

# TWO COMPLEMENTARY ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY VOCAL PEDAGOGY

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## Abstract

*Increasing competition among musicians on the contemporary scene means additional requirements in terms of preparing of versatile and competitive singers, i.e. students who have acquired stable and high-level technical skills and who cope with the competitive environment. Therefore the additional ability of the voice teacher emerges: that is to support the student emotionally in the lesson, and equip the student with knowledge to deal with performance anxiety.*

*Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven eminent voice teachers and interviews with an ad-hoc-designed questionnaire were conducted with the students of classical singing at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (14), at the Tallinn Georg Ots High School of Music (13), and with the singers of the Estonian National Opera choir (30). The five-point balanced Likert scale was used in the questionnaire. The collected data were subject to statistical analysis. Cluster analysis was applied to those correlations in the obtained data, which were statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).*

*Analysis of interviews and answers to the questionnaire demonstrated that besides to the training of technical skills, attention must be paid to the psychological training of classical singers. Results demonstrate that younger students tend to expect more care from their teachers than their older counterparts. Almost all of the respondents are willing to obtain more knowledge about how to learn to cope with stress. The voice teachers admitted that the majority of their students have problems with performance anxiety. Educational institutions which prepare music performers, including classical singers, have to ensure that their students achieve a high level of technical skills and that they have the necessary mental skills to deal with the performance situation.*

**Key words:** *performance anxiety, vocal pedagogy, voice production.*

## Introduction

Due to changes in society in recent years competition has become more intensive in many areas, including among professional musicians. In the developed conditions professional excellence has an important role, but in addition skill and ability to perform at a very good professional level

in stressful and unfavourable conditions is required. Beside professional proficiency also ability to cope with the competitive environment is needed to ensure entrance into the labour market.

Performance anxiety is to a lesser or greater degree familiar to every performer. For classical singers coping with performance anxiety becomes especially important, because the singers' instrument is located in themselves. Everything that influences a performer either externally or internally directly influences the quality of the singer's instrument. If psychological balance needed for performing is not achieved before the performance, the singer's instrument becomes either partially or entirely unusable and "playing" on it does not yield the desired result. In addition to the basic vocal techniques vocal pedagogues today have to provide their students with confidence to put their technical skills into practice. What use is a beautiful voice and years of work if performance anxiety reduces skills by half or even more? A singer's training takes years, because the necessary sensibility for the instrument evolves gradually and muscles only yield to the will of the singer in the course of time.

### *Problems of the research*

This study is aimed at studying attitudes of vocalists and their teachers towards the psychological conditions during the musical performance or preceding it. One of the most important factors contributing to the quality and success of a musical performance, besides the voice characteristics, musicality, and technical skills, is the so-called performance anxiety. The problems of the performance anxiety and other such, which are related to the singer's psychological comfort or well being during a performance, are usually systematically not dealt with during the course of the singer's educational program. This study tries to shed light, on the one hand, to expectations a student may possess towards her/his psychological preparation for a successful performance and, on the other hand, to the willingness and ability of vocal teachers to provide their students with such help.

The aim of the current work is to ascertain the following:

- Do students of classical singing receive sufficient psychological support from their teachers in the lessons and when preparing for performances?
- Do vocal pedagogues think that students need skills for coping with performance anxiety?

### **Vocal Pedagogy**

For students the relationship with their teacher plays an important role in their development as a singer. In the learning process not only students have to understand the teacher but the teacher also needs to recognise students' natural potential for becoming a good singer, the strengths and weaknesses of the students' singer's instrument, each concrete student's personality traits advantageous for learning singing and what kind of singer will each student turn out be in the future. Empathy has been considered especially important in singing teachers as, well as ability to bring out in students the best and most optimal sensibility for the instrument. Jones (2002) views the specific vocabulary used in teaching singing and finds that the topic is extremely important in vocal pedagogy since it has a direct impact on the desired result. Green (1987) also focuses on the positive and negative effect of teacher's words on student's performance. For example suggestion "don't be tense" does not teach students to relax but may increase the tension.

On the other hand it may become a problem that a student does not understand the metaphorical recommendations of the teacher or understands them but is not willing to apply what has been recommended. In their work Vurma and Ross (2002) have studied what vocal pedagogues mean when they ask their students to "place their voice forward" and "place their voice backward". All pedagogues claimed that forward and backward placement of the singing voice is important, but many of them had faced difficulties trying to explain students the exact meaning of these terms. Whatever expressions are used by the pedagogues, there is always a danger that students will not

understand them. The most suitable solution would be that the vocal pedagogue possesses knowledge about the acoustic principles of work of resonators and only after the objective basic truths have been acquired, it is agreed about the mutually unambiguous terminology that will be used in the future. Miller (1996) posits that metaphorical language should not be used with novice singers but with more advanced students who have acquired breathing and larynx control as well as resonator coordination, i.e. the technical side of singing. Vurma and Ross (2000) have studied vocal pedagogues and students of Estonian Academy of Music to find out what Estonian singing pedagogues pay most attention to in their work with students. The research results demonstrate that more attention is paid to work on carrying power of the tone and less to the quality of the tone. Miller (1997) claims that expectations for tone quality derive from national and aesthetic understanding of the beauty of a tone. For example, there is great difference between an Asian opera singer and a singer with classical Italian training. Since operas hire singers from different countries, the standards of tone quality will gradually converge.

## Performance Anxiety

In the conditions of today's fierce competition it is becoming increasingly more important how singers are able to realise themselves in unfavourable situations that may be caused, for example, by health reasons, fatigue or competitive environment. The outcome depends very much on the habitual behaviour of the singers in different situations and their adaptability and skills of coping with additional performance anxiety caused by stressful conditions. Performance anxiety is considerably widely spread among musicians (Steptoe & Filder, 1987; Kenny et al. 2004). Sternbach (1995) describes professional musicians' work as a profession which generates a "total stress quotient" that far exceeds the stress of other professions. It has been discovered that women are two to three times more susceptible to stress than men (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Lewinsohn, Gotlib, Lewinson, Seely, & Allen, 1998). The same trend in performance anxiety can be observed in musicians: the level of performance anxiety is noticeably higher in female musicians than in male musicians (Huston, 2001; Osborne & Franklin, 2002; Sinden, 1999). The research relied on Barlow's anxiety model (Barlow, 2000; Kenny et al. 2004), which suggests three interrelated causes for vulnerability: 1. A generalised biological (genetically inherited) vulnerability. 2. A generalised psychological vulnerability based on some earlier experience of coping with stressful situations. 3. A specific vulnerability related to the process of learning, a response to indirect environmental influence. Barlow asserts that genetic disposition and earlier life experience may constitute a sufficient cause for general anxiety and mood swings. The third source of anxiety is primarily related to self-esteem and unfavourable and competitive environment.

Young musicians who are used to the supportive attitude of their listeners, may experience deep performance anxiety when they have to perform in a new environment that does not offer psychological support. In these cases attention and concentration fall, which has a negative effect on the quality of the performance. Salmon, & Meyer (1992) have addressed stress and performance anxiety and revealed that even experienced performers are anxious before performance independent of whether they have experienced failure or not. However, experienced performers have a different attitude towards performance anxiety than novice performers. Namely, experienced performers accept anxiety before a performance and feelings and physical changes related to it and therefore keep their composure, do not panic and always maintain certain professional standard.

Performance anxiety has been described as the occurrence of physiological, psychological, cognitive and behavioural symptoms and also their combinations. The most frequent physiological symptoms include: increased heart rate, dry mouth, sweating, shortness of breath, indigestion, nausea, diarrhoea, trembling, dizziness and flushing (Ely, 1991; Salmon, 1991; Wesner, Noyes, & Davis, 1990; Hallam, 2008). In relation with performance anxiety situational anxiety has been most frequently mentioned (Humara, 1999; King, Mietz, Tinney, & Ollendick, 1995; Little, 1999). Achie-

ving outstanding skills requires years of perfection-focused training, solitary practice and continuous self-improvement from a performer. High level of anxiety may also be caused by low self-esteem (Borozdina and Zaluchenova, 1993).

Several theories have been worked out and used to describe performance anxiety. The best known of those is the Yerkes-Dodson law, which is represented by an inverted U-shaped curve and defines the optimal proportion between emotional arousal and good performance. Emotional arousal that is too low or exceeds a certain optimal limit has a negative effect on the quality of performance. It is also noted that performance anxiety is considerably increased by insufficient preparation or too complicated task. As the solution, it is suggested to get to know one's own behaviour in certain situations, get familiar with the best personal emotional state for performing and how to ensure the optimal state when needed.

## Methodology of Research

The data for the present study have been collected in two different forms. For a large group of high-school and academy students as well as for the opera choir performers, we had to use a standardised questionnaire. For a smaller group of vocal teachers, we used semi-structured interviews in order to get a more panoramic picture about their long experience of educating their apprentices.

The interviews were conducted with seven recognised Estonian vocal pedagogues. The duration of each interview was approximately two hours. All interviewees were professional classical singers and vocal pedagogues in state music education institutions. The majority of them had 30 years or more teaching experience.

The written structured questionnaire for the students consisted of closed questions with rating scales and contained 88 statements. The statements fell into five categories: 1. Recognition, 14 statements, 2. Consideration, 17 statements, 3. Expectations for the teacher, 15 statements, 4. The lesson, 23 statements, 5. The performance, 19 statements.

Questionnaire respondents' sample consisted of professional singers of the opera choir of Estonia National Opera (30), students of classical singing of Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (14), students of classical singing of Georg Ots Tallinn Music School (13).

The questionnaire was rated on a 5-point balanced Likert scale, which has an equal number of positive and negative categories. The data received was processed with the data-processing programme "Statistica 5.1". All decisions about the differences between the means were made at the significance level of  $p < 0.05$ . In order to divide indices that correlate into clusters, Ward's method was used for cluster analysis of all parts of the questionnaire.

## Results of Research

### *Semi-structured interviews with vocal pedagogues*

The analysis of the interviews revealed that all interviewees considered psychological balance before performing an important factor of coping with performance anxiety.

All interviewees had a firmly established daily routine, which they followed especially strictly on the days of performance. All vocalists emphasised that before a performance they need 1. very good rest, 2. time at home before noon, 3. meals on time, 4. breathing exercises and an established set of vocal exercises, 5. to avoid the use of voice for speaking, 6. to avoid rehearsing the programme of the concert or the role with voice before the performance.

For example, it was said: "I definitely avoid conversations or speaking on the day of performance", "I speak as little as possible", "I revise my role only by following the music with eyes, I don't use my voice".

All interviewees wished to spend the time before the performance in silence and with their own thoughts. For the majority of them the preparation for the performance in the evening already began in the morning. All interviewees emphasised the importance of the prior preparatory work for avoiding stress and achieving better feeling on the stage. If the time of preparation had been insufficient, it definitely increased the level of performance anxiety.

All vocal pedagogues stressed the usefulness of breathing exercises in reducing tension before the performance. The majority of them did breathing exercises every day and longer on the day of performance. All seven interviewees noted that when the voice is not in order because of tiredness or a cold, breathing exercises help to alleviate the situation. They all also mentioned the immediate calming effect of breathing exercises on the nervous system.

The most frequent breathing exercise was rhythmic inhaling, holding breath and exhaling. For fast relaxation two to three deep inhalations and exhalations or two or three deep sighs were used.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of rest after a responsible performance and said that they never commence the learning of a new role or song immediately after the performance. As good stress relief, activities in the open air (gardening, fishing, walking) were pointed out.

For example: *“I definitely have a rest after the performance. Stress relief is useful and then you can carry on again,”* or *“After a responsible performance, if possible, I do some gardening”*.

All interviewees underlined that classical singing is very tightly connected with emotions. A good feeling before the performance is ensured by good professional preparation, good physical shape, established daily routine and satisfaction with personal life.

All interviewees were involved with a sport that helped them to maintain a better physical form. They pointed out the great importance of a healthy lifestyle and its direct effect on voice quality.

Interviewees considered most difficult the need of a classical singer to be in good shape every day throughout the season.

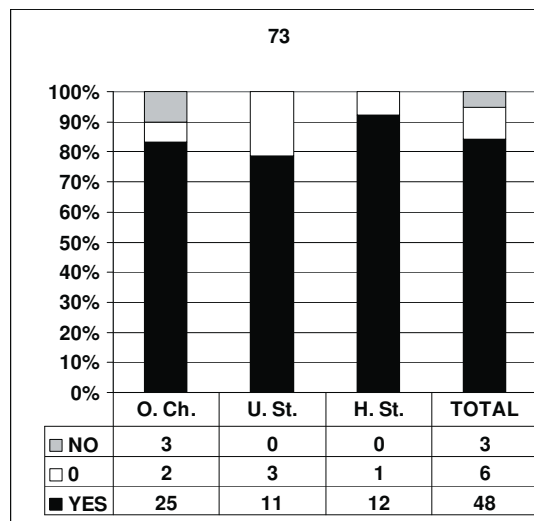
All vocal pedagogues confirmed that all their students have experienced performance anxiety to a greater or lesser degree. All pedagogues introduced breathing exercises to their students immediately at the beginning of their singing studies, but did not maintain continuous and regular use of them further on.

All vocalists-teachers claimed that the profession of a classical singer requires high stress tolerance.

#### *The written structured questionnaire for the students*

The mean of the rating of the statement “The profession of a classical singer requires high stress tolerance” was very high ( $\bar{x} = 4.79$ ), which is related to the need for an optimal psychological state both during the studies and in a wider context of the profession.

The majority of the students replied that they are always nervous before performances. The highest percentage of anxiety was displayed by the students of the Music School 92%, followed by the singers of the opera choir 83% and a little less anxious were students of the Academy 79% (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Responses to the statement "I am always nervous before a performance" (O. Ch. – singers of the opera choir, U. St. – students of the Academy, H. St. – students of the Music School). Reflects students' anxiety before performances.**

The lowest mean rating was received by the statement "My teacher speaks too much about her/himself in the lessons and valuable lesson time gets wasted" ( $\bar{x} = 1.72$ ), which on the whole is a positive result, since it shows that Estonian vocal pedagogues do not use lesson time to distract students with self-presentation.

A low mean rating was given to the statement "I like it when the teacher does completely new vocal exercises before a performance" ( $\bar{x} = 1.81$ ), which indicates that for the peaceful and positive progress of singing studies it is necessary to establish and maintain a routine, especially before performances, in which the opportunity of receiving a negative assurance should be prevented.

In the category of *Recognition* students considered important that the teacher would sufficiently recognise the student ( $\bar{x} = 4.32$ ) and instil more self-confidence ( $\bar{x} = 4.04$ ). All students ( $\bar{x} = 3.27$ ) were significantly more disturbed than professional choir singers ( $\bar{x} = 2.37$ ) by the teacher demonstrating with her/his voice how poorly they had been singing. The part of the questionnaire dealing with recognition revealed that teachers should give more positive feedback to students and in spite of the occurring errors they should always clearly outline the successes.

In the category of *Consideration* a cluster analysis of characteristics describing teachers' consideration was carried out, as the result of which four clusters formed. By using the values of individual entities converged into clusters sum characteristics were calculated. The characteristics of individual values were added up and divided by the number of cluster characteristics.

The first group of characteristics ( $\bar{x} = 3.83$ ) includes pedagogical attitude towards students as future professionals (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.76$ ) and reflects teacher's interest in the development of the student as a young musician. The second subcategory views teacher as a mentor ( $\bar{x} = 4.08$ ) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.82$ ) and observes teacher in the role of a supervisor. The third subcategory views teacher as an authority ( $\bar{x} = 4.18$ ) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.81$ ) and clusters statements that describe trust in teacher's decisions. The fourth subcategory deals with the relationship of the teacher-student in the "Own child" style ( $\bar{x} = 2.75$ ) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.59$ ). In this subcategory all groups gave relatively low ratings. Students most expected from the teacher support and faith in students ( $\bar{x} = 4.33$ ) and least wished teacher to take interest in the details of their personal life ( $\bar{x} = 2.18$ ). Consideration was viewed as positive when it was related to studies and professional preparation.

In the category of *Expectations for the teacher* students most expected the teacher to be open to new ideas and opportunities ( $\bar{x} = 4.40$ ) and tell them more about the options and skills of psychologically preparing themselves before singing ( $\bar{x} = 4.33$ ). The influence of the feeling of well-being

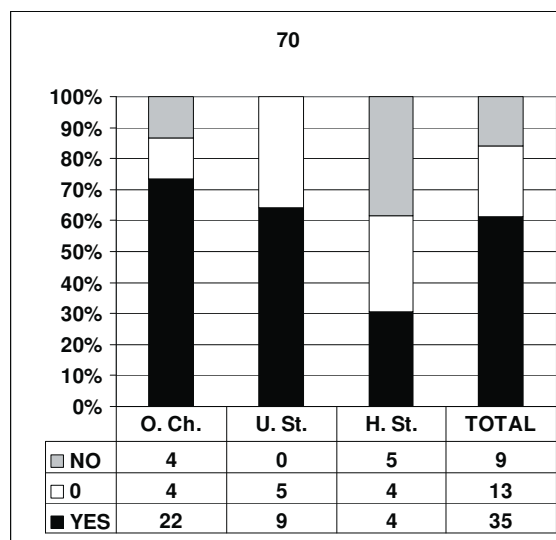
is extremely important for classical singers. Since singers’ “instrument” is located in themselves, it becomes defining for the tone quality or end result whether the psychological balance before the performance supports and amplifies technical skills or not. Cluster analysis revealed three subcategories.

The first is characterised by the pressure exerted by the teacher ( $\bar{x} = 3.27$ ) (Cronbach’s 0.64), teacher’s dissatisfaction and excessive emotionality. The second subcategory characterises the competence of the coach (accompanist) ( $\bar{x} = 4.55$ ) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.63$ ). The common denominator of the third subcategory is the support provided by the teacher in the learning process ( $\bar{x} = 4.10$ ) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.75$ ), which includes psychological preparation. There were no significant differences in the responses of the groups by subcategories. However, differences in individual statements occurred.

Maintaining a distance between the teacher and the student received higher ratings from the working singers ( $\bar{x} = 4.07$ ) than students ( $\bar{x} = 3.33$ ) and women ( $\bar{x} = 3.95$ ) wished to maintain a distance with the teacher more than men ( $\bar{x} = 3.18$ ). Professionals ( $\bar{x} = 4.37$ ) appreciated more than students ( $\bar{x} = 3.85$ ) a teacher who encourages students to take risks and focus on challenges.

As the result of the cluster analysis of the characteristics describing *The lesson*, three subcategories formed. The first group of characteristics describes the effect of cooperation on the lesson ( $\bar{x} = 4.66$ ) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.66$ ). In the second group of characteristics ( $\bar{x} = 2.95$ ) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.51$ ) the influence of the teacher’s mood on students is dealt with. The third cluster describing teaching process includes 10 characteristics ( $\bar{x} = 3.86$ ) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.83$ ) and views the teacher as the shaper of the lesson and creator of the mood.

Students of the Academy ( $\bar{x} = 3.86$ ) more than Music School students ( $\bar{x} = 2.77$ ) thought that their pedagogues can create a suitable mood in them. The received results reveal that teachers should be more active in creating a suitable motivating and positive mood, especially in the work with younger students. Most satisfied with their teacher’s skills to create suitable mood in them were singers of the opera choir 73% and students of the Academy 64%. The youngest or students of the Music School were least satisfied with their teachers in this respect, only 31% (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Responses to the statement “The teacher is able to psychologically prepare me so that I can give my maximum when performing” (O. Ch. – singers of the opera choir, U. St. – students of the Academy, H. St. – students of the Music School). Reflects psychological support provided by the teacher.**

As the result of the cluster analysis of the characteristics describing preparation for *The performance*, four clusters formed and three statements remained separate. The first group of

characteristics deals with psychological support provided by the teacher ( $\bar{x} = 3.25$ ) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.76$ ) and describes teacher as the one who psychologically tunes the student before the performance. The second group of characteristics describes students' stressors ( $\bar{x} = 2.42$ ) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.56$ ) and covers situations causing tension in students before the performance. The third group of characteristics describes the feeling of security before the performance ( $\bar{x} = 3.92$ ) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.49$ ) and views the circumstances that have a positive or negative effect on pre-performance anxiety. The fourth group of characteristics deals with students' worrying before a performance ( $\bar{x} = 3.90$ ) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.67$ ) and includes problems causing hesitation in students before the performance. Differences in rating the statements were distinct from the differences between groups, where the working singers ( $\bar{x} = 3.51$ ) rated the psychological support provided by the teacher higher than students ( $\bar{x} = 2.95$ ). The need for and importance of the support provided by the teacher was rated higher by men ( $\bar{x} = 3.82$ ) than by women ( $\bar{x} = 3.00$ ).

It became evident in this category that students of all groups wished the teacher to do the same vocal exercises before the performance as usual ( $\bar{x} = 4.47$ ), which would ensure a routine and give security for performing.

The highest rating among individual statements was given to the statement that the profession of a classical singer requires high stress tolerance ( $\bar{x} = 4.79$ ). This reveals the view of students that in vocalists necessary psychological preparation is the primary precondition for positive realisation of technical competence.

## Discussion

The research results showed that in addition to developing vocal technical skills in the process of vocal training both vocal pedagogues and students considered very important the giving of knowledge and skills of coping with performance anxiety. All vocal pedagogues stated that their students had to a greater or lesser degree experienced the destructive effect of performance anxiety. That statement was also consistent with the study involving students, where the majority of students of the three groups claimed that they were always nervous before performing, but this assertion was most confirmed by the students of the Music School. Bunch (1997) has observed the same tendency that novice singers especially often lose coordinated activity in musculature, body posture, breathing, articulation, application of resonators – principally in the perception of the dynamic activity of the whole body as a unity. According to Lehmann (2007), performance anxiety usually manifests in negative changes in mental and physical sense of self before the performance.

All vocal pedagogues participating in the study were professional singers and also asserted the occurrence of performance anxiety before performances. They all confirmed that certain routine helps to better concentrate before the performance. Nevertheless, little if any attention was paid in vocal lessons to developing students' pre-performance routine. Thus it can be noted that teachers have noticed problems related to performance anxiety in their students but have not dealt with them systematically and simultaneously with the development of vocal technical skills.

All vocal pedagogues stressed the benefits of breathing exercises in singers' daily professional life, but the practicality of these exercises before performances was especially emphasised. Many vocalists-teachers admitted doing breathing exercises regularly every day but introducing breathing exercises to students at random, so there was no systematic work in this area. Williamon (2008) stresses in his works that mental skills of reducing performance anxiety should be taught and developed similarly to musical skills, i.e. they also have to be practised regularly. The study of students revealed that 87% of opera choir singers, 78% of the students of Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and 87% of the students of Georg Ots Music School were interested in the teacher telling them more about the skills allowing them to psychologically tune themselves before performances. That indicates that students are aware of psychological readiness and the need to learn respective skills.



Students of the Music School rated lower than singers of the opera choir and students of the Academy their teachers' skills to create a suitable mood in the lessons. All groups admitted that their teachers did not praise them sufficiently and students of the Music School expected recognition from their teachers even if a positive change had been minimal, while professional singers did not consider a small positive change as important. Consequently, novice singers should be recognised more often and given positive feedback even on smaller successes in order to reinforce students' belief in their skills.

Students considered important that teachers noticed their progress in comparison with their earlier achievements not with those of their fellow students or professional singers. Students of the Academy realised most and students of the Music school least when they had done well vocally. That once again refers to the need to give positive feedback to novice singers, who are less confident about their singing.

Respondents of all groups wanted that before performance their teacher would do the same vocal exercises with them they were used to in their lessons. Especially negative about using new exercises were students of the Academy, which confirms the need for a certain routine in vocal pedagogy. To ensure successful performance, Hallam (2008) recommends musicians to learn to accept symptoms unavoidably connected with performance anxiety and focus their attention and energy only on things related to the performance. The greatest willingness and readiness to perform was displayed by students of the Academy and the smallest by students of the Music School. Hereby it should be considered how to make the performance situation more pleasant for Music School students. One possibility would be to pay more attention to the interpretation of the piece in spite of technical skills that require more training and development. It should be noted that the requirement of perfectionism should not be overdone with novices, because it tends to overshadow the pleasure of performing. In his article on performance anxiety Barlow (2000) claims that one of the components contributing to anxiety is related to self-esteem and unfavourable and competitive environment and points out that this especially affects young musicians, for whom supportive attitude and promoting their performance confidence is extremely important.

## Conclusion

The research results revealed that students of classical singing wanted their teachers to give them more knowledge and skills of pre-performance psychological preparation. All vocal pedagogues emphasised that professional singers have to be able to manage, control and direct themselves despite internal or external unfavourable factors. They all had established a daily routine they followed. They did physical exercises improving their stamina. They all claimed that classical singing is tightly connected with emotions. All pedagogues contended that the majority of their students had performance anxiety problems. In spite of that they did not cover in their lessons the topics ensuring pre-performance well-being. As a by-product it became evident that younger students and students with less singing experience needed greater psychological support from the teacher.

In vocal pedagogy, beside developing vocal technical side, more emphasis should be put on knowledge and skills that help students to adjust to the pre-performance situation. Exercises and techniques facilitating and ensuring good performance should be given to students simultaneously with the development of technical skills. Knowledge about developing pre-performance preparedness may be vital in the training of singers, given that the profession of a classical singer today requires readiness for performing in a very tight, worldwide competition.

Undoubtedly, exercises and techniques facilitating pre-performance well-being are also useful for other fields involving interpretation as well as for students whose future profession requires public performing.

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