Operatic becomings: A narrative exploration of singers' personal and professional development

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Abstract
Prior research has demonstrated that the highly competitive professional environment faced by musicians and music students can increase risk for a variety of mental health concerns. However, therapists know relatively little about this population, the stressors they face, or how musicians and music students navigate and make meaning of the diverse stressors they encounter personally and professionally. The present narrative inquiry (NI) study, explored the experiences of five advanced classical operatic trainees as they navigated diverse personal, professional, and mental health concerns while pursuing education and employment in this highly competitive discipline. Narrative analysis of collected interview data was grounded in constructivist theory and yielded five coherent narratives, each centered around the personal meaning-making process of its generating artist in order to afford clinicians insight and understanding related to the clinical needs of this under-studied population. All reference to “singers” in this article refers to singers in the field of art-music performance, more vernacularly known as “classical singers” or “opera singers.”
Keywords: Opera, Music Performance Anxiety (MPA), Mental Health
Introduction

The highly competitive professional environment faced by musicians and music students, including singers, can increase risk for a variety of mental health concerns, including burnout (Bernhard, 2005; Bernhard, 2007; Spahn et al, 2004; Teasely & Buchanan, 2016), anxiety (Diehl, 2016; Stephenson & Quarrier, 2005), depression (Vitale, 2009; Young et al, 2013; Young & Hippel, 1996), and substance abuse (Butkovic & Dopudj, 2017; Fishbein et al, 1988; Stormer, 2017). Despite these risk factors, therapists know relatively little about this population, their stressors, or the developmental process by which singers navigate these risks personally and professionally. In fact, many keyword searches related to music, musicians, music majors, mental health, psychology, counseling psychology, and clinical psychology yielded minimal empirical literature, very little of which was directly related to therapeutic treatment.

Available literature focuses on educational experiences (e.g. Berhnard et al., 2005, 2007; Demirbatir, 2012) and attrition rates. This small body of literature also neglects the unique experiences of singers, as opposed to those whose instruments are external tools and not embodied aspects of the self. Extant research has elucidated the long-held assumption that different instrument types share unique professional cultures (Benedek et al, 2014; Butkovic & Dopudj, 2017) and that certain performative roles (e.g., being a soloist) are more highly correlated with symptoms of psychological distress than others (e.g., orchestral and ensemble playing) (Vitale, 2009). Further still, the highly visible, image-driven nature of classical singing performance has been shown to be a risk factor for perfectionistic tendencies and eating disorder development when compared to other types of performers (DiPasquale, 2012; Aksoydan & Camc, 2009; Hildebrandt et al, 2012).
Singing, Psyche and Soma

Anecdotally, many singers describe working on themselves and their personal issues as an essential component of becoming artists. The technique-based work of building their vocal instrument and gaining proficiency with vocal mechanics is key, yet in order to gain their fullest freedom of expression in performance, many singers turn inward, facing their own personal issues (Sandgren, 2002; Sherman, 2013). This often involves re-storying their experiences, finding a meaningful narrative that explains who they are and who they become as they encounter and overcome diverse professional obstacles. This process organizes the individual’s history into a worldview-shaping narrative that can be quite powerful (Specter-Mersel, 2010).

The present study explores the experiences of five advanced opera trainees to gain insight and understanding into the challenges, stressors, and mental health concerns they face, how they make meaning of the obstacles they overcome, and how they develop en route to becoming professional artists. The study’s primary research questions are: How do singers engage with themselves and their technique as they work toward realizing their full artistic potential? Where must we as clinicians and pedagogues look to understand and assist singers in their suffering?

A Culture of Self-criticism

Musicians and music students are more likely than many others to disregard objective, external methods of evaluation, focusing instead on personally defined understanding of perfection (Depasquale, 2012). This perfectionism is further apparent in that musician-related literature operationalizes anxiety as the fear of imperfection (Barlow, 2000; Brodsky, 2006; Kemp, 1996; Langerdorfer et al, 2006).

This oft-held expectation of perfection can lead to intense distress. Fishbein et al. (1988) uses the term “absolute standards” to describe the professional expectation of perfection and
argue that this dynamic has only intensified with increasingly high-fidelity recording technology. Individual musicians compare their performances against those of leading performers in their field in order to identify and address technical deficits. Among singers, this can be especially problematic, due to the internal and deeply personal nature of the instrument. Further, singers face the audience head-on, without any physical barriers between their bodies and the audience. Renowned soprano Renee Fleming (as quoted in Diehl, 2016, p. 6) notes,

“There is nothing to hold on to. There is nothing between you and the audience. And the other thing is that we’re actually looking at the audience and most musicians are more involved with their instruments. Or the conductor, he is looking at the ensemble he’s conducting. Singing is definitely such a lot more personal…you know, we can’t exchange our instrument for a new one. It is us, because our voices are in our bodies, so each one is unique, just as we are.”

This level of vulnerability and instrumental embodiment could explain why singers have been shown to have three times the trait anxiety rates of a normative sample (Kenny et al, 2004).

The present study’s participants echo this sentiment. As Participant #1 explained: “It is you. They’re not criticizing your instrument, they’re criticizing YOU [capitals added for emphasis].” The present study explored these phenomena. The study’s guiding questions: How have professional/training stressors impacted you/your mental health and how have you navigated these stressors? were explored through semi-structured, life story interviews with five advanced (master’s and doctoral degree seekers) singers. Participants attest that this voice-as-self identification makes personal artistic difficulties all the more trying. Nagel (2010) argues that an audience’s acceptance or rejection of a performance can feel like a personal judgment of the singer’s own self, stating that unresolved personal issues can play out in performances. Up to
79% of music students link their self-worth to their perceived performance quality (Dews & Williams, 1989; Nagel, 1988; Kenny et al, 2004), so it seems meaning-making and narrative restructuring could be essential for both musical growth and personal well-being. Equating self-worth with performance quality can negatively impact individual singers’ quality of life if unaddressed. Further, these high-stakes and absolute standards of the field characterize the culture of singers’ professional environments (Nagel, 2010; Sandgren, 2002). As Paris and Epting (2004, p. 21) state,

“We are more inclined to collude with a prevailing meaning (narrative, discourse) that assaults our very sense of worth as human beings rather than accept an alternative that may be far more validating but seems to threaten us with expulsion or estrangement from those communities that matter to us most. Here we are talking about processes of meaning-making that are profoundly personal, and yet, profoundly social as well.”

This culture of perfectionism (Kenny et al, 2004) might further singers’ development of personal life stories (Specter-Mersel, 2010) centered around perfectionism and that contribute further to experiences of anxiety and shame, compounding the need for an understanding of how these individuals develop more validating narratives toward healthy coping.

Methods

Participants

Five Caucasian American students (two men, three women) aged 24-39 seeking either Master’s (1) or Doctoral (4) degrees in applied music participated in semi-structured, life story interviews. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Each interview lasted between 75 and 120 minutes. Participants gave informed consent prior to engaging in the interview and
interviews were conducted either in participants’ homes or via secure teleconferencing platforms. Data and narratives were co-constructed throughout the research process (Chase, 2005).

**Procedure**

Semi-structured, life-story interviews exploring personal, musical, and professional experiences, once transcribed, yielded over 200 pages of text detailing participants’ constructions of their past, present, and future (Kim, 2015, p. 167), and narrative meaning was sought through data analysis and interpretation (Kim, 2015, p. 190) focused on participants’ construed meanings related to personal identity, coping, and professional development. Narrative smoothing (Kim, 2015, p. 193) was used to enhance narrative readability, and flavoring particles (e.g. like, literally, um), and interviewer content were removed after analysis. The resulting narratives illustrated events’ temporality and participants’ causal conclusions of past events’ impacts on their sense of self, present experiences, and future possibilities (Chase, 2005; Whiffen, 2014). These conclusions (e.g. “minimal childhood support made me an independent person”) were identified through participant attestations (e.g. “my father’s death was the most impactful experience of my life”) and member checking throughout the analytic process. Transcripts and recordings were repeatedly reviewed over a period of six months to identify subtler or potentially overlooked conclusions, thus insuring minimal author influence and maximal privileging of participant voices in the final narratives.

**Results and Analysis**

The narratives yielded by these five students’ in-depth, life-story interviews are presented below, followed by a discussion of themes. To ensure maximum anonymity, minimal demographic data are provided.
#1 (26 year-old, White male)

I’m a really good tuba player, and I guess I can sing. I was trying to find scholarships for college. I had a lot of interests growing up, but the only thing I really LOVED was composing. I couldn’t afford to go to school for it, but my test scores got me into pre-law so I could become a lawyer and make some money. I became a pre-law major singing in choirs for scholarship money to help with school. I was miserable. I figured if I transferred schools, I could at least be with my girlfriend, so I flowed in that direction. I auditioned at her school, and one teacher took a chance on me. I moved and declared a choral education major, thinking if nothing else I could get a job as a choir teacher. How bad could that be?

In my junior year, a coach approached me. “You’re better than you think you are. How would you like to start doing coachings?” he asked. By my senior year, he gave me an ultimatum: Switch to performance, and really “DO it”, or he’d quit coaching me. I realized I wanted to sing professionally, but more importantly, for the first time I felt someone believed in me, and thought I could succeed at something that was truly my own, just for me. I threw myself into it, a late starter at 22, unsure if I was a baritone or tenor (nobody knew), doing five coachings a week and determined to sing. I came to graduate school as a tenor, with minimal tenor training and almost no tenor repertoire on my resume. My first graduate assignment was a VERY high, floating, pure tenor role. I had begun my journey into tenordom and was setting out on a career path. I’d also entered fully into its psychological difficulties.

People introduce themselves in professional spaces by saying, “I’m Jennifer, and I’m a soprano.” People heard me sing and would ask, “What ARE you?” I had billed myself as a tenor, but I still wondered, “Am I a tenor with no high or a baritone with no low?” Daily, I interacted with myriad people (conductors, directors, coaches, coworkers) who felt completely entitled to make
value-laden, totally subjective judgements about ME. They might be talking about aspects of my performance, but their comments cut ME. Every musical, artistic, acting decision comes from my personal history. My experiences shape the way I interpret a score, personify a character, or portray a specific raw emotion. When they critiqued me, often because they just disliked something for reasons they might not even understand, that taste-driven feedback cut all the way to my sense of self. You can’t buy a new instrument as a singer, you can’t restring yourself or change your mouthpiece to adjust your tone, and people feel free to comment (often harshly) about YOU.

Learning to cope with that has been a big adjustment. No one in an opera production cares how I’m doing on a personal level. Learning how to manage all of that in this highly personal work and still come home and do the dishes, love and support my wife, and be a good pet owner involved learning how to have a life outside of opera, to develop and foster the 1,001 interests I have.

**Themes and Psychological Risk Factors**

Evident themes congruent with phenomena of shame, psychological distress, and internalized judgment congruent with extant literature (Nagel, 2010; Vitale, 2009; Young et al, 2013; Young & Hippel, 1996) appear here, as well as in other narratives. This singer marked his turning point as enhanced confidence and self-efficacy through a coach’s belief in his abilities and support. The socially co-constructed meaning, (I’m capable because an empowered other believes in me) combined with the idea expressed across participants that musical interpretation is shaped by meaningful personal experiences could exacerbate the participant #1’s perception that “They’re not criticizing your instrument, they’re criticizing YOU” and increase vulnerability to self-doubt and performance anxiety (Diehl, 2016; Nagel, 2010).
“She’s got real talent! You’ve gotta push her toward that!” I was three or four years old, and all I had done was stay on key singing *Happy Birthday* at a friend’s party, but I did like to sing. In high school I sang in choir and did musicals, but I really thought I wanted to be a doctor. I enrolled in college as a pre-med major but and I was MISERABLE. I didn’t realize how central music had been to my life. When it was gone, so was a huge part of myself. I’d struggled with anxiety before, but I became DEPRESSED. I was always tired. It felt like something had been taken from me.

I auditioned at a new school and pursued classical vocal training. It was the best decision I ever made, but it was also jarring. I’d always studied traditionally academic subjects where testing and evaluation were private experiences. If I performed badly on a test, it was between me and the teacher. Now I was on display. Final exams, tests, and quizzes were in front of an audience. I started to struggle with full-on panic attacks every time I had a jury or exam. Voice lessons were also hard. My undergrad teacher was not the warmest person. After she once threw me out of my lesson for being underprepared, I became fearful of each week’s lesson. What had I forgotten? What might be undone? I adjusted. I learned to manage that anxiety, but my current teacher doesn’t critique me enough, which also makes me anxious. It’s hard to find the right balance with a teacher.

My personal growth has been the most central part of navigating professional stress. Growing up comes with so much uncertainty. Had I not pursued music, I wouldn’t have nearly as strong a sense of self. When I was a miserable pre-med major, I knew intuitively that I just wanted to sing. Despite the risks that come with this career path, I listened to myself and now I’m aware
every day how much I love what I do. It’s also hugely stressful. There’s a highly prescriptive developmental path for singers that requires a great deal of financial investment with no guaranteed returns. It’s a hard and a highly emotional career path. Sometimes I have to sing about emotions I’ve never really felt before. I think a lot of people shy away from that because it’s unnerving to contemplate how you’d feel if someone close to you was murdered or got deathly ill with consumption, which happens a lot in opera. I think it has helped me connect with emotions I’ve never felt (at least not yet), especially grief. Directors always tell you to pull from experience. When I’m able to perform and dig into those sorts of things, it can really pull me out of myself. When you’re onstage singing by yourself it’s only you and your emotion, and your understanding of the piece, and how you see the character, and I want to express it through the window of myself.

After all of these experiences, I never underestimate the importance of self, and being who you are. You have to listen to yourself, your gut, to determine what’s right and wrong for you. I’m happy I listened to myself when I wanted to change majors. All the best things in my life have come from trusting myself, and that comes from, and goes into, singing too. All the decisions I make performing, accepting or declining jobs, all come down to listening to myself and not overthinking.

**Themes and Psychological Risk Factors**

Here again is the emergence of performance anxiety and shame congruent with the literature (Barlow, 2000; Brodsky, 2006; Kemp, 1996; Langerdorfer et al, 2006). As this participant’s experience of evaluation shifted from private (eg traditional testing) to public (performance evaluation) she described anxiety attacks she learned to manage, as well as a sense of personal insecurity she eventually overcame, both of which she dealt with by finding a sense
of internal strength and trust in her own ways of knowing. Further, she situates this trust of self as central to her performance, which could leave her vulnerable to an internalizing response to criticism. Anxiety management, enhancement of self-efficacy, and maintaining a strong sense of self in the face of critique could all be focal areas of therapy for this individual that are directly related to personal, professional, and musical aspects of her narrative.

**#3 (39 year-old, White male):**

I come from an arts background. My dad’s a music teacher, and several people on both sides of my family are professional musicians, so it was just in my blood. I’d go to my dad’s concerts and rehearsals, my brother and I would play piano and sing in talent shows, and I picked up the saxophone in fourth grade. It was the eighties, every song had a cool saxophone solo, and I thought saxophone was awesome.

When my brother asked me to sing a duet with him for his bachelor’s capstone recital, I said no. I hated classical music. I wound up singing a cheesy duet with him anyway, and after the recital his teacher tried to recruit me for the opera program. I refused and turned down a full scholarship. I had second thoughts and contacted the teacher, who set up a voice lesson and then an audition. Singing was a lot different than the saxophone. You can’t change your instrument. Screw it up and your instrument is gone. There’s no way to separate your singing voice from you. When somebody judges it, they’re judging YOU. I think that’s the hardest thing about it.

When it comes to performance anxiety, I imagine it has to be higher for singers than most other musicians. When you’re judged for your musicianship it does affect you.

I remember the exact moment when I started doubting. I sang a pianissimo section that culminated in a soft, sustained high note. I always felt like I nailed that section. But when I was done my teacher said, “Only 12 to 13% of the audience is going to like that sound.” Getting that
kind of criticism from my teacher was devastating. It would take years to learn to take that kind of criticism and maintain my self-confidence. At that time, I tried to do what my teacher wanted. I strove to achieve sounds not meant for my body by “repeating the command.”

With a later coach I began regaining my self-trust and self-confidence. My first teacher had said, “Sometimes you’re better than the people who are teaching you. Your instincts might be better than those of the person telling you what to do. When you recognize that happening, let it go in one ear and out the other.” I wish I’d done that then. In the process of working with that teacher I undid so much good stuff from my prior teacher, and THAT’S where performance anxiety starts to set in. People sometimes complain about uncoachable singers; maybe they’re coachable. It’s not arrogance or cockiness, but there is a certain degree of self-confidence needed to help get through and continue as a successful singer.

Classical singing is a hard way to make a living. There’s not much money. It’s high-stress, and for three years I left it completely. I had a nervous breakdown and just quit. I built the eclectic resume of a classical singer: Administrative work in a Jewish hospice, merchandising ladies’ fine watches, kids’ clothing catalogues. I eventually started singing on the side again and got more and more work. I got administrative jobs with the local opera company and realized it wasn’t enough for me to be involved that way. I needed to be making the art, so I decided to pursue the DMA.

Having gone through all of these things, I’ve learned that so much depends on my state of mind. It takes willingness to say, “Screw it!” and just enjoy singing. The minute I do, I immediately feel it back from the audience, like waves of feeling washing through the room that are almost spiritual. I also need a life outside of music. Having a balanced life helps me take all of the criticism and uncertainty of the field less personally. My family and I lost everything in Katrina,
for instance. Our car wound up in the living room and we had to relocate to another state and start over. THAT didn’t affect my singing, but being told only 12-13% of the audience would like my sound devastated me and altered my entire approach for years. Keeping a balance and taking care of myself helps me stay sane and successful.

**Themes and Psychological Risk Factors**

Here, as in Participant #1’s narrative, we see how powerfully impactful external validation or criticism from a coach or teacher can be. This participant reports that surviving a natural disaster impacted him less than a teacher’s critique of his sound, which instilled self-doubt and anxiety until a later coach disagreed with this assessment in a meaningful way. This further illustrates the ubiquity of authoritative, external criticism these individuals face, as well as a tendency to internalize that criticism in ways that can increase risk for life-shaping experiences of anxiety and shame.

**#4 (24-year-old, White female)**

My undergraduate degree was in English education. I just did music on the side. After teaching English for two years, my dad died. It was sudden and unexpected. Grief gave me insight into pain and helped me relate to others’ pain. We all have families and personalities, and life throws us all into a blender and says, “Here’s what’s left.” I might have wanted to pursue performance but up to that point I followed a traditional path, did what I was supposed to do, got a usable degree. So much was out of my control: My relationships, the way I wanted them to be, how I thought others should act. Dealing with my grief and the grief of others helped me find more grace for people and myself. It also helped me realize that my dad would want me to be happy. I felt insecure about it, but I auditioned for graduate programs in voice.
Performing had always been stressful. I remember auditioning for a community play at six and being so nervous singing “I’m a little teapot.” I feared the physical manifestations of anxiety the most: That I would choke, be unable to breathe, pass out or something. That fear was there until recently. I remember being the lead in Oklahoma a few years ago in a small company. I was overprepared but I was still terrified that the physical manifestations of anxiety would take over. I would be in the middle of a song, wanting so desperately not to pass out or mess up, knowing that people are judging you. I’d be asking, “Am I good enough? Would someone else be better?” The constant competition of the performance world makes someone like me even more hyper-critical of themselves.

When I got to grad school I was insecure because I lacked an undergrad degree. I approached the people I thought were the best in the department and said, “I know this is weird but can I just sing for you? You’re really intimidating to me and I just want to sing for you and get it over with.” Singing in front of my peers helped me realize that we all expect the worst, that we all try to mind-read and predict the audience’s criticisms. There’s an internal sense of defeat even though they might not be thinking anything like that. It helps to realize that we all feel that way to some extent.

I’m a person of faith, which helps me separate my value as a person from my performance. I had to learn to see the meaning in my life outside of singing. My father’s death helped me realize that we all go through the blender in life. I remember interacting with people who didn’t know about his death. Insignificant interactions would overwhelm me and I’d think, “Don’t you know that nothing in my world is OK right now?” They didn’t, and I came to realize that everybody deserves the benefit of the doubt. This realization also helped me see that, as a Christian, it was pretty hypocritical to be as hard on myself while giving the rest of the world so much grace, and
I started to apply that grace to my own performance and others’ singing. This field is so competitive. Not only do you need to sing well, you need to know languages, music compositional theory. You need to be a good actor, self-promotor. You need to be insightful and emotionally aware. You need to dance and be physically attractive. I’ve come to know that it’s OK not to be the best at everything, even if it’s what the market wants, and that keeps me going.

**Themes and Psychological Risk Factors**

Participant #4 offers a strong example of Kenny et al.’s (2004) findings that singers experience trait anxiety at three times the rate of a normative sample, as well as risk factors for internalization of criticism as personal shame. This singer’s turning point centered around the death of her father, the meanings she made of that bereavement, and the enhanced self-efficacy, self-compassion, and grace she found for herself and others through that process. She became able to separate her sense of worth from performance and criticism.

**#5 (34-year-old, White female):**

I grew up hearing opera a lot, and I think I gravitated to the grandness of it, the big orchestra and big sounds. I was always singing *The Little Mermaid* or some other Disney song, and my grandma looks at my mom and says, “You know, she’s good at that, maybe you should put her in piano lessons and stuff.” It spiraled downward from there. There are certainly easier choices to be made with one’s life. It’s hard to be a musician, but especially a singer. Your voice is part of your body. You can’t separate from it, and it has to be an emotional thing. People pay for live performances to feel something, and YOU are the conduit of that emotion. YOU have to feel it so everyone else can too, which means you’ve just taken on a heck of a lot of feelings and amp up feelings you already have. You’re always living on the edge of a downward spiral.
I once had a teacher say, “Sometimes you don’t have enough scar tissue for a role.” I think there is some merit in a more “method” approach where you actually recall times that were painful or happy. Losing a pet might not compare to losing a human, but it can give you something to dig into. That is where the danger lies: opening up those wounds. You have to be able to package that back up at the end. I try to juxtapose the seriousness with which I take this craft against some levity. Off-stage I keep it as light as possible. I’m not going to sit there being “method” in my dressing room. I’m going to be listening to Madonna and voguing in the mirror. That way I can package up those emotions and pull them back out again only when I need to.

I think we cope through distraction. You need to give yourself a little happy hit and snap out of the performance role. Not all pieces are that emotional, but I do think the best performances are. You have to know as an artist that you’re giving a lot, it won’t be easy, and you won’t necessarily get much back in terms of money or accolades. By giving people the experience, I’m becoming the conduit of what the composer wanted, a conduit into experience. That affects me on that visceral leve. I’m allowing the audience to venture into the composer’s world by giving them a part of me. They’re able to say “I get that” and come along for the ride.

I’ve only ever had to play truly tragic characters a handful of times, but I do wonder if part of my strife during those contracts was because I was laid so bare. One of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do was a contract in a young artist program. I gave and gave but didn’t get the fellowship, and the rejection hurt so much. Even before the rejection, it’d been a very emotional time, maybe because I was living someone’s worst day onstage over and over again.

If I can’t reconcile the person who’s objectively lesser getting a part, the frustration is beyond what I can bear. It’s not who sang the best, but who you know. It’s rarely ever fair. When that happens, I work harder. I get defiant and bull-headed. It re-energizes me. It can be good in a
way. That young artist experience defined me for a while, though. I couldn’t rally against it. For the first time in my life I seriously considered not pursuing this career. I wanted to stay in music, but that had been such a shock that I had to take stock, to figure out how to do music on my own terms. I couldn’t suffer that again.

I’m proud of the work I’ve put in. The award I won in 2008 doesn’t mean much in 2019, but it means a lot to me that I’ve stuck it out. I try to attach my sense of achievement to something that’s a little more tangible than someone else’s fleeting opinion. I’ve not taken the most traditional path; I’ve definitely thrown weird forks in the road but you’ve gotta make your own way.

A little anecdote: I was living in NYC and I had no money. I was reading *Atlas Shrugged* on the subway on the way home from work (take from that what you will), and one of the characters is an orchestral composer who walked away, just decided he wasn’t going to bestow his gifts upon an unworthy public anymore. I’ll never forget crying on the subway as I realized that I can’t do this for others, that I have to do it for myself. The paycheck doesn’t last, the cheering doesn’t last. You have to decide, “This is mine and I’ll give it to whom I want.” Never fall into the trap of thinking you can only do it if someone else tells you that you’re good at it. Music is personal. You get to enjoy being the conduit and being on the journey with your audience, telling the story and experiencing this weird, “This is so emotional I’m going to yell it at you” kind of feeling. Do it for that. If I have to summarize how I’ve stuck around, it’s because I made the decision to do it anyway, despite the challenges. It’s always when I get to the end of my rope, when I scream, “Fuck this, I’m quitting!” that I’ll do one last audition. It’s like they smell my lack of fear and say, “Here’s a job!” and then I go have fun.
I always think about 9/11 and how Renee Fleming was at the smoldering rubble. Like they were probably not that far removed from digging bodies out and she was singing “Amazing Grace.” She said it was so important to her because it was this direct communication with people. I get teary thinking about it because that’s why we do it. That’s one of the darkest days I can remember, and I remember seeing that and thinking, “She’s right.” Music is almost spiritual. I just know this is what I’m supposed to do in the world.

**Themes and Psychological Risk Factors**

Depressive symptoms (congruent with Vitale, 2009; Young et al, 2013; Young & Hippel, 1996) appear in this narrative, as well as negatively valence perspectives that appear to be directly related to this individual’s experiences of nepotism in the field and the impact those have had on how she construes the world. This singer’s turning point appears to be related to repeated moments of realizing a sense of self that includes, but is separate from, her work.

**Conclusion**

**A population at risk**

Empirical understanding of singers’ meaning-making and development is needed to inform clinical practice and lead to early intervention with a population that is shown to be at risk for the development of mental health issues and psychological distress. To this end, I conducted a narrative inquiry (NI) study via in-depth, life story interviews with 5 singers regarding their personal and professional development, as well as their training and early career experiences. Constructivist and constructionist theories guided this exploration, examining how social dynamics and professional environments impact singers’ self-evaluation and how they individually construe what it means to be successful in both personal and professional capacities. Participants endorsed themes congruent with extant literature about performance anxiety.
(Arneson, 2010; Nagel, 2010; Stern et al, 2012; Stephenson & Quarrier, 2005), perfectionism, and deleterious psychological distress related to both (Kenny et al, 2004; Nagel, 2010; Vitale, 2009). Additionally, the most salient stressors endorsed across collected data arose from perceived personal inadequacies, with myriad financial stressors related to participants’ ability to provide for self and family given employment insecurities. For each participant, finding meaning in their personal lives was central as they learned to divorce their identities and self-worth from the absolute standards of the field. These five singers also shared the nuanced ways they came to cultivate a sense of identity as they navigated the diverse social, financial, and psychological stressors of pursuing higher education and careers in this highly competitive art form.

Each singer seemed to have one primary personal turning point in his or her journey, a profound experience or theme that helped focus and clarify the myriad smaller ways they had made meanings of their professional lives. These individual meanings shared common themes: Finding agency, accepting themselves and their limitations, and relaxing perfectionistic expectations. This helped each singer to cope, renew, and continue despite diverse stressors and obstacles. Singer #2, for example, realizing the fields’ demands were impossible to meet perfectly, found freedom from long-standing anxiety and a perceived need to exert external control. Learning that “all the best things in my life have come from trusting myself” enabled her to find peace and space for self-care instead of trying to please others. Similarly, Singer #4 developed a capacity for forgiveness and graciousness with herself and others that led to an overall higher quality of life across life domains.

**Areas of Clinical Need:**

Providers could benefit from a deeper understanding of the stressors described above. Each participant spoke to the identity-centric nature of their instrument and the intensely
personal ways they experienced criticism. Further, although some participants construed the deeply intense emotional processes inherent in their work as an opportunity to prepare for and/or process deeply affecting personal life experiences, all spoke to the negative impact that contacting these intense, often negatively valanced, emotions could have on their psyches. Three of the five participants described distraction as a primary method of coping with this intensity and other life stressors. Providers might benefit from attending to the potential ways that distractive/avoidant coping can quickly become deleterious to a person’s mental health especially in a population with above-average rates of substance abuse (Butkovic & Dopudj, 2017; Fishbein et al, 1988; Stormer, 2017). “Opera Man,” a persona described by Singer 1 developed with the aid of a mental health professional, appears to have been an effective way for the described singer to cope with criticism that had once felt cutting and deeply personal. This singer wore superhero T-shirts to rehearsals and conceptualized himself as “Opera Man” for their duration to depersonalize the experience of harsh feedback. Other, less intentionally chosen means of distraction (e.g. substance abuse, sexual escape, etc.), could easily become negatively impactful on diverse aspects of individuals’ functioning and psychological health and are common in this population (Butkovic & Dopudj, 2017; Fishbein et al, 1988; Stormer, 2017).

Participants all described issues related to support. According to Singer #5, mentoring and teaching positions are most often held by individuals who have retired and subsequently transitioned to teaching after successful performance careers. Although this makes intuitive sense, these individuals rarely have any background training in education, theories of learning, or mentorship. The result, described across interviews, is that these individuals often take a one-size-fits-all approach, assuming that pedagogical metaphors and approaches they found most helpful in their own journeys will work universally. Each singer interviewed discussed ways in
which some of their past mentors embodied this dynamic to their pedagogical and developmental
deficit, and spoke to the relief and growth that came when they eventually studied under teachers
with an openness to individual differences and a more nuanced understanding of
developmentally appropriate pedagogy.

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

Based on these participants’ stories and feedback, it stands to reason that clinical
interventions shown to be efficacious in the treatment of mental health disorders related to
anxiety, depression, shame, and avoidant coping could be highly helpful for this population,
especially if utilized within a context that supports exploration of identity, personal story, and
meaning-making. Acceptance-based approaches in therapy (e.g. ACT) might help singers
navigate these stressors and more clearly delineate their identities and their personal and
professional lives. The methods by which these participants learned to navigate these diverse
stressors all appear to have been developed in a degree of isolation, despite their many common
factors, indicating that the addition of therapeutic intervention could be powerfully helpful.

In summary, this study illuminates key vulnerability factors among singers and the
central role played by meaning-making in navigating these factors. Firstly, the voice-as-self
orientation among singers can intensify internalization of criticism, which can exacerbate self-
doubt and the self-critical and perfectionistic tendencies common to all musicians. This
orientation might also point to the utility of narrative, meaning-making approaches to therapy
and pedagogy with singers, whose developmental processes appear inseparable from their
personal stories. Further, these findings illustrate that successful resolution of personal and
musical difficulties leads to enhanced overall quality of life among participants, a finding with
many positive ramifications. Future research should build upon current findings through highly
focused investigation of meaning-making and personal narrative across diverse performative tasks.
References


Monrouxe, L. V. (2009). Solicited audio diaries in longitudinal narrative research: a view from


Appendix A:

1) Can you start by telling me a little about your, personal experience as a singer?
   How old were you when you first became aware of an enjoyment of singing?
   What experiences impacted your experience of singing?

2) What role has anxiety played in your experience as you've developed as a performer?

3) What stands out as having been the most stressful moments of your musical development?

4) To what extent do you feel that your singing is an aspect of your identity? To what extent does your voice feel like a part of 'you?' how does this level of identification impact your development as a singer, your experience on stage?

5) In your becoming as a singer, how did your sense of self and relationship to yourself unfold as you pursued your professional goals?

6) How did your pedagogical pursuits impact your experiences? Your personal growth?

7) Could you take a moment to reflect on ways that your positionality, your age, ability status, race, ethnicity, and sense of self affected your educational and personal development in this line of work? What experiences increased your awareness of such things?

8) Describe the ways in which performing feels like a personal act.
9) When did you decide to pursue this vocationally? What reflective process informed that decision?

10) As you've grown, how have life events shaped your experience of who you are and how you approached your art form?

11) How would you describe your experience of voice lessons? What patterns do you notice as you reflect on those memories?

12) How have you "made meaning" of your vocal development? What's the moral of the story, the take away from your endeavors?

13) What questions would you add to this interview if you were seeking to understand how singers' lives are impacted by their work?