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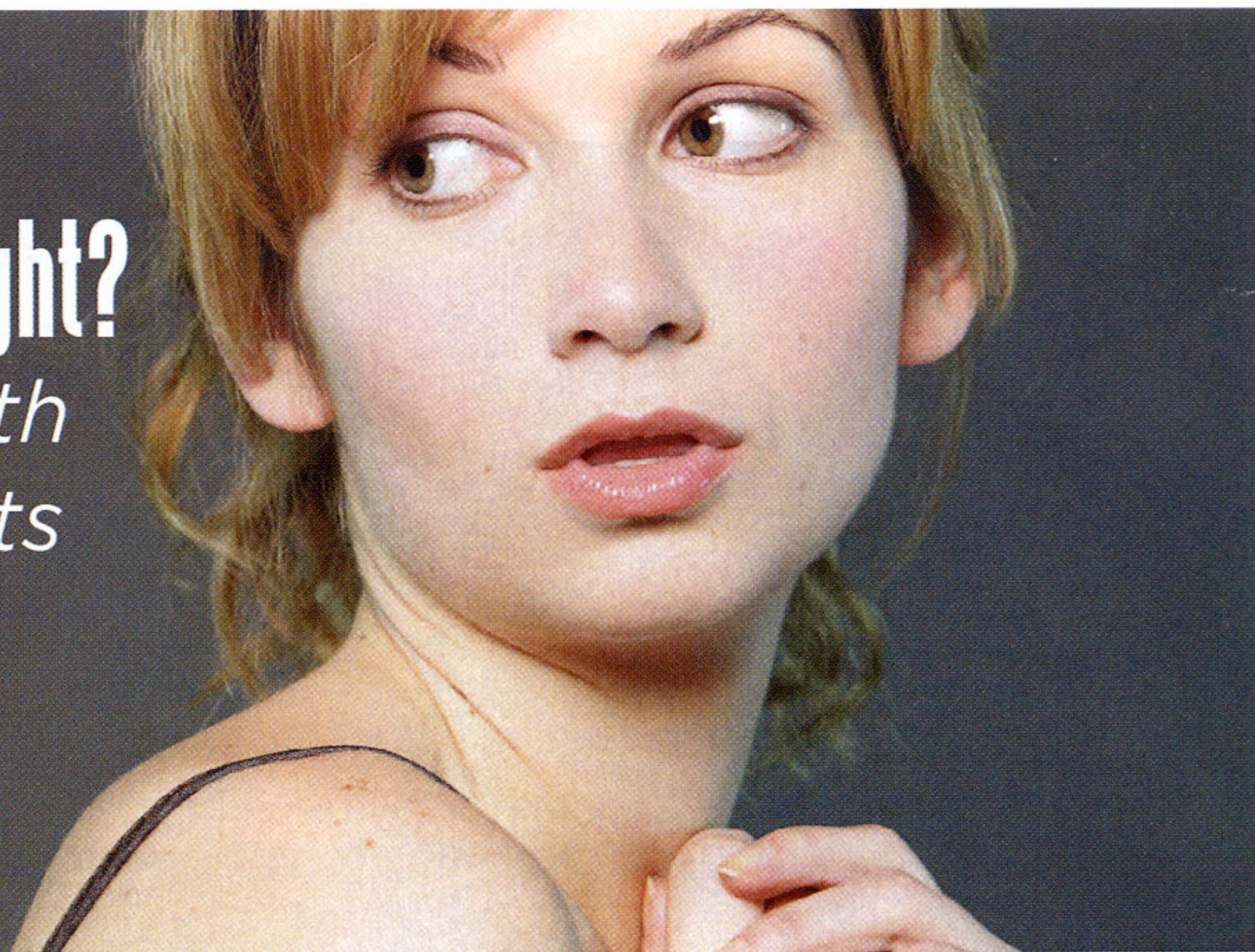


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Suffer from Stage Fright?

Learn to Sing with Positive Thoughts

by Greg Waxberg



Society emphasizes perfection: the perfect body, the perfect hair, the perfect complexion. Flawless, airbrushed images assault us at every turn, silently demanding we live up to them. The era of recordings has created the same unrealistic expectation for singers, and this unattainable pursuit of perfection causes many to suffer from acute stage fright (also known as performance anxiety). Here, several industry experts share ideas for overcoming what can be a debilitating affliction.

Backstage/Lincoln Center, the companion program to PBS' *Live From Lincoln Center*, produced a thought-provoking segment about stage fright in the 1990s. Luciano Pavarotti, Sherrill Milnes, Dolora Zajick, Kallen Esperian, and Deborah Voigt contributed almost unanimous ideas: singing in front of people is not a normal situation, going on stage means being scared, nerves are always present, nerves help generate a good performance, and your heart rate will increase.

Why do singers experience these feelings? Singers are human beings, and human beings aren't perfect. Maybe more importantly, what can you do to cope?

Before exploring the answers to those questions, stage fright—technically, performance anxiety—is not the same as “butterflies,” the nerves prior to a performance. That's adrenaline, and it's a normal sensation that provides energy and can enhance your performance. The problems arise when the adrenaline stays too high for too long.

“It starts to become stage fright when you start to become nonfunctional, when you can't achieve what you wanted to achieve in a performance [or] rehearsal,” says Michael I.

Goode, trumpeter and author of *Stage Fright in Music Performance and its Relationship to the Unconscious* (trumpetworkspress.com). In

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other words, he says, it is not stage fright if the feelings disappear shortly after the performance begins. It is stage fright when you've worked to prepare something and everything falls apart.

“Stage fright becomes debilitating when the person... is distracted from the task at hand to answer the question, ‘How am I doing?’” says

Dennis Helmrich, vocal coach at Tanglewood and chairman of the Accompanying Division at the School of Music of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “You can't perform and evaluate your performance at the same time,” he says.

The path to overcoming stage fright is awareness of the problem, and the problem begins with negative messages and emotions in your subconscious that have been shaped by a lifetime of experiences. When your nervous system responds to this negativity, your body doesn't function as well.

“Every time we have an emotionally stressful event, we create a little piece of garbage, and this piece of garbage gets stored in our psychological and physiological memory,” Goode says, “and we pile these things up over time.” The “garbage” prevents positive signals from reaching the conscious mind, causes stress, and has to be released from the body.

One possible solution is to “reprogram the brain,” says Wilma Wever, a member of the voice faculty at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York and founder of Singers Wellness (www.geocities.com/singerswellness/), a division of Musicians' Wellness Inc.

“Write down all the positive feedback you received as a performer, or create an encouraging top-10 list and read it 10 times a day,” she says.

Goode, explaining that your body will react based on what you think, offers this advice: Imagine that negative ideas are like graffiti on a blackboard. Erase them and think about a time when you were in your element on stage and everything went well.

“If that’s not possible,” he says, “think of a time when you were completely relaxed, happy and safe.”

Juliana Bishop Hoch, general and artistic director of Loveland Opera Theatre, also espouses this visualization technique, which she says singers should use for at least two weeks before performing.

Deep breaths and relaxation exercises can calm the nervous system. “Some singers find it hard to take deep breaths when they feel anxious because of physical tension. Concentrate on the exhalation. Blow out all the air you can. It’s easier to let the lungs fill up afterward,” Wever says.

Goode and Helmrich maintain that focusing on and being absorbed in the music are crucial; they allow the music and your expression of the music to be priorities. That focus—the goal of creating art—also can help alleviate the fear of making mistakes.

“[Singers] think they have to have a note-perfect performance in order to be a great artist. It’s just the opposite,” Goode says. “People are so obsessed with perfection that they don’t realize that true perfection comes from forgetting about perfection, but concentrating on trying to make art and tell a story through the music.”

Goode believes conductors and music schools are largely responsible

for making singers feel that mistakes are not allowed, so that the human element, the emotions and the risk-taking, are left behind.


Hoch attributes the fear of making mistakes to technology. “We all live in a ‘super-fantastic’ era of perfect recordings and perfect videos. How can one live up to a recording that took 200 takes to make the high notes perfect? The pressure is tremendous,” she says.

Like Goode, she wants singers to be human and take risks. “I don’t expect perfection. I expect to be entertained,” Hoch says.

To lessen the fear of making mistakes, Hoch emphasizes thorough preparation of a work, with many months of studying and coaching. That preparation could include two or three performances for smaller audiences.

“One of the biggest causes of performance anxiety is lack of thorough preparation. Working out the kinks ahead of time will make a much more confident performance,” she says.

For any singer, it’s important to realize that past behavior doesn’t have to be future behavior. Stage fright can be reckoned with—it’s possible you’ll never have to deal with it once your mind is on track for healthy, beneficial, artistic thoughts. More experience on stage certainly helps, because the stage feels less foreign and scary, but changing habits is probably the biggest step.

Greg Waxberg is music director of Mississippi Public Broadcasting Radio, program annotator for opera companies, and a free-lance writer covering the arts. He can be reached at GregOpera@aol.com. 

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