



Fearless Horning and Performing: “The Magic Line Theory”

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Here’s a quick test to see if this article is a good one for you to read. If the following scenario has played out for you, then you’re going to have use for this article. If the following scenario has never happened to you, then please skip the following read, for you are already a wizard!

The scenario: You practice something, and when you perform it in the practice room, it goes great! When you walk out on stage in front of an audience or audition panel, however, the performance does not go as well.

Still reading? Cool. The only reason I can write about this is because I experience it all the time too. Glad we lost all those freaky people who don’t experience nervousness. I would hazard a guess that we did not lose too many people though. If you’re still reading, you are in good and plentiful company!

Ok, let’s look at something that might cause fear in performance, and then something I believe is a great aid in reducing nervousness for performers. There are countless causes of fearful thoughts that cause nervousness. We could be worried about our embouchure not being efficient enough to get the high notes or soft notes, or if we remember the middle section. Or your mom knows you didn’t practice enough and your friends and peers are going to find us out! Any fearful thought can set us into a destructive spin.

Why do the fearful thoughts affect us more in

performance than in the practice room? Again, there are countless reasons, probably going back to the psychology of the first times we were shushed as a child.

In my “Fearless Horning and Performing” lectures, I ask people what the one consistent *physical* difference is between the practice room performance and the on-stage performance. I then illustrate both. I stand there and say, “OK, here’s the practice room version. Moo moo mooooo!” Then I say, “And here’s the on-stage version.” I walk five steps, bow, stand in silence for five seconds, and then make the identical “Moo moo mooooo!”

The only *physical* difference between the practice room and the on-stage performances is the walk from backstage to onstage...and the few moments of silence we give ourselves before ‘real’ performances. The same person is holding the same instrument, breathing the same way with the same embouchure going to play the same notes! Granted, once we start walking onto the stage, we might experience some physical changes like dry mouth or shaking, but those are a result of mental changes.

As musicians, we isolate so many things and refine them. We isolate our high playing, loud, soft, low, fast, slow, stopped, pizzicato, Mozart style, and the list goes on. Immense growth lies in also isolating and refining the real physical experience of walking onstage, and most importantly, performing after doing so. I call the process with which to isolate and

improve on-stage experience “The Magic Line Theory”. The best thing about simulating stage entrances and performances is that it is a small addition to our practice regimen that has huge all-encompassing results. Fast-note practice will improve our fast note playing, but practicing “The Magic Line Theory” will affect all we do in performance. A bonus result is that this work will also reduce nervousness.

“The Magic Line” is what I call the line we cross when we walk on and/or off a stage, or into and/or out of ANY performing situation, be it audition, mock-audition, playing “Happy Birthday” for Grandma, or performing a Strauss concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra. “The Magic Line Theory” is all the work associated with ensuring that we approach and cross “The Magic Line” completely filled with only constructive habits that create optimal mental and physical experiences in performance.

Essentially there is about a ten second walk from the backstage area to the spot upon which we are going to perform at center stage. During that time, there isn’t any opportunity for us to improve, right? We’re not going to learn another fingering, or memorize another bar. There is, however, an incredible opportunity during that ten-second walk to make things a lot worse for ourselves. For example:

We get ready to walk out, psych ourselves up, walk out, hear the applause, and keep walking and see Billy out there, and we know he wants me to fall on my face, and he still has my Halo 2 and yikes, Sally came...I better play well...wow, she looks great... did she change her hair, ‘cause last time I saw her she was... aaaaaaaaand take your bow, silly... concentrate. Ok, now, you’re supposed to be this hot-shot... you have to live up to that... expectations, success, failure...show what I can do...ego...hmmm, did I empty my horn already... better check...splat spit splat...etc...

For most of us at the best of times, our minds are already thinking too many thoughts. Add the energy that the attention of an audience or audition panel creates to our awareness, and our mental activity can exponentially increase. Since getting nervous usually has negative results, then I’d say the

increased amount of thinking usually doesn’t enhance our approach to performing, but rather becomes mental clutter. But we *can* train ourselves to respond well to this increase of mental activity.

Here is the working concept that inspires detailed work with “The Magic Line Theory”.

Our bodies do not discern between good and bad habits. We just learn habits!

Our bodies just learn habits? Great! Then I’ll make sure I’m teaching myself good habits. I use “The Magic Line Theory” every time I enter into a performance situation, which is any time I have a real or simulated audience. This audience can be anything from a live TV broadcast or a full concert hall, to walking into a room where you’ve tied your little brother to a chair...orrrr maybe better if we perform for a diet soda can on a chair. Best yet, a microphone on a chair so we can record ourselves. Then we get the added benefit of performing thinking “the red light is on” like it is in recording studios. Not many things make us perform better than knowing we’re being recorded.

Chronological list of habits to adopt while using “The Magic Line Theory”

Decide the performance begins NOW!

- The performance does not begin when we start playing our instrument...it begins here, backstage, moments before our stage entrance performance, bow performance, etc...

Empty my horn!

Check “Ties and Flies”

- Make sure my tie is straight and fly is up ☺

Glance at my Motivational Sheet (another future article)

- Remind myself of things that inspire me “They want you to play well” “Make the decision easy for them.” “Don’t ask – Tell!” “Every excerpt is the only excerpt” “Just make wonderful music”

Calm myself while elevating my musical intent

- “*Most people don’t aim too high and miss. They aim too low and hit*” Dive into the story you’re about to tell with your music. If this were an opera, what would your set and main character be? Doing this reduces the amount of ego (“me”) in the performance and elevates things above hopes of just getting all the notes, etc.

Accept that this is all I have at this moment, and it is enough!

- All we have with us is the culmination of all our choices we’ve made up until this moment. We can assess how those choices are serving us when we finish performing, and cross back over into this backstage area. Right now ALL we are going to do is fearlessly share where we are as a musician at this moment!

- We can lose some unreasonable expectations of ourselves that create fear and nerves by accepting that we are at our present level right now. Ohhhh, the freedom from fear that can be found in embracing how we play right now! We can practice more later, but we have a performance RIGHT NOW! Let’s do this!

Connect with my colleagues

- Take a moment with your pianist and/or chamber group and just nod to each other, smiling, connecting – psyching yourselves up together on the upcoming great performance you’re about to *share* with each other and your audience!

‘Note’ that making music beats working.

- I grew up on a pig farm. I could be doing something

MUCH less pleasant than playing my horn!

Walk out naturally and smile!

- Yes, every time! (ok, maybe not for an audition)

Bow

Prepare with my horn down

- Use audience ‘anticipation’ to our advantage– makes good theatre - Many performers rush into beginning a performance. Leaving our horn down allows us to calmly think about style, tempo, the first few notes, and a few point-of-interest things unique to each piece.

Bring the horn up only when it’s “Let’s go” time!

- Use the excitement of seeing the horn come up to our advantage – more good theatre! - Every time the horn comes up, our minds should be full of the musical context. We can replace fearful thoughts by musically focusing on the three beats before we begin making musical sounds.

- When Tiger Woods swings his golf club, he has already done all the preparation. He knows where he’s aiming, and he has his ‘groove swing’. When we bring our horn up, it should feel like a ‘groove motion’, done only after all the preparation has been taken care of.

Play our best!

- Doing this incorporates all the musician training we’ve been doing. - While doing so, there are some “Don’t do” things to list here. To better inspire us not to do these things, I will say that doing any of these things in performance screams, “I am an amateur!” to your audience.

- No stopping

- No verbalizing anything (from “oops”, “heh”, “sorry” to just a grunt) - No eye rolling, or any negative facial expressions

- To ‘not do’ these things, we replace them with doing what musicians are hired to do - Make it look easy!

Smile the smile we’d smile if we played better than we’ve ever played!

- Try this sometime with an audience. If you believe in your smile, your audience will too! It will bring them joy, I guarantee it! If it doesn’t work, ask yourself if you are really authentically smiling. If you don’t believe your smile can charm an audience, get a friend to do it for you, and see if their smile doesn’t make you happy for them.

Bow

Walk off stage naturally

Celebrate the performance

- Think of something that went well...finding the things that didn't go well, but growth also comes from finding our strengths. Collecting our strengths in no way inhibits our ability to look at what we can improve.

Collect thoughts and actions that served us in performance

- A friend said recently that they need very specific thoughts and actions to help with nerves. I think since fear comes from unending directions, that we need unending fearlessness tools with which to deal with nerves constructively. Specific things might work in specific situations, but what we do is much too organic to get locked in. Collect as many things as possible that served us well in our "Magic Line" work by writing them down, and practicing using them in the next performance situation, whether it be simulated or real.

Decide how we can improve the next performance and get doing those things!

- Suggestion: use a video camera next time.

I have found approaching every performance with this much detail is a great aid in improving performance quality while reducing nervousness. Don't worry; this is only for real and simulated performance situations. We can be ourselves in rehearsal, while practicing, back stage, or wherever. Every time we knowingly approach the magic line from back-stage to on-stage, I believe we (and our audiences) are best served when we bring these details with us. We psych ourselves up, perform, smile, walk off stage, and THEN we can throw our horn out the window or crumble into a thousand pieces for all our audiences care. But we have given our performances all that we can give...every time.

Once we cross the line when we leave the performance area, we are in the backstage area. We are in this area all the time we are not performing. We're in it right now. The next time we approach a performance situation, we bring with us EVERY choice we make in the backstage area. Choices like whether to practice or watch a movie, whether to eat pizza or salad, whether to go to sleep at 11pm or 3am, whether to drink some pop or some pints.

All these things are neither good nor bad, but they all bring consequences. Knowing every time I go to

perform that *all* my choices are being manifested onstage brings a potential for a great constructive responsibility on 'me' in performances. Well, the responsibility is to be assessed backstage! I'm too busy performing while onstage, yes? For me, I like a healthy balance of movies and practice, pop and pints. With every choice, I am also aware that each choice may bring more growth than fun, or the other way around. I've spent 3 months without seeing a single movie, gone and won my audition, and then watched 3 movies a day for a week.

I've learned that musicians are respected because achieving the degree of excellence we do is not an easy task. Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." We know what excellence is. Excellence is where we're going. "The Magic Line Theory" is the accumulation of all those things we repeatedly do and quite honestly reveals where we are. Our next step is what matters most. Our days are now spent simply walking and sometimes running down the path to excellence. Nice day for a stroll, isn't it?

Internationally acclaimed Canadian hornist Jeff Nelsen's eclectic career comprises a true cross-section of the music industry. He is equally successful in both classical and contemporary genres and in the roles of both musician and mentor. Jeff teaches horn, chamber music, and trains people in what he calls "Fearlessness" at the prestigious Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Jeff has also been recently freelancing with orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony and the National Symphony. He has recurring articles focusing on "Fearlessness" in the magazines for the International Horn Society and the British Horn Society. Mr. Nelsen is a Yamaha performing artist and clinician. Visit his website at www.jeffnelson.com.