiment with different placements of the horn and piano (see Appendix 1 for several variations). Even slightly different configurations can result in drastically different results. Let your ear be your guide! Some factors to consider when trying different placements are:

- 1) Size/acoustical quality of the room - is it a dry or resonant space? A dry space might require a less direct placement of the horn (bell away from the audience), while a resonant space might work better with the bell more towards the audience. In most cases, it is best to avoid pointing the horn bell *directly* at the audience.
- 2) Size/type of piano. See the diagram below for suggested placement for both grand and upright pianos. Experiment with different lid settings (full stick, short stick, closed) on grand pianos.
- 3) Avoid pointing the horn bell into dampening materials such as curtains, acoustical tiles, etc. The horn projects best when the sound can reflect off a hard surface at least six to eight feet behind the bell of the instrument. If the bell is too close to the reflecting surface the sound can get brittle and tinny, too far and it can become diffuse and unclear.

For more information on this topic and other areas of horn performance, visit my blog, <http://hornworld.wordpress.com>, or feel free to email me with your questions at boldin@ulm.edu.

Appendix 1: Horn/Piano Placement Options



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Figure 1. Suitable for many acoustical situations, allows for good communication between the players.
Figure 2. Creates a more direct sound, suitable for larger and/or more resonant venues.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figure 3. Another option which allows for more resonating/reflecting space behind the horn.
Figure 4. Similar to Example 1, but with more direct contact between performer and audience. The raised piano lid can help with projection for the horn player.



Fig. 5

Figure 5. Yet another option, suitable for chamber music combinations such as soprano, horn, and piano.

Appendix 2: Sample Solo Repertoire

from *Rubank Concert and Contest Collection*, compiled and edited by H. Voxman. Rubank/Hal Leonard, 1961.

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Allerseelen

French Horn (in F)

RICHARD STRAUSS, Op. 10, No. 8
Transcribed by H. Voxman

Tranquillo

The musical score for French Horn in F, 'Allerseelen' by Richard Strauss, Op. 10, No. 8, is presented in nine staves. The tempo is marked 'Tranquillo' and the initial dynamic is 'Piano' (p). The score includes various dynamic markings such as *pp*, *p con espressione*, and *ff*. There are also markings for *molto espress.* and *ff*. The piece concludes with a final measure marked with a '3' and a fermata.

R o m a n c e

French Horn (in F)

C. SAINT-SAËNS, Op. 36
Edited by H. Voxman

Moderato

p

p *f* *dim.* *p*

pp *p* *Un peu plus de Mouvt**

1

cresc. *sf*

ff *ff* *stringendo* *ad lib.*

p> *pp*

a tempo *p*

2

dim.

* more animated

Rêverie

French Horn (in F)

ALEXANDRE GLAZOUNOW, Op. 24
Edited by H. Voxman

Andantino (♩ = 66)

dolce
mp

f

a tempo
meno f poco rit.
mf

p
f
p cresc.

mf
dim.
stringendo
mp cresc.

Tempo I

agitato (♩ = 160)
f
rit.
dolce
mp

ff
f
mf

p cresc.
f
rit.
p a tempo
mf

pp bouché (stopped horn - play a semitone lower)
mf morendo