



POWER
PERFORMANCE
for SINGERS

Transcending the Barriers

Shirlee Emmons
Alma Thomas

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the Barriers

SHIRLEE EMMONS
ALMA THOMAS

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[A performer is] one who joins body, mind, and spirit in the dance of existence; one who explores both inner and outer being, one who surpasses limitations and crosses boundaries in the process of a personal and social transformation; one who plays the larger game, the Game of Games, with full awareness, aware of life and death, and willing to accept the pain and joy that awareness brings.

G. Leonard,
The Ultimate Athlete (1975)

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Preface

Within the first year that Alma Thomas, a performance psychologist, started working with singers in New York, her fame grew so rapidly that she was invited to adjudicate a New York State competition, which was an early stage of a prestigious national competition. There were to be five judges, four of them musicians and the fifth a nonmusician, Alma Thomas. Thomas demurred, declaring that she didn't have the necessary musical background with which to judge singers properly. Nevertheless, the competition chairperson insisted that Alma take part, advising her to define her own criteria, which she did.

Listening to the seventeen contestants, the four musician-judges busily juggled numbers (out of a perfect score of 100) for diction, tone quality, musicianship, and so on—the usual adjudication categories. Alma had no such categories or numbers, but she made notes. Hearing about the results later, I myself was astonished. Alma had ranked the first five contestants in exactly the same order as the composite score of the other four judges; had scrambled the order of the next three to 7, 6, 8 instead of the 6, 7, 8; and had ranked the remaining nine contestants just as the other judges had!

Although I knew what the official adjudication categories were, I couldn't wait to find out what Alma's criteria had been. "Apart from the mental skills demonstrated," she answered, "I had only one criterion: Whoever has best shown me *what he or she thinks the song is all about* is number one, and so on."

The Education of Shirlee

As many times as I have told this story since that day, it never fails to amaze me. For the adjudicated results to have come out as they did—virtually unanimous and this without any communication among the judges—the musicians must have been powerfully swayed (despite all the numerical calibrating of vocal and musical skills) by the same criterion that had influenced Alma—that is, the *quality of the performance*.

In 1990 my husband returned from an educational convention telling me that he had the answer to my longtime wish: the same kind of psychological help for singers as was routinely afforded athletes. He had met a certain Alma Thomas, a British performance psychologist, after a workshop she had conducted at the convention and had invited her to come to meet me in New York. As luck would have it, the day of our appointment found me signing autographs on copies of my Melchior biography, *Tristanissimo*, at the Metropolitan Opera Bookstore, something I had never expected to do in my lifetime and something I was enjoying immensely. Reluctantly I walked across the plaza to meet this British psychologist.

As a kind of test, I asked Alma to tell me what she would do to help two particular students of mine, whose problems I described in detail. Within five minutes I was enthralled; she had totally won me over. After she described what methods she would use with my two students, she asked gently, “Tell me, Shirlee, who *usually* does this sort of thing for your singers?”

Hesitantly I replied, “Why, I do, I guess, or the coach.”

Ever so politely she said, “With all due respect, isn’t that a bit amateurish?”

That was the first revelatory moment in our relationship, but not the last. Eventually my thorough understanding of the import of mental skills became directly proportional to the amount of time I spent watching and listening to Alma’s workshops. As I watched her first “distraction” workshop in New York, for instance, I learned to my amazement that the big effort we singers make not to *show* that we are distracted in performance is more or less useless, because our concentration is then focused on pretending, and the performance suffers. What we must learn is not to *be* distracted. The competition that she adjudicated taught me what Alma already knew, that *everyone* is swayed by the performance, not just audience members. The biggest change came, however, when I made three discoveries: What singers routinely do before a performance is devote only one or two run-throughs to *performing* in practice sessions; most singers do not know how to take their minds off technical skills in performance; further-

more, conductors, judges, and auditioners of all kinds judge them on those very performance skills!

The Education of Alma

When I was asked to be on the judging panel for this competition, I was both honored and flattered, because (let's face it) I had only been working with singers a relatively short time. What did I know about it? Not a lot! I did give it some thought, because I really had to consider what I had to offer the panel and the singers who were competing. I felt very strongly that I had to give them some kind of feedback. What *did* I know about?

Well, I know a great deal about performance and the preparation of the individual for high-level performance, no matter the field: sports, education, the arts, or business. As far as I am concerned, the skills that performers require are the same, especially if the performer is aiming for excellence. I know what to look for when people are performing. I know when they are nervous and when they are trying to cover it up. I know when their focus and concentration are sharp, and I realize when that focus leaves the performer in the lurch! Above all, I know when they are thoroughly prepared, know what they are doing, and—in the arts—when they are communicating a message to me and allowing me to share their performance. I can also recognize talent, ability, and skill, no matter the field of performance. So I agreed to be on the panel.

At the suggestion of the chairperson, I prepared an observation sheet of mental attributes that I would observe in the competition, from which I would give feedback to the performer. The other members of the panel had their own agenda on a different attribute sheet. This meant that we would be observing the performance from very different angles and expertise: one vocal and musical, the other in terms of mental attributes and a completely synthesized performance.

On the day of the competition, as I was introduced to the other panel members there was little discussion about a joint understanding of the criteria of observation. (But then, I probably wouldn't have understood it anyway.) But how, I wondered, did my colleagues know that they all shared the same understanding of the criteria for observation? This wasn't at all like the major gymnastics competitions I'd judged! Once the competition began, I found it quite easy to observe the singers in relation to the observable "mental" aspects of their performance, but I knew I had to have some kind of a list of winners.

Because I did not at that time understand what the pieces sung were about, I decided that, apart from the mental aspects, my principle would be this: The singer who sang in such a way as to make

me understand what he/she was singing about, who communicated the meaning clearly to me, and who made me listen—that singer would be higher up on the list than the ones whose renditions I did not understand. If the piece was about love or anger or depression or hopefulness and I understood that from the performance and the singer made me listen to him/her, that performer would rate highly.

Following the competition, when the panel members met to decide the winner and runners-up, I found that I had all but the middle three singers in the exact same order as the other judges!

The rest is history. At the time, I didn't know why Shirlee got so excited about the results. I do now! And I know much more about how singers prepare for and achieve excellence.

How to Use This Book

If you have a vocal technical problem, whom do you visit? A voice teacher. If you have a problem with expressive interpretation, where do you go? To a drama coach. If you have a problem with pitches or keeping a certain tempo, whom do you call? A musical coach. You don't think of these remedial visits as negative; you just go. If, on the other hand, you have a problem with concentrating in performance or are consumed by anxiety when performing, you simply conclude, fatalistically, that there is something basically wrong with *you*. Yet these issues are an integral part of your performance and must be faced, because if these problems are not solved, your vocal skills and interpretive abilities won't function optimally.

Some singers are good performers because they were gifted with great performing flair from birth. They usually have success, even when their technical skills are not exemplary. Some singers learned to be good performers by trial and error and lots of experience. If you are neither of these, you can still become a better performer by learning better performance skills.

This is not a book about performance anxiety, because anxiety is but *one* aspect of your total performance. This is not a book about how to sing, but rather a book about your performance, part of which is your singing. It does set out to explain exactly what constitutes performance. It is designed to help singers learn how to *perform* vocally, how to use what they have, how to enjoy their voices during performance, and how to perform consistently to the best of their ability. Although the performance skills within this book apply to all performers—experienced and developing—they will use these skills differently depending upon their present level. All performers can do better. World champions go on improving. Singers are late bloomers by the very nature of their instruments; they must go

on improving. And even if you are a singer who has performing flair or who has learned to cope in performance through experience, you can still improve your performance.

This book has been written so that it follows the cycle of the performance through all its stages: preperformance, performance, and postperformance. Therefore, we recommend that you read the table of contents all the way through, initially, from beginning to end. This will give you an overall view of the nature and concept of mental preparation for performance, because that, too, follows the performance cycle. Specifically, we have made a studied effort to present the material in its most logical arrangement.

This book presents many choices for assessing the quality of your performance and for improving it in whatever way you find necessary. To that end, feel free to dip into its pages wherever you are interested “as if” you were requiring one part of the mental preparation process for your own immediate needs. A reading of the overview to each part will help you decide which chapters would best serve your personal needs. At the end of each chapter, you will find a list of other chapters to whose contents you can refer for more help with your immediate needs. Care has been taken to make each part, at the expense of some repetition, into something that can be read independently. However, you should know that most mental programs need thorough planning and much thought relative to your own individual preparation and performance requirements.

Teachers will find references throughout the text to “Teaching Points,” which can be found in appendix 2 at the end of the book.

The term *collaborative pianist* has recently come to be the preferred designation for a pianist who accompanies another musician. We mean no disrespect by our use of the word *accompanist*, which was the preferred term as we wrote this book.

There is a detailed description in the afterword to help you with planning your mental journey to performance excellence.

Do it well. Do it thoughtfully. Practice it. It does work.

We hope that you enjoy your journey. Good luck!

New York City
London
November 1997

S. E.
A. T.

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Power Performance for Singers

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I THE POWER OF PERFORMANCE

Everyone would like to excel in something—personal life, relationships, sports, business, or the arts. Many people not only want to experience such excellence but actually live solely for the pursuit of excellence. Such is the power of performance. This desire to excel personally, to attain the highest standards, is seen to be a worthy “drive,” especially in today’s highly competitive world.

However, such excellence is not easy to achieve. It is only gained by grit, determination, talent, and sheer, unadulterated hard work. Referring to his conviction that high-level performance of any kind is only *partly* about skill, talent, and ability, Simon Barnes, a sportswriter from the London *Times*, said: “To think otherwise is to be taken in by sport’s great illusion.” These words were written in Barnes’s report of a kick in the 1995 Rugby World Cup quarterfinal between England and Australia. The kick was famous, for it happened in the last moments of the game, when the score was tied. Taken from the Australian defensive players under tremendous pressure, this kick won a great victory for England.

Substitute vocal performance for sport and the sentiments remain the same. It is not only the superior talent and skills that separate the very high achiever from the also-ran but also the ability to respond in pressure situations, still sing your best, and do it with nerve, verve, and even risk, if need be. This is known as mental toughness, an inner strength that goes beyond talent and skill. Without this toughness, excellence is unobtainable.

These are the characteristics of peak performers, whatever their pursuit. The strength of their body–mind link is exhibited in the way they *think*, followed instantaneously by what they *do*. They are confident, positive, and optimistic. Not for them are concerns about failure or worry about others. Their sense of inner calm and their ability to remain in complete control separate them from other, lesser beings.

To be consistently good, elite performers plan assiduously and prepare in depth before, during, and after their performances. Then they do it all again and again. Their focus on pushing their own performance boundaries is relentless. They are “hooked” on excelling. Once they are in the performance cycle, they keep going around, looking

for the place to add just a little more drive that will move the performance forward. This is their drug, and they take it daily, morning, noon, and night, throughout their performing lives. Their quest is unending.

Such is the power of performance.

1 This Thing Called Performance

Performance is a basic level of communication in life as well as on the stage; performance is an activity in which we daily, routinely, and, all but inevitably, engage.

Robert Cohen,
Acting Power

Singers, professional or amateur, regard the spectacle of the Olympic Games as virtually identical to their own work. Even an inexperienced singer knows—as Gertrude Stein would say—that performance is performance is performance, whatever the field. It matters not that an athlete broke an Olympic record back home in Indiana on a Thursday afternoon at 2:00 P.M. It only counts when he or she does it at the appointed time and in the appointed place, under pressure, in Montreal or Atlanta, say, at 10:17 A.M. Similarly, it matters not how well the singer performed the aria at the Monday rehearsal; it only counts when he or she sings it well on Wednesday evening at 8:26 P.M. before an audience.

Professional and nonprofessional alike, everyone performs every day, be it in sports, singing, or acting, summing up before a jury, taking an examination, making a presentation at a conference, or presiding over a business meeting. You have “performed” if you have worked to achieve competence at some activity and then done it *before others*.

In order to become an outstanding performer you must learn how to perform your skills. The task is to learn how to perform. You cannot assume that once you have learned the music and become skilled at your singing you can just spurt those skills out coherently again and again in a performance situation. Ask one of those singers who panic when they see particular people on the audition panel. Ask those who suffer from severe muscle tension during performances that do not go as they should. Ask any singer who feels permanently frustrated because he/she is never able to sing as well in performance as in the studio with the voice teacher or coach.

Knowing how to learn and becoming more expert in the performance process are linked together, as performance psychologist Tom Kubistant tells us: “If I know how to learn well, I can be in a better position to perform what I have learned, and if I can perform well, I can be in a better position to learn new things” (1986, p. 2).

You want to be the best you can be. Perhaps you have been told that you have great potential. Nevertheless, in one normal lifetime an average person actualizes only between 5 and 20 percent of his/her potential (Otto, 1970). One might ask: Where does the other 80 to 95 percent go? Potential is a difficult concept. You never know how much you actually have until you try to realize it. In their book, *Maximum Performance*, researchers L. E. Morehouse and L. Gross explain potential this way: “The better performer lies dormant in us for three basic reasons. The first is that the various cultural and social forces have conspired to keep it hidden. The second is that it doesn’t believe in itself. The third is that [the person] literally doesn’t know how to make use of potential” (1977, p. 11).

It may not be possible to focus on your potential alone, but it is certainly possible to focus on all your other qualities required for good performance, such as discipline, creativity, persistence, and sheer doggedness. These are the things you attend to, in addition to knowing what you can achieve now. You don’t have control over whatever potential you do possess, but you do have control over what you are capable of doing *now*. The answer, then, is to work at all the other areas relating to performance, continuing to push the boundaries of your performance abilities, perhaps using some of that latent potential along the way. With this plan of action you can become what you wish to become. You can experience the joy of performing well, even though you might occasionally be frustrated or disappointed. Kubistant makes us realize: “No matter what our roles and functions are in life, how we perform is as crucial to our successes and development as individuals as are the outcomes of our performances. These efforts define who we are as well as give us indications of what we can become” (1986, p. 6).

Left- and Right-Brain Functions in Performance

The nature of your performance and the manner in which you work to tap into that elusive potential can very often be traced to the way you view your performance—purely analytically, purely creatively, or a combination of both. How you think will affect your performance in many ways. Singing involves you in logical, analytical thought, simply because singing is a highly complex activity, during which *you really must think technically for some of the*

time, while constantly projecting creative, visual, nonverbal communication and body language. When you perform, the two hemispheres of your brain organize different modes of thought and perception. The left hemisphere dominates your logical, analytical thinking, strategies, evaluation and criticism, detailed specifics, verbal effort, and thinking in the future and in the past. The right hemisphere reigns over your insight, feelings, touch, tempo, intuition, positive feedback, imagery, living in the present, control by goal, nonverbal understanding, and effortless flow.

Performance gives you plenty of opportunities to develop and use (or misuse) both left-brain and right-brain functions. You require most, if not all, of these functions for your performance. Take imagery as an example. This is a right-brain function. It can enhance your performance greatly. On the other hand, thinking clearly about the next phrase or run or attack is correct use of both right- and left-brain thinking. But perhaps your imagery takes you repeatedly to a performance that was poor or you keep dwelling on the vocal detail that didn't go well. These are examples of the misuse of the right and left hemispheres of the brain.

Clearly, one of your performance skills is learning to use the correct brain function when you need it during performance. Staying only with the left-brain functions during performance is detrimental, because the performance may be very competent but will lack meaning and expression. There will be perhaps little of the correct type of thinking, using the right-brain functions (intuitive responses, sensitivity of touch, imagery, positive feelings, and staying in the present), and perhaps too much negative thinking, too much calibrating each note, each run, each phrase to get it right.

The left brain deals sequentially with input, while the right brain deals simultaneously with input. When you look carefully at the right-brain function (figure 1-1), you will see that it bears significant resemblances to performance.

Best performance results flow from the ability to use mainly the right-brain (synthesizer) function, with occasional visits to the left-brain (analyzer) function. A peak performance, where self-imposed limitations are momentarily forgotten, goes by various nicknames in sports. A basketball player talks about a "hot night." A tennis player refers to "playing out of his/her head." An Australian football player reaches for the "purple patch," and Jimmy Connors tried to "go into the tunnel" (Unestahl, 1983, p. 288).

Performance Levels

Your peak performance is a goal that you strive for, but before you get to a peak performance level, there are other levels of perfor-

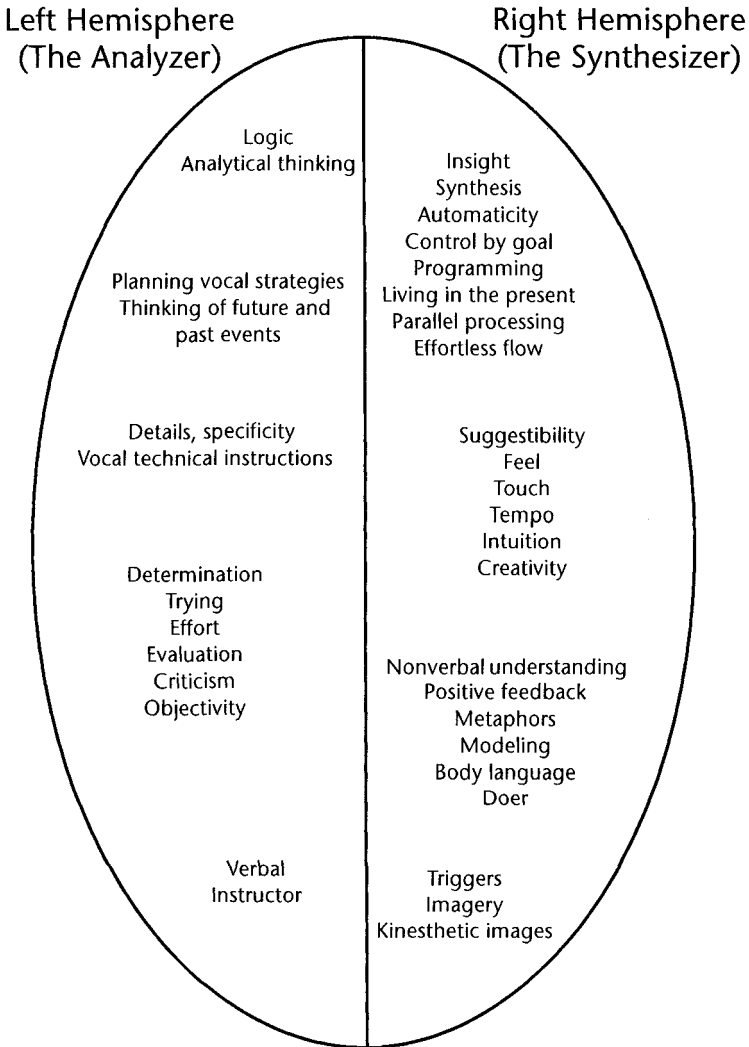


Figure 1-1. The functions of the brain's two hemispheres. (Adapted from Unestahl, 1983, p. 284).

mance for which to strive. These have been termed *optimal* and *maximal* performance (Kubistant, 1986).

Optimal Performance

This is described as a performance that is as good as possible at that moment, bearing in mind that more experience might be wanted and that certain skills and techniques might still need to be learned or upgraded. An optimal performance builds up those specific skills

and endurance levels that the specialty requires, achieving the most consistent and efficient results. Your new automobile is in the midst of an optimal performance when it is achieving its best gas consumption with minimal wear and tear at, say, fifty to sixty miles per hour.

Optimal performances can also be used as platforms for achieving greater things in performance later. You might think of optimal performance as learning to walk before you can run or learning the arias before the whole role or running many ten-kilometer races before you try to run a marathon. From your optimal performances you gain valuable experiences that will stand you in good stead for what is to come later. They have their own goals and can be complete within themselves. For example, singers are often encouraged to audition or to sing in workshops in order to appreciate how good their skills actually are. Particular goals are set at the singer's level, and the singer attempts to meet those goals. Many performing factors can be fine-tuned in this way. "Optimal performances are designed as consistent, progressive, integrative, efficient, and effective efforts that can be ends in themselves and/or be a means to an end," says Kubistant (1986, p. 13).

Maximal Performance

The next level of performance is one that makes great demands—both physical and mental—upon you as the performer. It is more consistent; it very often achieves the goals it sets out to attain; it extends your personal frontiers; it is an end in itself. Despite the requisite high mental and physical demands made upon you, a maximal performance gives the best quality, the best value, and the best results. This is like a new race car going flat out, the driver's foot depressing the accelerator pedal to the floor. A maximal performance is flat out, all or nothing.

While you can get to your goal more quickly this way, it does have its pitfalls. It uses up much more of your energy. All the wear and tear makes you become more anxious and, as a consequence, makes you break down more often. Your maximal performances, in which you push back your performance boundaries and really extend yourself, are very demanding. This is why it is important to *plan* and *space* your maximal performances judiciously. Important auditions, recitals, and stage performances may all require a maximal performance, regardless of the cost.

Track-and-field athletes plan carefully when during the season to give a maximal performance: It could be at the Olympic trials, at the major trials for the world championships, or even at the national championships, because they may lead to *inclusion* in the international squad. During 1996, the year of the Atlanta Olym-

pics, the track-and-field athletes were very careful to plan their maximal performances. Too many, and they ended up giving poorer performances while becoming stale. Too few, and they didn't make the squad. Every performance doesn't have to be a maximal performance. You must plan carefully for those. At a very high level of ability, fewer is better.

Although optimal and maximal performances are subtly different from each other, they are equal in their intensity. Their outcomes are geared differently: A maximal performance seeks to achieve excellence across-the-board, whereas an optimal performance is more likely to be a means to an end. An optimal performance could be compared to your voice lesson, where you practice and refine certain parts, lines, phrases, or even one note within a piece of music. It's like taking an audition for a specific reason beyond getting the part, because you want to try something out or because you need the experience of auditioning, for example. You gain your experience in optimal performances, not in maximal performances.

High levels of individual performance combine optimal and maximal performances. As these two types of performance constantly improve, they open the gates for another higher level of performance, the peak performance.

Further information:

1. On the right-brain function of imagery, see chapter 12, "Imagery in Performance."
2. On solving the misuse of the right and left hemispheres of the brain, see chapter 15, "Exploring and Planning 'Meaning' for Performance."
3. On dealing in depth with peak performance, see chapter 2, "The Characteristics of Peak Performance."

2 The Characteristics of Peak Performance

A successful performance is the pinnacle of achievement in your musical development. In one sense, performing entails a synthesis of thought, feeling, and physical movements; but in a broader sense, it signifies a supreme act of artistic giving.

Seymour Bernstein,
With Your Own Two Hands

A peak performance exhibits the strength of the mind–body link. For you as a peak performer *what you think* is echoed by *what you do*.

A peak performance is accompanied not by the fear of failure but rather by a confident and optimistic attitude, not by an unsettled state of mind but rather by a sense of inner calm and a high degree of concentration, not by an acceptance of powerlessness but rather by a feeling of being in control of an (apparently) effortless, unforced result, not by unmanageable tension but rather by a (learned technique of) physical relaxation and, at the same time, an extraordinary awareness of body and surroundings. As a singer, don't you long for such results? Wouldn't you be overjoyed to have this kind of experience?

The Effects of Peak Performance

These peak performances are exceptional and appear to surpass any ordinary level of performance. When such a performance happens to you, you will sing better than you have ever sung before. It will be a supreme high. It will be the moment toward which you, your voice teacher, and your coach have been working for many years. It will be the ultimate moment in your relentless search for excellence in performance.

Yet peak performances are rare occurrences and may be involuntary for some. When they do occur, they push you to a new level of experience that extends the boundaries of your performance into effortlessness. They enable you to tap further into your potential.

All your skills and abilities come together with your previous hard work. A peak performance integrates and synthesizes (a right-brain activity) all you know into one wonderful, complete whole. The experience is simply wonderful, say those who know. It's a floating sensation, blissful yet calm, as if you were standing outside yourself. You wonder: *What actually happened? Did I really do that? Was that my voice? Was that really me?*

When you give a peak performance your state of mind is actually altered; your perceptions are inverted. Time appears to slow down, and everything seems to be in slow motion, yet the event goes by so swiftly that you can scarcely believe it when it is over. Everything around you is in sharp focus. Colors are more vivid; sizes change. In golfers' peak performances that hole in the ground seems, they say, as "big as a bucket." For a weight lifter, weights become lighter. For a singer, there is a soaring ease. Senses become very acute; the victory of the performance can be smelled; the joy can be tasted. In a peak performance the boundaries of your performance are redefined.

Can You Train for Peak Performance?

In high-level sport and the arts one question has taxed researchers, athletes, and artists alike: Is it possible to train someone in such a way that peak performances occur more frequently?

As a singer, you are no different from an elite athlete. The same questions apply to you. Is there an "ideal performance state" (a phrase used repeatedly in sport psychology literature) for the singer? If so, does this "ideal state" vary from one singer to another? Are there common characteristics that distinguish the peak performance of the singer? Or are there common characteristics that all elite performers describe as a peak performance? Most important, if these common characteristics exist, can you learn them?

Any peak performance is an outcome of physical, technical, and mental factors. This means that the body and the mind cannot be separated in such a performance. In fact, the physical and technical aspects are *conditions* of high-level performance. There is no substitute for a complete mastery of the technical skills and, even in the arts, a certain level of physical well-being. The higher your level of physical well-being and your mastery of the vocal, musical, linguistic, and dramatic skills, the more control you have over your performance.



TEACHING

POINT:

See #1,
Appendix 2.

However, the higher your level of physical and technical skills, the more important the mental aspects become. Aiming for peak performance, you would be wise to lavish a focus on the mental

side that is equal to your usual concern with the physical and technical side. In high-level sport, most coaches and athletes will readily admit that 50 to 95 percent of success is due to mental factors. Now that the physical and technical aspects of sport are so advanced, it is the mental aspects, athletes believe, that differentiate between those who make it and those who do not. Mark Spitz, winner of seven gold medals at the Montreal Olympics, said on this subject, "At this level of physical skill, the difference between winning and losing is 99 percent psychological." And when Tiger Woods, on his way to being the youngest golfer ever to win the Masters Golf Tournament in 1997, played less well in game two and the press asked why, the young man replied simply, "I wasn't *thinking* right."

It is no different for singers. If the physical and technical aspects of your performance and that of your fellow singer are of high caliber, then the mental aspects will determine which of you will be successful and which will not.

Eventually there comes a point in performance preparation when your technical and physical skills are as good as they can be at that moment and there is little more to be done to improve these skills in the time remaining. But this does not indicate that you have nothing else to do. You must go on working at the mental aspects of your performance both before and during your performance.

Mental preparation is the single most critical element in peak performance.

Jack Nicklaus,
Golf My Way

Your Own "Ideal Performing State"

If, as the research states, the mental side of performance is so important for success, then it is up to you to determine what constitutes your own "ideal performing state" (Mahoney and Avel, 1977). In particular, you must know what your own ideal performing state is *before* you begin a mental training program. We know from the research (Ravizza, 1977) that certain characteristics are present when peak performances occur.

High-level performers identify their own ideal performance state and learn, either consciously or unconsciously, to produce and retain this ideal state, which in turn allows them to prosper from their skills and abilities when under pressure. The chief psychological characteristics of high-achievement performers are:

- No feelings of fear
- An ability to regulate anxiety and arousal during performance
- Maintenance of positive thoughts and imagery throughout performance
- High confidence that is unshakable
- An ability to remain focused and concentrated, without distractions
- Determination to succeed
- Thinking that is committed and disciplined
- Control over the performance.

Allowing for many individual variations, these characteristics are generally acknowledged by most elite performers.

Because of these common factors in the psychological makeup of elite performers, sport psychologists like James E. Loehr (1984) conclude that there can be no room for a negative climate during performance. Negativity will trigger reactions that produce, among other things, tension in the body (fatal for the voice) and poor concentration (equally fatal). Rather, there must be a psychological and emotional atmosphere that allows for desirable physical and technical reactions. To create such an atmosphere, you must become conscious of your thought patterns.

Not only is your level of performance a direct reflection of your thinking and feeling before, during, and after performance, but also the relationship between performance and thinking behavior may be circular in nature. That is, your ideal mental state allows you to perform better; then your success returns the favor and reinforces the ideal mental state.

How You Can Stimulate and Encourage an Ideal Performing State

The ideal mental state does not just happen. Mental skills have to be learned, even as you have to learn the physical techniques of your vocal art. Mental skills are learned through practice just as your vocal skills were. You yourself may be able to perfect your special talents on your own, but most singers must be taught them through systematic and specific programs.

Although a peak performance happens without your predicting it, you can give it a chance to occur more often by working at the most appropriate mental skills. Your *aim* is always toward a peak performance, and your *task* is to create the proper climate within which it can happen. Inevitably there will be individual differences in performers and their performing activities, but certain mental skills should always be present and combined in the

right dimensions at the right time in order to produce a peak performance:

- Your previous experiences during practice should have been at a very high level.
- Your goal setting and planning should have been specific and clear.
- Your self-confidence should be unquestionable.
- You should deal with your level of mental energy very efficiently.
- You should take advantage of each situation and of the opportunities it offers.
- You should accentuate your ability, your skills, and capitalize on your luck.
- You should keep a balance between your life as a person and your life as a performer, staying in harmony with your total self.
- You should make sure that you still enjoy what you do.
- You should be persistent.
- You should remain completely in the present moment, with no dwelling on past actions or future possibilities.
- You must remain noncritical of the ongoing performance (something that singers find extremely difficult to do!).

In other words, you must submit your total self to the experience of the performance.

A peak performance sets the standards for future performances. The more information you possess about the areas in your performance that must be improved, the more chance you have to give a peak-level performance. Clearly, the bases for such high-level performance are a development of your self-awareness and your need to be in complete control. As a singer you should learn, for example, to recognize your emotional state before, during, and after performance. You should learn to adjust it if and as necessary. You should learn to fine-tune your concentration by focusing on the appropriate critical points, not on the final result. If it is your habit to be concerned about the final outcome, you will find it difficult to remain in the present. The result is a waste of mental energy that could have been vital to a peak performance. Your aim is to gain control of every aspect of your performance—the functional vocal and breathing muscles as well as the extravocal musculature, your emotions, and your thoughts—so as to integrate them into one fine, smooth, joyous performance. As your awareness grows, so will your ability to make fine adjustments to your performance. Performance depends on *refinement* and *control*. Control of your self and your environment will increase as the understanding and awareness of your singing experiences deepen.

The peak experience is an intrinsic experience that is self-validating. It is vital for the athlete [and the singer] to have some internal feelings of value rather than to rely on the evaluation of significant others, teachers, or coaches. The peak experience teaches the athlete [and the singer] an awareness of their [*sic*] own significance independent of what others have to say.

Kenneth Ravizza, "Increasing Awareness
for Sport Performance"

Practical Ways to Begin Acquiring Control of Your Performances

If you are ready to learn techniques that will help raise your own level of awareness, if you are anxious to acquire the information needed to gain control of your performing, if you cannot wait to add peak performance to your singing life, try some of the following exercises.

Exercise 1

Keep a journal with a record of your auditions and other performances. You can use various headings to help structure your thoughts. For example, you might write down what it felt like when you sang or practiced at your best, a detailed description of your reactions to the enjoyable experiences during performance, a list of stress-inducing things that happened before, during, or after the performance, and a measurement of the confidence you felt, of your relaxation level, and of your focus and concentration. If you were focused and concentrated on the right things, write down how you did it. If you were unfocused or concentrated on the wrong things, what happened? Where *was* your focus? Were you able to use other skills, such as anxiety control or imagery? How did they work? When did you use them? Keep your journal up-to-date. Use it for practice sessions also. You can glean much information from a very good practice session. Here is a sample checklist of your physical and mental reactions that will help you assess the differences between the mental, physical, and technical facets of your best and worst performances:

my muscles were relaxed	or	tight
my mind was quiet, and calm	or	frantic
my anxiety was low	or	high
my attitude was positive	or	negative
I experienced enjoyment	or	no enjoyment
performance felt effortless	or	effortful
performance was automatic	or	deliberate

