

Tapping out the tension

Sarah Taylor describes how the empathetic approach of teacher Rosemary Wiseman and the use of Thought Field Therapy techniques helped her to overcome a mid-life performance crisis

Having encouraged my daughter to sit her clarinet exams right through to Grade 7, I never really gave a second thought to what I now know is the terrifying ordeal of a performance under exam conditions. My own recent experience has left me with great admiration for the thousands of children and adults who are subjected to this ruthless process every year.

A bit of a late starter, I took up the piano at the ripe old age of 45 and was delighted when I received a merit for my Grade 1 exam. Eighteen months later I sat my Grade 3 piano exam, having diligently practised my scales and pieces. Just minutes into the exam, however, I found myself quivering like a leaf and staring blankly at the music, which was suddenly indecipherable. My heart was racing and I was literally all fingers and thumbs. I couldn't understand it. I had practised endlessly, knew the pieces off by heart and had felt reasonably confident that morning. What was happening? I struggled through the exam, close to tears, and then ran out of the room apologising to the examiner.

Unsurprisingly, I failed. I was devastated. A normally confident and articulate adult, I was used to making presentations and had even sung *a cappella* in front of an audience. I was not used to feeling overwhelmed with panic and unable to perform. My confidence was badly shaken and I wasn't even sure I wanted to continue with my piano lessons. I sought advice from a number of musicians, and my daughter's clarinet teacher suggested I contact Rosemary Wiseman, a piano teacher who helps people with performance anxiety.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I went to Rosemary's Edgware home for my first lesson. She had asked me to come 'au naturel', ie wearing no cosmetics, deodorant or perfume. We spent the first half an hour discussing my feelings about the exam and about playing for her for the first time. It was an enormous relief to speak to someone who understood what I had been through and who wanted to help me. Rosemary introduced me to the principles of Thought Field Therapy (TFT), which involves tapping with the fingers on acupressure points on the upper body and face in a prescribed sequence. She gave me some simple tapping exercises to use when I was



Sarah Taylor (right) with her teacher Rosemary Wiseman: 'The tapping exercises helped me to reduce the fear to a manageable level'

feeling anxious or stressed and explained that chemicals in cosmetics or even diet can interfere with memory and concentration.

I must admit, I was a little sceptical at first. It almost seemed too simple and a bit 'New Agey'. But I was so desperate to conquer this crippling anxiety that I was willing to give it a go. A bit of research revealed that TFT, which was developed by clinical psychologist Dr Roger Callahan, is a drug-free method of literally tapping in to the body's energy and eliminating psychological blockages, without using acupuncture needles, drugs or any other invasive means. It has helped people to overcome phobias, addictive urges, physical pain and, in my case, performance anxiety. TFT has also been used to help victims of trauma, for example after the floods in New Orleans and the genocide in Rwanda.

Rosemary helped me to understand that my fear of failure had become an emotional block, which was actually preventing me from performing well – a self-fulfilling prophecy. As I tapped different points on my body, I concentrated on the source of my stress and gradually the anxiety seemed to subside. I felt calmer, more in control and more focussed. The tapping exercises helped me to reduce

the fear to a manageable level, which allowed me to continue with the performance.

For the next few weeks Rosemary took me through my Grade 3 pieces, incorporating the tapping routines whenever my anxiety returned and giving me lots of practical tips about coping with the exam situation, such as remembering to breathe! She also encouraged me to perform for friends and family whenever possible using the TFT exercises to control my nerves. I must admit, I became a bit of a bore in this respect, but each time I performed I discovered that it wasn't a complete disaster if I made a mistake or two. The important thing was to keep going and the tapping allowed me to do that.

When the big day arrived, I felt reasonably calm. I turned up at the exam centre in plenty of time and ran through some TFT exercises. As I entered the exam room I felt my old fears returning but, having handed the examiner a list of my pieces, I spent a few seconds tapping as he made notes. Like many students in exam conditions, I did not give my best performance that day and the nerves were still very much in evidence. But this time I was able to use the TFT techniques to regain control of myself at various points in the exam, to focus on what I was doing and, most importantly, to keep going. This in itself was a great achievement and a few weeks later I was delighted to hear that I had passed with a very respectable mark. Not only have I proved to myself that I can play the piano at this level, I have also learnt that a previously crippling anxiety can be reduced by this incredibly simple technique.

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'I've gone from playing unaccompanied Bach to not being able to assemble my instrument'

See page 89