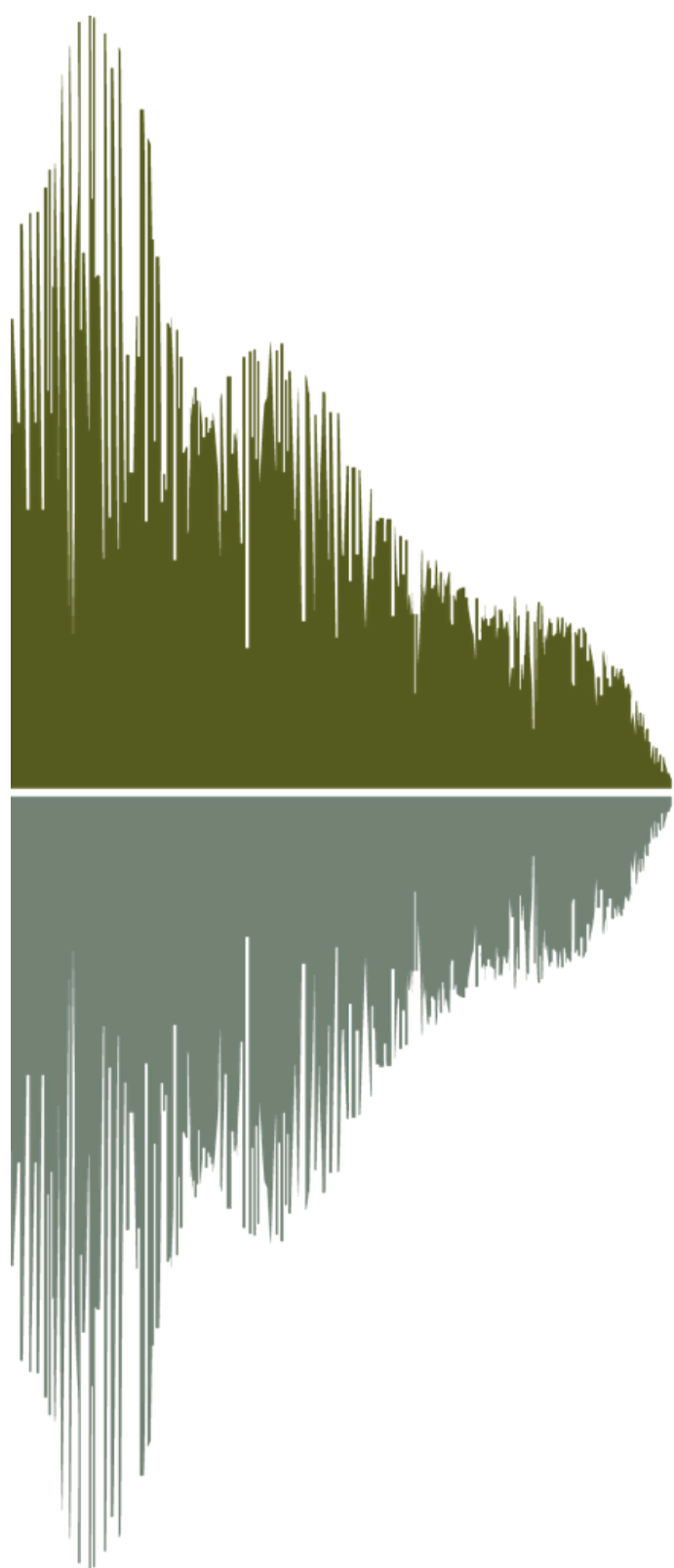


# PERFORM Ready

## THE BRASS ON THE MIND MENTAL PREPARATION & WELLBEING RESOURCE FOR BRASS BAND CONTESTS



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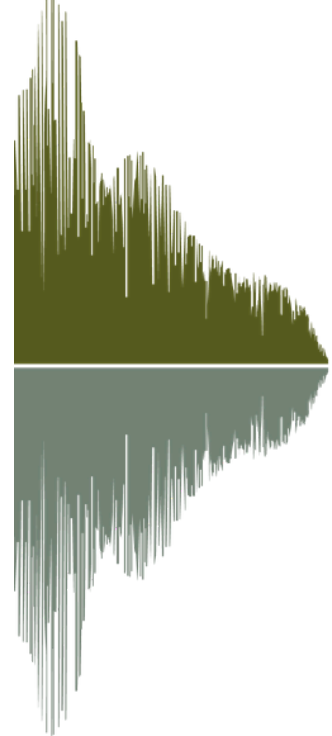
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# INTRODUCTION

This resource has been created for you — the musician. Not for your conductor. Not for your committee. For you.

Competing in a brass band takes courage. The hours of individual practice, the collective rehearsal, the early morning travel, the waiting — all of it culminates in a few minutes on stage where you are asked to perform at your very best under significant pressure.

Research tells us that 62% of brass band musicians experience nerves or anxiety on a contest stage. That is not a weakness. That is a human response to a high-stakes situation — and it can be managed.

This prep kit gives you practical, evidence-based tools drawn from positive psychology and the PERFORM framework — the first wellbeing framework developed specifically for competitive brass band musicians. Use it in the weeks before the contest, on the day itself, and in the days after.

You do not have to experience this alone.

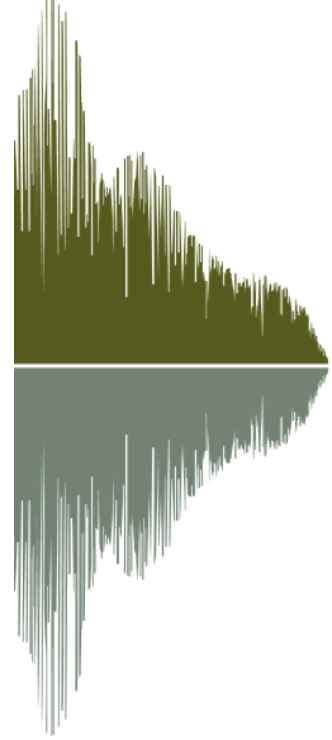
This resource has been developed by Tabby Kerwin MAPP, consultant psychologist, brass band musician, and founder of Brass on the Mind.

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## SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING YOUR NERVES

### WHAT IS MUSIC PERFORMANCE ANXIETY (MPA), AND WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Before you can manage your nerves, it helps to understand them. Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is the experience of persistent distress and impaired performance in a public musical performance context. It shows up differently for different people.

You might notice it as:

- A racing heart or shallow breathing
- Shaking hands or trembling lips
- A dry mouth or nausea
- Intrusive thoughts about mistakes or what others will think
- A sudden feeling of forgetting everything you know
- The urge to avoid the situation entirely

Here is the important thing: these responses are not signs that something is wrong with you. They are signs that your nervous system is doing exactly what it was designed to do. Your brain perceives the contest stage as a high-stakes situation and triggers a stress response — the same one that kept your ancestors safe from predators.

The physiological arousal you feel before a performance — the quickened pulse, the heightened alertness — is the same system that underlies excitement. The difference between feeling terrified and feeling exhilarated is largely in how you interpret those sensations.

The goal is not to eliminate nerves. Some level of arousal is actually beneficial for performance. The goal is to manage your response so that anxiety works with you, not against you.

## THE BRASS BAND CONTEST: WHY IT FEELS DIFFERENT

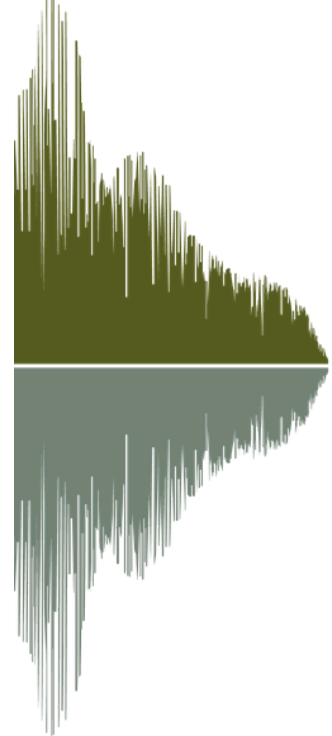
Brass band contesting creates a specific set of psychological pressures that are unlike most other performance environments:

- Subjectivity — results depend on the opinion of judges, which is outside your control
- Collective responsibility — your individual performance affects 29 other people
- Public comparison — your band is ranked against others, in front of an audience
- Time pressure — weeks of preparation culminate in a single, unrepeatable performance
- Identity — for many musicians, the band is a significant part of their sense of self and community

Understanding these specific pressures is the first step to managing them. The exercises in this kit address each of them directly.

### Did you know?

**Research from the 2019 Mental Health in Brass Bands survey found that 62.5% of brass band musicians experience nerves or anxiety on a contest stage. More than half of those who were struggling had not sought any support. You are not alone — and support is available.**



## SECTION 2: PREPARING TO PERFORM

### USING THE PERFORM FRAMEWORK IN THE WEEKS BEFORE CONTEST DAY

The **PERFORM** framework is a positive psychology framework developed specifically for competitive brass band musicians. Each letter stands for an element of emotional fitness that, when developed together, builds your capacity to manage MPA and PERFORM at your best.

This section gives you one practical exercise for each element, drawn from the “7 Minute Morning” Wellbeing Toolkit created by Tabby Kerwin MAPP. Each can be done in around seven minutes — in your own time, in your own space.

You can choose one exercise per day to undertake consistently and rely on any of the tools for a more ‘in the moment’ level of support on contest day.



## P — POSSIBILITY

Possibility is rooted in hope. Hope is not wishful thinking — it is the combination of having a goal, a pathway to reach it, and the belief that you can navigate any obstacle in the way. For a brass band musician preparing for a contest, possibility means genuinely believing that a great performance is within reach.

### **Exercise: The Hope Map**

Take a piece of paper and spend seven minutes on this.

1. Write down your personal goal for this performance. Not the band's result — your individual goal. (Example: 'I want to play the solo passage with confidence and enjoy the experience.')
2. Write down three things you can do to work towards that goal in the weeks before the festival.
3. Write down one thing that could get in the way — and one way you could navigate around it.

You have just created a hope map. Keep it somewhere visible in the weeks ahead.

**Based on the Hope Map (Lopez, 2013), adapted from the PERFORM framework (Kerwin, 2022)**

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## E - ENJOYMENT

Enjoyment is not a luxury. Research shows that when we are intrinsically (meaning internally) motivated — playing because we love it rather than purely to win — we are more likely to enter a state of ‘Flow’: that experience of being fully absorbed in the music, where time seems to pass differently and performance feels almost effortless.

MPA often hijacks our enjoyment by focusing our attention on what could go wrong. This exercise redirects that attention to what is good.

### **Exercise: Best Possible Performance**

Set a timer for seven minutes.

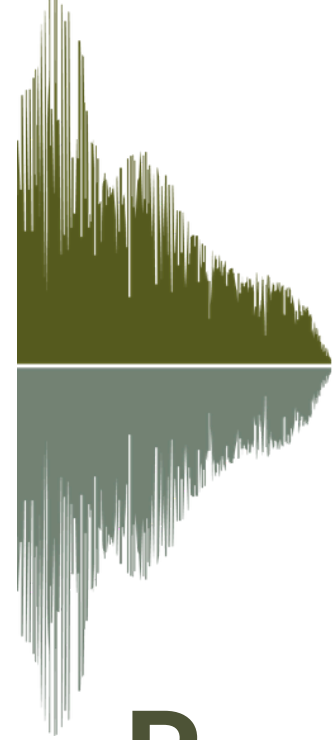
Imagine this contest performance going completely to plan for you. Not the band's result — rather your experience of the performance.

Write down in as much detail as possible what this looks like:

- What does it feel like to walk onto the stage?
- What do you notice about your breathing, your posture, your focus?
- What does it feel like when the music begins?
- What is the moment you enjoy the most?
- How do you feel when the last note ends?
- What is the audience's reaction?

Read it back. This is your intention for the day. Return to it whenever anxiety starts to narrow your focus.

**Based on Best Possible Future (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), adapted from the PERFORM framework (Kerwin, 2022)**



## R - RESILIENCE

Resilience is your ability to move forwards following adversity or difficulty. It is not 'bouncing back' to a former version of yourself, but rather growing with the difficulty to a stronger and wiser version of yourself. In a contest context it means being able to recover from a slip mid-performance, to not catastrophise a result you didn't hope for, and to return to the bandroom the following week with your head held high and with more genuine knowledge, data and intention to develop.

One of the most powerful tools for building resilience is combining breathing with positive affirmations. This exercise is drawn directly from the PERFORM framework and can be used at any time — including immediately before you walk on stage.

### **Exercise: Affirmation Breathing (PERFORM PPI, Kerwin, 2022)**

Set a timer for seven minutes. Sit comfortably. Breathe through your nose if you are able.

Breathe IN for 4 counts — say internally: "My skills meet the challenge."

HOLD for 4 counts — say internally: "I am a contribution to this performance."

Breathe OUT for 4 counts — say internally: "Other people's opinions are not my concern."

HOLD for 4 counts — say internally: "I am safe to enjoy the music."

Repeat for seven minutes. Notice how you feel at the end.

**This exercise can also be done as a group, guided by a conductor or principal player, in the warm-up room before performance.**



## F - FOCUS

Focus is the antidote to anxiety's tendency to scatter our attention — to dwell on mistakes already made, or catastrophise mistakes not yet made. Mindfulness-based focus techniques have been shown to significantly reduce MPA by reducing self-criticism and increasing present-moment awareness.

This body scan meditation can be done the evening before the contest, or during any quiet moment before you set foot on stage.

**Exercise: Pre-Performance Body Scan Meditation (Kerwin, 2022, based on Kabat-Zinn, 1990).** Read through once, then set a timer for seven minutes.

Sit or lie down. Close your eyes and take a few relaxing breaths. Check your posture — spine aligned, hands resting with palms upward, face and jaw relaxed.

With eyes closed, begin to notice the sensations in your body without any judgement. Simply observe.

Start at the crown of your head. Notice the sensations there. Slowly move your focus down through your face, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers. Then travel back up and down through your torso, hips, legs, feet, toes.

When you reach your toes, travel slowly back up to the crown of your head.

Take a moment to feel your whole body. Breathe gently. When you are ready, open your eyes.

**Notice any tension you were holding. Continue to check in with your body throughout the day.**

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## F - FOCUS

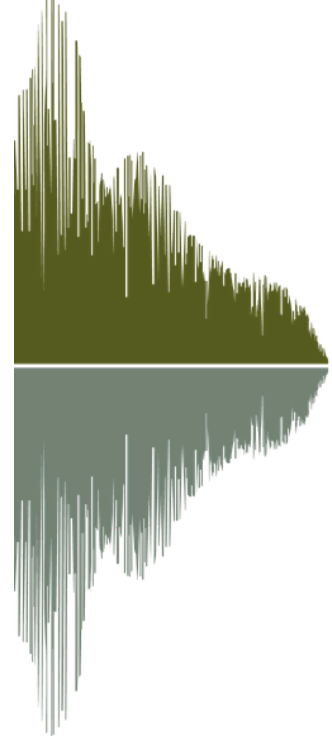
A second quick focus tool for use in any moment of overwhelm:

### **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding**

Wherever you are — the warm-up room, the corridor backstage, the car park — pause and notice:

- 5 things you can SEE
- 4 things you can TOUCH
- 3 things you can HEAR
- 2 things you can SMELL
- 1 thing you can TASTE

**This brings you immediately into the present moment and reduces the physiological symptoms of anxiety.**



## O - OPTIMISM

Optimism is a learned skill. It does not mean pretending everything is perfect — it means choosing to interpret events in a way that builds your confidence rather than erodes it. For a brass band musician, this means being able to reframe a difficult rehearsal, a critical comment, or a contest result that was not what you hoped for.

### **Exercise: ABCDE Reframe (from the PERFORM Framework, Kerwin, 2022)**

Think of something that is causing you anxiety about the contest. Work through the following:

A — Activating Event: What happened, or what are you worried might happen?

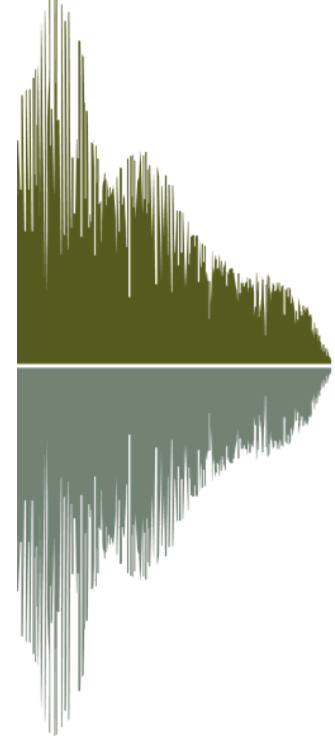
C — Consequence: What are you feeling as a result? How is it affecting you?

B — Belief: What belief about yourself or the situation is driving those feelings?

D — Disputation: Is that belief actually true? What evidence do you have? What would you say to a fellow musician who told you they believed this?

E — New Effect: What more helpful belief could you replace it with? How does that feel?

Example: A musician worries they will let the band down. Their belief is 'I am not good enough.' On disputation, they recognise they have prepared well, the band trusts them, and one small error will not define the performance. Their new effect: 'I am a valued member of this band, and I am ready.'



## R - RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships — with yourself and with your fellow musicians — are fundamental to both performance and mental health. Research consistently shows that strong social networks protect mental health, and in a brass band of 30 musicians, the collective emotional climate of the group has a direct impact on how you feel and perform.

This exercise focuses on your relationship with yourself, and specifically on self-compassion — the quality that allows you to recover from mistakes without spiralling into self-criticism.

### **Exercise: Self-Compassion Break for MPA (based on Neff, 2015, adapted by Kerwin, 2022)**

If you are feeling anxious about the performance, try this:

Bring to mind the thing that is causing you distress. Say to yourself:

"This is anxiety. This is what it feels like for me. I can feel it in my breathing, my heart rate, my hands, my thoughts."

Allow yourself to feel those sensations without pushing them away. Then say:

"Anxiety is a normal response. It is keeping me alert. Everyone feels this sometimes. It is natural."

Place your hands gently over your heart. Feel the warmth there. Then say:

"I am safe. I am prepared. I am a contribution to this band. May I give myself the compassion I need to perform with ease."

**This exercise can be adapted for any difficult situation, not just performance anxiety.**

A note on collective wellbeing: your individual mental health does not exist in isolation. The bandroom culture you are part of — how musicians speak to each other, how mistakes are handled, how results are processed — has a direct impact on everyone's wellbeing and performance. You have the power to contribute to a culture that protects mental health, not just your own.

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Mindset is the lens through which you interpret everything that happens in your musical life — a difficult rehearsal, a critical adjudicator's comment, a slip in the solo passage, a result you didn't hope for. Research by psychologist Carol Dweck identifies two broad orientations: a fixed mindset, which treats ability as static ('I either have it or I don't'), and a growth mindset, which treats ability as developable ('I can improve with effort and practice').

For brass band musicians, a fixed mindset is a significant risk factor for MPA. When we believe our performance ability is fixed, every contest becomes a verdict on whether we are 'good enough' — and that is an enormous amount of pressure to put on a single performance. A growth mindset reframes the contest as information, not judgement. A difficult result becomes data. A missed note becomes feedback.

The good news is that mindset is not fixed. It can be trained. The exercises below help you to notice your current mindset orientation and actively choose a more growth-focused response — especially in the high-pressure weeks before a competition.

### **Exercise: Choose Your 'Tude — Gratitude and Growth**

Set a timer for seven minutes.

Think of an aspect of your preparation for this contest that you are finding challenging. Write down the story you are currently telling yourself about it. Now ask yourself:

- Is this a fixed mindset story? (Example: 'I'll never get this passage right.')
- What would the growth mindset version of this story sound like? (Example: 'This passage is hard right now. I haven't mastered it yet.')

Write down three things you have improved at through practice and effort in your time as a musician — evidence that your ability is not fixed.

Finally, write down three things about your contest preparation that you are genuinely grateful for — the rehearsals that went well, the people or section who helped you, the progress you have made.

The word 'yet' is one of the most powerful words in a growth mindset toolkit. You haven't mastered it yet.

**Based on Dweck, C. (2006). Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.**

**Adapted for brass band context.**

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## M - MINDSET

A second quick tool for use in any moment of self-doubt before the contest:

### **Scale of Emotions — Shift Your State**

Think of a time you performed at your worst. Notice the emotion. Give it a word.

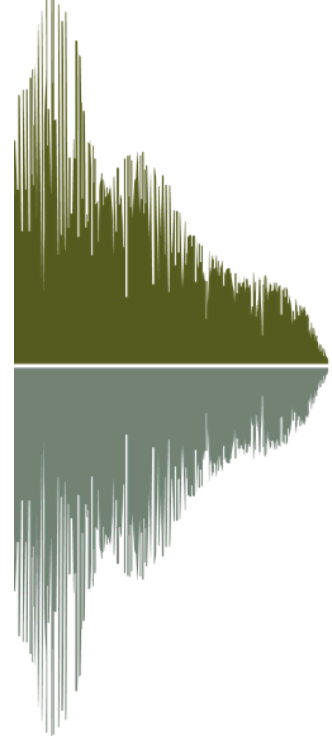
Now think of a time you performed at your absolute best. Notice that emotion. Give it a word.

Those two words are the ends of your personal emotional scale. You have evidence that the best one is available to you — because you have already experienced it.

Before you walk onto the contest stage, ask yourself: which end of my scale do I want to perform from today?

Then take one slow breath, recall a moment when you were at your best, and carry that state with you onto the stage.

**Based on Scale of Emotions exercise from the 7 Minute Wellbeing Toolkit (Kerwin)**



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## SECTION 3: CONTEST DAY

### A TOOLKIT FOR THE HOURS THAT MATTER

Contest day has a rhythm of its own. Early starts, long waits, a single performance window. The hours of preparation you have invested now need to be protected — not by perfect control, but by grounded, compassionate readiness.

Here is a simple sequence you can work through on the day itself.

#### **Morning — Set Your Intention**

Before you leave the house, take seven minutes to do this:

#### **Morning Intention Practice**

Write down ONE personal goal for today. Not a result. An experience.  
(Example: 'Today I want to feel the music, not fight it!')

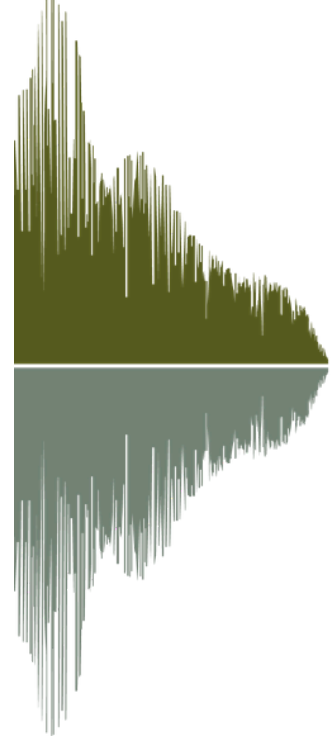
Read back your Best Possible Performance from Section 2. Sit with it for a moment.

Say your Affirmation Breathing sequence once — four rounds, 30 seconds.  
You are ready to go.

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## SECTION 3: CONTEST DAY

### A TOOLKIT FOR THE HOURS THAT MATTER

#### **On Arrival — Ground Yourself**

The new environment, the noise, the other bands — it can all amplify anxiety. When you arrive at the venue, before anything else:

- Find a quiet corner for two minutes
- Do the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding exercise from Section 2
- Remind yourself: 'I have prepared. I am ready. I am here.'

#### **Warm-Up Room — Collective Readiness**

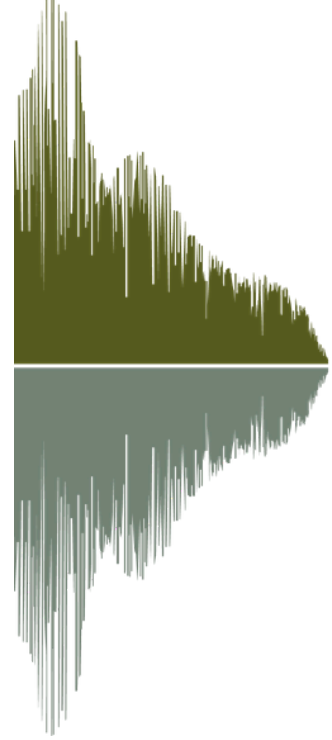
The warm-up room is charged with energy — some of it helpful, some of it not. Here are a few thoughts:

- Choose your conversations carefully. Avoid musicians from other bands who want to compare nerves or exchange predictions. That is not helpful data.
- If your band is open to it, your conductor or principal player could lead a brief Affirmation Breathing sequence as a group. It takes two minutes and changes the collective energy in the room.
- Focus on the music, not the result. You cannot control the judges. You can control your attention.

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## SECTION 3: CONTEST DAY

### A TOOLKIT FOR THE HOURS THAT MATTER

#### **Backstage — The Last Moments**

In the final moments before you walk on stage:

Pre-Performance Reset (30 seconds)

One slow breath in for 4 counts. One slow breath out for 4 counts.

Say internally: 'My skills meet the challenge. I am safe to enjoy the music.'

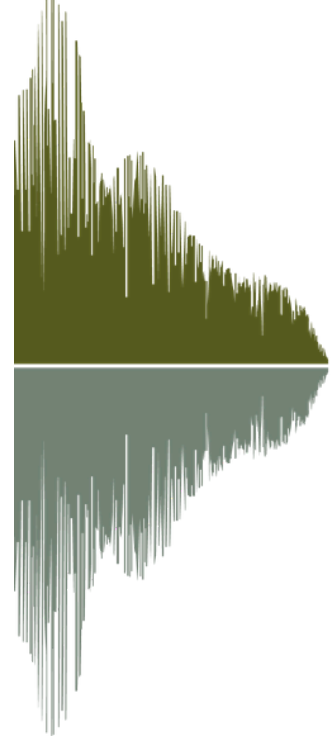
Roll your shoulders back. Lift your chin. Feel your feet on the floor.

You have done the work. Now go and play.

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## SECTION 4: AFTER THE CONTEST

### MANAGING THE COME-DOWN

Contest day does not end when the last note plays. The emotional aftermath of a brass band competition is something rarely spoken about — but it is real, and it affects musicians whether the result was everything they hoped for or a profound disappointment.

This section exists because no-one else in the brass band world addresses what happens next.

#### **If the Result Was Everything You Hoped For**

Celebration is right and good. Enjoy it fully. And notice: the high will pass. This is normal. The neurochemistry of achievement means that the dopamine response to success is time-limited. What sustains us is not the trophy — it is the meaning we made in earning it.

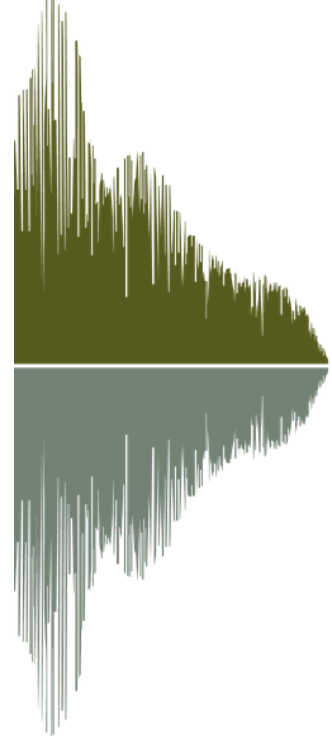
At your next rehearsal, try this as a band:

Three Good Things (from the PERFORM framework, Kerwin, 2022)

Ask every musician to share one thing about the day's performance that they were proud of — not the result, but something in the music, people or the experience.

Then share three things as a group that went well. Write them somewhere they can be seen.

This builds positive emotion, collective pride, and resilience for the next contest.



## SECTION 4: AFTER THE CONTEST

### MANAGING THE COME-DOWN

#### **If the Result Was Not What You Hoped For**

Disappointment is a valid and important emotion. Do not rush past it. Do not tell yourself you should not feel it. Allow it.

What matters is what happens next — and the story you tell yourself about what the result means.

#### **ABCDE Reframe for a Disappointing Result**

A — The result was not what we hoped for.

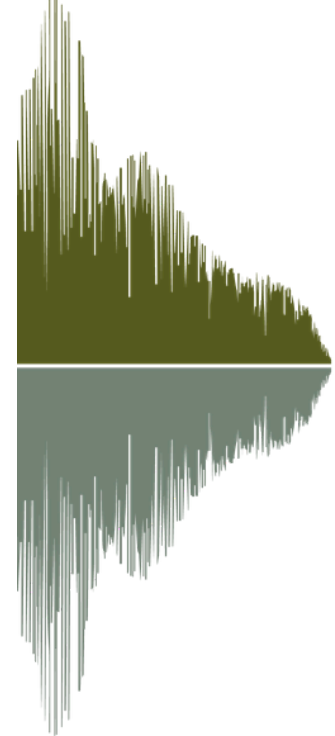
C — I feel disappointed, deflated, perhaps embarrassed.

B — My belief might be: 'We failed. I let people down. We are not good enough.'

D — Is that belief true? Did you prepare well? Did you give what you had on the day? Is a single contest result an accurate measure of your worth as a musician or a person?

E — A more helpful belief might be: 'We gave what we had today. We can learn from this. We will come back.'

Results are the opinion of one (or a few) judge(s) on one day under one set of conditions. They are not a verdict on you or your band.



## SECTION 4: AFTER THE CONTEST MANAGING THE COME-DOWN

### Managing the Emotional Come-Down — Whatever the Result

After any high-pressure experience, the nervous system needs time to recover. Here are some simple things that genuinely help:

- Give yourself permission to feel whatever you feel without judging it
- Put space between what you feel and how you behave (especially towards others)
- Eat something, drink water, move your body — the basics matter
- Reach out to a fellow musician — connection is one of the most powerful regulators of emotion
- Sleep — emotional processing happens during sleep more than anywhere else
- Do something that has nothing to do with music for 24 hours
- Avoid sharing your negative beliefs and emotions on social media (again, a reminder to put some space between what you feel and how you behave)

### Exercise: Three Good Things — Personal Version

Before you sleep tonight, write down three things about this experience — any three things — that you are genuinely grateful for.

They do not need to be about the result. They could be the journey, the person you sat next to on the coach, the moment in the warm-up when a passage finally came together, a conversation you had at the venue.

This is not toxic positivity. It is your nervous system's recovery toolkit.

If you find yourself struggling in the days after a competition — with persistent low mood, withdrawal from the band or from music, intrusive thoughts, or significant anxiety — please reach out. You do not have to manage this alone.

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Your GP or a mental health professional can also provide further support if the symptoms of low mood, withdrawal and loss of enjoyment persist for a few weeks.

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## SECTION 5: A NOTE ON BANDROOM CULTURE

This resource has been written for you as an individual musician. But individual mental health does not exist in a vacuum. The culture of your bandroom — how mistakes are spoken about, how results are processed, how people treat each other — has a direct and measurable impact on everyone's wellbeing and performance.

High-performance environments are not those where pressure is highest. They are those where trust is highest.

### **For bands and committees to consider:**

Does your bandroom culture make it safe to make a mistake?  
Are results processed in a way that builds the band's resilience or erodes it?  
Do musicians in your band feel comfortable speaking about mental health?  
Does your band have a wellbeing lead — someone whose role includes protecting the emotional health of your musicians?

If not, Brass on the Mind offers a free Certificate in Brass Band Mental Health & Wellbeing — a foundational training programme for anyone who wants to support the mental health of themselves and the musicians around them.

Find out more at [www.brassonthemind.co.uk](http://www.brassonthemind.co.uk)

Collective wellbeing is not a 'soft skill'. It is strategy. Bands with high levels of psychological safety perform better, recover from disappointment faster, and retain their musicians for longer. The work of protecting mental health in a brass band starts in the bandroom, long before contest day.

**This resource was developed by Tabby Kerwin MAPP.**

**For more wellbeing support and free music for your band visit Brass on the Mind | [www.brassonthemind.co.uk](http://www.brassonthemind.co.uk)**

References available on request. Key sources include: Kerwin, T. (2019). *Mental Health in Brass Bands Survey*. Kerwin, T. (2022). *Using PPis to Build Resilience and Flow to Protect the Mental Health of Competitive Brass Band Musicians through the PERFORM Framework*. MSc Applied Positive Psychology dissertation, University of East London. Gross, S.A. & Musgrave, G. (2016/2017). *Can Music Make You Sick? Help Musicians UK / University of Westminster*.

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## **5 POINTERS TO PERFORM AT YOUR BEST & PROTECT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING CONTEST SEASON**

- **You don't need more self-confidence, you need more self-trust.**
- **You GET to enjoy this.**
- **Stop aiming for perfection, start aiming for music... then everyone, including you, gets to enjoy the performance.**
- **It's not just about you. You are a contribution to a team event. Be the best contribution you can be.**
- **Stress, nerves and anxiety are not the enemy. They are natural. Embrace them and meet your energy where it's at.**

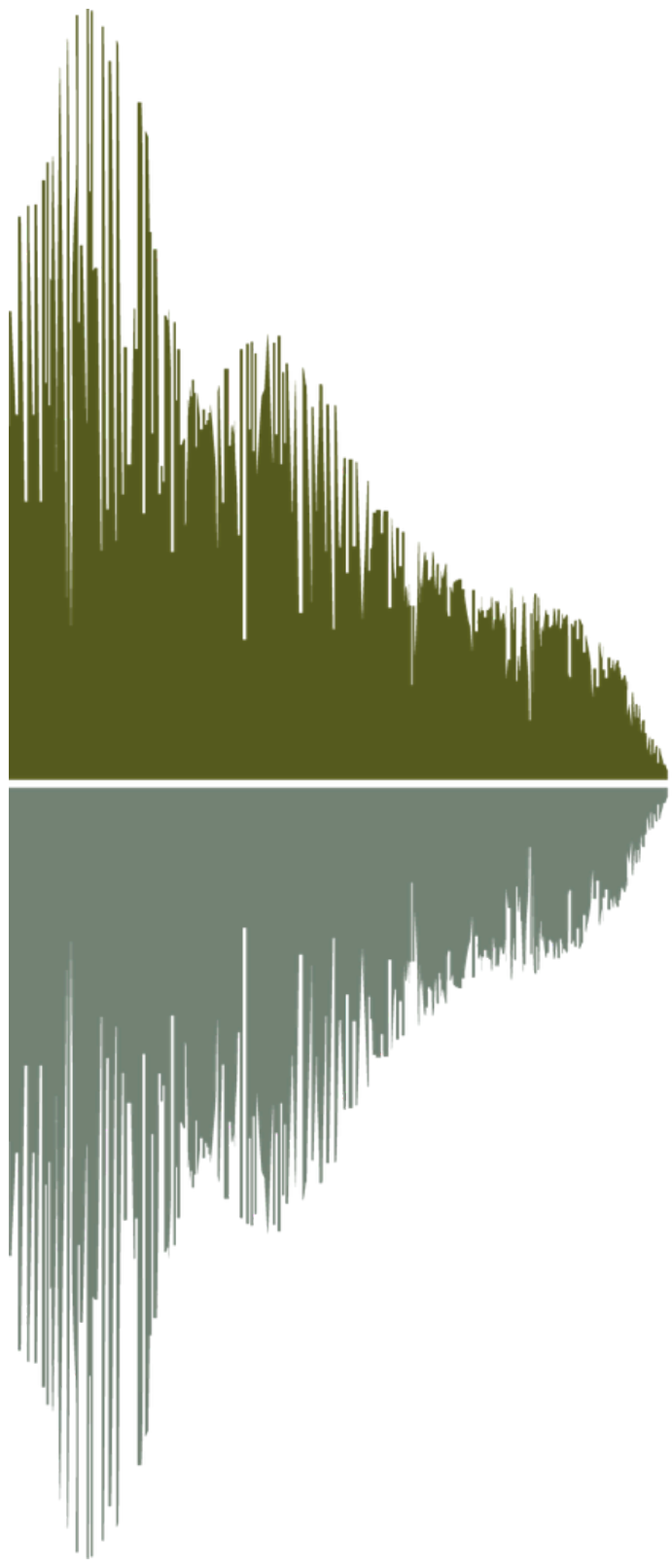
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# 5 SIGNS PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IS IMPACTING YOU

1. **Rapid heartbeat & shallow breathing** - this is adrenaline flooding your system.
2. **Sweating & shaking** - this is a physical reaction to the pressure you're under.
3. **A fear of messing up & failure** - before, during & after the event.
4. **'Butterflies' in your stomach** - which can escalate to cramps or gastrointestinal issues.
5. **Muscle tension** - particularly in the jaw, neck & shoulder areas AND a dry mouth.



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The 'PERFORM' Certificate in  
Brass Band Mental Health &  
Wellbeing  
(CPD Accredited 4 points)  
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**BRASS ON THE MIND: PROTECTING  
THE MENTAL HEALTH OF BRASS  
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# LET'S CHANGE THE TUNE

BRASS ON THE MIND:  
PROTECTING THE  
MENTAL HEALTH OF  
BRASS BAND  
MUSICIANS

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raising awareness in brass  
bands of the harassment, abuse,  
and coercive control  
experienced by some women

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AWARE &  
WOMEN FEEL  
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