



Theme & Variations

BRUNO BORRALHINHO

Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions. Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

Anxiety, fear or phobia: when being on stage becomes a nightmare

As in all other arts and crafts, in music not everything is rosy and sometimes the path is very thorny. Being an instrumentalist, conductor or singer means, in most cases, being subject to high levels of pressure associated with public exposure on stage. It is so and it cannot be avoided. The question is: how can or should we deal with this inalienable situation, in order to enhance our own performance and our ability to communicate with the audience and the world around us?

Being anxious and nervous before a concert or an audition is absolutely normal. There are even those who say it is necessary, as a guarantee of positive levels of adrenaline, emotion and concentration. But it is also a fact that every musician has already had less pleasant experiences, in which such anxiety and such nervousness prevented him from having a satisfactory performance or even induced him to a really frustrating result. So far everything is normal and acceptable, but what about the musicians who lived this experience two, three, ten, several,

FEATUREDGUEST

Alina Pogostkina



© Nikolaj Lund

Alina Pogostkina was born in Leningrad but emigrated with her family to Germany shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She has been awarded at several international competitions, including the 1st prize at the Jean Sibelius International Competition in Helsinki and is one of the most acclaimed violinists of her generation, regularly appearing as a soloist with some of the best orchestras in the world.

too many times... or always?

Musical Performance Anxiety (MPA) is a psychological, physiological, cognitive and emotional syndrome that has always affected many musicians, but which continues to be the subject of intensive analysis and studies at present, such is the multiplicity of cases and situations associated with its definition itself. If, on one hand, we can speak of a *phobia*, in the form of permanent anxiety mental disorder, with conceptual similarities, for example, with glossophobia or sociophobia, we can also speak of *fear*, as a specific or general response or reaction to a stressful circumstance.

Each case is a particular case but general screening allows the definition of frequent psychological and symptomatic patterns: insecurity, fear of making mistakes and of what others might think, fear of failure, rejection and even humiliation. All this translated into practice in the form of shivering and excessive sweating, heart palpitations, chills, high blood pressure, nausea, stomach knots, mental exhaustion and even panic attacks. Yes, I know these are not pleasant terms to read or hear about, but one of the most common problems is precisely the hesitation and reluctance to talk about the problem itself.

Alina Pogostkina is one of the most outstanding and admired violinists of her generation and, in addition, a great example of courage and firmness in the personal and general struggle against MPA. To my cautious questions, Pogostkina always answered directly and in the first person: «it can be damaging to not be able to look at something so present in the music field» as APM, especially when «we try to cope, suppress and judge ourselves for feeling the way we feel». «That is not healing, it is only perpetuating the experience and we keep re-traumatizing ourselves», she says, stressing that talking openly about the subject undoubtedly helps to break out of the spiral of self-judgment and individual suffering.

To tell her story, Pogostkina goes back to her childhood and remembers that the problem started very early. At only 5 years old, she already played in public concerts, satisfying her father's desire and dazzling increasingly admirers with her enormous talent. «My father was my teacher, you see, and he cared a lot about how well I did. Maybe a bit too much, or perhaps it would have helped to feel or to hear that he would love me either way, no matter how well or how badly I played.» «Unfortunately it was too obvious for him to communicate and show it to me, so I never knew... only when I grew up and spent a lot of time with therapy, inner work, spiritual practices, I understood how much he must have loved me.»

In her memory were also the abdominal cramps, before and after being on stage, as well as the terror of failing and how this terror seemed existential even though she was just a child. Supporting the theory that some symptoms are the result of traumatic experiences in the past, Pogostkina acknowledges that «until today the symptoms come back regularly», especially when she is not playing too often, for example during the lockdowns caused by the pandemic. «So I have a lot of

opportunities to look at this topic again and again, which is great because it is also my mission to bring healing and empowerment to musicians and it is useful to continue exploring myself.»

About that mission of Alina Pogostkina towards those who suffer from MPA or similar problems, it is absolutely imperative to highlight MMM - Mindful Music Making (*), a program created by herself to «support musicians at a psychological, physical and emotional level». The idea is to provide tools for healing, «helping musicians to step into their unique essence and let go of entanglements that don't allow them to have full agency in their life». The program's activity includes organizing punctual retreats, workshops and online events, but also ongoing support and instruction. «My vision is to make musicians fall in love with their souls and to help them finding out what their very own path is, outside all expectations of parents, teachers or the society.»

But after all, how do we know if we are just anxious or nervous, or if we really have a problem? Pogostkina underlines that the important thing is to distinguish whether the emotions «are related to the present moment» or if, on the contrary, «the nervous system is active and we are going through a trauma which you notice by feeling very strong emotions that don't seem to bear relation to the situation». The borderline exists and each one of us should be able to recognize it: «if you are excited and a bit nervous but you are still able to enjoy, to look forward to the music, to feel yourself fully, that is a healthy response to going on stage». On the other hand, the alarm should sound «if you are completely shutting down, you can't feel yourself any more, you are panicking, your mind goes crazy and your body goes into survival mode: that is likely trauma».

Infallible tricks or secrets to avoid MPA, unfortunately, do not exist and Pogostkina claims that it is essential to recognise and understand the root of the problem. «I don't try to avoid the subject and I continue to learn to take full responsibility for my emotions.» Relaxation techniques, meditation and other psychological strategies are some of the methods most advised by experts. And sometimes simple lifestyle changes or sleeping well the night before can significantly alleviate anxiety and insecurity on stage. In the most acute cases, talking about the problem with a family member or a friend, and looking for a good therapist can be the first steps towards regaining reasonable levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. Because, above all, it is important not being ashamed of asking for help.

(*) <https://www.mindfulmusicmaking.com/>