

The Empowered Singer: Singing Your Best When It Matters Most

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Music, and song specifically, can move us like nothing else. The power of song is undeniable. If words alone could express what we wanted and needed to express, we would merely say them. But no, combining the words with music is what enables us to express more accurately what is deep within us, what we desire to share with others—the ineffable nature of being human. If this sounds heavy, it is. Musicians go through a rigorous preparatory and training process to become performers. They learn the skills necessary to sing with ease and expressivity. This process is fraught with ups and downs of a musical sort and much attention is paid to learning and refining technique, diction, style, and performance practice. In contrast, very little attention is paid to dealing with the ups and downs of the mental sort—the psychological aspects of musical performance.

In this paper, I will address the psychological aspects that often stand in the way of performers' abilities to sing their best when it matters most and will discuss effective ways to cope with these aspects. Mental challenges that performers face often fuel performance anxiety and include worrying too much about what others think, experiencing fears that adversely affect performance, doubting themselves and their skills, over-analyzing in an attempt to perform perfectly, and lacking trust in learned skills.

Singers can learn to cope effectively with these challenges by cultivating and practicing specific mental skills that will greatly improve their ability to sing as well or better than they practice, increase or reclaim the joy in their performing, and empower them to perform 'in the moment' to experience and communicate the expressive elements through song and singing.

Background

As a young, passionate, and motivated teacher, I thought that if I armed my students with the requisite vocal and musical skills, they would be fit and ready to perform their best. Through the past 25 years I have learned from my students that being the best singer they can be is only the beginning of the journey that we call *performance*. My students have taught me that they need to possess strong mental as well as musical skills and habits. My students have also taught me that they walk into the studio not only with certain musical skills and habits in place, but with many mental and motivational habits already in place as well. Research shows that these habits are formed at an early age (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Let us consider a simple piece of blank paper. Imagine for a moment that this piece of paper is your brain. You write on it. You read from it. Now, fold the piece of paper in half: over time the information one learns to pay attention to, like the thoughts one has and the feedback one receives—becomes patterns and these patterns become *habits*—much like the crease you just made in your piece of paper.

These habits—our thinking patterns and our motivational tendencies—become very strong folds or creases in our brains. When we try to change or when we realize we need to make a change, we open up our brains—much like opening up our piece of paper. Why don't you try it? Once opened, drop the paper to the floor. What happens? The paper will usually land on the floor, folded in half along the crease. This is how it is with our brains. It can be difficult to make

new creases or change our ways of thinking because our minds naturally go back to habitual thinking (Zull, 2002).

Let us see what this process looks like (see Figure 1):

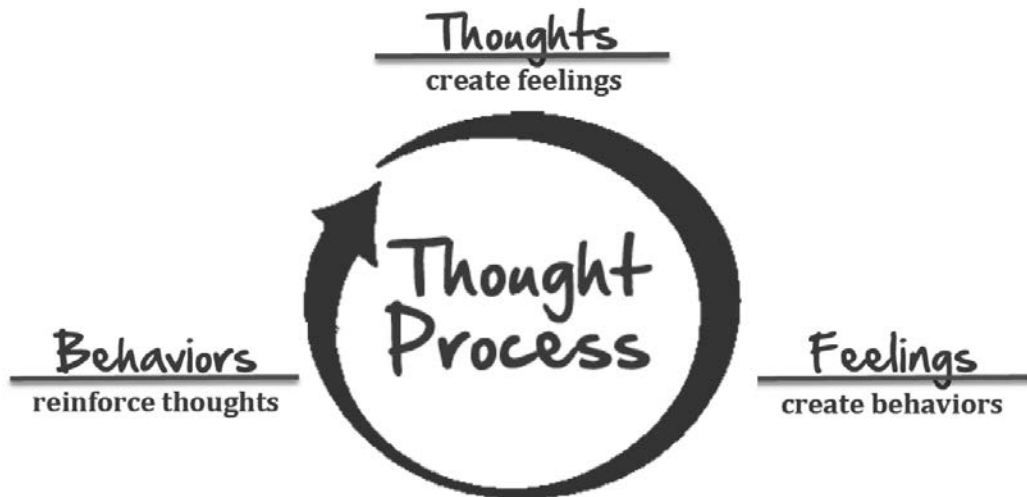


Figure 1. The Thought-Feelings-Behavior Cycle

This cyclical process feeds and reinforces itself—for us and sometimes against us. The good news is that research and experience shows that habits can change (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003). Over time and through effort, we can change our habits—our mindsets—if we are not happy with them or they do not serve us well. We just make a new crease—oh, that it were that easy.

The thoughts that go through singers' minds will not only influence their subsequent feelings and behaviors, these thoughts reveal a great deal about their attitude or mindset about themselves and their performing. When I work with performers who are preparing for a major performance, competition, or audition, or who are unsatisfied with a recent performance, they often ask:

- Why do auditions feel different than other performances?
- Why can't I perform as well as I practice?
- How can I be more calm and confident when I sing?
- How can I stay out of my head and focus better on my performing?
- What can I do?
- What CAN we do?

In answer to these questions, performers often conclude:

- *I need to work harder*—which could be true. Nothing beats GREAT preparation—but some issues that performers face cannot be solved by practicing more or preparing better musically.
- *Everybody deals with performance anxiety*—yes, many performers deal with varying levels of anxiety and they deal with their anxiety in a variety of ways as well—some helpful, some hurtful.
- *I'm just too hard on myself*—which is very likely.

- *Maybe I'm not cut out for performing.* Even though this may be true—and unfortunately, this *will* be true for some performers—how does this thought improve performing? It would be unfortunate to make this conclusion when it is really more or different effort that is needed.

Many performers have thought one or more of the above reasons to explain why they may underperform or why performing may make them feel too anxious to perform well.

What Performers Report

Here is what the students themselves report about their experiences and why some of them struggle and others do not. In 2010, sport psychology expert, Dr. Patrick Cohn, and I created a survey, *Mental Skills Necessary for Performing at Peak Levels* (Cohn & Allan, 2011). Since that time, nearly 400 musicians have completed the survey. When developing it, we wanted to gain greater insight into the challenges that students, aspiring professionals, and teachers perceive to be standing in the way of their ability or their students' ability to perform at peak levels. Questions we asked concerning the mental skills necessary for performing at peak levels included:

- How do musicians rate their ability to perform well under pressure?
- How familiar are musicians with the mental skills necessary to perform at peak levels?
- What are the top mental strategies musicians perceive necessary to successfully meet these challenges?
- What are the top perceived mental challenges performers face?
- What do musicians report is the most important mental strategy they need help with today?

Data analysis revealed the top five mental challenges that these performers face are:

1. Worrying or caring too much what others think. (45. 1%)
2. Anxiety or fear that adversely affects performance. (43. 1%)
3. Lack of confidence or presence of self-doubt. (37. 9%)
4. Lack of trust in learned skills. (36. 6%)
5. Perfectionism or obsession with technical details. (34. 6%)

When reading the above list of mental challenges, there are no surprises. These data only confirm what we have been experiencing as performers or seeing in our studios all along. Identifying students' issues, can give teachers a better understanding and can inform teachers' work with students to help them embrace, cope with, and overcome their barriers to excellent and enjoyable performances or help performers to avoid developing ineffective habits and patterns in the first place.

It is very important for musicians to be proactive in their approach to preparing mentally as well as musically. It is important to note that each performer is unique with his or her own individual combination of strengths and challenges. Generally, though, there is an accepted mental skill set that performers will want to possess in order to perform their best (Lesyk, 1998).

Specific Mental Skills

According to clinical and sport psychologist, Jack J. Lesyk, there are nine, specific mental skills that contribute to success in sport and I think you will find that they fit very nicely with singing performers who after all, are small muscle athletes (Lesyk, 1998). I developed a three-level hierarchy of 11 mental skills based on Lesyk's work.

Level I Skills

The first group of mental skills, Level I Skills, can be considered basic skills that constitute a broad base of skills, habits, and behaviors that aid the performer in setting and attaining long-term goals, learning, and sustaining daily practice. Level I Skills include 1) attitude, 2) motivation, 3) goal setting, and 4) commitment. These skills are actually life skills or habits that students have already learned or developed before entering the studio. Although many performers have already acquired Level I Skills to varying degrees, they may not have developed these skills in ways that help them prepare and perform well. For many performers, Level I Skills and habits need to be improved, changed, and/or cultivated anew in order to help rather than hinder them.

Attitude. Successful performers realize that attitude is a choice. They choose to believe strongly in themselves and their abilities in order to strive to improve. They view music and performing as an opportunity to compete—not with others, but with themselves. They choose to learn from both their successes and their failures. They have learned to pursue excellence, rather than perfection. Mentally tough performers respect their own performing, other performers, their teachers, and themselves. They recognize the distinction between the need to *be good* and the desire to *get better* (Halvorson, 2012). More discussion of attitude, or mindset, will follow.

Motivation. Successful performers enjoy the attention that an enjoyable performance garners. However, they are primarily motivated by personal love and joy of participating in and improving their performances rather than by the attention they receive or the specific outcome of their participation. These performers use their strong sense of intrinsic motivation to persist through difficult tasks and difficult times, even when rewards and benefits of their participation are not immediately forthcoming.

Goal setting. Setting long-term and short-term goals that are specific and realistic is habitual behavior for most mentally strong performers. They routinely track their current performance level and develop specific detailed plans and goals for improving and growing.

Commitment. Committed performers set specific and regular practice sessions. They practice their technical skills, mental skills, and performing skills regularly and often. They recognize that commitment means being willing to sacrifice and do whatever it takes to reach goals and continue to improve. Mentally tough performers don't just want 'it' the most—excellence or to perform well—they want it the 'most often'.

Level II Skills

The Level II Skills, including 1) focus, 2) self-talk, 3) mental imagery, and 4) emotional control, constitute the performers' psychological habits and skills that aid in their preparation and

practice prior to performing under some kind of pressure. Many performers may not even be aware that they need or even use some of these skills. For this reason performers need to focus on and cultivate these skills in order to perform well or perform better under pressure.

Focus. Most successful performers identify what they need to focus on or pay attention to during each practice, rehearsal, or performance. This includes identifying what is likely to distract them as well. Identifying what is likely to pull their focus enables these performers to devise effective ways to resist distractions, whether they come from without or from within. Performers need to practice their ability to shift their focus back quickly, when distracted and learn how to perform in the ‘here and now’, without regard to either past or anticipated future events.

Self-Talk. Successful performers often maintain self-confidence when under pressure or during difficult times with realistic and positive self-talk. They have learned to talk to themselves the way they talk to their own best friend—with honesty and encouragement. Performers who use self-talk to regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors prior, during, and after competition or performance find themselves more calm and able to perform more easily under pressure (Emmons & Thomas, 1998). “Do not empower your negative thoughts by giving them ‘legs’ so they can run around your mind, creating worries, frustrations, and anxiety in your life” (Costa, 2009, p. 58).

Mental imagery. Mentally strong performers prepare for competition and performance by visualizing preparing and performing well. They accept that mental imagery is an incredible preparation tool for and they incorporate it into their practice routine. Mental imagery involves vividly creating and using mental images of the performer’s preparatory process and performance—visually, aurally, and kinesthetically—that are detailed, specific, and realistic. Performers can use imagery to prepare for performance as well as to recover from errors and unsatisfying performances.

Emotional control. Performance, by its very nature, is a highly-charged experience. Mentally strong performers accept strong emotions such as excitement, anxiety, and disappointment as a normal part of musical performance. They learn to use these emotions to improve their skills and to motivate themselves, rather than letting their emotions interfere with their high level practice or performance. It is vital for performers to recognize and accept that some degree of anxiety, arousal, or excitement can actually help them perform well. Learning how to reduce anxiety when it becomes too strong or interferes with performance, without losing the intensity necessary to perform their best, is an incredible asset.

Level III Skills

Three key psychological performing skills that are necessary to become a mentally strong performer constitute the **Level III Skills**: 1) trust, 2) acceptance, and 3) courage (Moore, 2010). Many performers will need to cultivate and develop these skills to perform at high levels. This may involve changing some long-standing habits or thought patterns—making a new crease.

Trust. Most successful performers know that they need to rely on their preparation and practice. They have learned that nothing can replace effective preparation. However, a lack of

trust in learned skills creates doubt, fear, and the inability to maintain confidence under pressure. Trusting themselves and their preparation enables mentally tough performers to shut off their analyzing and evaluating inner voice to allow them to instinctually react to the expressive elements in the music rather than continue in the practice mindset. In order to trust, performers let go of the practice desire to consciously control needing to be correct (Moore, 2010).

Acceptance. When performers trust themselves, their abilities, and their skills, they can start accepting themselves and their performances. Accepting their performances without judging them in terms of ‘good or bad’ or ‘right or wrong’ is critical to performing well and enjoying the process and the product more. Mentally tough performers reserve evaluating- and judging-type thinking for practice, not performance. Mentally strong performers recognize that a lack of acceptance in performance will often result in excessive thinking and analyzing that inhibits their ability to trust themselves and their abilities and practice and ultimately, inhibits the pleasure of performing (Moore, 2010).

Courage. Finally, it takes courage for performers to truly trust and accept themselves, their preparation, and their performances under pressure. For performers, having courage means actively directing their will to overcome self-doubt and fear. Having courage takes planning and enables performers to prepare for adversity—distraction, lack of focus, anxiety—and decide ahead of time how they will deal with these challenges. Having courage also means letting go of the need to control every movement or action in their performing (Moore, 2010).

It is important to note that successful performers may not possess all of these skills or may possess them in varying degrees. Our students need to understand that successful performers are not immune to doubt and fear, but have learned to use these emotions, re-interpret, or embrace them, and to perform in spite of them. Although all the skills are valuable to our students in order to become more mentally strong performers, the one that is a foundation on which the others can more easily be built, is attitude.

Attitude or Mindset

Performers’ performing attitudes, or mindsets, are the set of beliefs they have about their singing and their ability to perform. Their mindset can be compared to a lens—a lens through which they view their world—their performing. It is the way they determine:

- what to pay attention to,
- how to interpret and draw meaning from their experiences,
- how to feel,
- how to cope or which strategies to choose in order to cope,
- what they consider motivating, helpful, or effective, and
- what kinds of goals they choose to pursue (Halvorson, 2012).

Mindsets frame the thoughts our students have about their performing. According to Dweck (2006), one type of mindset creates a view that is focused on judging. “This means I’m a loser.” “This means I’m a better musician than they are.” “This means I’m a bad student.” A second type of mindset is not focused on judging, but is attuned to information that helps the student learn and take constructive action. It may seek answers to questions such as, “What can I learn from this?” “How can I improve?” “How can I help myself become better?”

These two mindsets motivate our students in completely different ways. A student with the former mindset is motivated by the need to *be good*. A student with the *be good* mindset often views goals, lessons, and performing as opportunities to receive validation or proof of their ability, likability, or worth (Halvorson, 2012). They may say or think things like:

“Winning will prove I’m talented.”

“Performing well will mean I have what it takes.”

“I have to impress the audience or I might as well go home.”

The *be good* mindset really speaks to the top five challenges that musicians face. The information that students with the *be good* mindset pay attention to is:

- information about how they compare to others, which
- can produce high levels of anxiety and
- cause them to doubt themselves and their abilities, which
- causes their confidence to drop, which
- feeds their desire to try harder and over-analyze every move they make, which
- shows that they have lost trust in their preparation and their skills.

If you suspect that you have students who perform primarily out of this mindset, they will likely face a great deal of doubt, fear, and struggle. Wanting to prove themselves and maintain their image is a full-time job, but can be very motivating. Research has found that wanting to prove themselves is only motivating, however, if the tasks are always easy, before any feedback is given, and when feedback is given, if it is always positive (Halvorson, 2012). Since these conditions are not likely to occur very frequently, when students continually pay attention to comparing themselves to others or working to impress you or others, they either feel really good because they compare well or have pleased you or they feel really bad because they do not think they measure up. It can really be that black and white for those in the *be good* mindset.

With the other mindset, characterized by Halvorson (2012) as the *get better* mindset, students see most everything—goals, performing, mistakes, setbacks—as opportunities to develop their abilities and master new skills. These students may think or say things like:

“I want to enter this competition to test my skills under pressure.”

“Performing well will be gratifying and will help me determine what else I need to do to improve.”

“My lesson was rough today, but I learned so much from all my mistakes.”

These students pay attention to information they can use to improve. This allows them to feel good most of the time because they view most situations as opportunities to grow. If we take another look at our students’ top mental challenges through this lens we see that students with the *get better* mindset:

- focus on their own performance and what they can do to stay in the moment and perform as they have planned,
- embrace anxiety or fear they feel prior to performance and view it as excitement,
- usually maintain high confidence and shoot down doubts that may surface from time to time,
- strive for excellence and improvement, and
- trust and rely on their preparation.

The importance of mindset can be concisely summarized by remembering that in the *be good* mindset our students are focused on *proving* themselves and those in the *get better* mindset are focused on *improving* themselves and their performing. Adopting a *get better* mindset can effectively address the top five challenges and will foster the growth of the other mental skills as well.

According to Dweck (2006), students with the *be good* mindset, or as she calls it—the *fixed* mindset, are led by the desire to look talented and have a tendency to avoid challenges, give up too easily, see effort as fruitless or as failure, ignore useful negative feedback, and are threatened by others’ success. On the other hand, students with the *get better* or *growth* mindset are driven by the desire to learn and improve. They have a tendency to embrace challenge, persist in the face of setbacks, view effort as the path to mastery, learn from criticism, and are inspired by others’ success.

Bestselling author of *Tipping Point* (2000), *Blink* (2007), and *Outliers* (2011), Malcolm Gladwell, made a great point in an invited presentation he gave for the American Psychological Association Convention held in Chicago in 2002. He stated that many of us—especially Americans—value effortless achievement over achievement through effort (as cited in Dweck, 2006, p. 41). Being lucky, winning the lottery, and thinking our lives are ruled by destiny are highly prized by our society. *Be good* mindset performers can easily fall into this type of thinking as well. When they do, they often believe that if they cannot easily accomplish what is asked of them—when a task requires a great deal of effort or time—it may mean that they are not talented enough to accomplish a specific task or they conclude that they might *never* be able to succeed in general (Halvorson, 2012). These performers end up viewing success as a straight-line approach rather than the possible rocky road that success can follow (see Figure 2).

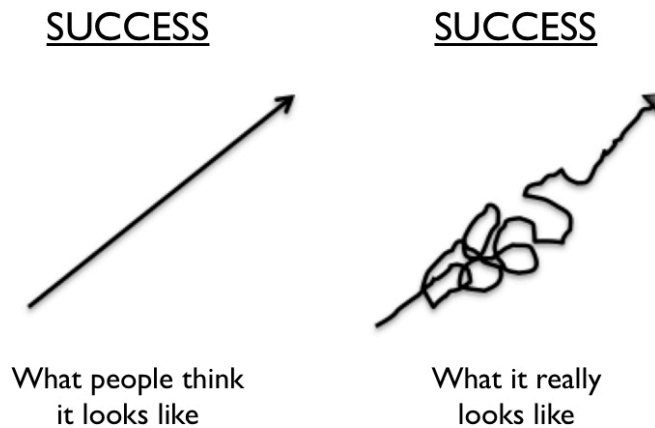


Figure 2. What success looks like

Retrain Your Brain

If this discussion of mental skills and mindset resonates with you, you can begin doing something about it today. You can start to retrain your brain or make a new crease in your brain and encourage your students to retrain their brains as well.

The first step to take in order to shift your mindset is to identify *why* you believe you perform the way you do. What performers attribute their successes or failures to is extremely important to how they think about themselves as performers. Do you explain success or failure to action or strategies or do you think that your performance just ‘happens’ to you? There is a big difference (Halvorson, 2012).

Step 1

Determine whether you are attributing your successes to or blaming your setbacks on forces outside yourself, like luck, or explanations that sound like: “I’m just talented.” “I’m not talented enough.” “I never win.” “I’m just not good at auditioning.” “Competitions are NOT my thing.” “I always get unfair judges.” These types of explanations will make performers feel powerless, frustrated, and disappointed most of the time (Halvorson, 2012). Many performers actually do identify uncontrollable causes for their successes or setbacks. When they do, they need to challenge these reasons or explanations and ask: Is there something within my control that would make a difference?

Step 2

Suggest controllable alternatives. Could the outcome of a disappointing performance be that you didn’t put in enough effort or

- if you did put in the effort, then do you need a different strategy? or
- do you need a better plan? or
- do you need to seek the help of an expert, teacher, or coach?

Step 3

Remember, that the plans of action that you make based on controllable explanations will involve:

- focused effort,
- effective strategies,
- access to expertise, and
- cultivating and developing some of the nine important mental skills and habits.

Step 4

You will need patience. Research tells us that there is nothing about us that cannot change if we want it to (Halvorson, 2012). It will take time, but with effort you can retrain your brain to think about yourself and your performing more often in *get better* terms.

In summary, you can empower yourself and your students by remembering this simple formula (see Figure 3): Our **P**erformances really are the sum of our 1) **E**ffort, 2) the **S**trategies we choose, 3) the amount of **T**rust we place in ourselves and in our preparation, 4) multiplied by how **C**ourageously we take action, minus 5) the **I**nterference that can get in our way such as doubt, anxiety, lack of goals, lack of focus, lack of commitment, or motivation, or acceptance.



Figure 3. The Empowered Singer Formula

This formula illustrates that when performers put in the appropriately focused effort, employ effective strategies, and acquire the necessary mental skills to put it into action, they will be empowered to counteract the worrier who cares too much what others think, squelch the fear that overwhelms them and sabotages their performing, build their confidence and help them fight self-doubt, and encourage diligent striving—striving for excellence rather than perfection. In addition, as teachers we can reinforce these concepts with our students as well as communicate our trust in them and encourage them to trust themselves when it matters most.

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