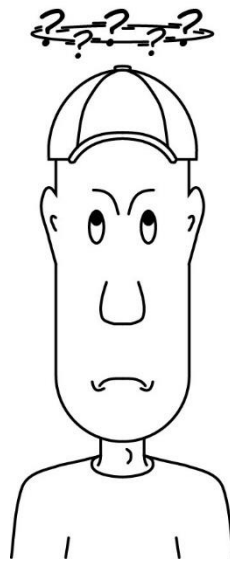


## Stage Fright

Don't Get Nervous, Get Angry



**Barry Cuthbert**

Text Copyright © Barry Cuthbert 2024  
Images Copyright © JHMoller 2024

## Foreword



When I first started playing a number of years ago, I found it virtually impossible to play in front of other people. My music teacher, Alison Stephens, invited a number of her pupils to a workshop, and she asked me to play the piece that I had been learning with her. I was about the tenth person to play, and by the time I began, my nerves had been working overtime. My mouth was dry, my hands were tense, and I was shaking a little. The tension in my hands made it difficult to find the right notes, and by the time I had finished the piece, I was shaking quite a lot. Under the circumstances, I was amazed that I had made a reasonable job of the performance. It was not an enjoyable experience.

I tried on numerous occasions to play in public after this event. I read books on controlling anxiety, and tried to work out other ways to conquer my nerves, but never really made any significant progress. Some friends ran on Open Mic Night. (OMN). I thought that if I went along frequently enough, I would get used to standing on stage, or the end of a public bar, and simply be able to carry on like the rest of the musicians. This didn't work.

Fortunately, my friends, George and Lorraine were very supportive. They were (and still are) really encouraging with all the players at their events. I am truly grateful to them for their help.

With this encouragement, I analysed each OMN, and tried to work out what I needed to do to reduce the impact of nerves on my playing. It has taken rather a long time to reach the point where I no longer have a dry mouth or the shakes whilst playing. The time taken could have been much shortened if my plan from the outset had not been to keep trying to overcome the problem by just repeatedly playing at OMNs. What I needed was a plan as detailed in this booklet.

Set out below is the benefit of my twenty- twenty hindsight.

## Introduction

If you are reading this booklet, it is likely that you have difficulty playing music in public, whether that is in front of friends and family, your music teacher, or at a musical event. You know that when practising, you can play to your own satisfaction. This actually represents a high standard of playing, because you are your most demanding critic. With someone listening, you wonder why you can't show them what you are capable of, and this forms part of a vicious circle. You anticipate that you are going to make mistakes, and tension builds the nearer you come to the appointed time to play.

There are numerous books available that deal with this subject. They usually focus on the fact that it is a "Mind Game", which of course it is. They run into quite a lot of pages, which means that there is a lot to remember. This is a disadvantage when you are tense, and trying to remember the music that you are going to play. Amongst the advice given, they say that you should remember a good performance before you play to confirm in your own mind that you "can do it". This is all very well, if that piece played well was not followed by one that you did not play well. That is not to say that you should not remember performances that went well. They are comforting, and mark some progress.

There are a number of direct instructions given in this booklet. You can ignore or modify them to suit your own temperament. However you use them, understand that they are key points that should not be ignored.

## Open Mic Nights

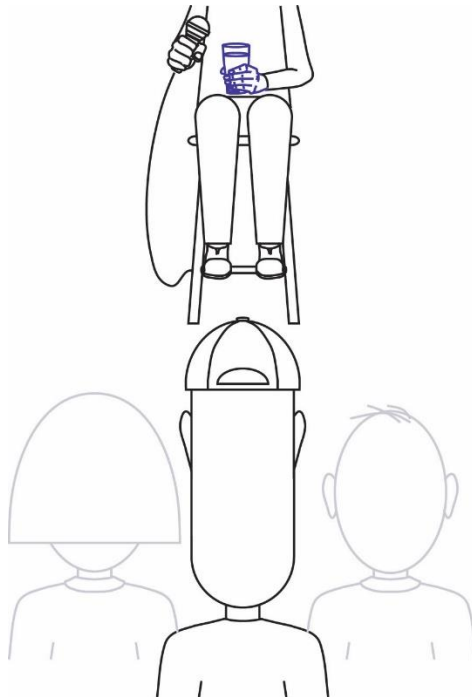
Open Mic Nights (OMNs) are a good place to start practising to play in public. Nobody will be marking your performance, or expecting too much from you. There will be a wide range of ability amongst the musicians, and generally they will be friendly, helpful and encouraging. Try to find one that is local to your home and go along, without your instrument, but preferable with a family member or friend.

Get to understand how the OMN works, and who the organiser is. You need to know how the order of players is arrived at. It could be that names are noted down in order of arrival, and then asked to play in that sequence. This may be important to you, in that the shorter time you have to wait, the less time you have to get nervous.

It may be that the organisers provide amplification. Your instrument might be acoustic, and so you will need to use a microphone if there is a noisy audience. If that is the case, you will need to stand near a speaker so that you can hear yourself play. If the organiser provides a 'monitor', obviously you can stand in front of that.

Work out what the other challenges might be, and have a plan to deal with them. No two OMNs will be the same. The musicians will be different, and so will the audience.

It is important not to go with the intention of playing, until you have been to the same OMN on a number of occasions. You can use the visits to chat to the organisers, and other musicians. The players will be happy to talk to you about the pieces they play, their instruments, and so on. They will inevitably ask you whether you play. Tell them that you do, but struggle to deal with your nerves. Eventually, they will ask you to come and play. When you feel like taking the chance, do so, but don't rush into it.



## Don't Get Nervous, Get Angry

The majority of recommendations in this booklet are of a practical nature. This one isn't. When you feel yourself tensing up in the lead up to going to play at an OMN, think about how your nerves are going to hinder what you are trying to do. Get angry about it. This will have the effect of reducing the build-up of tension. It changes the emotion that is affecting you. You become more determined to see it through, and stand up against your 'enemy'.

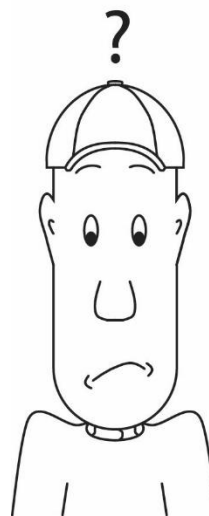
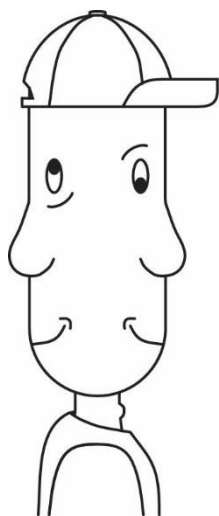
You may have to do this more than once before you play.

## Double Standards

When playing at an OMN, you should have a different aim, and standards. You should not be aiming to play like you would play a classical piece for example. The whole purpose of this process is for you to be comfortable playing in front of other people. Your aim is to finish each piece that you play. This will involve a different approach to that which you are already used to. The following points are relevant:

1. Don't worry about playing the music exactly as it appears on the sheet music. This is not important. Your ability to stand in front of people and play is the key here. If you lose it part way through a verse or phrase, start the same verse again, or the next one. Don't 'advertise' any mistakes, just carry on as if nothing happened.
2. Learn some folk pieces that are simple, but have attraction to visitors at the pub/ hall etc. For example, Jackie Tar, which encourages foot tapping, and Fairy Queen, which is quite melodic. Both of these pieces have verses that can be played out of order, or sequentially. You can vary the verses to suit how your mind is working whilst playing.

N.B. You will eventually find that double standards are of less importance, and that you can concentrate on playing at a level that is more pleasing to you. Be careful not to drop this recommendation too soon.

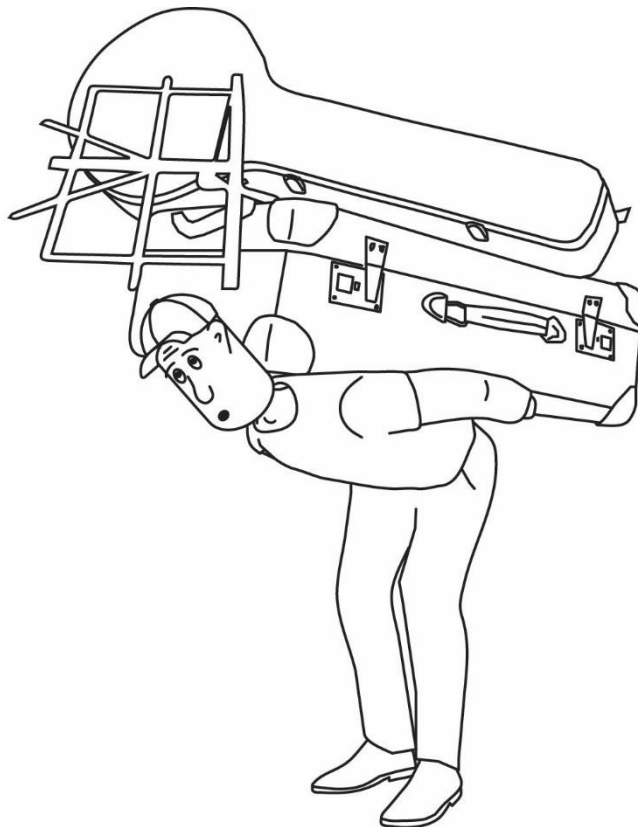


## Minimalism

When it is your turn to play at an OMN, minimise the process. For example, you may have a favourite chair or stool that you use at home when practising. This will not be available at the OMN. There might be a stool or chair, but it will probably be a different height to the one you use. A chair might have arms, which would hinder your playing. Other musicians will probably be standing, so a chair or stool would have to be dragged over for you to use. Such 'faffing around' will not help your frame of mind. Learn to play standing up, if you can.

### Other points

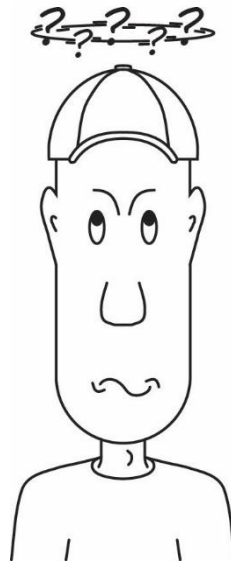
1. Have your instrument ready, in tune and strap fitted, if relevant. This is so that when you are called, you don't have to take it out of its case. Make sure you have a pick ready, or any other accessory you usually use. You don't want to be under pressure to get to the stage whilst the audience is waiting.
2. Don't sing. Playing an instrument and singing whilst under stress is probably going to result in you trying to remember too much.
3. Do sing, if you are a singer and will not be playing an instrument...



## Analysis

The recommendations in this booklet do not give instant success. They should give a gradual improvement over time that will seriously diminish the effect of your nerves when playing. You will however experience ups and downs in the process. The downs will be disappointing. The ups will be uplifting. If your performance at an OMN is disappointing, it may take a couple of days to get over it. Make use of this period. It is important to analyse your performance. What factors contributed to the problems you experienced? How could you have controlled them, or minimised them?

Don't be afraid of this self-analysis, and don't force it either. Your mind will be buzzing with the events of the OMN and thoughts will pop into your head, and you will be able to consider them as they do so. All of the recommendations in this booklet require determination on your part. Standing up to the problems you face is the only way to achieve your goal.



## Temptation and Control

Once you have played at an OMN a few times, you will find that you are either encouraged by the organiser, other musicians, or your own thoughts to play more pieces. If you have not fully prepared those pieces, you should strongly resist the temptation. If you have played reasonably well up to that point, quit whilst you are ahead. Anything other than a fully prepared piece will result in a disappointing performance. This will not assist you.

Control is the key to overcoming your difficulties. At first, you will think that much of this process is outside your control. You do, however, have complete control over when and what you play, as well as the number of pieces in your set.

A very important matter when it comes to temptation and control is whether you play or not. You may feel that your last outing was very disappointing. This may tempt you not to go to the next OMN. You must control this urge, and play, even if it is only one number. The effect of trying to play in public is cumulative. The more you do it, and the closer the events are to each other, the better your progress will be. It is easy to slip back if you do not keep up the momentum.

Don't play your pieces faster than you have practiced them. There is a temptation to speed up whilst playing, but this will reduce your thinking time, and shorten the time that you are listening to the phrases you are playing, and hence what comes next. Within reason, the slower you play, the more relaxed you will be. It is preferable not to learn pieces that need to be played fast.

## Tips

1. Alison Stephens, an exceptionally talented mandolin player commented about her early days of playing in public. She practiced the pieces she was going to play, until she was confident that she was well prepared. She then went and played them for her mother, and realised that she was not prepared enough! Try playing the pieces you have prepared in front of a friend or relative.
2. Don't apologise in advance of a piece. Telling the audience that you might make mistakes because you haven't played the tune in public before, or done sufficient practice will not help. This may result in them listening for mistakes, rather than listening to your music.
3. Continue your studies/learning/serious music as a separate occupation.
4. Accept that you won't give your best performance, under pressure, but that this is a process you will be going through.



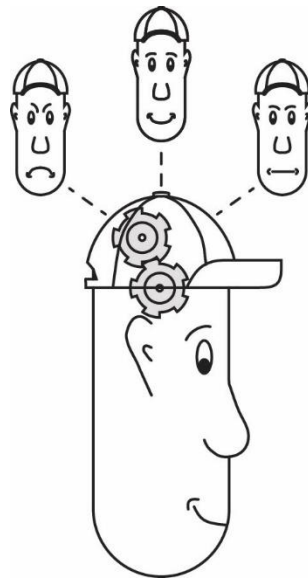
## Counter Intuition

You will probably start by disagreeing with this recommendation. It concerns the advice that you should not rehearse on the day you are going to play at an OMN. There are a number of reasons why you should not rehearse, and it is something to include in your analysis of your performance. The reasons for not rehearsing are:

1. You will bring your nerves into action before you get to the venue
2. You will not learn anything extra, under the circumstances.
3. The first time that you play a piece on any given day will quite often be the best. A following rendition is likely to have you overthinking the piece.
4. Having thoroughly learnt a piece, your memory will serve you well.

Testing this recommendation can be done easily. Try rehearsing for one event, and don't for the next one.

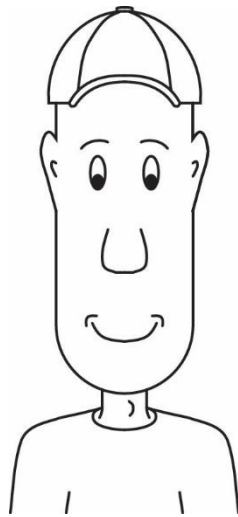
Don't forget to do your warm up exercises before going to the venue, if you do not rehearse before going to the OMN.



## Finale

When playing in public, it helps not to rely on sheet music. You haven't got time to find your place on the page if you look at your instrument for a particular phrase, and then look back at the wrong bar. It is preferable to be able to play from memory. Memory in this case is made up of muscle memory, and remembering the tune. Both of these components require repeated playing of the piece, and this in turn will reduce the likelihood of mistakes.

A number of top-class golfers have said of their performance that "The more I practice, the luckier I get". Make sure you get lucky.



## Any questions?

Please email [bmgfederation@gmail.com](mailto:bmgfederation@gmail.com) with Don't get mad, get angry in the email title line.

Text Copyright © Barry Cuthbert 2024

Images Copyright © JHMoller 2024