The Performing Artist: Unique Challenges

The intensity of university coursework confronts nearly every student taking classes. Sure, studies come naturally to some, but for most people, the increased expectations from high school to college are experienced as a major stressor. An advanced academic level, increased competition, and a heavy workload only compound the stressful transition from high school to college. Moreover, every major has its own unique stresses and challenges. Today we will focus specifically on the performing arts.

Stage, vocal or instrumental performance requires physical training that complicates a person's daily schedule. There is also an emotional component to artistic training that can affect a person's mood, relationships, and social skills. The addition of physical and emotional components to an already challenging intellectual exercise lends tremendous weight—and significant stress—to the already complicated college lifestyle. The dedication and discipline needed to excel in the creative arts—or simply to stay afloat in a competitive program—taxes the hardiest individual. Let's take a closer look at a few of the unique situations encountered by performing arts majors:

Practice and Rehearsal Time

In a competitive music program, it is not unusual for a student to need to practice two to six hours per day. Advanced musicianship requires a tremendous amount of intricate physical training that must be joined with the intellectual component of reading music and the emotional component of bringing the music alive. Similarly, theater majors must memorize lines of dialogue, interact with others, and do so in a fashion that conveys the playwright's depth of meaning. None of this happens quickly, and the body—not just the mind—must be trained in a manner that can be grueling. The physical learning process for many of these skills are both subtle and exact, and the personal demand for perfection is impossible to achieve. Yet perfection is expected by teachers, conductors, directors, and the performers themselves. The practice time needed in the search for perfection can be overwhelming.

Isolation

The seeds of performance are grown in the isolation of an individual practice space that allows full, deep concentration. The power of artistic expression comes from deep within, and performance majors initially cultivate their skills in the solitude of a practice room for hours at a time...and for days, weeks, and years on end. It is only when the orchestra gathers or the ensemble assembles that the individual is brought out from the practice room and into a space shared by others.

Melding individual talents with those of others is the job of rehearsal, and it is hard work. The transition from practice room to ensemble performance is not always easy or smooth, and is the result of many hours of individual effort that allows the orchestra to make a cohesive sound. The hours needed to perfect artistic expression can actually hinder social skills...just ask anyone after a four-hour practice session how hard it is to come out of "the zone." The understandable social difficulty that comes with dedication to an artistic endeavor can lead to emotional neglect and depression. Isolation is sometimes necessary for artistic accomplishment, but it can also create dangerous emotional side-effects if the isolation leads to the neglect of the emotional and social experience.

Competition

Nearly every individual pursuing artistic education covets principle orchestral chair placements or leading roles. Performing arts are inherently competitive. The individual desire to express creative artistic material is equally shared by actors, musicians, and writers. However, there is only one lead position available in any given play, or one principle position in any given orchestra section. Likewise, only so many stories are ultimately chosen for publication. A performer may have practiced for literally hundreds of hours for a specific part or role and their performance may be, by all accounts, outstanding. Yet the subjective beauty of individual performance is ultimately judged as to who will "win" the part or gain the principle chair, or what story will be granted space in a publication. The subjective nature of casting roles and the structure of the artistic medium demand that a decision be made. Such losses can be emotionally and professionally devastating.

Big Fish, Little Fish

A competitive music or theater program naturally draws the most talented individuals, creating a tremendous talent pool in which it can be difficult to swim. Nearly every performer in a competitive college program was the *best* at something in high school. The best actor, singer, or oboist...you name it, they were big fish prior to their college environment. Upon entering college, however, the promising young performer with immense talent is immediately faced with the realization that the competition has been dramatically increased. Not only might there be another outstanding oboist, but there might be...are you ready...two or three! Woe to the violin major or acting major that easily gained top positions in previous ensembles, because now there may be a dozen or more individuals in the pool. The process of learning your true size while swimming in this larger, more-crowded pool is difficult...and can be a painful experience.

The Emotional Connection

The emotional component of artistic performance can have a significant impact on how a person experiences the world.

The capacity to convey a *feeling* to an audience is a vital element for most creative expression. For many, the transmission of that emotion requires a personal investment that conjures the depressive, euphoric, hateful, loving, or otherwise extreme emotional experience within an individual. The "moody artistic individual" is often depicted as a cliché or a stereotype, but the nugget of truth lies in the fact that an artistic individual can be drawn toward mood swings by either the material itself, or by the personal need to convey the message in the material. Artistic performance is one of the classic examples of the body and mind connection. The authentic artist genuinely *feels* the material. When the performance of the work is over, the body and mind hold the emotional residue of the material, and as such, the work itself affects a person's day-to-day life.

What Can Be Done?

Coping with the demands of intensive artistic study can be a complicated process due to the combination of mental, physical, and emotional elements that are involved. And of course, each person's experience is different. One person might thrive on a six-hour practice session, while another might be "burnt to a crisp" after an intense single hour of practice. One person may find joy in the expression of an

intense work, and another may become depressed during the rehearsal of less-than-challenging material. Some may find solace in the isolation of the practice room, whereas others avoid individual pursuits. The requirement of refining physical skills while blending them with intellectual exercises and emotional elements draws upon different vulnerabilities for different people. There is not a single combination or mathematical equation that predicts how any individual will react to the stress of studying artistic expression. It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the personal challenges unique to artistic study.

One thing to do is to become aware that the stress level of this endeavor is extraordinary. Practicing or rehearsing is no simple task, and feelings of isolation, dread, sadness, or depression should be identified and addressed. Time management can become complicated with all the demands of a single day. Difficulty managing time can create anxiety and worry, which can lead to irritability, depression, or lack of sleep. If a person is experiencing these types of reactions during an intense semester, it is a wise decision to take a single step back to find out what is the source of the problem.

If the isolation is overwhelming, take an extra 10-minute break and commiserate with another student. If time management is a problem, try to draw up a schedule each week, planning your practice time, study time, meals...and be sure to include some "self" time in that schedule. The competition for roles and parts can be discouraging, but keep in mind that the loss of a role does not necessarily mean that a performance was substandard or that a person was unprepared...it might simply mean that the judges were looking for something other than what was offered. Quality, meaningful performance is not necessarily the same thing as getting the top spot. If losing the top spot strikes a raw nerve, seeking help to understand different perspectives can be a valuable way of regrouping and preparing for the next part that comes along.

Similarly, the transition from being a big fish in a little pond to a different-size fish in a huge pond can be jarring. It can be important to remember that one's own talent is not determined by how many other talented people are in the vicinity. Indeed, one's own talent stands on its own, regardless of the number of fish in the pool. Remember, adjusting to a bigger pool can be difficult, but you probably haven't forgotten how to swim.

As for the emotional component to the performing arts, it is important to remember that this is a primary element to the beauty and vitality of creativity. It would be naïve to suggest that the emotional component should be shut down. Management of emotion after practice or performance, however, can be a vital skill in coping with extreme moods. The joy or despair felt following a performance must be recognized as residue of the performance itself, rather than an indicator of the state of one's life. Further, some people feel depressed simply due to the fact that a performance has been given, and once it is given, it is gone. The loss of the performance itself can be confusing, but once it is identified it can be understood and managed. In times of slight depression due to a sense of loss or the residue of the performance, it is important to have a set of self-soothing behaviors that can help you manage these feelings. Everyone has their own set of coping mechanisms...make sure you can identify positive things that help you through tough times, and don't be afraid to use them after practice or a performance.

As always, the Counseling Center can help you sort through these challenges, and can also assist in identifying your emotional experience and self-care skills. Although studying the performing arts is a unique challenge, the reward is a special part of the human experience. Artistic expression is a gift, and its pursuit should not be taken lightly. Being aware of your complete experience—and tending to the vulnerabilities that come with artistic expression—fulfills the promise of the art itself. If art makes you whole, then the whole person must be cared for if the art is to work. It is at this point where art, mind, and body are all one. Through accepting, understanding, and overcoming these unique challenges, one can achieve that magic moment that can be so elusive.