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The Impact of Performance Anxiety on Stage Performance of Classical Vocal Singers and Intervention Strategies

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Abstract: Classical vocal performance is an artistic endeavor highly dependent on live conditions. Performance anxiety remains a persistent challenge for singers at all stages, directly constraining their artistic expression and compromising the quality of classical vocal stage presentations. This study begins with a core definition of performance anxiety, systematically examining its specific impacts on singers' physiological states, psychological cognition, and artistic performance. It analyzes three fundamental causes of anxiety formation: individual factors, environmental influences, and technical aspects. The research ultimately proposes four actionable intervention strategies—psychological regulation, optimized professional training, pre-performance preparation, and social support system development—to provide practical references for classical vocal practitioners in alleviating stage anxiety and enhancing performance consistency.

Keywords: Performance anxiety; Classical vocal music; Stage performance; Influence; Intervention strategies

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1. Introduction

Classical vocal performance demands both technical precision and artistic expression, where the performer's physical and mental state directly determines the final stage presentation. Performance anxiety is a common psychological issue affecting singers from amateur enthusiasts to professional artists. Many technically proficient performers experience disrupted vocal rhythm or even complete performance failures due to excessive pre-performance anxiety. Prolonged anxiety can undermine professional confidence and hinder career development. Understanding the underlying mechanisms of such anxiety and developing effective coping strategies not only provides tailored stress management solutions for professional performances but also offers supplementary guidance for psychological training modules in vocal education, bridging the gap between training environments and actual performance scenarios.

2. Definition and causes of performance anxiety

Performance anxiety is a common psychological state experienced by classical vocalists during formal performances and professional evaluations. When affected by this emotion, singers exhibit physiological reactions such as accelerated heart rate, irregular breathing patterns, throat tightness, and slight limb tremors. Psychologically, they experience excessive worry about mistakes, fear of negative audience reactions, and heightened concern over meeting performance expectations. The distinction between performance anxiety and general stage fright is clear: ordinary nervousness only causes mild emotional fluctuations without affecting normal performance, whereas performance anxiety is more severe, directly interfering with breath control and rhythm management, and may even prevent singers from completing their performances completely [1].

The triggers of this type of anxiety can be categorized into three main groups. First, individual factors: Individuals with higher trait anxiety levels exhibit heightened sensitivity to external stimuli. Many performers tie their performance outcomes to self-worth, while daily training often lacks psychological adjustment components. Misconceptions about their own abilities further exacerbate mental burdens. Second, environmental factors: The inherent importance of performances, expectations from mentors and audiences, and the industry's singular focus on technical evaluation criteria all impose additional pressure on singers [2]. Third, technical factors: Insufficient refinement of musical challenges, a mismatch between technical proficiency and artistic expression demands, limited stage adaptation experience, and selecting works beyond one's capabilities can directly trigger anxiety emotions.

3. Impact of performance anxiety on the stage performance of classical vocal singers

3.1. Physiological level

Performance anxiety triggers the body's stress response mechanism, activating the sympathetic nervous system to a heightened state. The body secretes excessive adrenaline, causing a significant increase in heart rate and disrupted breathing patterns. The abdominal breathing technique developed through long-term training becomes disrupted, with shallow inhalation depth and unstable breath support. Muscles in the throat and face contract involuntarily, vocal cords deviate from standard training parameters, and resonance channels narrow during phonation. Articulation muscle flexibility decreases, directly impairing speech clarity. Limb control weakens simultaneously, resulting in involuntary postural stiffness, tense arm and shoulder muscles, and distorted stage movements. In severe cases, temporary dizziness or blurred vision may occur, with all physiological functions failing to reach normal training levels [3].

3.2. Psychological level

Performance anxiety alters a singer's attentional allocation, shifting focus from the musical content to anticipating negative outcomes. Singers repeatedly question whether their performance meets external expectations, obsessively monitor subtle audience reactions, and struggle to fully concentrate on artistic interpretation. Their self-perception experiences temporary distortions, unjustifiably magnifying minor flaws and developing unwarranted doubts about vocal competence. Previously accumulated confidence erodes rapidly, plunging emotions into excessive tension and self-doubt. Cognitive flexibility significantly declines, rendering them incapable of timely adjustments during unexpected challenges. Long-established vocal muscle memory becomes disrupted by negative emotions, rendering it inaccessible. The entire psychological state completely deviates from the relaxed atmosphere essential for effective performance [4].

3.3. Artistic expression level

Performance anxiety directly undermines the artistic texture of classical vocal performance. Singers lose the original emotional depth in interpreting musical works, causing meticulously crafted dynamic contrasts and timbral variations to become rigid and mechanical. This results in superficial expression that fails to convey the emotional core inherent in the compositions. Singers often misjudge rhythmic patterns, unconsciously accelerating or slowing their tempo, and introducing unnecessary pauses between musical passages. Such disruptions disrupt the integrity of the performance, neglecting artistic details that should preserve the aesthetic value of classical vocal works. Audiences consequently miss the intended emotional resonance and thematic essence, with stage presentations falling far below singers' regular training standards. In extreme cases, performances may even deviate completely from the artistic vision of the original compositions.

4. Intervention strategies for performance anxiety in classical vocal singers' stage performances

4.1. Psychological intervention strategies

Psychological intervention serves as the core approach to alleviate performance anxiety in classical vocal singers. It enables adjustments to the performers' cognitive patterns and emotional states at the root level, thereby establishing a stable psychological support system for stage performance.

First, cognitive reappraisal can correct singers' irrational cognitions. Singers may adopt the three-column recording method for daily practice, sequentially documenting anxiety-triggering scenarios, automatically generated negative thoughts, and realistic, rational alternative thoughts, thereby gradually resolving erroneous cognitions such as equating errors with incompetence or evaluating biases with low self-worth. The training frequency for the three-column recording method should be at least three times per week.

Secondly, targeted emotional regulation techniques can rapidly mitigate stress responses. When experiencing stage anxiety, singers may employ the 54321 grounding technique to anchor their attention: sequentially identifying five objects within visual range, four tactile sensations from body contact, three audible sounds near the ears, two olfactory sensations from nasal perception, and one lingering taste in the mouth. This method effectively redirects focus from negative expectations to the immediate environment. Additionally, the 478 breathing rhythm can be utilized to regulate physiological states—inhaling for 4 seconds, holding breath for 7 seconds, and exhaling for 8 seconds—repeated 3–5 times to significantly alleviate sympathetic nervous system overactivity. During daily training sessions, singers should practice 10-minute mindfulness breathing exercises. Conducted in a quiet, undisturbed indoor environment, performers should maintain comfortable seated or standing postures with natural spinal alignment. Focus should be anchored on nasal breathing sensations: perceiving the coolness of incoming air during inhalation and the warmth of exhaled air. Any distraction should be gently redirected back to the breathing process. Pairing the training with Baroque-era slow classical music as background music can enhance emotional stability and reduce anxiety triggers through consistent practice.

Thirdly, phased stress desensitization training enhances singers' stress tolerance. The program consists of three progressive stages: The first stage involves friend and family practice sessions where singers perform for up to five acquaintances without evaluation requirements, focusing on acclimating to public performance settings. The second stage shifts to an unfamiliar audience practice with 20–30 strangers, allowing for occasional mistakes while emphasizing concentration under unfamiliar gazes. The third stage replicates full-scale concert environments, replicating official performance procedures, venues, and rules to progressively increase stage

pressure tolerance through authentic performance requirements.

Fourth, multidimensional daily psychological maintenance can enhance intervention effectiveness. Before performing, singers should practice positive self-suggestion using specific affirmations to reassure themselves that adequate training has been completed for smooth performances. They should actively relax tense muscles in the shoulders, neck, and throat to quickly enter a relaxed state suitable for singing. Regular psychological debriefing is recommended: after each performance, singers should truthfully document emotional fluctuations, identify specific triggers of anxiety, and gradually develop personalized emotional regulation patterns. Collaborative support groups with peers can help share stage emotions and provide mutual positive feedback, alleviating the loneliness of solo performance pressure. Proactive communication with professional mental health practitioners allows for customized anxiety management plans tailored to individual needs, rather than waiting until anxiety impacts performance. During stage preparation, singers should engage in brief conversations with staff or accompaniment teachers to divert excessive tension and avoid falling into negative thought cycles of repeated misjudgments [5].

4.2. Vocal music professional training intervention

Vocal training interventions serve as the foundational support pathway for alleviating performance anxiety. Stable professional skills can minimize singers' concerns about stage errors, thereby reducing the potential triggers of anxiety at its root level. Such interventions are fully integrated into daily professional training routines without imposing excessive additional training burdens, making them suitable for classical vocal learners at all stages.

First, the dual-track training method integrating technical skills and emotional expression can establish interconnected memory for vocal performance capabilities. This approach should be incorporated into every daily practice session. During routine training with musical pieces, odd-numbered repetitions focus on refining technical precision—particularly correcting vocal placement and breath control to solidify technical foundations. Even-numbered repetitions allow complete release from technical constraints, emphasizing emotional delivery and expression to gradually build synchronized memory between technique and emotion, thereby preventing stage performance imbalances. Concurrently, coordinated stage movement training should be implemented, integrating pre-designed gestures and posture adjustments into daily practice to develop synchronized muscular memory between physical movements and vocal delivery, effectively avoiding post-performance limb stiffness [6].

Secondly, error-tolerant training and technical threshold refinement can reduce anxiety triggers at the technical level. Error-tolerant training should be conducted at least twice monthly, intentionally incorporating sudden disturbances such as abrupt noise generation, temporary accompaniment tempo adjustments, and random vocal interruptions. This enhances performers' on-site emergency response capabilities, gradually reducing excessive perfectionism while strengthening adaptability to unpredictable live environments. Simultaneously, implement the "thousand-training" standard for piece refinement: beginners should complete 300 error-free repetitions of challenging sections before progressively reaching the thousand-training benchmark. For core difficult passages in compositions, performers must complete at least 1,000 error-free repetitions to establish stable muscle memory thresholds. This ensures smooth performance even under nervous stage conditions, minimizing technical anxiety triggers. Training should also incorporate realistic scenario simulations including full-stage procedures and acoustic feedback adjustments for different venues. Post-simulation reviews and optimizations should be conducted promptly to gradually build stable confidence in vocal performance capabilities.

Third, multi-scenario adaptation training enhances performers' stage adaptability. Singers should establish a tiered accompaniment coordination training system. During initial piece refinement, they should first

conduct segmented rehearsals with accompanists, aligning vocal phrasing, dynamic fluctuations, and rhythmic synchronization with the accompaniment. Only after achieving precise coordination in each section should they proceed to full-piece rehearsals. Post-rehearsal, singers must complete at least 20 full ensemble practice sessions with fixed accompanists, dynamically adjusting tempo and dynamics during rehearsals to cultivate real-time adaptation skills and reduce overdependence on fixed rhythms. Performers should participate in at least one small public performance weekly, including institutional weekly showcase events and community charity concerts. Even performing 1–2 familiar short pieces can gradually accumulate stage experience across diverse scenarios, minimizing discomfort in unfamiliar settings. Monthly fatigue-based vocal training should include 30 minutes of aerobic exercise to simulate post-performance physical conditions before full-piece performances, honing voice control capabilities to prevent performance disruptions caused by physical fatigue.

4.3. Optimization of performance preparation

Performance preparation optimization serves as a direct intervention strategy to alleviate stage anxiety in classical vocal performers. It enables early elimination of most potential emotional triggers, helping artists maintain stable performance states throughout the event. First, implement a 72-hour pre-performance tiered preparation system: complete full orchestral arrangement within 72 hours prior to the show, verify technical challenges and segment transitions; finalize venue adaptation 48 hours before the performance through stage rehearsals, familiarize with acoustic environments and movement patterns, and conduct full-process coordination with accompaniment teams; conduct only 1–2 full-song rehearsals 24 hours before the event, avoiding repetitive refinement of isolated technical points to prevent amplified anxiety while ensuring ≥7 hours of sleep and avoidance of spicy/cold stimulants; perform vocal warm-ups and emotional arousal exercises 3 hours before the show without high-intensity vocal training [6]. Second, establish a proactive contingency response system: develop melody transition plans for lyric slip-ups using sustained notes or repeated phrases for natural continuity; establish vocal recovery protocols to maintain uninterrupted performance flow after errors; create collaborative response strategies for accompaniment disruptions including pause-and-recovery techniques or half-measure solos to guide accompaniment; all contingency plans must be pre-approved with accompaniment teams to ensure seamless coordination and prevent decision-making conflicts during emergencies. The emotional rehearsal technique can be employed to achieve pre-performance arousal. Ten minutes prior to the stage entrance, performers should remain in a quiet waiting area with eyes closed, mentally rehearsing the entire process from taking the stage, delivering greetings, singing, to concluding the performance. This involves predefining emotional expressions and nuanced handling for each segment, while synchronizing the rehearsal with diaphragmatic breathing techniques to immerse performers in the performance context. This approach effectively reduces post-performance discomfort and nervousness [7].

Finally, performers can establish a personalized pre-show support system by preparing a portable waiting bag containing room-temperature diluted honey water. During each waiting period, they should take only 1–2 small sips to soothe the throat, avoiding consumption of ice water or excessively hot liquids that may irritate vocal cords, as well as excessive water intake to prevent post-performance abdominal bloating that could disrupt breathing. The bag should also contain 2–3 personalized vocal warm-up cue cards detailing their most effective vocalization techniques, allowing silent self-adjustment without vocalization to minimize unnecessary vocal strain. Thirty minutes before performance, performers must wear full stage attire and shoes, spending 2-3 minutes moving around to acclimate to clothing constraints and avoid physical discomfort affecting movements and breathing.

During waiting periods, performers should refrain from discussing technical challenges with other performers or monitoring their performance status, focusing instead on maintaining their breathing rhythm while calmly awaiting stage entry [8].

5. Conclusion

Performance anxiety disrupts classical vocal performance through physiological responses, cognitive processes, and artistic expression. Its causes involve multiple dimensions, including individual traits, external environments, and professional skill development. Effective intervention strategies require coordinated approaches to address root causes and mitigate anxiety's negative impact on stage performance. Future classical vocal training systems will progressively emphasize psychological development, integrating professional-grade emotional regulation techniques into daily practice and performance preparation. This approach helps singers maintain a balanced stage presence while avoiding excessive anxiety, enabling them to fully demonstrate professional capabilities and convey the unique aesthetic value of classical vocal artistry.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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