

Using the Performance Skill in D&D 5th Edition (2014)

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The Performance Issue:

This basic came to the fore while considering whether and how to include the Bard class into the Circe Road 5th Edition campaign, which was started in December, 2024. The problem is that there's not much of any practical use for the Performance skill, even by a Bard.

The description the Performance skill in the Player's Handbook, in listing the skills and how they are used, reads:

“Performance: Your Charisma (Performance) check determines how well you can delight an audience with music, dance, acting, storytelling, or some other form of entertainment.”

That's it. Yes, it might make people happy. But in game terms, if you want to have an effect, you use Deception or Persuade. Those are the two skills directly supported by the Eloquence subclass of Bard's "Silver tongue." Or, you just have a direct effect not mediated by any skill check at all. Performance seems to never enter into practical issues. The various features of the Bard class very seldom reference performance at all, and I've not seen any instance of using a Performance check.

So, what should Performance do? What consequences should there be for a favorable performance? In 3rd Edition, the Performance skill "impresses" people and earns money. There's no explicit way in which impressing someone gives a game benefit. The monetary benefit is quantified. (Presumably this means sustained performances averaging out at the DC's specified.)

DC10 Routine performance. Trying to earn money by playing is essentially begging. 1d10 cp/day

DC15 Enjoyable performance. In a prosperous city, you can earn 1d10 sp/day.

DC20 Great performance. In a prosperous city, you can earn 3d10 sp/day. In time, you may be invited to join a professional troupe and may develop a regional reputation.

DC25 Memorable performance. In a prosperous city, you can earn 1d6 gp/day. In time, you may come to the attention of noble patrons and develop a national reputation.

DC30 Extraordinary performance. In a prosperous city, you can earn 3d6 gp/day. In time, you may draw the attention from distant potential patrons, or even from extraterrestrial beings.

So, in addition to earning the specified living, the performer also earns interaction opportunities with people that matter, a "reputation," and with that chances to gather information. There are no specifics, but a DM can figure out how to use this for adventure hooks or a way to drop hints. That would be true whether the character is a Bard or not.

Especially for a Bard, shouldn't performance amount to more than that? Should not a performance influence the audience in mood, perhaps convey a point of view, or even inspire action? The "bard" Timotheus, on the occasion of "Alexander's Feast," provides an illustrative example. By his music, he inspiring Alexander the Great to burn down the Persian Palace in Persepolis (Dryden, Handel). So, rather than a direct "Persuade" or "Deceive," maybe the way a Bard would more usually function would be to use his "Perform" skill to both enhance his own Charisma and set a mood in his listeners, that would give the effect of a further bonus to a check to Persuade and Deceive. Consider entertainers at a party. They function not only to enhance

their own reputation, but also to put those entertained in a mood for enjoyment, delightful conversation, meeting people, dancing, and love. That makes these same people ripe for the Bard's possible agenda of meeting someone important, dropping a suggestion, making friends with a particular target, or even just more ordinary intimate opportunities.

So, the motivation is to make Performance mean something in game terms, especially in the case of Bards. Bards should have good reason to choose "Performance" as a skill and Expertise in that skill, in order to be more effective as Bards. That's not the case as the 5th Edition rules stand now.

Performance versus Persuasion or Deception:

A Bard should be a master entertainer using performances by music and forms of entertainment, and possibly oratory. Oratory may differ in addressing some particular topic or desired action more directly. Antony's speech in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" or Henry V at Agincourt would be examples of direct persuasion by Oratory without being "Performance" in the same sense as Entertainment. On the other hand, Oratory can be strictly for entertainment, as in recounting deeds of historical figures. I'm going to focus on such general forms of "Performance" rather than Persuasion or Deception cloaked as Performance.

The same principle can apply to poetry reading or song where the intent is, through language, to direct the audience attention to particular facts, circumstances, with the intent of motivating some sort of action or response.

Having said that, Performance could and likely will be used by a skilled Bard to prepare the audience for a Persuasion or Deception attempt, where some particular response is being sought. Those responses might be solicitation of financial support, backing a particular worthy cause, revolting against the authorities, or rioting against an enemy party. The role of a "Performance," rather than just a naked attempt at Persuasion, would be to prepare the audience to consider the Persuasion more favorable. That, in game terms, might be a positive die roll modifier, or "Advantage," to the Bard's (or someone else's) Persuasion attempt.

On the other hand, if the purpose really is just entertainment, the consequences would again be that the Bard, or other performer, has prepared the audience for anticipated subsequent actions. Those may include gifts of money (coins tossed to the performers as tips), but also improved success in romance opportunities, or loosening people's tongues to allow secrets to slip out a little more easily. The intent might even be to lead the audience to relax, letting its guard, making them ripe for an attack or thievery attempts.

So, in attempting to better model "Performance" in the system, I'm going to say Performance is a preliminary step for other interactions that are mediated by social skills, particularly things like Persuasion and Deception. The Performance presumably could be used to influence a general direction of attitude, but not with the specificity possible with Oratory alone. It would be up to the Performer to choose music, style, emphasis, and artistry to invoke the mood and attitude sought. Once that is done, the success (or failure) of the Performance influences more specific Persuasion or reactions.

Performance skill and Musical Instrument skills

Musical instruments have their own specific proficiencies. The instrument cannot be used without having the instrument skill. The rules are explicit that someone with an instrument proficiency adds his proficiency bonus when using the instrument. That would seemingly replace the need for the Performance skill to be a musician with that instrument. So, is there any

point to having the “Performance” skill as well? The base rules allow for a proficiency bonus to be counted only once for a given skill check. In other words, the two proficiencies don’t stack.

However, *Xanathar’s Guide To Everything* has an optional rule that would say having both the skill proficiency (in this case Performance) as well as an applicable tool proficiency (a musical instrument) can give Advantage:

“**Advantage.** If the use of a tool and the use of a skill both apply to a check, and a character is proficient with the tool and the skill, consider allowing the character to make the check with advantage.”

This does seem to mean that a Performer who is singing won’t have Advantage, but one who is playing an instrument does. Unless someone with a singing voice, who has training for that, is considered a “tool” as well. Maybe “singing” should be a “tool proficiency?” Perhaps “Oratory” too, though the training for that would be different. And other Performance types.

In 3rd Edition, the Perform skill came with a requirement to choose a specific type of performance: Act, (comedy, drama, mime), Comedy (buffoonery, limericks, joke-telling), Dance (ballet, waltz, jig), Keyboard Instruments (harpsichord, piano, pipe organ), Oratory (epic, ode, storytelling), Percussion instruments (bells, chimes, drums, gong), String instruments (fiddle, harp, lute, mandolin), wind instruments (flute, pan pipes, recorder, shawm, trumpet), or sing (ballad, chant, melody). The points put into one perform skill down to the instrument type level did not apply to a different instrument. Singing both ballads and melody would be two different skills. Under 3E rules, Bards must have certain numbers of points in some specific perform skill to be able to use particular Bard features, which pretty well committed Bards to accumulating Performance skills.

In 5E, the Entertainer background character is “versatile,” allowed to choose up to three “routines” to “define your expertise as an entertainer.” The Performance skill is required. So, does the character get the Performance proficiency bonus only when providing entertainment of the up to three types chosen? Can the entertainer do any of the other forms at all? Or do them, but without the proficiency bonus? Now, consider, not all Bards are necessarily of the “Entertainer” background. Not even all of those skilled with an instrument will be. For example, an Outlander gets a musical instrument proficiency, and that proficiency will apply if the Outlander does a Performance. So, choosing a “Routine” of “Instrumentalist” seems to convey no additional benefit.

With the rules as they are, the use of the proficiency bonus for someone with an instrument proficiency can’t be denied. So, having a Perform (instrumentalist Routine) should give some additional Advantage. I’m going to rule that it does just that. In other words, the musician is a more professional grade player, much less likely to have a low end performance. Now, extrapolating from that, I’m going to say that choosing a Perform skill requires making up to three choices from that same list (page 130 of the Player’s Handbook). An instrument skill may be chosen instead of one or two of the “Routines” listed. A Routine can be chosen instead of an Instrument. So, to be the best Singer, a Singer is not just a “Singer” by Performance routine, but instrument (trained voice) too, thus getting Advantage on Performance checks.

Entertainer	2 Dancer	5 Juggler	8 Singer
Routine:	3 Fire eater	6 Instrumentalist	9 Storyteller
1 Actor	4 Jester	7 Poet	10 Tumbler

In summary, someone choosing the “Perform” skill (not just Entertainers) chooses one to three of the “routines” (Performance types) listed on p. 130 for the Entertainer. If less than three, the other choices can be “entertainment tools,” usually meaning musical instruments, but possibly dance training and appropriate shoes and clothing, a ventriloquist’s dummy, one’s trained singing voice, or something else that is tied to the performance mode in a narrower sense than the broad “routines” list. If skilled in the appropriate Performance “routine” OR the instrument, one gets a performance proficiency bonus. If skilled with both the performance routine AND the appropriate instrument, one gets Advantage as well as the Proficiency bonus.

All this has assumed single performers before the audience. A carefully designed Bard ought to be performing with Advantage, assuming properly chosen skills and instruments. So, does that mean no other help can be effective? What about accompaniment, or ensembles? That will be addressed later.

Performance Parameters: Time

The Glamour Bard’s “Enthralling Performance” is required to be at least a minute. That seems a mighty short time. Perhaps the brevity is due to the fey magic by which it is accomplished? I would expect more like several to tens of minutes would be more normal, giving the audience time to see watch and listen, to consider the artistry and message and content, reflect on it, and decide whether it is enjoyable and entertaining or not.

Establishing a minimum time is important, due to the durations of spells and other forms of aid that might influence the Performance. Many spells, such as “Guidance,” are only effective for a minute. That’s too short to cover the performance time of a typical song, poem, dance, or oratory. When does one actually make the die roll for the Performance, in the first minute? If so, then maybe “Guidance” is applicable. I’m more inclined to think, “in the middle,” after the artist has gotten over any initial nervousness, and is able to continue in good form consistent with training. If a performance is going to be particularly good or bad, that’s probably true from nearer the start, but perhaps more than a minute, especially if the performer is singing or dancing for half an hour or more.

For the sake of specificity, lacking reason to say otherwise, I’ll make the nominal Performance skill exercise as needing 10 minutes up to 30 minutes, possibly as long as an hour. So, transitory help from the “Guidance” spell is too brief. A “Bardic Inspiration” use can be held for up to 10 minutes, so if given at the start of a performance, it would still be available when the actual check is made. “Enhance Ability / Eagle’s Splendor,” with an hour duration, would be applicable to a Performance, even should it go on more than an hour, because by the end, the effect will have given its advantage. What about “Luck points” or a Wizard’s “Portent?” These are specifically to replace single rolls for a skill check (or something else). No duration or held time is specified. I’d think these would be applicable.

Multiple Performers:

The stereotypical bard performs alone, but entertainment often features multiple performers: A singer accompanied by an instrumentalist, a duet or music ensemble, a dancer with music provided, or a troupe of actors presenting a play. Seemingly the most obvious way of treating this is to consider additional performers as providing a “Help” action. That would give “Advantage.” But, a performer is likely to already have “Advantage” by having both the Performance skill and skill in the instrument used. Extra Advantage is not allowed in the system. So, some other way of treating multiple performers is needed.

A seemingly reasonable approach is to start with an average performance bonus for the performers. There generally will be a “lead performer.” If it’s a singer or dancer with accompaniment, that would be the singer or dancer. A brass instrumentalist would take the lead over strings, simply through volume. In determining the average, give the lead performer a double share of the average. So, a singer at +8 accompanied by flute at +5 would give $(8+8+5)/3 = 7$. Now, in this case, if we left it at that, the singer is worse off for having an accompanist! That doesn’t make sense. So, we add +2 for the first extra performer, +1 for the second, +1/2 for the next two, + ¼ each after that, to a maximum of +6. (The added performers are likely to have lower performer skills than the lead, so that would be bringing the average down. If a troupe of actors is all equally skilled, yes, together they could get +6 better than the skill level of the individuals. That’s what it takes to put on a play. It ought to have greater value than just a single orator.) So, the singer with the flute accompanist is raised from +8 to +9.

All of this so far assumes that the Performance is in a receptive setting. But, suppose there are hecklers? Or, multiple independent performers, say, on the street. That’s a distraction! Either case, one deliberate, the other incidental, would take away from the performance. One way to treat this is as a “Disadvantage,” which at worst would cancel “Advantage” for complementing perform and instrument skills, or impose Disadvantage on the check. Especially for hecklers, “competing performances” might be a better model, where the heckler (Oratory) performance subtracts from the achievement of the performance being presented. At this time, I’m leaning toward “Disadvantage” unless the distraction is “skilled,” such as someone with Oratory performance. Loudness might be a factor too. It will simply be impossible for a flautist to be effective if someone is blowing a trumpet. Ultimately the effectiveness of a Performance assumes people are able to watch and listen. Once a fight starts, everybody will be too distracted by concerns of safety, anger, or horror to pay attention.

Performance Effects:

All the above results in a d20 Perform (Charisma) skill roll, possibly with advantage, and possibly with additions for magical effects such as Bardic Inspiration. A 1st level Bard with no help could expect to have a +5 skill, giving an average expected 19 result with the “Advantage” (average 13.8) from complementary Perform and instrument skills, likely better. A 5th level Bard with a masterwork instrument (+1), +10 for skill with expertise and Ch=18, could expect to achieve a 30 result, and likely better. But, what does that do?

The fundamental assumption for this treatment of “Perform” is that the Performance increases the effects of Charisma for subsequent exercise of skills such as “Persuade” and “Deceive.” For this purpose I’ll use a scale similar to that used by the 3rd Edition:

- DC10 is like begging, and amounts to an annoyance. -1 on Charisma.
- DC15 is at least enjoyable. Nice, but no real payoff. +0 on Charisma
- DC20 is great. Now we’re feeling something afterwards. +1 on Charisma.
- DC25 is memorable. This is going to have a significant impact: +2 to Charisma
- DC30 is extraordinary. Now we are really moving people: +3 to Charisma
- DC35+? Magical. People are almost at the mercy of the performer, +4 and above.

So, how does this work? The Level 1 bard gets a good roll on Performance, and gets a 20. So, +1 on a subsequent effort to entice the Lord’s daughter into a relationship that might be beneficial to both she and the Bard. If this is done with “Persuasion,” the Persuasion for the

Bard would be at +5(skill with Ch=16) +1 (performance), and likely with Advantage. (If help to get Advantage is needed, he presents a small gift to her at the same time, say, a nice ring.) That's going to have to beat her Insight skill (we'll say +4 for skill + W14) and she may well have Advantage from being well warned and guarded against such ventures ("help"). Still, the Bard has a better than 50% chance following this model (+6 vs. +4), with the Performance making a little bit (5%) of difference. Likely a better model is that, unless the daughter enticed the Bard, his appeal automatically would have disadvantage, so he is +6 without advantage versus her +4 with Advantage, which is a less than 50% chance, but still maybe a chance worth taking.

In similar manner, the Bard could follow up the performance with an attempt to persuade the Lord to release the Bard's party from the dungeons, or he could try to incite a crowd into adulation of the Lord to put him in a yet more favorable mood.

The benefit of the performance would decay over time. I'd suggest -1 for each follow-up attempt, or at the most an hour given no attempt to exploit the performance except to create good will. Then -1 more after two more hours or another attempt, until the benefit of Performance is finally zero.

In the context of a celebration or party, the Performance benefit would be available to those at the party. Their openness to suggestion or romance with each other would be enhanced. (Possibly by ½ that as for direct action of the bard? Rounded up.) So, +1 at DC20, +2 at DC30. That may be on top of a general benefit of being at a party with drinks and good food and elegant dress, all that contributing perhaps +1 to +3 at the most. Big Solstice and Equinox celebrations would likely have a +1 bonus in addition.

Conclusion:

While this development of the Perform skill was motivated by looking at how that might be used by the Bard class, it's certainly not exclusive to Bards. Perform and the use of musical instruments are available to other classes as well, and are especially useful to someone choosing the "Rogue" class, with the availability of "Expertise" to help boost the skills.

This development is still a work in progress. We'll see how practical and playable all of this is as the Circe Road campaign progresses.

The Appendix is a brief summary without the reasoning and explanation.

Appendix: Performance Skill Summary

When the “Performance” skill is chosen during character building, choose up to three “routines” (types of entertainment) from the list on p130 (Entertainer) for the modes of performance to which the proficiency bonus applies. Any of the three choices not used can be used to choose instruments, to include special singing and dancing training beyond the usual.

A performance requires at least a minute, and usually at least 10 minutes, up to an hour or more. About 1/3 to half way through, a skill performance check is made. The check has Advantage if the performer has both the applicable Perform “routine” skill AND the tool skill with the instrument (to include possibly singing and dancing etc.).

After the performance, the performer enjoys a Charisma benefit that depends on the outcome of the Performance skill check: <DC5: -3; <DC10: -2; <DC15: -1; DC20: +1; DC25: +2; DC30: +3, and so on up. After one attempt to use this bonus, or an hour, the bonus decays by 1 toward zero. After the second attempt or 2 more hours, by additional 1, and so forth. Those in the audience gain half of this benefit (rounded up) for their interactions with each other.

Special case of Multiple performers: Take an average of performer skills, counting the “lead” performer (usually a dancer or singer if present) as two performers. Then add a +2 for the first extra performer, +1 for the second, +1/2 for the next two, +1/4 for others, up to a total of +6. Use that averaged and modified skill for the skill check.

Magical enhancements may be applicable. Typically “Guidance” or other 1 minute effects can only apply if a performance is only a minute or two. (There needs to be a good reason why such a brief performance can be allowed, and the brevity may come with a penalty to the skill bonus.) Bardic Inspiration (can be held for 10 minutes), “Eagle’s Splendor,” and other spells of 10 minutes to an hour, can be used. Magic or masterwork instruments may add a +1, or perhaps more.

If the performance is strictly for the purpose of earning money, in a city a performance of DC15 earns 3d10 cp. DC20 or above earns d10 sp, at DC25 3d10 sp, at DC30 d10 gp. This is assuming a suitable venue. Performances over a week can bring in triple that. In smaller towns and villages, or on the street in a city, the earnings are typically ½ or ¼ of that.

Termination of the performance after making the skill check, and not completing it, brings a further -1 Charisma effect in addition to what the Perform skill check indicated. If the performance ends prematurely because a fight breaks out, the early ending imposes no penalty.

Hecklers (a form of oratory performance), or a competing performance, imposes at least Disadvantage on the performance. For competing performances, especially stronger ones, a Charisma subtraction (The bonus earned by the competing performance) may be imposed.