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Music performance anxiety and occupational stress amongst opera chorus artists and their relationship with state and trait anxiety and perfectionism

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Abstract

This study explored the inter-relationships among state and trait anxiety, occupational stress, perfectionism, aspiration, and music performance anxiety in a group of elite operatic chorus artists employed full-time by a national opera company. The chorus artists reported higher trait anxiety, higher occupational role concerns, and higher occupational personal strain than normative samples. Higher scores on personal resources were associated with the higher scores on trait anxiety. It appears that these resources were used adaptively to manage anxiety. High trait anxiety was also associated with high personal strain in the work environment. Anxiety was not related to occupational roles or issues related to the physical environment or working conditions. These results suggest that while trait anxiety and music performance anxiety were closely associated, occupational stress makes a separate contribution to the quality of working life experienced by elite choral artists.

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Performance anxiety is a group of disorders that affect individuals in a range of endeavors, from test-taking (Elliot & McGregor, 1999), math performance (Ashcraft & Faust, 1994), public speaking (Merritt, Richards, & Davis, 2001), sport (Hall & Kerr, 1998; Hanton, Mellalieu, Stephen, & Hall, 2002) and the performing arts in dance (Tamborrino, 2001), acting (Wilson, 2002), and music (Deen, 2000; Ryan, 2003). Females are two to three times more likely to experience anxiety than males (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Lewinsohn, Gotlib, Lewinsohn, Seeley, & Allen, 1998) and this relationship appears to hold for music performance anxiety (MPA) where studies demonstrate that females have significantly higher MPA than males (Huston, 2001; Osborne & Franklin, 2002; Sinden, 1999), although this relationship is more complex in children (Ryan, 2003).

As with all performance anxieties, MPA occurs on a continuum of severity from “normal everyday healthy aspects of stress and anxiety that are intrinsic to the profession . . .” (Brodsky, 1996, p. 91) to the severely debilitating symptoms of “stage fright,” an experience close to panic. MPA is defined as an anxiety disorder, specifically a social phobia, if the performer demonstrates significant impairment and otherwise meets the criteria for social phobia presented in DSM IV (APA, 1994).

The theoretical formulations of Wilson (2002), Hardy and Fazey (1988; cited Hardy & Parfitt, 1991) and Barlow (2000) are useful in understanding the etiology and phenomenology of the condition. Barlow’s model of anxiety may have heuristic value in understanding performance anxiety in general and music performance anxiety (MPA) in particular. This model proposes an integrated set of triple vulnerabilities that can account for the development of an anxiety or mood disorder: a generalized biological (heritable) vulnerability; a generalized psychological vulnerability based on early experiences in developing a sense of control over salient events, and a more specific psychological vulnerability whereby anxiety comes to be associated with certain environmental stimuli through learning processes such as respondent or vicarious conditioning. Barlow argues that genetic predisposition and sensitizing early life experiences may be sufficient to produce a generalized anxiety or mood (depression) disorder. However, the third set of vulnerabilities appears necessary to produce focal or specific anxiety disorders, such as a panic disorder or specific phobias. For example, social evaluation may be accompanied by heightened somatic sensations that become associated with a perceived increase in threat or danger. In the case of young performers who are high in trait anxiety (the expression of the generalized biological vulnerability), who come from home environments in which expectations for excellence are high but support for achieving excellence is low (generalized psychological vulnerability), exposure to early and frequent evaluations and self-evaluations of their performance in a competitive environment (specific psychological vulnerability) may be sufficient to trigger the physiological, behavioral, and cognitive responses characteristic of MPA. Anxiety may be triggered by conscious, rational concerns or by cues that trigger, unconsciously, earlier anxiety producing experiences or somatic sensations. Once triggered, the

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