About Attitude and Mindset in Singing

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As a voice scientist trained in physics, I can say generally much more about the vocal instrument than the vocalist who plays the instrument. While the player and the instrument are tightly packaged in singing, the most successful vocalist is probably the one who can mentally separate himself from the instrument, at least from the mechanics of sound making. I thank Greg Enriquez, a singing teacher in Las Vegas, for a stimulating discussion on this topic. He asked me to describe my own singing, which I still cultivate at a rather advanced age. He was surprised that my answers were not couched in scientific language, but rather in terms of self-expression and communication with an audience. I was rather surprised myself that words like register, pitch range, spectrum, and vibrato did not surface. Everything that came out of my mouth was mental, emotional, and experiential. Sports psychologists say that professional athletes regrettably spend less than 20% of their practice time on mental preparation. More than 80% of the time is spent on the physical aspects of training (stretching, weight lifting, running, jumping), with their mind peacefully turned off. Then, when it comes to performance time, the preparation for addressing spectators, opponents, team players, and one's own ego is lacking.

ABOUT WINNING AND LOSING

In preparing for a vocal performance, one important decision I make is whether the performance is of a cooperative nature or a competitive nature. The two are often confused by vocalists. Clearly, in an audition for a role or a part, the performance is competitive. A winner needs to be chosen. But what about performance in a church, or at a party with friends? Should the same mindset about " winning the audition" be applied to every setting? I hope there is not much difference of opinion about that.

The competitive mindset is one of winning at all times, in all situations, and (sometimes) at all cost. To be a winner, one must be comfortable with winning, not just once, but over and over again. Not many of us are life-scripted by our upbringing to be winners. This is not to say that we are losers, but we're not comfortable with winning all the time. We want the other person to have *a* turn, too. But if we follow that mentality, the odds of succeeding in a competitive environment are low. Regrettably, your opponents must lose, over and over again, and you must feel good about that. There is no room for negotiation, sharing, or feeling sorry; even manipulation is part of the tactic of winning.

The cooperative mindset, on the other hand, is based on sharing and negotiating. Everybody can be a winner, and nobody needs to be a loser. The focus

is on collective success rather than individual success. This would be the mindset when performing at a party, a family reunion, or an otherwise fun-loving gathering.

The situation in a church performance is still different. Here the focus is on God. A singer or speaker is only a medium, a conduit for spiritual communication. By drawing attention to oneself, one can only be a loser. Comments like, "I was totally uplifted by this service," or "never has music or speech touched my soul like this," should be valued higher than "you were awesome," or "your voice was fantastic today." Thus we can add a third mindset to the competitive and cooperative ones, the spiritual mindset, which is often one of self-denial. Winning or losing is totally irrelevant.

It is the rare performer who feels comfortable with all three of these mindsets, being able to choose appropriately among them. The few who are scripted to be winners, by their parents or teachers, usually assume center stage wherever they are. They generally attract attention, they usually have the best story to tell, and they are often talked about by others. Parents or caretakers have implanted in them a great deal of self-confidence, and winning is an obvious and expected outcome. When they do not win, they are convinced that this unfortunate outcome was beyond their control. But their life isn't necessarily easy. In a cooperative setting, they are often viewed as arrogant, aggressive, and less than friendly. This can be more of a perception than a reality, primarily by those who do not understand the winner's mindset.

The larger percentages of us are taught to be non-winners and non-losers. We usually follow a dual script. One parent may have taught us to be competitive and the other parent to be cooperative. Thus, we may do everything to win, but once we have won, it feels uncomfortable to keep repeating the victory. The second script calls for relinquishing the crown, letting someone else share in the glory. This mindset is appreciated by others, especially our competitors, but keeps us out of the spotlight. Nevertheless, there are performance settings where this adaptable mindset is entirely appropriate, and the consummate performer knows when to sit down and share in the glory of others.

For the few who are scripted to be losers as a result of many negative comments in childhood (perhaps by both parents), becoming a winner is following a complete counterscript. The mindset must be: "I will prove you wrong." A natural-born fighter can pull it off, but following a counterscript all of one's life creates a lot of psychological unrest. The fighting attitude sometimes carries over into social situations where winning and losing is not an issue; the fighters cannot take off the boxing gloves.

The question for the vocal performer is: Can I strut like a winner when an audience expects me to strut, and can I return to a cooperative environment off-stage? Most performers long for the rush that comes with the spotlight, then give it up prematurely because they are embarrassed and apologetic when they have it. Then they seek to regain it offstage. This flip-flop seeking and relinquishing the spotlight can be a major distraction for a vocalist. What helps is to create a performance focus, discussed below.

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Many performers are affected by psychological stress. This includes preperformance anxiety, postperformance depression, loneliness, difficulty getting along with others, and loss of sleep. Preperformance anxiety is a particularly debilitating problem for performers who engage in skills that require the perception of calmness, ease, and agility. Many musicians and dancers are in this category. One of the endearing features of opera, art song, and ballet, for example, is that minimum effort is portrayed when the tasks are maximally difficult. Our nervous system, which is designed for survival, is not well suited for this type of trickery. When fear sets in, the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system produces the "fight or flight" response, or the parasympathetic branch produces the "freeze or faint" response. These responses, stemming from the phylogenetically "old" limbic system in our brain, are defense mechanisms that we have in common with animals. "Fight or flight" involves a heightened activation level in many muscles to either defeat an opponent in combat, or to outrun the opponent in an escape. These muscle activations can be of a "shotgun" nature, totally lacking the differentiability for precision movement needed in an artistic skill. There is also increased heart rate, dry mouth, sweating of the palms, or tremor in the limbs.

"Freeze or faint" involves inhibition of many muscles, a playing dead approach to survival. This is used by

animals that clearly cannot overcome or escape their opponent, hoping to become less desirable prey by being limp or nearly dead. There may even be an inhibition of the sensory system, so that an inevitable death scenario is rapid and less painful. This freeze or faint response is obviously also not helpful to a performer who is trying to demonstrate skill. The two types of responses can be observed in vocalizations uttered by people who ride roller coasters (or other freefall objects) in amusement parks. Some scream in an uncontrolled fashion, others clam up and utter no sounds; rarely does anyone engage in normal vocalization, and, if so, it is done by those who have overcome the fear of falling.

So, if fear is the culprit that disrupts our ability to perform skilled behavior, what are we afraid of when vocalizing in public? We are not being physically attacked, nor are we likely to fall off the stage. The real fear for performers is loss of self-esteem, humiliation, being poorly evaluated by others, and (surprisingly) success itself. The last one of these fears, success, goes back to the concept of feeling comfortable with winning. Being successful as a performer may mean a change of lifestyle, giving up certain securities (home, family, a steady paycheck, watching ballgames or drama series, etc.), or having to change one's personality. But for most performers, the fear is being evaluated, particularly if the evaluation involves one's competency, ease, and self-assurance. Then a vicious feedback cycle (with catastrophic outcomes) can be set into motion. Fear diminishes fluency and ease, which is evaluated as less skillful by the audience, which is sensed by the performer who is poorly focused, which produces more fear, which results in less fluency and ease.

FOCUS

A new word has now been introduced, focus. Focus is a self-administered strategy to overcome mild cases of stage fright. For some performers, this may not be enough; more professional approaches such as medication, hypnosis, or other psychotherapies may be needed. But focus is a first approach for the performer to eliminate distractions that trigger fear. Focus can be narrow and broad, internal and external. A narrow focus is sometimes needed when the skill level is not yet high. The performer focuses on execution, literally shutting out the audience. The audience clearly senses this, but by shutting the audience out, the performer breaks the vicious cycle and does not allow the audience's perception to heighten his fear. A protective shell is built around the performer and his instrument. A slightly broader focus is on a character that the performer portrays. Preparation consists of studying the character. By becoming someone else, fear can be eliminated because the audience is consumed with the character, not the performer. However, motor skill has to be automated; otherwise, the performance may suffer by the character transformation.

An even broader focus can be assumed by those who have automated their skills (and know their character). A focus on the audience, or on the goal of the performance, is an appropriate focus. Here the performer prepares herself by getting to know the audience, their likes and dislikes, their history. She chooses members in the audience and specifically performs for them. But the broader focus can also be the event itself, its humanitarian purpose. Here the performer prepares by deciding how she can best meet the needs of the organizers, hoping to surpass their expectations. It should be understood that, even if the invited performer is a "mega-star," the planned performance has a purpose other than to gratify the star. People behind the scenes have agendas they would like to see met.

Yet another focus is a spiritual one. Whether one calls this focus broad or narrow is perhaps debatable. Here the performer seeks divine intervention. She dedicates her performance, and perhaps her whole life, to a Supreme Being. This focus is extremely helpful to those who are control freaks, who worry about every detail. In a spiritual focus, control is relinquished to the Supreme Being. Fear is eliminated because God is in control, and God will not abandon you if you are in his service. But a spiritual focus requires faith, because God works in (seemingly) mysterious ways. An occasional "failure" by the performer may not be a failure at all in the eyes of God. The "failed" performance may actually have improved another person's life in some strange way. For example, another person on stage, or a young budding performer in the audience, may have derived courage from the fact that the star is mortal. Thus, a spiritual focus is a long-range (eternal) focus, in which occasional failures are acceptable and inconsequential.

To this point, all of the foci mentioned have been external. Even the narrow focus on skillful execution is external, in a sense. When the focus is internal, that is, on oneself, it is most destructive. In singing a difficult aria, it is easy to lose focus after having poorly executed a run or high note. If the thought is "I have blown it," and subsequent thinking is that my performance is failing, it usually will. The focus must immediately be changed to an external one to break the vicious fear cycle. It is better to think that the bobble may give a new dimension to the character, or that the audience may appreciate your honesty in taking a chance with a difficult piece. A high wire act in the circus would have no lasting appeal if nobody had ever fallen off the wire.

To solidify the focus, performers often engage in a preperformance ritual. This varies from doing specific warm-up exercises to eating certain meals at certain times, to prayer and meditation, to relaxation therapy, to walking in a park, to reading an inspirational text, or to going over lines of text. But, for some performers, the ritual doesn't work because it is not specific to the focus. They see other people's rituals and adopt them simply as a thing to do. This can be more a distraction than a solidification of one's own focus.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE SONG AND THE SINGER

Over the years, I have learned the importance of "putting the song into my voice," as opposed to "putting my voice into the song." It took me a long time realize that most of the tenor arias I fell in love with as a kid were not intended to be sung by vocalists who have an instrument in the norm of the population. They were meant for the statistical outliers. For years I struggled to reach the B♭s in "Celeste Aida" and high Cs in "Che gelida manina," never getting to the level of expressing the emotions of the aria. Occasionally I built a music theater song into my practice to relax my voice. My wife Kathy applauded and said, "That song is in your voice. You own it."

In conclusion, while science explains much about the vocal instrument, I would like my long-term readership to know that when science "geeks" like me sing, their mind is not on physics and mathematics, but they are connecting with listeners in ways that physics has not yet captured.

Dr. Ingo R. Titze has served as Founder and President of the National Center for Voice and Speech since 1990. His was a University of Iowa Foundation Distinguished Professor of Voice, Speech, and Vocal Music prior to retirement from Iowa in 2019.

He has published over 500 articles in scientific and educational journals. His book publications include *Principles of Voice Production* (1994), *The Myoelastic-Aerodynamic Theory of Phonation* (2006); in collaboration with Katherine Verdolini, *Vocology: The Science and Practice of Voice Habilitation* (2012); and *Fascinations with the Human Voice* (2010), which is printed in eight languages. His research interests include biomechanics of human tissues, acoustic phonetics, speech science, voice disorders, professional voice production, and the computer simulation of voice. His formal training is in Electrical Engineering (MS) and physics (PhD).

Dr. Titze is a founding member and first elected President of the Pan-American Vocology Association. Other professional affiliations include the Acoustical Society of America, The National Association of Teachers of Singing, the American Speech Language Hearing Association, and the American Laryngological Association. Honors include The Gould Award for outstanding research in laryngeal physiology (1984), the Silver Medal Award from the Acoustical Society of America (2007), the Honors of the Association from ASHA (2010), and the Sundberg-Titze Award from the Voice Foundation (2020). He has administered and taught in the Summer Vocology Institute, the premiere Vocology training program, for 20 years. He has been married to Kathy Titze for 52 years, with whom he has four children and nine grandchildren. He remains an active singer.