

“An amazingly thorough and carefully crafted book, *ACT for Musicians* never talks down to the reader, or skips over material that is harder to explain. It’s like having an instructor who refuses to give up on you. It covers almost every imaginable issue faced by musicians, and does so with honesty, gentleness, and care. If you want a superficial pop psych, fly over book, filled with empty tricks and happy talk, look elsewhere. If you are ready to get serious about learning, practicing, and mastering the psychological skills needed to create and perform at your best, you’ve come to the right place. Highly recommended.”

—**Steven C. Hayes, PhD**

Foundation Professor of Psychology, University of Nevada, Reno, NV,
Originator of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
and author of *A Liberated Mind*

ACT for Musicians is a ground-breaking book, full of useful techniques and interventions that will help musicians and performers tackle performance anxiety. Musicians and their teachers will find the ACT approach explored in this book invaluable. In addition, other helping professionals who work in this field including coaches, psychotherapists, and psychologists will gain insight and knowledge into how ACT can be applied so that musicians can also improve their performance quality. David Juncos and Elvire de Paiva e Pona are to be congratulated for writing this trailblazing book.”

—**Stephen Palmer, PhD**

Professor of Practice at the Wales Academy for Professional Practice and Applied Research, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK

“This phenomenal resource is written with an acute awareness of musicians as students, performers and teachers. The authors’ integration and application of their expertise in performance, psychology and education enables an explanation of the theory and practice of ACT in a thorough and accessible way. Extensive exercises and examples are clearly formulated to entice musicians to immediately and compassionately incorporate the strategies into their practice. As a consulting psychologist, university lecturer and

researcher specialising in music performance anxiety, I have seen firsthand how the material contained in this book has enabled students and patients to reach new levels of their potential. This book will be my go-to resource for using ACT to help musicians at all levels and stages. I encourage you to make it yours, too.”

—**Margaret Osborne, PhD**

Registered Psychologist
Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Music,
University of Melbourne, Australia

“Conductors often hit a wall when trying to understand how musicians cope with personal constraints. This happens because they fail to address the underlying physical and psychological issues that manifest in musicians. Both conductors and musicians lack the knowledge of the tools needed to cope with the pressure of musical performance. This magnificent book brings thorough insight and a valuable path to finally create a healthy and productive environment to make music in small or large ensembles. This process not only helps single performers but also conductors who need to be aware of their fellow musicians’ performance struggles. Bravo Dr. Juncos and Ms. De Paiva e Pona!”

—**Paulo Vassalo Lourenço, DMA**

Conductor
Head of Choral Conducting Program
Escola Superior de Música de Lisboa, Portugal

“It has always struck me as odd that, of the thousands of hours that we in the performing arts devote to cultivating our craft, so few of those are dedicated to perhaps the most essential skill of all: how to execute that craft under pressure. As a longtime sufferer of MPA (finally, a name for this thing that I’ve been enduring for so long), nothing was more frustrating to me than not being able to demonstrate on stage that which I was fully capable of in the practice room as a result of an unlucky biochemical

response to stress I felt I simply could not control. But, of course, therein lies the essential paradox clarified so eloquently and so helpfully in this wonderful book. Years of ‘trying to control’ my anxiety by denying it, fighting it, faking it ‘til I made it (except I never quite did), in effect made my anxiety far worse. Applying some of the basic tenets of ACT in recent years has shown me that the somewhat counterintuitive process of accepting and acknowledging my fears, and mindfully attending to them, has yielded more successful and more *enjoyable* performances.

Having recently pivoted to the role of educator, I am so grateful to be able to add this comprehensive, evidence-based, and ever accessible resource to my pedagogical toolkit. It is a wonderful feeling to know that I will be able to offer *hope* to a new generation of performers who may in the past have felt doomed to a lifetime of subpar performances on account of anxiety.

Thank you, Dr. Juncos & Ms. De Paiva e Pona, and as we say in the opera world, Bravissimo!”

—**Kiera Duffy, MM**

Soprano

Head of Undergraduate Voice Studies,
University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN

“It is rare to find decent research that merges Psychology and Musical performance. As a professional singer with a degree in Psychology, I found *ACT for Musicians* very enlightening in this field that still holds so many questions. Fascinating, practical, and with an empirical curiosity that approaches a much needed field of research. I highly recommend any performer to read it and benefit from the many tools to help navigate the mind: an ingredient so vital and yet neglected to a successful music performance.”

—**Nuno Queimado, BA**

Professional Actor and Singer based in London
West End credits include *Hamilton*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*,
and *From Here to Eternity*

“The effectiveness of previously available music performance anxiety treatments was always questionable in my experience. A shift in focus from intervention to therapy based on the ideas of acceptance and commitment is the way forward not only for being an approach for addressing performance anxiety in conceptual and practical terms, but also for becoming a healthier & more complete individual. This shift is supported by the data presented where we see once anxious, shaken musicians with nowhere to turn, now being able to face their fears and achieve success. In my forty years of performance experience, I’ve utilized various methods of reducing performance anxiety, mostly by trying to suppress those uncomfortable feelings—but this book is rooted in compassion and acceptance, and in the understanding of the psychological complexities involved in the world of the performing arts. It also provides practical exercises and solutions and is without a doubt a game-changer. Any musician that reads it I have no doubt will agree, but I would go as far as to say that any musician, coach, or professor of music *should* read this book because philosophically, conceptually, and statistically there is no doubt it can change the struggles of music performance for the better.”

—**Pablo Cohen, DMA**

Classical Guitarist

Associate Professor of Music of Latin America & Classical Guitar
Whalen Center for Music, Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY

ACT for Musicians

A Guide for Using Acceptance and Commitment
Training to Enhance Performance, Overcome
Performance Anxiety, and Improve Well-Being

David G. Juncos, PsyD
Elvire de Paiva e Pona, MA



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ACT for Musicians: A Guide for Using Acceptance and Commitment Training to Enhance Performance, Overcome Performance Anxiety, and Improve Well-Being

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Foreword

As Rage Against the Machine disbanded and then morphed into Audioslave; Metallica resurrected from self-implosion; and Rascal Flatts struggled to realign with its transcendent mission, I've witnessed first-hand the debilitating burdens of success and fame confronting the mental, emotional, and spiritual survival of these (and other) extraordinarily talented, divinely endowed, fellow human beings.

Here are some of my conclusions:

The pressures on professional musicians and performers, though seemingly obvious, are too often obscured by our fanatical enchantment with how well they serve *our* entertainment, as well as *our* psychological needs. They start out totally impassioned, their souls propelled by their art, only eventually to be forced to confront the commercial realities that their creativity must subsequently depend upon. If unsuccessful, they struggle to survive, scared to betray their dream... constantly scrambling to pay for its elusive pursuit. When successful, their dream is still threatened by those commercial realities that compete with the integrity of their art. The stress of being adored often replaces a healthy need for self-love with intoxicating, yet precarious, external popularity, making them addicts to what they cannot control.

Simultaneously, the rest of us worshipping fans expect our idols to fulfill *our* fantasies of an idealized, fabled life. We are not interested in, nor are we readily attuned to what it must take for them to "satisfy" us, to that which goes on behind the scenes. Often times, performers have to manage their human personalities, while also negotiating immensely overwhelming careers, and some of them enter into the blinding, and potentially fatal spotlight of celebrity status. We enjoy what they do for us, until we decide they no longer hit the mark—until we move onto our

next heroes, retiring our former idols to the purgatory of “once was,” or “Hey, didn’t you used to be...?” Just as they were unprepared for stardom, now, they find themselves unprepared for obscurity. Who helps them with such a transition from celebrity status to being abandoned? And who helps them manage the stresses of their careers and daily lives before they’ve even reached this point, while they were still emerging, or when they were fully established artists?

Along comes my wise, compassionate friend and colleague, David Juncos, and the work he’s done in this pioneering book, with his co-author Elvire de Paiva e Pona. Their undying devotion to helping musicians effectively share their gifts with the world, has led to a comprehensive, research-based and objective approach for implementing long overdue, crucial performance & life enhancing strategies aimed at treating the specific problems they deal with. What they’ve done here is truly groundbreaking and will undoubtedly help performing musicians better navigate their psycho-spiritual development and artistic growth, in the face of serious personal and professional hurdles. Given the difficulty in finding the right practitioner, this book also brings the help directly to them, and to the team of influencers around them, so they may avoid spending countless hours searching for treatments that may or may not work.

To those fortunate enough to be reading this benchmark work—please take its brilliant text, and its breakthrough ACT science delivered with an enduring sense of humanity, as my personal invitation for you to understand how crucial it is for *all of us* to provide our performing musicians with the support they need in order to thrive in their careers and personal lives. Enjoy all that these revolutionary authors have to offer you, and then promise to use it within your own work in helping musicians or other performing artists continue to soothe our deepest pains and express our greatest joys.

With love,

Phil Towle, MA
Performance Enhancement Coaching, LLC

Preface

Friedrich Nietzsche, the great 19th century German philosopher, wrote about the inherent power of music to bring people together and dissolve the boundaries that normally keep us separated from one another in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1967). While listening and dancing to good music with others, he argued, we transcend our sense of selves as individuals and participate instead in a shared experience as a more unified whole. Think of the best concerts, operas, recitals, and festivals you've attended—undoubtedly, you felt uplifted and connected with the performers and/or audience members at some point during your experiences (this is usually a sign of a good performance, of course). Herein lies the power of music Nietzsche extolled, which he referred to as music's Dionysian impulses—named after Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility, and ecstasy. Not only does a good music performance connect the audience to the musicians, and to each other, but one's sense of individual suffering may be temporarily alleviated too. It's no wonder, then, humans from every known society have participated in some form of music-related activity for centuries—*doing so keeps us sane*.

However, while music contributes to the health and well-being of societies, the reverse is not necessarily true. According to a 2016 survey conducted by the University of Westminster, 71% of professional musicians from the UK reported they've suffered from panic attacks/high levels of anxiety at some point in their careers, while 69% reported they've suffered from depression (Gross & Musgrave, 2016). These prevalence rates are three times higher than that of the average adult in the UK. Further, 53% reported it was hard to find help, and 55% believed there are gaps in the provision of services for musicians. Another survey of 377 orchestral musicians from Australia by Dianna Kenny, PhD, and colleagues showed

that 33% met criteria for Social Anxiety Disorder, a rate also three times higher than that of the average adult in Australia (Kenny, Driscoll, & Ackermann, 2012). Those musicians often rely on colleagues for help, rather than psychotherapists or other health care providers, as it is difficult and time-consuming to find someone qualified to treat them. Moreover, when help is provided it is often unhelpful, with an over-reliance on unwanted or expensive treatments, like pharmaceutical solutions.

These sobering statistics point to a grim conclusion: *musicians suffer from psychological problems more than adults in the general public*. With this in mind, we feel a calling to support musicians' mental health so they may succeed in bringing audiences the healing powers of music Nietzsche wrote about nearly 150 years ago. Thus, our primary aim in writing this book is a commitment to promoting and disseminating evidence-based interventions, so musicians may be more confident they're receiving help for their psychological challenges with adequate empirical support. To accomplish this objective efficiently, we've focused our efforts predominantly on a psychotherapy that has recently been applied to the treatment of musicians, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT (said as a word, not as individual letters). ACT has shown to be effective in treating a wide variety of clinical and non-clinical problems, including anxiety and depression, and ours and our colleagues' research suggests ACT is a promising clinical anxiety treatment and performance enhancement program for musicians (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz, 2020; Clarke, Osborne, & Baranoff, 2020; de Paiva e Pona, 2016; Erenius & Wallengren, 2012; Juncos et al., 2014; Juncos & de Paiva e Pona, 2018; Juncos et al., 2017; Juncos & Markman, 2015; Juncos, Roman, Osborne, & Zenobi, 2022; Mahony, Juncos, & Winter, 2022; Osborne, Roman, Zenobi, & Juncos, 2021; Roman, Juncos, Osborne, & Zenobi, 2021; Shaw, Juncos, & Winter, 2020; Singh & Dudek, 2020; Swain & Bodkin-Allen, 2017). In writing this book, we drew upon ACT's 30+ year research history, which includes over 800 randomized controlled trials in which ACT was tested against other therapies or control conditions, and we've carefully selected techniques and exercises already shown to be helpful. It's also our aim that these interventions are used to address the common psychological challenges musicians seek help for, i.e., performance enhancement and music performance anxiety, and other areas affecting their well-being, i.e., pain and injury recovery, perfectionism, procrastination, shame, occupational burnout and career uncertainty. We will

directly guide the reader on how to use ACT to treat these common challenges, in the hopes that musicians may be liberated from the harmful distress and impairment caused by these problems. At times we've adapted helpful ACT exercises so they're more applicable for musicians. By including ACT interventions with demonstrated efficacy, we are adhering to an evidence-based model of care similar to what patients in clinical psychology would receive. We believe such a practice must become the norm in the emerging field of performing arts medicine, because it ensures a higher quality of services received for musicians seeking help and a higher level of professional accountability among practitioners.

This book is intended for musicians and their teachers, coaches, psychologists, psychotherapists, and other practitioners who work closely with them. One of the strengths of the ACT model is it can be used by professionals other than psychotherapists and psychologists, as research by us and our colleagues suggests that music teachers can be trained to effectively deliver ACT interventions directly to their students (de Paiva e Pona, 2016; Mahony, Juncos, & Winter, 2022; Shaw, Juncos, & Winter, 2020; Swain & Bodkin-Allen, 2017). Professionals from these various disciplines should collaborate in using ACT to help their musician clients, as we are a clinical psychologist/performance coach and a classically trained singer/singing teacher, respectively. Thus, musicians may chose from a variety of ways to use this book: by directly applying it to themselves, by using it to enhance the services received from a psychotherapist or psychologist trained in ACT, by using it to enhance their work with a music teacher or performance coach who is also trained in ACT, or by a combination of these ways. When used in a non-psychotherapeutic setting, ACT is referred to as Acceptance and Commitment Training or Acceptance and Commitment Coaching.

It is our true hope this book serves as a remedy for those who struggle with any of the common problems addressed herein, and as a resource for clinicians and other professionals seeking an evidence-based guide on using ACT with the musicians they work with. As practitioners working together, we remain dedicated to the alleviation of musicians' suffering and the advancement of their well-being through the use of research and practice grounded in contextual behavioral science (CBS), a newer approach to the understanding of human behavior of which ACT is an example. A central tenet of CBS is that in order to alleviate human

suffering, we must first understand the context in which the symptoms and actions related to the suffering occur. We can then intervene more helpfully by manipulating those contexts so they no longer perpetuate the suffering. In other words, musicians' symptoms of psychological distress don't occur within a vacuum. Clearly, there are bigger picture historical and situational contexts in which the problems addressed in our book are occurring, e.g., conservatory and university music departments with high standards for success, occupational settings where high rates of anxiety, depression, and other psychological problems are prevalent, a societal trend to view musicians as "tortured," or "suffering for their art's sake," etc. While we, as two practitioners, are limited in our ability to change these larger contexts in which musicians typically operate, we believe they *can and must* be changed from the inside out to enact a broader, more meaningful change in the direction of improved health. By enlisting the help of other, equally dedicated practitioners working in performing arts medicine, and by training them in an evidence-based intervention like ACT, we all may adhere to CBS' mission of alleviating suffering and advancing well-being. Perhaps then, the musicians we serve will be better equipped to contribute to ours and our societies' well-being—through their beautiful music—because we will have used our knowledge to contribute to theirs as well.

David G. Juncos, PsyD
Elvire de Paiva e Pona, MA

January, 2022

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I am deeply grateful for the love and support of my dad, Guillermo, my sister and brother, Andrea and Dan, and my extended family in the US and abroad. Without their steady encouragement and appreciation for good music they instilled in me at a very young age, none of this work would be possible. To my beloved mom, Maureen, who departed this earth more than 20 years ago—I could still hear your voice cheering me on while I was writing this book. To my colleagues in private practice and to my former supervisors from throughout my clinical training—thank you for believing in me and in this work. In particular, I'm grateful to Glenn Heinrichs, Bob Giglio, Jay Dickinson, Amy Stein, Robin Hornstein, Randi Platt, Michael Silverstein, David Rubenstein, Helen Polak, Julie Mallory Church, Bob Logan, Amy Hoch, Sarah Whitman, Scott Sorensen, Jen DeGross, Travis Porter, David Leibovitz, Bruce Millman, and Ann Waters. To my students and colleagues at the Voice Study Centre, in particular Debbie Winter and Teresa Shaw, and the coaching faculty at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David—thank you for providing me with such a collegial work environment and for the wonderful opportunity to grow this research within such a reputable institution. To my dissertation adviser, LeeAnn Cardaciotto, and other committee members, Megan Spokas and David Falcone—thank you for giving me the confidence to carry on with this work after graduating. To my other professors at La Salle's PsyD program—thank you also for shaping me into the psychologist I am today. To my former classmates at La Salle who are now my psychologist colleagues—thank you for our fruitful discussions, many of which planted the seeds for this work. I'm also grateful to the other colleagues I've met and collaborated with in the ACBS and the international performance science communities, in particular, Phil Towle for his helpful mentorship

throughout the years and for giving me the courage to “make those hard phone calls when I needed to make them.” Thank you to Joanna Roman for her invaluable contributions to creating the MAAQ questionnaire with me, and to Margaret Osborne and Dana Zenobi for their help as well. Also, thanks to Deborah Hart and Dennis Tirch for sharing their time and insights with me—I believe so many musicians will benefit from reading your inspiring interviews. A big thank you to my co-author, Elvire, for her shared love of ACT and music, attention to detail, and never-ending willingness to move this work forward. Thanks also to Jeff Young and the team at Universal Publishers for their help in publishing this work, to my closest friends for being there with me along this journey, and to the professors I worked with at Vassar College who nurtured my love of psychology and music. Finally, I’m especially grateful for my wonderful and loving wife, Danielle, for her unwavering support in spite of the long hours needed for writing & editing this book. She is the best person I know and we both know it. Thanks also to her friends and family for openly welcoming me into their lives. Finally, thank you to the musicians of the world for inspiring me with your art every day—this book is a gift for you!

David G. Juncos

First and foremost, words cannot express how grateful I am to my parents Afonso and Elisabeth—throughout my life they have been supporting my dreams, while helping me stay grounded in reality with their common sense, experience and pragmatism. Thank you to my brother Arthur and his family for the joy and unconditional support they bring me. To my brother Rodrigue, wherever you are—thank you for your support, every day I feel your presence inspiring me. Also, I would like to acknowledge the teachers that have shaped my way of thinking and helped me to become better at what I do throughout my education. To all the teachers and staff at Fundação Musical dos Amigos das Crianças, thank you for laying the groundwork for the musician I am today. A huge thanks to all my singing teachers and vocal coaches who shaped the musician and teacher I have become today: Catherine Rey, my first singing teacher, Sílvia Mateus and Nuno Vieira de Almeida at the Escola Superior de Música de Lisboa; Rainer Trost, Gabriele Fontana and Dieter Paier at the Universität

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Elvire de Paiva e Pona

PART I
OVERVIEW OF ACT

CHAPTER 1

Introducing Acceptance and Commitment Training and Psychological Flexibility

“Pain and purpose are two sides of the same thing. A person struggling with depression is very likely a person yearning to feel fully. A socially anxious person is very likely a person yearning to connect with others. You hurt where you care, and you care where you hurt.”

—Steven C. Hayes

CHAPTER GOALS

1. Learn about the types of problems student and professional musicians often seek help for.
2. Learn about the ACT model and how psychological inflexibility leads to human suffering, whereas psychological flexibility is associated with improved well-being and enhanced performance. Know about the ACT “Hexaflex” and “Inflexahex.”

Welcome to the beginning of what we hope is a better and clearer path. You’ve likely arrived here because you’re a musician of some kind who is eager to improve an aspect(s) of your performance. If so, we applaud you for taking the difficult step towards making helpful changes to your performances. Maybe you’re a professional or student musician who struggles with performance anxiety or other psychological barriers to performing at your best. Or maybe you’re a musician who used to perform

but stopped due to similar challenges you couldn't overcome, or possibly you're an amateur musician with no aspirations to perform professionally, yet you still want to overcome the psychological hurdle(s) getting in your way. Regardless of the kind of musician you are, we commend your bravery in taking action to improve your performances. Really, that isn't easy to do. Just know, we believe the information in this book may be of help, because it's already shown to be helpful for numerous others who struggle with similar challenges. Alternatively, perhaps you're here because you're a professional who works with musicians, i.e., a music teacher, a performance coach, a psychologist, or another practitioner, and you want to help them improve their performance skills, but you're unsure how to help. So, you're taking steps to educate yourself about any performance psychology-based techniques you might want to implement within your own practice. We commend you too for developing yourself professionally so you may better meet the needs of your clients or students, as that can be time-consuming. Just know, we believe the contents of this book may help you as well, because the information, techniques, and exercises contained herein are supported by 30+ years of clinical research, including over 800 randomized controlled trials, a type of research study often considered the best methodological design for determining the efficacy of a newer treatment.

No matter who you are and why you're here, we want to offer you *hope* if you're a musician struggling with any of the common psychological problems facing you during your training and/or professional career, and *encouragement* if you're a professional who works with musicians and you want to develop your ability to help. In either case, we believe the contents of this book may help to alleviate your struggle and revitalize your passion for performing music on the one hand, and serve as a comprehensive resource on the other hand for professionals looking for credible information. It's our mission to introduce to you a newer psychological intervention that can be used as a psychotherapy by mental health clinicians and as a coaching approach by performance coaches and music teachers. We believe the standard by which musicians receive care for their performance problems, and by which practitioners provide help to musicians, needs to be raised so more evidence-based approaches are used, and approaches usable by non-clinical professionals like coaches and teachers are used, in order to maximize the likelihood for musicians' success. The name of the therapy we've dedicated ourselves to teaching you is Acceptance and

Commitment Therapy, or ACT (said as a word, not as the individual letters A-C-T). Whenever ACT is used by non-clinical professionals, such as coaches or music teachers, it's called Acceptance and Commitment Training or Coaching. We'll refer to it heretofore as simply ACT, or ACT *training*, as that's a phrase that encompasses ACT more broadly than either ACT therapy or ACT coaching.

Before we start teaching you about ACT, however, we'll first want to discuss the types of psychological challenges faced by so many musicians that occupy the focus of this book. If you're a musician, chances are good you're already struggling with at least one of them, and that's what brought you here.

Types of Performance-Related Problems Commonly Experienced by Musicians to Be Addressed in this Book

While listening to music and making it are associated with increased well-being and lower levels of stress, becoming a professional musician is a challenging endeavor associated with both positive and negative outcomes. In our conjoint experience as a clinical psychologist/performance coach and a classically trained singer/singing teacher, we've learned student musicians often face a number of difficulties during their training that interfere with healthy psychological functioning, and professionals may continue to experience these same difficulties during their career, plus additional ones. Research also confirms musicians are more likely to experience psychological challenges compared to other professions. As a student, then, it's possible you'll be impacted by one or more of these difficulties (which will be discussed in a moment), and as a professional musician it's also possible you'll continue to be impacted by them during your career. This may be overwhelming to think about now, on top of everything else you're working on, and if so we'd understand why. However, we'd again like to offer you hope—all of the psychological problems we'll discuss herein are *treatable*.

The types of common difficulties to be addressed specifically in this book are the following: music performance anxiety (MPA), performance-related pain, recovering from injury, perfectionism, procrastination, shame, occupational burnout, and career uncertainty. We believe these are some of the most important challenges facing student and professional