Befriending the Piano: A Dual Case Study on the Impact of Music Therapy and Piano-Based Free Play on College Students' Piano Performance Anxiety

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Abstract

This mixed methods dual case study explores the impact of creative free play sessions on college music students' experiences of piano performance anxiety within a music therapy context. Participants included Johanna and Wade, undergraduate students enrolled in a class piano course for non-piano majors. Johanna, a white 20-year-old cis female, and Wade, a white 35-year-old cis male, participated in 8-10 music therapy sessions that involved discussion and creative free play on piano focusing on alleviating performance anxiety and fostering creative expression.

Findings indicate that both participants experienced varying degrees of anxiety reduction and increased comfort with piano performance over the semester. Johanna's narrative highlighted her journey of overcoming internal fears and building self-confidence while Wade's narrative demonstrated his experience of finding a meaningful connection to the piano and utilizing the piano as a tool to help manage external stressors. Both participants reported the therapeutic relationship and dedicated time to engage creatively with the piano as the most beneficial in reducing anxiety and increasing productivity. Pre and post test questionnaires indicate the most improvement in the areas of proximal somatic anxiety, worry about performance, and negative cognitions related to performance anxiety and well as self-reported decreases in overall levels of general and piano performance anxiety.

Implications for future research suggest incorporating creative arts therapies in college counseling centers to address performance anxiety for students across performing arts modalities. Future research should expand to include larger studies and participants from diverse performance disciplines to validate findings and broaden applicability in higher education settings.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the impact of music therapy and piano-based free play on college students' Piano Performance Anxiety (PPA). PPA is a pervasive issue among musicians, often leading to significant psychological distress and hindering their ability to complete their piano proficiency exams and become effective music educators, therapists, and performers. By examining the experiences of two music therapy students, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how PPA manifests in individuals and the potential pathways for mitigating its impact. The study focuses particularly on the use of creative free play within music therapy sessions as a therapeutic tool to alleviate PPA and enhance personal creativity and freedom at the piano. Through both quantitative and qualitative analysis of therapy sessions, self-reports, and observational data, the thesis will offer insights into the complex relationship between performance anxiety, therapeutic relationships, and the role of creative expression. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to the development of more effective strategies for addressing PPA in the academic setting within the context of music therapy and beyond.

Motivation for the Research

The idea for this study originated from a conversation with my husband about a student in the musical theater program at Slippery Rock University who experienced debilitating performance anxiety during studio class. This conversation prompted myriad questions, one of which was: "If you have so much performance anxiety, why major in musical theater?" Reflecting on my own experience in undergraduate school at Baldwin Wallace University, where I majored in music therapy with piano as my primary instrument, I too struggled with performance anxiety. This led me to wonder, "Could the cure for performance anxiety be more

‘musicking’ and less ‘performing’?” and “Could creative arts therapies help decrease performance anxiety?”

As I considered potential thesis topics, I reflected on my own relationship with the piano. I began taking piano lessons at age seven. My mother, a keyboardist in a worship band who had taken classical piano lessons, projected her own musical ambitions and frustrations onto me. Early lessons with a strict teacher involved constant scrutiny, and later, lessons with my mother were fraught with frustration and anger. Despite my dislike for formal lessons, I found joy in playing the keyboard in the contemporary worship band at my church, where I felt like I could be free and creative. This freedom contrasted sharply with my classical lessons and allowed me to play and sing passionately, though feeling like a “faker,” as my mother called it since I wasn’t playing written notes on a page.

At 14, when I decided to pursue music therapy as a profession, I realized I needed to audition on a primary instrument to gain admission to a conservatory. I chose piano over voice to challenge myself and prove my proficiency. My audition journey was marked by both failure and success, ultimately leading me to Baldwin Wallace University, where I found a supportive, albeit intimidating, environment. During my undergraduate years, I was consistently intimidated by other pianists and struggled with performance anxiety and imposter syndrome. Surprisingly, my one respite from this anxiety was the piano itself. I began writing music and using the piano as a means of personal expression, finding solace in private playing sessions.

Observing music therapy students and interns struggle with piano-induced performance anxiety further solidified my research interest. I often wondered, “What is it about the piano that causes so much stress and anxiety?” This led me to explore whether engaging creatively with the piano could address performance anxiety and transform the piano from a source of fear into a

source of comfort and free expression which would result in decreased feelings of fear around piano playing.

Positioning the Researcher

In positioning myself as the researcher for this study, it is essential to recognize how my background, experiences, and potential biases shape my perspective and approach to researching performance anxiety and creative engagement with the piano.

My journey with music and performance began at a young age, influenced by my mother's background in classical piano and contemporary worship music. Starting piano lessons at seven years old, I experienced a strict and often critical teaching environment, often fostering anxiety and frustration. These early experiences created a complex relationship with the piano, characterized by both a desire to excel and a fear of inadequacy. Despite my struggles with formal piano lessons, I found joy in playing contemporary worship music at my church, where I could be creative and play by ear. This contrast between the rigidity of classical piano lessons and the freedom of contemporary music highlighted the duality of my relationship with the piano—both a source of stress and a creative outlet.

My undergraduate years at Baldwin Wallace University, where I majored in music therapy with piano as my primary instrument, further shaped my understanding of performance anxiety. The conservatory environment, coupled with my ongoing imposter syndrome, made my relationship with the piano even more complicated. However, during this time, I began to explore songwriting and using the piano as a means of personal expression, which became a therapeutic process for me. These personal experiences are central to my research interest in performance anxiety and creative engagement with the piano. My journey from debilitating

performance anxiety to finding joy and expression through music therapy informs my theory that creative arts therapies, specifically involving the piano, can help mitigate performance anxiety.

It is important to acknowledge the potential biases that my background may introduce. My personal struggles with both performance and generalized anxiety and my positive experiences with music therapy could lead me to view creative engagement with the piano more favorably. Additionally, my deep connection to the subject matter may influence my interpretation of data and interactions with participants. To mitigate these biases, I am committed to maintaining a reflexive approach throughout the research process. This involves regularly reflecting on my experiences and potential biases, seeking feedback from peers and advisors, member-checking with both participants, and ensuring that my data collection and analysis methods are rigorous and transparent.

By positioning myself in this way, I aim to provide a clear context for my research and ensure that my findings are grounded in both my personal experiences and a rigorous methodological framework. I, a white-settler colonizer, cisgender and heterosexual female in my late 20s, hailing from a middle-class background, identify myself as an individual committed to understanding and addressing issues pertinent to diverse communities. Drawing from my own experiences and unearned advantages I strive to approach my work with sensitivity and empathy, acknowledging the importance of amplifying marginalized voices and perspectives. Through my research, I aspire to foster dialogue, promote understanding, and advocate for positive change in society. Understanding the interplay between my background and my research allows me to approach the study with both empathy and critical awareness, ultimately enriching the exploration of how creative engagement with the piano can address performance anxiety.

Review of the Literature

Performance Anxiety

Performance anxiety is defined as a performer's state of being uneasy, apprehensive, or worried about what may happen during a performance, encompassing both cognitive and physiological responses. It is characterized by the belief that actions must be perfect to avoid disaster, somatic symptoms such as tremors and rapid breathing, and behavioral tendencies to avoid performance-based activities (Barlow, 2000; Clark & Agras, 1991; Conklin, 2011; Steptoe & Fidler, 1987). Performance anxiety is a common issue that affects individuals across various situations including testing, sports, and public speaking and is considered normal unless it becomes extremely intense (Endler & Kocovski, 2001). It has been identified as a significant challenge for performing musicians of all ages and abilities, impacting their ability to perform effectively (Sadler & Miller, 2010).

Music Performance Anxiety

Music performance anxiety (MPA) is a specific type of performance anxiety experienced by musicians. It is a persistent apprehension that compromises performative skills in both solo and group performances, affecting instrumentalists and singers alike (Barros et al., 2022; Brodsky, 1996; Ryan & Andrews, 2009; Salmon, 1990). MPA is characterized by a multidimensional emotional manifestation, including cognitive symptoms (e.g., fear, tension, panic, negative thoughts), behavioral responses (e.g., technical failures, retracted posture), and physiological reactions (e.g., hyperventilation, accelerated heartbeat) (Kenny, 2011, 2016). These symptoms can occur before, during, and after a music performance, and can have significant negative impacts on a musician’s professional and personal life (Papageorgi et al., 2007). MPA is often understood as a subtype of social anxiety, characterized by fears related to

musical presentation and performance (Burin & Osorio, 2017). The perception of audience expectations and the predetermined nature of musical interpretation are central to the experience of MPA (Roland, 1993; Sawyer, 2000).

Studies indicate that MPA is prevalent among musicians, with 24% of Brazilian professional and amateur musicians and 22% of members of the Australian Symphony Orchestra exhibiting symptoms of MPA, alongside significant rates of depression and social anxiety (Barbar et al., 2017; Kenny et al, 2016). Predictors of MPA include a range of socio-demographic and individual variables such as self-esteem, perfectionism, anxiety traits, cognition, cultural values, situational factors, social perception, psychophysiological symptoms, gender, performance experience, age, and institutional culture (Barros et al., 2022; Burin & Osorio, 2017).

Gender differences in MPA have been observed, with most studies concluding that women are more likely to experience higher levels of MPA than men, influenced by both biological factors such as estrogen and societal pressures (Coşkun-Şentürk & Çırakoğlu. 2017; Saleh & Connell, 2007). Additionally, research shows that gender-specific responses to performance anxiety can manifest differently, with some studies finding higher self-reported anxiety in women while men may exhibit more overt anxious behaviors during performances (Barros et al., 2022; Kenny et al, 2016; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; Yondem, 2007;). Regarding performance experience and age, studies suggest that more years of musical training and experience positively impact MPA levels and performance quality, with older and more experienced musicians often displaying lower MPA levels compared to their younger counterparts (Burin & Osorio, 2017; Coşkun-Şentürk & Çırakoğlu, 2017; Hamann, 1982). Situational factors also play a crucial role, with higher MPA levels reported in association with

solo performances compared to group performances and in concert settings compared to rehearsal settings, highlighting the impact of performance context on anxiety levels (Casanova et al., 2018; Cox & Kenardy, 1993; Orejudo et al., 2017; Papageorgi et al., 2010, 2011; Robson & Kenny, 2017; Studer et al., 2012, 2014; Sulun et al., 2017). Furthermore, social perception significantly influences MPA, with anxiety being linked to feelings of catastrophe, everyday fears, low perceived social support, dysfunctional attitudes, social phobia, and concerns about making mistakes and parental perceptions (Cox & Kenardy, 1993; Dobos et al., 2019; Liston et al., 2003; Schneider & Chesky, 2011; Steptoe & Fidler, 1987; Yondem, 2007).

Psychophysiological symptoms include cognitive, psychological, behavioral, physiological, and somatic symptoms associated with MPA and its intensity, with cognitive symptoms often being more intense than somatic ones, and variations in intensity indicating either facilitating or debilitating impacts on anxiety (Chanwimalueang et al., 2017; Miller & Chesky, 2004; Zarza et al., 2016b). Institutional culture was correlated with MPA in three studies, indicating that the context in which musical learning takes place influences students' perceptions and approaches to learning and performance, as well as their motivation and anxiety levels (Casanova et al., 2018; Papageorgi et al., 2010; Zarza et al., 2016a).

Music Performance Anxiety and Undergraduate Students

MPA is notably prevalent among music students, with studies reporting varying levels of incidence. Miller and Chesky (2004) found that 83.1% of music students experience MPA, while Bannai et al. (2016) reported a prevalence of 75.1%. Other studies indicated lower but still significant rates: 39% by Zarza et al. (2016b) and 16% by Paliaukiene et al. (2018). Furthermore, Ioannou et al. (2018) found that 40% of participants experienced high or extreme levels of somatic anxiety, and 36% reported high or extremely high levels of general anxiety outside of

performance situations. The impact of MPA extends beyond anxiety, with 51% of students in Spahn et al.'s (2014) study reporting playing-related health problems at least once during their studies.

Despite the high prevalence of MPA, many students struggle to cope effectively. Paliaukiene et al. (2018) found that 20.2% of students reported difficulties in managing MPA, and Studer et al. (2011a) noted that coping strategies to reduce stage fright were seldom used. Additionally, Spahn et al. (2014) observed that students showed a low ability to deal with health problems. In Dews and Williams' (1989) study, students most often turned to friends for support, with formal counseling seen as a last resoInrt. Although 96% sought help for music-related stress, the support sources were typically informal rather than professional.

Lack of institutional support has been shown to be a significant concern. Findings suggest that inadequate support can lead to the abandonment of musical careers or the persistence of high MPA levels throughout professional lives. The prevalence of MPA among professional musicians varies from 16.5% to 60% (Fernholz et al., 2019). Thus, there is a significant need for clinical, psychological, and institutional support for music students in higher education (Barros et al., 2022).

MPA has substantial negative consequences for students' health and well-being. Sternbach (2008) highlighted that musical activities could be more stressful for students than for professionals, as students often find practice physically and emotionally exhausting. Lessons and rehearsals involve frequent criticism, which can exacerbate emotional problems for students who are still developing their techniques and self-confidence. Test anxiety, combined with the stress of performing in front of a crowd and being evaluated, further elevates anxiety levels (Guven, 2016; Hamann and Sobaje, 1983; Taborsky, 2007).

Substance use as a coping mechanism for MPA is surprisingly common among students. Orejudo et al. (2018) found that 33.9% of students used substances to alleviate MPA, and 19% considered abandoning their music studies. Students who used substances also showed higher prospects of quitting their musical careers. This highlights the critical need for effective preventive health programs in conservatories and universities to improve the quality of musical performance and students' health and well-being (Barros et al., 2022).

Performance Anxiety and Piano Exams

Performance anxiety, particularly in the context of piano exams, presents a significant challenge for all music students. Unlike traditional academic tests, piano exams offer students a single opportunity to demonstrate their skills without the chance for correction, leading to heightened levels of test anxiety (Guven, 2016). Research indicates that students preparing for piano exams often experience medium-level anxiety, with some studies suggesting that moderate anxiety can positively influence performance outcomes (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Ely, 1991; Papageorgi et al., 2007; Roland, 1994;). In a study by Guven, 2016, interviews conducted with students prior to piano exams revealed expressions of anxiety, worry, and nervousness, although many students reported feeling relieved both during and after the exam, suggesting that their anxiety did not impede their performance goals. However, unique challenges associated with piano exams, such as the inability for students to typically practice on the piano used for their piano exam and the shared practice environment in schools, can exacerbate anxiety levels. To mitigate anxiety triggers, Guven recommended facilitating exams on familiar instruments and in familiar practice spaces, as well as managing non-musical factors like clothing, ambient temperature, and noise levels.

Treatment for Performance Anxiety

The treatment of MPA remains a challenge, with a notable lack of studies confirming the methodological effectiveness of interventions. This limitation can discourage health professionals from employing appropriate treatments tailored to each case. It is suggested that treatment models for MPA should be evidence-based, and information regarding prevention and specific treatments should be disseminated among health professionals, musicians, and music teachers (Juncos & de Paiva e Pona, 2018). Given the need for stress-free methodologies in teaching musical performance, efforts are required to encourage students to improve their musical, instrumental, and academic performance (Barros et al., 2022). Coping strategies employed by musicians vary widely, including deep breathing, relaxation and distraction techniques, self-talk, increased practice, prayer, hypnosis, medication, alcohol, and natural substances, with breathing exercises and self-control techniques being among the most effective (Burin & Osorio, 2016, 2017; Kenny et al, 2014; Studer et al, 2011; Zakaria et al, 2013).

The literature on coping strategies for MPA reveals a diverse array of psychological and pharmacological interventions. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is frequently highlighted, with studies suggesting its efficacy in modifying maladaptive mental schemas, particularly given the significant situational, social, and individual factors contributing to MPA (Brugues, 2011; Kenny, 2005; Miller & Chesky, 2004; Papageorgi et al, 2011). Hypnotherapy paired with the Alexander Technique have also shown promise in reducing performance anxiety, with evidence indicating substantial distress and impairment among performers (Wilson & Roland, 2002). Pharmacologically, beta-blockers are commonly used despite concerns over potential impairment of fine motor control, with a notable percentage of orchestral musicians reporting their use to reduce fear of exposure and negative self-criticism (Kenny, 2005; Lehrer, 1987; Ryan &

Andrews, 2009; West, 2004). Additionally, systematic desensitization, relaxation therapies, and increased performance experience, such as regular playing in various settings, are recommended for their effectiveness in lowering anxiety levels (Appel, 1976; Kenny et al, 2011). Alternative approaches like yoga and the teaching-learning process also provide beneficial coping mechanisms, though further research is needed to solidify their effectiveness (Burin & Osorio, 2017; Lemos et al, 2012). Despite the availability of these strategies, the use of substances like alcohol and illicit drugs persists among musicians, highlighting the need for more effective and healthy coping solutions (Burin & Osorio, 2017). In response to identified gaps in research, educational institutions could develop programs addressing coping strategies for MPA within university curricula (Barros et al., 2022).

Music Therapy and the Treatment of Music Performance Anxiety

Music therapy emerges as a promising treatment modality for addressing anxiety, including MPA. Numerous studies in the field of music therapy have explored its efficacy in managing anxiety (Ferrer, 2007; Gadberry, 2011; Gutierrez & Camarena, 2015; Hernandez-Ruiz, 2005; Horne–Thompson and Grocke, 2008; Zatare, 2016). Dileo-Maranto (1992) suggested that music might be a particularly viable approach for treating MPA among musicians due to their unique physiological and psychological responses to music resulting from their extensive training. Music can enhance relaxation and focus attention, thereby reducing anxiety-provoking thoughts and can affect one's physiological, psychological, and cognitive responses (Brodsky & Sloboda, 1997). Music therapists, being musically trained, can offer tailored interventions that resonate with the specific needs of musicians experiencing MPA (Ostwald, 1987; Rider, 1987). Researchers have suggested that incorporating music into desensitization and PMR techniques could both be established as effective treatments for MPA (Appel, 1976; Avants et al., 1990-

1991; Bryson, 1980; Davis & Thaut, 1989; Kibler & Rider, 1983; Lund, 1972; McCune, 1983; Reitman, 1997; Rider, Floyd, & Kirkpatrick, 1985). Moreover, Ruud (2010) referred to music as potentially fitting the role of self-object, suggesting that it offers opportunities to explore and restructure autobiographical narratives within improvisational moments, highlighting the transformative potential of music therapy interventions. He commented that it could happen "when we turn to music to regulate our moods, indulge in memories, or recollect events and persons" (Ruud, 2010, p. 48).

Two significant music therapy studies that focus on MPA have explored the effectiveness of improvisation in alleviating anxiety symptoms among pianists. Kim's (2008) research investigated the impact of improvisation-assisted desensitization, as well as music-assisted progressive muscle relaxation and imagery, on reducing MPA among pianists. Kim's study found statistically significant reductions in anxiety levels among participants who underwent these interventions, suggesting their potential efficacy in managing MPA. Kim highlighted the potential of improvisation as a therapeutic tool for musicians with MPA, emphasizing its flexibility and the personalized nature of improvised music: "Especially, some classically trained musicians do not feel comfortable with improvising and even are afraid of it. This reluctance to improvise may be due to the fact that improvisation is relatively unusual in Western musical culture. Moreover, these musicians often think that a good performer should "get it right," as "it" is written by a famous composer. Therefore, improvising music on the spot is a new idea to these musicians. Once musicians become aware that there is no right or wrong in improvisation, and overcome their anxiety to improvise with a therapist's support and guidance, musicians with MPA can use improvisation to enhance relaxation" (Kim, 2008). Kim also pointed out that two participants in her study had difficulty engaging in improvsation due to insufficient composition

and/or music theory skills. Limitations of this study included utilizing lab performances instead of real performance situations, unequal preparedness between participants, and participants variability in willingness to complete homework. Similarly, Allen (2013) delved into the relationship between free improvisation and performance anxiety among piano students. Allen's study shed light on how free improvisation could serve as a coping strategy for mitigating performance anxiety. By encouraging individual musicians to explore different aspects of musical creativity, free improvisation emerged as a promising approach to overcoming stress and nervousness associated with performance. Both studies contribute valuable insights into the diverse range of interventions available for addressing MPA among pianists, offering potential avenues for future research and clinical practice in this area.

Conclusion Based on Existing Literature

In conclusion, performance anxiety, especially MPA, presents significant challenges for musicians, impacting both their professional and personal lives. Studies have identified predictors of MPA, including individual characteristics, situational factors, and social perceptions. Gender differences in MPA prevalence have been noted, with women often experiencing higher levels of anxiety. Additionally, MPA is prevalent among music students, highlighting the need for institutional support and effective coping strategies. Piano exams, in particular, pose unique challenges for students, with anxiety often heightened due to the inability to practice on familiar instruments. Various treatment approaches for MPA have been explored, ranging from cognitive-behavioral therapy to music therapy. Kim (2008) demonstrated the potential efficacy of improvisation-assisted desensitization and music-assisted progressive muscle relaxation in reducing MPA among pianists, emphasizing the flexibility and personalized nature of improvised music. Allen (2013) further highlighted the role of free improvisation as a

coping strategy for mitigating performance anxiety among piano students. These studies underscore the importance of tailored interventions and holistic approaches in addressing MPA, providing valuable insights for future research and clinical practice in this area. Neither of these studies focused on addressing MPA in non-piano major college students who must show proficiency in playing piano.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore whether or not music therapy in the form of piano-based free play can reduce levels of performance anxiety of non-piano major college music students during their piano proficiency exams. The main goals of the research were to ascertain the following:

1. What is the experience of performance anxiety among non-piano major college students around their piano proficiency exams and music performance anxiety in general?
2. How does music therapy (by engaging students in creativity and piano-based free play) address issues related to performance anxiety of non-piano major college music students when preparing for their piano proficiency exams?

Methodology

Research Design

A dual case study is a research methodology that involves the in-depth examination of two distinct cases or individuals within a specific context or phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2019). Unlike single case studies, which focus on a solitary case, dual case studies allow for comparative analysis between the two cases, often to explore similarities, differences, patterns, or causal relationships (Stake, 2006). This approach enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances inherent in the subject under investigation. By

examining multiple cases, researchers can triangulate data, validate findings, and enhance the reliability and validity of their conclusions (Baxter & Jack, 2015). Dual case studies are particularly valuable in fields such as psychology, education, sociology, and business, where researchers seek to explore multifaceted issues and phenomena through an intensive and comparative lens (Yin, 2009).

Theoretical Perspective and Epistemological Positioning

This study is situated within a constructivist paradigm, drawing on theories of music therapy and performance psychology to explore the efficacy of piano-based free play in alleviating MPA among participants. Grounded in the belief that individuals actively construct their own understanding of the world through personal experiences and interactions, constructivism offers a lens through which to examine the subjective experiences and perceptions of participants within the context of music therapy interventions (Creswell, 2017). Guided by this perspective, I approach knowledge generation as a dynamic process shaped by the interactions between researchers, participants, and the social and cultural contexts in which they are situated. Epistemologically, I position myself as a reflexive researcher, acknowledging my role in shaping and interpreting the data collected (Finlay, 2002). By embracing reflexivity and recognizing the inherent subjectivity in research, I aim to cultivate a nuanced understanding of the complex phenomena under investigation and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding MPA management within the field of music therapy.

Method of Data Collection

The data collection process for this research study involved several steps. Firstly, participants completed a pre-test questionnaire which I developed as a way of gaging participants' self-rated level of performance anxiety in both the contexts of general music

performance and piano performance (see Appendix A) and the Kenny Music Performance Anxiety Inventory (K-MPAI) (See Appendix B) (Kenny, 2023). Following this, the researcher scheduled 12 music therapy sessions with individual participants over the course of the semester. These sessions occurred weekly and lasted for one hour each, taking place in the music therapy clinic in the music department building at Slippery Rock University. The sessions began with an approximately 15-minute check-in and discussion about the participant's feelings, followed by approximately 30 minutes of piano-based free play and improvisation with the music therapist. For the purposes of this study, "piano-based free play" is defined as, "a spontaneous musical creation produced in an unthinking state, one in which we are relaxed yet aware, incorporating and negotiating disparate personal perspectives and worldviews not limited by genre or methodology, applied to a wide range of highly personal, individual styles" (Allen, 2010 p. 41). The activities during this time were tailored to the participant's preferences, comfort level, and skill level, with options including solo improvisation, collaborative improvisation with the therapist, or observation by the therapist. The sessions concluded with approximately 15-minute debriefing and discussion of the improvisation (See appendix C). Throughout the 12 weeks, sessions were recorded for later review by the researchers to track progress in terms of comfort around piano playing and creativity. After completing the therapy sessions, participants engaged in a 15- to 30-minute post-piano proficiency exam interview (see appendix D) with the co-researcher about their feelings during the exam and throughout the research study. Participants also filled out the post-test questionnaire (See appendix E) and K-MPAI again as a post-test measure following the final interview.

To analyze the data, I meticulously listened to the recordings of each session, carefully noting my impressions of the events of each session and capturing relevant quotations. This

process allowed me to capture the nuances of the sessions and the participant's experiences in detail. I then used these detailed notes in conjunction with entries from my research journal, where I documented ongoing reflections and observations throughout the study. By synthesizing the recorded observations and journal entries, I was able to identify and extract salient themes. After writing the case narratives, I utilized member checking to provide participants the opportunity to clarify anything they felt like I misrepresented about them, remove any information or musical examples they did not want public, and/or provide more insight in their experiences. This comprehensive approach enabled me to craft rich, insightful case narratives that accurately reflect the participant's journey and the therapeutic process.

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from Slippery Rock University's Institutional Review Board. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research and were not deceived or misled at any point. Their participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. While no significant risks or discomforts were anticipated, participants were made aware that discussing past performance anxiety experiences might evoke strong emotions. In such cases, resources for additional counseling and mental health support were provided beyond what the researcher could offer. To protect confidentiality, each participant chose a pseudonym, which was used throughout the study.

Trustworthiness

Member checking. After listening back to the sessions and identifying key themes, the case narratives were written as thoroughly as possible to capture the most significant aspects of participants' experiences. The narratives were then shared with participants for their review to ensure accuracy and that their contributions were represented correctly.

Prolonged engagement. To minimize bias in the analysis and interpretation of the data, I thoroughly reviewed each recording multiple times over the course of four months. I took notes of my reactions, maintained an open mindset as best I could, and engaged in self-reflection to acknowledge and address any personal biases throughout the process.

Reflexive journaling. Throughout the process, I kept a reflexive journal documenting my personal thoughts, biases, and reflections.

Peer debriefing. Throughout the writing process, I consulted with my research advisor, to review my interpretations and findings to minimize researcher bias as much as possible.

Recruitment and Participant Demographics

This study was approved by the Slippery Rock University Institutional Review Board in November 2023. The study was originally intended to be a small sample, mixed methods study. However, due to low recruitment and the number of participants who were able to complete the study, the decision was made to present the research as a dual case study, highlighting two students' journeys through the course of the spring semester 2024. Participants were recruited from students in a Western Pennsylvania university's Department of Music. Criteria for participation in the study included being a music department student who is 18 years or older and enrolled in class piano where they are required to complete piano proficiency exams where piano is not their primary instrument. Students must have reported having some level of music performance anxiety around piano-playing/piano proficiency exams as demonstrated on the K-MPAI. For the purposes of this study, performance anxiety was defined as, "a performer's state of being uneasy, apprehensive, or worried about what may happen in a musical performance and the physical or physiological consequences of that anxiety" (Allen, 2013). Several participant recruitment emails were sent through the music department email list from November 2023-

January 2024. If interested, students could follow the google form link in the recruitment letter and complete the interest form. Interested participants were then contacted by the researcher to fill out the K-MPAI and consent forms. If the potential participants demonstrated any level of performance anxiety on the inventory, they were contacted to set up weekly sessions throughout the spring 2024 semester.

Out of the six potential participants who filled out the interest form, three signed on to participate in the research. Of those three, two were able to complete the study (the third participant had to take a medical leave from university). The recruitment process involved initial screenings to ensure the participants met the study criteria, followed by detailed briefings to explain the study's objectives and expectations. Despite the small number of participants, the experiences and insights gathered from the two participants who completed the study provided valuable data for understanding the dynamics of piano performance anxiety and the effectiveness of music therapy intervention in the form of free, creative play.

Case Narratives

The case narratives section of this thesis delves into the personal journeys of two music therapy students as they navigated the challenges of piano performance anxiety (PPA) in the academic setting. Through detailed session summaries and reflective accounts, these narratives provide a rich, qualitative insight into the lived experiences of music students grappling with PPA. By focusing on the therapeutic use of creative free play, my aim is to illustrate how engaging with the piano in a non-judgmental, exploratory manner can facilitate emotional expression, reduce anxiety, and foster a more positive relationship with the instrument. These case studies not only highlight the unique struggles and breakthroughs of each participant but also underscore the potential of creative free play as a valuable tool in music therapy for

addressing performance anxiety. Through their stories, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of PPA and the transformative power of therapeutic interventions.

Johanna

At the time of the study, Johanna was a college student studying for a dual degree in music therapy and music education at a public university in Western Pennsylvania. She was enrolled in class piano 4 and was a college sophomore. She is a young adult between the ages of 18-25 years old. She is white, cisgender female, and heterosexual. She identifies with Christianity as her religion and describes her current socioeconomic status as lower/middle class. She seemed to generally have more anxiety around playing piano and piano proficiency exams as indicated on the self-assessment portion of the pre-test questionnaire (scoring 9 for both) than she had music performance anxiety in general (scoring 7). According to her K-MPAI, she struggled the most with worry/dread (negative cognitions) focused on self/other scrutiny with a score of 96% as well as having generational transmission of anxiety with a score of 94%. She also struggled with music memory with a score of 92% and proximal somatic anxiety and worry around performance with a score of 88%. She indicated that she felt struggled with depression and hopelessness with a score of 81%. She also indicated that she felt like she generally has received empathy from her parents with a score of 38% and had less concerns about anxious apprehension with a score of 44%. Finally, she had always been anxious about performing since early in her music studies (100%), and not just when performing on piano.

Session 1: Something's developing

Johanna entered the room nervously, frequently stuttering and waiting for me to speak. She asked numerous questions about seating and often apologized for rambling. Describing herself as having an analytical mind, she explained, "I'm very black or white, so sometimes

things need to be described to me. Sometimes I don't fully get things, and so sometimes I just need a few different perspectives to view things." When asked about her piano playing confidence, she rated it as 3/10 and expressed a desire to improve, criticizing her class piano instruction, "I feel the class piano classes are not reaching the goals we need and to improve I need to do my own study. I have no problem doing that, it's just you can only get so much with yourself without having some form of instruction. It's not meeting the needs and to be honest I got tendonitis last semester and I have a brace because I was playing so much with poor technique and no one told me."

Johanna expressed various feelings about piano playing, including feeling "anxious," "fear of the unknown," and "25% nerve-wracking." She metaphorically described her relationship with the piano: "We cross paths in the hallway. I know their name. I can ask him for a pencil. I don't know much more than that. It's not negative. It's not inherently positive either, but it's like you've had a few good conversations here and there. It's like, ohh, something's developing."

For the session, Johanna chose side-by-side playing and opted for the electric keyboard over the upright piano. Initially tense, she performed two improvisations: the first on the electric keyboard, where she played in the low register with a drum backtrack, and the second where she played the white keys while I played the marimba in C major. She described her feelings during the first improvisation as "anxious" and "uncomfortable," noting, "When you're just going for it, it's going to feel unnatural at first." She commented about the drum backtrack: "Having something reliably fair and steady is a comfort." Johanna Music 1.1

In the second improvisation, Johanna's playing was soft and without meter but gradually became bolder. She reflected, "The biggest thing is I just let go and tried my best, take a deep

breath and just go for it. It still feels wildly uncomfortable, but it's OK. And it's okay to not be the loud one and the loud leader. That's what I'm trying not to do." Johanna Music 1.2

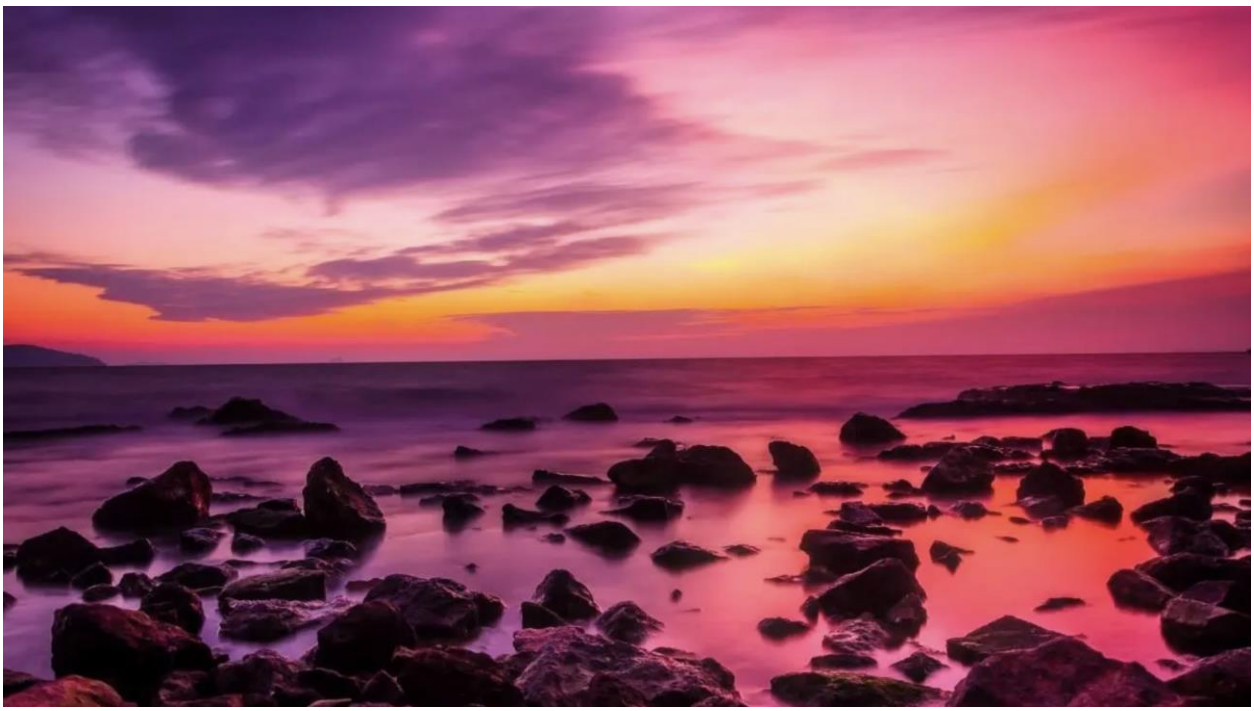
Post-free play, Johanna shared a childhood memory of playing piano at her grandmother's house, noting that part of her discomfort came from remembering this time: "I remember when I didn't care about the musicality of it. I just was a kid, and I played the piano. So, I still very much think of it as the, like, not even acquaintance in the hallway. But at the same time, it reminds you of an old family friend like it has the same facial structure as if an old family friend. Doesn't mean anything, but you nevertheless notice it." For future sessions, she wanted to explore playing without a set meter and recognized the need to become more comfortable in a leadership role, admitting, "Like, you continually pushing into the uncomfortable is going to make it more familiar."

Throughout the session, it became apparent that Johanna often set up scenarios for someone else to take the lead, such as choosing the backtrack that controlled her tempo and key. This realization led her to acknowledge the need to embrace control and leadership in her piano playing.

Session 2: The tacky tuxedo t-shirt

In the second session, Johanna exhibited noticeable progress and confidence. She volunteered for a piano improvisation exercise in her clinical improvisation class, calling it a "victory" and crediting our previous session for this newfound bravery. Johanna expressed her goals for the session, emphasizing her desire to not be "afraid" of the piano and to "accept failure" and "experimenting." She noted, "I found myself messing around with the piano [this week] more even if it wasn't perfect."

Johanna's relationship with the piano already showed signs of improvement after only one session. She described her current feelings as, “We’re still low but there’s a light at the end of the tunnel, it turns on and off.” She defined this light as “not being afraid of the piano” and mentioned that although she wasn't there yet, the light was “inviting” and “welcoming.” She again referred to the piano as an “acquaintance in the hallway” and expressed a goal to “get myself out of the accompaniment zone,” meaning she wanted to stop being so “mathematical” about her playing and to experiment more freely. For this session’s free play, she requested an image to keep in her mind and chose an image of a twilight sky with purply reds and gold sparkles, stating, “I feel like that will create some cool sounds.” She chose this image from a google image search that she felt like closely aligned with her vision for the free play.



Johanna initiated the free play this time, choosing the upright piano despite her fear of its louder sound. She took a moment to get “acquainted” with the piano and agreed to dim the lights to help create an atmosphere related to the twilight image. The free play session exhibited a marked

improvement in her relaxation and control compared to the previous week. Although occasionally self-conscious and fumbling over notes, she appeared more at ease and less restricted by her self-imposed metronome. Johanna Music 2.1, Johanna Music 2.2

After the first free play of this session, Johanna described it as "fun and musical," noting, "There's no mistakes, it's just fun. Anytime I got off the beat, it was because I was thinking too hard." The second free play was described as "musical, unbelievable, encouraging, fun." She reported minimal somatic symptoms, only a little tension that she was able to acknowledge and move past.

Johanna's description of her relationship with the piano evolved significantly since the first session. She felt they were on a "first name basis" and had a "very good and funny conversation that was like our first real true conversation." She likened the piano to someone wearing an ironically bad tuxedo t-shirt, symbolizing that the piano gives a bad impression and can "push people away" but this "ick" is just surface level. She shared that she envied those who have a unique and fun relationship with the piano, expressing a desire to reach that level of comfort herself. Johanna was clearly more relaxed, showing excitement for incorporating more imagery in future sessions and aiming to "get out of her own way of being an accompanist," and to handle mistakes with greater ease.

Session 3: It's complicated

Johanna came into the session in pleasant spirits, although she continued to apologize often as was typical for her. She reported experiencing stress around a piano exercise in her music therapy improvisation class, particularly feeling embarrassed when her playing didn't go as planned. However, she "rebounded" from the experience quickly. She shared about her struggles with timing when playing the piano or guitar, explaining, "I don't notice it… That's the

thing that really gets me is I have other people telling me it's like you're consistent and then you do a random weird like strumming a chord five times and then doing a different for three and then going like it still equates to an 8 bar phrase, but it's not right."

When asked about her feelings toward piano playing for this current session, Johanna said, "It's improving, but it's still unsettling. It's not an impossible task and doing it more often has been helping. You know, you have to make mistakes to learn from them." She described her relationship with the piano as purely an acquaintance and felt "indifferent" with "no real feeling or opinion about them." Her goal for the session was to avoid getting into a "metric rabbit hole" and to improvise in 4/4, aiming to "get the feeling of four in my body in relation to the piano."

Johanna's idea for the session was to have her left-hand play something predictable to build hand independence, while her right hand would play something more free-flowing and inspired by an image. After verbally describing her plan, I suggested that I take the predictable pattern on another instrument so she could focus solely on the creative part with one hand on the piano. Johanna chose boomwhackers for me to play, while she played the piano.

Initially, Johanna played an oscillating pattern with her left hand and struggled to create a melodic line with her right hand. Johanna Music 3.1 I stopped the improvisation after a couple minutes and suggested she let me handle the oscillating pattern on the boomwhackers, giving her more freedom to play something more freely with her right hand. As the improvisation continued, Johanna smiled frequently and stopped playing to apologize, though she seemed more comfortable without the pressure of keeping time. She began to switch between using one hand and both hands, showing more creative freedom and autonomy. The music remained quite stagnant, without significant changes in dynamics, timbre, style, or tempo. Johanna Music 3.2 However, as we played, Johanna chose more boomwhackers for me, and it felt like we were

having more fun creating music together. She started playing with more rhythmic fluidity, dissonance, and syncopation. Johanna Music 3.3

In the debrief discussion, Johanna mentioned that there were moments when she was in 4/4 and happy about it, and other times "I just did what I wanted… and that's okay." She noted that she needed intense focus when reading notation in simple meter and felt naturally drawn to compound meter. She was convinced that she had played in 3/4 at one point even though we had stayed in 4/4 throughout the free play. She described losing a sense of time when she thought something sounded musically correct in her head, and often reverted to simpler patterns with a "little metronome" in her head instead of focusing on musicality, describing those two things as mutually exclusive.

Johanna described her relationship with the piano as "complicated," like a Facebook relationship status. Despite her focus on meter and timing, she had chosen an instrument for me that made it difficult to keep a perfectly steady beat, assuming it was her fault whenever we went off-beat. She brought her left hand back into the free play because it felt "naked and boring," and she felt she "should be doing better than that." When asked why she thought there needed to be more, she jokingly said, "the man" and then seriously, "it's what you're told… not me."

For the next session, Johanna expressed a desire to "learn how to lose the tension and that metric feel" and keep the focus on "time." She believes her anxiety around the piano stems from the pressure to get back on the beat immediately after making a mistake, and she wants to learn to accept mistakes and move on rather than stopping.

Session 4: Hi

Our check-in discussion was brief in this session. Johanna mentioned she wasn't feeling the piano playing much the last time, but in this session she felt more positive and interested,

partly due to working on 12-bar blues patterns in her instrumental improvisation class. She described her relationship with the piano by commenting that they were “saying hi in the hallways again” and said she wanted to focus on “being creative within time” in her free play for this session.

Johanna chose the conga for me to play, and without discussion, we both knew she would play the upright piano instead of the electric one. She started with a very rhythmic pattern in her left hand and slowly began incorporating more free-flowing and melodic parts as the improvisation went on. I followed along on the drums, keeping time and providing opportunities for fluidity and flexibility. The free play began upbeat, major, and happy but took a more sinister turn with more minor tones and dissonance. Johanna frequently stopped, trying to get back on the beat when she felt she missed it.

The improvisation had clear movements. The second movement had a more relaxed and slower tempo, and Johanna seemed more relaxed in her posture and expression. The third movement began with a light arpeggiating pattern in the higher register of the piano, starting in 3/4 time before moving into 4/4. Johanna seemed most relaxed during this movement, not struggling with the tempo and smiling joyfully. The fourth movement also started with a 3/4 feel but was free and fluid, eventually transitioning into 4/4 with more rhythmic components. The final movement ended rhythmically, strong, and victorious, with a marching feel. Overall, this free play was the longest we had gone without stopping to talk (~23 minutes). Johanna Music 4.1

After this free play, Johanna wanted to try something different, asking, “Is there a way I can escape my own mindset of the piano and do something different with it?” She felt limited by her technique and theory knowledge which she said was preventing her from playing the sounds she envisioned. I suggested she explore the piano's sounds on her own while I sat on the other

side of the room. She played confidently, using the sustain pedal and experimenting with dynamic sounds, arpeggios, and even using the piano body as a percussive instrument. Afterward, she expressed a desire to experiment further by plucking the inside strings and singing into the piano. Johanna Music 4.2

In our debrief, Johanna felt she achieved "creativeness within time." She appreciated the drum helping her get back on track when she got out of time. She found the music "better" when it was less stressful and more calming: defining "better" as "typically musical rather than just kind of plunking out random notes." Reflecting on the second half of the free play, she said, "It was nice to be able to play and just exist, like no parameters. Just making music as music. No rhyme or reason. No chord progression, just existing…no repercussions." She reported feeling some nervousness in the first free play, but no somatic symptoms in the second. She described her relationship with the piano after the session as "closer than before…somewhere between acquaintance and friend." For next time, she expressed interest engaging in the free play with "no rhyme or reason…just playing something that the body feels is musical and having someone else do the same," akin to the second free play but with a me playing as well.

Session 5: Piano, B.

This session was different than our previous ones due to a variety of factors. We had to move to the theory classroom instead of the music therapy clinic due to a scheduling conflict, and this session occurred during midterm exams' week. Johanna said that she felt good about the first half of her class piano test but was worried and "scared" about the second half. She mentioned that the test had been stressful for everyone due to limited class time between tests, saying, "it's not the piano's fault, it's genuinely just time." To prepare, she had been doing free improvisation in the key of her test piece, *Imbakwa*, which made her feel more comfortable

playing in that key and helped her “just play” instead of always looking at her fingers. When asked about her relationship with the piano that day, she described it as “positive” and a “learning experience,” likening it to “teammates” because they were “working towards a goal, working towards improvement.”

For this session, Johanna wanted to do more free play in the key of her test piece, using the chords and having someone else present to “break down the stress of playing in front of someone.” She opened the music therapy education instrument closet since we weren't in the usual clinic space and seemed to have a difficult time choosing instruments. I was getting the sense that she wanted to play by herself in this session despite what she had said in the previous session. However, when I offered that she could play alone, she declined the offer. She picked out small rhythm instruments for me to play, including castanets, a djembe, cabasa, and bongos. The improvisation started slowly with basic chords and simple patterns, with my rhythm instruments adding an atmospheric component. As the free play progressed, Johanna became bolder, adding more melodic elements. She stopped once, saying something scared her, but then resumed with a more confident and more varied play style. Johanna commented that the free play was very similar to her test piece, describing it as “absolutely slow and awful.” Johanna Music 5.1

Lacking ideas for the next part of the free play, I suggested adding imagery like she had discussed wanting to do in prior sessions. She explained that her test piece was for a film about an organization benefiting orphans in Tanzania. Johanna chose an image from a Google search of “Tanzania orphans,” selecting a photo because “they seem moderately happy, and they don’t feel like they’re being forced to take this photo. It feels like they’re kind of existing.” I had a choice to make in addressing her comment. Although I felt discomfort with Johanna’s reasoning

behind choosing the photo, I understood that her interpretation of this photo was a projection of how she wants to be in her relationship with the piano: that she can feel happy in it, and that she doesn't feel forced to play, but can just exist in the relationship. I recognize that Johanna and I as white descendants of American colonizers do not understand the experiences or the events that lead to taking this photo. Johanna's awareness of how easily children from other counties can be exploited for heartwarming photos lead her to choose this particular photo and make this interpretation, even if I did not agree.

For the next free play, Johanna asked me to play more djembe and to start with a strong rhythm. She struggled with playing both hands on the piano and decided to use only one hand, saying, "OK, that's okay, we can do that." She started with a few notes in the lower register

while I kept a steady beat on the djembe. She experimented with different ideas, sometimes seeming tense and other times more relaxed and playful. Johanna Music 5.2

During the debrief, Johanna said she liked taking elements from different parts of *Imbakwa*, finding it freeing and less stressful because she "put them in her own time." She felt she was in a "theory mindset," which provided a different kind of focus and attention. She felt like she was "existing in the space" and described it as "positive pressure," asking herself, "How can I take elements of that [something that is stressful] and put them in a comfortable context?" In the second free play, she didn't think much about the song elements, focusing more on the visual and imagining the three kids playing outside. She felt no pressure during the second free play, wasn't consciously thinking about chords, and leaned into her mistakes, incorporating them into her playing: "accepting where you're at." She felt most comfortable and creative during the second free play, feeling like she was telling a story instead of just extending the test piece. Johanna also discussed naming instruments, which is something she had recently learned about in her music therapy improvisation class and how emotional connections can be created with instruments. While she didn't have a name for the piano yet because they weren't on a first name basis, she humorously mentioned, "their last name is 'Piano' and the first name starts with B. 'Piano, B.'" One of her new goals is to reduce the stress around playing chords by including playing them in these sessions.

Session 6: Our first fight

Johanna returned from spring break in her typically cheery but apologetic mood. I couldn't help but get the impression that she felt the need to say the "right" answer to every one of my questions. She began by describing her experience with the piano exam she took between our last session and now. She said the class piano teacher chose her to go first, and as she started

to play, she "blacked out for a second" and had a panic attack. She described the experience in detail for me: "The whole experience caught up with me and my body just froze. I shook and I just…passed out for two to five seconds." She described the feeling as like "your arms being weighted…you just felt like emptiness in the back of your head…it's like the cold shiver concept…fight or flight kind of thing…head absolutely empty." Her friend woke her, and the teacher said they would come back to Johanna later in the class period.

Determined to take the exam before spring break, she described how she "[took] a deep breath….just really focus on it…I was focused on much more like the visuals that we'd had the previous session…just put myself in the headspace from the day prior [when we had our session together]." After calming herself with deep breathing and self-regulation, she decided, "It's worth the shot. Why not? Let's go for it. And I got through it. I genuinely did get through it and was everything there? No, but it was much closer than I had been and I actually got through and I was steady. It was a good tempo and I did some musicality. So, the practicing had paid off and just focusing on something else, just like the state of being of the previous day [our session]." She still found the test to be not an "enjoyable moment" but was proud of her perseverance. She described her relationship with the piano as having had "our first fight, even though we don't know each other, we had the argument…the piano was not on my side, but we reconciled."

Johanna said that during this session, she wanted to work on her fear of chords and the feeling of fifths, as she mentioned in the last session. She suggested removing the thirds from her chords and gradually adding them back in. She also admitted, "I understand music can be simple…it's just hard to get over that mental hurdle that things can be simple." We decided together to focus this session's free play on *existing in simplicity*. Although she almost chose to play alone, she ultimately decided I should play the electric piano while she played the upright.

As she started to play, there was clearly tension in her body, and the music felt disjointed. She started with a simple rhythmic pattern in fifths in the left hand. As time passed, she began to relax, and I played a harpsichord sound on the electric piano to add a playful element to her repetitive pattern. The music then took a more melancholy turn, with a slower pace and a minor feel, before becoming more relaxed and ethereal. I switched to a synth pad sound, allowing Johanna to lead, but she remained controlled in her playing and demeanor. Johanna Music 6.1

She ended the music abruptly, saying, "that wasn't the best time to close it." She then expressed a desire to "accompany" me but struggled to start again, nervous and stiff, and talked about what she wanted to do without playing anything. She began a rhythmic arpeggiated pattern but was clearly anxious and hesitant. Johanna Music 6.2

I thought back to in a previous session when she expressed a desire to get away from being the "accompanist." Instead of calling this out, I reminded her that she was in total control of the free play and she responded, "that's awful…that's cool but that's awful." She explained her frustration with understanding music theory but struggling with the piano, feeling her music was too simplistic and fearing her "mistakes" would negatively affect my playing. She admitted a "fear of making bad…incorrect music," knowing it could be better and valuing her work as a musician on that concept. I challenged her to not be musical, prompting her to think about freeing herself from external pressures. As she started to play again, I noticed she immediately started playing confidently and loudly, using the sustain pedal for the first time. As she continued to play, she sounded free for the first time in our sessions. Although she continued with the driving rhythm in the left hand, she confidently played dissonant and unexpected notes in the right hand. I knew then that my playing was going to hold her back as she had described to me

earlier. So, I didn't play. I sat at the piano and listened. Her music was driving and fast-paced, steady. Like she was running towards something. Johanna Music 6.3

In the debrief, Johanna avoided eye contact and spoke quietly, focusing on the musical aspects (despite my best efforts) rather than her personal experience. I asked her to not describe the music as much as her own experience and feelings around the free play. She described her mindset during the third free play: "[I just got into] that kind of mindset like 'just play, don't think, just if it sounds good, go for it.'" She was concerned about wasting my time when I wasn't playing with her but felt she could direct the music as she felt appropriate without me playing with her. She described her playing as a "musical version of 'slam the keys.'" Johanna felt her relationship with the piano had deepened during this session: "Maybe even friend. Not close friend but you can make meaningful stories and messages. You can get meaningful conversations [with] the individual; you know their name…you now know more of their tendencies."

After the recording ended, she seemed to relax and make more eye contact than when the audio recording was going. I mentioned to her jokingly that I thought she was going to "beat the shit out of the piano" during the third section of the free play. She lit up, smiled, laughed, and admitted she thought about it but didn't because she still felt the need to be musical and had a sensitivity to loud noises. When I suggested she could bring noise-canceling headphones for the next week's session and really beat the piano, she enthusiastically agreed, "yes."

Session 7: A private friendship

This session with Johanna began with logistical challenges, requiring us to move to the choir room instead of the music therapy clinic due to a scheduling conflict. Despite this, Johanna opted to proceed with the session. She started by expressing stress about an event she had to plan that was occurring that evening, but also shared a significant positive development: she had been

using the piano to manage her stress outside of our session times. Johanna described her recent experiences with the piano, saying it helped her "get out my stress about this thing [event]" and that she had been "music therapizing myself" by improvising, writing songs, and singing. She noted that playing the piano had become a way for her to express thoughts she couldn't verbalize, stating, "it was just a chance for me to say what I was thinking or say what I wasn't sure how to say."

Johanna's comfort with the piano had noticeably increased, as she mentioned feeling less fear about her upcoming proficiency exams. She described her relationship with the piano as being "on the scale of friend," appreciating that her recent playing was purely for her own benefit: "It's not perfect every time…but it's the fact that it's not for a class." This session marked a significant step as Johanna felt comfortable enough to ask me to leave the room while she played, although I kept the recording on as she requested so I could go back and listen to it later.

During her solo time, Johanna's playing was initially exploratory but grew more confident and steady. She used the sustain pedal freely and experimented with various ideas, even incorporating some quiet singing. Johanna Music 7.1 Despite an unexpected interruption by another student who came in to do homework, Johanna's playing didn't falter; if anything, it became more assured and full. She and the student engaged in some conversation without Johanna missing a beat. Johanna Music 7.2

In the debrief, Johanna admitted to initially struggling to get into the session, feeling like she wasn't doing justice to the beautiful piano in the choir room versus the crappy, broken down upright piano in the music therapy clinic. However, she eventually relaxed and enjoyed experimenting with sounds and ideas. She said that before the student entered the room, she was

“just existing” and not worried about how she sounded. The presence of the other student initially disrupted her, but she soon adopted a “screw it” attitude, deciding to play as if performing her “magnum opus.” This mindset helped her channel her frustration about someone who had been causing her stress, aiming to “take it out on the piano.”

Johanna reflected that playing the piano in this session felt more connected to her emotions, noting that when she plays while angry, her music often transitions to more relaxed and calm tones. Despite still feeling infuriated by class piano, she found that strong emotions led to more interesting sounds. She described her relationship with the piano as progressing along the friend spectrum but acknowledged it as a “private friend” due to concerns about external judgment. Looking ahead, Johanna expressed a desire to continue playing what she’s feeling in the next session.

Session 8: The poser’s therapist

Johanna appeared in high spirits in this session, more relaxed and articulate than usual. However, she admitted being a bit distracted due to a friend having a seizure in class earlier. Despite this, she shared positive news about her recent class piano test, describing it as flowing naturally and making her feel "very confident." Over the prior week, she had been playing the piano for her own creativity, finding it "very enjoyable" and "very comfortable." She emphasized that this personal playing allowed her to experiment and express emotions, feeling like “a weight had been taken off me and at the same time increased my mood even if my mood was positive already.”

Johanna noted that playing with her feelings helped her become more aware of stress and physical tension related to piano playing. She felt "very positively" about playing piano in this session, describing it as “non-threatening, familiar, and inclined to go towards.” Ironically, she

mentioned that despite the piano being the most threatening musical instrument, she was inclined to approach it with a “child’s brain” and just have fun. She likened her relationship with the piano to a “sympathetic ear,” saying it listens and responds without always providing a solution, akin to a therapist. However, she second-guessed this comparison, feeling like a "poser" because she doesn't know what she's doing at the piano.

For the free play time during this session she said that she wanted to explore playing what she’s feeling while also having musical experiences playing with me but wasn’t sure how we would be able to accomplish that but “you can’t read my mind.” After some discussion about it, she reminded herself that the music we create in our free play doesn’t have to be “good.” I suggested that we choose an instrument for me that would allow for creative freedom on her part without her self-imposed inhibitions like choosing rhythmic instruments for me instead of melodic. She chose a large gathering drum and some small hand drums for me.

Johanna started boldly with loud, strong notes in the lower register, experimenting with different sounds and creating dissonance in the upper register. Eventually we found a groove together and towards the end the music became slower and more melancholy, leading me to grab the ocean drum to complement her playing. Johanna Music 8.1 After a brief pause, the second movement I can only describe as magical, with heartfelt, bold music that connected us deeply. I visualized a boat in a storm transitioning to calm waters. Johanna Music 8.2 In the third movement, Johanna attempted a rhythmic pattern but initially struggled, exclaiming, “oh I can’t do it, I can’t do it!” before trying again more comfortably. The improvisation ended abruptly due to time constraints and Johanna second-guessing what she was playing. Johanna Music 8.3

During the debrief, Johanna explained that each movement had a vision from her personal life, helping her express and let go of many feelings. She described the first movement

as "vomiting her thoughts out," while in the second movement, she became more conscious of creating a musical picture and focusing her thoughts. Her focus during this free play was mostly about how she's grown as a person and personal, traumatic experiences she had in her past and how it's been brought up in her life recently. In the third movement, she visualized "little dancing stars" that felt "light and yellow."

Johanna noted a significant shift in her approach to sessions, moving from people-pleasing to focusing on her own needs. She shared a story from a couple weeks prior where she had a "mental debacle" and so she went to a practice room piano to express her emotions, feeling a need to tell me about the experience. She credited her participation in this research study, theory knowledge, and improvisation skills for her current ability to express emotions on the piano. Reflecting on this session's free play, she acknowledged changes in rhythm and tempo, sometimes intentional and sometimes not, but noted that these did not hold her back. Finally, she mentioned that the testing environment in class piano exacerbates her performance anxiety.

Session 9: The non-threatening (but still a little bit threatening) calm yet chaotic husky

Johanna entered the session in high spirits, sharing that her recent piano test went very well. She took the test in the professor's office, which she found to be a "non-threatening" approach. She felt "very well" about piano playing in this session and mentioned she only had one more piano exam for the semester, along with an upper division exam for her music therapy degree that includes a piano proficiency component. Johanna expressed feeling "very, very positive" about piano playing lately, saying, "I'm starting to actually really enjoy it and want to pursue it more…it's not as threatening to get to work on it." She described her relationship with the piano as "non-threatening….inviting even…fun, dare I say." She compared her relationship to the piano now like a dog that she likes from a distance and is now getting to know more

personally. “[The piano] is one of those calm dogs. But every once and a while it barks and that can be threatening. [Like] a husky.”

During free play, Johanna wanted to explore playing together, curious but anticipating it might be “chaotic.” I suggested she play the upright piano while I played the electric keyboard. Johanna began with a rhythmic and chordal pattern. I incorporated dissonant notes and syncopation to align with her desire for chaos. Gradually, Johanna started to relax and add more unorthodox elements. We eventually synced up, and she later shared that she visualized a train zooming by, with the cross rhythms and hairpin dynamics enhancing this imagery. Johanna Music 9.1 Encouraging her to embrace chaos fully, I suggested moving away from a tonal center and meter. Initially hesitant, Johanna began by randomly banging her hands on the piano, leading to a highly dissonant and spontaneous movement reminiscent of 20th-century composers like Prokofiev. The playing was free, relaxed, and deeply connected, to the point where it sounded like one person was playing. Johanna Music 9.2 Between this movement and the next one, Johanna was laughing and analytically planning the next movement. Starting with a playful head-banging against the piano, the third movement was slower, more relaxed, and spontaneous but seemingly more reserved. Johanna Music 9.3

In the debrief, Johanna was cheerful and energetic. She said she “did not realize how much chaos was brewing inside her body.” Describing the free play as “random but at the same time it felt like there were occasional moments of structure…this is the motion my hands are feeling used to, it creates a sound I like,” she used words like “adventurous,” “creative,” “good,” and “fun.” She hadn’t considered that “positive chaos” could be a beneficial outlet, explaining that the perception of chaos as positive or negative depended on her mood. For example, playing

with feelings of anger or sadness would be “negative chaos.” She also noted, “beauty can be ugly.”

The debrief interview was overall chaotic, with Johanna often going on tangents and using numerous analogies. She acknowledged that, as a structured and ordered person, it was good for her to “vent” and embrace chaos occasionally. Johanna noted significant changes in her relationship with the piano, now viewing it as fun rather than threatening. She expressed a desire to focus on making more musical connections together in the next session.

Session 10: We’re buddies…but not with you

In this final session before end-of-year exams, Johanna felt “pretty good” about her upcoming final piano exam. She described her relationship with the piano as, “we’re hanging out…we’re buddies.” Reflecting on the previous week’s session, we discussed the “chaos” and its impact. Johanna aimed to focus on “gaining a sense of both myself and others in the space and an awareness of how that can fluctuate.” She requested that we both play pianos again and keep the hand pan on standby.

Johanna began with a rhythmic left-hand pattern, typical for her. Johanna seemed more reserved in this session, with moments of her self-imposing ideas of what music she should create, reminiscent of our earlier sessions. As the music progressed, it became ethereal with a wide dynamic range, evoking triumph, sadness, anticipation, and apprehension. She ended the first movement and, while transitioning, commanded her left hand to “now you play,” shifting to bold, triumphant chords and booming bass notes. The music grew quieter and more reserved over time. Johanna Music 10.1 When she tried to transition to a rhythmic pattern, she struggled, stopping to apologize and explain that a “musical idea is forming…that’s all up to the player now, isn’t it?” Johanna Music 10.2 She felt her body wasn’t playing what she wanted, describing

her struggle while still playing little bits on the piano. I encouraged her to play only what she felt comfortable with, leading to more confident and joyful playing. The music grew big and loud before fading into a reflective state. Johanna Music 10.3

Johanna reflected in the debrief that she found the free play more difficult during this session, struggling to take the chaos and musical ideas and "make it a musical connection." She felt challenged in getting the piano to "speak… speak!" and articulating her ideas. I thought this was interesting since we intended to be more musically connected before we started the free play. She brought up that she thought she had trouble becoming "buddies" with my piano meaning that she struggled to make what she felt like was a musical connection with my piano. After listening to her describe her experience, I felt like it would be helpful for me to point out that I felt that Johanna's self-imposed ideas of what is "musical" held her back from being fully immersed, connected, and creative in the music. After I shared my thoughts, Johanna acknowledged that she noticed there was a sense of thought and trying to be "musical." "I think I made it more into this rule…and I had to work with intent to break said rules and it was still very difficult to do."

Johanna requested one more minute at the piano to "play whatever the hell." She chose the intention to "make something colorful." We returned to the piano, and I set a timer for one minute. Johanna played boldly with a rhythmic pattern, which I matched. Though still reserved, she seemed a bit freer. Johanna Music 10.4 I appreciated that Johanna requested we meet in person for the final interview to make music together one more time, despite this being our last session because I felt like we left our music and session unfinished.

Final Interview: My homie

Following her last piano class exam and the piano portion of her upper division exam, Johanna reflected on her experiences and participation in the research study. She described her last piano exam as going smoothly: "[it] fell into my hands very easily and it just felt comfortable, and it didn't feel like I was straining anywhere in my hand." She mentioned using the visual of the Tanzanian children from a previous session to relax and focus, realizing afterward, "oh wait, I'm not incompetent with piano." Although stressed about the piano part of her upper division exam, she ultimately felt more confident on piano than guitar, appreciating her professors' acknowledgment of her progress.

Regarding her piano performance anxiety, Johanna said that her nerves, "[weren't] nearly as significant as they have been at certain times." She felt "willing," "ready," "prepared," "playing without mistakes," and "just playing it for fun," experiencing functionality instead of debilitating anxiety. Comparing her piano exams from the beginning of the semester to now, she noted a "night and day difference."

Johanna credited the research study for decreasing her performance anxiety. She explained, "You have to break me down…you had to say, 'This is for you. Do whatever the hell you want.' Bang, bang, bang. Great, beautiful…but after the process of breaking [me] down and [I could get] more comfortable in a piano space." She appreciated the encouragement to think more "avant-garde" and my contribution to pushing her out of her comfort zone, such as playing the upright piano instead of the electric and leading on the piano instead of being the accompanist. A significant turning point for her was when I asked the question, "what if you don't make that musical?" which led to more practice outside our sessions and increased comfort with the piano.

Johanna went on to describe the therapeutic relationship as crucial to her progress: “The therapeutic relationship was important for encouragement and gave me experimental methods.” She mentioned the session with the hand pan and playing the twilight stars, which helped her because she couldn’t mess up her perception of what is musical. Using different rooms for sessions also forced her out of her comfort zone by not getting too comfortable with any particular piano.

She described that outside of the context of the study, she had played the piano to express feelings and had volunteered in her instrumental improvisation class and felt that doing these things were beneficial to decreasing her piano performance anxiety. Her theory classes also helped, bringing everything together until “things just started to make sense to the point where I now understood piano accompaniment.” She now felt “freedom” and “clarity” when sitting at the piano, no longer seeing a mess of keys but understanding where she was going and how to get where she wanted to go.

Reflecting on her relationship with the piano, she said, “He’s cool. He’s a homie. It’s a friend. It’s [more] than a friend, he’s a homie.” She reclaimed a song that reminded her of an abusive person by playing it during her upper division exam. She requested we make music together following the interview, describing her desire to play “victory” after the interview. The music she wanted to play was “fun,” in a “groove,” and “happy to be alive.” And we did play, ending the session on a high note. Johanna Final Interview Music

Summary

Johanna completed the questionnaire and K-MPAI again several days after the final interview. Johanna indicated that she had generally less anxiety around music performance anxiety and piano performance anxiety (scoring 5 for both) and less anxiety around piano

proficiency exams (scoring 6). According to her K-MPAI, she showed a general trend towards decreased performance anxiety particularly in the areas of proximal somatic anxiety and worry about performance with a score of 39%. She indicated having some worry/dread focused on self or other scrutiny with a score of 77% and feelings of depression and hopelessness with a score of 71%. She also reported a significant improvement in the areas of memory with a score of 50%. She did not report any improvement in the areas of anxious apprehension with a score of 56%.

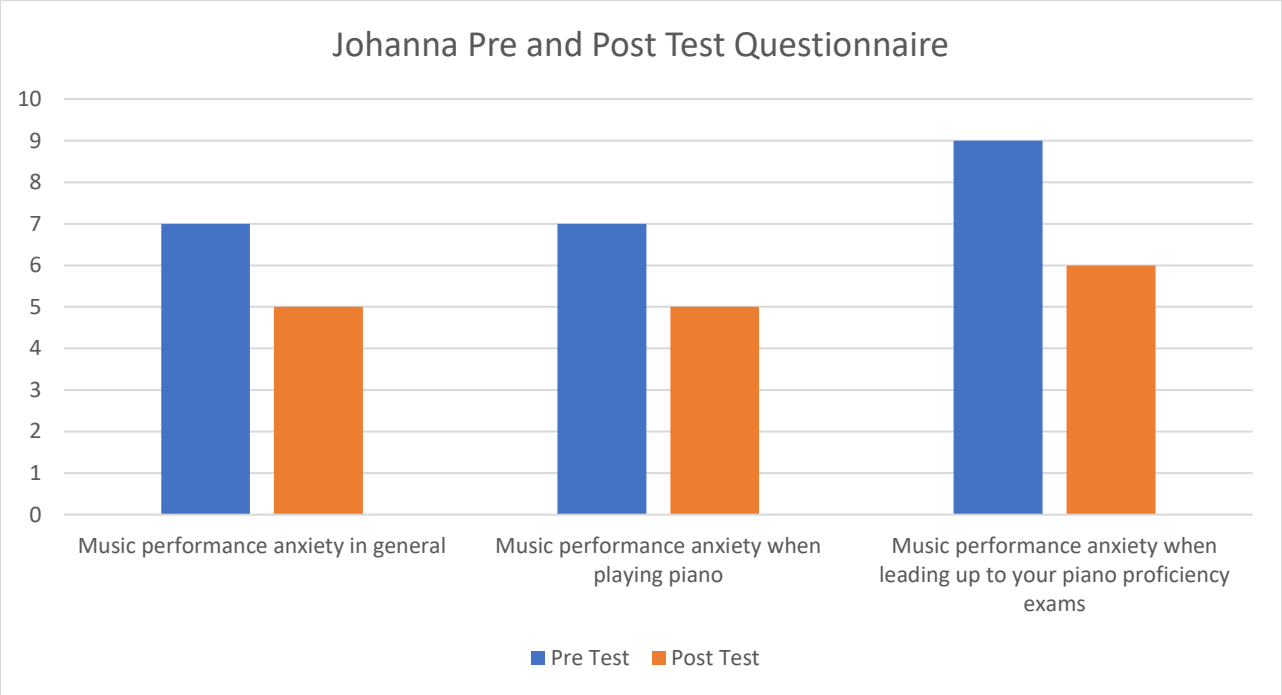


Table 1.1

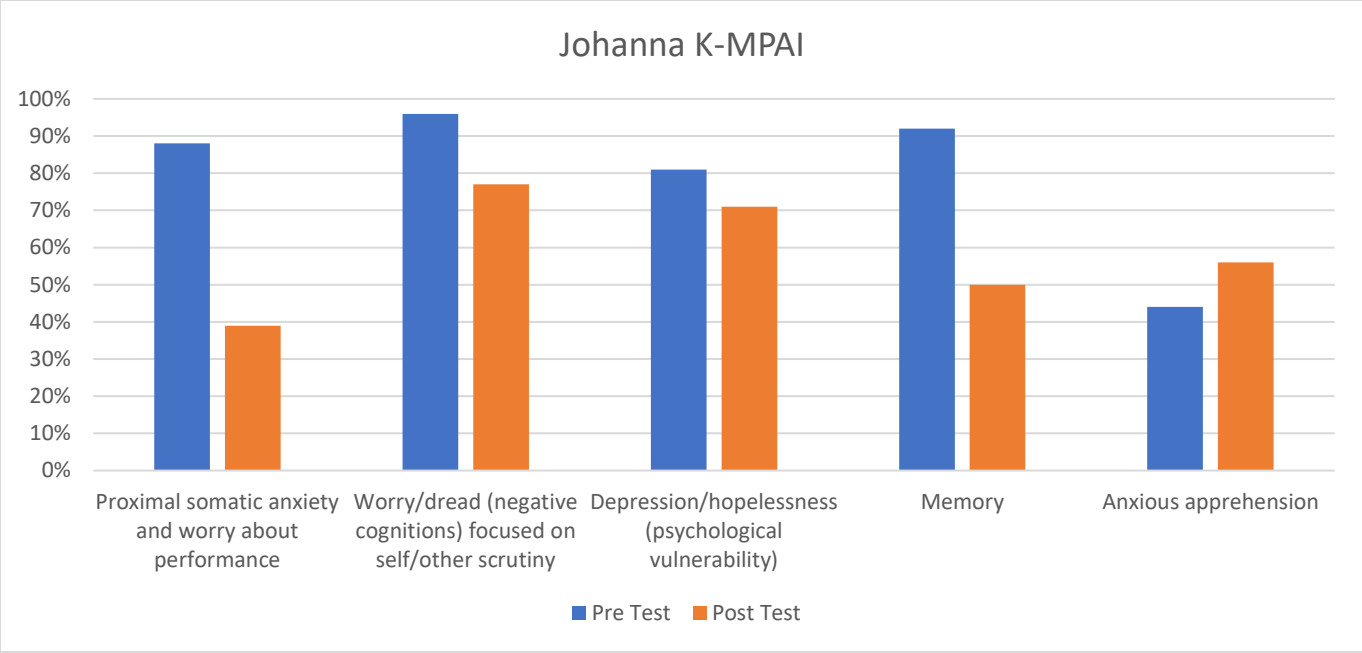


Table 1.2

Throughout our ten sessions, Johanna's journey with the piano revealed a profound transformation in both her technical skills and emotional connection to the instrument. Initially, Johanna approached the piano with considerable anxiety and self-imposed expectations, which often hindered her ability to fully engage with the music. Barriers to overcoming her PPA were deeply rooted in her experiences with class piano, where the emphasis on technique and theory left her feeling inadequate and overwhelmed. She specifically mentioned that her anxiety began in Class Piano 3 when they started working on hand independence, which she found unnatural and uncomfortable. This struggle was compounded by a lack of access to a piano outside of class, inhibiting her ability to express emotions and practice freely. Johanna's fear of making bad music and her imposter syndrome around playing "nice" pianos further exacerbated her PPA, making the piano a source of stress rather than joy.

A critical aspect of Johanna's transformation was her shift in mindset regarding what it means to be "musical." Initially, her people-pleasing tendencies and fear of not meeting

expectations led her to feel that she always had to play in a certain structured, traditionally musical way. This fear of failure and making bad music was restrictive and limiting. However, our sessions focused on free play and experimental techniques, which allowed her to break free from these constraints. Encouraging her to embrace avant-garde approaches and play without worrying about tempo or musicality was pivotal. She found it helpful when I played instruments that didn't interfere with her perception of what was musical, allowing her to relax and just exist in the moment. This, along with my encouragement to take the lead and experiment, significantly reduced her anxiety and helped her reconnect with the piano in a more natural and enjoyable way.

Johanna’s personal reflections highlighted the emotional barriers she faced with the piano. She recounted memories of playing the piano at her grandmother’s house as a child and how free play on the piano brought back memories, both joyous and traumatic. The piano became an outlet for her emotions, a way to express and process feelings that were otherwise difficult to articulate. For instance, she mentioned reclaiming a song that had attached memories of an abusive relationship, turning it into a source of strength rather than pain. This therapeutic use of the piano was crucial in helping her overcome the fear and anxiety that initially hindered her playing.

By the conclusion of our sessions, Johanna's relationship with the piano had evolved dramatically. She described the instrument as a "buddy" and a "homie," indicating a deep personal connection and comfort level that was previously absent. Her final exams, which she approached with remarkable composure and confidence, underscored this transformation. Johanna reported a considerable decrease in performance anxiety and an increased ability to enjoy playing the piano for its own sake. She found that incorporating visuals and getting into

the creative free play mindset from our sessions helped her stay focused and relaxed during exams. The combination of our creative play together, her coursework in theory and instrumental improvisation, and her personal practice brought everything together, providing her with the freedom and clarity she needed to express herself through the piano.

Johanna's journey highlights the importance of a holistic approach in addressing performance anxiety, blending therapeutic support, creative freedom, and technical knowledge to foster a profound and lasting change. The therapeutic relationship we built was essential in providing her with the encouragement and experimental methods needed to explore the piano with substantially reduced fear. My role in pushing her buttons and encouraging her to step out of her comfort zone, like playing the upright piano instead of the keyboard, was crucial in her growth. Her experiences underscore that overcoming performance anxiety is not solely about technical proficiency but also about finding joy, connection, and self-expression in music. This multifaceted approach ultimately led Johanna to a place where she could appreciate the piano not just as an instrument, but as a companion in her musical journey.

Wade

Wade is a college student studying music therapy a public university in Western Pennsylvania. At the time of the study, he was enrolled in class piano 4 and was a Post Bacc student in the music therapy program. He is an adult between the ages of 31-40 years old. He identifies as white, a cisgender male, and heterosexual. He identifies with Christianity as his religion and describes his current socioeconomic status as lower/middle class. He reported having the most performance anxiety when playing piano and leading up to his piano proficiency exams as indicated on the self-assessment portion of the pre-test questionnaire (scoring 9 for both). He reported having slightly less music performance anxiety in general (scoring 8) and the

least amount of anxiety while performing his piano proficiency exams (scoring 7). According to the K-MPAI, he had moderate difficulty with memory around performance anxiety (67%) and had always been anxious about performing (67%). He also struggled moderately with generational transmission of anxiety (55%), worry/dread (negative cognitions) focused on self/other scrutiny (54%), proximal somatic anxiety and worry about performance (53%), and anxious apprehension (44%). He only minimally was prone to depression/hopelessness (psychological vulnerability) (35%). He had mostly strong parental empathy (21%).

Session 1: A combative acquaintance

In the first session, Wade immediately went to sit at the upright piano, highlighting his initial comfort with the instrument despite describing himself as “pretty bad at piano.” He expressed a “looming stress” about his semester workload but felt it was manageable. Wade's interest in the study stemmed from his nervousness about playing piano, especially in facilitating music therapy sessions, contrasting with his natural ease with the guitar. Despite his self-critique, Wade found the piano in the music therapy clinic comforting, likening it to the one at his parents' house where he took childhood lessons. He shared his use of "mood-altering substances" and anxiety medications, noting his reduction of use since attending school, and expressed interest in alternative coping methods for performance anxiety.

Wade described his daily music practice routine, emphasizing his goal-oriented approach rather than creative freedom, feeling “not good enough” to simply play spontaneously. He characterized his relationship with the piano as “combative,” viewing it as the last instrument he needed to get comfortable on. During the session, Wade asked questions about free play, seeking guidance on how to approach it. His initial playing was simple and structured, reminiscent of class piano exercises. Wade Session 1.1 As he progressed, he began experimenting with riffs and

patterns, though he often reverted to more simplistic structured playing. He commented on the difficulty of piano compared to guitar, highlighting the challenge of visualizing notes.

As Wade continued, his playing became more varied and emotional, incorporating interesting melodies and mimicking sounds from an orchestra that was rehearsing in a nearby room. He oscillated between structured exercises and more free-form playing. Wade Music 1.2 During the debrief interview, Wade said he felt “a little more comfortable practicing” and motivated to play piano at home with “a little less stress.” He described his relationship with the piano as “acquainted…not friendly…not familiar…like an acquaintance.” For the next session, Wade expressed a desire to draw inspiration from movie scores and suggested dimming the lights to create a more conducive environment for free play.

Session 2: We’re friendly…ish

In the second session, Wade expressed confidence about his semester workload, despite facing a piano test in the coming days. Although he felt capable of completing his tasks, he admitted feeling intimidated by the "notes on the page," which he found "daunting." However, improvising on the piano was “fun…it’s not a stress.” Wade aimed to incorporate elements from his piano test into his improvisation and described his relationship with the piano as “cordial…friendly-ish.” He wished he had more knowledge and wished that he wasn't "ashamed of it," feeling he didn’t have a great relationship with the piano.

Wade asked a lot of questions again about the structure of the free play session, seeking to balance creativity with practicing for his piano test. The only guidelines I gave him was for his focus to be engaging creatively at the piano. He joked that he wasn’t going to just “pound on the keys.” And I joked back that he could. Wade requested I play the electric piano while he played the upright piano. After dimming the lights, as he requested last week, Wade began playing

simple chord progressions with a pop song flair. It took some time to synchronize our improvisation, but as the music evolved, we became more in sync, creating a flowing, melodic interplay. The music varied in mood from epic to deeply emotional, reflective, anticipatory, and joyful. This session reminded me of the joy of creating music freely and from the heart, fulfilling the purpose of the study and my own personal need for musicking. Wade Music 2

During the debrief, Wade wished he had more reasoning behind his playing but felt "calm and relaxed," believing he was "doing something worthwhile." He contrasted this with practicing class piano exercises, which he viewed as a means to an end. He decided against integrating these exercises into the free play, feeling it "wasn't appropriate...it didn't fit with the vibe" and would have "messed up the moment of sound." After the free play, Wade felt more friendly with the piano and eager to practice, aiming to balance required practice with playing for fun. He used workmanship tools as an analogy for understanding the piano and other instruments, feeling "less intimidated" to create something.

For the next session, Wade expressed a desire to pick pieces out of a song or follow more along with my playing on the electric keyboard. He felt that the free play was like a conversation where he talked too much. I suggested he engage in free play on his own throughout the week and bring any musical ideas to our next session to expand on together, instead of bringing in a pre-composed song. This approach would allow him to explore his creativity while building on his improvisational skills in a more structured and intentional way. He ran out of the room quickly after we finished the debrief interview, seeming excited to get to practicing and continuing creative free play on his own.

Session 3: The indifferent antagonist

In this session, Wade appeared distracted and anxious, eager to finish so he could attend to other tasks. He shared that his class piano test went well and that he's been trying to use the piano more in his music therapy clinicals. He expressed frustration, feeling that the piano creates a physical barrier between him and his clients. This separation makes him feel like there's a "learning curve," and when he messes up, it affects his therapeutic relationship. Wade mentioned, "I bet if I was better at it...if I could get more creative in the way I incorporate it...it motivates me to be a little bit better." He felt that his ease with the piano would translate to his clients' ease as well.

Wade had a lot on his mind, including other assignments, and wanted to use the session to relax and "work on my posture" inspired by his recent attendance at a musician's health workshop. He described his relationship to the piano as "antagonistic" and "indifferent," seeing it mainly as an instrument for testing, not for fun. His music therapy professors had been encouraging students to use more piano and other instruments instead of just guitar in their clinicals. For the free play, he wanted to focus on his breathing and posture while experimenting with musical ideas. We recreated a clinical setting with chairs in a semicircle behind the piano to simulate playing for clients. Wade played by himself while I sat in a chair taking notes on my iPad and allowing myself to listen fully and presently with the music.

During the free play, Wade started with basic chords and moved into melodic lines, showing hesitation when he "messed up." He explored different musical ideas, transitioning into scales and chord inversions. As he played, I journaled, my typing adding an interesting sound element. This was reminiscent of the interruption of the creation of art in an academic environment. His music became minor, more dissonant, and free, alternating between sinister

and playful tones. He seemed deep in a meditative state, ending naturally on a dominant major chord as we ran out of time. Wade Music 3

In the debrief, Wade talked about the key signatures he played in and mentioned feeling hungry. When asked what was going on in his head, he admitted thinking about other assignments and his to-do list for other classes, which hindered his creativity. He felt "spacey" at times, playing cadences to feel his body move and "force himself to feel something." He described the free play as "hazy," like driving at night in the dark with a sense of "uncertainty." His relationship with the piano remained "apathetic," though he acknowledged the need to improve. For the next session, Wade wanted to bring in a song and practice it repeatedly, using it as inspiration to improvise. Throughout the conversation, Wade appeared anxious, fidgeting and tapping his toes with obvious physical signs and symptoms of something being different that day than our other sessions.

Session 4: A barrier to get over

After a couple of canceled sessions, Wade returned, expressing that he felt “pretty anxious” about an upcoming piano test. He shared his regret for not practicing more as a child, revealing that the anxiety stemmed from the pressure to pass this test, which would exempt him from the piano proficiency exam, a hurdle he wanted to avoid. Wade noted that he needed to dedicate significant time to practice and mentioned environmental issues like noise in the testing room, which he found “not very conducive to taking a test.”

When asked about his feelings towards piano playing in our session, Wade expressed a desire to use the opportunity to work on material for his class piano test, including different chord progressions and scales. He described his relationship with the piano as “eager to approach it… kind of attack it almost in a way… like knock it down, get it done… it’s not like enjoyable

for me necessarily more like a barrier to get over… I want to overcome it." This led to a discussion about the piano test feeling like a "competitor." Wade explained that while he enjoyed jamming and playing popular songs on the piano with friends, he felt much less comfortable with the structured nature of class piano tests, which he found "scary." He contrasted the creativity and lack of stress in jamming with the rigidity and pressure of testing, noting that music in a test setting feels disconnected compared to the natural, connected flow of playing with friends.

For the free play, Wade expressed difficulty in focusing solely on creative exploration with the looming piano test. I suggested bridging the gap between his feelings of connectedness and competition with the piano by riffing around on the chords for his exam. Wade eagerly sat at the piano and began playing, initially in a prescriptive manner similar to class exercises. Wade Music 4.1 Gradually, the mood of the music varied more, though it remained largely consistent with big block chords. As the session progressed, Wade introduced more emotional and interesting elements, mixing in pieces from his class assignments. Wade Music 4.2 The session concluded with a playful and triumphant musical exchange. Wade Music 4.3

During the brief debrief, Wade discussed the technical challenges of class piano exercises, comparing them to a computer crashing. He described the free play as the most enjoyable session yet, calling it "freeing" because he had a loose idea of what he wanted to do, giving him structured options to pick from. Wade hummed a recurring melody from the session and expressed eagerness to practice for his test. He acknowledged that the free play session felt more akin to jamming rather than testing. When I asked him what his relationship to the piano was he said that he felt bad every time I asked him that because he feels like his answer is always the same. "It's a piano, it's cool…indifferent. I like them, they're neat…I'm not crazy about them. I love listening to the piano but I wish I was better. I know I need to practice more to be

better. It's a reminder that I should practice more…regretful." He suggested a loose structure for the next session, focusing on a few keys, and left the room quickly, eager to continue practicing at home.

Session 5: The rival

Wade was very jittery and chatty throughout the check-in, sipping his energy drink. He started the session by saying he felt really good about his last piano test and that he "aced" it. For his next test, he mentioned needing to learn a Russian polka, which he described as "a little hard" because "it's like real piano." When asked how he felt about piano playing today, he expressed frustration, feeling bad for always giving the "shitty answer" of "indifferent." He tried to find a quote in a book to better describe his feelings but ended up not reading from it. He described his relationship with the piano as "like an acquaintance or like an old friend…I feel friendly with it…but I'm never going to master it." Watching skilled pianists play filled him with awe, though he felt comfortable enough to use the piano in a music therapy setting. He found it "reassuring" to hear that many bedside music therapists don't use the piano in their clinical work. For Wade, the piano felt like "a monkey [on] my back…I got to find a way to just get really comfortable with it."

Wade shared a story about playing the piano around an old friend who complimented his playing, to which he responded that he "sucked" at piano, pointing out that his friend didn't understand what "good" is. He was beginning to understand patterns, helping him with skills like transposing chord progressions, but he still got frustrated when comparing himself to proficient pianists. He likened his relationship with the piano to a rivalry: "You're never gonna beat it, but you're always going to get a good match out of it."

When asked about free play, Wade said he wanted to "jam in G" and be inspired by TV and movie scores as well as the atonal material from his theory class. He aimed to stay in minor keys, reflecting the sad, dark, and gray weather, despite being in a good mood. He wanted to create tension and anticipation in his music, contrasting with his usual pop style, and "be weird about it." He was excited about helping a friend with a movie score project themed around existential ideas and hopelessness, which inspired his free play. Wade chose for me to play the electric piano while he played the upright, starting to play even as we were still talking. He incorporated elements he talked about, creating tense but epic music with recurring and expanding melodic ideas. Wade Music 5.1 Wade seemed very comfortable and confident at the piano, though I often felt lost and not an active player in his musical scene. Wade Music 5.2 Wade talked about incorporating this waltzy feel from his class piano assignment into his movie score. Wade Music 5.3 He stopped and talked more during this free play, ending with a "storm" and a rendition of "Tainted Love" by Soft Cell, and finishing with reflective, emotional, and minimal solo playing. Wade Music 5.4

During the debrief, we joked about the prevalence of death in history and how the ending to his free play sounded like someone died. Wade discussed feeling older than his fellow students as a post-bac student and advising them often to seize life. He tried to "paint a picture in his head" during the free play, alternating between "scary" and "hopeful" music, wanting it to end on a bad note. He focused less on technical playing and more on creating chords and clusters, seeing the piano as a "paintbrush" or a "musical being." Reflecting on their rivalry, he admitted, "[the piano] always wins, I mean I always leave just feeling more like 'maybe I'll get it next time.'" Getting good grades on piano tests reduced his stress, making him feel friendlier

towards the piano: “Every day that [I] get closer to the semester being over, the less stress I have and the more I’ll be able to be friendly with it.”

When pressed about his relationship to the piano, Wade found it hard to describe because he viewed the piano as an inanimate object: “It’s just a…it’s a piano. My relation to it is I’m approximately 17 feet away from it. I am near it, I can see it. I can play it if I want to. I can also not play it if I want to. I can look at it. My relationship to it is it’s just a thing.” He acknowledged the potential for anxiety around physical objects but didn’t care enough about the piano to hate it or be mad at it. For him, the piano was just a grade to move on to the next level of his life, like a pencil: “It’s a tool. It’s never gonna give me back anything.” He acknowledged that for some, the piano gives back love and a job, but for him, it just produces music: “It’s noise.” He speculated that in ten years, he might fall in love with it or never use it for his job and not care about it. The guitar, by contrast, had gotten him a job in the military and provided benefits. While piano tests gave him anxiety, the piano (as an inanimate object) itself didn’t.

We discussed the meaning of the word “relationship,” and Wade confessed feeling like he was “faking it” at the piano. He didn’t have much anxiety around it because he didn’t expect to use it professionally but felt he should be a good pianist because he was in music school and in his 30s. This made him feel “kind of bad, like ‘you’re lazy,’ like you should work harder but also like who cares?’ It’s not like I’m not going to eat if I don’t learn. It’s nice to know that challenge is there.” For the next session, Wade wanted to continue letting his mood influence his free play, incorporating movie scenes and emotions into his music.

Session 6: Getting something out of it

Wade started the session by discussing his upcoming class piano test, detailing his need to practice coordinating his hands for the Russian polka. He expressed a desire to “have some

fun with it" despite feeling "a little bit anxious" about the test. Wade arrived with a clear idea for the free play: improvising within the chord structure of his class piano material. His focus was on schoolwork and practicing, but he expressed a sense of anticipation. He explained that familiarity with the material reduces his anxiety about the tests. Wade also described the stress of the class environment, where the teacher rushes through scales due to time constraints, and students listen through headphones rather than observing the professor's hands. He wished the tests were conducted one-on-one in the professor's office. When asked about his feelings towards piano playing in our session, Wade said he "wanted to get this over with" due to other class obligations. However, he mentioned a riff he wanted to try during the free play and wanted to continue the "sad Russian story" from last time. He often felt bad for describing his relationship with the piano as "indifferent," but he did say he felt "excited" this time.

Wade began the free play with a piece resembling a funeral march, layered with the melody from the previous session. The session was typical for Wade, blending pop song styles and epic movie score elements, with clear influences from his class piano material. Throughout the free play, Wade seemed absorbed in his own musical world, barely acknowledging my presence. This raised questions about why he wanted me to play along. It felt like he was more focused on completing the session rather than reducing his performance anxiety. There were noticeable pauses and transitions, suggesting he was contemplating when to stop playing. Wade Music 6 Towards the end, he began talking while playing, transitioning into "Jingle Bells" in different keys, and riffed for another minute. He concluded by discussing specific intervals he liked, without a reflective conclusion to the music.

When asked about the free play experience, Wade described the musical elements, such as riffs and techniques, and the keys he used. He said he felt "spacey" and found the free play

more “free-flowing” compared to the “controlled” feeling last week. He described this session as feeling “pretty good” and “more musical,” particularly due to the melodic riff he incorporated. Wade also felt “hazy” as he was thinking about a research paper, using the free play as a mental break. He described the session as a “stress reliever” and felt it gave him a “good clear map” for his upcoming tasks. Wade planned to focus on specific keys and play without expectations for the next session, noting it took about five minutes to get into the free play this time.

Session 7: I’m going to be friendly with you. You’re going to be friendly with me.

Wade began the session by revealing he was in a “hot mood today” because he had to attend a viewing for a friend who had died from a drug overdose. Despite the urgency and distressing news, Wade maintained an upbeat and cheery demeanor and chose to proceed with the session. When asked about his overall experience participating in the study, Wade explained that it has helped reduce his stress around playing the piano. He mentioned how incorporating ideas from our sessions into his class piano test had made a significant difference: “It went great because I stopped thinking about it like I’m playing ‘music.’ I’m just going to sit down, I’m going to be friendly with you. You’re going to be friendly with me. This isn’t going to be a bad experience because if you go into the experience with the idea it’s going to be a bad experience it’s not going to be a good experience.” He discussed how the recurring question of his relationship with the piano, though frustrating, has become a useful mental tool. Wade admitted, “That question honestly kind of pisses me off because I never give you a good answer. But it’s not about answering the question. It’s about just posing the question to yourself before you get in the situation. Yeah, I’m not a concert pianist, but I can do this. And I know I can do it.” When I brought up the lack of musical interaction during our sessions, Wade noted that my electric piano

was too quiet for him to hear, although I noted that he could have brought it up earlier. We agreed to adjust our approach, and Wade suggested I play the drums instead.

Before the free play, Wade talked about his deceased friend's musical tastes, including bands like *The Grateful Dead* and *Phish*. I encouraged him to channel that energy and inspiration into the session. Wade began playing intensely and loudly, with a steady, fast rhythm in the lower register. Wade Music 7.1 As the music grew more personal and emotional, Wade spoke about the feelings surrounding young people's deaths, using words like “tumultuous” and expressions like, “you hope you go to heaven.” Wade Music 7.2 I accompanied his driving music with a steady clicking sound on the drum, creating a sense of urgency. The same melodic idea from previous sessions resurfaced, but this time it felt more reflective and personal. Wade Music 7.3 The music concluded very intensely, resembling a triumphant march infused with sadness and reflection. Towards the end, Wade mentioned that some of the music was inspired by a Coldplay song. Wade Music 7.4 In the final moments, he concluded the piece with a phrase, “now we’re going to go to heaven,” and began to sing, although the words were too quiet and muffled to discern. This part of the free play had an R&B feel. Struggling to resolve it, Wade ended the session by contemplating, “Is life 40…you die at 40?” Wade Music 7.5

After cleaning up the instruments in silence, we started the debrief. I emphasized that I was more interested in his personal experience rather than the specific musical material. Wade initially focused on the musical aspects, saying, “I was just thinking about licks and riffs and stuff,” but also mentioned, “lot of death on my mind…that’s about it.” When I asked if he would share the words he was singing, Wade chose to write them on the whiteboard instead of saying them aloud, stating, “I can’t say it.” He was clearly reluctant to discuss his feelings and preferred to talk about the riffs he played and their development into a song. His body language was closed

off, and he seemed eager to leave, exiting the room quickly as usual. He erased the words on the whiteboard before I had a chance to write them down. I respected his request to leave those as something personal for him and not a part of the study. Wade cancelled his next session.

Session 8: Still indifferent?

Wade started the session by mentioning his upcoming final piano test in the upcoming week, describing it as “not bad, it’s pretty easy.” He was focused on getting an A to avoid taking the cumulative piano proficiency exam. Despite a busy week, Wade agreed to have one more session before his final test. He seemed uninterested in talking or answering questions, expressing a desire to focus on his end-of-semester tasks. When asked about our last session, he simply mentioned his workload. Indifferent about the session’s direction, Wade requested I play the drum again and was quiet and reserved. When prompted to set an intention for the free play, Wade admitted, “I don’t even want to be here right now honestly, I just want to get through it. But since you phrased it like that, I’ll be a good sport about it and play by your rules. How about ‘happy?’...just definitely not ‘sad.’” He explained that he was trying to help me out with the study and felt it was important to be honest, even if sometimes playing music didn’t seem beneficial to him. Wade questioned the efficacy of "forcing someone to be creative" but agreed to set the intention of the free play as a break from his busy week.

During the free play, Wade appeared more engaged than previous weeks, excitedly choosing instruments for me, including the big floor drum and the hand pan. The session started with minor feeling and reflective music but evolved into something more major and uplifting, ending with the most definitive conclusion of any session. There were still moments of musical disconnect, but overall, the free play felt more dynamic and personal. Wade Music 8 After the session, Wade was more energetic and chatty than usual. He remarked, “I like that, that was

relaxing...that was pleasant," and he expressed that he felt that he had accomplished his intention: "That was relaxing…20 minutes of not thinking." When asked about the notion of "forcibly creative" he brought up earlier, Wade clarified that it was possible to be creative without strict parameters, though he found it easier to relax with defined key constraints. He expressed that class piano exercises felt more "recreative" than creative due to their structured nature.

In our debrief, Wade elaborated on his idea of creativity, noting that it involved doing something "different or new." He felt he wasn't skilled enough at piano to be truly creative and that creativity required practice. We discussed what makes music "good" or "musical," with Wade asserting that true musicality comes from the ability to play and improvise proficiently. He acknowledged that he had less anxiety about piano performance as the semester progressed, attributing it to becoming more comfortable with the class piano material and nearing the end of the course sequence. Despite initially feeling indifferent about the session, Wade seemed more relaxed and more invested in answering my questions. Wade cancelled his next and final session.

Final Interview

During our final debrief session over Zoom in finals week, Wade had just completed his last piano test of the semester. He reported acing the test despite having "got in his head a little too much" and utilized deep breathing to calm himself. Wade mentioned having less performance anxiety for this exam since it was the last one in the class piano series. He described participating in the study as "pretty nice," appreciating the "30 minutes-ish a week of uninterrupted time" for creativity, which he sometimes struggled to find on his own.

Wade felt the free play sessions in the study didn't help his performance anxiety directly but acknowledged they reduced his overall stress levels and increased his productivity around

schoolwork. He preferred structured practice for proficiency exams but valued the creative space the sessions provided without homework or practice quotas. He enjoyed when I played drums during free play, finding it helpful to "interact and kind of bounce ideas off." Wade also appreciated that the sessions weren't stressful because I was accommodating, allowing him to lead and be creative.

Surprisingly, Wade said he would participate in the study again because it was helpful to him. He agreed with the assumption that guided my research that free play could reduce stress if approached with competency rather than "screwing off." He felt like a "bad subject" due to his combat experience, which made other stressors seem insignificant: "When you've been shot at and you've almost died a few times like nothing really stresses me out like combat and war would stress me out…I don't let things stress me out because it's not life or death." The most impactful session for him was the one with the hand pan, as it allowed for a groove and "freedom." He found it easy to open up to me, describing me as a "good listener" and "easy to talk to," and felt the study helped him process and explore themes on the piano due to our communication and rapport.

Summary

Wade completed the questionnaire and K-MPAI again several days after the final interview. Wade indicated that he had generally less anxiety around general music performance anxiety (scoring 5), piano performance anxiety (scoring 7), and anxiety leading up to piano exams (scoring 6). According to his K-MPAI, he showed a general trend towards decreased performance anxiety particularly in the areas of worry/dread focused on self/other scrutiny with a score of 19%. He indicated having some proximal somatic anxiety and worry about performance with a score of 39% and feelings of depression and hopelessness with a score of 33%. He also

reported a significant improvement in the areas of anxious apprehension with a score of 17%. He did not report any improvement in the areas of music memory with a score of 75%.

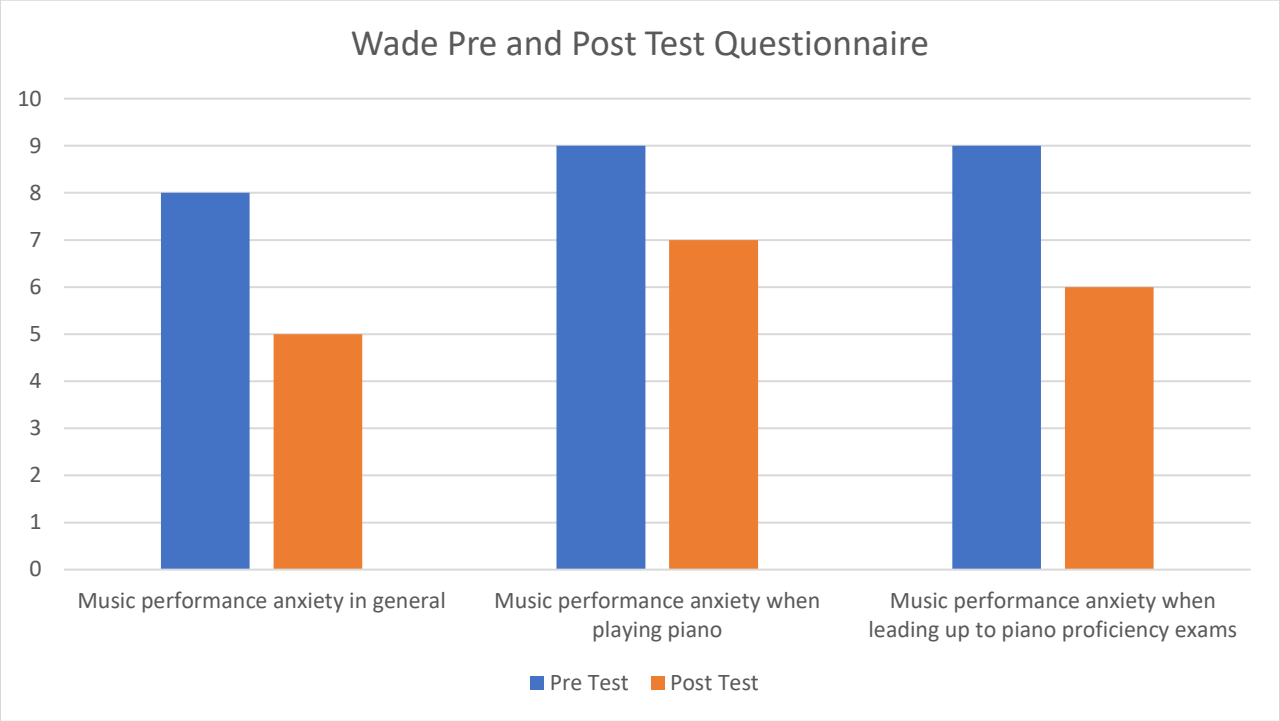


Table 2.1

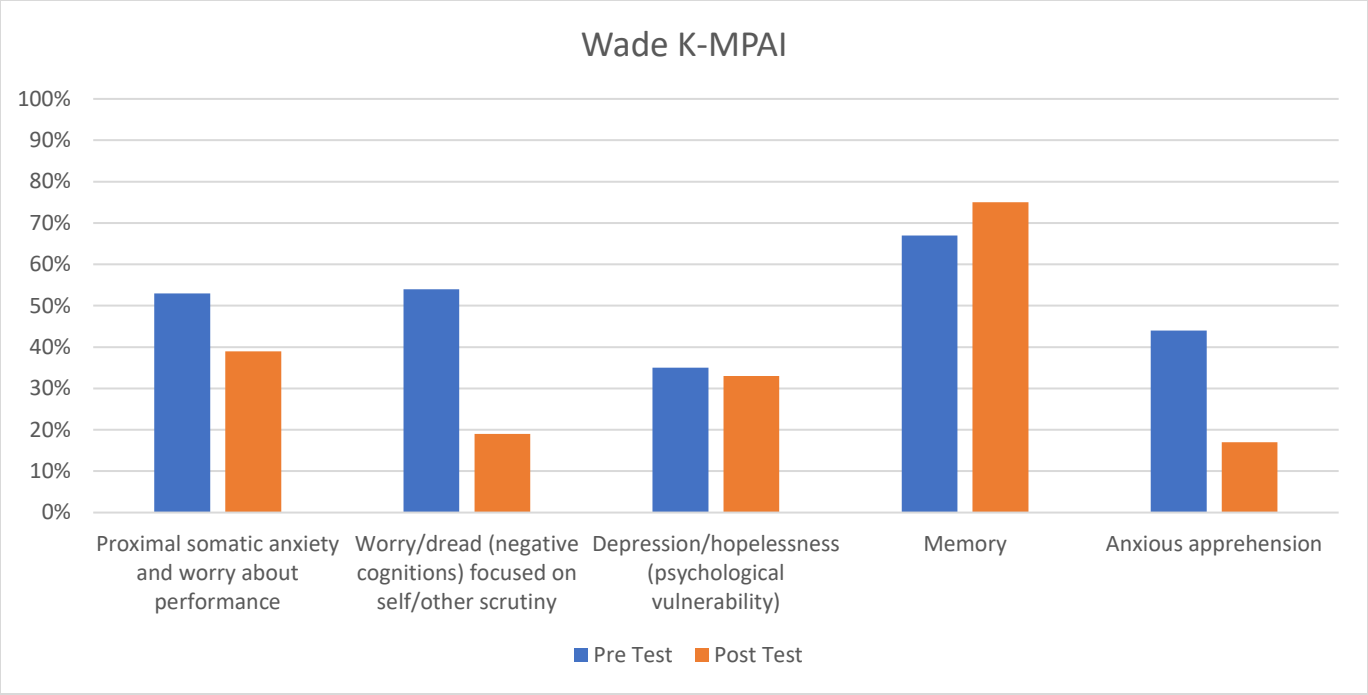


Table 2.2

Wade's participation in the study provided a deep dive into his complex relationship with the piano and how various factors influenced his experience. Over the course of the sessions, themes such as personal beliefs about musicality, the balance between creativity and structured practice, and the significance of a supportive therapeutic relationship emerged. Wade's journey revealed both challenges and growth, highlighting how his initial struggles with the piano evolved into a more nuanced understanding of his capabilities and stress management. Additionally, his personal life events and substance use played significant roles in shaping his experience throughout the study.

Wade's beliefs about the piano and his perceived inadequacies played a significant role in his experience. He often compared himself to concert pianists, feeling that he was "faking it" and not truly proficient. These comparisons fueled his anxiety and led him to question his musicality. However, as the sessions progressed, Wade began to view the piano less as an inanimate object and more as a potential ally. This shift was gradual and often met with resistance, especially

when confronted with questions about his relationship to the piano. Ultimately, he realized that approaching the piano as a friendly companion rather than a source of stress could positively influence his performance and overall experience.

Wade had mixed feelings about creativity and structured practice. While he appreciated the freedom that free play offered, he often felt insecure about ending sessions cleanly, which highlighted his discomfort with the piano. He found it easier to engage in free play when there were parameters around keys or chord progressions, drawing inspiration from TV, movies, and music theory classes. Despite his struggles, Wade recognized that structured practice was more beneficial for his proficiency exams, while free play helped decrease his overall stress levels and provided a much-needed creative outlet. His session following the death of his friend from a drug overdose was particularly poignant, as it influenced the intensity and emotional depth of his music, demonstrating how personal events could profoundly shape his creative expression.

Wade's use of mood-altering substances and medication for anxiety may have impacted various aspects of his study participation. These substances could have influenced his mood, energy levels, and overall engagement in the sessions. While he often appeared upbeat and cheery, there were times when he expressed a desire to get through sessions quickly, possibly indicating fluctuations in his motivation and emotional state. His substance use might have also affected his ability to fully immerse himself in the therapeutic process, potentially limiting the benefits he could derive from the study.

The therapeutic relationship was a crucial element in Wade's experience. He appreciated having dedicated time each week to engage with the piano creatively without the pressure of extra practice or learning quotas. This structure helped him manage his busy schedule and reduced stress in other areas of his life, enhancing his productivity. Wade valued the sessions for

their accommodating and supportive environment, which allowed him to lead and explore different elements on the piano. The rapport built during the study made him feel comfortable and open, enabling him to delve deeper into his musical exploration.

Wade's journey through the study was marked by personal growth and a redefined relationship with the piano. Initially plagued by anxiety and self-doubt, he gradually found value in structured creativity and the therapeutic benefits of the sessions. Through introspection and musical exploration, Wade learned to view the piano as a source of comfort and stress relief rather than a daunting obligation. His experience underscored the importance of a supportive therapeutic relationship and the positive impact of having a dedicated space for creative expression. Additionally, the influence of personal life events and substance use highlighted the complexity of his journey and the multifaceted nature of stress and anxiety management. Overall, Wade's participation in the study provided him with valuable insights and tools to better manage his stress and approach the piano with a more positive mindset.

Personal Reflection

I haven't engaged much in free, creative musicking with the piano between my undergraduate days and this study. Little bits here and there but nothing like the pouring out of my soul in my late teens and early 20s. In the days before I started working with the participants, I opened my old journal and played some songs I had written in college It was difficult to play them, thinking about the imperfections I would tweak now; the awkwardness of some of the chords and notes. I engaged in an improvisation with them with the purpose of preparing my heart and mind in working with these students. I felt still, like it was difficult to flow creatively with the piano. The improvisation started hopeful, and I felt joy and hope sitting at the piano again. It quickly evolved into one of the songs I wrote when I was in college, and I couldn't get it

out of my head. The words I wrote were *"I'm taking one for the team, I don't need someone to rescue me. I need to go where I'm meant to be. Set myself free."* I'm wondering if I'm feeling connected back to my college days and the struggle to take care of others in my music therapy work when I could barely take care of myself. I was in denial of my limitations and that I needed help just as much or even more so than my clients. I wondered how this idea would manifest itself as I embarked on my study and why these lyrics were the ones running through my head. Ruby Music 1

As I started sessions with the two students, I felt hopeful, excited, nervous. Having been out of the music therapy space for about 9 months due to an unplanned, extended maternity leave, I often had feelings of imposter syndrome coming back again. But it only took a moment of sitting at the piano for the old feelings of freedom and creative expression to come back again. Throughout the process of this study, there were times when I felt connected and grounded in the music and in connection with the study participants. At other times, not as much. As I wrote in my journal early on, "My mind (like Wade's) doesn't feel like I'm completely here." The struggles of missing my baby or difficulty finding childcare often infiltrated my thoughts and therefore, the creative process. "Life gets in the way of being creative sometimes and our mind gets focused on other things. What if we just took an hour each week to engage in creativity, meditation, focus, music for ourselves? How much 'healthier' would we be? How much better musicians, therapists, humans would we be?"

Later journal entries documented my obsession with listening to and playing the songs I wrote in college. I noted how I've become embarrassed by the obsession. I wrote, "It feels narcissistic to be singing along and obsessed with your own songs. But I feel so connected to them in a way I haven't felt connected to music in a long time. Like they are just the most raw,

most vulnerable versions of myself with no strings attached. There's themes of finding love, what I want out of my future, feeling like I need to be, feeling like I need to be perfect, losing love, God and demons, heaven, death, pain and suffering in the world." I wondered why I don't write songs and engage with the piano like I used to anymore and I determined the reason was twofold. I stopped writing when I graduated which was the same time I got engaged to my husband. The other reason is that I didn't have the space and time like I did when I was in undergrad where I was surrounded by creativity and music and would go to grand giant pianos in grand halls at 2 in the morning to sing and play my heart out. My creativity came out of my pain, my grief, my discovering myself. Is it possible that I'm too happy and content to truly be creative? Ruby Music 2

As the sessions progressed, thoughts around the dreaded imposter syndrome started to invade. I journaled often on feeling stuck and unsure about how sessions were going with Wade. "I feel like in our sessions lately, we have no connection musically and I'm just "existing" at the piano trying to find a place to jump into the music or asking if I should even jump in at all." Wade's sessions started to feel in stark contrast to Johanna's who had come into her own with using the piano to creatively express her feelings and emotions. I realized that Wade and Johanna almost moved through these sessions backwards of one another. Wade came into the sessions playing independently and engaging on the piano alone with no anxiety while Johanna came into the sessions barely even able to approach the piano let alone play it freely. I wrote: "The difference is that Johanna has journeyed to where she is now where Wade feels like he is still stuck in his own universe yet still reports having piano performance anxiety around exams and when using the piano in clinical spaces. That and his denial that he has any kind of relationship to the piano (an inanimate object)." Immediately following journaling, I engaged in musical

reflection. My improvisation started with disjointed two hands, similar to Prokofiev or other 20th century piano compositions. It sounded very similar to my first session with Wade and the ninth session with Johanna (which occurred right after this). Little to no tonal center or meter but somehow still connected in listening to the way the two hands interplayed and the unique rhythmic and harmonic combinations it made sometimes by accident and sometimes on purpose. I landed on G (the tonal center of mine and Wade's last two improvisations) and moved into a simple melody moving between Am and C. This resembled the kind of simple melody I craved to engage in musically with him again. The piece struggled to end, wanting to hold on and figure out where it goes next. Eventually it landed but it still doesn't feel resolved like the feeling of there still being something under the surface waiting to be revealed. Ruby Music 3

Towards the end of the sessions, I started to reflect about how I felt like I was the third case in my research study. Post-undergrad, the piano and I really lost touch. I didn't turn to it for support and processing like I used to. I used it for music therapy, or even making music with my husband. It wasn't until I went to graduate school that I started to reconnect with the piano on that personal relationship level. I started engaging in creative, reflexive projects as a part of my coursework and then as a part of this thesis. I rediscovered the songs I wrote in undergrad and starting listening to them like songs I connected with on the deepest level. Like I was listening to someone else when I was really just listening to my past self. No longer critical, no longer telling myself that they weren't good enough. Just feeling the deepness, the meaning, the connection.

One of the greatest privileges and challenges in this thesis for me personally was my new role of being a mother. I started this project when I was eight months postpartum and no longer employed as a music therapist. Motherhood brought its own challenges such as finding childcare, feeling "not here" mentally and emotionally. It also brought its own privilege in that I was

flexible and available for the many reschedules. It also allowed me to take a step back from music therapy work, refresh and recharge, and have a full tank for this study. Being a participant in this study allowed me to find that piece of myself again. Being a participant in this study made me realize that I am a mother, a music therapist, a friend of the piano, a musician, a creative, a student, a researcher, a human existing in the world.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the complex nature of MPA and its implications for undergraduate music students, particularly in high-pressure contexts like piano exams. The results of this study align with existing literature on performance anxiety, reinforcing the notion that MPA is a multifaceted issue with cognitive, physiological, and behavioral components (Barlow, 2000; Clark & Agras, 1991; Conklin, 2011; Steptoe & Fidler, 1987).

Research by Kenny (2011) highlights the prevalence of music performance anxiety and its complex, multifaceted nature, which can be exacerbated by self-imposed standards and external pressures. Both Johanna and Wade exhibited symptoms of this anxiety, with Wade's journey reflecting a tension between his obligation to be proficient and his personal indifference toward the piano and Johanna's showing how allowing preconceived ideas of how she should play the piano and what musicality is often contributing to her anxiety around piano playing. This aligns with Kenny's assertion that music performance anxiety often stems from a deep-seated fear of negative evaluation and the desire to meet certain expectations.

Results of the pre and post test measures correlate with themes that emerged from the case study narratives. Both participants saw a general decrease in self-reported levels of music performance anxiety in general, piano performance anxiety, and piano performance anxiety

related to piano proficiency exams. Both participants also self-reported a significant decrease in proximal anxiety and worry about performance as well as negative cognitions surrounding worry/dread focused on self/other scrutiny. The quantitative data of the pre and post test align with the narrative accounts of the participants' evolving relationship with the piano, where both participants expressed feeling more comfortability with the piano and less anxiety in their performance environments. The qualitative data further supports this, as the participants' reflections on their piano playing became less fear-driven and more focused on enjoyment, engagement, and emotional connection, suggesting a holistic reduction in performance-related stress.

A common discussion point among the participants was the impact of the class piano setting on their performance anxiety and outcomes. The participants highlighted how the classroom testing environment, pace of the material taught in class piano, and being unable to practice on the same piano they would be testing on significantly contributed to their PPA. Similarly, Guven's (2016) study found that these issues contributed to heightened anxiety levels before exams. Comparing both studies highlights the importance of addressing these environmental challenges to support student performance.

The coping strategies employed by the participants in this study, such as deep breathing, relaxation techniques, substance use, and increased practice, align with those identified in the literature (Burin & Osorio, 2016, 2017; Kenny et al, 2014; Orejudo et al, 2018). However, the study also highlights a gap in the use of professional support and formal counseling, which is consistent with Dews and Williams' (1989) finding that students often rely on informal support sources. Both participants of this study found the therapeutic relationship to be a crucial factor in decrease their PPA. This underscores the need for educational institutions to offer more

accessible and individualized support services for students struggling with MPA (Barros et al., 2022). The high prevalence of MPA and its potential to persist into professional life suggest that more proactive measures are needed to support students in developing effective coping strategies and accessing professional help when needed.

The potential of individual music therapy treatment as a treatment for MPA is supported by the findings of this study. The benefits of improvisation and music therapy interventions, as highlighted by Kim (2008) and Allen (2013), suggest that these interventions could be valuable additions to the repertoire of coping strategies for MPA. In this study, Johanna's use of the piano for emotional release and Wade's exploration of his relationship with the instrument illustrate how creative free play in the context of a music therapy session can serve as a therapeutic outlet for processing complex emotions. The study's participants reported positive outcomes from these techniques, indicating that further research and integration of music therapy into college music departments could be beneficial.

Implications for Practice

Incorporating creative free play across various disciplines at college campuses could significantly benefit students dealing with performance anxiety. This study shows the potential of creative arts therapies to alleviate anxiety and decrease performance anxiety in both music and other areas with high-pressure performance expectations such as dance and theater. These sessions provide a safe space for exploration and expression, fostering resilience and confidence in students and an increased positive relationship with their craft.

College counseling centers should prioritize integrating creative arts therapies to address the growing mental health challenges among young adults. Performance anxiety, a common issue among undergraduate students, shouldn't deter aspiring professionals. Instead, it should be

approached holistically, without relying solely on medication or substances by hiring music, art, and drama therapists to work in college counseling centers. By engaging in creative activities tailored to their discipline, students can develop meaningful coping mechanisms, manage stress, and improve mental health outcomes.

Through these therapies, students can explore and confront their anxieties in a supportive environment. They can learn to harness their creative potential to manage performance pressure effectively. This approach not only enhances mental well-being but also cultivates skills that are crucial for professional success in artistic fields and well as shaping well-rounded and creative individuals. By recognizing and supporting students' emotional needs through creative arts therapies, colleges can contribute to a more resilient and thriving student body in their performing arts degree programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, it is recommended to replicate this study on a larger scale and incorporating more quantitative data to explore the impact of creative arts therapies on performance anxiety among college students. While qualitative insights from this study were valuable and provided a deeper dive into the experience of two music therapy students, a larger sample size would enable more robust statistical analysis, offering more generalizable insights into the efficacy of creative free play sessions.

Including control groups in future studies would allow for comparisons between creative arts therapies and other interventions or no intervention, helping to establish causal relationships and validate observed therapeutic benefits. Longitudinal research designs could track participants over time to assess the sustainability of anxiety reduction and performance enhancement effects.

In future studies, expanding participant inclusion beyond music majors to encompass disciplines like theater and dance holds promise for broadening our understanding of how creative arts therapies can mitigate performance anxiety across various performance-oriented fields. By including students from theater and dance, for example, researchers can explore how different forms of creative expression influence anxiety levels and performance outcomes.

Participants from theater may face unique challenges such as stage fright and the pressure to perform in character, which could benefit from therapeutic techniques similar to those explored in this study with music students. Similarly, dancers may experience anxiety related to movement precision, performance expectations, and physical stamina, making creative arts therapies a potentially valuable addition to their training regimen.

By encompassing these disciplines, researchers can explore how various forms of artistic expression and performance contexts influence anxiety levels and performance outcomes. This holistic approach not only enhances our ability to tailor therapeutic interventions to the specific needs of different disciplines but also underscores the importance of integrating creative arts therapies into college counseling centers. Ultimately, such initiatives aim to foster a supportive environment that nurtures holistic well-being among performing arts students, empowering them to navigate performance challenges with resilience and creativity.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that impacted the results and the overall experience for participants. The small sample size limited the richness of the experiences of diverse perspectives. Although the goal of qualitative inquiry is not generalization or determining causatiog, having more participants would have led to having a more diverse range of experiences, backgrounds, and identities in the participants. Additionally, a larger sample size

would have provided a deeper understanding of the nuances in how different individuals respond to creative free play as a music therapy intervention to address performance anxiety.

Using the music therapy clinic space posed confidentiality challenges, as other students had access to the area and could see who was entering and leaving. This issue was compounded by the small conservatory setting where everyone knows each other, potentially affecting participants' comfort and openness. Additionally, while I kept the participants names confidential, my husband taught music theory to the participants which introduced a potential conflict of interest, and which could have influenced their engagement and responses.

Scheduling conflicts with the clinic space and the participants' overcommitted schedules were significant obstacles. Although we aimed for 12 sessions over the semester, cancelled sessions and busy schedules resulted in only 10 sessions for Johanna and 8 for Wade. The participants' minds were often preoccupied with other academic commitments, hindering their ability to fully engage in the sessions. It was particularly challenging to complete this study with music students to due to music students often being overcommitted and too busy to fully invest in any additional activities such as research studies.

My mood, attitude, and ideas about what I wanted to play significantly impacted the creative space, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. The therapeutic relationship played an important role, and my input often fueled creativity and inspired ideas. However, when we weren't musically connected, I may have contributed to the disconnect, affecting the overall effectiveness of the sessions.

Conclusion

Johanna and Wade's experiences in the study revealed unique and shared challenges, insights, and growth paths. Both participants experienced reduced anxiety and stress related to

piano performance through the study. They valued structured time dedicated to creative exploration without additional pressures. Johanna's journey focused on overcoming internal fears and building self-confidence, while Wade's was about finding a meaningful connection to the piano and managing external stressors.

With the same motivation I had to become a music therapist, this study was driven by my desire to help others because of the help I needed and the hope someone else gave me. Johanna's sessions often reflected my own journey in overcoming my own piano performance anxiety and was what I expected when I set out to do this study. In contrast, Wade's sessions highlighted the need for me to be flexible and open to the diverse ways individuals relate to music and therapy. The experiences of Johanna and Wade provided valuable insights into the interplay between anxiety, stress, and creative expression. Their journeys emphasized the importance of a personalized approach, the therapeutic relationship, and considering the broader context of each participant's life. This study reinforced the profound impact of tailored, empathetic, and flexible therapeutic practices on managing anxiety and stress through creative expression.

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Appendix A: Pre-Treatment Questionnaire

Pseudonym: _____

What is your college major?

- Music Therapy
- Music Education
- Music Performance
- Undecided
- Other: _____

What level of class piano will you be enrolled in in the spring of 2024?

- Class Piano 1
- Class Piano 2
- Class Piano 3
- Class Piano 4

What will be your academic status in spring of 2024?

- College Freshman
- College Sophomore
- College Junior
- College Senior
- College Post-Senior
- Other

What is your age?

- 18-25 years
- 26-30 years
- 31-40 years
- 41 years or older

What best describes your race?

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other _____

What best describes your ethnicity?

- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Not Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

What best describes your gender identity?

- Cisgender female
- Cisgender male
- Non-binary/Gender nonconforming
- Transgender male
- Transgender female
- Other: _____

What best describes your sexual orientation?

- Gay/Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Heterosexual or Straight
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Queer
- Other: _____

What religion (if any) do you identify with?

- Judaisim
- Christianity
- Islam
- Hinduism
- No religious identity
- Other: _____

How would you describe your current socioeconomic status? (In household income)

- Less than $10,000/year
- $10,000-$20,000/year
- $20,000-$30,000/year
- $30,000-$50,000/year
- $50,000-$70,000/year
- $70,000-$100,000/year
- Greater than $100,000/year

Rate the following about your level of music performance anxiety in different contexts, where 1= no performance anxiety at all and 10 = extreme performance anxiety.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Please rate your level of music performance anxiety in general										
Please rate your level of music performance anxiety when playing piano										

Please rate your level of music performance anxiety when leading up to your piano proficiency exams										
If this is not your first proficiency exam, please rate your level of music performance anxiety when performing in your piano proficiency exams										

Appendix B: Kenny Music Performance Anxiety Inventory (K-MPAI)

Below are some statements about how you feel generally and how you feel **before** or **during** a **performance**. Please circle one number to indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

		Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
K_1	I generally feel in control of my life	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
K_2	I find it easy to trust others	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
K_3	Sometimes I feel depressed without knowing why	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_4	I often find it difficult to work up the energy to do things	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_5	Excessive worrying is a characteristic of my family	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_6	I often feel that life has not much to offer me	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_7	Even if I work hard in preparation for a performance, I am likely to make mistakes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_8	I find it difficult to depend on others	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_9	My parents were mostly responsive to my needs	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
K_10	Prior to, or during a performance, I get feelings akin to panic	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_11	I never know before a concert whether I will perform well	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_12	Prior to, or during a performance, I experience dry mouth	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_13	I often feel that I am not worth much as a person	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_14	During a performance I find myself thinking about whether I'll even get through it	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_15	Thinking about the evaluation I may get interferes with my performance	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_16	Prior to, or during a performance, I feel sick or faint or have a churning in my stomach	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_17	Even in the most stressful performance situations, I am confident that I will perform well	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
K_18	I am often concerned about a negative reaction from the audience	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_19	Sometimes I feel anxious for no particular reason	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_20	From early in my music studies, I remember being anxious about performing	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

		Strongly disagree						Strongly Agree
K_21	I worry that one bad performance may ruin my career	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_22	Prior to, or during a performance, I experience increased heart rate like pounding in my chest	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_23	My parents almost always listened to me	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
K_24	I give up worthwhile performance opportunities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_25	After the performance, I worry about whether I played well enough	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_26	My worry and nervousness about my performance interferes with my focus and concentration	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_27	As a child, I often felt sad	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_28	I often prepare for a concert with a sense of dread and impending disaster	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_29	One or both of my parents were overly anxious	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_30	Prior to, or during a performance, I have increased muscle tension	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_31	I often feel that I have nothing to look forward to	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_32	After the performance, I replay it in my mind over and over	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_33	My parents encouraged me to try new things	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
K_34	I worry so much before a performance, I cannot sleep	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_35	When performing without music, my memory is reliable	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
K_36	Prior to, or during a performance, I experience shaking or trembling or tremor	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_37	I am confident playing from memory	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
K_38	I am concerned about being scrutinized by others	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_39	I am concerned about my own judgement of how I will perform	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
K_40	I remain committed to performing even though it causes me great anxiety	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

K-MPAI© (Kenny, 2009, 2011) FACTORS	*SCORE*	*%*
1. ***Proximal somatic anxiety and worry about performance***		
K_10 Prior to, or during a performance, I get feelings akin to panic		
K_12 Prior to, or during a performance, I experience dry mouth		
K_14 During a performance I find myself thinking about whether I'll even get through it		
K_16 Prior to, or during a performance, I feel sick or faint or have a churning in my stomach		
K_22 Prior to, or during a performance, I experience increased heart rate like pounding in my chest		
K_26 My worry and nervousness about my performance interferes with my focus and concentration		
K_28 I often prepare for a concert with a sense of dread and impending disaster		
K_30 Prior to, or during a performance, I have increased muscle tension		
K_34 I worry so much before a performance, I cannot sleep		
K_36 Prior to, or during a performance, I experience shaking or trembling or tremor		
K_40 I remain committed to performing even though it causes me significant anxiety		
TOTAL/66		
2. Worry/dread (Negative cognitions) focused on self/other scrutiny		
K_7 Even if I work hard in preparation for a performance, I am likely to make mistakes		
K_15 Thinking about the evaluation I may get interferes with my performance		
K_18 I am often concerned about a negative reaction from the audience		
K_21 I worry that one bad performance may ruin my career		
K_25 After the performance, I worry about whether I played well enough		
K_32 After the performance, I replay it in my mind over and over		
K_38 I am concerned about being scrutinized by others		
K_39 I am concerned about my own judgment of how I performed		
TOTAL/48		
3. ***Depression/hopelessness (Psychological vulnerability)***		
K_1 I generally feel in control of my life (-)*		
K_2 I find it easy to trust others (-)*		
K_3 Sometimes I feel depressed without knowing why		
K_4 I often find it difficult to work up the energy to do things		
K_6 I often feel that life has not much to offer me		
K_8 I find it difficult to depend on others		
K_13 I often feel that I am not worth much as a person		
K_31 I often feel that I have nothing to look forward to		
TOTAL/48		
4. Parental empathy		
K_9 My parents were mostly responsive to my needs (-)*		
K_23 My parents always listened to me (-)*		
K_27 As a child, I often felt sad		
K_33 My parents encouraged me to try new things (-)*		
TOTAL/24		
5. Memory		
K_35 When performing without music, my memory is reliable (-)*		
K_37 I am confident playing from memory (-)*		
TOTAL/12		
6. Generational transmission of anxiety		
K_5 Excessive worrying is a characteristic of my family		
K_19 Sometimes I feel anxious for no particular reason		
K_29 One or both of my parents were overly anxious		
TOTAL/18		
7. Anxious apprehension		
K_11 I never know before a concert whether I will perform well		
K_17 Even in the most stressful performance situations, I am confident that I will perform well (-)*		
K_24 I give up worthwhile performance opportunities due to anxiety		
TOTAL/18		
8. Biological vulnerability		
K_20 From early in my music studies, I remember being anxious about performing **TOTAL/6**		
OVERALL TOTAL/240		

Appendix C: Weekly Check In and Debrief Questions

Check-in Questions

1. How is your week going?
2. How are you feeling about piano-playing today?
3. How would you describe your relationship to the piano right now?
4. What can I do to support you today as we move into our free play?

Debrief Questions

1. Describe your experience engaging in the free play today?
2. How would you describe your relationship to the piano now?
3. What ideas do you have of things you would want to try next time and how can I best support you?

Appendix D: Final Interview Questions

1. Describe your experience during your piano exam.
2. Describe your experience of performance anxiety this time.
3. Was this experience different from your previous experiences taking a piano exam? If so, how?
4. What was your overall experience participating in this research study?
5. If you experienced decreased music performance anxiety, what did you find to be the most helpful?

Appendix E: Post-Treatment Questionnaire

Pseudonym: _____

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Please rate your level of music performance anxiety in general										
Please rate your level of music performance anxiety when playing piano										
Please rate your level of music performance anxiety when leading up to your piano proficiency exam										