

From pianist to performance coach

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Schmidt adapts musical talents to tackle stress

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Stress. How much is enough, and how much is too much? It's a question that has occupied psychologists and other health-care professionals ever since the pioneering research into biological stress by Montreal endocrinologist Hans Selye more than a half century ago. In recent years, the matter of stress and its role in a digital age has also

become central to a growing industry — experts versed in the art of stress management as it pertains to performance, whether onstage or in everyday life.

One such professional is Heather Schmidt, a hugely gifted, multi-faceted pianist and composer with a markedly Romantic sensibility who performs the world premiere of her piano concerto *Ammolite* tonight with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra.

The Schmidt work, inspired by the brilliantly hued organic gemstone found especially in Alberta, forms part of the orchestra's inaugural *Hear & Now* new music festival, a two-day CPO blockbuster event that kicks off tonight at the Rozsa Centre.

A native Calgarian who received her early training in composition from prominent University of Calgary composer Allan Bell — “He was so much about finding your own voice and being true to who you are,” she says of her former teacher — the 34-year-old Schmidt recalls first becoming interested in the whole notion of performance psychology while studying flute. Schmidt formally studied both flute and dance extensively, in addition to becoming the youngest student to receive a Doctorate of Music degree at Indiana University, at age 21.

Whereas public speaking, dancing or performing at the keyboard in public never made Schmidt nervous — “I live for the high of being onstage,” she says — playing the flute did.

“I never practised flute as much as piano, and so I always felt under-prepared — and I was always terribly nervous when I had to perform on flute,” Schmidt says.

And then one year, when she was in her mid-teens, Schmidt was asked to play at the Calgary Kiwanis Music Festival's Rose Bowl concert gala — not as a pianist, as she would have preferred, but as a flutist.

Her teacher at the time, former CPO principal flutist Philippa Fullerton, took her anxious young charge aside several days before the concert and, using a kind of hypnosis relaxation technique, “had me visualize all the steps of the performance,” Schmidt says.

“I had no expectation that it would make any difference to my performance. But the night of the concert came, and I was so relaxed I actually forgot to bring my flute (onstage) and I had to go back and get it.”

Did the visualization training pay off?

A resounding “yes,” according to Schmidt.

“I never felt so focused and clear-headed. I'd never felt so good playing flute — ever.”

As much as future flute performances were to remain a challenge, however — “I tried the same (technique), and it didn't work,” she says — her sense of well-being in the role of public pianist never wavered.

Unless, of course, you count the “cold hands” syndrome she had fallen prey to, early in her career.

“When you're onstage, your body goes into the ‘fight or flight’ adrenalin response,” Schmidt explains, pointing out that the response, aimed at constricting blood flow to the extremities as a kind of evolutionary survival mechanism, isn't all bad.

In fact, it's part of what adds the essential ingredient of excitement to a performance.

But there's a fine line between “excitement” and a case of mere nerves.

“The trick is to have just enough (of the former) that you don't lose control in your playing,” says Schmidt. “It's all about having that optimal level of arousal to help you achieve your best performance.”

To discover more about the root cause of her own cold-fingers under performance conditions, the pianist read up on the autonomic nervous system, and then on well-worn techniques such as bio-feedback, hypnosis and breathing strategies — eventually going on to parlay her research into scientific and culturally based relaxation methods and philosophies from around the world into a postgraduate degree in psychology.

What she learned in the process not only cured her own condition, but also accelerated an interest in applying her new-found knowledge towards helping people in all walks of life who daily cope with performance and competition anxieties.

Today, her manageably small but thriving performance coaching practice with musicians, dancers, athletes and actors — anyone

in high-demand environments — keeps her busy via phone and webcam throughout North America, as well as through consultation in person either at her home base in Toronto or in Los Angeles.

And having an international professional background steeped in music (she is also adept in the creative world of jewelry design) gives her an edge when it comes to dealing with clients in the corporate world, where executive and life coaching practitioners generally come from business backgrounds.

Says Schmidt, “I think what draws people into working with me is that I have additional creative insight from another field that is equally demanding.”

Bottom line in her philosophy for stress management and performance enhancement?

Achieving a mental state of well-being.

“If your body is physiologically stressed out by your flight response, it's almost physiologically impossible to feel real happiness,” Schmidt says.

“I guess what it comes down to is that you can't take stressful elements out of your life. But what

you can control is how you react to them. You can control your psychological reaction and you can control your physiological reaction — and they're both connected.”

Does it work?

“Everybody I've worked with and advised is happy with the result,” Schmidt says with a smile. “So far, I haven't had any complaints.”