

The demons inside my piano

**A woman's battle to
conquer lifelong
stage fright grips**
Janice Turner



Playing Scared: My
Journey Through
Stage Fright
by Sara Solovitch

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Whenver I see a politician walk up to a lectern, an actor perform a soliloquy or, most especially, a stand-up comic start an hour-long set, I wonder why they don't just run. Glimpse the expectant mass of faces and scarper. That's what I'd do. That's what my body would tell me to do. Heart thumping, vision blackening as if I'm about to faint, throat tight, hands moist and tingly as blood drains to more vital parts preparing for fight or flight.

This book is for the third of the population with a terror of public performance, whether like me of speaking to an audience or, like Sara Solovitch, of playing the piano. Her phobia began in childhood when as a talented pianist with professional aspirations she sat down to play in a competition and experienced a wave of panic so ghastly that she cast aside her

musical self for ever.

Instead of battling her dread, Solovitch reordered her life around it. She quit music study, became a journalist and raised a family, playing piano sporadically only when her house was empty. Even when her (very musical) children begged her to accompany them she largely refused. Then, reaching her late fifties, looking back on her life, she wondered why she'd let fear steal her pleasure in Bach and

Debussy and vowed to perform a public recital on her 60th birthday.

This book follows her passage towards this dread date. In trying to understand and master her anxiety she learns how it is a universal, timeless state. Moses, "slow of speech and of a slow tongue", was its first recorded sufferer: eventually God let Aaron become his front man. Socrates' protégé Alcibiades was fearful of oratory until taken around Athens to talk to blacksmiths and shoemakers, learning that crowds were just composites of ordinary, harmless people. Jewish Orthodox men refer to *qymat zibur* — literally "fear of the community" — which may stop them attending synagogue in case they are called to read aloud the Torah. In baseball it's known as the "yips".

Since Solovitch not only had to overcome her anxiety but raise her piano skills back to concert level, we learn much about her search for a mentor. One teacher makes her visit her local airport and play the old upright in the departures lounge to inattentive passengers. Even this she finds hell.

Although a non-musician, I loved her account of tense masterclasses and the religiosity of daily practice. Solovitch is a

skilled, self-deprecating, wry and quizzical writer, who fills her account both with diligent research into all relevant fields — from psychology and medicine to sports history — and wonderful vignettes of fellow phobics, some of whom before a concert literally pray for death. Most interesting are musicians who rise to the top despite their fear: a third of orchestral musicians take beta-blockers, with dire consequences for sleep and male libido. The celebrated pianist Glenn Gould once remarked that the ideal ratio of artist to audience was one to zero.

But for me the most interesting chapter was on public speaking. I have carefully organised my whole life so I never have to do it. And I was agog to read of campus suicides linked back to a course that had a compulsory spoken element; of a lawyer who qualified only to realise he could never speak in court; a racing commentator who would dream of a ship sailing down the final straight obscuring the horses. Oddly Solovitch has no fear of speaking at all.

The enemy here is the traitor body, in particular the damned amygdala, a tiny ball of neurones inside the brain that acts as the body's guard dog, telling us to be

frightened, flooding us with adrenaline. The problem is the amygdala may bark without good cause. And we don't tremble because we are scared: rather we are scared because we tremble.

Why does this, Solovitch asks, affect one person, not another? She notes and envies her children's insouciance about public playing. Then one son suddenly becomes serious about a musical career and grows nervous now he cares. Every study into



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performance anxiety agrees that it affects people with “self-inflicted demand for perfection”: speakers who fear that one stutter will horrify or bore listeners.

Although with Solovitch there appear to have been external factors too: the high expectation of her mother, who longed for her to be a concert pianist and would chase her around the house hitting her with a wooden spoon (light-heartedly, she claims) if she would not practise. And who, after that first awful panic attack performance refused to meet her eye. Yup, that might make a person shut the piano lid for good.

How fortunate for readers — and, as it turns out, Solovitch’s own deep joy — that she finds the courage to open it once more.

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PATRICK TEHAN



LOST CHORDS As a child, Sara Solovitch experienced a wave of panic at a competition that halted her musical career