

Title: What performance anxiety management strategies can be used to support the psychological and vocal wellbeing of adult semi-professional singers?

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Professional Practice (Voice Pedagogy)

Module 1

University of Wales Trinity St. David

20/10/2024

Word count -3532

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Introduction

“Anxiety is an affect, something more subtle, sometimes more persistent, than an emotion or a passion. It lies at the intersection of embodiment and cognition, sensation and emotion or passion” (Bergo, 2020, abs). “The importance of anxiety as a powerful influence in contemporary life is increasingly recognized, and manifestations of current concern with anxiety phenomena are ubiquitously reflected in the literature, the arts, science, and religion as well as in many facets of our culture” (Spielberger 2013 p.3). In this research paper I will assess what anxiety management strategies can be used to support the psychological and vocal wellbeing of adult semi-professional singers by attempting to answer two questions. What causes Performance Anxiety (PA)? and What techniques can be used to alleviate PA when preparing for a performance, in performance and post-performance?

The use of the term Performance Anxiety (PA) and Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) will be used interchangeably in this paper since the common denominator for both singers and actors is the voice. The act of speaking is the basis of the act of singing, therefore, singing can be viewed as a refined and amplified extension of speaking skills (Tulay 2022). Thus, PA and MPA can be used as a representation of each other.

Rationale

Many of my students, both vocalists and actors, experience performance anxiety. As a voice and performance coach, as well as a performer myself, I recognize the importance of addressing this issue. Performance anxiety, or stage fright, is an intensified and often debilitating fear of public performance as stated by Wilson and Roland (2002). The insights gained from this research will be instrumental in helping my students manage their PA more effectively. One notable observation among some of my adult semi-professional students is that despite years of experience, they have recently started facing heightened anxiety before performances, which has negatively impacted their ability to perform at their best. My research has revealed various treatment options for PA, including pharmacological interventions such as beta-adrenoceptor blocking medications, commonly known as beta-blockers. Psychotherapeutic approaches like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and psychodynamic therapy are also commonly used (Juncos, Heinrichs, et al., 2017). Many of these options are not available in the Caribbean region, and more specifically in Trinidad and Tobago where I am based. You may wonder why these services aren't simply accessed online, but the culture of my country in relation to therapy will have to be taken into consideration. Many locals are

uncomfortable with the concept of therapy and what it entails. As I am neither a trained psychotherapist nor qualified in psychology or therapy, my role is limited to ethically guiding exercises. Therefore, my focus for this research will be to find techniques that incorporate breathwork and exercise in managing performance anxiety. The primary strategy I will implement to explore this will be through a structured lesson plan.

What causes Performance Anxiety?

“Performance anxiety is a common experience for actors, public speakers, and all those who appear before an audience; and it is particularly pernicious for singers” (Arneson 2010 p.537). Since this is a common phenomenon, the main question is where does it stem from? According to Arneson (2010) Performance anxiety naturally arises when we put ourselves in situations that invite judgment and evaluation, stemming from our individual experiences. The theoretical model developed by Valentine emphasizes that one of the causes of PA is the participation of variables related to the individual, the task, and the situation (Burin, Ana et.al, 2019).

Driskill (2012) states that *Performance anxiety* describes the mental, behavioural, and physical symptoms of anxiety experienced during any kind of performance, whether in front of an audience of any size or when an audience is merely perceived, such as through a camera, microphone, or nearby listeners. It covers a wide range of possible symptoms, both physical and emotional. With a greater accumulation of life experiences, adults are likely to have faced more impactful psychological events than younger individuals. In some cases, these adults may require therapeutic support to manage their PA effectively because according to Driskill (2012 p,1) “whether it is perceptible to others or not, those experiencing performance anxiety symptoms are not trivial, and many struggle with them throughout the entirety of their careers.”

What techniques can be used to alleviate performance anxiety:

Pre-Performance

As a performer, I recognize that the preparation process for a performance can often be challenging. Performance anxiety (PA), as outlined in the rationale, refers to the fear of public performance; pre-performance anxiety, specifically, is a form of PA experienced prior to an event or show. Kenny (2011) mentions, PA is quite common among performers of all levels,

from beginners to seasoned professionals, and according to Finch (2018), MPA is widespread among musicians at any stage of expertise and can detract from overall performance quality.

Through discussions with my performance students, it became clear that perspectives on PA differ, with some students perceiving it positively and others negatively, likely due to the varying intensities at which PA is experienced. Petrovich (2004) believes that stage fright is a normal and inevitable part of any meaningful performance, acting as a form of good stress that heightens physical and mental alertness and intensifies the emotional experience, potentially enhancing the musician's performance. I agree with this perspective, as performers may occasionally become uptight; experiencing a manageable level of PA serves as a reminder that setbacks are possible, reinforcing the need for sustained focus, preparation and the significance of remembering to enjoy the experience. Individuals who reinterpret their anxious arousal as excitement, rather than trying to calm down, tend to feel more energized and achieve better performance outcomes (Wood 2014).

To reduce PA, Arneson (2010, pp 540-544) gave twelve PA reduction techniques:

- 1) Accept your fear
- 2) Understand your fear
- 3) Silence negative inner voices
- 4) Get rid of excuses
- 5) Eliminate self-destructive behaviour
- 6) Don't fear criticism
- 7) Don't be "unsure"
- 8) Recall and prepare
- 9) Release physical tension
- 10) Refuse to focus on nervousness
- 11) Have realistic expectations
- 12) Be generous

I have implemented many of the exercises listed above with my students and they occasionally work. However, in alignment with the assignment's objective—to employ strategies I have not previously utilized but can ethically administer—I have identified additional approaches to explore. According to Petrovich (2004), self-efficacy a social learning theory widely applied to various challenging and problematic situations, refers to the belief in one's ability to employ effective coping skills to achieve a successful performance outcome. Kenny (2011) reviews treatment for anxiety disorders, and below I have listed some treatment options that can be used to help reduce PA:

1. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)

This state involves an intense focus and awareness of the present moment, where the mind fully acknowledges and accepts the experience without assigning thoughts, emotions, or judgments (Bishop, 2002).

2. Goal setting

According to goal-setting theory, establishing clear and challenging goals can enhance performance, though this relationship is complex and impacted by multiple intervening factors (Kenny, 2011).

3. Yoga for music performance anxiety

“Kripalu Yoga is a complete yoga practice system incorporating classical yoga postures, multiple breathing techniques, and meditation. This style of yoga emphasizes introspective focus while coordinating breath and physical postures as a meditation in motion” (Khalsa, Shorter et.al, 2009, p.281).

4. Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is an educational method where students acquire skills to release bodily tension, making movement smoother and requiring less effort (Kenny, 2011).

5. Pre- Performance routines

Preparing for a performance by familiarizing oneself with the venue and practicing in that setting can benefit anxious performers by integrating environmental cues, which may help reduce anxiety, enhance confidence, and improve performance (Kenny, 2012).

6. Mental Practice

Research in musical mental practice consistently shows that mental practice alone is more effective than no practice, while combining mental and physical practice tends to produce the most favourable performance outcomes (Kenny, 2012).

Currently, no empirical studies examine the impact of mental practice as a strategy for reducing music performance anxiety by substituting negative thoughts with mental rehearsal

before a performance according to Kenny (2012). There are also not many recent research papers I have found that discuss mental practice. As a result of this I will focus on the first five techniques.

As a coach I have quickly learnt every student is different, and what works for one student may not work for another. The first five techniques outlined above will be integrated into a lesson plan, detailed in Appendix 1.0, and applied to students experiencing PA. Elliot (2010) states that some benefits of the mindfulness training are increased concentration, more focus and clarity, decreased agitation and reactivity, and a greater feeling of calm and ease. Latham & Locke (2007) add that factors influencing goal selection include the extent of personal choice involved, the complexity of required tasks, and the level of effort and persistence needed to reach the goal.

Although I am not a certified yoga instructor I do practice yoga, so I know from personal experience how relaxed it can make your body feel. "Research documenting the therapeutic benefits of yoga has grown steadily over the last 4 decades and now includes controlled clinical trials on psychiatric conditions such as depression and anxiety" (Khalsa, Butzer et.al, 2013, p.35). It is my belief that yoga supports overall emotional well-being and can potentially enhance performance quality. I am also not formally trained in the Alexander Technique, but I have participated in numerous exercises. While not originally designed to treat PA, the Alexander Technique (AT) is worth noting, as it is commonly applied by musicians for the purpose of PA according to Wilson (2002).

Finally, Kenny (2011) observes that much of the current research on pre-performance routines focuses primarily on athletes. This is reflected in the predominance of sports-related literature encountered during my research. However, it is my opinion that athletes, singers, and actors share similar psychological anticipation before a performance. Hence, Wergin (2020, p.2) evidently explains "psychological advantages of using a PPR may among other things constitute of lowered anxiety, increased task-relevant focus, and reduced negative introspection."

In Performance:

PA is a frequent challenge encountered by performers, myself included. When a performer stands before an audience, the moment is irrevocable, which can lead to a physiological and psychological response to the accompanying emotions. "An awareness of some danger causes fearful thoughts that trigger sweaty palms, dry mouth, or trembling hands, that, in turn,

cause behavioural responses such as missing notes and forgetting words” (Lee, 2002, p. 37). Two techniques that can be used to help reduce PA in performance are:

1. Mindfulness

This relates to the performer living in the moment. Performers who cultivate greater awareness of the present moment typically experience a reduced sense of losing control during their performance, allowing them to stay grounded and effectively navigate its demands (Lecuona, 2023)

2. Positive affirmations

Daily positive affirmations can serve as a self-help tool, boosting confidence, reducing self-doubt, and encouraging belief in one’s abilities (Taylor, 2022). Focusing on positive self-talk rather than fixating on the physiological and psychological effects of anxiety can be highly beneficial to a performer.

Post-Performance

I believe managing PA after a performance is important for your mental well-being and for improving future performances. Through research I found that literature seldom uses the term post-performance; however, post-event rumination appears to convey a similar concept. Rumination involves dwelling on negative thoughts (psychiatry, 2020). Rumination following an event has been recognized as a central characteristic of social anxiety disorder (Kocovski, 2005), and “The potential physiological implications of this post- performance cognitive procession are largely unknown” (Haccoun, Hildebrandt, Klumb *et al.*, 2020, para 1).

Two techniques that can be used to help reduce post-performance anxiety are:

Mindfulness – “Mindfulness can help reduce emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment” (Biswal and Srivastava, 2002, p. 4). This may be helpful for anyone experiencing post-performance anxiety.

Yoga - Yoga, identified as a mind–body therapy, has gained popularity as a method to attain and sustain wellness and is widely regarded as beneficial for emotional well-being (Cramer, Lauche,et al., 2018)

All techniques chosen can be implemented at any stage of the PA process. By using these techniques, you can not only manage post-performance anxiety, but I believe you can also

turn the experience into a positive opportunity for growth, reflection, and future success. See appendix 1.0 for a detailed lesson plan with the techniques used above.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has examined various techniques to assist in managing PA among adult semi-professional singers, emphasizing approaches that engage both mind and body to alleviate stress at different stages of performance. PA, also termed stage fright, is described as an intensified and often debilitating fear of public performance (Wilson & Roland, 2002), and it many performers, which can create barriers to artistic expression. Given the limitations of psychotherapeutic treatments in Trinidad and Tobago, and the culture of the people in relation to therapy, another approach was used. The inclusion of techniques such as mindfulness, yoga, positive affirmations, and pre-performance routines provide performers with tools to maintain focus and reduce stress. Mindfulness-based stress reduction, for instance, fosters present-moment awareness that helps reduce anxiety during a performance by enabling performers to live in the moment (Lecuona, 2023). Similarly, positive affirmations can mitigate anxiety, allowing performers to focus on self-belief rather than dwelling on physiological symptoms of PA (Taylor, 2022).

Moreover, while yoga has grown in popularity as a method to attain and sustain wellness (Cramer, Lauche, et al., 2018), it remains a valuable approach to managing emotional health and PA specifically. The Alexander Technique, though not designed specifically for PA, is widely used by musicians to reduce physical tension during performance (Kenny, 2011), and pre-performance routines have shown promise in helping performers feel familiarized with performance environments (Wergin, 2020).

Overall, these techniques can be used independently or integrated to support psychological resilience, enabling performers to transform PA into an opportunity for personal growth, reflection, and enhanced performance quality.

Critical Reflection

Although it was recommended to begin my critical reflection at the start of Module 1, I delayed the process and, as expected, found it more challenging to catch up later. I only started midway through the module when I gained clarity on what my topic would be. Once I decided on the topic and felt more confident, I realized that the DEBRIEF model would be the most suitable

strategy for my reflection. However, I discovered that there is limited research on this specific model, so I relied on Kolb's (1984) work to further break down and analyse the information.

This assignment has highlighted the importance of maintaining dialogue throughout my class sessions. Learning can be defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). I am excited to see how this assignment transforms the format of my classes.

D- Describe details as factually as possible

In my recent group classes, I observed a notable instance of performance anxiety (PA) manifesting among my semi-professional students. A new student exhibited considerable apprehension towards participating in class exercises due to a fear of making mistakes. This anxiety quickly permeated the classroom environment, as other students began to express similar hesitations. In response, I emphasized the creation of a safe, judgment-free space, reassuring the students that mistakes are part of the learning process. Despite these efforts, the persistence of this anxiety has proven challenging, as students continue to struggle with implementing the suggested strategies.

Initially, I felt confident that my strategies, such as fostering a safe learning environment and encouraging students to embrace mistakes as growth opportunities, would be sufficient. However, as the anxiety continued to spread among the group, I experienced frustration, particularly with the need to reiterate the same reassurances without evident progress. This was compounded by the realization that I had never previously encountered such a pronounced ripple effect of anxiety within a classroom setting. The experience left me feeling uncertain about the adequacy of my current approaches and concerned about how best to support the students' mental and vocal well-being.

Another issue I encountered was finding articles for this assignment. It was challenging, especially since it required using unfamiliar PA techniques. My usual approach was to rely on methods I already knew, but to adhere to the assignment's requirements, I needed to expand my search for strategies I had not yet explored. I quickly realized that my choice of keywords was too limited, which meant revisiting and refining my search terms.

E- Evaluate what went well

Upon reflection, there were positive aspects of the situation. On the positive side, my immediate response of reinforcing a safe learning space and reframing mistakes as learning opportunities was effective in initially addressing the issue. Creating a supportive classroom environment is a fundamental aspect of teaching, and I believe that my students felt comforted by my reassurances. Also, I have noticed students have trust in my judgement as they always attempt exercises and work given, even when they are not entirely comfortable at first.

B- Bring out the emotion/ values/ beliefs that cloud judgement and development

*We probe the concept of experience in experiential learning, suggesting that teachers require a kind of 'experiential expertise' to draw both on embodied felt sense and on what one has done in one's own career to role-model the transformation of experience into knowledge, which is at the heart of Kolb's theory (Tomkins and Ulus 2016). As a performer, I often assumed that the techniques that worked for me would be equally effective for my students. I was sometimes firm in my belief and its effectiveness, overlooking the fact that they didn't always achieve the intended results. I also underestimated the potential for one student's anxiety to influence the group dynamic which was exhausting to witness. I am now more aware that I need to further develop techniques and develop a strategy to manage collective anxiety in classroom settings. The lesson plan found in Appendix 1.0 can assist.

R- Review and analyse in view of previous experience

One possible reason for the persistence of anxiety in this scenario may be the underlying fear of peer judgment, which can be exacerbated in group learning environments. While I stressed the importance of viewing mistakes as opportunities for growth, this message may not have resonated deeply enough with the students, particularly those who are highly self-critical or prone to anxiety. Additionally, the presence of a new student may have heightened the sense of uncertainty within the group, making it more challenging for the students to adopt a mindset of experimentation and learning. The fact that the anxiety affected multiple students also highlights the interconnected nature of group dynamics, where the emotional state of one individual can impact the entire class. Kolb (2014) states, acknowledging that learning and growth continue throughout life, social institutions and organizations bear a responsibility to create experiences that support adults in their ongoing personal development and learning.

Therefore, as a teacher I must also take accountability for the experience my students have when they work with me.

I-Identify lessons learnt

This experience has taught me that managing performance anxiety in a group setting requires more than just creating a safe space and encouraging positive attitudes toward mistakes. It calls for a deeper understanding of group dynamics and more targeted strategies to address individual and collective anxieties. Moving forward, I need to explore additional approaches, such as incorporating some I learnt during the process of this research, and perhaps even one-on-one check-ins to ensure that students feel individually supported. Additionally, I should consider revising my classroom structure to reduce performance pressure and allow for more gradual, low-stakes participation.

I also learnt the importance of using specific and varied language in research to uncover broader and more novel techniques that could benefit my teaching approach.

E-Establish follow up actions

Every task we encounter demands a specific set of skills for successful execution. When personal abilities align well with task requirements, adaptive competence is achieved (Kolb 2007). Follow up actions will include but are not limited to:

1. Acknowledge a change was needed.
2. Have a conversation with persons individually then collectively.
3. Identify what the problems are and how they can be rectified.
4. Introduce new techniques to students.

F-Feedback on actions

Kolb (2007) states that resolving creative tension through experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting is when learning occurs. In future classes, I will implement a more comprehensive set of anxiety-reducing techniques that I have learnt about through research for this module, including mindfulness exercises at the beginning of each session to help students centre themselves. I will also introduce more collaborative activities to foster a sense of camaraderie, where students can work together in small groups, and I can lead them in alexander technique exercises. These group exercises can assist their bodies and voices in releasing tension, while

reducing the pressure of individual performance. To further address individual anxieties, I will offer students the opportunity to discuss their concerns privately, allowing me to tailor my approach to their specific needs. Lastly, I will continue to explore the psychological aspects of performance anxiety through research and reflection, using this insight to refine my teaching methods in ways that better support my students' overall well-being.

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Appendices

1.0 Lesson Plan

Detailed lesson plan for a 1 hour singing class (student suffers from PA)

Technique	Benefits
Start class with Mindfulness exercise	To concentrate on self and being present in the moment.
Positive Affirmations	Speaking positively to self, encourages freedom to be creative without judgement.
Alexander Technique	Body Mapping- Being aware and realistic of the body's size and function. Breathing exercises – With emphasis on movement of the body.
Goal Setting	Set a goal for what will be achieved in the class.
Pre-performance Routine	Decide on repertoire that student is most comfortable doing and get information as to where the performance will be.
Practice	Do the work.

1.1 Personal Development Plan

<u>Learning Focus</u>	<u>Research Topics</u>	<u>Timeframe</u>
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Objective	To ensure that 5 days in each week I get work done for Module 2.	
Activity	Read articles and books on Vocal health if only for 45 mins each day.	20 th December 2024
Action	Set a schedule and stick to it.	20 th November 2024

<u>Learning Focus</u>	<u>Research Topics</u>	<u>Timeframe</u>
Objective	To gain more knowledge on the anatomy of the voice and how it works.	10 th January 2025
<u>Activity</u>	Read more articles and books on the broad topic for information's sake.	10 th January, 2025
<u>Action</u>	Stop procrastinating	

<u>Learning Focus</u>	<u>Research Topics</u>	<u>Timeframe</u>
<u>Objective</u>	To take a zoom class with someone trained in the Alexander Technique.	
<u>Activity</u>	Research certified persons in AT and choose one I feel comfortable with.	1 st January, 2025
<u>Action</u>	Do class.	24 th January, 2025

<u>Learning Focus</u>	<u>Research Topics</u>	<u>Timeframe</u>
<u>Objective</u>	To reduce external workload.	

<u>Activity</u>	Place more focus on module.	Going forward
<u>Action</u>	Get assignment finished at least a week ahead of time.	

<u>Learning Focus</u>	<u>Research Topics</u>	<u>Timeframe</u>
<u>Objective</u>	To be a more attentive teacher.	Going forward
<u>Activity</u>	Working with students	
<u>Action</u>	Use new techniques learnt	Going forward