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## VOICE TEACHERS' STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

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### Abstract

Increasing competition among musicians on the contemporary scene implies additional requirements for them in terms of versatility and competitiveness. Performance anxiety usually manifests itself in negative changes in mental and physical sense of self before a performance. In recent years increasingly more attention has been paid to problems influencing musicians' performance. Performance anxiety is undoubtedly one of the negative factors each performer has to face to a greater or lesser degree. As a rule, performers are sensitive and emotional in nature and it is not likely that the audience would enjoy watching a dull or completely rational performance. The purpose of this study is to learn how professional classical singers and voice teachers cope with performance anxiety. We are interested in how they maintain well-being and mental balance needed for a successful performance, which pre-performance anxiety suppressing activities they find most efficient and which ones they have suggested to their students. The study was carried out through semi-structured interviews with 12 recognised classical singers and vocal pedagogues, who were working or had worked as soloists at Estonian National Opera, or as oratorio or chamber singers. To allow organisation, categorisation and analysis of the received information, the texts were processed with the qualitative research software Nvivo 7. Coping successfully with performances all singers had developed a daily schedule which had often become their lifestyle to which they did not attach special importance on a daily basis. Support of the family was considered important and it was seen as natural that family members follow and respect the singer's rhythm of life. All singers stressed that most difficult for them was to maintain vocal health throughout the season and emotional balance in stressful situations.

*Keywords:* Multiage instruction; non-graded classroom

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## **1. Introduction**

Increasing competition among musicians on the contemporary scene implies additional requirements for them in terms of versatility and competitiveness. Performance anxiety usually manifests itself in negative changes in mental and physical sense of self before a performance. Almost all musicians feel anxiety before performances but experienced artists are able to exercise control over the anxiety-related feelings as well as over possible physical disturbances. Today, due to the openness of the world and intense competition, the training of classical singers is becoming more similar to professional sports. In addition to vocal and technical skills, students have to pay increasingly more attention to knowledge and skills needed for successful coping in adverse conditions and stressful situations. They have to learn to keep top form throughout the season despite the circumstances, health problems or competitive environment. Kenny (2011) discusses that for achieving a peak performance there are both physical and psychological preconditions, which are overlapping and interdependent. Salmon and Meyer (1992) view musicians' coping with performance stress and admit that there is no denying the highly competitive nature of music as a profession, particularly with respect to performing.

In the training of classical singers' skilful coping with performance anxiety is of utmost importance, since singers' living instrument is equally vulnerable to thoughts, perception and external conditions. Many years of singing studies will be rendered useless if the performer is unable to implement the vocal technical skills learned in the classroom in front of an audience or competition jury. During demanding performances and in competitive environments, preparation in singing techniques as well as in coping with stressful situations will have a determining role. As a rule, classical singers have developed a lifestyle that helps them to maintain general endurance and emotional balance. Paradoxically, classical singers have to be emotionally gripping during a performance, but balanced at the same time to keep control of their instrument.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### *2.1. Concept of vocal pedagogy*

The objective of vocal pedagogy today is to highlight and reinforce the best features of students' voice by developing its tone quality, range, mobility, intensity and endurance. Each singing student is unique, but the principles of vocal sound production are common to all. The vocal apparatus mainly develops after puberty and as a living organism continues to develop in relation to age and health. It takes years to become a classical singer, until the co-operation between mind and muscles is optimal enough to allow the production of the desired tone through different vocal registers. It is common that a singing student has to "play" and perform on an instrument that is not yet fully developed. As a rule, instrumentalists are normally able to use a good instrument that is in a good condition. Burwell (2006) in her study of singers and musicians notes that voice teachers place more emphasis on the development of technique than instrumental teachers. Achieving vocal technical superiority is one of the main goals of the training of classical singers, which in turn establishes a basis for creative freedom. Bunch (1997; p.102) describes components, which generally define the quality of a singer's voice: the physical structure of the head, neck and vocal tract, the coordination of the mechanism for singing, the imagination of the singer and the levels of health and energy. By Coffin (2002) the first record of vocal pedagogical instructions written by the male soprano Pier Francesco Tosi in 1723 originate from Italy. The *Bel Canto* vocal technical traditions are used mostly in vocal pedagogy even today. In great opera houses and concert halls it has become essential that the singer's voice should carry over the orchestra and be durable. As technology develops, singers' public performances are increasingly more often compared to the recordings on CDs or DVDs. High expectations of human voice, singers' external attractiveness and general endurance in today's competitive environment also place

higher and more varied demands on teachers and educational institutions where competitive performers are trained.

## *2.2. Performance anxiety and singers*

In recent years increasingly more attention has been paid to problems influencing musicians' performance. Performance anxiety is undoubtedly one of the negative factors each performer has to face to a greater or lesser degree. As a rule, performers are sensitive and emotional in nature and it is not likely that the audience would enjoy watching a dull or completely rational performance. According to Spielberg (1972) and Rapee (1991), fear and anxiety can be regarded both as emotional states, evoked in a particular context and having a limited duration, and as personality traits, characterising individuals across time and situations. Salmon et al. point out that emotional states such as anxiety arise from an interaction between three psychological components; cognitive (or verbal), behavioural, and physiological (Salmon et al., 1998, pp. 121-137). According to Levy (2006) physical symptoms of stress include: sweating, flushing, headache, tachycardia, angina, backache, fatigue, insomnia, gastrointestinal problems, dry mouth, and other symptoms.

Compared to other musicians, classical singers are especially vulnerable to unfavourable conditions, since their "instrument" is prone to react to both internal and external factors. It becomes highly important how a singer is able to realise what has been acquired in the lessons in front of an audience or competition jury. Classical singers' insecurity in their feel of the instrument may be increased by 1) emotional disturbance, 2) insufficient level of vocal technical skills 3) unfavourable external conditions and 4) health. Problems related to performance anxiety of professional classical singers have not been much discussed.

### **3. Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to learn how professional classical singers and voice teachers cope with performance anxiety. We are interested in how they maintain well-being and mental balance needed for a successful performance, which pre-performance anxiety suppressing activities they find most efficient and which ones they have suggested to their students.

The study was carried out through semi-structured interviews with 12 recognised classical singers and vocal pedagogues, who were working or had worked as soloists at Estonian National Opera, or as oratorio or chamber singers. They all were vocal pedagogues and were teaching classical singing in public educational institutions. They had remarkable working experience as singers and voice teachers. Their experience as a soloist ranged between 10 and 45 years and as a voice teacher, between 2 and 36 years. Among the respondents were 4 male and 8 female singers-voice teachers. The interview questions focused on classical singers' pre-performance activities, performance-related tensions, professional tensions, coping with performance anxiety and stress, techniques and exercises for coping with performance anxiety, most frequently used performance-related exercises and activities used (before, during and after performance).

There were altogether 56 questions, which were divided into two topic areas: 43 questions asked classical singers/vocal pedagogues about their personal coping with performance anxiety. For example: What has a negative, positive effect on the voice? What is recommended to immediately calm the nerves? If the performance has failed, what do you think, what do you do, what should be done, what should be avoided? What is the best way of restoring your strength? Do you have a daily schedule in your day-to-day life and before performances? etc. 13 questions dealt with voice teachers' work with students in lessons and before the students' performances. At the beginning of the interview all singers-pedagogues answered two questions: How long have you been a professional classical singer? and How

long have you been a teacher of classical singing? The average duration of an interview was 2 hours. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. To allow organisation, categorisation and analysis of the received information, the texts were processed with the qualitative research software Nvivo 7.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1. Responses of 12 singers-voice teachers*

Responses of 12 singers-voice teachers concerning qualities required of professional singers were listed the following 22 qualities required of a professional singer:

1. A beautiful voice, 2. Strong vocal apparatus, 3. Very good health, 4. Healthy nervous system, 5. Very well trained voice (technique), 6. Emotionality, 7. Ability to work hard, 8. Very good memory, 9. Perseverance, 10. Self-confidence, 11. Intuitive voice control, 12. Analytical skills, 13. Strong desire to sing, 14. Talent for music, 15. Musical literacy, 16. Overall musical education, 17. Artistry, 18. Charm, 19. Ability to become absorbed, 20. Fanaticism, 21. Certain degree of selfishness, 22. Emotionally giving personality.

The classical singers/voice teachers highlighted 16 factors interfering with coping as a professional singer.

1. Maintaining vocal fitness, 2. General health problems, 3. Lack of preparation time, 4. Difficulties due to the part they need to sing, 5. General technical difficulties when they have to sing very different parts in a short time, 6. Responsibility for maintaining their voice quality in spite of travel conditions and changes in climate, 7. Fatigue, 8. sleeping disorders,
9. Too intensive schedule of rehearsals before a performance, 10. Problematic family relations, 11. Problems with colleagues (especially conductors), 12. Maintaining a healthy and stable nervous system, 13. Unjustified criticism, 14. The fear of making mistakes, 15. The difficulty of acting at maximum efficiency at any moment of time, 16. Subjective area of assessment.

The respondents also mentioned that at different stages of life difficulties vary and may change.

#### 4.2. All singers-vocal pedagogues were unanimous

The respondents unanimously considered the following 6 factors important for being a successful singer:

1. Maintaining vocal and general health,
2. Good preparation,
3. Physical fitness,
4. Pre-performance routine,
5. Support of the family,
6. Maintaining emotional balance.

Respondents were unanimous in comparing the profession of a classical singer with that of a top athlete and considered most difficult maintaining a good condition of their voice throughout the whole season. For example, the following question received answers given below:

*Is the profession of a classical singer comparable to that of a top athlete?*

R. 2. (a singer for 45 years, a voice teacher for 25 years): *They are comparable, but we, singers, have to be fit for a longer period. I have to be in a good shape throughout the whole season. Our field requires highly purposeful practising.*

R. 1. (a singer for 45 years, a voice teacher for 25 years): *Preparation and focusing on one certain day, one certain time. The psychological preparation of a practising singer and an athlete is quite similar. Before a difficult performance, singing the main role or an important concert, the physical and mental preparation is exactly the same. The activities are different but the trend is the same. At a certain moment you'll have to be able to make an utmost effort. Then health or weather don't matter.*

#### *4.3. Pre-performance routine*

All singers had developed a certain pre-performance routine reflected by an established daily schedule, which included sleeping time, meals, and specific voice exercises. The respondents listed 15 common pre-performance activities:

1. The morning of the performance day at home/at a hotel,
2. Sufficient sleeping time,
3. A light breakfast,
4. Avoiding the use of voice for speaking,
6. Preferring being alone,
7. Doing well-established physical exercises,
8. Doing well-established breathing exercises,
9. Doing well-established vocal exercises,
10. Eating 4 to 5 hours before the performance,
11. If needed, the part was reviewed with eyes only without using the voice,
12. If needed, only some places were sung through with voice,
13. Changes were not accepted before the performance,
14. Avoiding haste in actions,
15. Getting to the venue of the performance in good time, usually 2 to 3 hours prior to the performance.

#### *4.4. Singers' breathing exercises*

Breathing exercises have a toning effect, especially when the voice is not in a very good condition. On average, respondents did breathing exercises for 10 to 30 minutes a day. One of the respondents did breathing exercises for an hour and a half a day. Different singers used some exercises that were similar and some that were different. All vocalists did the following breathing exercise:

They breathed in with certain rhythm, held breath and breathed out.

All vocalists emphasised the calming effect of breathing exercises. The three most frequently used exercises for quick calming were the following:

1. Two or three deep breaths (in and out),
2. Two or three deep sighs,
3. Take a deep breath, keep your muscles tense for some time, then suddenly let go (if necessary repeat several times).



#### 4.5. Advice to students

All singers-vocal pedagogues agreed with the statement that the singers' instrument is to a great deal a psychological instrument. Especially in the beginners, emotional excitement can cause a complete loss of the feeling for the instrument. For example, to the question *When the inner balance disappears, will the instrument fail too?* it was responded:

R. 5. (a singer for 30 years, a voice teacher for 39 years): *Absolutely. Yes.*

All teachers admitted that to a greater or lesser degree their students have problems with performance anxiety. In the initial stage of the course they teach students breathing exercises and recommend focusing techniques that they themselves have used. In the later stages of studies there is no systematic approach. It is students' own responsibility whether they apply the techniques and methods taught to them.

For example, the question *When a student loses his nerve before a performance, what do you recommend?* received the following response from

R. 7. (a singer for 24 and a teacher for 11 years): *I would recommend breathing exercises. But that requires systematic practice.*

The respondents did not consider it especially important emphasising to students the necessity of physical stamina, but they often found it to be a sensitive topic. The same applied to overweight. The interviewed teachers stressed that nowadays achieving physical similarity with the character portrayed is increasingly important. The teachers pointed out that singing students should gain more performance experience, learn to rationally assess themselves and their outcomes. When a performance is a failure, there should certainly be a rational analysis of why the error occurred. Self-blame should be avoided. Advice should be taken from trustworthy people who you know wish you the best. Negative thoughts should be avoided. It

is important to believe in yourself and find your own solutions. The teachers recommended not to eat too much immediately before singing, since it makes deep breathing difficult and thus hinders achieving the level of perception needed for singing. Certain foods that they suggested to avoid before singing were the following: nuts, chocolate, milk products, spices, grapes. Everything that might irritate or dry the vocal tract should be avoided. Hydrating substances, primarily still water, were considered beneficial. Respondents unanimously believed that alcohol, tobacco and chemical substances used to relieve anxiety damage the voice. One voice teacher was of an opinion that if a singer uses some medicine, its effect has to be previously tested on the same user in the same situations. However, general point of view was that a professional classical singer has to develop skills in coping with performance anxiety without chemical substances

## **5. Discussion**

All 12 singers-voice teachers stressed that in today's intense competition every classical singer has to be a very good singer. Nevertheless, their success is determined by their performance in front of an audience. They all agreed that pre-performance preparation must involve work with the piece they will perform as well as activities ensuring emotional balance before the performance. Maintaining emotional balance despite internal or external interfering factors was considered very important. Woody et al. (2011) also emphasise that successful performers have to learn to manage their emotions before and during performances. Kenny (2006) investigation indicated that music performance anxiety is not limited to orchestral musicians, there was shown that opera chorus artists are also prone to high levels of performance anxiety. Öhman (2010) have stressed out that in fear organisms try to cope with the danger, but in anxiety, the situation does not allow effective means of coping. Therefore, becomes highly important to find the helpful ways that are suitable for overcoming destructive situations.

Coping successfully with performances all singers had developed a daily schedule which had often become their lifestyle to which they did not attach special importance on a daily basis. Support of the family was considered important and it was seen as natural that family members follow and respect the singer's rhythm of life. All singers stressed that most difficult for them was to maintain vocal health throughout the season and emotional balance in stressful situations.

Most frequent problems with colleagues mentioned by the respondents were difficult conductors, whose behaviour had an especially adverse emotional impact. This allows us to completely agree with what Kenny (2011) states while viewing the impact of composers on musicians, that those who are responsible for the development of conductor training courses in tertiary music institutions should seriously consider the introduction of additional courses in tempi and rhythm, and focused courses on understanding human behaviour, human motivation, and risk factors for the development or exacerbation of anxiety disorders in orchestral musicians, including their own role as a risk factor.

The singers-voice teachers recognised the importance of physical stamina in their profession and they all had a physically active lifestyle, engaging in swimming, running, skiing, gymnastics or yoga. All respondents did breathing exercises more or less regularly. They considered a breathing-based exercise especially beneficial on occasions when their voice was not in a very good condition and when they needed to calm themselves quickly. All vocal pedagogues had witnessed their students experiencing problems with performance anxiety. In lessons these problems were mainly treated for a short period at the beginning of the course. It was not common to give these problems systematic attention in the teaching process in parallel with the acquisition of vocal techniques. Teachers most frequently introduced breathing exercises and techniques to their students they themselves used before performances. They also told their students about food preferences before a performance. Students' attention was directed to the need to develop a habit of rational analysis after

performances. The singers-voice teachers did not generally use medication to cope with performance anxiety, because they thought it could cause addiction and have an unpredictable effect on their voice. They also recommended their students not to use chemical substances. West (2004) have pointed out that for musicians there is a need for fine control of one's muscles so that notes are played or sung as intended with the required quality and intonation. It becomes very important how the individuals' may react to taken tranquilliser. The topics of developing physical stamina and body weight were considered sensitive in spite of the fact that all voice teachers admitted that today's singers have to have a physical appearance that is in keeping with the role played on the stage. The voice teachers emphasised that students have to view performances and everything related to them as an inevitability everyone who wants to succeed in their competitive field has to learn to independently cope with.

## **6. Conclusions**

The voice teachers stressed the importance of being aware of how to adjust their cognitive activities in order to achieve the best performance. All singers-voice teachers had developed their personal routine of daily activities and work, which helped them to maintain an optimal feeling before a performance. All teachers claimed that their students to a greater or lesser degree have problems with performance anxiety, but these problems are not systematically treated in the lessons. Singers were recommended to view performance anxiety as an inevitable part of their profession. To ensure a better quality of music education more emphasis should be placed on problems related to performance anxiety.

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