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Is There a Cure for Performance Anxiety?

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Much has been written recently about performance anxiety – what used to be less elegantly termed “stage fright.” Workshop sessions and journal articles discuss techniques for reducing fear of public performance; and medical science has been exploring substances that block feelings of disquietude, although opinion remains divided on the wisdom of their use.

Certainly there is cause for apprehension about an upcoming public performance if one is ill. No singer should be faulted for developing a case of “nerves” when hoarseness, congestion, or upset stomach strikes. Personal crises can also take a serious toll on psychological balance. No other musical performer is so at the mercy of physical and mental condition as the singer.

Increasingly one wonders if there are not some neglected factors that contribute to the anxiety which may be felt by singers when facing an audience.

The technology of our era permits a number of short-cut strategies. The pocket calculator allows me to dispense with my life-long struggle with the multiplication tables; if I wish, I may do my writing seated at a machine that will correct my faulty spelling; I am not required to shift gears as I absent-mindedly drive; I can have a complete dinner ready in five minutes despite my limited culinary talents; advocates of the

auditory approach to language study tell me that I no longer need to memorize tedious grammar rules; and exercising my body can take only a brief period each day with the aid of a machine. Modern invention, alas, has found no such short-cut to the acquisition of a dependable vocal technique. The requirements of time, hard work, and discipline are the same today as they were in past centuries.

A singer who has never managed to sing a recital successfully in the studio, or a role during staged rehearsals, would be foolish to trust to deus ex machine help during performance. No one can expect reliable coordination in performance if it rarely occurs in the practice room or the voice studio. To assume that because it happened once or twice out of a number of practice tries it will be there in public is to invite grave performance anxieties. If satisfactory results have appeared only intermittently, or without the singer knowing how they came about, it is illogical to hope for ease of mind when facing an audience. If, on the other hand, the singer is consistently able to perform well in rehearsals, there is no logic to performance anxiety. A singer in good vocal and mental health may look forward to performance with pleasure because the mind and body have been drilled to produce a routinized outcome. The best solution for performance anxiety is the acquisition of a reliable tech-

nique that permits the mind to be in a confident state.

Last-minute attention to remaining technical problems in the literature to be performed, or late memorization of difficult textual materials often contribute to nervousness that spills over into other aspects of the performance. It is easy to trust that problems which exist when the literature is being chosen will have disappeared in six months, only to realize two weeks before the scheduled recital that one has been too hopeful. It is wiser to cut from the program any item that has consistently presented a technical hurdle than to worry about it so much that insecurity infects the entire recital. However, procrastination in recital preparation may exclude the option of eliminating problematic material or substituting other items.

Inevitably there are passages in any stage role that lie less well for the singer than does the rest of the role. However, if the problems they present are not solved in an acceptable fashion long prior to the performance time, the singer should try to cut the passage, make alternate decisions regarding phrasing, even make text or translation changes, or reconsider his or her appropriateness to the role.

Both technical and artistic (expressive) security can be developed only through performance. Modest performances should be a part of accumulating experience. Young singers should have opportunities to try performance techniques on a regular basis, for example, in studio class.

Often overlooked, then, is the fact that performance anxieties may be caused principally by lack of technical security. Technique, after all, is the ability to repeat consistently the same patterns of coordination, whether in playing tennis or in singing. To rely chiefly upon the emotional high of the performance is usually to court disaster in either activity.

Even in the presence of technical security two common psychological factors may still contribute to "stage nerves."

The first of these lies in miscalculating the expected level of performance. Not infrequently a young singer approaching professional capabilities will score success in a particular role or recital, going beyond all former expectations. The singer tends then to imagine that the surrounding world is now placing him or her on an artistic pedestal that in reality does not exist. It is easy for a performer to assume that an audience has a higher opinion of his or her abilities than is actually the case. Unnecessary pressure can be avoided by objectively assessing expected levels of performance accomplishment. It is the teacher's task to help make that clear.

An illustration may be in order. A young tenor, with some recent fine successes, reports to his teacher that singing in public is getting more difficult. "Why am I getting nervous?" he asks. "Because," says his teacher, to the singer's great surprise, "you have become conceited." "But," protests the student, "exactly the opposite is true!" He insists his anxiety stems from modesty. "Not at all," says his teacher. "You are afraid they are not going to think as highly of you as you want them to or as you regard yourself. That is conceit."

His teacher explains that the tenor deserves to have a very good self-image because he is a young artist with excellent vocal material and growing technical proficiency. That is exactly the performance level expected of him. To regard that level as anything higher is to indulge in conceit and to place oneself under enormous pressure. Teacher indicates several levels of a hypothetical pedestal and continues: "You have placed yourself at this height, which is one appropriate to the accomplished professional, when in actuality you are at this very good, more median level. Always set current performance expectations realistically

while working for future goals, and you will be a much happier performer.”

In part, unrealistic expectations stem from good teaching itself, in which student and teacher maintain high goals and search for excellence in performance. However, an experienced performer soon learns to acknowledge that there is no such thing as performance perfection, and that it is not possible to always deliver 100 percent. In fact, one notices that an artist often exhibits greater freedom in performance after the first “mistake” of the evening has occurred. Perfection is not a performance goal. Reliable performance is.

A second, perhaps more subtle and even more debilitating, psychological draining comes to the performer who uses his critical powers as ammunition against the competition. Singing is a highly competitive field. Comparisons are constantly made among singers, and their abilities are judged. Good singers listen critically to each other, because that is one of the ways they learn. However, critical listening is not the same as dagger throwing.

The more generous a performer can be when listening to other fine performances, the greater the ease reflected in his or her own performance. This is because one associates one’s own responses as an audience member with any audience at large. If a singer attending a performance writhes inwardly at beautiful sound or gleefully notes what has not gone well on the stage, that same singer is likely to find himself nervous in his own performing, because he will perceive “audience” as “enemy.” It behooves performers to develop an attitude of generous, though critical, listening, because in the performance world, as in any other, bread cast upon the waters has a way of returning.

Performance is an act of sharing, not of self-demonstration. The compelling recitalist is a mediator between the vocal literature and the audience, like the person who shakes the beautiful little- paper weight so that

others may look in at the miniature scene of falling snow. The singer presents a world that connects self and audience, and avoids feeling like an isolated object to which the audience directs its attention. Singer and audience share experiences, and self is transcended. This performance quality is largely what separates the true artist from the showman.

Establishing a generous attitude toward the performance art itself, whether for others or for oneself, comes about through experience; one can gain that valuable experience by making sure that performance demands coincide with one’s current performance ability. When the craft of singing is in hand, nervousness tends to disappear. When performance becomes an act of communication, rather than personal display or confrontation, performance anxiety greatly diminishes.

The best cure for performance anxiety, then, is to direct one’s attention away from the self through the acquisition of a highly reliable vocal technique, excellent musical and textual preparation, a systematic rehearsal procedure, frequent performance outlets, and a realistic attitude toward one’s relation to colleagues and audiences. 