

## Strategizing Music Performance Anxiety: a Pedagogical Approach

## 1. Introduction

No matter how it is glossed over with euphemistic language—stage fright, getting the jitters, having butterflies in your stomach—music performance anxiety (MPA) is a stark reality that presents issues to thousands of performing artists. Being brought from the comfort of a private practice room and into the public sphere is perhaps the most daunting aspect of being a musician, and the anxiety caused can often be debilitating to an artist's achievements and confidence. However, when dealt with in a healthy manner, MPA can be drastically reduced and even be used to one's advantage. In order to maximize the success of students, it is vital that pedagogues recognize performance anxiety and understand how it is manifested, as well as provide both long-term and immediate strategies to counteract its effects.

## 2. Recognizing MPA

Often, “having nerves” and experiencing MPA are considered to be interchangeable terms. However, being nervous or experiencing tension before a performance is natural and to be expected: it is simply a biological function in response to environmental stimulants, and should not be categorized as MPA. When presented with stimuli, our autonomic system—more commonly known as the “fight or flight” response—is activated, adjusting homeostatic functions such as the heart and respiratory rates of our body. This ability to diagnose and respond to potentially dangerous situations is our body's natural survival mechanism; however, the heightened awareness of a performance situation can also trigger this system, requiring the musician to essentially battle their own bodies.<sup>1</sup> On the spectrum of nervousness and tension,

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<sup>1</sup>David Pargman, *Managing Performance Stress: Models and Methods*, New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006. p. 3-5.

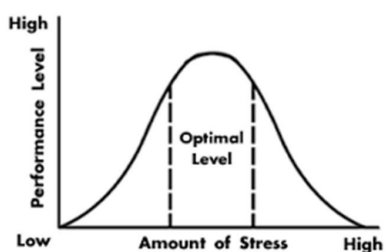
MPA reaches the extremities; it is when the body's natural responses become detrimental to performance, and when one's mental and physical health is compromised as a direct result. It is essential that teachers have the ability to distinguish nerves or MPA in students, so that a proper course of action may be pursued.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Exploring Stress as an Advantage

In his book, *Managing Performance Stress*, David Pargman focuses on the differentiation of stress and arousal. He explores the body's heightened state of awareness during performance, and how performers can use it to their advantage. As proposed by Yerkes and Dodson in the *Inverted-U Hypothesis*, there seems to be a direct correlation between optimal performance and stress; where these two factors work together to create the best conditions for performance is called the "optimal level of arousal."<sup>3</sup>

#### The Inverted U Theory

- Yerkes-Dodson Law (1908)



The research of sports performance scholar Joseph B. Oxendine echoes similar conclusions:

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<sup>2</sup>Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician's Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup>David Pargman, *Managing Performance Stress: Models and Methods*, 2010. p. 11.

1. *A high level of arousal (stress) is essential for optimal performance in gross motor activities involving strength, endurance, and speed.*
2. *A high level of arousal interferes with performances involving complex skills, fine muscle movement, coordination, steadiness, and general concentration.*<sup>4</sup>

Oxendine's research, while intended for athletes, has direct parallels with the "complex, fine muscle movement" of performing musicians.<sup>5</sup> Pargman suggests that performers apply these theories to their own practice to find their "individual zone of optimal focus" (IZOF). As the name implies, an IZOF is unique to each person—to be found through experimentation and reflection upon one's performance experiences. For example, one's IZOF can be accessed by recalling the level of arousal felt before a performance that went especially well, asking the questions: "How can that same level be recreated?" "What should remain the same", and "What could be altered?" Pargman argues that, by understanding the self, one of the largest barriers to conquering MPA is bridged.<sup>6</sup> Teachers should also encourage students to participate in this method of self-examination; while directions and suggestions can be made, we cannot understand every facet of their mind, nor find their IZOF for them. As well, working through their anxiety and creating a solution themselves will boost their confidence and promote the ability to problem solve independently. However, there is an issue with Pargman's theory that I would like to address. The method which he uses to find a performer's IZOF requires the

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<sup>4</sup>Oxendine, J. B., "Emotional Arousal and Motor Performance," *Quest*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1970). p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician's Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>David Pargman, *Managing Performance Stress: Models and Methods*, 2010. p. 110.

performer to “bring to mind the anxiety/arousal level associated with a past performance”<sup>7</sup> that has gone exceptionally well—by analysing the arousal level during an exceptional performance, the performer seeks to recreate the conditions of arousal. However, in cases of especially debilitating MPA, the performer may not have *access* to an “optimal performance level” that can be recalled/recreated: there may be no performances that can be used to hone one’s IZOF.

#### 4. MPA’s Physical Manifestations

In a state of MPA, an artist often experiences bodily disturbances which alter their ability to perform effectively. These changes, categorized by Casey McGrath in her book *Performance Anxiety Strategies* are as follows:<sup>8</sup>

1. Physiological differences, such as increased heart rate, sweating, shortness of breath, shaking, clammy hands, nausea, dizziness and diarrhea. These changes occur within the body and are likely the most recognized symptoms of MPA.
2. Destabilization of psychological and emotional states, including intense apprehension, fear of failure, irritability, and in severe cases, panic attacks.
3. Cognitive disturbances, such as a loss of confidence, lack of concentration due to preoccupation with an upcoming event, interferences to the creative process, and perhaps the most widely feared of all, lapses in memory.
4. Changes of behavior that are atypical of the performer, such as lifting shoulders, pacing the room, or even abandoning the performance commitment all together.

While several of these symptoms are clearly discernible to members of the audience, the majority are internalized and are only evident to the performer themselves. Performers are not as transparent as they often believe they are, and maintaining an air of confidence—even if only a façade—may be translated by the audience as calm composure. In addition to the aforementioned bodily manifestations of MPA, musicians may also experience what is known as “blocking” and

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician’s Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 2.

“depersonalization.” *Blocking* is the fear of technical failure during performance; that the hours spent mastering technical passages will vanish when put to the test. *Depersonalization* is the feeling of dissociation from the body and mind: where the performer views themselves in a detached manner, as if from the audience’s perspective. Experiences such as these only serve to amplify the anxiety of the performer; the musician is no longer focused on musical expressivity, but on surviving the performance.<sup>9</sup> Dale Fogle refers to this as defensive playing, when performance is “de-automatized” and performers revert to the self-conscious and deliberate attention present when first approaching a piece. Stripped of that layer of security, attention is shifted away from prioritizing creative expression onto the fearful avoidance of memory lapses and note mistakes.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. The Four Common Fears

While the origins underlying the onset of MPA in differ between in each individual, the root causes can generally be traced back to four common fears:

### 5.1 Fear of the Unexpected/Unknown

No matter how many hours one practices, there is still no certainty of a given outcome in performance: this lies at the root of many performer’s MPA. One does not know what each performance will bring, and often the places where memory or technical mistakes happen are in areas where the performer least expects it. When left to the mercy of our imagination, what may begin as a small concern can quickly snowball into panic; the preoccupation with what might

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Fogle, D. O., “Toward Effective Treatment for Music Performance Anxiety,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, vol. 19 no. 3 (1982): 368-375, doi:10.1037/h0088448. p. 369.

happen becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>11</sup> An effective strategy used to combat this “catastrophizing” effect is exercising cognitive self-regulation, by focusing on positive and healthy outcomes. In so doing, the artist learns to self-assess in an honest and constructive manner, and choose realistic goals. However, this mindset of self-efficacy is not one that can be achieved overnight, as it requires extensive fostering and conditioning. This practice does not apply only to the “fear of the unknown,” as it can and must be applied to every aspect of studying an instrument in order to gain a healthy relationship with performance. It is essential that teachers promote such a mindset from a young age, as negative mindsets and habits become increasingly difficult to tear down as age increases.<sup>12</sup> However, a musician does not always have years at their disposal when facing an upcoming performance, and a more immediate solution is required. Visualizing a performance in its entirety—from putting on performance clothes at home, to the drive back post-performance—helps remove a sense of ambiguity or lack of preparation. This can be completed to even the smallest of details, including the physical sensation of playing the instrument, specific audience members, and layout of the hall.<sup>13</sup>

## **5.2 Fear of Loss of Control**

The prospect of losing control— whether it be of the emotions, mind, or bodily functions— is a terrifying prospect to performing artists. The fear of memory loss is perhaps the most commonly suffered symptom associated with MPA; studies show that for both male and female performers alike the anticipation of memory slips was ranked as the number one anxiety

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<sup>11</sup>Maisal, E. *Performance Anxiety: A Workbook for Actors, Singer, Dancers, and Anyone Who Performs in Public*. New York, NY: Back Watson-Guptill Publications, 2005. p. 71.

<sup>12</sup>Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician’s Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 120-123.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p. 79.

inducer. While the fear of having an emotional breakdown or publicly defecating are significantly less addressed, they are issues that are both real and must be confronted.<sup>14</sup> The loss of control is often viewed as a shameful experience, with the perpetuating—but grossly inaccurate—belief that if you are talented enough it does not affect you. An effective learning strategy for avoiding such “slips of control” can be fulfilled by removing the automaticity from a performance: by studying each aspect of performance from multiple perspectives, one gains a multi-faceted understanding that is much less likely to fail when on the stage. For example, when memorizing repertoire, one cannot rely on muscle memory alone during performance: by analyzing a piece of music’s theoretical, auditory, expressive and technical structure, memory gains a much more complex and reliable support system.<sup>15</sup>

### 5.3 Fear of Strangers

While the fear of strangers is a common phobia for musicians and non-musicians alike, blending into and performing before a crowd of strangers present vastly different challenges. There is a sense of anonymity in blending into a crowd—nothing setting one person apart from another. However, in a performance space, the opposite is true: the physical spaces of performance have a clearly delineated function between watched and watching. From the stage, the audience can be viewed as the detached and impenetrable “other:” Are the dimly-lit faces welcoming and supportive, or hostile and judgmental? Through the distorting lens of MPA, audiences are often perceived as the latter; which creates a space for the performer where they

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<sup>14</sup>Maisal, E. *Performance Anxiety: A Workbook for Actors, Singer, Dancers, and Anyone Who Performs in Public*. New York, NY: Back Watson-Guption Publications, 2005. p. 72.

<sup>15</sup>Ginsborg, J., “Managing Music Performance Anxiety,” in *The American Music Teacher* 68 no. 4 (2019): 16-18, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/docview/2189995339?accountid=12063>. p. 17.



are opponents of, rather than communicating to, the audience. To counteract such fears, Maisel proposes the “bring a friend” method; where the performer “brings” an supportive individual with themselves to a performance, and performs for them alone.<sup>16</sup> Another approach—albeit an less welcomed method—is exposure therapy. After determining the physical and psychological triggers that induce MPA, these factors are gradually introduced at increasingly concentrated rates until the targeted fear has been nullified. In the case where the audience is the principal fear, musicians may begin performing before a very small and non judgemental group of listeners; such as grandparents or parents, or even a pet. When performing before such a group becomes comfortable, stronger stimuli is presented; this process is repeated as necessary until larger performances become faceable.<sup>17</sup>

#### **5.4 Fear for Loss of Love and Approval**

While the act of getting up on a stage before for strangers often causes anxiety, the same is also true when performing for family and loved ones. Especially for younger children, performances are often viewed as opportunity for ‘winning’ love and approval, with an unsuccessful performance translating as a loss of love, friendship or support. Essentially, the process undergone when performing before strangers becomes exacerbated: the performer feels that the success or failure of a performance directly correlates to the success of intrapersonal relationships. In such situations, the focus of performing becomes pleasing others, rather than

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<sup>16</sup>Maisal, E. *Performance Anxiety: A Workbook for Actors, Singer, Dancers, and Anyone Who Performs in Public*. New York, NY: Back Watson-Guptill Publications, 2005. p. 72.

<sup>17</sup>Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician’s Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 61.

creating music for oneself.<sup>18</sup> In order for performers—especially younger beginners— to feel self-assured in performance, often positive reinforcement is necessary. However, teachers must exercise caution in how they deliver encouragement: for example, the phrase “I’ll think you’re a wonderful person no matter how you do in this performance” is intended to offer reassurance, but can be perceived as a very different message. By telling a student that they are loved no matter how they perform, the implication that the teacher has given up on the abilities of the student may be drawn. Before offering advice or encouragement, consider the following: Does the statement function positively in terms of motivation or instruction? Does it contain anything that may be perceived as hurtful?<sup>19</sup>

When dealing with others facing MPA, it is essential that we present it as a challenge faced—and overcome—globally and not as a personal issue or weakness: they are not the first to experience such problems, nor will they be the last. Teachers must address each concern as an equally valid, without brushing aside issues they feel are inferior: emotions are subjective for each individual and cannot be rated on a scale of legitimacy. In so doing, MPA is reduced to a simplistic, if not juvenile concern that exists only in the imagination of the performer, rather than being recognized as the very present and real concern that it is. The lack of validation could serve to be incredibly counter-productive for struggling artists, and may only further isolate them

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<sup>18</sup>Maisal, E. *Performance Anxiety: A Workbook for Actors, Singer, Dancers, and Anyone Who Performs in Public*. New York, NY: Back Watson-Guption Publications, 2005. p. 73-74.

<sup>19</sup>Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician’s Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 130.

in their worries.<sup>20</sup> A safe space must be created, where concerns can be brought forward without the fear of dismissal or judgement.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Societal Conceptions of MPA—MPA as Illness

The image of the ‘tortured artist’ has been romanticized since antiquity, holding fast to the societal myth that mental illness, substance abuse, and personal trauma create more emotionally driven and successful artists. This notion is exemplified in the words of Aristotle: “no great genius has ever existed without a strain of madness.” Superficially, there indeed appears to be a strong correlation of creativity and psychopathology, with many of the musical giants such as Mozart, Beethoven, and Robert Schumann suffering from mental illness.<sup>22</sup> This stereotype, along with the societal misconceptions of mental health, often prevents musicians from seeking professional help when battling MPA. If the issue remains unaddressed, artists may turn to other damaging coping mechanisms such as illegal substances, alcohol, or the misuse of beta-blockers. In his study of postsecondary education musicians, psychologist Jung-Eun Park found that students with high levels of MPA reported to frequent use of illegal substances as a coping strategy, while in comparison colleagues with low levels of MPA rarely did.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David Pargman, *Managing Performance Stress: Models and Methods*, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician’s Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> I.R. Reddy, J. Ukrani, V. Indla, and V. Ukrani, “Creativity and psychopathology: Two sides of the same coin?” *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 60, no. 2 (2018): 168–174, accessed April 13, 2019, doi:10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry\_129\_18. p. 168.

<sup>23</sup> Jung-Eun Park, *The Relationship Between Musical Performance Anxiety, Healthy Lifestyle Factors, and Substance Use Among Young Adult Classical Musicians: Implications for Training and Education*, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I, 2010, accessed April 13, 2019, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/docview/756253986?accountid=12063>. p. 25-27.

Encouraging free and honest discussions among teachers, students and peers is critical: it is a matter of mental health and wellness. Furthermore, MPA is often viewed as a personal shortcoming, rather than as a mental health issue that must be addressed: while MPA is frequently reinterpreted by the musician as a lack of talent or insufficient preparation, this is neither a constructive nor accurate method of self-diagnosis. There are countless examples of brilliant and world renowned musicians that struggled with MPA: Vladimir Horowitz, Arthur Rubinstein, Renée Fleming, even the acclaimed pianist and composer Frederic Chopin.

### **7. MPA in the Classroom**

Demanding studio teachers, school directors, mentors, and unhealthy home experiences can be major triggers of performance anxiety that can appear during childhood or appear at later points in life. Often, the onset of MPA in performers can be traced back to events that occurred during the youth and teenage years of musicians; further prioritizing the necessity of proper pedagogical approaches when instructing students of this age. Emphasizing the importance of impeccable technique and gaining audience approval in young performers often is more damaging than beneficial, as the primary focus is shifted to impressing others rather than personal creative interpretation and growth. The pedagogue's role in encouraging familial involvement is also critical: according to Alfred Adler's theory of inferiority, "our self-perception is profoundly influenced by whether we receive the family support we need in adolescence to develop a positive self-image and sense of confidence as an adult." A lack of positive reinforcement in the home may lead to chronic doubt and impede emotional expression.

<sup>24</sup> The same is true for music teachers in public school systems, when large groups of students are instructed simultaneously. This offers a unique challenge to the instructor; the course must be tailored according to the collective needs of the ensemble, rather than personalized to the needs of every member. Without receiving the individualized instruction present in private lessons, students that excel under one-on-one instruction may experience MPA and self-doubt; resulting in them leaving the ensemble or losing their love for music all together. In such scenarios, musical ability is often mistakenly understood as a binary; with students being categorized as either “have” or “have not”—talented, or untalented. Especially for students who *perceive* themselves as being a “have not,” fostering a musical environment that presents music as a skill to be developed is crucial. In encouraging such a mindset, musical success becomes something that can be achieved through personal determination and effort, rather than a skill one is simply born with. In their article *Creating Safe Spaces for Music Learning*, Hendricks, Smith, and Stanuch promote this notion, stating that “intrinsic motivation can be fostered through learning environments that recognise student individuality, focus on progress and effort, and provide student ownership and control over their musical development.”<sup>25</sup> A commonality among public schools, competitions present an entirely new set of variables in MPA: instead of having only their own nerves to face, performers now have to contend with being compared and rated alongside other musicians. While for some students competitions can be exhilarating and promote musicality, for others the mere thought of competing can cause great distress and

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<sup>24</sup>Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician’s Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 17.

<sup>25</sup>Karin S. Hendricks, Tawnya D. Smith, and Jennifer Stanuch. Creating safe spaces for music learning. *Music Educators Journal* 101, no. 1 (2014): 35-40, accessed April 13, 2019, doi: 10.1177/0027432114540337. p. 35-36.

anxiety. Often, the motivation driving competitive performances are fear-based, where the preoccupation with public opinion and approval drives the performance rather than the desire for creative output.<sup>26</sup> Especially when viewed through the lens of MPA, the underlying function of competition is to provide few “winners” and many “losers”, with the success of one depending upon the failure of another. When instructing students with MPA, pedagogues should approach entering competitions with great discretion: a poor showing may result in lifetime of self-doubt in performance. Perhaps other alternatives should be considered; such as non-competitive recitals for friends and family, of both solo and collaborative repertoire. In a collaborative setting, the stage is not faced alone, and the presence of other musicians may offer comfort and security to a hesitant performer. Additionally, the overall success of a collaborative performance does not depend solely on one individual—as is the case in solo performance— but rather on the combined effort of all involved. In so doing, students still have the opportunity to demonstrate their progress over time, but in a manner that is less likely to be psychologically damaging.<sup>27</sup>

## 8. Alternative Approaches

As well as mental strategies to alleviate MPA, there are physical methods to counteracting anxiety. Before performances, it is recommended to avoid processed, fried foods, refined grains, sugary products, as well as coffee and alcohol. While alcohol may be used to temporarily ease nerves, prolonged use will likely only raise level of anxiety felt by a performer. Instead, consuming foods high in calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium or Vitamin B may

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid. p. 36.

<sup>27</sup>James R. Austin, “Competition: Is Music Education the Loser?” *Music Educators Journal* 76, no. 6 (1990): 21-25, accessed April 13, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uleth.ca/stable/3400964>. p. 25.

prove to be a more beneficial option. Exercise is also a proven method to reducing anxiety: studies from the Arizona State and Maryland Universities suggest that twenty-one minutes of daily exercise is effective in reducing both temporary and enduring anxiety. Similarly, the US Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion recommends a minimum of 150 minutes of exercise per week for optimal benefits both mentally and physically.<sup>28</sup> Other biofeedback strategies, such the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method, are often utilized by performers to reduce the accumulation of anxiety and tension. The Alexander Technique seeks to become more aware of where unconscious bodily tension is held, and replace potentially harmful mannerisms with healthy, intentioned actions. The Feldenkrais Technique uses similar ideas, using “gentle movement and directed attention to improve movement and enhance human functioning.”<sup>29</sup>

## 9. Conclusion

Ultimately, Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) often creates an impasse for performers. Facing an audience, facing one’s loved ones, or facing a stage as opposed to facing a practice room is a physical and mental obstruction for those who suffer from MPA, as their bodies and minds prohibit them from successful—or even satisfying—performance. Using the growing contemporary understanding on the effects of MPA as well as theories as to how to combat it both in private lessons and in the classroom, this paper seeks to consolidate both the theoretical and the practical. When MPA is understood in both private lessons and classroom settings, and

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<sup>28</sup>Casey McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, & Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician’s Guide to Managing Stage Fright*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. p. 84.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. p. 88.

dealt with in a healthy manner, the effects can be significantly lessened for students. Through this, educators can reintroduce music as an *artform* rather than as a *fear*; students, at all levels, can have maximized success in whatever musical setting they find themselves.



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