



MIND OVER MATTER

by Chelsea Chisholm

My undergraduate voice instructor used to tell a joke about how if you read the mind of the mezzo-soprano when she was singing her aria, you would see her visualize a cross-section of her throat, but if you read the soprano's mind you would see her thinking about applause. While it always made me laugh, she made it very clear that sometimes it was best to avoid over-thinking. When I moved past my college days and began nurturing the gifts of my own students, I realized that for vocalists, the issue of mind-over-matter was ever-present. Once they convince themselves that a technique, a note, or another physical skill is beyond their ability, it will become so.

I have a student who is often affected by this issue. When we do warm-ups in her lessons, she has no trouble moving into her upper registers. Yet, as soon as she watches the piano keyboard and becomes cognizant of the notes I'm playing, she shuts down vocally—her throat tightens up and she can barely squeak out E5, let alone anything higher. It is easy to conclude that this phenomenon is directly related to her mental processes. She has decided that the notes are too high and that she could not possibly sing them, and thus has a physical reaction that prevents her from vocalizing. When I couldn't find available research material on resolutions to her specific problem, I looked to other disciplines and to solutions for general anxiety issues for musicians.

How Attitude Affects Ability

Since vocal production is considered a fine motor skill, research into how self-perception of one's ability factors into actual fine motor skill is relevant and can assist in musical problem solving. Three individuals from Stanford University, Forest

J. Jourden, Albert Bandura, and Jason T. Banfield, studied the effect of perception on aptitude. They completed a series of trials measuring aptitude in a group who believed it is something you either have or do not have and a group who believed aptitude can be acquired. Their 48 subjects had to use a light-sensitive stylus to illuminate a target. Those who were told that the aptitude for this activity was *inherent* displayed negativity when unsuccessful or less successful than desired, and they showed a limited range of improvement across tests. The subjects who were told that it was an *acquired* skill and who were instructed to use mistakes to learn exhibited more interest, greater positivity toward their performance, and better measurable skill acquisition, with better subsequent performance achieved by those who had stronger positive reactions.¹

These findings can easily translate to internal physical functions as well, such as in the case of vocalists. Anyone experienced in the study of the voice can imagine that those negative feelings and reactions could be equally limiting to singing performance as they were to the simple act of illuminating a target. While the specifics have not been tested or researched, possibly because of an attempt to avoid negative psychological reactions from test subjects, the vocal tension my student experienced can be explained by these concepts. It would follow that encouraging a greater belief in vocal production as a learned skill rather than an innate ability would greatly benefit students with mind-over-matter tension issues. Pointing to examples of singers who dedicate hard work and training to become successful rather than those who appear to have stumbled into fame (e.g., the way *American Idol* contestants are viewed), might better encourage our students.

Impact of Self-Awareness on Performance

In addition to self-perception, self-awareness seems to be a factor in student anxiety. Minat Lyons performed research to measure the level of performance anxiety in musicians and to discover key contributing factors. He wanted to determine how aware the musicians were of the reasons behind their psychomotor responses and whether they believed their anxiety resulted from short-term factors, such as poor preparation or technique, or from more general factors, such as self-esteem issues. He hypothesized that students who were unaware of the true reasons for their anxiety would display a higher anxiety level than those who were more self-aware.

A diverse group of fifty college music majors participated in a survey about their performance experiences and accompanying anxiety. Interestingly enough, his hypothesis proved incorrect. Students who were less self-aware reported fewer instances of anxiety, and when they experienced anxiety, it was also less severe than the reports of their counterparts who were more aware of the causes.² So, much like my undergraduate instructor used to point out, over-thinking is not helping students overcome their anxiety. With this in mind, the Feldenkrais method could guide us to solutions for those who are afflicted with hyper self-awareness. Developed by Moshe Feldenkrais, this is a method of learning that uses simple, gentle body movements as the means of developing self-awareness. The method is widely used by musicians, actors, dancers, and athletes. It suggests that when dealing with tension issues, rather than encouraging students to try and focus on relaxation, advise them to tense up to the point where it makes an extremely noticeable impact on the singing process. This can convince the body to take a path of less resistance, and thus reduce tension.

Students See and Learn

While negative self-perception or acute self-awareness can cause both tension and anxiety in vocal performance, there can be other contributing factors. Charlene Ryan and Nicholle Andrews investigated performance anxiety in 201 choral singers to uncover the contributing factors. The vocalists (who performed high-level repertoire and were paid for their perfor-

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mances) were measured for anxiety in choral and solo vocal performance and for anxiety in instrumental ensemble and solo performance. The findings indicated that solo performances were more anxiety-inducing than ensemble performances, and that instrumental ensemble performances seemed to cause more anxiety than vocal ensemble performances. The most common factors they reported to have contributed to their anxiety were difficulty of music, memory, importance, and the conductor. Interestingly, only one of the 201 indicated the conductor made *no difference*. All others varied on the degree to which he or she contributed.³

With these findings, it is clear that educators, whether conducting or attending a performance, must project confidence, calm, and assurance. While other factors exist, we have the opportunity to help eliminate one possible source for increased tension, and thereby decrease the possibility for vocal fault resulting from doubt or disbelief. How many of us have increased the tension levels of our students without realizing it, simply by failing to present a calm and reassuring demeanor?

Medications and Alternative Solutions

Positions vary about taking medication as a solution to general performance anxiety, and this decision is entirely between performers and their doctors. However, most studies I encountered in my research dissuade musicians from using medication as a solution. In a study by Gates, Saegert, Wilson, Johnson, Shepher, and Hearne that attempted to evaluate the effects of dosage upon performance, a group of vocalists performing end-of-semester juries was studied. Each was given either a placebo or a dose of a beta blocker, Nadolol (20, 40, or 80 mg). Results indicated that lower dosages enhanced performance, but larger dosages impaired performance.⁴ Since beta blockers target the cardiovascular system and can affect fine motor skills, they could reduce the subtlety one is capable of when experiencing the heightened physiological responses of a performance. This could suggest that any musician seeking

medical assistance for their performance anxiety should communicate openly with their doctor to regulate proper dosage.

For those who prefer to avoid medication and pursue a more natural route, other methods can mitigate performance anxiety. Kendrick, Craig, Lawson, and Davidson studied whether compared behavior reversal or cognitive behavioral therapy was more effective at treating performance anxiety. Their study revealed that, by comparison to the control group, musicians who participated in behavior reversal or cognitive behavioral therapy showed greater improvement in performance quality (those in cognitive behavioral therapy also demonstrated lower anxiety levels).⁵ This would indicate that therapy is a valid and effective method for long-term performance anxiety management. For students who are non-responsive to positive reinforcement and standard levels of encouragement by their directors and private instructors, our referral, in a tactful and compassionate manner, to a qualified counselor may be a recommended option.

As music educators, we all want to help our students overcome negative psychomotor reactions. As my research revealed, there are several helpful classroom and private studio behaviors that can help reduce our students' anxiety levels. We should help them maintain a positive outlook on their own abilities and potential. We must not only try to avoid nervousness but avoid the appearance of displeasure as well. If a conductor can be a mitigating factor in nervousness, then how much can a private instructor also affect students' opinions of their abilities?

I imagine our students will look to us as we did to our instructors—to measure successes and failures. While medications and therapy can be solutions for students with overwhelming anxiety problems, encouraging students to know their music and react rather than over-think in their early music training may help ease potential performance anxiety in their later experiences.

While more studies exclusive to vocal concerns may be needed in this area, it may not hurt to encourage them to take a

little more soprano with them into their solo and choral performances, helping them look forward to the applause rather than dissecting their performances. ❏

References

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