

# THE SYMPTOM OF PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IN RELATION TO ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The symptom of performance anxiety is always an obstacle for the artist's endeavour. Although the symptom can be described objectively in terms of physiological and cognitive variables, the psychological meaning might differ qualitatively to a great extent. The obstacle to good achievement always occurs in a context consisting of various processes and factors. The obstacle turns the artist into an under-achiever instead of over-achiever which may have serious consequences. The artist's greatest professional concern is his or her positive development. There are many obstacles to overcome. The problem arises for the caregiver to make the proper diagnosis for the proper treatment. However, the artist's symptom can be due to work overload, marital problems, musical challenges, childhood issues etc. In each case, maladaptive processes have contributed to the symptom and its presence. It is beneficial to look at the symptom from a wider scope.

The concept of artistic development is based on the assumption that at each state of development or process, organized structures of "elements are the results of previous processes and forms, at the same time, the basis for current processes (Magnusson et al, 1993). Quantitative and qualitative studies with opera singers and classical dancers indicate that the artistic development is shaped by individual characteristics (personality, motivation), psychosocial factors (meetings with significant others, roles/musical pieces, family life) and phases (positive musical experiences in childhood, age-related issues, learning of specific skills). There is a constant interaction taking place between social world, individual characteristics, certain life and artistic phases. These factors and interactions promote on one hand change in terms of progress, insight and failure, on the other hand stability in terms of maintenance of adaptive processes. The occurrence of obstacles can be interpreted as a sign of maladaptive processes and factors. Among the group of very successful opera singers, early signs of outstanding musical or singing skills were not noted. A discussion about obstacles and facilitating experiences for artistic growth and development will follow.

## 1. METHOD

This presentation will include results from various studies a) a qualitative and quantitative study with professional opera singers (n=15, female n=8, age 27-65, male n=7, 31-55), b) a present qualitative study (semi-structured interviews) with Swedish female opera singers with international careers (n=5), c) a present longitudinal study with opera students (n=35) using quantitative measurements of artistic abilities, d) a study with elite students in opera and economics (n=95), using personality scales (Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-I) (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975), Karolinska Scale Personality (KSP) (Schalling, 1987), State Trait Anxiety-Trait (Spielberger et al, 1970), e) a study involving professional and amateur singers using measurements of stress

hormones (serum concentrations), emotional states (Visual Analogue Scale) and semi-structured interviews (n=16, female n=8, male n=8).

## 2. AIMS

The aim of this research project is to study the concept of artistic development over time among opera singers – by identifying a) important variables, b) changes in the development, c) specific phases, d) the interaction between variables. Furthermore, the aim is to compare factors and processes in other groups of artists (professional classical dancers, high-achieving students in acting and economics). In this paper, these results will be discussed in relation to performance anxiety.

## 3. RESULTS

The studies indicate that the artistic development is shaped by individual characteristics (personality, motivation, a certain level of artistic talent), psychosocial factors (meetings with significant others, roles/musical pieces, family life), certain experiences (positive musical experiences in childhood), phases (age-related issues) and the learning of specific skills for the professional endeavour. Each phase of the life and career cycle brings with it certain coping tasks and responsibilities which can lead to success and failure. From this developmental point of view, it is necessary to focus on a number of factors, phases and processes in order to develop and maintain an high level of expertise and artistry. For the professional career, the development of an appropriate technical ability (for example singing technique) is essential together with other musical abilities (knowledge about genres, practise routines, interpretation etc). Specific social competence (how to collaborate in musical settings) is necessary. Another less regarded but vital variable is the personal experience of music and role (emotional connection).

### 3.1. The debilitating symptoms of performance anxiety

The overlap of symptoms between social phobia (DSM-IV, 1994) and performance anxiety are interesting to note. In both cases, the essential feature is a "marked and persistent fear of performance situations in which embarrassment may occur" which provokes an immediate anxiety response. The anxiety is related to fear of exposure and of being weak and anxious. It also includes a concern about negative reactions from others. Anticipatory anxiety can occur just before the anxiety-provoking situation and as well far in advance of the upcoming event. The event is anticipated with dread and/or endured with anxiety or distress. For the performers, it is bound to a certain situation: the performance on stage. Performers generally tend to tolerate high levels of performance anxiety over the years and they wait to

seek professional help unless this debilitating anxiety interferes significantly with occupational functioning and their productivity is endangered. The impairment is interpreted as less significant when it influences only daily living and the well-being. In this paper, only the debilitating effects of performance anxiety are regarded.

It has been argued to reduce performance anxiety to a concept of career stress (coping with psychosocial stressors) which implies less focus of the human being and personality (Brodsky, 1996; Steptoe, 1989). This way of reductionistic view concerns also for treating performance anxiety mainly as a medical problem. In contrast, there are many advantages for the performer if the symptoms (physiological, psychological, social) are evaluated within the context of the individual's psychological makeup, background, current life situation and time-related phases. From this point of view, psychological factors are seen to contribute to the onset, course or healing of a disease/complaint. This may at first represent a pessimistic point of view, but on the contrary, it offers the possibility to learn another way of coming to terms with problematic issues long-term, instead of only reducing the symptom short-term.

### 3.2. Personality and motivation

How and why person think, feel, act and react as they do can serve as a general idea of what constitutes the personality (Pervin & John, 1999). Some personality traits are associated with performance anxiety, for example a significant positive correlation ( $r=.70$ ) was found with neuroticism (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964). Perfectionism is frequent among high-achievers (Blatt, 1995) which involves self-blame and doubts, rumination, feelings of dissatisfaction, difficulties to cope with criticism, which at the same time might motivate the performer in his or her artistic pursuit. The subsequent strategy is to avoid mistakes (fear of failure) instead of exploring other more constructive strategies for the musical achievement.

In a study about how professional and amateur classical singers perceived a singing lesson, the professionals experienced more negative stress and less joy than the amateurs (Grape et al, in press). Levels of stress hormones increased significantly among the professionals who were clearly achievement-oriented with focus on singing technique, vocal apparatus and body during the lesson. The amateurs used the singing lesson as a means of self-actualisation and self-expression as a way to release emotional tensions.

In another study about the professional life of opera singers, the fear of being negatively judged by important others was a prominent feature (Sandgren, 2002). This fear was associated with doubts, depressiveness and psychosomatic complaints. Only two out of fifteen professional opera singers spoke spontaneously about motivational factors that included explicit satisfaction derived from deepening the artistic work (interpretation of role figure and music). The majority of opera singers spoke mainly of fear of being negatively evaluated and obstacles that might occur (bad rehearsals and preparations, vocal indisposition etc.) as well as difficulties of dealing with criticism from significant others. Surprisingly, aesthetic aspects and strivings were not mentioned by this majority. Since this study was completed, these two opera singers have made great international careers. Other features

differed as well, which involved personality issues. It appears as if extremely successful opera singers have a robust personality profile and are guided to larger extent by intrinsic motivation in comparison with successful opera singers. The fear of being negatively judged is less prevalent and there is more satisfaction from the artistic work (on stage and preparations).

In the final study of this research project, prominent opera singers were asked to tell about musical activities in childhood. Interestingly, they told that playing music and singing in childhood was a way of meeting and being together (initially often with the father and later friends). It was not connected to any specific expectations of musical progress. The musical activity was described as "easy, natural and fun" which contrasted to the professional life in adulthood. The strivings for a specific vocal expertise came in the late teens after being recognized having an extra-ordinary vocal ability. These childhood experiences of playing and singing together might have a great positive impact on artistic development later on. They seem to be a good foundation for a constructive relation to artistic and perfectionistic strivings. Probably, these positive musical experiences create a certain intrinsic motivation that promotes further creativity and progress.

Another personality feature is narcissistic vulnerability that is associated with performance anxiety. Performers often say that they feel vulnerable and naked on stage, that they "give it all" to the audience. This kind of openness and presence is probably needed for the credibility of an interpretation. But if this vulnerability demands constant appreciation and validation (from colleagues and audience), the performers will suffer from severe stress on a deep level in terms of fatigue, rumination, anxiety and low self-esteem. They may be preoccupied with how well they are doing and worry if they are favourably or not regarded by others. Vulnerability in self-esteem makes performers sensitive to "injury" from criticism or defeat. This is as well an expression for the performers' difficulty to separate the private person from the professional artist. Taken together with the constant high level of occupational stress, the performer is at great risk of facing severe problems in the career in terms of depression, anxiety, alcohol problems and not at least psychosomatic problems. Their own self-esteem is enhanced or weakened by the value of what they present on stage. This kind of lack of self-esteem is also related to feelings of being an impostor, a fake. The performer who does not feel authentic is at high risk of developing debilitating symptoms and feelings of dissatisfaction with his or her life and professional situation. This narcissistic vulnerability is one major reason for performance anxiety. More results from a present study about specific personality traits will be presented at the conference.

Furthermore, from the life span perspective the performers pass various phases that have their specific demands on coping. There are many reasons for the occurrence of performance anxiety in its classical description. Problems with performance anxiety might be related to not being able to deal with phase-specific issues, for example if the opera singer still has not been able to establish a suitable repertoire that matches his or hers abilities, he or she will be regarded as less competent and not identified as an opera singer, also by the opera community. See below a brief description of the successful career path for opera singers (figure 1). The aspect of family life is included as it is a significant factor for the well-being. Motivational and personality factors are not included.

<b>Social roles</b>	<b>Personal level</b>	<b>Occupational stress</b>	<b>Artistic development</b>
<i>Promising student</i> 18-25 years	Identity formation of being an artist Difficulties to deal with competition “Will I be good enough?”	Uncertainty about future career Choice of appropriate voice coach	Many technical, musical and social skills have to be learned in short time Choice of appropriate repertoire
<i>Young and talented</i> 25-30 years	How to handle work load Problems establishing a family life “Will this success continue?”	Trial and error of choosing engagements Many new professional situations Disillusions about the opera world	Further emphasis on technical and acting skills
<i>Recognized performer</i> Around 35-40 years	Satisfaction due to recognition Problems maintaining a family life	Constructively dealing with various stressors	Well established vocal technique and repertoire
<i>Respected and experienced</i> > 40 years	Satisfaction due to recognition	Network of colleagues	Emphasis on deeper work with role figure Vocal impairment
<i>Singer soon retired</i> > 50 years	Dealing with loss of vocal ability Contentment with soon former career and its implications on private life Identity formation as “former singer”	Uncertainty about what to engage in Network dissolves	Possible new career path based on earlier experiences

Figure 1. Brief description of essential factors and age-related phases in the successful career path of opera singers.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper wishes to highlight psychological issues important for the artistic development as well as to present an attempt to grasp the formative process of artistic development – in relation to performance anxiety. In this text, performance anxiety was regarded as an obstacle for the artistic pursuit and treated as a psychosomatic symptom – due to inner conflicts and vulnerabilities as well as outer stressors in terms of various psychosocial and phase-related variables. Performance anxiety is one of many detrimental factors that challenge the performers in their endeavour. Its most salient feature is the fear of exposure and being negatively judged – an experience that anyone of us can recognize. As this symptom is a destructive variable for learning, progress and life/career satisfaction, the question arises, what would happen if the artistic endeavour would be less burdened with this fear. A creative person is characterized by the boldness to be misunderstood or unappreciated. The courage to overcome fears of success and failure is as well demanded. One of the “cures” could be to become deeper involved in the artistic expression as opposed to be dependent on others’ admiration of the performance, i.e. to put the focus on intrinsic motivation than on extrinsic. Motivation in general and intrinsic motivation in particular, are important determinants of creativity, of high achievement and the development of high abilities. Intrinsic motivation is connected to existential values of the performer such as “Why am I singing? For who’s sake? How do I want to express myself on stage? What is the meaning of music to me? How can I stay authentic in my artistic pursuit? Or develop more authenticity?”

When creative performance is the objective, it is vital to endeavour to reduce the salience of extrinsic constraints and highlight the intrinsically interesting aspects of the strivings. High abilities are necessary but not sufficient for outstanding and creative achievement. Perseverance, task-commitment and strong motivation are basic components of giftedness. A talent is a potential and does not exist unless it is developed and maintained.

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