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Of Comparison, Envy, and Self-Enhancement: The Dark Side of Listening to Your Peers' Performances



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AS YOU READ THIS, THE ACADEMIC YEAR is wrapping up, studios are beginning summer schedules, and students are performing in front of their teachers, public audiences, and (perhaps most nerve-wracking) their peers. As I write this, young singers are furiously preparing for, or are in the midst of the thrilling and/or excruciating audition and competition season. These two periods of time are ripe for growth and recognizing potential for our students, but they are also notorious for dashing singers' dreams and even ending their study of voice. Both results are in response not only to the feedback they receive (or don't) from adjudicators and those hearing auditions, but also to the singers' internalized comparisons of their own performances to those of their peers. The latter is potentially more devastating as those comparisons occur in the dark recesses of our singers' minds where reality, perception, and reason battle for supremacy. In this article we will explore the nature of comparison, its underlying cognitive principles, and its potential impacts on the performance and health and well-being of our singers.

THE "BETTER THAN AVERAGE EFFECT"

One of the most reliable findings of social psychology is termed the "Better Than Average Effect" (BTAE). The BTAE, in essence, is the strong tendency for an individual to rate one's own traits as superior to most of his or her peers, particularly in Western cultures.¹ For example, if individuals in a group are asked to rate their abilities in comparison to others in same group, most will rate their own abilities as better than average, even though it is statistically impossible for the majority of individuals to have better than average abilities. Decades of study seem to indicate that the rationale for this phenomenon is simply to serve self-enhancement motives.² We all just want to believe that we, individually, are above average. For this reason, the BTAE has also been dubbed the "Lake Wobegon Effect," named for the fictional town featured on the radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*, where "All the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."³

While the BTAE is widespread and can be reliably produced in experimental conditions, it is not universal across all traits or abilities. Much of the BTAE research requires subjects to identify an "average" individual's

Journal of Singing, May/June 2020
Volume 76, No. 5, pp. 591-593
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National Association of Teachers of Singing

performance, and then to rate their own performance against that anchor. A recent study sought to mark the distinction between the perception of “average” and the statistical median when comparing self to a theoretical population.⁴ These researchers found that for relatively simple tasks, subjects assigned an “average” anchor to individuals performing at around the fortieth percentile, well below the median. In other words, these subjects indicated that they saw the “average” person as an individual with mediocre abilities. Not surprisingly, the further below median the average target was placed, the larger the discrepancy between the ratings of self and the average was (i.e., a larger BTAE). Inversely, more difficult tasks netted an “average” target at or even above the fiftieth percentile, at or above the median. In these cases, the BTAE expressed was smaller.

DOES THE BTAE APPLY TO SINGERS?

If you have been thinking that the BTAE sounds like the opposite of what you experienced when you listened to your singing peers or what your students express to you after they have listened to their peers, there is good reason. First, recall as we just discussed that the BTAE is lessened with increased difficulty of the task being evaluated. No one would argue the difficulty of the task of singing, so it is understandable that any BTAE expressed in regard to singing would be minimal. Additionally, the BTAE is observed most strongly when comparing self to an ambiguous, ill-defined “other.” The perceived supremacy of one’s own abilities is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain when presented with contradictory evidence.⁵

If these two elements of the BTAE make it less applicable to singers rating their own ability to sing, why discuss it here at all? Because it is valuable to be aware that there is an innate tendency, at least in Western cultures, to believe (if not desire) that we are better than our peers. When a singer sits in a performance of a peer that is perceived as better than her or his own, or hears that a friend won a competition in which he or she did not perform as well, this causes cognitive dissonance. The singer wants to believe that he or she is better than average but has been presented with a reality in which he/she is not. Cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable and one response to this discomfort is to change one of

the elements that are at odds with each other.⁶ If singers can’t deny the evidence that their peers have been more successful, then the only other element to change is their perception of their own ability. While doing so may relieve the cognitive dissonance, it comes with its own pain—pain that teachers may be in a position to help assuage if they understand the underlying principles.

HOW TO COMPARE AND NOT HATE YOURSELF

In today’s socially networked world, we often are fed a steady stream of examples of how successfully our peers are living their best lives. If we are passive in our interaction with this stream, scrolling through the thread and cataloging our peers’ successes, evidence suggests this social network information will increase symptoms of depression.⁷ Conversely, engaging in the community by sharing your own stories and interacting with your peers’ posts can have positive effects, decreasing the sense of loneliness.⁸ Applied to singers, it may be less helpful simply to evaluate a peer’s overall performance as better or worse than your own. Instead, engage in the evaluation, asking the right questions: Why is that performance more successful? What is that singer’s strategy for achieving that success? How does that singer accomplish that strategy?

Above all, it is important (particularly for young or inexperienced singers) appropriately to identify their peer group when it comes to singing, which most likely will not be equivalent to their age group or years of study. Noa Kageyama, performance psychologist and author of the *Bulletproof Musician* blog shares this simple guidance.

It’s trickier to compare yourself with someone you don’t perceive as being similar, but if your mind insists on comparing yourself to someone who is older/more advanced/more experienced/etc., at least try to avoid comparing your worst moments with their best moments.⁹

Helping our singers identify their position among their true peers can actually benefit their learning process, but only if the comparison is between similarly skilled singers.¹⁰

NOTES

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10. Lynn Maxfield, "Incorporating Motivation Into Your Model of Motor Learning," *Journal of Singing* 75, no. 5 (May/June 2019): 587.



NATSCAST

The National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) is pleased to unveil the podcast network **NATSCast**. "We have partnered with these podcasts, produced by NATS members, to provide reliable information to our members and their students and clients," said NATS Executive Director Allen Henderson. "The NATSCast network also provides a unique platform that will help expand the listenership of these podcasts through NATS's own communication channels while also spreading the reputation of NATS's quality resources and services through the podcasts in the network."

The NATSCast Network includes the following podcasts:

- **The Full Voice:** A fun and informative podcast for the independent voice teacher working with singers of all ages. Hosted by Nikki Loney. www.thefullvoice.com/podcasts
- **The Holistic Voice:** The mission of The Holistic Voice is to connect listeners with the resources needed to have a successful career in voice. Hosted by Jordan Reynolds and Austin Vitaliano. <https://theholisticvoice.net/>, <https://theholisticvoice.net/>
- **New York Vocal Coaching:** New York Vocal Coaching interviews industry professionals in theater, recording, producing, and live performing. Hosted by Justin Stoney and Andy King. <https://nyvcpodcast.podbean.com/>
- **VocalFri:** A weekly dash of voice science, pedagogy, and pop culture. Hosted by Nicholas Perna and Sarah Pigott. <https://www.vocalfri.com/>

The NATSCast network can be found at www.nats.org/NATSCast