

Singers in Waiting | What Singers Actually Do While Awaiting Their Performance

by Jochen Ressel



Around this time last year, I penned an ABS Blog article titled "Culture – What is it good for?" exploring the significance or insignificance of cultural events, such as those held in Vienna at the turn of the year. Following a series of recent concerts where I had the privilege of performing, I'd like to shed light on an aspect largely unknown to today's audiences: what occurs for singers as we wait on stage while the orchestra plays parts one to three of Beethoven's 9th Symphony? What is the "inner game of singing" during this time? And why might this insight be valuable for you?

I refer to the "inner game" having read two remarkable books on the subject: "The Inner Game of Tennis" and "The Inner Game of Fencing." As someone who has intensely practiced both sports, these authors provided intriguing insights into the thoughts and emotions during competition and how to effectively manage them. It heightened my awareness of experiences I've had on the court or fencing platform but never grasped so vividly. It made me a better tennis player and fencer. Consequently, I developed strategies, with my coach's support, to navigate these challenges.

While not all of you might become singers, you may find yourselves in situations awaiting a performance: perhaps during a business meeting before your presentation, or preparing for a job interview in a lobby. Understanding what singers do while waiting might prove helpful in such instances. I hope so, at least...

Maintaining Body Tension

In a concert hall filled with around 1,800 people, the orchestra poised, the conductor taking the stage, applause echoing, the conductor gestures to sit down, in this few moments of silence, maintaining inner tension becomes paramount. Seated on a small, uncomfortable bench, knowing cameras are capturing every move, perhaps even live TV coverage, for the next 45 minutes, finding a position that allows upright, elegant yet relaxed sitting is crucial. Failure to find comfort can lead to tense vocal delivery and prevents sound quality at the highest level. Thus, physical balance is key for a brilliant performance.

Relaxation Amidst Waiting

Between the first three movements, brief breaks of around 30 seconds to a minute allow us to relax muscles essential for singing – neck, shoulders, throat, and cheeks. We recall the comfortable posture for the next movement. These seconds serve to address any discomfort – a bead of sweat, a misaligned bow tie. Utilizing this brief respite sensibly is imperative before returning to tension mode.

Monitoring Personal State

Constantly monitoring our physical state is essential. Is there slight perspiration under the stage spotlights? Is the hot air drying our throats? As a contact lens wearer, dry, hurting eyes can be an issue. Whether it's a tissue, eye drops, or a soothing lozenge for the throat, knowing how to rectify these concerns in the fleeting moments ensures peak performance.

Mental Focus Through Active Listening

Amidst managing tension and physical condition, maintaining mental focus is crucial. We listen attentively, as if part of the orchestra, aligning ourselves with it. Singing demands harmony with the orchestra, necessitating awareness of variations of tempo, dynamics and intensity set by the conductor and which may differ from rehearsals or previous performances, creating an atmosphere that we, as singers, must synchronize with when we begin. This active listening keeps us focused, preventing wandering thoughts, crucial when we must rise at a specific moment in the fourth movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony, synchronising with 130 other singers. This rising is the first proof that we are focussed and synchronised and the audience will see clearly, if one remains seated and jumps up in surprise a second later. Active listening prevents such embarrassment.

Additionally, active listening gives us the opportunity to check our voice a few moments before the choral part begins. We use the fortissimo part of the orchestra a few moments before we raise, to add our voice in a super pianissimo and thereby check whether the voice is ready or whether a short clearing of the throat is required – all very quietly, unnoticed by the audience in the fortissimo of the entire orchestra. The certainty that the voice is in order gives us confidence. Successful vocal performance has a lot to do with confidence and is therefore of crucial importance.

Conclusion

We don't idle away time waiting for our cue. It's an active period on stage, aimed at delighting the audience when our performance begins. You might find parallels in your professional or personal life, waiting for your big moment. Consider these points to manage similar situations: maintaining body tension, using relaxation moments, monitoring and addressing physical sensations, and sustaining mental focus. Wishing you success in your future performances, wherever they may be!

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!

About the author



Jochen Ressel is the Secretary-General of the Austro-British Society. He worked several years for a UK company and its HQ in London. As a tenor, he is a member of the choir ensemble of the Vienna Cathedral Music, which provides musical accompaniment to large high masses, masses, requiems, and concerts in St. Stephen's Cathedral about 25 times a year. He also performs on a project basis in various choirs, including the Vienna Singakademie, which regularly performs Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra at the turn of the year. In his professional life, he holds the position as Head of Communications & Fundraising of the Sovereign Order of Malta – Grand Priory of Austria.

The views expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.