

Douglas Niedt's GUITAR TECHNIQUE TIP OF THE MONTH

Yes, it's "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets"



I subtitled my Tech Tip "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets" after reading someone's posted message on a guitar web forum. The writer asserted that professional virtuoso guitarists all had secrets they kept to themselves and wouldn't tell anyone else, so no one would play as well as them!



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How to Give a Performance without Making a Complete Fool of Yourself

By Douglas Niedt

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A guitarist can give many different types of performances: solo recital in a concert hall, provide music as part of a church service, lecture-demo in a school classroom or gym, soloist with orchestra, performance for family or friends, provide music for a wedding or party, music school jury, duet with another guitarist or other instrument, participant in a chamber ensemble, background music in a restaurant or coffee shop, gigs at Barnes & Noble or Borders, and more.

The requirements and preparation for giving a successful performance are different for different situations and venues. Some of the information I give you may be applicable to the situations in which you perform. Some of it will be of little value. Use what works for you.

Some performers are such naturals, they can walk into any situation with guitar and footstool in hand, sit down, and give a spectacular, engaging performance. If you're not one of those people and need every bit of help you can find to get through a performance, this article is for you.

Is Everyone in the Room Naked?

Mention to someone that you're nervous about giving a performance, and naked people will be mentioned within the first thirty seconds. "Yeah, you're supposed to imagine that everyone in your audience is naked, or wearing only their underwear. People say it works great."

Actually, no successful performer or speaker offers this advice. All it does is make things more complicated, not less. It's one of the reasons we invented clothes! Despite this being bad advice, it's one of the most universally "known" tips for performing in front of a crowd. Ignore it.

Perfection Does Not Exist

If you want to be good at something, forget perfection. It's very unlikely you will give a perfect performance. Thinking you will, and expending the effort required to attempt to reach perfection produces a tremendous amount of tension and psychological struggles. You're bound to fail miserably if you attempt this goal.

Not even professional performers attain perfection. Instead, they keep their performances at a uniformly high level below which they rarely fall. They're very much like athletes in this regard. No one wins every time on the court, the links, or the field. They have off days. But their off days still produce acceptably good results. This will be your goal as a performer—to give performances some of which will be better than others, but all at a level well above average.

Accept that you will make mistakes. Everyone does. Obsession about perfection can be harmful. You will begin to be too careful. You will stop taking chances. Instead of thinking about playing with spirit, enthusiasm, and energy you will turn inward, thinking about fingering, notes, and memory. Forget that. You want to communicate. You want to enjoy what you're doing. You want to sound as good as you play at home on a good day. Obsessing on perfection gets in the way of all these goals.

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Believe it or not, most people (I'm guessing 95%) will not notice your mistakes. I attend many concerts of all types—guitar, piano, chamber music, violin, cello, symphony, vocal—you name it, I'm there. Because I know the music extremely well, I notice the mistakes. But most people don't know the music intimately and never notice. A few snarky guitarists may notice your mistakes and comment on them. But you aren't playing for them. They are a minority of your audience. It's amazing to me that even glaring errors go unnoticed by most people, even professional musicians. For us performers, that's a good thing! Take strength in knowing that *what seems like a whopper of a mistake to you will go unnoticed by most of your audience.*

When you think you've played badly, usually you will be the only one who thinks so. The drama, the "Oh my gosh I was terrible" is mostly in your own mind. To paraphrase speaking guru Dale Carnegie, you usually find there were four versions of the performance you just gave: the one you prepared, the one you gave, the one others say you gave, and the one on the way home you wish you had given.

You magnify your mistakes and imperfections in your own mind. If you wait a few weeks after the event, and you listen to a recording or watch a video of the performance, you will realize that yes, things went wrong and you made many mistakes. But you will also see that even though it wasn't a great performance, it wasn't that bad either.

The audience doesn't usually care about the things you obsess about. They want to be entertained. They want to learn. **THEY WANT YOU TO DO WELL.** They don't care if you're perfect. They know you aren't. Instead of worrying about mistakes, focus on enjoying your music and playing it with verve and feeling. Connect with your audience. **THAT'S** what the audience cares about.

Therefore:

1. Avoid the mistake of trying to make no mistakes. Practice hard to know your pieces, but face the reality that you won't be perfect. Take comfort knowing that most of your mistakes will not even be noticed by your audience. Lighten up. That way you won't be thrown off or devastated when small things (and some not so small) go wrong.

2. Recognize that your response to a mistake defines the audience's response. If you wince, shift in your chair, utter profanities or are otherwise visibly upset by each mistake you make, the audience will become equally tense and uncomfortable. If you stay cool, ignore it, or have that "that's just what I had in mind" look, the mistake will fly right by your listeners unnoticed.

Of course you're scared to death

As science uncovers new information about the wonders of the human brain, we marvel at its abilities. But the brain also displays abilities that, while designed to ensure our survival, are sometimes out of sync with the requirements of our daily lives. One of those is its fear-response programming.

For instance, our brains identify the following four things as being very bad for survival:

- Standing alone
- In open territory with no place to hide
- Without a weapon
- In front of a large crowd of creatures staring at you

Does any of that sound vaguely familiar to you? How about:

- Sitting alone in a chair with a footstool
- On an open stage
- With just a guitar in your lap (for the most part, not an effective weapon)
- In front of a crowd of people staring at you

Any creature, especially a human, finding itself in the above situation knows the odds are high it will soon be attacked and eaten alive. Many predators hunt in packs. Their easiest prey are those who stand alone, in open territory with no cover, without a weapon or other effective means of defense. Our brains are wired to fear what it knows is the worst tactical situation for a person to be in. This fear resides in the amygdala, one of the oldest parts of your brain that regulates your breathing, heart rate, and many other things. There is no way to turn it off.

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Even though our fear-response wiring is essential to our survival in dangerous situations, it can get in the way of modern daily life. It is automatically applied to non-survival but stressful situations in our daily life, oftentimes leading to high blood pressure, ulcers, headaches, and other physical symptoms.

For the performing musician, the best way to greatly reduce the fear-response phenomenon is to plan and prepare before a performance. Once you're onstage giving a performance, many variables are out of your control. It's normal to have some fear from that. But by preparing beforehand, taking control of as many factors as possible that you *can* do something about, your fears about the entire experience will be lessened to a significant degree.

Therefore, the following topics of discussion describe how to reduce the body's unstoppable fear responses by reducing fear of the unknown through simple, common-sense preparation.

Before You Leave Your House:

1. Practice! If you're unprepared to play your pieces, the result will be disastrous. You should be able to play through a piece at least three times in a row without serious mishaps. If you can't do that, choose another piece. If none of your pieces are at that level, try playing easier pieces.
2. Choose pieces appropriate for your audience and the gig. Don't play a complete Bach lute suite for a group of 2nd graders. Try to find out in advance what the acoustics of the room are like. If you're playing in a cavernous gym with a reverb delay of two or three seconds, think twice about playing a super fast piece with zillions of notes. It will sound like a mess. On the opposite spectrum, if you're playing in a dead room with zero reverb, think twice about playing slow, thinly textured pieces. They will sound empty and won't hold the audience.
3. Time your entire program from beginning to end including tuning and speaking, with no stops. If your performance is supposed to be 40 minutes long, don't run over. In fact, time out every piece individually so that if you arrive at the venue and find out they want you to cut 10 minutes, you won't get frazzled. You'll know which pieces you need to cut.
4. If your memorization is unreliable, *use the music*. Not being sure you have a piece memorized is a major contributor to stage fright. It's easy to fix. *Use the music*. Practice with the music.
5. Decide if you're going to speak. Will you say something before you begin? Will you speak between pieces? Will you say something after you're finished? If you're going to speak, prepare your words as carefully as you prepare your music. I can't tell you how many times I've seen people play the guitar beautifully, but ruin their performance because their speaking segments are totally unprepared. They sound very self-conscious and awkward. They ramble on and make inane or pointless remarks. Their performance is reduced to that of a rank amateur.

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Decide what you're going to say and when. Write it down. Don't memorize what you're going to say. That can sound stilted. But write out your words to organize your thoughts and decide precisely what you want to talk about. Be concise. Also be certain your words are appropriate for the audience you will play for. If you don't know who your audience will be, find out. Even for school performances, you will speak very differently to 3rd graders from how you speak to 6th graders. Practice your "script" out loud until it sounds natural. Be sure you're pronouncing the titles of pieces and the composers' names correctly.

When you practice playing through your performance, include your speaking segments exactly as you will do them for the real performance. *Do not tune the guitar or play the guitar while you speak!* It

makes you look unsure of yourself and self-conscious. It also makes it difficult for your audience to hear what you're saying.

6. Of course you will practice. But you must also *practice the performance*. In other words, wear the actual clothes you will play in, walk into a room, sit down, imagine an audience in front of you, and perform exactly as if it's the real thing. If possible, do your practice performance in the actual room in which you will play. That way, you can get used to the lighting, the chair (if you don't bring your own), temperature, and many other factors unique to that venue (which I will discuss below).

Don't just play through your pieces. Practice how you will tune for each piece, practice your patter (if any) between pieces, practice acknowledging audience applause between pieces, everything. Play straight through the program non-stop. Don't stop to correct or practice problem passages.

It's a good idea to record or especially video these practice performances. Not only does it put you on the spot mentally, but will give you valuable feedback on how the practice performance went—what should be left alone and what needs to be improved. A video may also reveal odd gestures or facial expressions you make that need to be corrected.

7. Superstitious? Who, me?

The thing to remember here is that if you *believe* something helps you, it *does* help you. It doesn't matter whether rigorous scientific studies support your belief or not. Don't let anyone talk you out of it. For instance, some performers have a piece of good-luck clothing they wear, or a piece of jewelry. A group may have a little ritual they go through before going onstage. If you believe that facing northeast, standing on one foot, and reciting *The Little Engine That Could* will ensure that you give a great performance, I'm with you. Do it. Small acts of control, however random or bizarre they may seem to others, can give you the confidence you need to give a better performance.

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Included in this category are things such as eating bananas before a concert (they contain potassium and trace amounts of beta-blockers), exercise, stretching (the entire body not just the fingers), staying in good physical shape, getting enough sleep, eating a good diet, etc. All of these things are positive activities, but none are categorically proven to actually improve one's performance. But again, I can't overemphasize, if you believe it works, it works.

8. Strings

Having to wrestle with strings that are stretching and don't stay in tune as you play will distract you and possibly add to nervousness before and during a performance. The goal is to have fresh strings on your guitar that sound good, but are stable and stay in tune. How far in advance of a performance should you change your strings? The answer depends largely on how much you will play on them before the performance.

If you change the strings four days before the concert but only play two hours in those four days, you're in trouble. If you change them the day before but practice on them six hours before doing the actual concert, you will probably be okay.

If you aren't good at tuning, change them at least a week before the concert. If you're a tuning wizard, you can narrow the window.

If you wear out bass strings very fast because your hand perspiration is acidic, go ahead and change the trebles anywhere from a few days to two weeks before the performance. But wait to change the basses one to three days prior to the performance.

I like very fresh strings. New trebles intonate better and harmonics come out more clearly. They sing better. I like the bright clear sound of new bass strings (some people actually prefer the sound of totally or nearly dead basses). New bass strings also intonate better and are easier to press down. However, they squeak more.

To summarize, how far out you change your strings will be determined by how many hours you play on the new strings before the performance, and the amount and acidity of your hand perspiration. It can vary from one day to about two weeks.

Be certain you check the intonation of each string. Even new strings can be defective and not play in tune. Play the string at the 12th fret. Then, play the natural harmonic at the 12th fret. The pitch should be identical. If it isn't, throw the string away and put another one on. Test the new one. If it's no good throw it away and try another. I have actually gone through a dozen strings (usually a treble string) to find one that played perfectly in tune.

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Make sure you cut off the extra string segments at the tuning machines and the bridge. Those loose ends can cause buzzes and rattles. They also look sloppy.

Inspect your tuning machines for wear. Examine the 6th string gears closely. They wear the fastest due to frequent drop-D tuning. When a tuning machine is severely worn, the tuning key will become difficult to turn, lock up, or will not raise the string past a certain pitch. The tuning machines usually fail at the worst possible time. You don't want to get freaked out before a performance by a malfunctioning tuning machine.

9. Practice tuning.

In your practice at home, rehearse how to tune for each song so you can tune efficiently and quickly in a performance. Know exactly which intervals you will check for each piece. If you have a scordatura tuning (altered tuning) know exactly how you will stabilize the strings. [See my tip](#). I've seen many a performer get rattled as he frantically tries to get his guitar in tune.

If you're playing one or more pieces that require two or more strings to be in altered tuning, you might want to use two guitars. While you're playing on guitar "A" in tuning "x", guitar "B" can be on a stand or case next to you, acclimating to tuning "y".

10. Eat early enough before the performance so you won't be hungry, but not right before you perform. Some people have superstitions that if they eat a certain meal or food before they play, they will give a good concert. If that works for you, do it. There was a time I believed eating a Hardee's Bacon Cheeseburger helped calm me before a concert. It worked, but I got tired of Hardee's Bacon Cheeseburgers real fast.

Before You Leave for the Venue

Again, our goal is to reduce stress through preparation. Following is a list of some of the basic items you should always take with you that will get you through most basic gigs. Make your own list and check off each item before you leave for the venue.

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Keep a paper copy of the list, a copy on your computer, and a copy on your cell phone. Why the redundancy? Once, I was packing for a trip but running late. I called up my packing list on my computer. It locked up. I didn't have time to shut down and restart. Another time I had the list in Google Docs. When I needed it, suddenly my computer couldn't access the Internet. No Google Docs. No packing list. So much for computers. Cell phones fail when you need them most. A list on an old-fashioned piece of real paper works nearly every time.

- Your Guitar.

Performers have been known to bring everything they could possibly need to the venue, but forget their instrument! I had a band gig when I was fourteen years old. I was so engrossed in packing all the amplification equipment and electronic doodads that I forgot my guitar. My dad had to drive home to get it.

- Footstool or other guitar support.

Be sure it doesn't creak. If you're playing a formal concert, decide whether you will:

1. Leave the stool onstage after you try out the hall
2. Have a stagehand place the stool
3. Carry it onstage with you.

I forgot mine once. I had to walk offstage to retrieve it from my dressing room. Dumb. Since then, I always leave the footstool onstage after I test the hall. I pack an extra footstool for backstage warm-up.

- Extra strings.

Even though you changed your strings ahead of time, they're stable, and you checked their intonation, a string can suddenly go bad or even break for no apparent reason. Carry at least two complete spare sets.

- Your music.

Bring your music even if you have everything memorized. I have witnessed performers warming up, going through their pieces and suddenly forgetting a passage. They panic. They can't remember it. They have to decide whether to drop the piece from the program or hope that during the performance, they will suddenly remember the passage again.

- Music stand.

The venue may or may not have a good music stand. Bring one you like that works.

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- Capo.

Capos are cheap. Keep one in your guitar case at all times. If your program has a piece requiring a capo, put the capo in a pocket when you dress. Worst-case-scenario, you can go offstage to fetch one from your guitar case.

- Fingernail care.

Keep a file, sandpaper, etc. in your guitar case at all times. I highly recommend keeping a fingernail repair kit in your case as well. RicoNails are fabulous. [See my tech tip.](#)

- Tuner

Keep a tuning fork, tuner, or metronome with A-440 tone generator in your case.

- Maps and contact information.

1. Get directions a few days in advance from the person in charge. That includes getting directions to find the performance room once you find the building! Tip: college campuses are particularly difficult to navigate.

2. Find out where you're supposed to park.

3. Use Google Maps, Bing Maps, or MapQuest to double-check the directions you were given. Sometimes, people who give directions leave out key elements. Or, you might have written down their instructions incorrectly.

4. Know the amount of travel time required. Give yourself extra time. Few things are worse for your pre-concert nerves than running late. Also, in frantically scurrying about, the chances of your breaking a nail are doubled.

5. Know the phone numbers of your contact—home, work, and cell. Keep these numbers in your pocket or wallet in addition to being entered into your cell phone. But remember, cell phones tend to be undependable when you need them most.

6. Have a backup contact.

7. Double-check the starting time of the concert. Presenters have been known to change the start time without informing the artists! By the way, if you're traveling, be sure you know what time zone you're in.

8. Have a candy bar, protein or energy bar, or the like nearby in case you suddenly get hungry. You don't want weak or shaky hands from hunger. Likewise, keep some water handy.

At the Venue

Arrive at the performance venue early. You don't want to feel rushed. For a concert hall performance, that means you should arrive before the audience is allowed into the hall, usually at least an hour before start time. I arrive two hours before start time. For restaurant or other informal gigs, a half hour to an hour should be fine unless you have to set up amplification equipment.

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Why arrive early? Part of ensuring that your performance goes well is to have as many controllable items under control as possible. That way, everything helps your performance instead of hindering it. Knowing that everything is under control will give you confidence and lessen anxiety.

- Figure out exactly the best place to sit in terms of your comfort, lighting, and sound. In a concert hall, moving a few feet forward or back can make a huge difference in how well the audience can hear you. Once this position is determined, extra time may be required to re-aim the stage lights.
- Try out the hall or room with the stage lights or room lights turned ON. I like to play through several pieces to get acclimated to the space and sound. Different spaces will make your guitar sound very different to you. You may have difficulty hearing yourself in some venues. Sometimes bad sound can't be fixed. But by arriving early and testing the sound, at least you know what to expect. You won't be surprised during the actual performance and be thrown off by it.
- If you're using music and a music stand, get everything set just the way you want it.

- If your performance is a stage situation, be sure you know where to go to get on and off stage. Know which side of the stage you will enter from.
- Arrange for a dressing room or some sort of private space in which you can prepare and warm up. I have warmed up in many janitor closets.
- Walk around the performance space so your body feels safe in the room. Make the room yours. Own it. Getting used to the physical environment will minimize your body's sense of danger. Strolling around the stage or performance area helps your body feel like it knows the terrain.
- Sit in the audience so you have a sense of what they will see.
- In informal situations, sometimes talking with members of the audience before you come onstage will calm you. They will feel more like friends instead of scary strangers.
- Even fine concert halls can have noisy ventilation systems. Usually, the management is unaware of how noisy it is until they have an unamplified classical guitarist perform! It may have to be turned off right before you walk on, back on at intermission, and then off for the second half of the program.
- If you're giving a school performance, be sure to sit far away from vending machines (or have them turned off) and pedestrian traffic. You want to be sure everyone in the audience can see you well. You will need to figure out if there are noises you have to deal with—kitchen, adjoining room, phones, mowers, and machinery.

In school auditoriums or gyms, you may have the option of sitting on the stage or on the floor. In a gym, you may have the option of the students sitting on the floor or in the bleachers. Keep in mind you want the students to be as close to you as possible to hold their attention.

- Whether in a concert hall, school, or gig venue, you must deal with the sound. If you anticipate having to use a sound system, be sure you ask that the sound person be there at least half an hour before you really need them. The people in charge of sound often have many other responsibilities and therefore are usually late getting set up.

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Sound systems in most venues are a crap shoot. You usually lose. In schools, retirement homes, and hotels, they're usually terrible. Or, the person on site may not know how to set up or operate the equipment. Sometimes the sound person doesn't even show up—they forgot or weren't told to be there.

Some venues don't have mics on stands available. All they have are mics mounted on lecterns—not exactly useful for a guitarist. Their mic cables may not be long enough for you to sit where you really need to be.

It's best to bring your own sound system if possible. Allow even more time to haul it in, set it up, and adjust it.

- If you're planning on speaking, you will also need a mic for that. It's best not to use the same mic for your guitar and speech. It's a hassle to readjust the position of the mic back and forth. And, you will probably need different volume levels for the two.

If you decide not to use a mic for your voice, have someone sit in the room or hall to help you determine how loud you must speak to be easily heard.

But remember, just because your guitar can be heard well without a mic doesn't mean your voice will not need to be amplified. Usually, amplification will be required for your speech.

Be sure the mics are positioned so they are easily accessible and not in your way. Turn the speech mic off (or if you're playing a concert hall, instruct the sound man to turn it off from the mixing board) when you play the guitar.

- In any situation, the right chair is a must. You will be amazed at how difficult it can be nowadays to find a straight chair with no arms. A straight chair with no arms and just the right height may not exist in the performance venue. For concert hall performances, my contract specifies the type and height of chair needed. But guess what? I usually bring my own anyway. I recommend you do the same, especially for gigs. If the chair is not the same as what you're used to at home, you will be amazed at how much anxiety results when you play and suddenly discover that everything looks different on the fretboard and the positions of your hands, legs, and body all feel different. Finally, be sure your chair and footstool don't creak. It will make you self-conscious and distract you. It's also very distracting to the audience.

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- Control the temperature of the room. I had a school performance in a gym where the person in charge thought it would be a great idea to air out the gym beforehand—in the middle of the winter. The temperature in the gym was in the low 60s when I arrived. Fortunately, after immediately closing the doors and cranking the heat, it was comfortable a half hour later. For concert halls, my contract specifies hall temperature of at least 70 degrees. Always have an extra sweater, warmer or cooler shirt, and extra socks (if your feet are warm, your hands stay warm). If being too hot is the problem, dress in layers so you can take off extra layers as the

temperature increases. A guitarist doesn't want cold clammy hands and stiff fingers or sweaty hands and slippery fingers. Either can send the performer into panic mode.

- An excellent remedy for clammy hands is baby powder. Keep a small container of it in your guitar case. Be sure to use the corn starch variety, not the type containing talcum powder (talc). The talc can get into your lungs causing a temporary or prolonged cough. Use the corn starch baby powder sparingly so it doesn't get all over the guitar and your clothes. Wipe your hands with a towel after application. Then, *test it!* Before applying the powder, your hands were probably sticking to the guitar and strings, especially on shifts. After applying the powder, your hands will glide very freely on the strings and neck. On shifts, you may suddenly sail right past your intended destination points! It takes a minute or two to get used to. I also prep the neck by rubbing my powdered hand up and down the neck.
- Test your clothing in advance to be sure it is guitar-friendly. A dress or pair of slacks may look fantastic, but if the guitar slides uncontrollably on your leg, you're in trouble. You may look great in a certain shirt, blouse, vest, or coat. But if the buttons rattle or get caught on the top edge of the guitar, it will rattle your performance. Also, be on the lookout for shirt buttons and cufflinks on the right arm coming into contact with the guitar. For younger performers, you may look really hot in your leather outfit, but if it makes noise every time you move, it will most certainly distract the audience.
- Ladies, if you decide on a new hairstyle, have it done far in advance of the performance. Test it while playing the guitar. It may look great in normal life, but when you are looking down at the guitar, hair may fall over your eyes or face and become very distracting to you. Or, your hair may look great when the audience sees you straight on. But when you turn your head to look at the fretboard and all the audience sees is hair and no face, you may want to reconsider the style.
- One of the most important reasons to arrive at the performance venue early is to have enough time to warm up. I once gave a great concert with zero warm up (my car died on the way and I arrived two minutes before concert time). But psychologically, I feel much more confident if I have 60-90 minutes to warm up. For many guitarists, that's way too much. Fifteen minutes may be sufficient. Experiment and determine the optimal amount of time for you to get your hands in gear.

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What to practice? Some people warn against playing any pieces you will play on the program. They say that if something goes wrong during practice right before the concert (such as not remembering a passage or being unable to play it) the performer will be panicked. Others say to

play through your pieces at half-speed. Others recommend only practicing exercises. Again, you will have to experiment to see what works best for you.

- Before the performance, wipe your guitar off with a soft cloth (microfiber cloths are great) to remove smudges. I once gave a great concert only to be told by an audience member afterward that my guitar was really dirty.

All of the preceding may seem like small things on their own. But when you have all these items under control, you compensate for the bigger issues that arise during the actual performance over which you have zero control. In this way, you take as much responsibility as possible for your body's unchangeable responses to stress and fear.

The Performance

Gather Intelligence

If you're part of a program with other guests, try to catch pieces of other performers' and speakers' presentations before you. Your purpose is to get a feel for the mood of the audience. If you watch another musician who performs before you, you may get a feel for what the audience likes or doesn't like. You may need to adjust your program content. Or, you may pick up on a speaker's comments that you can use (or avoid) to help you connect with the audience. If the previous performer is absolutely wonderful but only gets tepid applause from the audience, you'll know if you fall flat, it may not be your fault. There may be something else at work in the room. On the other hand, if the performer does really well and receives tremendous applause, but you go down in flames, you'll know it wasn't the audience—it was you.

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Final Check

Before you walk out to your audience, take a quick but careful look at yourself in a mirror. Check hair, teeth, clothes, and shoes.

Do you have your capo? Is the music on the stand? Is your footstool out there? Do you need to turn on the mic when you sit down to play?

The Density Theory of Public Performance

No matter what the venue, it's important to follow the density theory of public performance. This theory maintains that crowd size is unimportant. What matters is crowd density. If you sit down to play before a sparsely populated audience, you should have them move to create a densely-packed crowd located as close to you as possible. Don't pretend you don't notice there are only sixty people in the

600-person hall. Or only six people in a space that seats 80. You're not fooling anyone. A performance by a classical or acoustic guitarist, or any solo artist, is an intimate event. Your audience members' enjoyment, perception, ability to hear you, and ability to see you will increase dramatically if they are close to you and densely packed.

Take control. If you leave your audience members scattered in a wasteland of empty seats towards the back of the room, they will feel like lonely losers. They may even feel embarrassed for having chosen to come hear a loser who can only draw an audience of sixty. They may feel embarrassed for you. But if you pack them together, at least they'll know they're not the only losers who decided to come to your concert. They now have loser friends! Or, on a more positive note, members of a small, elite, tightly-knit group who know quality music—unlike the masses packed in at the Neil Diamond concert down the street.

Ask the attendees to gather into a central compact space directly in front of you. It isn't really difficult. For the most part, in lecture hall and concert halls, we do what people in authority tell us to do. We've spent our lives listening to people at the front of the room tell us to stand up, sit down, sing songs, repeat after me, etc. If you explain the situation with humor and a smile, your audience will willingly rearrange themselves as you request.

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In school situations, sometimes you will have a few straggler students who sit away from everyone else. Speak to them directly and have them join the group. Otherwise, during the performance, I will guarantee that they will not pay any attention to you and talk while you play.

You're Contagious

What I mean is, *your attitude is contagious to your audience*. If you're happy to be there, they'll be happy to be there with you. If you're scared, they will be uncomfortable. If you're full of energy and enthusiasm they will be energized. If you smile with sincerity, they will feel the warmth. If you're confident, they will be relaxed and put themselves in your hands.

Yes, there is such a thing as a tough audience. But usually, a tough audience is the result of the performer's attitude or a problem with the performing space. Audiences genuinely want you to do well. After all, they didn't buy tickets or drive to the venue because they wanted to hear lousy music.

Energy

Audiences want to listen to and watch a confident, engaged, energetic performer. I wrote a previous tech tip covering aspects of this where [I compared the performing styles of cellist Yo-Yo Ma, Christina Aguilera, and the Pussycat Dolls](#).

A common mistake people make is to shrink onstage. They become overly cautious and reserved. They speak softly and give restrained half-smiles. They become devastatingly neutral. It's safe but an attention graveyard.

When you're onstage, be bigger than you are. Be enthusiastic. Speak louder, play with big contrasts, make your body movements pronounced and extroverted. Think about how far away you are from your listeners. They need help to connect with you and your music. Sure, your music can pull them into you, but you can only pull so much. Subtleties may be difficult to communicate in a larger space. To compensate, you must project more energy. You need to give your audience that extra energy so their attention doesn't drift away.

But don't be a phony entertainer. Don't act like a standup comedian or game-show host. Give your audience the passionate, interested, and fully present version of yourself. Be genuine and sincere. If you are enthusiastic and care about what you're doing, your audience will be enthusiastic too.

The Post-Mortem

Remember, you will tend to magnify everything that went wrong and turn it into a big deal. It's not. Most people will fail to notice or remember the things that went wrong—*unless you make a big deal out of it.*

Take with a grain of salt what others say to you after a performance, even the glowing compliments. People are usually not completely honest because they don't want to appear rude. They're polite.

You will hear conflicting feedback. The sound was good. The sound was bad. You played too fast. You played too slow.

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The cultural and social characteristics of the audience can fool you. I remember the first time I played in a small town in Iowa. The audience was so quiet, reserved, and unresponsive that as I played I thought I was really bombing. After the concert I realized it was just the way they conducted themselves in a concert setting. I found out that they loved the concert, thought it was amazing, and the small audience of 200 persons bought close to a thousand dollars worth of merchandise.

You're on your own to sort out which bits of feedback matter and which you want to act upon. If someone tells you, "Great job," ask them, "Thanks, but what can I do to make it better?"

When you know you were bad, keep it to yourself. Don't tell everybody that you played badly or blame other things for what went wrong. Don't put yourself down. Usually, everyone else thinks it was just fine.

After the performance, as soon as possible, make notes of what went right and what went wrong. Then you can attend to improving those specifics.

Try to have the performance recorded or videotaped. *Wait a couple weeks*, and then listen or watch. Only after the passage of time will you be able to do an objective evaluation of the performance. Don't just evaluate your playing. Look at everything. Did you look confident or did you look self-conscious and awkward? Did your smile look forced or genuine? How did you look walking on and off stage? Did your bows look natural? Did you make weird faces when you were playing? These are all things that can be easily fixed. Your next performance will be that much better.

The Elephant in the Room

The preceding information is designed to help head problems off at the pass so you aren't rattled before you even play a note. Everything is in place, everything is set to your liking, and all the pre-performance preparations have proceeded smoothly.

But, an elephant is standing in the middle of the room! You must acknowledge and handle this elephant. Otherwise he will crush everything there including your spirit! That elephant is performance anxiety—the nervousness you experience as you're actually playing that makes your hands shake, sends your fingers out of control, or causes memory lapses.

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You can take some comfort knowing that everyone gets nervous before a performance. Mark Twain, who made most of his income from public speaking, not writing, said, "There are two types of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars." Elvis had stage fright. Thomas Jefferson was so afraid of public speaking that he had someone else read his State of the Union address. Bono gets nervous. Segovia got nervous. At times, Vladimir Horowitz, one of the greatest pianists of all time, had to be pushed onto stage. Some performers become *physically ill before every performance*.

Performance anxiety is a huge topic on its own. I will cover it in a future technique tip. In the meantime, use the tools I've presented to you here. You might find that these eliminate a large portion of your performance anxiety.

To Sum Up

If you follow the suggestions in this article, you won't make a complete fool of yourself when you perform. Prepare as much as possible in advance and control the controllable. Don't try or expect to give a perfect performance. If you give a less than stellar performance, take heart—few people noticed or will remember it. Pick yourself up and dust yourself off. Do a post-mortem. Fix or improve the things that went wrong. Read this article again. Give another performance. It will most certainly be better. Repeat this enough times and before long, you will consistently give better performances.

My thanks to writer and public speaker Scott Berkun. Some of the information in my article is taken from his excellent book, *Confessions of a Public Speaker*, available at Amazon.com.

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