

Mental training in opera

Pauliina Sairanen

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Opera singers are often compared to elite athletes. It requires years and years of training and hard work, performing at their best under a great amount of pressure, extreme amount of endurance from the voice, being able to communicate with the conductor and orchestra and most of all with the audience, not to mention knowing the entire role by heart, the list goes on and on. To manage all this, singers prepare a long time for roles, have singing lessons, lessons with pianists, practice with conductors and directors and of course they have their ongoing meetings with specialised mental trainer...no, wait! That does not sound something singers often have written in their timetables.

What is mental training? There is no unambiguous explanation for mental training, one might say it is closer to the definition of brain training which is a program consisting regular mental activities to maintain or improve one's cognitive abilities. Mental training could also be a form of meditative training together with mindfulness. NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) is also a form of mental training. All in all, what could be said about mental training is that it is a training to develop our brain, emotions and our spirituality to be able to reach the highest result in performing (and especially performing under a lot of pressure).

I started thinking about mental training in singing quite late in my studies. I had many problems with my nerves when I was at the beginning of my professional studies. I remember having a course for three months that was called "Performance training". When I look back the only thing I remember from that course is what not to do and getting even more nervous when walking on the stage. I remember thinking that I cannot do this, I will never be a good singer. I have luckily had good singing teachers who have had a lot of time, understanding, commitment and compassion towards me. I have managed to control my nerves and learned to love to perform.

What happens if a singing teacher cannot solve these problems? I myself have studied to be a singing teacher and during my studies I have never faced the challenge to solve these kinds of

difficulties. It requires a good understanding in the human psyche to train people to reach their very best and to overcome traumas that prevents us to perform on our best. It takes a whole village to raise a child, as the saying goes. So why should the training of the voice, becoming a great individual performer and artist, rely on the shoulder of the singing teacher? When I think about the singing lessons, shouldn't most of the time be spend on training the voice, exercising the muscles that help us to sing? Have you ever heard a football player going to the practise and spending 50% of that time in solving problems they have faced? Probably not. I'm not saying that football players don't have problems they feel are holding them back in playing football and performing at their best. They just have another time and place to fix these problems. This work happens with the mental trainer.

And I most definitely am not saying that singing teachers should neglect the psychical side of the student in teaching singing. David L. Jones in his book *A Modern Guide to Old World Singing* tells how Allan Lindquest described his teaching philosophy: "When teaching we must treat the entire person, not just the voice! It is important to understand how critically important it is to encourage singers psychologically."¹ and "Great singing is inspired by the spirit. When the human spirit is free, the resulting singing will be free as well."² This more than anything made me think how important it is for the singers to sing with their whole capacity, not just with the voice but their spirit as well.

I got interested in mental training from three different aspects – the music student aspect, the music teacher's aspect but most of all the opera singer's aspect. I started doing internet searching because I was interested where I could find a mentor who is specialised to mental train opera singers. What my quick Google search showed me was that there are very few nearly no mental trainers at all whose expertise lies in mental training for opera singers (or even musicians in general). What my search did show me was the mental health issues that opera singers are often suffering. I admit that my choice of words in the Google search field was not the most measured way of finding the best result. Nonetheless when I did a similar kind of search in sports I got directly to many contact information and the same was seen in business world also. The first question that came to my mind was: if opera singer is like an elite athlete, why don't we get the training of one? Of course, we get it in many ways but in my opinion not in all the possible ways.

¹Jones (2017), p. 253

² Ibid. p. 253

Then I got into conversations with my colleagues and one of my friends and colleagues, a mezzo-soprano living and working in Germany, said that she has been trying to find a mental trainer for over a half a year, with very little results. The closest who could match her needs was a mental trainer who trains horseback riders. She herself being an experienced rider she found that it could be a benefit even to singing. My conversations with other colleagues revealed to me that there surely is a great need for mental training in our field of art. And we all seemed to face the very same problem: there seems to be so few mental trainers who have a comprehensive view in what it takes to be an opera singer. All the people I interviewed wishes to remain anonymous. These interviews and conversation where all held between August 2019 to September 2019 via email, in-person meeting and phone.

In my honest opinion I think that some form of mental training is better than no training at all. I myself have had lessons in NLP and it did help me overcome some of my difficulties in performing at my best. NLP or Neuro-Linguistic Programming is a form of mind training where there is a strong connection between neurological processes, language and behavioural patterns and how these can be changed to achieve goals. It was developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in the 1970s. This method can be used in helping people with for example phobias, learning disorders and depression. The key is to know how the mind works and change the old thinking patterns that are not useful.³ The very first thing in my NLP session, before we even got to the point of breaking some of those unfavourable habits that I carried in my thoughts, was to explain what it actually is to work as an opera singer. That made me think how much easier it would be to work with a trainer who has a thorough understanding when it comes to be an opera singer. I find meditation and mindfulness great tools in my own work as a singer. I also am a singer who had to face quite many problems in the beginning of my professional studies, I end up having a teacher who I was highly afraid of, I had started my music studies quite late at the age of 16 and did not have any clue about music theory or how to play any instrument, I even started having problems with my voice because I felt I was under so much pressure. Some of it was my own creation but some of it was also the expectations others had on me. It took me years to solve these difficulties. And some of those I still haven't figured out. If only I had met a mental trainer who could have saved a lot of my time (and maybe my teachers time as well)!

³ Accessed 2019-10-20 <<https://www.nlpyhdistys.fi/tietoa/usein-kysyttya/>>

Like I already mentioned, I have been lucky when it comes to singing teachers, but I am also blessed with a family that gives me their support and I can always count on their help. To say in other words, I have a good safety net (or I could even say good mental safety net). But what if someone does not have that? What if someone has not met a teacher who is able to give a profound help with the psychological difficulties they are facing? Where can singers find help to break the mental barriers that are keeping them from performing up to their peak potential?

Janet Williams, a world-famous soprano, started having problems in performing quite late in her career. She tells about these problems in her book *Nail Your Next Audition*, which in her words she wishes to be singers' blueprint to achieving optimum performance not only for auditions, but also throughout singing life. She also tells how at first, she thought that all of her problems in singing were due to technical problems and that something was wrong with her voice. To her surprise these problems did not appear at practice sessions with voice teachers or coaches but would raise their ugly heads at the most inopportune times like during an important audition or on-stage. She describes it: "I was gripped with fear and could no longer concentrate on the music I so loved communicating." She started finding answers for her problems with the help of Alma Thomas, Don Green and Barry Green, each of whom had begun their careers as performance psychologists for top seeded athletes. Where are all these coaches? Where can one find help of these people? Does one have to be a world-famous soprano to have this kind of help? This is one of the problems we "common" opera singers seem to face; we do not know who we should turn to when we need help in mental training!

Williams says that: "The collective approach to eliciting optimal performance is grounded in mental conditioning, or the building of mental muscle as I came to call it. I believe that mental conditioning provides the foundation to being able to perform optimally under any and all types of stressful circumstances."⁴ She describes her book to be a help for singers to: "find the teachings of master performance psychologists adapted to the unique needs of singers"⁵. And that is what it is to perform as an opera singer: a unique thing. As much as I like reading Janet Williams' book and as much as it has helped me, I don't think 212 pages can necessarily give all the answers to the challenges singers have in their career and practice. To read books and have them as a help is a great tool one can have but it sure is not as valuable as meeting a good coach who is able to work

⁴ Williams (2006) p. iii

⁵ Ibid. p. iv

as a mirror and help reflect the thought patterns. Sometimes the hardest thing is to understand those thoughts that are holding us back.

Are we singers really getting help from mental training? Are we being introduced to the world of mental training and to the possibility that it actually could be a great help for us? I think we are more and more acknowledging the fact that we do need help in the mental process as well, the training of the voice might not be enough, like one of my teachers said that training a singer is 20% of the voice training and 80% of figuring out all the problems in the singer body and mind. She also said that she is not quite sure if she has all the right tools and the capacity to do that. I have talked to many student colleagues of mine, some of them say that they have had few courses of mental training. It is all good! Like I said some form of mental training is better than no training at all! But if you compare the amount of mental training athletes have to opera singers, athletes tell that they meet their mental coach at least once a week and if they have a need for more coaching they will get it. If opera singers truly are like athletes, why don't we have as much mental coaching?

We are all unique and we all have our own special skills but also difficulties. There are many singers who have absolutely no desire and no need for mental training. Some singers have their own way of finding the answers in solving the problems they meet along the way. There are people who have these skills. Hard to say is it naturally that they have these skills or is it because of events in their lives that have led to them to that point where they are able to solve their problems on their own, nonetheless they just seem to have figured it all out. But then there are these people who do not have the solutions for it, people who might be extremely talented in what they do but under pressure are not able to show their capacity. And if they are not finding the proper help, there is a risk that they might stop pursuing a professional career or, worst of all, maybe they stop singing completely. When it comes to art, we need all kinds of people, those who are strong, those who are sensitive, those who find it easy to see the bright side of life and those who are easily drawn into melancholy. Art reflects life and of the human spirit and all performers should have the right to find the way to work at their very best and be able to break the mental barriers. That's why mental training should be self-evidence not just a fleeting moment or a one single course where the singers only get a brief view of all the possibilities mental training can give them.

Jack J. Lesyk, Ph.D. from the Ohio Center for Sports Psychology lists nine skills that are common with successful athletes:

1. choose and maintain a positive attitude
2. maintain a high level of self-motivation
3. set high, realistic goals
4. deal effectively with people
5. use positive self-talk
6. use positive mental imagery
7. manage anxiety effectively
8. manage their emotions effectively
9. maintain concentration

Lesyk thinks that these skills are necessary for performing well in sport as well in non-sport performance situations. He believes that all of these skills are learned and can be improved through instruction and practice.⁶ I agree with Lesyk, these skills are necessary when it comes to performing and are really important for opera singers! Even if these skills might seem really simple, it is surprisingly hard to maintain all of these skills at the same time. It is also really hard to give a self-evaluation of these skills. I talked to my sister about Lesyk's list and we were going it through step by step. Mostly I managed to evaluate my skills quite well but when we were at the number five on the list, I said that: "I think I use quite positive self-talk...", she said to me: "What? You? No! You say so horrible things about yourself sometimes that it breaks my heart!". Then I started thinking about it, I really sometimes say unnecessarily horrible things to myself. Positive self-talk is something I have to learn my brain to do! When it comes teaching yourself something new, there are very few people who manage do it without any help at all. And sometimes we are unable to see the things that we need to develop in ourselves and most of all in our way of thinking. Therefore, quite often, behind every successful performer, there is a group of people who gives the performer help in every possible aspect.

Are there any downsides when it comes to mental training? Mostly it is easy to see the positive sides of mental training. In my opinion the downsides might be that in opera there are relatively little amount of people who has specialised in training opera singers or even training musicians. This might lead to the problem that the trainer is unable to see the whole picture of the performer's requirements in the artistic skills and therefore is not able to give a profound help.

⁶ Accessed 2019-10-20 <<https://www.sportpsych.org/nine-mental-skills-overview>>

The master and apprentice type of teaching and learning in music is something that is also necessary, we need good musicians to teach us, no mental trainer can ever replace a good music teacher, but maybe they could work side by side.

I once again had a long discussion with my singer friends about the downsides of mental training and it seems that there are still quite a lot of prejudice regarding mental training. One singer had this image of a serious athlete standing at the sports arena, preparing for the upcoming performance. She said to me: "That is not what I want to do. I want to maintain my sensitivity and be able to feel all the emotions!" I admit that it can become a downside if singing becomes just a mission one has to do. and has to do it at all costs. But this leads me back to number eight on Lesyk's list: to manage emotions effectively. Maybe mental training, instead of just making us singers serious achievers, could be a helpful tool in recognizing the emotions which are helping us to communicate even better with the audience? Maybe instead of becoming a cold-hearted executor, mental training gives us a better opportunity to become even more sensitive performer? The only difference is that maybe we could learn to have the control over our emotions instead of emotions having control over us?

All in all, mental training could be a great help for us performers to be able to accomplish higher level or even the highest level of performing under a pressure. It could be a great help in understanding ourselves and our emotions better and therefore it could help us to communicate better with the audience. It is because of communication we singers sing. We want to be able to touch as many hearts as we possibly can. The moments when we are able to forget about ourselves and make the music the main focus is what makes the most impact on people. To get to that point we have to have a good understanding of ourselves. How can we put ourselves aside and make it all about music if we are not capable of understanding ourselves? If we just don't know who we are and how we function?

Situations in life are changing all the time and we might not always know the best way to react to these situations. Mental training gives us tools to handle these situations better and gives us the possibility to perform even if life itself has given us challenges and difficulties. Mental training is a great aid when we learn to understand ourselves. Even though it is still hard for us opera singers to find suitable mental trainers, it makes me happy to notice that rising number of singers are finding help from mental training to overcome the barriers in different phases of their career. I myself am still looking for a mental trainer whom I want to work with. In the meanwhile, I rely on

reading good books such as: *Nail Your Next Audition* (Janet Williams), *The Art of Mental Training* (Dc Gonzalez) and *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Daniel Kahneman), to mention few as an example. My sincere wish is that maybe someday opera singers have mental training as a daily help in their occupation and that instead of brief courses in music schools it becomes an established subject which is taught throughout the studies and the career from the very beginning to the very last performance!

Reference List

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