

UNIVERSITY MUSIC STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF  
PERFORMANCE ANXIETY AND HOW THEY COPE WITH IT

by

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the lived experience of post secondary music students who experience music performance anxiety (MPA). Also, this study investigated how these students cope with MPA. Ten university-level music students participated in a series of interviews. Content analysis of the data was used to identify a number of important themes. Upon examination of the data, it appears that the experience of MPA and how music students cope with MPA is varied and complex. Possible implications of this study include gaining insight into the needs of music students who seek counselling for performance anxiety as well as informing counselling interventions in general. Limitations of the present study and suggestions for future research will also be discussed.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### Personal Experience

I have been interested in performance psychology for many years. I am fascinated with the process of desire to perform, preparation, and execution of skills under various circumstances. As a musician, I have experienced the effects of music performance anxiety first hand and have wondered about the extent to which it affects other musicians.

#### Music Performance Anxiety

This study will employ a working definition of MPA: the experience of persisting, distressful apprehension about and /or actual impairment of performance skills in a public context, to a degree unwarranted given the individuals musical aptitude, training, and level of preparation (Salmon, 1990).

#### Why study post secondary music students?

Music performance anxiety (MPA) can be a serious problem for many musicians whether they are professionals, music students, or career amateurs (Wilson, 1997, cited in Rae and McCambridge, 2004). Steptoe & Fidler, (1987) believe that MPA is a widespread problem that affects musicians of various ages, experience, and types, to varying degrees. There have been numerous studies documenting the frequency and severity of MPA among musicians. Fishbein & Middlestadt (1988) found that among 212 classical musicians, 24% reported MPA to be a serious problem (as cited in Nieman, Pratt, and Maughan, 1993). Pratt, Jessop, and Neiman (1992) found that 87% of a sample of 246 university music students suffered from some sort of physical pain as a result of

MPA. Wesner, Noyes, and Davis (1990), found that among 294 musicians surveyed, 16.5% indicated that their musical performance was “markedly impaired’ by performance anxiety. According to Wesner, Noyes, and Davis (1990), 21.3% of musicians surveyed reported that they experience performance anxiety when performing and 16.1% reported performance anxiety adversely affected their music career. Fehm & Schmidt (2006) reported a “high frequency” among 74 (15-19 year old) music students, stating that 33% of their sample described being ‘distinctly’ handicapped by their anxiety. In a study of Norwegian music students, Kaspersen & Gotestam (2002) found that among 126 participants, 36.5% reported a need for help with MPA.

One of the most common setbacks musicians experience as a consequence of MPA is impaired performance (Wesner, Noyes and Davis, 1990). Musicians report that anxiety can cause mild to very serious impairment of performance. Mild performance impairment may include missing an occasional note, while serious performance impairment may be debilitating to the point where the performer cannot continue or even begin performing (Wesner, Noyes and Davis, 1990). Of course, even missing an occasional note can be enough to unsettle some musicians and be the cause of great concern (Steptoe and Fidler, 1987). While the severity of performance impairment can vary as a result of MPA, the length of time that musicians experience MPA can also vary considerably. Some musicians report experiencing MPA for days, weeks, and even months before a performance (van Kemenade, van Son, and van Heesch, 1995).

Common symptoms of MPA include increased heart rate, increased perspiration, increased dry mouth, tremor, and poor concentration (Wesner, Noyes, and Davis, 1990). In fact, Clark and Agras (1991) found that subjects who experience MPA almost always



show increased heart rate, whether they are female or male and of various levels of competence and experience. Abel and Larkin (1990) have found that increases in heart rate are related, and thought to be causally linked, to lower reported confidence. Also, blood pressure has been shown to increase among musicians experiencing MPA (Abel and Larkin, 1990). These altered physiological states can interfere with the actual execution of motor skills required to complete a musical task, let alone the ability to perform the task with finesse. For example, sweaty palms can prevent free movement of the hands up and down the fret board of a stringed instrument, make it difficult for a drummer to hold onto drumsticks, interfere with a piano players' attack of the keys, and so on. Tremors can interfere with desired control of the hands which would affect almost any type of musical performance. Dry mouth can certainly interfere with singing or playing a wind instrument. Of course, all of these physiological symptoms alone or in combination can impair performance in a myriad of ways. Further, the various physiological symptoms can interfere with ones ability to concentrate at a level required for optimal performance (Wesner, Noyes and Davis, 1990).

The problems musicians face as a result of MPA are not necessarily limited to impaired performance. MPA could lead to a reduction or even complete loss of enjoyment of musical performance. Further, MPA can be damaging enough to potentially curtail music careers before they begin (Rae and McCambridge, 2004) or even halt the trajectory of established professional careers (Clark & Agras, 1991). MPA can be serious enough to affect not only musician's professional lives but their personal lives as well (van Kemenade, van Son & van Heesch, 1995). For example, Wright (1999) contends that MPA can lead to various existential crises that could possibly affect one's identity in

a number of ways.

At present, there appears to be a paucity of qualitative research in which the voice of musicians is heard regarding their experience of MPA. Much of the research literature regarding MPA is generally quantitative. The purpose of the current study is to hear the lived experiences of musicians who experience MPA. This information will be obtained within a qualitative framework. It is hoped that the present study can obtain information about the various aspects of MPA from the point of view of musicians in their own words. Further, it is hoped that information can be obtained regarding how these musicians cope with MPA.

There have been endless charges that much of the psychological literature lacks external validity due to the over reliance of using university students as participants for studies. The main contention regarding the external validity of many studies using university students as participants is that these students do not represent the general population, most notably because they are more highly educated than the average citizen and that their age range is generally limited. This type of convenience sampling has often been pejoratively referred to as “warm body” sampling. It is important to note that this study does not aim to simply follow the usual “warm body” research protocol often seen in university research for the sake of convenience. Rather, this sub-group is important to study for a number of reasons including the fact that many of them aspire to forge some kind of future career, whether it be professional or amateur, in music performance. Also, this sub-group appears to suffer from MPA more than other groups. According to Steptoe and Fidler (1987), music students report the highest levels of MPA compared to other musicians, such as amateur and professional musicians.

Another interesting development that pertains to the usefulness of using university students in a study such as this is that there appears to be a growing trend among conservatories and university music programs to teach students the necessary skills to help them meet the demands of performing (Niemann *et al*, 1993). This suggests that there is a growing awareness that MPA is a serious problem that needs to be addressed, particularly with music students.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### MPA

In 1987 Steptoe and Fidler conducted a comprehensive study that has often been cited by researchers interested in MPA. This important study attempts to assess two major themes: 1) the relationship between performance anxiety of musicians and age/experience, and 2) the cognitive processes of musicians who experience varying levels of performance anxiety. According to Steptoe and Fidler, there exists a gap in the research literature regarding the cognitive processes of musicians who experience stage fright or performance anxiety. Also, the authors point out that much of the research conducted before their study that has focused on the relationship between performance anxiety and amount of performing experience has neglected to factor age into the equation. In the past it seems to have been assumed that increases in the amount of performance experience would be positively correlated with increase in age. However Steptoe and Fidler question this assumption and thus include in their study a group of amateur musicians whose age and performance experience vary greatly. While the two major themes were delineated by the authors, the hypotheses were not clearly stated from the outset but rather implied.

Most of the data for the Steptoe and Fidler (1987) study were gathered using quantitative questionnaires distributed to the participants. The authors report no information regarding who distributed the questionnaires. The response rate across all three groups was excellent; 65 of 75 (87%) professional musicians, 41 of 41 (100%) students, and 40 of 55

(73%) amateur musicians. According to the authors, the proportion of male and females in the study was approximately equal. However, of the 146 subjects, it is unknown exactly how many of them were males or females as the authors deemed it impossible to identify the sex of the subjects without breaching anonymity.

Performance anxiety was measured using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), which consists of 20 statements that measure how a respondent feels at that particular moment (state anxiety) and 20 statements that measure how a respondent feels in general (trait anxiety). Every-day fear was measured using the 16-item Fear Survey, which was adapted from Hallam and Hafner (1978). This measure was used to assess six types of fear: fear of crowds, illness, animals, travel, heights and water, and social situations. The subjects also completed the Eysenck Personality Inventory. This was used to assess the relationship between neuroticism and performance anxiety. Cognitive strategies were assessed by presenting subjects with a list of 20 statements that musicians tell themselves before performing. The subjects responded to each statement by rating on a scale from 1-3 how much they say these things to themselves before performing. Finally, the student and professional musicians were asked how they cope behaviourally with performance anxiety.

The results of Steptoe and Fidler's (1987) study yielded a number of interesting findings. Student musicians reported the highest rates of performance anxiety while professional musicians reported the lowest levels with amateur musicians reporting lower levels of performance anxiety than student musicians. Performance anxiety was positively correlated with neuroticism in all three groups of musicians. Catastrophising self-statements (statements that envision some sort of catastrophe such as fainting or getting sick) were used more frequently by musicians with high performance anxiety while realistic appraisal self-

statements (such as “I’m bound to make a few mistakes but so does everyone”) were used most by musicians with medium levels of performance anxiety.

The authors conclude that age appears to be a more important factor than experience in contributing to performance anxiety given that amateur musicians tended to be older than students but having approximately equal experience. The relationship between performance anxiety and neuroticism as indicated by scores on the fear survey was not as strong as the authors predicted. The most important theme to emerge from the factor analysis regarding cognitive processes as reflected by self-statements was the theme of catastrophising. In all three groups, catastrophising self-statements were used more frequently by subjects with high performance anxiety. A curvilinear relationship was found in all three groups regarding the relationship between performance anxiety and the use of realistic self-statements; subjects with medium levels of performance anxiety use realistic self-statements more than subjects with low or high performance anxiety.

A number of limitations were addressed by the authors of this study, such as the appropriateness of using amateur musicians as a control group, given that they would not be faced with the same types of evaluations as either student musicians or professional musicians. Some limitations not mentioned by the authors include the fact that only classical musicians were analyzed. Given that classical musicians might face different performance expectations than jazz or blues musicians (classical musicians tend not to improvise during performance like some jazz or blues musicians), performance anxiety and coping strategies may be different for these subgroups of musicians. In fact, there have been findings that suggest that there are differences in anxiety levels between jazz students and classical students, with lower levels of MPA reported in the former group

and higher levels reported in the latter group with piano and string instrumentalists reporting the highest levels (Kaspersen & Gotestam, 2002). Also, Steptoe and Fidler (1987) did not report the socio economic status (SES) and cultural background of the participants in their study, though it is unclear that SES is a related factor in MPA. Finally, while some open ended questions were used to gather information regarding how professional and student musicians cope with performance anxiety, open ended questions were not presented to the amateur musicians in the study. Thus no qualitative data was collected to determine how amateur musicians cope with MPA. Furthermore, the questions that were used for the professional musicians were reworded for the music students to refer to their future careers rather than their present career. Given these last two shortcomings of the Steptoe and Fidler study, the use of the same open-ended questions for all three groups might provide a more compelling comparison.

Another comprehensive and often cited study was conducted by Rae and McCambridge (2004). The purpose of Rae and McCambridge's study is two fold: 1) the authors investigate the psychometric properties of a truncated version of the Performance Anxiety Scale (PAI) - the authors refer to the short form of the PAI as the PAI-R, and 2) the authors investigate whether MPA is related to age, gender, years of playing experience, level of competence and various aspects of personality. Rae and McCambridge (2004) note that past research has tended to investigate the relationships between MPA in professional or conservatory musicians. Their study focuses on high school music students in the context of being evaluated or graded. The authors do not state a specific hypothesis. Rather, the study appears to be exploratory.

In the Rae and McCambridge (2004) study, a series of questionnaires were handed

out for the participants to complete. The questionnaires include the PAI-R and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (EPQ-R, a short form of the EPQ). Reliabilities for the subscales for the EPQ-R range from .62 to .88 for males, and .61 to .84 for females. Internal consistency ratings for the PAI-R = .88, as found by Rae and McCambridge in the present study. There is no information provided regarding who distributed the questionnaires or the environment in which the subjects participated in the study.

The participants in this study include 36 males and 84 females ( $n = 120$ ), with ages ranging from 15-18 ( $M=16.5$ ,  $SD=0.97$ ). SES and cultural/ethnic background was not reported. 117 of the 120 participants had previous experience being examined. Levels of competency among these students ranged from grade 3 to grade 8 with the highest proportion (35%) at the grade 4 level and (27.5%) at the grade 6 level.

Rae and McCambridge (2004) report a “significant negative correlation” between PAI-R scores and psychoticism ( $-0.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and a “significant positive correlation” between PAI-R scores and neuroticism ( $0.55$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). A one way ANOVA revealed a significant difference between groups scoring high on neuroticism and psychoticism,  $F(3,116) = 9.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The authors report an internal consistency rating of 0.88 for the PAI-R (vs. .89 for the PAI).

In general, Rae and McCambridge report that females experience higher levels of performance anxiety than males. Similar findings have been observed in other studies. For example, according to LeBlanc Jin, Obert & Siivola (1997), gender (female) is a significant predictor of increased MPA during performance. Further, LeBlanc *et al* found that females tended to have higher heart rates in all conditions of their study.

Rae and McCambridge (2004) also report a negative correlation between MPA



and psychoticism (those who don't care about others will not be as anxious), and a positive correlation between MPA and neuroticism (those who are neurotic tend to be more anxious). Finally, the authors report that the PAI-R measures a single construct. It is assumed that this single construct is performance anxiety though this is not explicitly stated but rather implied by the authors.

It should be noted that while Rae and McCambridge (2004) report an internal consistency rating of .89 for the PAI-R (their truncated version of the PAI) vs. .89 for the original long version of the PAI, the authors did not attempt to test other variations of a short form. In other words, the authors decided to modify the PAI by eliminating 9 of 20 items. The authors did not test other possible permutations of a short form by eliminating other items, or trying more or less items. Even though the internal consistency of the PAI-R and the PAI are almost identical, there is no information provided regarding the validity of either measure.

Rae and McCambridge (2004) extrapolate their findings to suggest that the relationship between state/trait anxiety and music performance anxiety may determine whether or not the Yerkes-Dodson law would apply to every musician. Depending on the severity of either state or trait anxiety an individual experiences, a moderate amount of pre-performance anxiety, which is often thought to be facilitative of optimal performance, may in fact be debilitating for some. This could have significant implications for treatment of individuals experiencing MPA. Future research could examine and compare the lived experiences of musicians who are either high in state or trait anxiety. This could provide insight into how these people cope with MPA and what types of interventions would best suit them.

LeBlanc *et al.*, (1997) found that MPA appears to increase when an audience is present and increases as the audience grows in number and depending on who is in the audience. LeBlanc *et al.* claim that if there are people in the audience that a musician perceives as a potential judge (e.g., teacher, contest judge, parent), then the experience of MPA will be more severe. One of the potential limitations of the LeBlanc *et al.* study is the manipulation of the independent variable. Students were exposed to three conditions: performing alone in a practice room, performing in a practice room with one researcher present, and performing in a rehearsal room with all researchers, a peer group, and a tape recording being made. The finding that MPA increased in severity in each of the three conditions is interesting. However, the third condition in the experiment appears to be sufficiently far along the continuum from the first two conditions that it is rendered categorically different. In other words, the researchers appear to be using a “sledgehammer” independent variable that renders the findings less impressive. Also, there is no clear indication of the use of a control group, thus further confounding the findings.

### Coping

Just as members of any population attempt to cope with various associated challenges, musicians of all ages, gender, competence levels, career stage, and musical style, attempt to cope with the effects of MPA. A popular misconception is that musicians often cope with MPA by using drugs or alcohol as a means to dampen anxiety and fear. This misconception may be due to some of the notorious case examples described in popular media such as the tortured and tormented jazz musician or rock star, which may bias our view of musicians coping with MPA. But do these artists represent the majority

of musicians who attempt to cope with MPA?

There are a number of studies that suggest that drug and alcohol use may not only be the exception among musicians coping with MPA, but it appears to be, on average, a less appealing coping method to musicians. For example, in a survey of 294 musicians, Wesner, Noyes, and Davis (1990) found that drug and alcohol use was an uncommon method of coping with MPA. Participants in the Wesner, Noyes, and Davis study more commonly favoured psychological therapy techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation to cope with MPA. Fehm & Schmidt (2006) found that drug or alcohol abuse was actually rarely reported from a sample of gifted adolescents between 15- 19 years old. Rather than perceiving drug or alcohol use as appealing, most of the students in the Fehm & Schmidt study indicated that they wanted more support from parents and teachers. It would be interesting to discover whether there is a difference in reported use of drugs to cope with MPA between high school age students and professional musicians or university students who no longer live at home with their parents. These musicians may not have the support network that high school age music students have.

There has been a growing trend among musicians to use beta blockers to cope with the adverse effects of MPA. While there is some evidence that supports the effectiveness of beta blockers to reduce anxiety in general, other evidence suggests that beta blockers are generally not effective in reducing MPA before a performance but can be effective in alleviating MPA during a performance (Neftel, 1982).

In a recent study, Miller (2005) examined the effectiveness of journal writing as a method to cope with MPA. While there has not been any published literature on the effectiveness of journal writing for MPA, in his dissertation, Miller suggests that journal

writing may be an effective tool to help musicians cope with MPA. As it stands, journal writing may be a useful adjunct to other forms of treatment for musicians trying to cope with MPA; however future research is needed in this area.

### Treatment

At present there are numerous types of interventions used to help musicians who suffer from the effects of MPA. The list of interventions for MPA include, but are not limited to, systematic desensitization, progressive muscle relaxation, imagery techniques, breathing techniques, etc. Many of these interventions tend to be cognitive-behavioural and behaviourally based.

Niemann, Pratt, & Maughan, (1993) studied the effects of various treatments to diminish pre-performance MPA in music students. The treatments included biofeedback training, music relaxation and other coping strategies including breathing awareness, muscle relaxation, and performance-coping imagery. Students in the experimental condition were involved in six training sessions which included skin temperature training and cognitively based coping strategies all the while with sedative music playing in the background. The researchers reported a significant reduction in the levels of anxiety experienced by music students. MPA was measured by scores on the STAI and the Debilitating/Facilitating scales. As mentioned earlier, the State-Trait anxiety Inventory (STAI) consists of 20 statements that measure how a respondent feels at that particular moment (state anxiety) and 20 statements that measure how a respondent feels in general (trait anxiety). Debilitating/Facilitating Anxiety Scales consists of five subjective questions on a ten point rating scale. It would be interesting to see the results of an expanded version this study to assess the effects of the different components of treatment

used in the experimental condition.

The Niemann, Pratt, & Maughan (1993) study discussed above is an example of one among a number of studies that illustrate the apparent effectiveness of the various types of interventions employed by therapists to treat clients who experience MPA. And while many of these techniques have also been useful to varying degrees for general anxiety and sports performance anxiety, there are a number of important issues to consider when applying these types of interventions to musicians coping with MPA. A number of researchers raise the issue of methodological problems in many effectiveness studies for treatment of MPA.

According to McGinnis (2005), past research on the effectiveness of various treatments seems to be undermined by methodological limitations such as overuse of self-report outcome measures. Other researchers believe that there is a need for tightly controlled, rigorous studies to confirm the most effective treatment for MPA. In a review of various treatments for MPA, including behavioural, cognitive-behavioural, cognitive, etc, Kenny (2005) found that due to various methodological issues, different number of studies for the various treatment modalities, sample size problems, and other issues, it is difficult to make any conclusive statements about the efficacy of any of the treatments for MPA. Given that there is a lack of a large scale, unified, and systematic research program in place to test the various treatment modalities with strict control and rigorous methodology, we cannot make any firm conclusions about treatment effectiveness for this population who are, according to Kenny (2005), in “urgent” need.

Another potential issue raised by Fogle (1982) regarding treatment of MPA is the appropriateness of using ‘tried and true’ methods for other types of anxiety and applying

them blindly to musicians. It appears that caution and care needs to be exercised when applying general anxiety treatments to musicians. In Fogle's words (1982), standard treatments for anxiety can be "blunt-instruments" if applied indiscriminately to musicians, thus possibly reducing the potential effectiveness of treatment.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### Original plan for this study

It should be noted that the present study was initially intended to investigate the lived experience of MPA by employing focus group interviews. The original plan for this study was to arrange two focus group sessions with 5-6 participants in each group. After contacting a number of potential participants, enough participants signed up to run two focus group interviews. Unfortunately, when the time came to conduct the group interviews, a significant proportion of the participants opted to decline, even though they had previously committed to a specific time and place to participate.

According to Krueger (1988), there are a number of advantages to using the focus group interview. One of the advantages is that group dynamics is offered by this method. This method takes advantage of the fact that people tend to interact with each other and are influenced by each other. Indeed, this was evident during the first two interviews for this study. Initially, two groups were scheduled for focus group interviews (one group with five participants and a second group with six participants). However, due to a number of late dropouts, only two participants arrived for each interview. With the permission and willingness of the participants, it was decided that we would continue with the interviews. While there were only two participants in each of the first two interviews, it was apparent that the dynamics of the groups, in these cases dyads, produced some interesting and fruitful dialogue. It would be fascinating to observe what the dynamics of a full group could yield.

One of the potential disadvantages of focus groups is that they may discourage some people from participating (Morgan, 1988). It is difficult to know exactly why in this case assembling a group of participants together to take part in the focus group interview sessions failed. There are a number of potential explanations for this. First; perhaps the nature of the focus group could have prevented a number of people who experience MPA to want to be around other people who experience MPA. Some music students who suffer from MPA may feel a certain level of anxiety that would prevent them from wanting to be with others who are anxious. Indeed, the very fact that they suffer from performance anxiety may arouse anxiety in them to a sufficient degree that makes them want to avoid such a focus group. The encounter may simply provoke too much anxiety for them to want to participate. Second, perhaps a number of the music students do not want to be identified by other students as being anxious about performing. Some of the participants may have had second thoughts after initially indicating a desire to participate. Another possible reason the focus group interviews failed to materialize could be the simple fact that scheduling busy music students who are part of an intensive program, who have part time jobs, auditions for other music gigs, among other commitments, make it difficult to arrange.

#### Revised plan for this study

After numerous failed attempts to arrange focus group interviews, and given that the same content analysis methodology could, and indeed would be used, it was decided that the present study would continue with individual interviews.



## Design

The present study employed a qualitative research design: descriptive content analysis of individual interviews.

## Content Analysis

Krippendorff (2004) suggests that “content analysts examine data, printed matter, images or sounds -texts- in order to understand what they mean to people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does.” In other words, content analysts perform systematic reading, or analysis of texts. Further, Krippendorff suggests that content analysis provides the researcher the possibility to ask the kinds of questions that may be beyond what the natural scientist may ask, or have the answers to. He defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.” Neundorf (2002) defines content analysis as “the systematic, objective, and quantitative analysis of message characteristics.” While both of these are admittedly brief definitions of content analysis, they are both consistent in many ways with how the data in this study was analyzed. After the interviews for this study were completed, they were systematically reviewed: while reviewing the interviews, notes were carefully taken and themes that developed within the context of an interview were identified. After all of the interviews had been analyzed and major themes identified, all of the notes from each interview were compared. If there was a theme that ran through most of the interviews, or was a significant part of some of the interviews, it was considered important enough to develop as a major theme in this study. Consistent with Krippendorff’s definition of content analysis, there were some inferences made in that I made the decision, based on the

available data, what the important themes were. However, beyond this inference, this study remains for the most part, descriptive. Neundorff (2002) suggests four types of content analysis; descriptive, inferential, predictive, and psychometric. The goal of this study is to analyze the interviews and describe the major themes that were identified.

This of course limits the number and types of claims that can be made in this study.

However, it is my opinion that making any claims beyond describing the major themes is not justified.

### Procedure

Participants were given the opportunity to preview the questions on the interview script before the interview started. Some of the participants reviewed the questions before the interview began. However, the majority of participants decided not to review the questions and came into the interview “cold.”

The participants were reminded that all of the data gathered during the interview will remain strictly confidential and that none of their names will be used in the final write up of the study. After the participants indicated their willingness to participate, they signed the informed consent form (see Appendix A). Before the interview started, I inquired about the participants' current mood and state of arousal. I would begin by asking each participant ‘how are you feeling right now?’ A follow up question was then asked; ‘are you feeling anxious at the moment?’ This was followed by; ‘would you like to take a few moments to relax?’ If the participant indicated that he/she was feeling anxious, I was ready to implement one of a number of relaxation exercises ranging from deep breathing to imagination of a relaxing scene. I also tried to make each participant feel as comfortable as possible. I feel that I accomplished this as none of the participants

expressed any need to engage in relaxation exercises. In fact, all of the participants seemed eager to get the interview underway. Once the interview began, I asked a number of ‘facilitating’ questions related to two main categories: “experience of MPA” and “coping with MPA”. As the participants responded, I asked follow up questions when I thought it was necessary to extract more rich detail. The duration of the interviews ranged from approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked each participant how they were feeling at that moment and specifically if they were feeling anxious. After a brief discussion, each participant indicated that they were feeling comfortable. At this point, each participant was thanked for their time and for sharing their personal story.

#### Contacting Participants

Dr. Richard Kurth, Dean of the music department at UBC, was contacted via email to arrange a meeting to discuss the possibility of the present study being conducted at UBC. After receiving Dr. Kurth’s permission to run the study with UBC music students as participants, an advertisement (see Appendix C) was sent via email to canvas potential participants for the study. The advertisement was first sent to Dr. Kurth for his approval. Dr. Kurth then sent the email message, including his own personal note of encouragement, to all of the students in the music department at UBC. Once the students received the advertisement via email, potential participants then voluntarily contacted me via e-mail. I then contacted these potential participants and identified myself and provided further details of the study, including any relevant information describing the study, how many participants are required, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and incentives for participating. Potential participants who made contact were thanked for responding. They

were also reminded that any information that they divulged during the contact phase would remain strictly confidential. I also indicated that any questions the participant may have would be answered before the interview was conducted. I then asked when the potential participant would like to meet. Once a time and place had been agreed upon, I provided the potential participant with a consent form and answers to any questions the potential participant may have regarding the consent form.

#### Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Participants must be currently enrolled in the music program of their respective institution, be 19 years of age or older, have had experience being evaluated in a performance situation, and experience performance anxiety in evaluative situations. Participants were asked to consider if they have experience with MPA. There was no specific selection process other than for the potential participants to think about whether anxiety has had an impact on their performance as a musician.

#### Incentives for participants

Each participant was entered into a draw for a fifty dollar gift certificate. Participants who signed up for the study but decided to withdraw were still be eligible for the prize.

#### Setting

Most of the interviews were conducted in various classrooms in the music department at UBC. Two interviews were conducted at different locations for the sake of convenience to the participants. One of these two interviews was conducted at Simon Fraser University while the other interview was conducted at the Britannia Community

centre in East Vancouver. All of the interviews were conducted in a closed room to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

### Materials

I used an interview script (see Appendix B) during the interviews with the participants. This interview script was divided into two main sections: questions regarding both the participant's experience of MPA and coping with MPA. Each section contained a number of questions designed to elicit focused but open ended responses from the participants.

An electronic digital recording device was used to record the interviews.

### Personal Experience

My interest in MPA stems from a fascination with performance psychology as well as being a musician who has experienced MPA. I have been a musician for many years. However, my music performance history is erratic; I have performed in public only a handful of times over the past decade. Over the past few years however, I have performed in public six times. This amount of public performance has been enough to bring the effects of MPA into greater focus in my own life but not enough to for me to become familiar with MPA on a regular basis. Further, I have not been subject to the type of evaluation that university music student's experience. However, given my recent past experience with MPA, I am aware of the potential biases that could emerge in my research. Critics could contend that it is possible that I may interpret responses from participants differently than others might. However, I believe my personal experience with MPA is relatively novel enough and sufficiently limited to situate me in the position of observer/learner.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **INTERVIEWING TEN PARTICIPANTS WITH MPA**

#### Description of the interview process

During the course of this study, ten participants were interviewed over a period of approximately six months. As mentioned earlier, I originally began this study with the intention of using focus group interviews to generate data. Two focus group interviews were arranged to take place at UBC. Unfortunately, a number of participants decided, for various reasons, to opt out of the focus group interview. However, two participants from each scheduled focus group decided that they would still like to take part in an interview. The first two interviews for this study were conducted with pairs of participants. The participants who took part in the paired interviews were Joan and Eunice in the first interview and Ray and Nikki in the second interview. The remainder of the interviews were conducted individually, one participant at a time. While a script was used (appendix B) for each interview, the interview process was dynamic in the sense that the scripted facilitating questions that were asked were followed up with questions that depended on the response of the individual participant. The result of this was the possibility that certain themes might develop within the context of some interviews that may not develop in other interviews.

The lengths of the participants' careers as a musical performer range from approximately 5 years to 25 years. It should be noted that the length of the participants' career as a performer is self-defined; it was left to the participant to decide how long they have been a "performing musician." It was very difficult for many of the participants to

identify precisely when they started performing as a musician. Many of them described how they had been a part of a choir since early childhood, or how they have been performing in some way for much of their lives. However, many of them tried to distinguish this type of performing from “serious” performing and tried to identify the length of their performing career by that criterion. Nonetheless, most of the participants seem to have found it difficult to identify precisely how long they have been a “performing musician.” This could be due to the fact that most of the participants are still navigating their way through their respective programs and may not have yet identified themselves as a career musician in the professional sense. Unlike many other occupations, defining the start date for when an artist becomes an artist is somewhat difficult for many to define.

### Participants

**Joan** is a 22 year old clarinetist in her fourth year in the music program. She decided to enter the music program at UBC after deciding that things were not working out to her satisfaction at her former university. She is very busy with her studies, as well as teaching music many days of the week. Joan described how she used to have problems getting over a bad moment in her performances and how that used to interfere with her ability to perform to the best of her abilities. She has also struggled with MPA to such a degree that it made it very difficult for her to perform. Joan has suffered the consequences of a bad student/teacher relationship in the past and suggests that this relationship did much to undermine her confidence as a musician and contributed directly to her experience of

MPA. In fact, her relationship with her former teacher was discouraging to the point that she considered quitting music all together.

**Eunice** is in her first year in the music program at UBC. She is a singer and is currently a student in the voice program. She is adapting to life as a first year music student, though she says she is never feeling relaxed. Eunice is a music teacher as well as a student.

When asked how long she has played her instrument, she said it is hard to know because her instrument is her voice. She started taking voice lessons at the age of fourteen, which she says is a rather late start, but that it is acceptable to start a little late rather than starting too young, which she describes as ethically questionable. Eunice considered quitting music as a result of her relationship with her current voice teacher. She is also struggling with some identity issues as a result of the relationship with her teacher. When we conducted the interview for this study, she was preparing for a number of exams.

Because of her exam preparations, she stated that she was feeling a general and pervasive sense of anxiety. At the time of the interview, Eunice wasn't sure exactly what her future as a musician looks like. She is not sure she will ever overcome her performance anxiety. However, she is also not convinced that completely overcoming performance anxiety is a good thing. She sees anxiety as a necessary component of performing.

**Ray** is a 32 year old classically trained tenor singer. He has performed in many different situations, including major roles in opera productions with notable major metropolitan opera companies. He has been performing since he was four years old. Ray sang pop music in variety shows as a young child performer. He stopped performing at the age of



15 and returned at the age of 23. At this point in his life he was singing recreationally at karaoke pubs. He then started singing in a choir and after two years he began taking “formal” voice lessons. It was during this time that Ray began having problems with his confidence and subsequently began having problems with MPA. He cites the lack of competence on his teacher’s part in undermining his technical abilities and thus undermining his confidence. His experience of MPA has been profound, and at times it has made him feel catatonic. He has recently completed his undergraduate degree in music at UBC and is currently making strides in his professional career.

**Nikki** is a 21 year old singer in the music program at UBC. She began singing with choirs at the age of 5, and has studied voice since the age of 12. She has also been a soloist since the age of 12. Her experience of MPA has included nightmares before performing. She usually experiences MPA approximately 10 minutes before going on stage. She says that her experience of MPA is generally similar across situations, but the duration of MPA changes depending on factors such as importance of the performance and size of the audience, the length of the performance, and proximity to the audience. Various forms of judgment used to be a contributing factor to her experience of MPA, but now she says it is just the presence of people that is a contributing factor. Nikki does not like to make eye contact with audience members. If this happens it increases her level of MPA dramatically. She has won a lot of voice competitions in her childhood and adolescence but says she didn’t always enjoy the physical act of singing. Rather, she has always enjoyed the communication aspect of singing for others.

**Norma** is a 31 year old violinist from Simon Fraser University. She has been performing for over 22 years. Norma began playing in music festivals, music camps, and honours orchestras intensively from the age of 14 until the age of 19. After this period, she began to play for Celtic bands and jazz bands. Also during this time, she would act as a substitute for other players who were unable to attend performances in many different settings and situations. Norma's versatility has allowed her to play many different styles and genres. She was especially busy as a working musician until the age of 28. She has recently secured a spot on the Vancouver Chamber Orchestra roster and plays with them regularly. She considers her serious performing career to span 16-17 years. Norma tends to experience MPA most when she is auditioning in front of people who know her instrument and who have knowledge of technique. She has experienced violent hand shaking that has interfered with her intonation and vibrato during some of these auditions. Norma tends to experience little MPA during performances or auditions in front of whom she considers less knowledgeable audience members.

**Sarah** is a 23 year old vocalist in the education stream of the department of music at UBC. She also plays French horn, clarinet, trumpet, saxophone, and is planning to learn piano, obo and tuba. She plans to establish a career as a professional pop singer. She is studying classical singing in her university program but also performs her own material which is a mix of pop, rock, folk, and fusion. Sarah has been performing for most of her life. She started as a little girl and began singing in music theatre in elementary school and continued with that through high school. Even though Sarah continued to sing with choirs, she made a decision not to pursue a career in music at the age of 8 because she felt

it was impractical. She then experienced a turning point in her life after she completed her second year of post secondary education; she was asked to sing in a choir that was touring Europe. Since then, she has forged a plan to be a professional musician. If her career as a pop singer is unsatisfying for her, she plans to become a music teacher, hence her desire to learn multiple instruments. Sarah experience of MPA has been challenging for her. She has experienced many of the nervous symptoms, such as jitters and shaky hands, but she has also had to content with sudden bouts of diarrhea shortly before going on stage. Sometimes she would have to rush to the bathroom up to five times before a performance.

**Tracy** is an opera singer in her early to mid twenties. She considers herself to have been a performing musician for 7 years. She started singing in children's choirs at the age of 8 years. She began taking private lessons since she was in grade 5. She got started with lessons because her older sister was taking them, and that's what she thought everyone was supposed to do! Tracy performed in singing competitions throughout high school but was not a serious musician, in her words, until she started her undergrad. She has recently completed her master's degree and is currently working on her DMA. She began to get her nerves under control during the middle of her master's degree. However, during her undergrad MPA for her was "almost paralyzing." She described how she used to feel terrified by performing. She used to have problems breathing properly which would cause her MPA to rise dramatically. She is now able to control her MPA.

**Barb** is a 27 year old soprano singer who recently completed her master's degree. She has been performing seriously, in her words, for 10 years. She started singing in choirs between the ages of 5 and 6, and started studying opera at the age of 16. Barb describes the exhilaration of MPA as something similar to falling in love; she says that one feels butterflies, shaking, wobbly knees, and other physical manifestations of nervousness. Sometimes she feels nervousness for days before a performance. MPA has made it difficult for her to continue on a career path as a performing musician. In fact, Barb has decided to change her career path in part due to her experience of MPA as well as the unpredictability of life as a performing musician.

**Marc** is a 21 year old saxophonist in the undergrad program at UBC. He has been playing since he was between 8 and 9 years old. He describes that he has been playing rigorously for the past 6 years. He first performed in front of people at the age of 11. Marc experiences MPA in different contexts, including auditions, playing for audiences, and during rehearsal. He describes how he feels MPA just up until the point he starts to perform. He has enjoyed his time in the program but has described his frustrations with some of the judgment he experiences as a result of being a jazz musician in a program primarily comprised of classically trained musicians. This has contributed in part to his current experience of MPA.

**Lorna** is a multi instrumentalist in her early twenties who is in her second year of the undergrad music program at UBC. She has been playing piano for a significant portion of her life but when asked what her main instrument is, she believes it is her voice. In fact,

she has performed as a vocalist for approximately 8-10 years in many different parts of the world. Lorna has experienced palpitations of the heart, cold sweat on the palms, and images of failure when on stage. Her experience of MPA has impacted her music career to such a degree that she felt that she couldn't perform to the level that she would like and thus has influenced her choice of instruments. Recently she has turned to conducting, and considers this as a likely pathway for her music career.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ANALYSIS AND REPORTING OF DATA**

Once the interviews were transferred from the recording device to a computer, I began the process of reviewing them. During the review process, each interview was carefully examined and individual themes were identified. Once these themes were identified from each interview, they were compared with other interviews to find if there were any themes that were consistent among all of the interviews. If there was a theme that ran through most of the interviews, or was a significant part of some of the interviews, I considered it important enough to develop as a major theme in this study. Once these major themes were identified from the data, I extracted quotes from the interviews that were deemed pertinent to a given major theme. These quotes were then integrated into the summary of the major themes and reported in the final write up of the study. It should be noted that some of these themes developed during the interview process from a combination of questions while other themes emerged from a particular scripted question that seemed to yield a rich source of information (e.g. “How does MPA affect your future plans”).

### **MAJOR THEMES**

#### Definition/Experience of MPA

During the interviews, participants were asked to provide, in their own words, a definition of music performance anxiety. Specifically, they were asked “if someone came up to you and asked you what MPA is, what would you tell them?” Upon examination of

the responses to this question, the trend among all of the participants was to define MPA in terms of the physical reactions to MPA, especially when preparing for a performance. Indeed, all of the participants described physical manifestations of nervousness. These physical manifestations included feelings of cold sweat on their palms, shaky hands, heavy breathing, nausea, wobbly knees, lips twitching, and heart palpitations.

Upon close examination of the responses to questions regarding the experience of MPA, it is interesting to note not only the descriptions of the physical manifestations but also the descriptions of the relationship between various mental/emotional states and their physical manifestations. Half of the participants in this study suggested or at least implied some sort of division between the mind and body when they described the relationship between their thoughts, emotions, and their physical responses to MPA.

Of course, there appears to be an assumption being made that mental states are synonymous with emotional states, as they seem to be used interchangeably within the context of the interviews. It should be noted that I am making no claims whatsoever regarding emotions being distinctly mental as opposed to physical. Indeed, I am making no claims about any ontological distinctions between mind and body in this study. Rather, I am merely representing the observations of the participants in the context of the interviews.

**Tracy:** “In terms of an emotional response I would say that it is a form of low grade panic...in terms of a physical response I would say that it has much more to do with your natural breathing rhythm, and then again how that in turn would affect your pulse...”

“Depending on the performance situation obviously you feel differently (pause) I would define [MPA] as a nervousness, an emotional nervousness with physical manifestations”

**Norma:** “I would define it as the inability to play at the level you are capable of due to nervousness/anxiety”

**Barb:** “Well, I would say it’s the nerves people feel before they perform. So it’s an emotional nervous reaction to performance specifically as opposed to playing your instrument or singing...you know I was actually thinking about this before my last opera. This is ridiculous. It’s kind of like falling in love. Like butterfly is cliché... I think that for me the biggest thing about feeling is that it’s hard to pin down what your feelings are ...sort of because you know your heart starts shaking...besides my mouth shaking...my knee swollen...”

“And then you know you come to the performance and your emotions are so different; your body is different because you’re ... because you’re about to perform. So all those things when you practiced what it feels like before you even set up that support is totally different. I find that when I’m standing on stage, I feel like that the voice I am producing is something that I would never be able to replicate in the practice room. It’s just I don’t know where it comes from. And you...it’s just so hard to practice because you can’t replicate it... it makes you more nervous because you don’t know what’s going on...”

**Lorna:** “Like having cold sweat on your palm because you know during piano... I just have you know sweaty palm anyways. I just have sweatier even more sweatier palm... for me at least. I start to imagine like funny, funny things... Yeah, like umm sometimes I mean... when I was inexperienced, I used to always think that I might flop on stage... so you know I’ll have only bad thoughts running, running through me before the concert



because of many bad things... so I'll be like 'oh no what if I screw up this part, you know, what if I don't make the nice drill, what if I don't da da da da da.' All the what-ifs, and then when I get up to perform, it all really happens because I thought about all these bad things."

**Marc:** "uh the closest thing I could think of is what really feels like is someone just grabs the entirety of your brain and just goes 'Stop!' And everything you know...you know you can do it. It's that confidence that you can just do it just fades away."

"Oh, [there is] so much doubt with this stuff..."

"It's the thinking that's your worst enemy because that what creates the anxiety because you're thinking and thinking and it's kind of just locks down, you can't do it."

Yeah, just absolutely hollow. It's a hollow cold feeling where you just like 'oh ahh...' I also shake."

"You get geared into directly what's exactly happening, which is not a good thing for music. You should be looking ahead..."

**Sarah:** "It's one of my favourite things to do, I've never feel so alive as when I'm on stage. But I also feel absolutely petrified and my guts turn to goo, you know before every performance. Yea, I mean it's the classic butterflies...I also have, you know, a relatively unique physical reaction as well you know you may have heard certain performer, actor or musicians vomit or something before every performance. I actually get horrendous diarrhoea. Before every performance I had to rush to the bathroom you know...three, four, five times before I can get on stage and you know if you think just getting on stage is nerve-wracking enough, imagine, you know, worrying about having to run off and go to bathroom..."

“Actually when I was in piano class, it would happen frequently that I would literally freeze up that my hands couldn’t move, and I start to cry...”

“Oh God, I feel very cowardly um...a lot of time before I go up. Umm...yeah...just very submissive.”

### The need to feel some anxiety

For most of the participants in this study, the experience of MPA is unpleasant and deleterious to their well being in a number of ways, and it also undermines their ability to perform at an optimal level. However, it should be noted that three of the musicians interviewed expressed a need to feel a certain level of anxiety. Usually, the participants described the benefits of experiencing a moderate amount of performance anxiety in order to feel motivated to perform to what they would consider an optimal level. One participant described her need to feel at least some level of MPA before performing;

**Eunice:** “nervousness doesn’t necessarily make my performance worse, it seems like it’s kind of necessary to my performance...I remember not feeling nervous for a performance and that performance was terrible...it didn’t feel natural at all...I built some kind of defense system against nervousness... I got rid of something that was good.”

“I view performance anxiety as necessary to create a performance like I use that like as a resource...so I don’t have a negative view of it necessarily and if I just accept that it’s

there and I'm I guess willing to let myself feel that then I can do things with that, but if I try to block [anxiety] away then I can't have the same effect."

**Joan:** "teachers often say that if you don't feel nervous it's a bad thing, it means that you don't care"

#### When and what situation is MPA worst?

During the interviews, participants described when, and in what situation(s) the experience of MPA was worst for them. It appears that a number of factors determine in part when the experience of MPA is at its worst. Some of these factors include proximity to the audience, size of the audience, who is in the audience, fatigue, being under prepared, and whether one is playing solo or with other musicians. These factors will be discussed separately below. As with many issues related to the participant's experience of MPA, there is some variability in the responses among participants. Again, the general trends in the data will be reported and represented with quotes. It should be noted however that some of these factors interact with others for some of the participants. It is not my intention to imply that these factors stand alone in complete distinction from one another. The purpose here is to describe some of the factors that were discussed during the interview process and later identified as important during analysis of the data.

For half of the participants in this study, the proximity of the audience during a performance can be a contributing factor that heightens the level of MPA they experience. One of the participants in this study described his preference to be close enough to the audience so that he can see their eyes. This closeness allows him to be able to communicate more directly with them, and as a singer, he can this tell his 'story' to

them more directly and thus more effectively. So for this participant, close proximity to the audience can help reduce the level of MPA he experiences during a performance. For the other participants in this study who discussed proximity to the audience however, the proximal relationship is: decreases in the distance between the audience and the performer leads to increases in the level of MPA experienced by the performer. So when the participant is closer to the audience he or she tends to feel heightened levels of MPA. This is an interesting finding for this particular group of participants because they often find themselves playing in close proximity to certain audiences. Some of these audiences include class mates during 'studio' classes and instructors during auditions. These are situations in which these university level music students often find themselves. It appears then that proximity to the audience can be a significant source of stress for music students. It is interesting to note that only two of the participants discussed the effects of the size of the audience has on their experience of MPA. While one may predict that the greater number of people in the audience would lead to increased levels of MPA, this was not always the case among the participants in this study that discussed this issue. One participant suggested that a larger audience decreases his perceived MPA because the audience then becomes "more abstract" to him. Still, it should be noted here that the issue of audience size was not discussed at length during these interviews. It would be interesting to investigate further what the relationship is between audience size and MPA among musicians.

The composition of the audience is one of, if not the most important factor that contributes to the experience of MPA for the participants in this study. Seven of the participants in this study described that their level of MPA rises when they are aware that

members of the audience possess a level of expertise in the field of music that is at least equal to, or greater than their own. The relationship between composition of the audience and MPA is approximately: increases in the level of expertise among members of the audience leads to increases in the level of MPA experienced by the performer. For these participants then, the issue of judgment is related to performing before those who possess expertise in their field. This is a very important concern for these participants as they find themselves in situations where they are indeed performing for experts in their field. These music students are often required to audition before juries that are composed of experts in order to progress through their programs.

Another factor identified during the interviews that contribute to increased levels of MPA is fatigue. One participant described how the effects of fatigue, as a result of continuous performing over a protracted period of time, can contribute to increased levels of MPA. Also, the task of performing a very long piece of music can potentially instill fear within the musician because it can lead to physical fatigue towards the latter stages of a performance. This type of fatigue can undermine the musician's ability to perform optimally towards the end of the piece and thus could be a potential factor leading to MPA during a performance or even before a performance if the musician is aware of the possibility of becoming fatigued during a performance.

Fatigue was an issue raised by three of the participants in this study. One of the participants described feeling exhausted because he does not have the luxury of living on campus and having to work part-time to help support himself financially. Fatigue can also come as a result of being busy in such an intense program such as the music program at UBC. Managing the workload of the music program they are in, while having to invest

time into working at a part time job and traveling to and from school decreases the amount of time and energy they have to devote to their studies and rehearsals. For these participants, the problems associated with fatigue are compounded with the problems associated with under preparedness.

Under preparedness was identified by half of the participants in this study as one of the key contributing factors leading to increased levels of MPA. These participants described how being underprepared leads them to feel vulnerable in that they know they are not going to be at their best and be able to perform optimally. Interestingly, the issue of under preparedness was also associated with feelings of guilt among two of the participants.

Three of the participants in this study discussed the differences between performing solo as opposed to performing within a group, and how that could affect their experience of MPA. Among those participants who discussed this issue, performing solo was identified as generally more anxiety provoking than performing within a group. For all of these performers, performing solo has often occurred in the context of being evaluated during exams or competitions. It was also suggested by one of the participants that these types of situations are relatively infrequent and that can also lead to anxiety. Furthermore, because these situations tend to be relatively brief, there is the perception that there is very little time to prove one's abilities. Add to this the fact that some of these solo performances occur among their peers in the music program and it comes as little surprise to observe that a fear of solo performances can develop.

When asked to discuss the issue of when MPA is experienced the most, all of the participants in this study declared that MPA is worst prior to performing. All of the

participants suggested that the period “just” before performing is when they feel the highest levels of MPA. Of course, defining “just” before a performance can be difficult as this time frame varies from moments before performing to days before performing. Generally, the period when one is waiting to perform is when the highest rates of MPA are experienced. Two of the participants described how the experience of MPA is made even more difficult if they can hear other musicians perform while they are waiting to perform themselves.

**Ray:** [during the dress rehearsal of an opera in which he was singing lead] I was singing really well until the dress rehearsal and all of a sudden the CBC was recording it and I freaked out because nobody told me that the CBC was going to be there and that one of the biggest critics in Canada was there watching in dress rehearsal...

Q: and you found out when exactly?

I didn't until I was onstage and I saw the critic, who I know by face and it freaked me out and that dress rehearsal was horrible, so the next three days before the first performance was hell, I was so scared...things like that throw me off...it's like somebody's who's important, or somebody's there criticizing, that's what I, what scares me the most, somebody who's there who knows, who we think knows music and vocal technique and all of that, judging me, and I hate that feeling

Q: so the feeling of judgment?

It's the feeling of judgment

**Nikki:** “I mostly don’t think of whose there...I don’t know, judgment used to be a bigger thing for me than it is now but now I just think that any people...I don’t even make a mental connection in my mind that it is judgment [rather] it’s just like people scare me!” “more people and more music, if I have a lot of music to learn, even if it’s just for my jury, where I have to sing in front of just like three people then I will get nervous about it because I’m worried that I won’t know everything properly, but then if I have to sing like smaller passages and things in front of like lots of people then that also could be a factor” “It often depends on the size of the performance. When I was a soloist for the requiem here a few weeks ago, up to like two days before I was like ‘oh no I’m going to have to sing this and what if I throw up and I have like nightmares and stuff, but usually if it’s like a small recital here I don’t get nervous until like about ten minutes before then I’m like ‘oh I have to sing’.”

**Tracy:** “Solo performance in a recital format.” “most of the performance opportunities that I had in that format were, well in junior high and high school, they would have been competitions or exams, and then throughout my undergrad these opportunities that I had in a recital format were either my end of years exams or at the, we have divisional recitals here, and twice a semester, or I can’t even remember anymore, but a few times a year every student in the voice division is required to sing for up to ten minutes, maybe it’s seven minutes in a noon hour recital so you would think that that wouldn’t be such a big deal but because it was done so infrequently I think that had a great deal to do with how nerve wracking that was...you were singing in front of all your peers and you only had a couple of shots to prove yourself...it bothered me before because I had this great fear of not being able to measure up to my peers...[a number of my peers were] really wonderful



singers, excellent performers, great stage presence, and they were all fairly senior to me at the time but they really set the bar fairly high and I just felt that I wanted to do well so badly that I put this pressure on myself that I think it made it difficult for me to perform to the best of my abilities.”

“If I don’t feel prepared. If I don’t feel prepared for a rehearsal, or if I’ve memorized something on the fly and this is the first time I am really performing it then I will feel very nervous, and when that happens it’s more of a mental anxiety than an experience of the physical symptoms that I, you know, the lack of breathing properly.” “[during rehearsals] if I am working with just a pianist (pause) and it’s interesting because it doesn’t seem to matter if this is a pianist that I’m paying for their time or someone that I have been assigned to work with for a school performance or something like that, I feel very guilty about wasting their time if I’m not adequately prepared and I think from that a lot of anxiety develops, and if I’m performing in an ensemble or a duet or something like that I guess my biggest concern becomes being a good colleague to the other singers making sure I am giving them exactly what they need in order for them to do their best and I think that’s where that specific anxiety comes from.”

**Norma:** “it happened when I auditioned for the chamber orchestra because I hadn’t actually auditioned for anyone for so long, well I had but it was for, you know, like Celtic bands, but people that, ah I sound like such a jerk, but people that wouldn’t know as much about actual violin technique and so I maybe show off a little, and people are like ‘oh wow, violin!’ but then when you’re playing in front of people who know your instrument and stuff you know you’re going to be, er see through your showboating or whatever right, so...[before the audition with the chamber orchestra] before I started

playing my hand was like shaking violently, I couldn't control it and I'm like 'you better stop or I'm not going to be able to play and I really, like the whole thing [audition] was a big blur, and I can barely remember it and I kind of went on auto pilot...I almost cried when I came out of the audition..."

**Barb:** "Singing for people I don't know when it's for something I want...like an audition situation...when it's for an audition that I want."

**Lorna:** "performing in front of a group of people that you know very...especially if they all know music very well...and especially if it's in the close proximity space."

"It's annoying because you know that it's going to affect your self-confidence." "...so I'd just annoyed and I couldn't focus on my music."

**Marc:** "performing things that I haven't quite yet 100% learned."

**Sarah:** "So yea I guess the more that's riding on it, or the more I want to do well or the more I feel like I need to do well, that's when I get more nervous."

"That's [making a mistake during a test] when I'll freeze. Because I kind of put a lot of pressure on myself for what I'm being tested on it to do it perfectly. So if I have one wrong not or do one wrong thing, then I freeze and go (gasping) 'Oh God, I'm in for it now, that's it' and I mean when I was in classical piano, it got so bad and I would freeze and literally I couldn't even read the notes on the page. I would just, like my brain would shut down and it, it's scary because it's like music is a different language you learn to read that language which is a bunch of you know black dots and sticks... but a lot of time when I freeze that like, it just becomes a bunch of dots and sticks again...and that's a petrifying experience. And that why I just freeze because it's like 'Oh My God, I...I can't read...you know...what's happening?'"

### How MPA makes participants feel about themselves

During the interviews, the participants were asked to describe how MPA makes them feel about themselves. The participants responded to this question in a number of interesting ways. Four participants tended to describe the effects that MPA has had on their work as artists, and thus how their deteriorated performance as a result of MPA had affected their perceptions of themselves as musicians. This negative impact of MPA on their ability to perform to the best of their abilities affected these participant's feelings of confidence and self-esteem. One of participants even described feelings of conflict and even anger as a result of experiencing MPA. The participant who described these feelings of discord suggested that there is a conflict between what she asserts is the mind not interacting with the body in a way that facilitates optimal performance.

**Barb:** "it feels like...like it is umm...what I'm trying to say...it's hard on your ego. It's just feels like...just makes you feel insecure.

**Lorna:** "I used to feel it was weakening to my self-esteem and confidence as a performer, on a piano as least."

**Marc:** "you just feel incompetent...I am a competent musician, I can do these things, but that anxiety and fear of doing it in these contexts (school rehearsals) really does elicit that complete feeling of ignorance and incompetence"

**Sarah:** "I guess I get frustrated sometimes with the way my body reacts and the way I react because I think you know...I know if I'm calm, and I'm just doing this for enjoyment, I'm going to do better and I'm going to have a lot more fun doing it."

I feel it's like my head and my body are two separate...or my mind or my body are two separate entities. And it's like my head is saying 'I'm okay with this, I can do this' but my body says 'oh no! I'm so scared' and my mind is like 'snap out of it body!' and my body is like 'nooo...I'm so scared' and so it's, it's really aggravating because I have that that division between the two and it's like half of me is saying 'no I'm calm, I'm fine this is something that I wanted to do it but I feel like my body holds me back because it says 'oh no, I'm so scared.' So, that's why I was so aggravating."

### Discrimination/judgment

Half of the participants described how feelings of judgment and discrimination were contributing factors to their experience of MPA. According to these participants, there is a high level of intensity to their music program that at times leads to competitiveness among the students. This in turn appears to lead to a sense of judgment that seems to pervade various aspects of their life as a music student. Not only does this sense of judgment negatively affect these participants experience as music students on a personal level, it appears to interfere with their ability to perform optimally as it increases their levels of MPA.

**Joan:** "Everyone's always judging each other in this program, whether they say it or not, there's always judgment"

"as an orchestral player, your sitting there in the orchestra and you have someone sitting next to you who's won the first spot for example and your sitting there and they're screwing up and you're like 'man, how did she get this spot?' like you know these are the

sorts of things that go through your head and even though you know she deserves that spot and you know she won it fair and square you just can't help but think it 'wow I wouldn't be screwing up there, I wouldn't, you know, it just goes to you head, that sort of thing.'

**Norma:** "when I was a kid, my first violin was this one I got from my Grandpa that my Mom had gotten when she was a kid, it was like \$25 from the Sears catalog, like I helped my Mom clean houses to pay for my violin lessons, I was, like, we didn't have a lot of money so I was poor kid with the 'shitty fiddle from black creek,' you know what I mean? And I was good [skilled], like I was 'o.k.' despite, you know, a lot of things, I'm playing with kids who started at the age of three who had the best fiddles, they're from the city, they've got the great teachers, they come from you know upper middle class families and so I got a lot of, like people were sometimes very judgmental, and I kind of, that came up...sometimes that would play into it [experience of MPA]"

**Lorna:** "Umm...I think it's sort of social context. Like we're all in the same school music, and everything is just so close unit. So what if you perform bad beat, they might tell somebody else or they...it's more like a judgement...you don't want to be judged, and yet you will be whatever happens, so..." "I am very conscious that people will be judging me based on the performance. Because music is so transparent, it's very transparent, like whatever...whatever sort of music you produce, it reflects directly or indirectly on your personality."

**Marc:** "It's a type of almost a discrimination I guess, depending on where you're coming from, with such a majority of people here being trained classically, coming from that background. If they know where you come from, so I mean there's obviously a jazz band

here, there's two but that's about it. I mean you get pigeon-holed in a sense of that. So you do get the feeling that people judge you on the base of what they think you understand of what you know musically." "You don't want to be judged, like 'oh you can't do it because all he does is Jazz.'"

**Eunice:** "I felt like I have been belittled sometimes just by comments people make...they want to know what I'm singing, and I feel very anxious about showing them because the type of repertoire that your doing says where you are in your technique you're your development...if I say I m singing this aria then it's like 'oh I sang that three years ago' ...they always want to know!"

#### Talking about MPA with others

There was no specific question in the interview that asked if participants talked with other musicians, or anyone else for that matter, about their experience of MPA. There was a question that asked them if they had sought help from anyone else to help with coping with MPA. However, the issue of talking with other people about MPA arose often during the interviews. Sometimes the issue would be raised directly by a participant, and then followed up on by the interviewer, especially if the issue seemed important to the participant. Sometimes a participant would mention something related to the issue in a more tangential way, and then a follow up question related to talking with others would be asked. The issue of talking with others about MPA is an interesting one as it appears that many of the participants had a different view on the issue. It seems as though talking about MPA with others is acceptable for some performers, while for others, it is something to be avoided.

For one of the participants, talking with others about MPA appears to be a strategy to explain why a performance was not executed optimally. For two of the participants, talking with others about MPA is a way for them to cope. By talking about it with other musicians, the experience of MPA becomes normalized. Of course, for others, talking with others about MPA can be difficult and thus does not occur frequently, if at all. For one of these participants, a number of factors, such as a need to protect one's self-esteem, prevent her from talking with others about her experience of MPA. Indeed, this participant described how talking about MPA with others was far too personal and that she would tend to avoid doing it altogether. This tendency to avoid talking with others about MPA seems most pronounced when it comes to talking with other musicians, or peers about it. Of course, talking with others about MPA is quite a complex issue. There seems to be a number of factors that prevent some participants from doing so. What is interesting here is that for these participants, talking about their experience of MPA seems difficult for them to do. Fortunately, for those who haven't talked about MPA with others very often, if at all, they felt that talking about the subject during the interview was generally beneficial. Indeed, one of the participants appeared to discover certain aspects of her relationship with MPA that she had not known before.

**Joan:** "I have no problem telling people I was nervous, because it is always something you could easily fall back onto should something technically fall apart...it's often an excuse some people can use to [say] 'oh, I was just nervous' and it is something I have no problem telling people anyway because it is true, and I think more people are accepting of the fact that some is nervous."

**Eunice:** “[talking about MPA is] fairly easy...it is something we all suffer from in one form or another.”

**Barb:** “I haven’t talked to a lot of other performers about it which is probably...probably...especially; it’s such as a personal issue.”

“I mean I guess I have a little bit of an ego and I don’t like to acknowledge weaknesses I have in myself. Also because if you...to me when I acknowledge weaknesses like that, and it makes them more real.”

“because to feel nervous about your own performance undermines your performance...like if your audience and you know that I was nervous, I feel like they would be more uh not critical, skeptical, yeah...judgmental of what I was going to do...”

**Lorna:** “No, no, hardly. People don’t want to say that they get nervous when they perform because; I can’t find the word for it. I just know that all of us are expected to go out there and do a good job. So I think people don’t want others to have lower expectations for them or something like that.”

“It’s so weird. Yea, we all rather not speak about it unless we are forced to speak when somebody asks for it; I think it’s an emotional barrier for us. It’s more like personal issue that we can deal with ourselves. It’s like if I have a low self-confidence but I’m not going to tell people that I have a low self-confidence. I think that’s the same kind of concept, like I have problem performing. But you know, I’m going to deal with it myself and not tell anyone.”



## Competition

During the interviews, four of students revealed that there is a sense of competition among many of the students in the music program at UBC, and that this sense of competition has a number of different effects on the lives of these participants. According to one of the participants there is competition everywhere: in auditions, in school, amongst each other, etc. As stated by one of the participants, many of them have come to the program formerly being the best in their town, or among their former peers. Now they find themselves among others who were also the best among their former peers. While being in a program with others who are on a more even plane in terms of talent level can be a source of inspiration and motivation to improve, it also appears to be a source of frustration and anxiety as a result of real or perceived competition among peers. Two of the participants described how this sense of competition can translate into other areas of social interaction such as who is the most popular and highly regarded among their peers. This pervasive sense of competition can also influence the anxiety these musicians experience. Three of the participants suggested that the presence of some fellow students in various settings produced an atmosphere that was ill-suited to optimal performance. It was also revealed during the interviews that some belittling occurs among some of the students in the program. One participant mentioned how on a number of occasions the presence of other students who do not believe in her abilities and who do not like her as a person had a negative effect on her performance and increased her level of MPA. Another participant described how she would not want to reveal to other music students that she experienced MPA because it would make her look weak in the eyes of her fellow students. It appears that fellow students are sometimes looked upon as

competitors, and revealing one's experience of MPA to other students could make them feel vulnerable. Competitiveness, and how it manifests differently with different participants, can be a source of unease and can contribute to the experience of MPA in numerous ways. Some feel the direct effects of competition that undermine their self-confidence while for others the sense of competition prevents them from talking about MPA with other musicians.

**Joan:** “[competition is there] to establish a pecking order...a sense of competitiveness that develops during training, even within a program that is set up to eliminate any sense of competition.”

**Eunice:** “I try to distance myself from it (competition) because I don't want to be involved but it's really hard to be in a group, you know I mean everyone is really talented or else they wouldn't be here so it's difficult because a lot of us come from places where we're, you know, some of us are the best musicians from our town so it's difficult to put everyone together, um, it's a different experience for sure, and there is a bit of competition but I try to keep it internal as possible and not act out on it like because that's just making it worse for other people as well as for myself, uhm but it sometimes because we're around each other so much it's that competition is translated into other things like not just about musical talent but a host of other things like, really stupid things like who can, like, I don't know like who has the best hair, that kind of stuff.”

**Barb:** “I would like to be perceived as a confident person and a good performer... Well, umm it's just very funny. But I mean I would like to think about myself as a confident performer and a good performer and part of that is I don't admit ...I don't think about

p.a. very much to myself and by extension, I don't talk about it to other people because I don't want their perception of me to be different. But I would also like to think about myself as an open person.”

“I also don't like to think of myself in competitive. I am though, I'm definitely am. I am uh I guess I just feel like wow weird. I guess I just feel like if they think that I am unable to perform the way they can, then they have an edge...like it's inside your heart. They know how my performance works; it's like an advantage... yeah...weird yeah. Just to feel...yeah...I guess I feel like it would make them feel...as far as perception goes, it would make them better than me somehow...seems to happen in any performance.”

“[musicians are competing] for everything. I mean you know violins start competing for concert master positions; singers are competing...just getting a role...I mean in school that's all built-in right because you sing a role and you see your grade and you perform for each other and you see each other perform and everybody knows who's better than who or.”

### Relationships with teachers

An interesting finding in this study is that four of the participants described how their relationships with teachers, former and present, were actually the source of some, if not much of their performance anxiety. These relationships even had the effect of making some participants contemplating quitting the program. According to these participants, a poor student-teacher relationship can lead to a lack of interest and motivation, which could in turn lead to a lack of caring. These participants indicated that they had become disillusioned as a result of the relationships with their instructors. This has led to a sense

of isolation among one of the participants. Another participant described the link between poor student-teacher relationships and MPA in terms of trust and the ethical obligation that an instructor has to provide adequate training for the student. This participant described how improper training can lead to increased levels of MPA.

Interestingly, one of the issues that seems to be at the core of a poor student/teacher relationship is, according to two of the participants, a lack of understanding of the student as a person and how the student identifies him or herself as a musician. One of the participants described her experience of not being understood, or being classified as something other than who the student thought of herself as. This experience of being misunderstood by their instructors seems to be a key issue for those participants who revealed that they have endured increased levels of MPA as a result of poor relationships with their teachers. One of the participants described how she was in the process of carving out her own identity by selecting a range of material that would set her apart from others. It appears that this identity formation was undermined at times by her instructor who would suggest other material for her to perform, or simply by cutting out pieces from her repertoire. It appears then that poor student-teacher relationships can have a detrimental effect on the lived experience of music students by increasing their levels of MPA for a variety of reasons.

**Eunice:** “I seem to be the only one with this issue...I wish the teacher was more forgiving.”

**Joan:** “my former teacher created my performance anxiety, I actually never had any problems before, and this teacher at a different university, she had told me that I would

never make it as a clarinetist, that I should go into science and math instead, and that absolutely destroyed any sense of confidence I had and I was not able to perform anymore and when I did I was just so full of anxiety that I just could not do it so I left and came here and found a better teacher” “I will never be completely over her”

**Eunice:** “...wanting to be your own person...being the best or whatever that’s not how I am at all...you want to differentiate yourself, that’s kind of been my struggle this year ‘is well maybe I’m not at the level of some of the other people, I’m not singing these arias, I can’t sing these arias yet, but I want to do something different so I chose some repertoire that was pretty different and I sang a couple of pieces at a recital recently and people really liked the repertoire I chose so I kind of felt like, well then maybe there is something I can use to differentiate myself at this point in time, if you do something that know one knows there is a bit of comfort in the fact that they can’t judge it...the thing is that there is a standard repertoire for any instrumentalist probably and for singers there are songs that everyone sings, and I guess it’s easier to judge people on those things because everyone has done them and they hear them all the time and it’s easier to compare that so at a school you get a lot of that sense ‘we all are doing our training...I try to evade it by doing strange...more obscure repertoire so that was one of the ways I tried to get around that anxiety, but then I have some issues with that because my teacher didn’t, like at the last minute [said] “I don’t actually want you to sing this for your recital...I don’t think it’s right, or whatever, for you” and so I kind of have an identity issue with that because I started to identify with these more obscure pieces and kind of trying to find some kind of talent in singing, like we need to let these pieces that aren’t usually performed and that was kind of like ‘Oh, at least I have a purpose now I can’t do all the

standard repertoire really well then maybe I can do this you know, but then she cut those pieces and I kind of felt like I lost my anchor...”

“I tend to have terrible lessons because my teacher and I don’t really get along that well, which is definitely something that doesn’t help anxiety.”

“I sometimes get the sense that maybe the frustration that my teacher feels, like in training me, she’s starting to kind of give up and she thinks, well she’s projected that upon me a lot about how it must be that “oh it must be that you’re not practicing, you’re giving up, you don’t care, that kind of thing, and I don’t really think she understands what I’m coping with, like what I’m trying to cope with, like the anxiety and the identity issues and things like that, I don’t think she understands me as a person, I don’t think she understands that you need to understand the person psychologically in order to train them musically...”

**Ray:** “When I first started studying, when I was 25, I started with this teacher in Toronto I had no idea what was good techniques back then because I sang pop and pop came naturally to me, and when I started singing classical music I sang pop, the pop way, obviously the choir directors would tell me, you know, ‘you don’t sing it like Christine Aguilera, you have to sing it like classical music’, so I got myself a teacher but my teacher wasn’t very good in the sense that she didn’t really know what she was talking about, she was never a “singer,” and I didn’t know this...she sang in the choir, as one of the “old ladies” and she (pause) she made it seem like she’s had all this education and, you know, she was a music degree holder from U of T and that was it, but anyway, I studied with her for three years, and because I am a very loyal person I didn’t leave her all these years, for three years, and I studied with her and the more I studied with her the

worse and the worse I got my, singing got, to the point that the solos I was getting with my choir I stopped getting and um I lost all my high notes and I didn't know what was going on and I sort of trusted her so she told me "in the beginning when you change your technique from pop singing to classical singing that happens you lose your high notes" and I'm a tenor so you have to have high notes, I lost all my high notes, I would perform as if I didn't know what I was doing technically anymore, I would perform really badly, so I had three years of this instruction and three years of bad experiences singing with bad technique um because I didn't know any better, so a combination of poor instruction and the experience of performing with the technique that I learnt from her and not doing well I think is part of the reason I developed this sort of fear of singing because it no longer felt natural, it became something manufactured...what happened was that I lost security with my voice, I didn't trust it anymore so up till now there would be times when I was singing well and when I got nervous I would lose faith in it to the point that I wouldn't sing well and it doesn't make sense because just an hour before I was singing well so what happened in that hour is that I don't trust my voice and that was because of these three years when I first studied where I got bad instruction and I didn't know what I was doing and I kept on singing and I kept on getting bad experiences from singing... For singers, when you have a relationship with an instructor or with a teacher, you are entrusting them with one of the most sacred things you have, which is your voice, so you are entrusting them with this instrument, and you expect them to respect that, and to take care of it, and when they don't, then you're the one who suffers, not them, so you develop all sorts of neurotic tendencies about your voice because of this bad instruction..."

### How MPA affects future plans

During the interviews, participants were asked to respond to the question; “how does the experience of MPA affect your future plans?” This question was asked to investigate a number of potential aspects of the participant’s lived experience of MPA, including how future plans as a musician may have been altered or modified by the experience of MPA and how affected future plans influence current experiences. It was interesting to note the rather wide range of responses to the question regarding future plans.

While it appears that MPA has affected approximately six of the participants perspective of their future careers as a musician, or has altered their future career plans as a musician, it should be noted that two of the participants, at this stage in their schooling, suggested that MPA will not affect their future career path to any significant degree, if at all.

The relationship between MPA and future career plans then appears to be complex and varied. Two participants expressed how MPA has interfered with their original plans and has led them to modify the direction of their careers. Four participants described how MPA has cast some doubt and uncertainty into their lives as musicians but not any clear diversions from their career path. Yet two participants suggest that MPA has had relatively little effect on their career paths. Upon examination of the data, one can see elements of doubt, uncertainty, and discouragement among some of the participants, but resilience, hope, and optimism among others. It should be observed that all of the participants have, at this point in their lives, committed to remain in the music field in some capacity.



**Barb:** “Definitely [MPA has had an effect on career plans]. As you know I just did my master thesis and I didn’t do it in a performance because essentially I’ve decided that I can’t make my living performing...that’s not reasonable and in part that’s definitely because I can’t put it what is going to happen when I perform because practicing doesn’t replicate the same emotions as that are present when I perform and it’s I definitely am different when I’m performing... Well basically it changed from performing to academic...”

“Yeah. Um...so I did my undergrad performance. Studying performance is a very um...very revealing thing because it’s so personal, especially acting because it’s your body. Your body is your instrument, so you put yourself on stage and you don’t get anything to hang on to, it’s just you and so when people judge what you bring to the stage, then it’s very hard to separate what they’re doing from judging yourself. And so the study of it it’s like very, very individual... very internal, and for I guess for four years of my undergrad, it just brings all these issues you know I feel like I’m going on the stage and what I bring to that isn’t what I’m practicing for two months. That’s just I mean how do you fix that, where do you even start? So when I...when I decided you know I also love the academic side and I can get out of what I want to being a musician by doing it as a hobby; it doesn’t need to be my whole life. And it was just a relief: I don’t need to wrestle with all these issues as a central way of earning a living. I couldn’t think of another way that these issues could be dealt with.”

“[career change is] tied to anxiety because I can’t predict what happen on stage but I would never have say before you had asked me that the reason I changed [careers] was

because I was anxious. I would have said that it was because I can't perform constantly which is a result of being anxious."

**Lorna:** "Definitely. Like because last year, it was just last year, I felt that I couldn't perform in front of other people in my studio class, so as a result I decided to do, I mean I could do composition and piano performance, like I'll do major in both. But because I found myself not being able to express myself musically on stage on the piano as compared to voice (it's so easy for me). But for piano, I just felt this barrier, so I couldn't do it. So in a sense, it did affect my undergraduate degree choice."

"It (MPA affecting career) did until last year...I felt I couldn't perform...it affected my choice of instruments...but it is not interfering with my plans as a conductor."

A final word regarding the relationship between MPA and future career plans goes to one of the participants;

**Eunice:** "I don't know what my future plans as a musician are so that's another anxiety in itself."

### Experience of the interviews

Upon completion of the interviews, the participants were asked how they felt. I wanted to ensure that the participants did not leave the interview feeling anxious. Also, I was concerned that the interview itself could have elicited some memories of events that could be troubling in some way for the participants. Given my ethical obligation to ensure that the participant departed from the interview without feeling hurt, anxious, or

diminished in any way, time was set aside at the end of the interview to inquire about the participant's current emotional state. Participants were first asked to describe how they were feeling. They were then asked specifically if they were feeling anxious after having talked about MPA. All of the participants responded to these inquiries by suggesting that they were feeling well. None of the participants reported experiencing levels of anxiety that caused them any discomfort.

A rather interesting, and somewhat surprising theme developed during this final stage of the interview. Half of the participants suggested that talking about MPA was a positive experience for them. As noted earlier, many participants have had a difficult time finding others with whom they can feel comfortable talking about MPA. Of course, some participants have simply chosen not to discuss the topic of MPA with others for various reasons. Given the participant's responses, it appears that the interview process was determined to be quite beneficial in a number of ways. I expected that participants might feel elevated levels of anxiety due to talking about and reflecting on their experiences of MPA. This is why measures were put in place to ensure the participants well being upon completion of the interviews. I was quite relieved, and satisfied to see that the participants were feeling well and relaxed after the interviews.

Another interesting theme to develop during this closing stage of the interview was that of self-discovery. While reflecting upon the experience of the interview, three of the participants suggested that they had made some interesting and at times surprising discoveries about themselves as musicians and about themselves in general.

**Sarah:** “I like doing this kind of thing because it helps me discover...speaking something aloud can help you see things in new ways...explaining it to someone can help acquaint me with my own issues...hopefully it will help me to get to an anxiety free state in the future...”

“I like doing this because it acquaints me more with my own issues. I guess with my own anxiety and why I have it, where I have it.”

**Barb:** “I would never have said before you asked me that the reason I changed [career paths] was because I was anxious...”

“I’m surprised about a lot of the things that came up that I never thought about...haven’t thought about these things before.”

**Lorna:** “this is the first time I’m actually telling like somebody, a stranger that I don’t know, everything about the way I deal with all these things like psychologically, and all inside. So yeah, I think it helps me to understand myself better...”

**Marc:** (when asked how it was to talk about MPA) “Wonderful!...really good...it’s hard because you don’t get a lot of opportunities, especially here because I don’t get to see people as much as I would like to...”

It should be acknowledged that this final stage of the interview was prepared and conducted to ensure the participants well being. It was not my intention to use these questions as part of the original research question. However, given the richness and complexity of the responses, as well as the fact that the participants, by their own accounts, were functioning well and appeared to be quite eager to share their observations about the interview process, I decided that these responses should be included in the study as a point of interest. Indeed, it was at this point in the interview that most of the

participants revealed that they were happy to be part of the current research and, furthermore, that they believed that this type of research is important.

### Coping with MPA

One of the major issues discussed during the interviews was how the participants cope with MPA. A number of facilitating questions were asked of the participants to explore the issue of coping with MPA. Some of these questions were directly aimed at finding out how the participants themselves cope with MPA, while some of the questions were aimed at eliciting information about what they know about how others cope with MPA. Also, all of the participants were asked to provide advice for musicians who the participants would perceive as junior to them.

Six of the participants in this study suggested that an effective strategy to cope with MPA is to prepare adequately. Simply being prepared appears to alleviate much of the anxiety these participants experience before performing. As discussed earlier, being under prepared is one of the most commonly cited factors leading to MPA among the participants in this study.

Four of the participants in this study mentioned various forms of visualization as a means to cope with MPA. Another common strategy employed by five of the participants in this study is to develop a routine that involves various steps to prepare physically for a performance. Some of these techniques include deep breathing during the preparatory stages before a performance. Stretching and relaxing muscles is also a strategy that some participants employ to reduce MPA before a performance. Gaining some control can help alleviate the effects of MPA, according to one of the participants. It was suggested by this

participant that an effective way to gain this sense of control is to formalize a physical routine to prepare for a performance.

Only two of the participants described using any external substance as a method to cope with MPA. One participant described having used a homeopathic substance she referred to as “calms.” It should be noted however that this participant only takes these pills occasionally, when she is experiencing unusually heightened levels of MPA. Also, this participant isn’t even certain that they are effective. In fact, this participant suggested that she was open to the possibility that any effect from these “calms” could be merely placebo. The other participant described using stimulants such as caffeine by drinking tea or coffee. The use of external substances as a means to cope with MPA is almost non-existent among the participants in this study. When asked about whether they have heard about any substances that other musicians might take as a means to cope with MPA, all of the participants responded by saying that they have heard very little if anything at all.

During the interviews, participants were asked what advice on how to cope with MPA they would give to someone who is just entering into the music program. Some of the advice suggested by the participants included being organized and staying on schedule with their school work and rehearsals. Maintaining close contact with instructors was suggested by one of the participants as a way to facilitate remaining organized. Some simple advice, such as reminding oneself that “I can do it” was also suggested by two of the participants. An interesting trend among four of the participant’s responses to the question of advice, however, was that they suggested that music students simply have to experience MPA for themselves. Other advice that was suggested by one

of the participants on how to cope with MPA is talking about it with other students. It was interesting to note that most of the participants generally do not talk to other musicians about their MPA.

**Ray:** “I would have thought that since I have been performing at a certain level now for the past three years, I have been singing semi professionally and professionally for the past three years and I would think that I have developed some kind of coping mechanism to deal with my fears but the only thing that I find that really helps me, with my fear, is knowing my music perfectly meaning that it is almost second nature, that even if I’m freaking out I know that I won’t forget the words, and I won’t forget the music, so knowing my music in and out is one coping mechanism that I have that helps...the second one is rest, I find that resting eases my anxiety the most, the problem is when you have anxiety and you have a big show coming up I start getting nervous the day before, I get nervous and it would affect my sleeping habit that night

**Barb:** “I don’t think I have any good [coping strategy] because I haven’t really focused it on much. Just to focus on technique, that’s it.”

“I don’t like using ...using pills to change the way my body deals with things.”

**Lorna:** “So I mean now, I’m more mature and older, I’ll tell myself, you know, it’s ... I don’t know how it works... one of my other friends who’s a multiple performer for piano at least, she always tells me that there are two ways to go about it before performing. You think of yourself as the best performer on earth and you walk up there, or you think of yourself as the worst performer on earth and you walk up there... for me, I have to think that I’m the best performer.”

“I just tell (myself), it’s just an internal thing. I tell myself that I can do it, like I’m the best pianist in the world.”

**Sarah:** “if I can trick myself and say this doesn’t matter, I love doing this, all I want to do is to connect with the audience and show them what I can do, I’m generally going to be a lot more relaxed and no problems.”

“If I know that song inside and out and I sing it all the time and I’m 100% positive that, you know, I could do it under any distraction no matter what’s going on, you know, then it’s generally no problem. I feel way more relaxed. I mean there is still a certain amount of anxiety and nerves that are acting upon me, when I have to perform, but it’s way less than if I feel at all under prepared.”

“It’s just your doubts and your fears that are getting in your way before performing. So what you have to do is to take all of that and you gather it up and you put it in a box at your feet and then step on top of that box...”

Finally, during the interviews, participants were asked if they had sought help from anyone else to help them cope with MPA. Only one of the participants described seeking help from another musician. In this case, the participant sought some help from her piano teacher in Singapore. The remainder of the participants did not indicate that they had sought help from other musicians. Interestingly, none of the participants indicated that they had sought any outside help from counselors.

Some of the reasons given by participants for not seeking help from other musicians include:

**Barb:** “I think of myself as tough,”



**Marc:** “It is hard to go because as a jazz musician in a classical program one feels handicapped, and classified as something less, [making] it hard to ask for help from instructors.”

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

Upon examination of the stories shared by the participants in this study, it seems quite evident that the experience of MPA is complex and varied. What is consistent amongst all of these stories however is that MPA adversely affects the lives of these performers.

During the interviews, participants were asked to provide their own definition of MPA. One of the participants in this study defined MPA as; “emotional nervousness with physical manifestations.” This appears to be quite a useful working definition of MPA as it seems to be reflective of the experience of all of the participants in this study. Indeed all of the participants in this study reported experiencing various physical symptoms of MPA. These symptoms include; heart palpitations, wobbly knees, heavy breathing, shaky hands, sweaty palms, etc. The reported experiences of the participants in this study are consistent with Wesner, Noyes, and Davis’ findings (1990) suggesting that common symptoms of MPA include increased heart rate, increased perspiration, increased dry mouth, tremor, etc. These physical symptoms can undermine one’s ability to concentrate and can even undermine one’s confidence (Abel and Larkin, 1990). All of the participants in this study suggested that these physical symptoms interfere with their ability to perform optimally. Thus these physical symptoms can be, and often are the source of frustration, disappointment, and even disillusionment.

As Rae and McCambridge (2004) suggest, MPA can cause some musicians to terminate a career in music before it even begins. Two of the ten participants in this study

described how the trajectory of their music career had been altered by their experience of MPA. While both of these participants have decided to remain in the music field, their focus has been altered significantly by MPA. One of the participants decided to pursue a career in academe and perform occasionally rather than pursue a full time performing career. The other participant decided to become a conductor rather than a performing pianist. Of course, as a conductor, one still is required to stand in front of an audience. However, the impact of MPA on this participant's ability to perform optimally as a pianist appears to have played a significant role in her career path. The rest of the participants in this study are, at present, continuing on with their initial career plan. It would be interesting to follow up with some of these participants in the future to inquire about the progress they make and to ascertain whether or not MPA interferes with the trajectory of their careers as performers.

Interestingly, and perhaps unfortunately, the size of the audience and its impact on the participant's experience of MPA was a theme that was not developed to any significant degree during these interviews. One may intuit that LeBlanc *et al's* (1997) findings suggesting MPA increases as the size of the audience increases would be a common theme brought up by the participants in this study. This was not the case however. In fact, only two participants discussed audience size as a factor related to MPA, and one of these participants described how a larger audience is sometimes easier to perform before because the audience becomes "abstract." Still, it should be noted that I am not suggesting that audience size is unimportant, or that the findings of this study contradict those of LeBlanc *et al.* There is simply no basis here for any such refutation. What is interesting here is that the issue of audience size was rarely discussed. Rather

than discussing the size of the audience, the participants in this study tended to identify the composition of the audience as a more important factor that increases MPA.

One of the most significant themes developed during the interviews was the issue of performing in the presence of knowledgeable audience members. Indeed, seven participants in this study suggested that one of the most significant factors related to increases in the level of MPA is when they are performing in front of audience members who are knowledgeable in their field, and are in a position to evaluate and judge them. Performing in front of teachers, competition judges, critics, committees, and sometimes fellow students appears to be the most anxiety provoking situation for most of the participants. It would come as no surprise if in fact most music students would identify this type of situation as the most difficult to control their nerves. This is consistent with LeBlanc *et al's* (1997) claim that MPA increases when the performer perceives that members of the audience are in a position to judge them. Of course, one of the requirements of music students is that they perform before teachers, judges, committees, etc. This can contribute to a number of difficult challenges a music student must confront during their academic careers.

The participants in this study described various strategies to cope with MPA. Somewhat surprisingly, there was no common strategy used by these participants. This is surprising to a degree because nine of the ten participants are from the same music department. One may have predicted that coping strategies could be part of the established curriculum and therefore shared among the participants in this study. During one of the interviews, one of the participants indicated that she had recently missed a workshop related to performance anxiety that was held on campus. This led me to believe

that many, if not all of the students in the music program at UBC might be exposed to similar training geared towards alleviating the effects of MPA. However, according to the participants in this study, this is not the case.

One thing that was clear however, and consistent with previous research findings such as Wesner, Noyes, and Davis (1990), is that none of the participants in this study described using drugs or alcohol as a strategy to cope with MPA. Going into the interviews I was unsure what to expect regarding the issue of drug and alcohol use as a coping strategy for MPA. I suspected that it might be difficult for participants to reveal to a stranger any substances use. To ease any potential reservations the participant may have had about disclosing such potentially embarrassing information, I posed a question asking the participants if they had heard of anyone else engaging in this behaviour. Still, no participants in this study revealed any dependency on drugs or alcohol as a means of coping with MPA. In fact, no participants reported occasional substance use.

### Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the various issues related to MPA among university music students through a set of interviews. As demonstrated earlier, a number of major themes emerged. It has also been demonstrated that the experience of MPA is complex and varied, the effects that MPA has on various aspects of university student musicians lives is also complex and varied, and coping with MPA presents a number of challenges.

While the nature of this study is exploratory, there are a number of ways that the findings can potentially inform counseling practice with musicians who experience MPA. A counsellor could anticipate a number of the potential issues identified in this study. For

example, the issue of their client's relationship with their teacher could be investigated by the practitioner. Investigating the nature and level of competitiveness amongst the client's colleagues could be a useful topic to pursue. Addressing the clients level of preparedness, and finding ways to assist improving this aspect of the client's life could be enormously beneficial. Also, given the finding in this study that no participants pursued counseling for their MPA, post secondary school counseling programs may wish to advertise their services more effectively to this segment of the student population. These are but a few of the possible ways that the findings of this study could potentially inform practice.

### Limitations

One of the potential limitations of this study is the composition of the group of participants. Students who are the most seriously affected by MPA simply may not want to participate in a personal interview study such as this. Given that some of these students may experience performance anxiety to such a degree, they may choose not to participate for a variety of reasons. First, they may not want to reveal to what degree they experience MPA to a stranger. Also, some potential candidates for this study may wish to decline participation because they may not want their colleagues to know that they are experiencing MPA. Some students who decline participation may believe that the mere act of signing up for a study related to MPA may be seen as an admission of failure or weakness in the eyes of their fellow students, or even in their own eyes.

Another potential limitation of this study is the size of the group of participants. There were ten participants in this study. It should be noted however, that this study is indeed an exploratory study; it was devised to investigate the lived experience of MPA and not necessarily devised to answer any predetermined hypothesis/prediction. Indeed,

this study was devised, among other things, to explore some important issues among music students regarding MPA and to potentially pose questions for future research. This study was not intended to generalize any findings to a given population.

There were no questions asked of the participants regarding their socio-economic status or cultural background. Knowing something about these aspects of the participant's lives may have been potentially useful for this study. I decided however, that asking questions pertaining to various participant variables such as SES or cultural background could undermine the present study on both methodological and ethical grounds. I assumed that the methodology of the study may have been undermined if questions about the above participant variables were asked because they may have interfered with the main focus of the study. By asking the participants personal questions about their cultural background, SES, etc, the participants may have wondered about the actual intent of the study. I believe this could have produced a lack of trust within the participant and ultimately had the effect of removing their focus psychologically from the purpose of the interview. In addition to this, the mere fact of including these types of personal questions would have extended the length of the interview, which could lead to participant fatigue. Most importantly, however, was that I wanted the participants to be identified first and foremost as a musician in this study. By asking questions about their cultural and economic backgrounds, the participant's perspective of how they identified themselves may have shifted. From an ethical perspective, asking participants these questions would have been a breach of their understanding of the intent of the study in my view. While some participants may not have minded answering such questions, including them in the

interview would have constituted involving them in a study that may be perceived as contrary to what was advertised.

Participants were asked if they would like to peruse the interview script before beginning the interview. This was done for ethical and methodological reasons. From an ethical perspective, by giving the participants the opportunity to read the questions before the interview, it was hoped that the participants would feel sure about what kind of interview they were about to participate in. In other words, they would not be surprised by any of the questions. This was done so that the participants could feel comfortable knowing what was going to be asked of them in advance. From a methodological perspective, giving the participants a chance to peruse the questions prior to the beginning of the interview was done in order for them to have time to think beforehand about some of the experiences they could share during the interview. Knowing that some people may get anxious and have a difficult time immediately providing answers to questions in the context of an interview, participants were given the opportunity to begin the interview prepared with some experiences to share. Interestingly, most of the participants declined to read the questions before the beginning of the interview. It is unknown at this time why participants declined to do so. I can only speculate why this was the case: The participants already felt secure and comfortable. This is supported by the fact that all participants provided verbal assurance that they were indeed comfortable in the environment in which the interview was held. Also, the participants may not have wanted to delay the start of the interview. This may have been the case because the participants in this study generally have very busy schedules. This is supported by the



fact that a number of participants declared that they needed to leave immediately after the interview for various engagements.

#### Suggestions for future studies

Future studies could profit from measuring if there is any impact on the levels of MPA experienced by musicians as a result of talking about MPA in an interview and/or counselling context. This could be done by comparing two groups: a control group who reports their levels of MPA before a performance and an experimental group who take part in interviews and/or counseling sessions and then reports their levels of MPA before a performance.

Introducing some pre interview test and post interview test of anxiety could be useful to measure more precisely if there are any potential benefits to the participant from taking part in an interview about MPA. However, the introduction of a pre-test and a post-test would have the effect of lengthening the duration of the interview. This is something that might be aversive enough to discourage participation in the first place.

Exposing all participants to the questions before the beginning of the interview as part of the procedure would ensure that the participants are exposed to precisely equivalent conditions. However, it should be noted that given the exploratory nature of this type of interview, failure to ensure precisely equivalent conditions may not undermine the validity of both the procedures and findings of this study. Still, for future studies, particularly comparison studies, it would be profitable to eliminate the possibility of unequal experiences between participants.

The participants were asked how they felt before the beginning of the interview. This was done to ensure that they felt relaxed enough to reflect on their experience of

MPA. I assumed that arousal in the form of anxiety would undermine the participant's ability to recall memories of past experiences of MPA. Also, I did not wish to have any participants experience any undue negative emotional reactions to the interview. Having stated this, it could be suggested that a study in which the participants were induced to psychologically recreate their experiences of MPA might provide a rich source of useful data. In this scenario, the participant could be in a similar psychological and or emotional state that they would find themselves in during a real performance situation. Of course, any study of this nature would need to be conducted with extreme caution and consideration for the welfare of the participant, and would require elaborate mechanisms and substantial follow up. This was well beyond the purview of the present study.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Subject Consent Form

Research topic: The lived experience of music performance anxiety among post secondary music students and how they cope with MPA.

Purpose of the research: M.A. thesis.

MA Student: Owen Thomas (tel:604-255-2325).

Faculty advisor: Dr. Norm Amundson  
 Faculty of Education  
 University of British Columbia  
 Tel: (604) 822-6757

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of university level music students who experience music performance anxiety (MPA). This study will also investigate how these music students cope with MPA. Insights gained from this study will serve to broaden an understanding of MPA. Implications of this study include enhancing a counseling perspective on MPA as well as potentially lay the groundwork for further treatment studies.

You are consenting to participate in a group interview process known as a focus group. This focus group will last approximately 90 minutes.

In this session, you, along with a number of other music students, myself, and my research assistant, will discuss various aspects of the experience of MPA and how you cope with it. During the session, you, along with other participants, will be asked to verify and confirm the themes that emerge from this discussion.

These sessions will be audio taped. These tapes will be kept strictly confidential. Direct quotes may be incorporated into the final write up of the paper but no participants will be identified by their real name. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to any confidential material. The audiotapes will be destroyed when the study is completed.

You are welcomed to ask any questions about the study. You have the right to refuse to participate or withdraw your participation at any time during the study.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE CONDITIONS OF THE STUDY AND CONSENT TO BE A SUBJECT IN THIS RESEARCH AS OUTLINED. I hereby acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### Focus group interview script for music performance anxiety study

Facilitating Questions:

Let's get to know each other first, can I have each member introduce themselves by telling me your name and the instrument you play?

Now, can each of you tell me how long you have played your instrument?

How long have you been performing?

If a stranger asked you what music performance anxiety is, what would you tell them? How does this experience of music performance anxiety affect your future plans as a musician?

Now, can you tell me when you experience anxiety related to performing?

Can you describe your experience of music performance anxiety? How does it feel?

How does this anxiety affect your performance?

Does the effect of music performance anxiety have any effect on the way you feel about yourself?

Do any of these experiences seem familiar to others? Does hearing how others experience of music performance anxiety trigger any memories of some other experience you may have had?

\*(after the major themes of the experience of music performance anxiety are discussed and recorded, the interview will focus on how these students cope with MPA)

Now that we have identified some of the major themes of music performance anxiety, let's talk about how you cope with it. Let's start with some advice you might give to a young musician who is just starting to perform and is feeling the effects of music performance anxiety, what strategies might you suggest?

What kind of strategies do you use for managing music performance anxiety?

Has anyone sought any kind of help from others to deal with music performance anxiety?

What kind of medications or substances are out there to assist those affected by music performance anxiety?

Has anyone tried using any of these? Can you describe your experience with them?

## APPENDIX C

# MUSIC PERFORMANCE ANXIETY STUDY

You have probably thought about the impact that anxiety has on your performance as a musician.

Dear UBC music student:

The stories of your experience with music performance anxiety are needed for a unique research study. My name is Owen Thomas, and I will be conducting some brief group and individual interviews at UBC to hear what you have to say about your experience of music performance anxiety and how it is coped with. Your participation would be one time only and confidentiality is ensured. If you are interested in participating in an interview session please contact me at [othomas@sfu.ca](mailto:othomas@sfu.ca)

Thank You,  
Owen



## APPENDIX D

**CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK**

<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b> Norman E. Amundson	<b>INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:</b> UBC/Education/Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education	<b>UBC BREB NUMBER:</b> H07-00483
<b>INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:</b>		
Institution		Site
N/A		N/A
Other locations where the research will be conducted: N/A		
<b>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):</b> N/A		
<b>SPONSORING AGENCIES:</b> N/A		
<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b> University Music Students' Experiences of Performance Anxiety and How They Cope With It		

**CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE:** January 17, 2009

<b>DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:</b>	<b>DATE APPROVED:</b> January 17, 2008	
<b>Document Name</b>	<b>Version</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Protocol:</b> Music Performance Anxiety Study Thesis Proposal	N/A	March 20, 2007
<b>Consent Forms:</b> Revised subject consent form	1	January 2, 2008
<b>Advertisements:</b> advertisement to recruit MPA participants	2	March 30, 2007
<b>Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:</b> Music performance Anxiety Interview Script	2	March 30, 2007
<b>Letter of Initial Contact:</b> Music Performance Anxiety Letter of Initial Contact	2	March 30, 2007
The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.		
<i>Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:</i>		
_____		

Dr. Judith Lynam, Chair  
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair  
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair  
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair  
Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair  
Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair