

Acceptance and Commitment Coaching As An Avenue for Enhancing Behavioral Change in
Vocalists Suffering With MPA

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Introduction

Music performance anxiety (MPA) is a multidimensional phenomenon that can drastically impair musicians' wellbeing and performance quality, especially among vocal students whose instrument is indissolubly connected to their physical and emotional states. In my own pursuit to better understand and support my students who struggle with music performance anxiety, I have been drawn to acceptance and commitment coaching (ACC) as a prospective approach of creating behavioral change (Juncos and Pona, 2022). My aim is to investigate and synthesize the potential relationship between ACC and how it impacts MPA, specifically among vocal musicians. This personal search for knowledge has grown from observing the intense struggle many vocalists often experience in silence as they confront the visceral terror that can often accompany public performances.

The implication of MPA spreads far beyond stage fright: it encapsulates a range of anxiety responses that can severely affect the careers of musicians as well as their quality of life ranging from body coordination, shaky voice, difficulty breathing, and behavioral interference leading up the performance itself (Guyon, et. al., 2020; Henshaw and Collyer, 2022 p 584; Irie, Morijiri, and Yoshi, 2023; MacAfee and Comeau, 2023). Vocal students in particular experience increased susceptibility due to the intensely personal nature of the instrument. ACC is an auspicious psychological intervention because it supports acceptance over avoidance, thereby encouraging mental flexibility and a commitment to action that aligns with personal values (Behrman, 2006; Clarke, Osborne, and Baranoff, 2020; Juncos and Pona, 2022, Cohen and Bodner, 2019). A gap still exists in available research pertaining to vocalists and the use of ACC as a viable resource in addressing MPA.

My experience as a music educator and psychology researcher has taught me that MPA is not just a rite of passage; it is a substantial barrier that can hamper the artistic expression and educational growth of vocalists. While valuable, conventional strategies for performance

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

preparation may not adequately address the underlying anxiety many students experience. This has driven me to the question: Could ACC in musical learning settings offer both the empathetic, compassionate, and empowering support that students need to begin to make behavioral changes surrounding MPA?

There are a small number of treatment options available for MPA (Henshaw and Collyer, 2022; Irie, Morijiri, and Yoshie, 2023; Lecuona et al., 2023; MacAfee and Comeau, 2023). Particularly prevalent, with a self-reporting of 31% of professional musicians using beta blocking medicines to ease the effects of adrenaline or epinephrine on the body such as hyperventilation and heart palpitations (Kenny et al, 2012). Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and other psychodynamic therapies have been used in the treatment of MPA with some success. Over time, cognitive restructuring and some behavioral exposures have been effective treatments for milder cases of MPA (Braden et al., 2015; Clark and Agras, 1991; Osborne et al., 2007). Alternative therapeutic approaches include Alexander Technique (Klein, Bayard, Wolf, 2014), progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) (Kim, 2008), art therapy, and yoga (Stern, Khalsa, Hofmann, 2012) mindfulness meditation (Diaz, 2018), and guided imagery (Finch and Moscovitch, 2016). Many of the aforementioned don't have the adequate empirical evidence, replicability, or sufficient follow up evaluations necessary to be considered best practice for teachers or voice students despite benefits provided to some.

What is Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)

Music performance anxiety is run a common problem among both professional vocalists and vocal students (Cohen and Bodner, 2019, Henshaw and Collyer, 2022). MPA can be characterized by emotional distress, apprehension, avoidance in the practice room or on stage, physiological manifestations of anxiety, vocal tremor or throat tightening, shaking or sweating, and different bodies and types of musicians may experience varied symptoms (Cornett and Urhan, 2021; Clark, Olsborne, Baranoff, 2020; Dobos, Piko, and Kenny, 2019; Henshaw and

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

Collier, 2022, pp 583). A distinction must be made between music performance anxiety and stage fright, which are often used interchangeably with each other (Henshaw and Collyer, 2022, pp583-584). Stage fright only takes place during the performance as an isolated incident whereas music performance anxiety takes place before, during, and sometimes after a performance (Henshaw and Collyer, 2020; Hase, et. al., 2019, p 123; Kenny, 2011; Sieger, 2017). Dobos et al (2019) make a potentially significant connection between perfectionism and performance anxiety. Their findings indicated that musicians of all ages also display higher levels of social phobias than non-musicians, which suggests that the same fear of negative evaluation that occurs in social settings seeps into the performance sphere. Kenny, Driscoll, and Ackermann (2016) found that pit musicians reported higher levels of MPA and stress than their orchestral counterparts, leading to an overall dissatisfaction with their work and made them more susceptible psychologically.

From the biopsychological and physiological perspectives, MPA can be broken down into just a few steps (Sapolsky, 2004). The first is autonomic nervous system activation (ANS). Activation of the ANS is the predominant biopsychological agitator and leads to symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dry mouth, and increased heart rate which encompass some of the body's "fight or flight" response (Sapolsky, 2004, Kenny 2010). After the autonomic nervous system has been activated cortisol is released. The stress of performing causes the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis to release cortisol into the blood stream. It is our bodies response to the release of cortisol that causes disruption in cognitive and behavioral function, both of which are crucial in any performance setting (Sapolsky, 2004). Similarly to what those with a panic disorder experience during a panic or anxiety attack, muscle tension and coordination impact motor skills, while increased emotional responses stoke feelings of fear and vulnerability which further exacerbate both physical and cognitive symptoms. Overall, MPA can lead singers down a path of noticeable decline in quality of performance, focus, execution of music, and expressive singing.

What is Acceptance and Commitment Coaching

Acceptance and commitment coaching is a derivative of acceptance and commitment therapy which focuses on psychological flexibility in the face of stressors (Juncos and Pona 2022; Mahony, Juncos, and Winter, 2022). The process, according to the psychological flexibility model, consists of six core goals: contact with the present moment, values, committed action, self as context, defusion, and acceptance. Four of the six core goals involve mindfulness skills (contact with the present moment, acceptance, defusion, and self as context). The other two goals, value and committed action, are the key components to behavioral change. Each component is dependent upon all other components and there is no correct or incorrect way to address them as each manifest in the context of an individual's unique personal history or current circumstance (Juncos and Pona 2022; Mahony, Juncos, and Winter, 2022; Juncos, et. al., 2017). However, it is crucial to identify personal values in order to effectively drive away from what is causing suffering and toward greater psychological flexibility. Unlike other more traditional therapies like CBT, ACC interventions hone in on helping individuals make profound shifts in how they address their thoughts and feelings in order to move forward, where the end goal isn't the eradication of symptoms.

ACC impacts the brain through the perception of neural plasticity, or the brain's natural ability to form new neural connections throughout the lifespan (Freeman and Dolan, 2001; Raihan and Cogburn, 2020; Behrman, 2006; Juncos, et. al., 2017). ACC interventions in students could influence areas of the brain responsible for cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation, the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is also responsible for moderating social behaviors, making day to day decisions, and the expression of one's personality (Sapolsky, 2004, Kenny 2010). Through mindfulness and acceptance, ACC may affect the prefrontal cortex's function in managing emotional reactions from the amygdala, thereby increasing an individual's ability to

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

adjust their emotions more successfully (Braden, Osborne, Wilson, 2015; Benjamins, Roland, Bylica, 2022; Juncos and Pona, 2022; Hase, et. al., 2019; Sapolsky, 2004).

Because of ACCs emphasis on committed action, engagement in meaningful activities that directly serve personal values, encourage behavioral change which aligns with behavioral activation theories (Freeman and Dolan, 2001; Raihan and Cogburn, 2020; Behrman, 2006) that emphasize the creation of new neural pathways coupled with healthy behaviors. The overall ACC is a promising partner in leveraging the brain's aptitude for plasticity, evolutions in neural circuitry that boost emotional regulation, cognitive tractability, and pursuing and aligning with personal values (Braden, Osborne, Wilson, 2015; Benjamins, Roland, Bylica, 2022; Juncos and Pona, 2022; Hase, et. al., 2019; Clarke, Osborne, and Baranoff, 2022; Mahony, Juncos, Winter, 2022; Juncos, et. al., 2017; Kenny, 2016).

How does ACC impact MPA?

With this information in mind, ACC's focus on allowing the acceptance of performance anxiety and stressors has the potential to be beneficial for a wide range of vocalists who may be prone to perfectionism in their lives by reframing the relationship that has developed between the self and perfectionism. Through this reframing, vocalists could find themselves less bound by the fear of judgement from their peers, studio, judges, or teachers and find more meaningful engagement with the intrinsic joy that comes from performing.

ACC has the potential to help guide communication that lies somewhere between good listening and giving information or advice (Juncos). Its design is built upon empowering individual and collective change by allowing others to come to their own conclusions, drawing out personal meaning, discovering and honing in on personal values which become an avenue for change that honors autonomy. The purpose of ACC is not to gauge your success on the changes possible but to become more psychologically flexible in order to move toward things that are important to you.

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

In a study conducted by Mahony, Juncos, and Winter (2022) a pilot study with undergraduate musical theatre and dance students found that participants experienced increased psychological flexibility without excessive psychological distress, reduction in performance anxiety intensity and frequency, and found better coping mechanisms especially during performances with and without anxiety. These advantages persisted beyond the immediacy of the study, implying that the techniques learned over the six-week study became integrated into the students' regular performance routines. The advantages to acceptance and commitment coaching in group settings is that it tackles not only the individual symptoms of anxiety but also cultivates a community environment where students can learn from and encourage one another (Clarke, Osborne, and Baranoff, 2022; Mahony, Juncos, Winter, 2022; Juncos, et. al., 2017; Kenny, 2016). Their findings imply (2022) that the integration of ACC and interventions like it should be presented as tertiary curriculum in performing arts educational environments (Clarke, Osborne, and Baranoff, 2022; Mahony, Juncos, Winter, 2022).

Why ACC on an individual basis might not be enough

Cohen and Bodner (2019) argue that focusing solely on the reduction of MPA may not be enough to achieve optimal performance. Instead, what educators should be focused on is a revision of how musical education is presented, especially for young or beginner musicians. Their findings suggest that building skills that enhance psychological well-being and resilience early, might better prepare students for the intense pressures of performance (Cohen and Bodner, 2019). Additionally, their two-pronged approach fostering positive psychological conditions is just as important as managing anxiety or MPA, and endeavoring to offer a more holistic method to music education and performance preparedness is necessary. Research by Clarke, Osborne, and Baranoff (2022) corroborate the findings of Cohen and Bodner (2019). Their research found that by intervening in education institutions, group ACC intervention showed promising results (Clarke, Osborne, and Baranoff, 2022). A small group of student

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

vocalists underwent six weeks of group ACC sessions designed specifically to increase psychological flexibility and help manage MPA without reducing symptoms, which is a distinct facet of ACC. Overall, participants in their study found significant reduction in MPA and increased psychological flexibility. Upon a three month follow up students seemed to maintain those results which implied lasting effect. Clarke, Osborne, and Baranoff's (2022) study suggests that not only can group ACC be beneficial but that it should be incorporated into tertiary music education curricula to provide students with tools to manage MPA flexibly and with support. Their findings also suggest that ACC is both adaptable and appropriate for vocal students who report high MPA (2022).

Ethical considerations

Being able to rely upon voice teachers, among other music lecturers, can be directly beneficial to students through the dissemination of psychological skills beyond what is considered traditional instruction. However, the ethical considerations of a voice teacher implementing ACC in their studio or classroom would be dependent on several factors, chief among them adequate training from an ACT or ACC professional (Campone, 2023). How the approach is implemented while balancing boundaries during its application is also a consideration. Without proper training or setting clear professional boundaries could derail student success (Campone, 2023; Milner, et. al., 2023; Shaw, Juncos, and Winter, 2020). Because of the inherently emotional nature of MPA as it pertains to singers, teachers must remain within their scope of practice (Koriath, 2023), i.e. we are not licensed psychologists unless specifically trained and accredited as such (Mazzarolo, Burwell, and Schubert, 2023, Milner, et. al., 2023; MacAfee and Comeau, 2023; Henshaw and Collyer, 2022). We must also be prepared to be trained in trauma informed educational practices (Koriath, 2023) in order for students to feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves in our educational spaces. This too means that ACC shouldn't lead to situations where students experience over vulnerability or over exposure beyond what would be acceptable in typical educational settings whether that be a private studio or a college

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

classroom (Mazzarolo, Burwell, and Schubert, 2023, Milner, et. al., 2023; MacAfee and Comeau, 2023; Henshaw and Collyer, 2022).

Critical Reflection

As I reflected during this learning process, I was drawn to Jarvis's concept of experimentation with new approaches after experiencing an event (Jarvis, 1995) due to its fluidity, giving space for trial, error, and ultimately growth on an individual's terms and abilities. During my exploration of the material, I interpreted this to mean being present with an experience but reflecting on the challenge at hand (for the purposes of my study MPA) and allowing room for experimentation with alternative methods in line with ACC to avoid "combat" mentality or further stress (Jarvis, 1995). The chief focus of this independent study was to synthesize and reflect on the research of others and transmute it for application in my voice studio to better assist my students' future needs and goals.

Only peer reviewed articles from reputable journals were chosen for examination in an effort to ensure quality. Those who were well cited and very active in their field of discipline were given preference but don't encompass all of the works cited. Balancing both technical skill with experience and logic lead me to incorporate several anecdotal findings in an effort to equally balance both the scientific background needed and real life experiences necessary to form better conclusions (Benjamins, Roland, and Bylica, 2022). During my exploration of acceptance and commitment coaching, I found myself left wanting, and chose to go through basic acceptance and commitment coaching training through APT (association for psychological therapies). As I moved through both readings and trainings I began to notice that I was uncomfortable, not with the plethora of new information, or how to implement ACC in an educational setting, but from an ethical and empathetical stance.

Using Jarvis's concept of experimentation (1995) I found myself imagining what ACC would look like for MPA in a university age classical vocalist. How would I have felt if my own teacher used

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

some of the mindfulness techniques during our lessons? I used this as a guide to focus my attention on both technical and ethical details associated with the use of ACC for MPA and how they could be integrated into tertiary curriculum in performing arts environments, much like the findings of Mahony, Juncos, and Winter (2022).

I found myself questioning my own perceptions of behavioral change, resilience, and mental health. In my initial research, I found ACC to be structured in a way that didn't pave a clear road for many educators across the board to replicate. Jarvis's existential learning model suffers a similar fate in that it doesn't offer a clear path for educators to see how a student might respond in certain learning situations, rather, there are so many moves a student with MPA could make that the oversaturation of possibilities becomes overwhelming (Jarvis, 1995). Perhaps what I was expecting was a formula rather than a hexaflex that reminded me more of a 12-step program than a viable tool for teachers to take on and stash in their emotional toolbox (Juncos and Pona, 2022). But as I sat with that somewhat judgmental and pessimistic thought, I looked back at Jarvis's concept of experimentation (1995) and began to look at ACC (and 12 step programs) through that lens. MPA isn't a black and white issue that occurs in a vacuum (Clark and Agras, 1991; Cornett and Urhan, 2021; Dobos, Piko, Kenny, 2019; Guyon, et. al., 2020) but is a delicate balance between asking the right questions as a teacher and allowing the student to accept their MPA symptoms, fail at doing so, or a combination thereof that requires many different ways of coming into total and true acceptance.

One of the more important takeaways from this process was not only that I needed ample space to ingest large swaths of information from neuroscientific to cognitive psychology, but I needed time to observe how I interact with some of students who have emotional regulation challenges. I teach both voice and piano to non-neurotypical students who have a wide range of emotional and behavioral needs that include MPA, and the process of reflecting on their many individual needs isn't unlike the training I undertook in my Psychology MSc. However, I found myself both avoiding this assignment and being completely consumed by the information on ACC and the

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

behavioral aspects of MPA. My goal as a teacher and voice mentor is to find new ways of addressing MPA as an educator and as a person who wants a road map to share with others, perhaps to write a book that is both relatable and offers a number of step-by-step processes that would work for a wide number of learning needs. Reflecting on these goals is both overwhelming and a driver for preparing for immediate goals; discovering how ACC works and fits into my own practice. My struggle with this concept is that I'm not sure ACC is the best intervention for MPA for all of my students, some of whom don't understand how to effectively communicate or internally process what they are feeling during performances or lessons. The motivational interviewing component that comes along with ACC also toes a very fine ethical line as I don't have the same resources as a University where a voice teacher might send a student for a counseling consult at the university's medical center. I would be taking on a large risk attempting to address deeply seated anxiety in students.

So why ACC and not other alternative therapeutic approaches like Alexander Technique (Klein, Bayard, Wolf, 2014), progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) (Kim, 2008), art therapy, and yoga (Stern, Khalsa, Hofmann, 2012) mindfulness meditation (Diaz, 2018), and guided imagery (Finch and Moscovitch, 2016)? PMR has plenty of data to back up that it works for people with anxiety across wide ranging vocations and ages. Is it just that we can't add another thing to our day as educators when we take on so much as it is? And why aren't we prioritizing legislation or curriculum that would support tertiary curriculum to be presented during teacher training?

I am increasingly aware that I need to further address my research skills and time management, get more practice with technical teaching skills, and perhaps address my own avoidance. As a very young singer, I struggled with how I would be perceived by my peers which led to an abundance of perfectionistic tendencies, an eating disorder which allowed me to maintain a very slim look on stage, and ultimately horrible depression and anxiety. This is my motivation. I think I

The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

can build something from the ground up and be the person I needed as a young singer for the next generation of vocalists and educators for a long time to come.

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The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

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The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

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The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

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The effectiveness of ACT in MPA

Goal	What is the aim/achievement in mind?	Actions to be taken	Resources Needed	How is success measured?
Develop acceptance and commitment coaching skills	To help students who suffer with MPA learn how to become more psychologically resilient in order to perform more freely	• Acceptance and commitment coaching training • Motivational interviewing training to start asking the right kinds of discovery questions • Mindfulness training • Use all techniques on myself • Dedicate time during lessons to identify student barriers to self-acceptance and identify their chosen values • Create ACT worksheet for student goals each week	Training courses for ACC, MI, and Mindfulness Larger number of students to track and measure success	Completion of trainings Application of methods in training