

# Mapping music performance anxiety in Portuguese higher education institutions

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Research on music performance anxiety (MPA) has expanded in recent decades and reports worrying results in relation to the health and well-being of musicians, especially music students. Current studies frequently indicate the use of beta-blockers and the abandonment of the musical career due to problems arising from MPA. MPA is perceived by musicians as a feeling of apprehension or fear of failure, which compromises musical skills in several performance contexts. Recurrent symptoms include physiological, cognitive and behavioural responses with a negative impact on performance. To address these issues, research has studied intervention strategies, such as virtual reality training, biofeedback, cognitive behavioural therapy and relaxation techniques. These studies, however, do not focus on the individual characteristics of each student, reflecting the current lack of qualitative research.

The main purpose of this research was to map the prevalence of MPA, from a qualitative perspective, in higher music education in Portugal, focusing on understanding teachers' and students' perceptions and feelings in relation to MPA, identifying coping strategies, studying contextual factors that induce MPA, and verifying conditions of institutional support in coping with MPA.

Methods involved undertaking two types of semi-structured interviews with music teachers and students from four higher education institutions in Portugal: 1) individual interviews with 12 music teachers (three per institution), and 2) focus group interviews with 24 students (six per institution). The contents of the interviews were analysed in order to systematize and categorize data, seeking to recognize patterns of perceptions and behaviours as expressed by the interviewees. The categories were organized into four major themes: perceptions about MPA, strategies, contextual factors and institutional support. These were divided into 16 correspondent subthemes, such as definition of MPA, symptom's manifestation, performance experience, coping strategies, teacher limitations, performance situation factors, external performance

situations factors, institutional culture and importance of discussing MPA in educational institutions.

The interviewees' perceptions of MPA highlighted fear of failure in front of an audience, alteration of physical and psychological states, lack of preparation for performance and variation of symptoms according to the personal history of each student. Some of the coping strategies identified included breathing exercises, mental simulation of performance, self-assessment and, mostly, technical and musical preparation. Teachers also reported having limited knowledge about effective strategies to address MPA. Regarding contextual factors, we found that the performance situation factors, external performance situations factors and institutional culture can negatively affect MPA levels. Finally, concerning institutional support, we found that there are no specific programs targeted to MPA prevention in Portuguese institutions.

The implications of this research demonstrate the need to discuss MPA in educational institutions with teachers, students and psychologists. In addition, it stressed the need for programs focused on the health and well-being of musicians in the curricula, and taking into account the individual profiles of students for the design of specific coping strategies. These actions should support the development of a more inclusive and stress-free teaching environment, attentive to the individual needs of the students, who, consequently, will be better prepared for a professional career.

### **Stream A | Thematic session: The arts and health**

Saturday, October 30, 2021 - 9:30 AM - 10:00 AM

**Presented by Samuel Barros**