Music performance anxiety is caused both by the ways we think and feel. This handout will give you new ways to try to optimize your level of anxiety. One way to feel less anxious is to discover and change thinking patterns that put too much pressure on you. Look at the list of cognitive distortions below and pick one or two that you use often; then brainstorm realistic alternative thoughts that you could use instead.

Definitions of Cognitive Distortions
Adapted from David Burns’ “Feeling Good: the New Mood Therapy, 1980)
Cognitive distortions are logical, but they are not rational. They can create real difficulty with your thinking. See if you are doing any of the ten common distortions that people use. Rate yourself from one to ten, with one being low and ten being high. Ask yourself if you can stop using the distortions and think in a different way.

• **ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING:** You see things in black-and-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

• **OVERGENERALIZATION:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

• **MENTAL FILTER:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors the entire beaker of water.

• **DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:** You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.

• **JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:** You make a negative interpretation, even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.

• **MIND READING:** You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don’t bother to check this out.

• **THE FORTUNETELLER ERROR:** You can anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact.

• **MAGNIFICATION (CATASTROPHIZING) OR MINIMIZATION:** You exaggerate the important things (such as your goof-up or someone else’s achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or other fellow’s imperfections). This is also called the binocular trick.

• **EMOTIONAL REASONING:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: “I feel it, therefore it must be true.”

• **"SHOULD" STATEMENTS:** You try to motivate yourself with "should" and "shouldn’t", as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequences are guilt. When you direct "should" statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

• **LABELING AND MISLABELING:** This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself. "I’m a loser." When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him, "He’s a louse." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is emotionally loaded.

• **PERSONALIZATION:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event, which in fact you were not primarily responsible for.

Sixteen Prescriptions for Overcoming Performance Anxiety (Adapted from PERFORMANCE ANXIETY by M. Robin)
1. De-stress yourself; don’t distress yourself.
2. Rehearse a skill, not a symptom.
3. Don’t confuse anxiety with effort.
4. Don’t self-medicate.
5. Concretize don’t awfulize.
6. De-sacredize, don’t idolize.
7. Use “why not?” not “why me?”
8. Act “as if”.
11. Stay in the moment.
12. Rate your behavior, not your soul.
13. Accept yourself, warts and all.
14. If you must compare, compare downward as well as upward.
15. Give yourself permission to be.

Four (4) Steps for Managing Performance Anxiety
Step 1: *Self-Assessment: Getting to Know Yourself Better, as a person & musician.*
• Identify problematic thinking.
• Ask yourself: “What am I really afraid of?” Worst-case scenario—you run off the stage and everyone laughs hysterically. That’s unlikely, and might give you perspective into the realities of what it is you are really afraid of.
• Try not to confuse self-assessment with self-criticism!

**Step 2: Gradual Exposure and Preparation**

• Look for opportunities for exposure to mild to moderate levels of stress that challenge, but do not overwhelm your coping skills. Example: visualization of the performance.
• Other Examples: practice performances, dress rehearsals, taping yourself, and playing back.
• Be thoroughly prepared. Nothing replaces adequate time spent in rehearsal and practice.
• Consider how the use of relaxation techniques can help to “harmonize” the body. Meditation, yoga, and/or muscle relaxation can help the body and mind feel uplifted and balanced so you feel excited and prepared, but not overwhelmed. Using these techniques can help you avoid self-medicating with drugs & alcohol.

**Step 3: During the Performance**

• Rather than blocking out the audience, or seeing them in their underwear, try seeing them as allies who are generally supportive and want you to do well.
• Remember, most performers have to contend with anxiety—it comes with the territory. You’re in good company!
• Feelings of anxiety are natural, and can be used to your advantage.
• Maintain your normal routine when preparing a performance.
• Act calmly, even if you feel nervous. The more you dwell on anxiety, the more you are likely to remain preoccupied with it.
• Try to overlook minor errors when you perform. Overall impressions are more important to the audience than note-perfect performances.
• Consider performing as an opportunity by becoming immersed in the musical experience. For example: Get out of yourself and into the audience. Try switching off the left brain’s critical words and switching on the right brain’s passive observation. This may help you escape self-criticism and stay in the moment.
• Enjoy what you’ve accomplished. Others are more likely to enjoy it this way, too.

**Step 4: After the Performance**

• Temper such external feedback with internal beliefs and expectations you have already established.
• Asking others afterwards, “How did I do,” without asking yourself first, might be depriving yourself of a significant source of valid information about your performance: YOU.