COPING WITH STAGE FRIGHT

Music Magazine; By Michael Colgrass

What is stage fright and how do performers overcome it? Probably everyone - musician or not - has at some time experienced the nerve-racking effects of speaking or performing in public: the mouth goes dry, the heart beats faster, the legs weaken, and it becomes a major effort to pull oneself together. Imagine the pressure on musicians, especially soloists and chamber music players, who must perform continually before large and critical audiences and maintain the highest musical standards. How do they do it?

It seems that each performer has his own way of dealing with stage fright, be it through meditation, comforting foods or - as with one famous conductor I know - relaxing by watching a game show on TV. One of the most interesting methods I ever encountered was from violinist Itzhak Perlman, who told me how he role-played his Carnegie Hall debut in his own living room.

First, he set a date for the mock concert debut, and then started working toward this date with all the daily practice and general preparation he would put in for the real event. When the given day arrived, he practised lightly, took a rest, then put on his tux and watched the clock for his eight o'clock "appearance." He warmed up in his kitchen, which he had designated as the artists' dressing room, and, a few minutes before eight, waited in the "wings" between his kitchen and living room. Then he imagined someone saying to him, "Okay, Mr. Perlman, you're on," and he walked "on stage," acknowledged the imaginary audience and played his recital, just the way he would do it on the real debut. He said he was very nervous for this mock concert and that there was no difference to him between this imaginary setting and Carnegie Hall. When the actual debut took place he knew what stresses to expect, because he had ferreted out the unknowns.

Flutist Robert Aitken uses self-hypnosis as a way to help himself prepare for performance, a technique he learned from a medical hypnotist in Saskatchewan. "It is a very useful thing for a musician to learn,' says Aitken. "I think many of the great musicians always used it, maybe without knowing it. It can be used for very specific things - even speeding up a trill!" But he also warns that hypnosis can be misused, especially trying to play a concert in a trance. "I tried it and found I wasn't really there and therefore it wasn't successful."

I think any overly comfortable state of mind or body on stage could sabotage a performance. Once a friend of mine in a Broadway musical suddenly forgot the words to a song and could not, no matter how she tried, remember them even though the conductor prompted her with the opening line and replayed the intro three times. Finally, overwhelmed with embarrassment, she turned to the audience and said, "I don't know what's the matter with me - I've sung this song at 157 performances," whereupon her memory came back and she sang it. I remember her interesting remark after the performance: "I was too relaxed'.

Experimentation with a drug called Propanolol (one of the so-called beta-blockers) has aroused interest for its apparent ability to control the performer's flow of adrenalin and thereby calm the person without negatively affecting the reflexes. This drug is not addictive, but its use can develop a psychological dependence in the performer which, in the long run, can be harmful to a player's confidence. It's important for an artist to know he can rely on his own resources. The positive side to this drug is that it can, in extreme cases, help a very nervous performer feel

what it's like to play without shaking on stage; he can then work toward achieving that same feeling without the drug.

I think, though, most drugs are a false panacea. Once I was waiting backstage to perform along with another musician, and, to my amazement, she pulled out a little silver box, extracted a marijuana cigarette, and lit up. When I asked her if smoking dope before going on stage was advisable she said: "Oh, I always do it. I think playing should be a special experience for the performer and then that feeling carries over to the audience." She was right. The audience almost fell asleep. In three different renderings of the same 18-minute piece her performance time varied as much as four minutes!

My own method of allaying stage fright is through changing any preconceived notions I might have about what's scaring me. Take for example Carnegie Hall - it's the tradition of that hall that's foreboding, not the actual audience or performing conditions. I was recently asked to give a casual talk at Carnegie to the audience prior to the performance of one of my orchestral pieces. It was an important occasion with a major orchestra, and I was nervous about it. The day of the concert was a madhouse and I got little rest or proper food (typical of a performer's life on the road), so when concert time came I was edgy and tired. My piece was last on the program.

At intermission I went back to the green room (the artists' lounge named for its soothing color), took off my jacket, shoes, cuff links, and tie and stood on my head and wiggled my toes, which made me giggle. Then I did some mime exercises, stretching my hands and making funny faces. By now the second half of the concert had started, and the orchestra was playing a Haydn symphony, which I could hear through the speaker system, so I danced to the minuet and thought to myself, "I wonder what the audience would think if they could see me now." Then I washed my face, put myself back together and went downstairs and stood in the wings. I felt energetic and ready, but not nervous, and the talk went well.

The exercise had circulated my blood and awakened me, but, more importantly, I had changed my image of Carnegie Hall. In this most venerable of concert halls you are supposed to be dignified, sophisticated - and scared. You don't frolic around the green room with half your clothes off, giggling like a kid. Almost without knowing it, I had broken old associations with that hall and made new ones: to this day when I think of Carnegie Hall I see myself dancing backstage to a Haydn symphony.

Assuming a performer has worked hard and prepared properly, nervousness is not something to be afraid of, but rather to be welcomed. It's the body's way of telling you that adrenalin is charging into your blood and that you're ready for a super effort. For a performer, nothing could be better.