

# PERFORMANCE CONFIDENCE

By David Griffiths

**T**his article is an exploration of evidence for the effectiveness of NLP in building confidence for musicians entering a music competition.

Earlier this year I was attending a Rally for the Banjo Mandolin and Guitar Federation which involves, amongst other activities, competitions for musicians to enter to win trophies in a variety of categories involving performance and musicianship. Having some time available I offered some free NLP sessions for musicians who would like help with their performance confidence. A golden opportunity for instant feedback, for the client about to take part in a performance and for myself to evaluate the change work. I had four people take up the offer. I saw one on her own and the other three in a group session.

After attending my sessions three of them came first in their competitions and one came second.

I was amazed at the results and also curious. It would be easy for me to attribute their success to the NLP change work. They could all of course have been brilliant musicians who won despite their nerves so I followed up their success by asking them each to write me some feedback about their experience.

I will outline the change work I did with them, their feedback and my thoughts.

## Change work

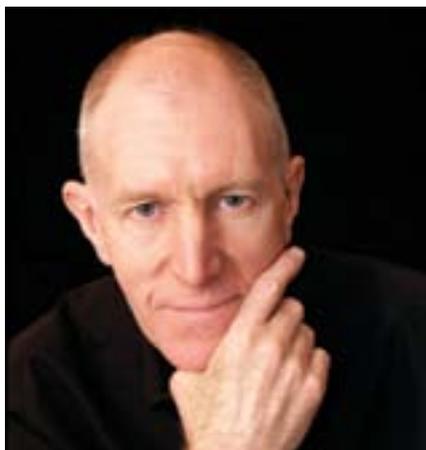
**Breathing** - Slow breathing to focus the mind and get oxygen into the blood stream. To breath before playing and during playing. Breathing out on the first note.

**Anchoring** - Each player created anchors for states of confidence from other areas in their lives. To use the anchor as preparation and if necessary as they sit down to play.

**Imagining** - Just before they begin to play to imagine they have just played the whole piece with complete confidence.

**Circle of confidence** - identifying what confidence meant for each player. What they would see, hear, feel if they were confident, how they would look, what their posture would be and what they would believe about themselves. They put each of these resources into a circle (or shape of their choosing) and stepped in and out adjusting the resources until the experience was what they wanted and they were congruent.

**Perceptual positions** - I asked each player to sit as if they were about to play with the audience in front of them and the judges to the side. I then asked them to sit in the audience to see themselves as the audience would see them and the same for the judges. In each



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position they were asked what they noticed, what they would change and what they learned about themselves. I then asked them to go to meta position as observer of the whole event.

**Mental rehearsal** - Each musician was asked to rehearse their performance from waiting for their turn to perform to taking their seat, introducing their piece, preparing themselves to play, playing, imagining a fluent performance, hearing the applause and leaving the stage.

**Affirmation** - I checked each player believed they had the technical ability to play their competition piece. I then asked each of them to tell me they were “great players” and we built affirmations in present tense language. “I am a good player”, “I know this piece”, “I am focussed and calm when I play”. Each player was asked to create affirmations that worked for them and to use this for their internal dialogue.

**Being present** - Most of the players recognised their internal dialogue was mind reading the audience and what they would be thinking. They created scenarios of things going wrong and negative or hostile intentions of audience and judges (dissociated). The perceptual positions exercise helped to change this negative

perspective. I now asked them to practice bringing their attention to focus completely on the music (associated) as they began to play, their love of playing, the joy of expression and their enjoyment of the piece as they played, in other words staying associated and present.

## Feedback

**Annette:** “I found the whole experience helped me greatly. I wondered at the time if I would have a problem applying what you told me but I didn't and would really like to learn more.”

**Elizabeth:** “I've always become very nervous when I have to play solo, or when I feel “exposed” when playing in an orchestra or band. I had a very short session with Dave at the BMG Summer School last year, which I found useful. I became much better at playing when exposed, and the more confident I was about the music and my ability the less trouble I had.

When I decided to enter the solo competitions at the BMG Rally, one of my main worries was the effect of my nerves on my playing. Even playing for my teacher was hard work.

The [NLP] session made me feel much more relaxed and actually looking forward to being able to show off my abilities in the competition. I planned my schedule so that I would have time to compose myself before each competition (I was doing two solos). Unfortunately the first one didn't work - I arrived 10 minutes early, to

discover that the competition was running ahead of time and they were waiting for me. Although I tried to take my time setting up I was rattled, and not practised enough in the technique to overcome the unexpected! My hand shook and although the overall impression wasn't too bad I missed all the difficult bits. Interestingly, this made me even more determined to get the next competition right, particularly as it was the one that mattered the most to me. This time, when I arrived early believing that I was the first to play, I did not allow a change of playing order to throw me. I sat and imagined myself playing perfectly. I took time setting up, I breathed properly before playing, and I enjoyed what I was doing - and at the end I knew I had performed very nearly as well as I could, and all the nuances I wanted to get into the piece were there."

**Rachel:** "[The NLP] Session started with some general tips for performance. Two that felt really useful were improving relaxation and getting rid of tension by concentrating on our breathing especially concentrating on breathing out and looking at the last few bars of a piece and imagining that you had just finished playing the piece and were now going to play it for the second time.

Before the ensemble playing I tried the breathing exercise which was good and imagining finishing the piece already, I felt quite calm and focussed before we started playing. During the performance I could feel myself starting to get tense and lose focus but there was enough time during and between pieces to "reset" using the breathing technique and the anchor. I felt focused and able to "lose myself" in some of the pieces and it had almost been enjoyable and found I could refocus fairly easily when needed.

Before the duet I didn't think I was feeling too anxious. I tried the breathing exercise which seemed to help. The time before we started playing felt a little bit rushed and I probably said I was ready to play before I was - I felt focused but not relaxed but it didn't really feel like that was going to get better however long I waited and using the anchor didn't seem to make any difference. The first few bars went OK but then my right hand started to shake and got to the point where I was unable to play. I had to stop for a few bars and found it difficult to get back in as everything felt too fast. I managed to finish the piece but my hand was shaking and the whole thing felt out of control and on the verge of falling apart again. I felt very frustrated with myself and that I had let [my duet partner] down, I hadn't felt calm or relaxed although I think focus again was better. Overall the session did help, certainly in the ensemble playing, and my focus was better in the duet which was probably what enabled me to get back in again rather than completely panic!"

**Vivien:** "I am pretty sure that I would not have won the class without Dave's help, and I will be using the [NLP] technique not only for public performances but also at lessons and during rehearsals - it works! The confidence session helped me a great deal and I felt automatically much calmer afterwards and that sense of calm and confidence was still there the next day when my performance was due to take place.



Prior to the competition, I used a couple of the techniques learned during the confidence session and was able to absorb myself in the music without being concerned with having an audience. This was something I had previously not been able to do."

### My thoughts

How do we know if NLP is effective. One criteria is the change in behaviour from the client's present state (problem) to their desired state (outcome). If the change is the outcome the client wants then this would appear to be an effective outcome. If its more than that its added benefits. For the practitioner, feedback loops provide evidence of change, difference and direction. Sensory acuity and rapport provide feedback for congruence and reading client state. Change can either be immediate or take place over time. The final call is with the client. They will tell you if they have a conscious awareness of the change or their own feedback loops will inform them of change if it is unconscious and over time.

Of the three who won first prize their feedback reported behaviour change which benefited their performance both in preparation and during the event. Elizabeth learnt from her first performance to expect the unexpected after being thrown by a change of time schedule and resolved to build that into her practice which on second application meant she stayed present and was able to effectively apply her skills. Vivien reported her intention to apply her skills in other areas (transference) like lessons and rehearsals. Annette wasn't sure she could apply her skills when it came to the performance and was pleased when she could (belief). She also wanted to learn more.

Rachel, was not pleased with her performance and found her state nearly collapsed because the tempo of the piece seemed too fast. Despite this some of the skills had worked, in particular her focus on the music which enabled her to recover enough to finish the piece and in her

first performance she used her breathing and anchor to regain a resourceful state in between pieces.

My learning has been to build in more strategies for clients for maintaining state when the unexpected happens. To create awareness that confidence is not the same as success. I am now also including change work on letting go of the need to be perfect.

I believe success and failure are not useful terms to use when evaluating the benefits of NLP, it either works for the client or it doesn't or something in between. What I look for is difference, result and feedback. All four players reported a difference in their approach to playing in a competition and tangible benefits from applying new skills and awareness. Three of them said they would continue to practice and improve their techniques and two were keen to develop their skills further. This is evidence of change.

The players began by describing their state prior to the NLP sessions with words like 'fear', 'exposed', 'nervous' and 'tension' and after their performances with words like 'relaxed', 'focused', 'enjoyed', 'looking forward' and 'calmer'. If this is the change that happened after just one session imagine the benefits for each of them as they continue to practice their skills for as we all know, the path to mastery is practice, practice, practice. ■