

STUDENT PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

by Daniel Roest

Are any of your students too nervous at their lessons to play well? Here are proven ways to help.

Last month [link to <http://www.guitarsessions.com/jul09/teaching.asp>] we took a close look at the age old problem so many students have at their lessons – it doesn't go as well as it does at home.

This month, we're looking at the teaching situation where your student is not just a little hampered by the pressure of the playing at the lesson, but physically shut down and very uncomfortable. We'll concentrate on the stressed out student *at the lesson*, not the student performing on stage.

Checking In With Your Students

In order to help your students with relaxing at their lessons, you need to register what their frame of mind is. A simple "How was your week?" can elicit a typical "Pretty good!" or "Lots of homework!" or "Same old, same old" and the like. But at the very start of their lesson, you have a chance to gauge whether they are in good spirits or not. Some students are just naturally more nervous than others once the playing starts, and that's where I want to focus.

There may be as many approaches to relaxing a nervous student as there are nervous students, because they are individuals. They may have had a teacher in the past who was rough on them, or they may be under some intense pressure from their parents – any number of reasons could be at work. My approach is to be gentle, friendly, patient, encouraging, and that all seems to help. Plus it's good practice in everyday life – an asset to your people skills.

Cold Hands, Warm Heart

Occasionally I will notice a student's hand skin temperature being cooler than average, even cold, and sometimes I'll notice the opposite. Hand skin temperature is an indicator of stress, as you may know from bio-feedback articles.

One of my students has a great attitude and work ethic but unusually cold hands, so I got interested in the bio-feedback aspect of hand temperature and bought a hand thermometer device. It came with instructions on calming yourself and learning how to increase hand temperature by reducing stress. The battery operated thermometer also came with a credit card size "Biofeedback card" with color coding for hand temperature. A place to press your thumb turns from black to red, to green and to blue, depending on the thumb temperature. The basic message is spelled out on the back of the card:

When stressed, your blood is drawn inward causing cold hands, and the card will register black. If so, try one of the easy relaxation techniques until card turns blue (warm hands.)

On the back of the card are techniques for breathing and visualizing. The \$20 thermometer device came with guidelines for what different temperature readings meant:

- High Tension / below 79 degrees
- Slight tension / 79 – 84 degrees

- Mild/calm / 84 – 90 degrees
- Quietly relaxed / 90 – 95 degrees
- Deeply relaxed / over 95 degrees

The Doctor Is Out

We're not suggesting you turn your studio into a day spa or you start serving herbal teas and providing massages to your overly stressed students, but it is good to know the mechanisms at work. Your nervous student deserves your skilled guidance and help, so let's see what we can do without too much trouble.

Last month, we dealt with students complaining that they play better at home than at their lesson. Students with more acute symptoms – performance anxiety – can still benefit from the bullet points listed:

- setting the right tempo
- telling them not to expect it to be just like it was at home
- helping them relax
- helping them focus
- aiming to give them a good time with enough fun in the lesson to balance all the hard work.

In addition to this list, some students will just need more:

- Compassion
- Support
- Understanding
- Balance of challenge and no challenge
- Conditioning /adaptation / desensitization to the process
- Preparation
- Possibly speaking with the parents about it

While it is difficult or impossible to know what makes every student tick – what's driving them in a positive way and what might be driving them in a negative way – you must be sensitive to their mood and note how happy or unhappy they are with their playing.

The Music Teachers National Association has a good fifteen minute audio clip of a lecture by MTNA President Gail Berenson speaking on Performance Anxiety. She makes an excellent set of points, summarized here:

Since any performance, even a lesson, can promote feelings of stage fright, it is conceivable that some individuals may not achieve their potential because of the intrusion of excessive performance anxiety. This brief lecture will address the issue of performance anxiety, presenting several coping strategies. You will need to decide which combination of approaches might be most helpful to you. The techniques to be discussed will include:

1. Breathing strategies;
2. Cognitive thinking and imagery strategies; and
3. Desensitization strategies. The goals - to view performance anxiety as a positive element, not the enemy, and to enjoy the performance experience!

That last point is especially valuable: Put stage fright or anxiety in the lesson in a positive light - to see it as a resource for excellence. Channel that energy into the music, and know that the world's greatest performers are not free of nerves, but they have learned how to leverage the adrenaline into an emotionally charged performance. Berenson recommends addressing the physical side by cardio-vascular conditioning and breathing techniques to influence the autonomic nervous system.

Here is the link for her talk:

<http://mtna.org/Resources/PerformanceAnxietyPodcast/tabid/656/Default.aspx>

I highly recommend listening to it.

All of the techniques for overcoming performance anxiety onstage apply at lessons, so you can show them to your students most in need of help.

You may have ideas you have discovered on your own and not described above – of course, whatever works for you, you should use. Robert Allen, a fellow teacher in my town, uses free improvisation to diffuse student performance anxiety, and he is even writing his thesis on it. The idea is to free the student from the audience's judgment role that comes with playing a known piece, like Für Elise, and tuning out their expectations.

Barry Green, author of the famous book, *The Inner Game of Music* (New York, Doubleday, 1986) made a great case for concentration as an anxiety reducer when he had a French horn major perform as several faculty talked at him and attempted to disrupt his playing. They succeeded. But then Green directed the student to play again and really focus only on his tone and tune out the offending faculty and their withering comments. It worked like a charm, and his playing was strong and sure.

Next month we'll leave the mind control and turn to hand control – the left hand. I will explain "The Hierarchy of Left Hand Technique" – until then, happy teaching!

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Daniel Roest (pronounced "roost") started playing guitar at the age of seven and never stopped. Today he has performed in countless solo and ensemble events in nearly every kind of venue, and his concerts are praised for being entertaining and informative. For ten years he served as President and Artistic Director of the South Bay Guitar Society based in San Jose, CA, preparing many successful grant applications, and is now Director Emeritus. He also is recognized for presenting gifted guitarists such as Laurence Juber, Peppino D'Agostino, Muriel Anderson, Jeff Linsky, Franco Morone, Michael Chapdelaine, Richard Gilewitz, Chris Proctor, Mark Hanson, Duck Baker, Sharon Isbin, Lily Afshar, Carlos Barbosa-Lima and many others. His *Great Guitars! 2004* CD received 5-star reviews.

Roest majored in guitar and earned three degrees in music performance. He participated in dozens of masterclasses, including many he produced. He taught guitar and music fundamentals at California State University Stanislaus and De Anza, Foothill and San Jose City Colleges and now maintains a full-time teaching studio in Folsom, CA. He has adjudicated several multi-instrument competitions, presented music clinics and introduced many new audiences to the art of the classical guitar. His original solo composition, *February 4th*, was selected from hundreds of submissions by the *ERMEDIA* "Masterworks of the New Era" CD series. Last year he was selected to be a teaching artist in the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission's Artist Residency Institute. Previous columns for **Guitar Sessions** include **So You Want to Make a Living with the Guitar**, Parts [1](#), [2](#) and [3](#), a ten part series, **Expressive Guitar Playing – Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist: Dynamics, Tempo, The Big Picture, Rhythm, Balance, Rubato, Pitch effects, Tone, Phrasing and Stage Presence and Heart, and **Teachers Who Can – Performing Your Own Community**, Parts [1](#) and [2](#).**