

**Research Article**

## **Effective Psychological Therapies for Alleviating Performance Anxiety**

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**Received:** July 20, 2024

**Accepted:** August 10, 2024

**Published:** August 18, 2024

### **Abstract**

This study examined existing treatment methods for alleviating music performance anxiety (MPA) and proposed a new therapeutic approach based on these methods. Existing treatments primarily included pharmacotherapy, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), and rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT). Music therapy techniques were investigated in conjunction with these established psychological therapies, utilizing methods such as songwriting, improvisation, and music imagery. Building on this foundation, the Neo MPA therapy method was proposed as a new approach to alleviate MPA. The Neo MPA therapy method consists of the following steps: First, the treatment is structured as group therapy. Second, muscle relaxation and meditation techniques from the existing systematic desensitization method are retained, but must incorporate guitar music. Third, the REBT technique is applied to songwriting, facilitating group songwriting sessions. Fourth, a group concert employing the exposure and response prevention (ERP) technique is organized. This study presented a new therapeutic method with supporting arguments for alleviating MPA, and it holds potential as a resource for future research and practical application in therapeutic settings.

**Keywords:** Music Performance Anxiety (MPA), Performance, Anxiety, Desensitization, Music Therapy.

### **1. Introduction**

The stage can be both a place to shine and a place of terror for performers. Many performers experience anxiety on stage, which can range from mild to severe levels that might qualify as social anxiety disorder according to the DSM-5 (2013). While a certain level of tension and anxiety can enhance performance and lead to positive outcomes, excessive anxiety can lead to complete immobilization. MPA can create a vicious cycle of anticipating mistakes, leading to actual errors and post-event rumination, thereby embedding a sense of failure. This anxiety does not only affect performances but can also result in depression and low self-esteem, deeply impacting one's psychological well-being (Jin-hee, 2020). While music performance can be a source of beauty for enthusiasts, for professionals or students striving for excellence, the stress and anxiety from competitive environments can be overwhelming. Despite the prevalence of MPA symptoms among performers, the root causes of their anxiety are often unrecognized, and appropriate treatment is seldom sought (Kim, 2008). This research aims to explore existing methods for alleviating MPA and propose new approaches to support individuals experiencing this condition.

### **2. Concept of Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)**

MPA (musical performance anxiety) is an experience that almost every performer has encountered to varying degrees. MPA refers to the fear and anxiety experienced when performing in front of an audience, which can prevent the performer from showcasing their full skill and diminish the quality of their performance. The resulting distress can be overwhelming. MPA manifests as fear and anxiety in performance situations, affecting emotions, cognitive distortions, physical symptoms, and behavior. This disruption can lead performers to give subpar performances compared to their usual abilities and develop negative experiences related to performance settings. Salmon (1990) defines MPA as "persistent and distressing anxiety about performing in public and/or actual impairment that occurs at abnormally low levels of performance considering the individual's musical talent, training, and preparation" (Jin-hee, 2020, citing Salmon, 1990). Extreme MPA can be viewed as an anxiety disorder that prevents individuals from fulfilling their duties during performance. Anxiety disorders include various subtypes such as separation anxiety disorder, selective mutism, specific phobia, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and generalized anxiety disorder (DSM-5, 2013).

MPA shares characteristics with anxiety experienced in public speaking, evaluations, and exams, showing similarities with social anxiety disorder. Social anxiety disorder involves intense fear and anxiety in social situations where one is closely observed (DSM-5, 2013). Such social situations include public speaking, being the focus of attention, and receiving evaluations, often leading to a misinterpretation of possible negative outcomes. Individuals who feel anxiety only in performance contexts but not in other social situations experience anxiety specifically related to being observed or evaluated (Jin-hee, 2020). Similarly, performers experience MPA differently depending on the situation. For instance, I have found that my level of MPA is significantly higher during an actual performance in front of an audience compared to during a rehearsal. This indicates that the presence of evaluators or an audience affects the level of tension experienced by the performer.

### **3. Symptoms of Performance Anxiety**

MPA symptoms manifest differently among individuals, primarily appearing as physical, cognitive, and psychological symptoms.

Firstly, physical symptoms of MPA include trembling hands and feet, excessive sweating as if it were raining, sudden chills, and cardiovascular imbalances. As anxiety is experienced, the body's autonomic nervous system becomes activated, leading to symptoms such as chest tightness, increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, rapid and shallow breathing, disruptions in breathing patterns, dry lips, and changes in body temperature. In severe cases, symptoms may include muscle rigidity and sensory abnormalities (Nam and Han, 2017). For example, my friend A experiences chest tightness and difficulty breathing as soon as the performance begins. Another friend, B, becomes so extremely nervous upon stepping onto the stage that they forget the pieces they are supposed to play. Subsequently, their hands sweat excessively, causing them to drop their instrument.

Secondly, performers experiencing performance anxiety often feel a sense of shame stemming from a perception of inferiority. They typically exhibit low self-esteem, and as they make frequent mistakes due to anxiety on stage, they tend to evaluate themselves harshly, leading to feelings of guilt and shame (Nam and Han, 2017).

Thirdly, cognitive symptoms include excessive worry about events that have not yet occurred, discomfort from intrusive thoughts, decreased concentration, and irrational beliefs about needing to be perfect. The desire to gain approval from parents, teachers, and peers drives a focus on flawless, error-free performances, leading to an intolerance for even minor mistakes that others might not notice. This belief that the audience will judge the performance critically can cause severe nervousness and lead to a repetitive thought pattern of constantly ruminating over what might go wrong, which in turn creates a vicious cycle (Nam and Han, 2017).

In my own experience, a malfunction with the monitor speakers during rehearsal prevented me from tuning properly, resulting in pitch issues during high notes when singing. This made me anxious about the upcoming performance. As I waited for my turn, my heart raced, and I had trouble focusing, which led me to repeat the mistakes from the rehearsal. MPA induces cognitive distortions, increasing anxiety, and fear of failure, gradually leading to irrational and negative thinking. According to American psychiatrist Aaron Beck, cognitive distortions include errors such as all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, mental filtering, minimization and maximization, personalization, mislabeling, mind reading, and fortune telling. These cognitive errors distort or exaggerate reality in a negative direction, leading to negative emotions and behaviors (Kwon, 2012).

### **4. Known Methods for Alleviating Anxiety**

Several methods are used to alleviate MPA and performance anxiety, including pharmacotherapy, CBT, REBT, psychoanalytic counseling, meditation, yoga, and music therapy. Among these, pharmacotherapy is the most frequently used method for reducing anxiety.

#### **A. Pharmacotherapy**

Individuals who experience anxiety symptoms affecting their performance in presentations, exams, and musical performances often try various methods to alleviate these symptoms. The most common and frequently used method is medication. They might obtain prescriptions from a doctor or purchase medication from a pharmacy based on the pharmacist's recommendations to alleviate MPA. According to an interview with pharmacist Yoon Jeong-wan of the Hannam-dong Moon Pharmacy, medication cannot

guarantee its effectiveness for everyone, and its suitability can be uncertain. Most anxiety-reducing medications work by stabilizing the sympathetic nervous system, which dulls the nerves. Depending on the individual, side effects such as drowsiness, decreased concentration, nausea, dizziness, and blurred vision can occur, potentially interfering with performance. Although medication can be an effective treatment, its side effects can be significant, and it has limitations in continuously controlling psychological symptoms related to performance anxiety.

### **B. Cognitive Behavior Therapy**

While medication can provide a temporary solution, it has side effects and is limited in its ability to control the psychological symptoms of MPA in the long term. As a result, non-pharmacological treatments such as cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), yoga, meditation, and music therapy are being implemented to replace drug therapy. According to the National Center for Mental Health, "CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) is a treatment that helps correct distorted thoughts and behaviors caused by pathological anxiety, enabling individuals to respond to anxiety symptoms in a rational and appropriate manner. CBT is particularly effective for treating anxiety disorders such as panic disorder and social anxiety disorder." CBT is a diverse approach used to address mental health and behavioral issues, with different methods selected based on the individual's specific problems, symptoms, needs, and circumstances. Among various CBT techniques, systematic desensitization is noted to be suitable for patients who have appropriate coping skills but exhibit severe anxiety in specific situations.

Systematic desensitization is a behavioral therapy that involves developing a hierarchy of fear-inducing situations, ranging from those that provoke minimal fear to those that provoke the most fear. The process involves helping individuals overcome their fear at each stage of the hierarchy, ultimately enabling them to confront and overcome the most fear-provoking situation. This method involves inducing a state of relaxation in response to fear and anxiety-inducing stimuli, and then exposing the individual to these stimuli according to the established anxiety hierarchy. The goal is to reduce and desensitize the anxiety or fear response triggered by aversive stimuli (wikipedia.org-1). Systematic desensitization is a behavioral modification technique developed by South African psychiatrist Joseph Wolpe in the 1950s. He exposed a cat to anxiety-inducing stimuli in a mild manner and then provided the cat with positive stimuli such as food. Through this method, he succeeded in reducing the cat's anxiety by helping it respond positively to the anxiety-provoking elements (Basics of Understanding Behavioral Management, Sigmampress, p. 14).

The first stage of systematic desensitization involves inducing relaxation through techniques such as muscle relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation. This step is crucial because relaxation is incompatible with tension, helping to desensitize the individual to anxiety. The second stage involves creating a hierarchical list of anxiety-inducing stimuli, ranging from the least to the most anxiety-provoking. This hierarchy is later used in treatment to systematically desensitize the individual. The final stage involves exposing the individual to the anxiety-inducing stimuli, starting from the lowest level of the hierarchy and gradually progressing to the highest, allowing them to overcome their anxiety. For instance, someone with a fear of dogs might start by imagining encountering a dog on the street, then progress to seeing a dog from a distance of ten meters, then five meters, and finally one meter, before eventually touching and spending time with the dog. This step-by-step approach helps the individual overcome their fear of dogs (Naver Encyclopedia, Systematic Desensitization).

### **C. Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy**

Rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) is a comprehensive and proactive psychological therapy with philosophical and empirical foundations, designed to resolve emotional and behavioral problems and improve quality of life. Created and developed by American psychiatrist and psychologist Albert Ellis, REBT draws inspiration from the teachings of Asian, Greek, Roman, and modern philosophers. It is a form of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) first described by Ellis in the mid-1950s. REBT posits that human emotions stem from thoughts, and it aims to address problems by focusing on human cognition, as thoughts lead to emotions and actions (Kwon, 2012). While CBT emphasizes thoughts and emotions, REBT considers cognition and emotion as critical elements in behavioral change. Ellis's theoretical model is commonly known as the ABCD model. In this model, A stands for activating event, which refers to any event or situation that triggers emotional turmoil or behavior. B represents the belief system, which includes the individual's attitudes or belief systems in response to environmental stimuli such as events or actions. These beliefs can be rational or irrational. C stands for consequence, which is the emotional and behavioral outcome that results from interpreting the activating event through one's belief system. Rational or irrational beliefs can lead to different outcomes. Consequences of irrational belief systems include excessive anxiety, depression,

anger, guilt, hurt, jealousy, and shame. Lastly, D stands for dispute, which involves challenging and questioning one's distorted thoughts and beliefs about external reality, encouraging the individual to reconsider whether their thoughts are rational (Kwon, 2012).

For example, hearing from family members, "You have always been the most inadequate child in our family. You must succeed at all costs to gain recognition," is an activating event. The belief, "I must strive to be recognized as a competent person, so I must perform perfectly. I must excel in any given role, and if I fail, it will be catastrophic, proving that I am always incompetent and worthless," is the belief system. The resulting emotions, such as anxiety, panic, depression, despair, avoidance of situations, and feelings of worthlessness, are the consequence. D can be explained as the dispute received from a therapist or psychologist, challenging the irrational belief system.

## **5. Existing Methods for Alleviating Performance Anxiety Using Music Therapy**

### **A. Systematic Desensitization and Music Therapy**

There are cases where systematic desensitization is combined with music in therapy. Music used as a tool in music therapy is considered effective for addressing the problems of individuals experiencing anxiety and is deemed useful for alleviating performance anxiety, leading to its application in various academic fields (Jin-hee, 2020). Although music can be a source of anxiety for performers experiencing music performance anxiety (MPA), forming a love-hate relationship, Dileo-Maranto (1992) suggests that musicians respond to music both physically and psychologically differently from non-musicians due to their musical training (Kim, 2008, citing Dileo-Maranto, 1992). Thus, these responses to music can enhance its effectiveness as a therapeutic modality. Moreover, music therapy has proven to be significantly effective in treating general stress and anxiety, and since music is a familiar and easily accessible medium for musicians, music therapy has garnered interest as an alternative treatment for performance anxiety. Juncos and Markman (2016) implemented desensitization techniques and progressive muscle relaxation training using music. They exposed individuals who fear musical situations to performance scenarios repeatedly, without avoidance, to reduce performance anxiety. These researchers identified the physical and psychological reactions experienced by performers in front of an audience and exposed them to actual performance situations to help them confront and manage their anxiety (Jin-hee, 2020, citing Juncos and Markman, 2016).

### **B. Desensitization and Progressive Muscle Relaxation Training**

Kim (2008) conducted desensitization training and progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) training by having participants imagine anxiety-inducing scenes and then listening to music to induce relaxation. The music used in conjunction with muscle relaxation featured slow-tempo, lyrical soundtracks. Additionally, improvisation using the piano was employed to intervene in the participants' negative emotions towards rigid music education. For participants with obsessive rumination, positive language chants were used after performances to help them overcome self-doubt.

### **C. Music Imagery and Songwriting through Listening to Music**

Choi and Kang (2018) used music listening to induce music imagery, allowing individuals to explore and cognitively restructure their irrational thoughts related to performance anxiety before engaging in performance activities. Music imagery is a deep psychological therapy technique that explores the inner world of individuals by experiencing various imagery through listening to music that is suitable for therapeutic goals (Jung, 2006). By exploring their irrational thoughts through music listening, individuals prepare for the main activities focused on cognitive restructuring. The main activities include songwriting and improvisational performance using percussion instruments and vocals. Songwriting can vary according to the cognitive level, response, and preferences of the individual and may include activities such as fill-in-the-blank, rewriting lyrics, song variation, and creating rap (Jung, 2006). In addition to songwriting, Choi and Kang (2018) encouraged improvisational performances, providing a free and creative experience within the music. Continuous exposure to performance situations aimed to create successful experiences, thereby alleviating performance anxiety.

## **6. Further Connection: The Neo MPA Therapy Method**

In this study, we aim to propose a new method for alleviating MPA symptoms by referencing existing research. The most notable aspect of the Neo MPA therapy method is its use of group dynamics and energy in the treatment. Additionally, it incorporates muscle relaxation and meditation, which were part of the existing systematic desensitization techniques, as they are performed in the same way. Furthermore, the REBT technique is applied to songwriting, leading to group songwriting sessions. REBT posits that human emotions originate from thoughts, which then influence feelings and behaviors. Thus, by focusing on

changing faulty thoughts and creating songs with the group that address these erroneous thoughts, the effectiveness of the therapy is enhanced. We aim to overcome MPA by holding a group music session using an enhanced ERP technique that builds upon systematic desensitization.

### **A. Group Therapy**

Above all, the treatment for MPA should be in the form of group therapy rather than individual therapy. A group can instill hope in its members that their issues can be improved, and this hope itself can have therapeutic effects. Additionally, members can find comfort in knowing that their current symptoms are not unique to them, but that others have similar conflicts and problems. They can acquire necessary information, gain a clear understanding of their issues, and receive direct or indirect guidance, suggestions, and advice from other group members, which is expected to boost their confidence. It is believed that openly expressing one's anxious emotions in front of others is a crucial process for MPA treatment. Through interactions with group members, individuals may gain insight that others will not only view them as objects of evaluation when on stage but will also recognize and appreciate their performance. This insight provides a platform to test the belief that they can fully express their desired skills as performers.

### **B. Guitar Music for Relaxation**

Music carries meaning beyond the sounds we hear and can be used in various ways for human benefit. Guitar music is considered one of the best choices for muscle relaxation and meditation, and it will be used for this purpose. The guitar is a type of stringed instrument that produces sound by plucking the strings with the fingers or a pick. It typically has six strings and, while not as wide-ranging as a piano, it can cover a considerable range of notes and play melodies. It has been said that the warm tones produced by the acoustic guitar can lower blood pressure, reduce heart rate, relax muscles, and decrease stress hormones such as cortisol. A guitar technique called strumming creates repetitive rhythms with predictability, which helps us unwind ([breakthroughguitar.com](http://breakthroughguitar.com)).

Stringed instruments, like the guitar, can be played using various tools or directly with the hands. However, even when using different tools, the method of producing sound differs from that of bowed instruments. While bowed instruments produce sound through the friction of the bow against the strings, plucked instruments create sound by strumming or plucking the strings. Plucked instruments, such as guitars and harps, produce vibrations that create a gentle and smooth sound, which is often perceived as more relaxing compared to the continuous and intense sounds of bowed instruments. The sound of plucked instruments fades more quickly, creating a more peaceful auditory experience ideal for relaxation. On the other hand, bowed instruments sustain sound longer, which can be less relaxing ([en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)-2). Instruments like the guitar and harp are frequently used in therapeutic settings due to their ability to produce calming and peaceful tones, whereas bowed instruments might evoke a broader range of emotions rather than solely relaxation ([classicalcompass.org](http://classicalcompass.org)).

### **C. Group Songwriting**

Through songwriting, individuals naturally express their unconscious emotions and conflicts, allowing them to examine their own feelings (Jung, 2006). Songwriting can help individuals become aware of their negative thoughts and reframe them into positive language, aiding in the correction of these negative thoughts. This process utilizes music as a form of projective identification, where individuals reflect on and internalize the behaviors and emotions of others as if they were their own. For example, adolescents might listen to a popular singer's song and change their behavior, engage in deviant actions, use songs to facilitate learning, or sing to maximize group cohesion during rallies (Jung, 2006). In particular, group songwriting activities are believed to be highly effective as they allow the group to collaboratively create and perform lyrics that help overcome MPA, potentially enhancing the therapeutic benefits many times over.

### **D. Improvisation: Playing with One's Major Instrument**

Improvisation involves creating music spontaneously during performance rather than playing from pre-composed sheet music. As group members collaboratively create music in real-time, this activity facilitates emotional awareness, understanding of others, consideration for others, and active self-expression. Improvisation is an active rather than passive activity, focusing more on creating and expressing music rather than merely listening. As noted by Dileo-Maranto (1992), music can form a complex, ambivalent relationship with performers experiencing MPA, potentially acting as a risk factor. However, musicians, due to their musical training, may respond to music physically and psychologically differently from non-musicians. Based on this, using one's major instrument, which can form a complex relationship with the musician, for improvisation might offer a new approach. This method could leverage the musician's

immediate physical and psychological responses to their instrument, potentially providing a more effective means of addressing MPA compared to non-specialists.

### **E. Holding an ERP Concert**

In behavioral therapy, exposure and response prevention (ERP) is known to be one of the most effective methods for overcoming anxiety. This approach involves inhibiting escape responses and exposing individuals to their feared stimuli (e.g., dirty substances) or thoughts (e.g., thinking that germs are on their hands) while preventing compulsive behaviors (e.g., hand washing). Through this method, patients learn not only to endure the feared stimuli and thoughts without engaging in compulsive behaviors but also to understand that the feared outcomes (e.g., contracting an illness) do not occur even without performing the compulsive actions (Kwon, 2012; Abramowitz *et al.*, 2019). Building on this concept, we propose organizing a concert where group members alternate between being performers and audience members. This event provides an opportunity for participants to adapt to the stage and the situation. When a performer experiences MPA on stage, the performance will continue and be repeated until the anxiety diminishes. Meanwhile, the other group members will act as the audience, assuming the role of critical evaluators who provide intense feedback and assessments of the performer.

### **7. Conclusion**

Musicians are prone to perfectionism, which serves as a driving force for continually improving their performances. They also tend to have a high self-image, which makes them fearful of criticism and judgment from others. This fear of disappointing those who have high expectations, combined with the fear of failure, leads to the onset of performance anxiety. This study aimed to review the current methods for alleviating performance anxiety and to propose future directions for such treatments. We investigated a range of approaches, including counseling techniques, relaxation through meditation, and music-based therapies, without restricting ourselves to any specific method, and sought to develop new approaches based on this review.

The conclusions are as follows:

- 1) Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which originated from behavioral psychology, was predominantly used as a therapeutic tool for alleviating anxiety. Subtypes of CBT, such as systematic desensitization and rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), were utilized.
- 2) In conjunction with these therapeutic techniques (CBT, Systematic Desensitization, REBT), music therapy techniques were employed. The music used included methods for physical relaxation, music listening, songwriting, and improvisation.

Performance anxiety ultimately stems from the act of performing music, but music therapy techniques are actively used to alleviate this anxiety for the following reasons: Although music can create a complex and ambivalent relationship with performers experiencing performance anxiety, musicians respond to music both physically and psychologically in ways that differ from non-musicians due to their musical training. They engage more deeply and actively compared to other media. Existing treatments typically adopted only one technique per therapy. However, the Neo MPA therapy method proposes a combined approach, integrating systematic desensitization and REBT techniques. Additionally, it presents the use of ERP techniques through concerts as a therapeutic method. The most crucial aspect is the provision of group therapy involving a therapist and multiple participants, leveraging the dynamics and energy of the group. Furthermore, the effectiveness of guitar tones for relaxation was demonstrated, and improvisation with the musician's most beloved or ambivalent instrument was utilized.

A limitation of this study is that the proposed method could not be practically applied and tested. This study aims to present this method as a resource for therapists and psychological counselors dealing with performance anxiety.

### **Declarations**

**Acknowledgments:** I wish to thank Seoul Innovation Research Institute.

**Author Contribution:** The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Consent to Publish:** The author agrees to publish the paper in International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research.

**Data Availability Statement:** The datasets used or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Research Content:** The research content of manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.

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**Citation:** Kaylin Lee. 2024. Effective Psychological Therapies for Alleviating Performance Anxiety. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 8(8): 30-36.

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