

Dinka Migić -Vlatković: EUYO's first mental health coach in Residence

Have you ever been scared of performing in front of an audience – be that your teacher, your family, an audition panel or hundreds of people in a theatre? Have you ever realized that you performed much better when practising at home alone rather than in front of someone else and wondered why?

There is darkness around you. The only tiny glimmer of blue light comes from your back. Holding your instrument in your hands, you feel them getting moist and sweaty. It is hot, but also cold at the same time. What you wear suddenly feels uncomfortable and unpractical. The tongue gets swollen and dry. A shadow looks at you and moves its arm in a commanding way. As you walk past it, a flashy light blinds you for an

instant. As a roaring thunder occludes your ears, you feel your heart racing and beating like a drum in your neck, and when your eyes adapt to the new conditions, you can envisage beyond a curtain of light hundreds of distant and blurred faces pointing their invisible eyes at you.

You are on a stage now. But you would like to be anywhere else.

Stage fright is but one of the problems that afflict musicians. Anxiety, depressive states and a sense of failure to keep up with high expectations are common elements in professional musicians and students. Until some years ago, such issues were disregarded, hidden, and treated as something to be ashamed of. When speaking with colleagues, it was customary to pretend not to be affected by such "weakness".

Luckily, as our collective understanding of mental health improves, some steps are being taken to solve or mitigate these issues.

Therefore, we invited Dinka Migić-Vlatković to join us in our Summer Residence in Grafenegg. Dinka, a renowned psychologist, psychotherapist and mental health coach, is also a musician, having played violin in youth orchestras, and also being married to a horn player. However, she did not devote her life (only) to music: she studied psy-



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Psychoterapist, psychologist and mental health coach, Dinka is herself a musician, with a deep-rooted knowledge of the classical music industry.

chology, deepened her knowledge at the Paracelsus School in Germany, and finally trained as a systemic consultant and family therapist.

"When I ask musicians what instrument they play, I am told 'violin', 'horn', and so on. And I tell them that their real instrument is their body: the one they have in their hands is just their loud-speaker", said Dinka in her first group meeting with the Orchestra in Grafenegg. "This means that you have to keep your body and mind under control, and my job is to teach you how to be better at that".

"Much of the nervousness that comes at the start of a concert is because we do things which are different from everyday practising", explains Dinka. "Our brain recognizes that. Everything that is not routine makes us nervous".

During the Summer Residence, Dinka gave lectures and workshops on how to promote mental strength and resilience. In addition, she was available throughout the day for advice and coaching for the Orchestra's members. Before each rehearsal, she dedicated some time for joint exercises to strengthen mental health, such as physical or breathing exercises. This often surprises musicians who seek mental or psychological help in a stressful situation. However, it is necessary to realize how much our body and mind are linked together.

Physical relaxation exercises help to relax mentally or to be more focused. "But of course", explains Dinka, "there's no point just saying: run on the spot a little if you're nervous. Nobody would

take me seriously".

Therefore, one of her tasks is to explain to orchestra members what happens to our body in a stressful situation from a medical point of view. Our bodies and our brains developed by recognizing patterns and flagging as potentially dangerous uncommon situations. On such occasions, our brain orders our body to get ready to fight, flight or freeze. It does that by stimulating the production of adrenaline and cortisol. The first increases heart rate and elevates blood pressure, constricting external vessels to concentrate blood in the main organs. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, increases the energy supply in the blood and its consumption in the brain. However, when adrenalin and cortisol levels are too high for too long, over exposure effects show up, such as muscle pain and tension, shaky hands, increased sweating, overreaction to external stimuli and so on. There is no pill against it.

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There are however things that may help in managing stress levels: a healthy diet and adequate sleep help a lot, as well as physical exercises and relaxation techniques. There is no magic trick, and relaxation exercises need practice as well to be effective, as our body will have to learn how to recognize and to respond to them. "To resort to an exercise only before the concert, when the nervousness sets in, it doesn't work at all" said Dinka "mental training, concentration and physical exercises like the ones shown in our workshop should be practiced continuously and integrated in a daily routine to be effective".

Want to hear more?
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