Stage Fright in Singers: Three Reaction Types

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Key Words

Stage fright · Body awareness · Muscle tonus · Breathing

Abstract

Drawing on both my own personal experience and that of many colleagues and pupils, I shall describe three kinds of reactions to stage fright. The first is the primarily mental reaction of derealization, which involves feeling cut off from fear and decreasing body awareness. The second and third reactions to stage fright involve (a) increased and (b) decreased muscle tonus and their associated breathing patterns. Furthermore, I shall indicate how singers manage to pull themselves together through the very act of producing their first tones.

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Introduction

Almost every performing artist, singer, actor, instrumentalist and professional speaker knows what stage fright is and they have all had to deal with it throughout their professional lives. Before they walk on stage this fear will manifest itself either mentally or physically. The familiar signs of stress that singers experience are: odd smelling sweat, frequent visits to the toilet, or an inability

(on the part of sopranos) to polish their nails after 2 p.m. on the day of a concert. One hour before the concert, some will have an excessively high pulse rate which will gradually slow down during the last half hour. Some won't be able to eat while others will be ravenous; some will have cold moist hands, others glowing faces. But singers become accustomed to these symptoms and accept them as being normal; it might feel awful, but they know things will turn out alright.

Yet from my own experiences and from what I have learnt from colleagues as well as students who I have helped onto the stage, the various manifestations of stage fright can be reduced to three reaction types. I have observed mental reactions involving a loss of contact with reality, which I will call *derealization*. And I have also observed reactions characterized by disturbed muscle tonus, with either too much or too little tension. In this article, I will describe my observations and illustrate each of the three reaction types with anecdotes about singers and their stage fright.

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Derealization

Stage fright made its entrance into my life some 20 years ago when I was a fellow researcher at the University of Nijmegen. One sunny afternoon I had to give a presentation on the progress of my investigations. Confident of my ability to speak in public, I thought I would be able to discuss the latest data with my scientific audience without doing anything more by way of preparation than simply glancing at the slides on which the data was displayed. I had, it turned out, vastly overestimated my improvisational skills. While presenting the first slide, the only thing I could say was: 'Well, as you can see here ...' And that was all. No words, no thoughts and no feelings followed. I went completely black; I didn't even feel any fear. It was disastrous.

Some 10 years later I had a second experience. As an oratorio tenor in the Netherlands, my career had been growing fast and I was singing with esteemed colleagues whose names I was proud to see printed on the program next to mine. During one particular concert, sitting in my chair, with a full house before me and an orchestra and choir behind me, I suddenly felt 'not there' and then the university flop came flooding back to me after all those years. Of course, I was already familiar with the physical signs of fear, such as a dry mouth, shaking hands and legs, and a hammering heartbeat in the head. But this time I didn't feel the fear physically; I just felt *unreal*, disconnected from reality and I wasn't even sure I would manage to stand up at the right moment to sing the right aria. But like a robot I came in on cue and all returned to normal. I don't know if anyone in the audience actually noticed what had happened – I didn't dare talk about it for some time after. Later on, however, I told one of my teachers, a well-experienced soprano. She replied that she was very familiar with this phenomenon and explained how, while seated in front of the audience, she would experience losing touch with reality before she sang. She also told me how she would have to repeat 'stay here!' to herself and how it helped to write her name back-to-front on the floor with her foot (even though she was afraid that this might cause her to make odd movements with her head). But it worked, she said.

An instrumentalist once told me how during a concert at a renowned concert hall he began to feel so shadowy and unreal that he thought 'what the hell's happening to me?' He then made a terrible mistake, but this jolted him back to reality and he went on to do an excellent job for the rest of the evening.

Others have described seeing themselves from a distance while climbing onto or sitting on the stage. Some

singers have even knocked over music stands or made silly counting errors, despite being thoroughly prepared.

This phenomenon, this twilight state of derealization as a reaction to stage fright, is a totally different experience to physically felt fear. It is a terrible experience because the victim knows that he is in a state of mind that might come in useful when in the mouth of a hungry crocodile but that it is of no use at all when on stage. What he needs to do instead is to concentrate, to focus on his goal. This is a process that can start hours before the performance and can lead to a high degree of lucidity that is most uncommon in daily life but can make a performer capable of timing his music to the millisecond and to executing extremely precise muscular activity at an artistic level.

Increased Muscle Tonus

People who might be characterized as courageous and eager to enter into combat tend to react to frightening situations with increased muscle tonus. And this is how some singers react to stage fright. In extreme cases the excitement constricts the body (fig. 1), the neck shortens, the throat narrows, and tension develops around the larynx and the cheek. The chest is in an inspiration posture, the abdominal wall is hard and the buttocks tightened. These singers tend to inspire rather than expire and may become loud and talkative. It is not difficult to imagine what effect this state will have on the voice: it will make it shrill (a high-pressure tone) and poor in color and vibrato, as if the singer is squeezing his body to get the sound out, like a dry lump of toothpaste out of a tube. When he sings in this state, he will tire easily and become hoarse, finding high notes more difficult than they should be, and experiencing problems with closed vowels like /i:/ and /e/. His excitement may also raise the pitch and tempo of his voice too much. Such a singer would be well-advised to relax his limbs, neck, chest and abdominal wall, and to stop taking such big breaths and to concentrate on expiration instead.

Decreased Muscle Tonus

Those who react to frightening situations with decreased muscle tonus tend to be floppy types who are likely to feel daunted and want to hide. A singer who falls into this category might think, 'Oh God, no!' and feel

Color version available online

Fig. 1. Increased muscle tonus [from ref. 1].

Color version available online

Fig. 2. Decreased muscle tonus [from ref. 1].

paralyzed from fear (see fig. 2 for an extreme case). Fond of expiration, this singer's abdomen will be weak and saggy, his breathing superficial and his sternum prone to collapse. His singing will be characterized by slow vibration and an airy tone. On /a/ and /o/ he will lose so much air that he will not be able to complete the phrase (especially if it is descending). Such a singer would be well-advised to stimulate himself physically with activating breathing exercises and laughter.

I found it remarkable that one of my students (obviously the excitable type) didn't want to believe that there were people who reacted to stage fright with decreased muscle tonus. Then one evening, at a dinner party, he spoke to an opera singer who told him that before a performance she would feel as though she had taken a long hot bath and that this feeling was exacerbated by having to stand still while getting dressed and sit down while being made up. The feeling of becoming more and more floppy was very frightening to her. What she needed to do was to reactivate herself before going on stage. Gener-

ally, singers are used to how they react before a performance and have found ways of dealing with those reactions. But it should be clear by now that the frequently given advice to 'just relax' is not always very helpful.

How Singers Pull Themselves Together

Let's see what happens when a singer walks on stage and is about to produce his first tone. He will have to deal with some form of stage fright but, being experienced, he will not lose control. The excitable type might have refrained from drinking too much coffee or driving too fast. The floppy type might have done some moderate working out. The singer will feel confident because he is well-focused and goal-oriented. Although his heart is pounding, although his voice feels hoarse and his hands clammy and shaky, he knows how to cope with the slight loss of body awareness or increased muscular tension in the shoulders.

First of all, in order to produce a good tone the singer must be aware of his skills and how to use them. And he must want to go up there on stage and sing to an audience. He also needs to be able to draw on previous experience – from the knowledge that he can do it.

A singer knows his tone, as well as the accompanying physical and mental sensations. He has, after all, worked on his tone (that very private feature of his personality) for years: he has improved it, made other people listen to it, and has had to deal with all kinds of remarks about it; he knows how to sing in a bathroom, car and concert hall. Without his tone, the singer is incomplete.

Stage fright can be very intense, but if a singer feels that his very first tones bear his essence, this will reassure him – and his audience – immediately. This effect is enhanced by previous positive experiences. It also gives him a focus for concentration, as his goal is completeness. The singer knows what to expect of his tone. If everything goes well, he will automatically do what he came for and all signs of fear will vanish to the fringes. Singing is thus a fright-soothing activity, because it is through the very act of singing itself that the singer gains control over his fear.

However, this process differs from person to person. Some singers manage to pull themselves together *before*

the very first tone, some do so *within* the first tone (or tones), and others take a little longer. It is the latter who find it more difficult to perform short fragments, even though they might be excellent performers.

Conclusions

Discerning different types of reactions can help us to clarify stage fright. If a reaction is mainly mental (with signs of derealization) coordination exercises of the hands or feet might help. If a reaction involves increased muscle tonus and too much inspiration, muscle relaxation and exhalation exercises might be of use. People who tend to react by feeling paralyzed need to activate themselves by taking deep breaths, moving their limbs, climbing the stairs or going for a walk. Singing teachers and breath therapists should bear these three reaction types in mind, especially if a particular piece of advice or form of exercise doesn't help or if it produces adverse effects.

Reference

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