

The Singer's Library: The Empowered Performer

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Sharon Stohrer's second book on performance anxiety aims to help singers strategize their way to more confident presentations.



In 2014, singer and voice teacher Sharon L. Stohrer decided it was time to take the “deep, dark secret” of performance anxiety—experienced by many musicians—and drag it into the light. With the publication of her first book, *The Performer's Companion: A Guide to Conquering Performance Anxiety*, she opened up about her own struggles and presented strategies that have helped her and her students work toward successful, satisfying performances.

Her newest book is titled *The Empowered Performer: The Musician's Companion in Building Confidence & Conquering Performance Anxiety*. In this more recent volume, she builds on the concepts of her first book, incorporates new perspectives, and offers a holistic process designed to help singers manage stage fright.

In the interview below, Stohrer discusses the stigma surrounding performance anxiety, explores the difference between singing to impress versus singing to express, and describes the resources found within her new book.

You start the book by explaining that taming performance anxiety is a journey, but that it does not have to take a long time to build confidence and empowerment. You suggest that adding even a few minutes a day of centeredness and focus work to regular vocal practice sessions can make a big

difference. How long after initiating these changes do singers tend to see noticeable results?

It varies with the level of anxiety experienced by the singer and the effort they put into the process. That effort is not measured in time but in attitude: maintaining a mindful approach to all singing/performing activities and trying a few new strategies. I have worked with singers on performance confidence for more years than I care to admit in print, and most make *huge* strides within three to six months.

If a few minutes a day is all it takes to put singers on the path to developing effective strategies for dealing with performance anxiety, why do you suppose more people haven't made this commitment yet? Is it simply ignorance of the tangible steps they can take to improve their situation or is there perhaps a resistance or skepticism about the efficacy of these strategies?

To both suppositions, the answer is yes, and I believe a third factor is involved: shame. People who suffer from performance anxiety tend to believe they are deeply flawed. When filled with shame, most people do not seek out resources or admit to anyone that they have performance anxiety. Or if they do, it's with the fear that they are unsuited to performing, like someone with short

legs wanting to be a ballet dancer. It is easy to forget that many teachers, coaches, and directors do not address performance anxiety or do not know of resources.

Because so many musicians think they are deeply flawed, it is hard to believe that simple steps can be of assistance. At my workshops, attendees are regularly astounded at the efficacy of simple strategies such as guided meditations, playful approaches to performing, or the Amy Cuddy power poses.

In your 2014 book, *The Performer's Companion: A Guide to Performance Anxiety* (reviewed here in 2015 and available in the archives at CSmusic.net), you refer to how performance anxiety can become a "deep, dark secret" due to a pervasive belief that it is the result of a defect in character. You repeat that idea in *The Empowered Performer*. Do you feel we are making any progress on this front, or is there still a widespread stigma in the performance world and among the general public when it comes to performance anxiety?

Unfortunately, I feel it is still widespread, as mentioned above. Given the number of articles in *Classical Singer* and the NATS *Journal of Singing* on mindfulness in singing, the ever-increasing interest in bodywork and meditation, and books and videos on empowerment, it is surprising.

My hunch is that it is tied to the ever-increasing pace of life and the concomitant (and unrealistic) expectation of instant results.

One idea in your book that stuck with me is the difference between performing to "impress" versus performing to "express." Can you describe the difference and how that shift in mindset can impact a singer's performance?

If I am performing a song or an aria to impress, I am self-conscious, critical in mindset, ungrounded, and externally focused: Does the audience like me? Am I measuring up? What if I make a mistake? Will that conductor in the audience hire me sometime? Oops: just made a mistake! Damn it! Oh, here comes that high note!—with resultant tension, shallow breathing, lack of commitment to text and character, and loss of flow.

If I am performing a song or an aria to express, I am thinking of sharing a wonderful text, character, emotion, moment with the audience. I am totally absorbed and focused, living in my body, thinking the character's thoughts, and being the character. Because of that, my breathing is lower, my whole body is singing, and my performance has depth and flow.

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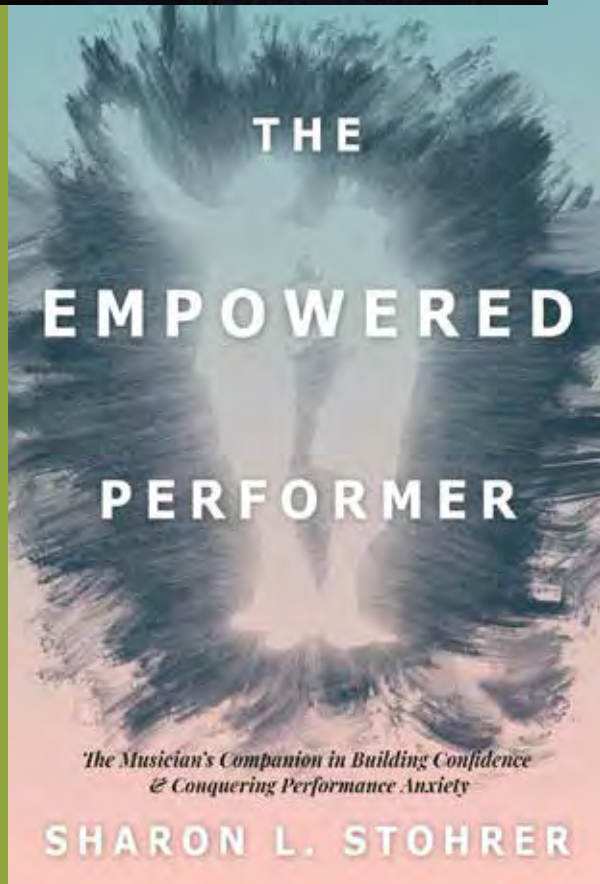
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Sharon L. Stohrer



REVIEW

Sharon L. Stohrer has dedicated years to the study of performance anxiety. As a recognized authority in the field, her knowledge of the subject is more than just academic. It is also rooted in personal experience.

In her first book, Stohrer discusses her own journey with performance anxiety, which went beyond basic symptoms like sweaty palms, dry mouth, and butterflies in the stomach. For her, it included difficulty sleeping, hyperventilation, and full-blown panic attacks. Although it took psychotherapy sessions to address some of the deeper issues at play, she knows firsthand what it is like to go from being crippled by anxiety to once again delivering confident performances. Many of the processes and tactics that led to her own success are presented in her new book, *The Empowered Performer: The Musician's Companion in Building Confidence & Conquering Performance Anxiety*.

In many ways, the book is laid out like a workbook, with step-by-step exercises, blank pages for note-taking and brainstorming, and targeted questions intended to lead to periods of thought and reflection. There are also links shared throughout the book that take readers to additional resources, including a variety of meditations (Personal Power Meditation, Touch-Response Meditation, Deep Relaxation Meditation, etc.), checklists, videos, and articles.

Stohrer is honest in acknowledging that becoming an “empowered performer” is a process that takes time, diligence, and regular focus and effort. From the opening pages, she eschews any sense that favorable outcomes are simply a matter of finding the right mantra or gimmick. Even so, her language throughout the book is encouraging and supportive, emphasizing that readers are capable of achieving positive results—and deserve to do so.

Since there are multiple reasons singers may experience performance anxiety (some of which are beyond a voice teacher's scope of practice to address), Stohrer presents a wide array of strategies to help individuals work toward possible solutions. Although there is no single path to success, the assortment of options presented in *The Empowered Performer* offers many ways for singers to build confidence as they navigate through, and perhaps even conquer, performance anxiety.

For readers familiar with your first book, what new material and ideas can they expect to see in this newer volume?

The Empowered Performer is a more interactive book. There are QR codes throughout that take the reader directly to resources, including websites, phone apps, YouTube videos, TedTalks, and recordings I made of guided meditations and centering exercises. Each chapter includes places for notes, reflections, plans, brainstorming, and sketching.

The Empowered Performer takes some of the ideas in *The Performer's Companion* and expands them with more recent information. Much more is explored in confronting those pesky inner critics and investigating some of the shaming tactics that help create them. Also new is more recent research on the importance of rest and play in daily life and play in the act of music-making. Also worth mentioning is the wonderful artwork throughout, thanks to my editor and illustrator, Jacquilyn Richardson.

Brian Manternach, DM (he/him), is an associate professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre and a research associate at the Utah Center for Vocology. He is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing, and his research, reviews, articles, and essays have appeared in numerous voice-related publications
brianmanternach.com / drbrianmanternach.blogspot.com / bmantern@gmail.com

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