Under Pressure: Reports of Performance Anxiety Across Multiple Singing Genres

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INTRODUCTION

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is the experience of heightened stress levels in musicians before, during, and after music performance.[1] It has been reported that between 15 and 25% of musicians will experience MPA in their career; however, because many musicians do not seek treatment, it is possible that the actual occurrence of MPA is much higher.[2] Since a shaky voice and difficulty breathing are common symptoms, singers may be particularly vulnerable to performance disturbances from MPA.[3] Currently, singers are underrepresented in the literature on MPA and more research is required to understand their unique experience.[4]

Although they share a reliance on the voice as their instrument, each separate field of singing, contemporary commercial music (CCM), music theatre (MT) and classical, has its own unique culture and expectations.[5] It would be advantageous for educators and researchers to understand the common and unique experiences of singers within these three fields, in order to design and implement appropriate MPA management strategies. To this end, a lecture presentation and panel discussion involving emic representatives from each field, was held at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University. Panellists were Ajhriahna Henshaw (CCM), Joel Curtis (MT), and Laura Fanshawe (Classical). The discussion was moderated by Dr. Irene Bartlett and Dr. Ron Morris.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Juslin and Sloboda define MPA as "the experience of marked and persistent anxious apprehension related to musical performance which is manifested through combinations of affective, cognitive, somatic and behavioural symptoms."[6] MPA is often used interchangeably with the term, "stage fright";[7] however, the two states are distinct from one another. MPA affects not only the performance itself but the performer's behavior leading up to performance, while stage fright is a profoundly negative experience occurring only at the time of performance.[8] MPA affects a performer's ability to coordinate body and mind in a manner conducive to optimal performance.[9] While it is a widely accepted view that a certain level of preperformance arousal is desired to feel "performance ready,"[10] and that feelings of excitement can foster an energy

that allows for individual spontaneity,[11] MPA occurs when arousal escalates to a level that causes physical, cognitive and behavioral interference to performance quality.[12] As singing requires the complex and simultaneous coordination of biological and psychological systems,[13] the occurrence of MPA in singers, makes singing particularly difficult.

MPA may occur within individuals who have a preexisting propensity for general (trait) anxiety, or it may be an isolated reaction to a specific circumstance (state anxiety).[14] Factors that are more likely to induce a state of MPA may include personality or disposition and introversion,[15] teacher driven perfectionism,[16] pressure of conforming to style conventions, performance environment, perceived pressures, negative self-perception and poor mental health, early attachment ruptures in childhood,[17] pressure to maintain vocal fitness, general health problems, lack of preparation time, difficult parts, exhaustion from touring and travel, and problems with colleagues.[18]

Researchers frequently have found correlations between MPA and trait anxiety, as well as social phobia and perfectionism among musicians. In a sample of 73 jazz music students, Martin-Gagnon and Creech not only found significant levels of MPA, but also found MPA was strongly related to trait anxiety among these musicians,[19] while in a study of 100 Hungarian musicians, Dobos et al. found perfectionism and social phobia significantly correlated with MPA.[20] Conversely, self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to handle a given task or situation[21]—has been negatively associated with MPA.[22] Sinden found that low general self-efficacy, low self-esteem, perfectionism, and emotional coping styles were significant predictors of performance anxiety.[23] Similarly, in a sample of 65 child and teen musicians, Dempsey found that students with high levels of perfectionism and low levels of self-efficacy were more likely to have high levels of MPA.[24] Dempsey concluded that a tendency toward perfectionism may make musicians more vulnerable to MPA, while self-efficacy may provide an important buffer against MPA. In line with this finding, McPherson and McCormick found that self-efficacy was the leading predictor of achievement in music examinations.[25] McPherson and McCormick recommend self-efficacy be given more attention in music research, as the pursuit of music, especially as a career, requires self-regulation and mental discipline.

As noted, there is a lack of research examining MPA in singers. While some studies have included singers among their participants, these have primarily been classical singers. In a study of 32 professional opera chorus singers, Kenny et al. found opera singers had higher trait anxiety, occupational role concerns, and occupational personal strain than normative samples, concluding that trait anxiety and MPA are positively associated.[26] Also, in a study of 49 professional opera singers in Sweden, Sandgren found health anxiety was a major concern that significantly correlated with MPA.[27]

It has been suggested that the almost exclusive focus on classical singers is because they are likely to experience MPA in greater numbers than their jazz, popular, or folk musician colleagues.[28] However, a lack of research examining MPA in nonclassical singers makes this claim difficult to support. Overall, larger samples and studies including singers from CCM and MT are needed to better understand the prevalence of MPA among singers. What follows is a synthesis of a lecture presentation and panel discussion held at Griffith University, exploring the experiences of singers in CCM, MT, and classical fields, along with recommendations for approaches that voice teachers might implement in the studio to help students with MPA.

VOCAL DEMANDS ACROSS CCM, MT, AND CLASSICAL

> What makes musical theatre different from CCM in terms of performance practice? Musical theatre is a different genre to the other two . . . It has different performance practices and different technique sets as well. These differences shape how we think, how we contextualise performance and how we experience our performance practice. It also affects how the research is contextualised.[29]

The separate stylistic concerns of CCM, MT, and classical singing determine what is considered acceptable vocal technique in each field. Beauty of tone is the central stylistic concern in classical singing. Classical voice training is therefore primarily focused on developing perfect, infallible technique.[30] McHenry et al. write, "the performance expectations of vocal clarity, resonance, endurance and resilience required in an unamplified theatre with full orchestra are more robust that in other genres that routinely use amplification in performance."[31] Physical symptoms of MPA therefore

directly affect the classical singer's ability to produce a clear and stable sound, audibly compromising the singer's performance. Relying on healthy functioning of the voice has been found to be a significant source of stress for some opera singers and has been positively correlated with MPA.[32] Additionally, the traditions and norms of classical pieces are well known to audiences, who have typically heard (if only on recordings) the most accomplished, well known singers perform the same repertoire. Knowledge that their performance will be compared with these famous performances can be an added source of pressure for classical singers.[33] For them, having to maintain a consistently superior level of performance over a long career can be a major source of stress.

CCM styles of singing, including pop, jazz, folk, and blues, typically prioritize individuality of timbre,[34] and it is accepted that within this style, scratchy, shaky, underarticulated, or overly breathy sounds can add character and emotional weight to a performance.[35] While tongue root tension, breathiness, or shakiness are considered unacceptable vocal faults in classical singing, they can be suitable stylistic choices in CCM. It would be interesting to investigate whether CCM's greater acceptance of a multitude of vocal qualities and techniques, in comparison to classical singing, has any significant impact on CCM singers' tendency to experience MPA.

MT singers are required to be skilled at incorporating both classical and contemporary techniques in service of character and story.[36] The MT singer is therefore required to be highly adaptable, crossing genres vocally, while also maintaining a high level of acting and dancing skill in what is becoming an increasingly vocally challenging field.[37] Currently, there are no known studies that investigate how, if at all, these differences in vocal demands across the genres of CCM, MT, and classical singing affect singers' experiences of MPA.

VULNERABILITY THROUGH MUSICAL EXPOSURE

A common risk factor for MPA is the feeling of being musically exposed. Stothert notes that people often feel vulnerable when singing; as the voice is part of the singer's physiological and emotional being, singing can feel like exposing one's inner being.[38] This feeling may occur if the singer is performing on their own with minimal backing or is the lead singer in an ensemble. It is common for CCM singers to perform solo, accompanying themselves or singing with backing tracks, or singing in a duo. Henshaw shares some of her own performance experience.

> Most of the performing that I have done has been in a small duo with just a piano player. As a jazz singer, those are the bread and butter gigs. Sometimes the size of the ensemble comes down to what the venue is willing to pay for. Sometimes they ask for a small group and when I give them a quote that exceeds their expectations, they request a duo or solo performer. I definitely feel more at ease when I'm singing with a bigger band.[39]

When singing in a band situation, CCM singers are typically the lead vocalist. Bartlett, for example, surveyed 102 professional gig singers and found 75% of CCM singers categorized themselves as lead singers in ensembles of various sizes.[40] There is a palpable amount of pressure on singers that fill this role. As Bartlett notes, "As the lead singer, they *front* the band acting as a conduit between the instrumentalists and the audience while managing a range of complex activities."[41] The CCM singer therefore has both the pressure and exposure of being the lead or solo singer and the task of connecting with both band and audience simultaneously.

Feelings of exposure and vulnerability are also experienced by classical singers. In a study of classical choral singers, Stothert found that the singers experienced less MPA if they felt they had a trusting relationship with their conductor and fellow group members. Stothert concluded that cultivating feelings of trust and support in the singing environment may help singers to feel less vulnerable and less exposed when singing.[42]

Little is known about MT singers' experience of exposure and vulnerability and whether it is similar to CCM and classical singers. It is possible that MT singers may feel less exposed in their performance, by virtue of their character and the story being the central focus; however, investigation into this area is needed in order to fully understand MT singers' experience and how it differs from the experience of singers in CCM and classical styles.

SECURING EMPLOYMENT

In order to secure employment, classical and MT singers need to participate in a demanding and competitive audition process. As Morris describes,

> You've got to remember the peril of the audition in the Classical voice world. Music Theatre have it in auditions too but as a CCM singer your next job comes because someone heard you and they thought you were great. Whereas in Classical you join the list of 20 people who've all come with their arias in their bag . . . you can hear the singer before you singing your aria and you think, how dare you![43]

The audition process is a source of stress for many singers. As Morris suggests, the process of securing work is notably different for CCM singers. As band leaders or solo performers, CCM singers are often responsible for getting gigs (by approaching venues, for example), and then promoting these gigs. Bartlett explains,

> It's all self-driven, you've got to create the gig. You've got to create the audience for the gig. None of that is laid on for you. So it's a difficulty from another perspective; having to believe in yourself enough that you've got something that people want to hear and then you've got to go and sell it to a venue and then you've got to go and sell it to an audience. Recording companies won't even look at you unless you've got thousands of followers so that they know they're going to sell your stuff.[44]

As MPA has been negatively correlated with self-efficacy,[45] it is possible that performers experiencing MPA will find quite challenging engaging in the activities Bartlett describes. During the panel discussion one audience member notes that he often delayed advertising a performance until he was certain that it would go well, by which time, it was often too late to attract a reasonably sized assemblage.

Social interaction and likeability also play a role in singers' careers. Henshaw notes that unlike other styles, for CCM singers, being the most accomplished, experienced or virtuosic performer does not necessarily mean that you will get the gig.[46] When forming new musical groups, members often seek out participants who are a good social and aesthetic match rather than prioritizing virtuosity. It is not uncommon to hear that "so and so is a fantastic musician but I could never play in a group with him."[47]

Social relationships and likeability also play a role in the lives of classical singers.

> In classical music we are very rarely a one woman, one man show. We have conductors, pianists, orchestras to work with. A whole range of people. And what we've found is that performance anxiety complicates those relationships to a very great degree in that it's hard not to take direction and criticism very personally.[48]

Fanshawe explains that, as a classical singer, an individual's identity is entwined with the idea that they are a *good singer*. It seems imperative to one's career success that the whole cast of people involved in the production like you and think of you that way. It is unclear, however, how social relationships and likeability affect MT singers.

From the panel presentation and discussion, it is evident that each field of singing has its own specific challenges and sources of stress. However, it is unclear how these stressors correlate with MPA or whether MPA is experienced to different degrees across the three fields. Assuming that MPA may affect all singers, regardless of genre, it is important for voice teachers to be aware of effective treatments for MPA. These are discussed below.

MPA TREATMENT

Research aimed at finding effective treatments for MPA has explored the implementation of a range of techniques, including psychodynamic therapy,[49] virtual reality training (a form of exposure therapy),[50] mindful meditation,[51] eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR),[52] biofeedback training,[53] cognitive behavioral therapy,[54] acceptance and commitment therapy,[55] and psychological skills training.[56] Though few studies have focused specifically on singers, the findings from general MPA research may tentatively indicate effective treatment approaches for singers.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is currently the gold standard approach in psychology for treating anxiety and depressive disorders.[57] In a sample of 62 adolescent music students, Braden et al. found significant reductions in students' self-rated MPA following participation in a CBT program. The program included

psychoeducation, imagery and visualization techniques, strengths identification, goal setting, cognitive restructuring, and relaxation techniques. Similarly, Kenny and Halls implemented a CBT model with 68 community musicians and found moderate significant reductions in state anxiety as well as improved performance quality. Like Braden et al., Kenny and Hall's model included psychoeducation about MPA, motivation, goal setting, and cognitive restructuring. Interestingly, many of these skills and techniques also are included in psychological skills training programs.[58]

Psychological skills training (PST) is an approach adopted from sports psychology. Based on the premise that an athlete's psychological state affects physical performance, PST involves learning and practicing a selection of psychological techniques that help athletes regulate their psychological state.[59] Typical PST skills include the use of goal setting, imagery, relaxation, and self-talk. Several studies have explored the application of PST for musicians. In a study of 24 classical music undergraduates, Cohen and Bodner found that after a semester of a music performance skills course, which taught mental skills training, physiological awareness, enhancing musical communication, and participating in simulated performances, students showed significant reductions in self-reported MPA and significant improvements in performance quality compared to wait-list controls.[60] Similarly, Hatfield implemented a 15-week PST program with a small sample of two jazz and four classical musicians and found participants experienced greater concentration, self-observation, self-efficacy, and coping in the face of failure.[61] Participants experienced reduced worry and anxiety in performance situations and at eight-month follow up, were still actively applying the learned psychological skills, including goal setting, attentional focus, arousal regulation, imagery, and acceptance/self-talk training. Osborne et al. implemented a similar program of PST with 31 conservatorium students.[62] Topics included developing confidence, improving self-talk, channelling performance energy, learning and memorizing music, mental rehearsal building courage, recovering from mistakes, dealing with adversity, and cultivating mental toughness. At post-test, students showed significant reductions in self-reported MPA, and improvements in performance preparation, courage, confidence, focus, concentration, and performance resilience. Though more large scale studies are needed to bolster the argument for the implementation of PST for music students, and even more specifically, for singers, the results from these small samples lend support for the efficacy of PST in decreasing MPA.

PST offers an accessible array of practical skills that students can use to decrease the occurrence and severity of MPA. These include building self-efficacy, gaining knowledge and understanding of MPA (psychoeducation), identifying and modifying cognitions/self-talk, preparing effectively for performance, mental rehearsal (imagery/visualisation), and relaxation methods. It is plausible that voice teachers could learn these techniques in order to help their students adaptively cope with the pressures of music performance. Further, these skills could be adapted to meet the specific needs of singers in each field of singing, where, while the vocal demands of each genre differ, the ability to perform under pressure, and maintain a high level of self-belief and self-efficacy are shared.

Other ideas that arose from the panel discussion that could be implemented in the studio to decrease the occurrence and intensity of MPA include building trusting relationships with students, so they feel supported in their pursuit of music, encouraging singing "just for fun"—for enjoyment and intrinsic reward rather than extrinsic reward or competition, modelling self-care and self-acceptance to students to help them learn a healthy approach to music, encouraging a growth mindset,[63] matching song level and performance opportunities to the students' current expertise, and identifying, questioning, and modifying unhealthy self-talk or thoughts around singing.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When preparing for vocal performance, both amateur and professional, it is important to consider the multifaceted requirements for success. At best, MPA symptoms have been shown to diminish performance quality, and, at worst, will stop a singer from pursuing performance opportunities altogether. The highly debilitating nature of MPA makes it an important phenomenon for teachers and performers to understand. More specifically, it is important to realize that within each genre, there are specific triggers that can exacerbate MPA symptoms.

Whether it be the self-driven career building required of CCM singers, the quest for perfect adherence to convention found in classical music, or the competitive nature of the musical theatre audition process, it is important that singers are taught to develop appropriate management strategies. The lecture presentation held at the Queensland Conservatorium was an important step in promoting open dialogue between teachers and performers of different styles. An emic understanding of the professional performance climate in CCM, classical, and MT is invaluable for the developing singer. Furthermore, as singers are underrepresented in the literature, it is imperative that more research is directed toward MPA management strategies for all styles of singing. It is not the role of the voice teacher to treat anxiety disorders, and, in some cases, referring to a psychologist is the appropriate action. With that said, however, it is important to remember that singing teachers should prepare their students for real life performance situations, and this involves training more than the voice.

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