

# Some specific medical problems of professional operatic singers<sup>1</sup>

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**The psychological and medical problems of operatic singers are presented. The stress and pressure created by the demanding environment of an opera production, including stage fright, are described and the question of using medications to alleviate these is discussed. The improper use of medications in general is also addressed. The unique problems for singers undergoing surgery and during the postoperative period are also mentioned.**

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The laryngologist has a particular responsibility to the patient who is a professional operatic vocalist, not to the producer nor to other members of the production company who may put pressure on the performer and the attending physician.

The professional singer, however, must work and cooperate with the producer. The singer is not only subject to the conditions imposed by the type of production for which he or she has been engaged, the nature of the operatic company, and its geographic location, but also to such problems involving provisions for an understudy in the event of illness. The performer is usually aware of most of the situations before signing a contract, but may ignore all previous knowledge and experience in the eagerness to obtain employment.

It is important for the singer, with the help and advice of the agent and the music teacher, to carefully select roles that are within a comfortable vocal range and that are not

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too strenuous or demanding. The injudicious acceptance of a role that is beyond the capability of the performer can strain the vocal apparatus and permanently damage a fine singing voice. Being chosen for a role at an audition does not assure proper casting. The singer must evaluate all factors when considering a role and ask many questions. Is the role for a single production or is it in a repertory group? How many performances are scheduled? Is there adequate rehearsal time, time off, suitable travel accommodations, and role rotation? What provisions are made for medical care if the singer gets a cold, laryngitis, or a stiff neck? Is the job in one location or with a travelling repertory company? Are there climatic conditions such as high altitude or an extremely dry or dusty atmosphere that will necessitate a period of adjustment? Is the producer careful and considerate of the singer's welfare or driving, uncompromising, and ambitious?

All of these questions must be carefully considered to protect the well-being of the singer. Overwork, fatigue, inadequate medical care, physical and mental strain, and stress resulting from an ill-considered role selection can have a disastrous effect on a singer's career.

### Psychological factors

The physician responsible for the health care of a professional singer must be aware of the sensitive nature of such a performer and should take care not to upset the patient in the course of medical treatment or consultation, especially immediately before a performance. The physician should dissuade a singer from performing when it would be a health hazard and should lend his support to the singer in resisting any pressures from a producer or others who would encourage a singer to perform under such conditions. Furthermore, a singer who might choose to perform out of a misguided sense of duty or loyalty in the tradition of "the show must go on," in spite of an illness, may find this is a thankless effort. If the singer's performance is below par, he or she may have to endure the stinging reviews of the critics and the blame of the producer, in addition to possibly injuring his or her voice.

Stage fright, which can be a serious problem, is faced by professional singers at various times in their careers and can often be overcome through training and the security gained with knowledge and experience. However, there are

many known cases in which stage fright has been present for an entire performing career. Even great singers have been so frightened before a performance that they vomited or exhibited various types of hysterical behavior. A balance must be achieved between incapacitating fear and the heightened excitement necessary to create the fine edge needed for a good performance. When something changes the balance that has been achieved, for instance an illness or surgery, all previous trained response patterns may change. Although the use of beta blockers such as propranolol can often help in these situations, those qualities imparted by the emotions of the performer may be affected and the performance may therefore be lackluster.<sup>1-4</sup>

### Medications

Prescribing beta blockers such as propranolol for treatment of stress should be done judiciously. I would recommend it only in a critical situation. Even then, sensitive individuals may respond badly. Propranolol must be used cautiously in an individual with an allergy, especially asthma. It should not be given indiscriminately. Other dangers are clearly indicated in the information provided by the pharmaceutical company.

It is extremely important that the professional singer be advised of problems relating to medications. Many vocalists carry a large number of drugs, which has been necessitated at times by extensive travelling in areas where no adequate medical care is available. This situation encourages the practice of the "good Samaritan" who generously dispenses his or her own medication to friends and acquaintances. Giving a potent medication to one who may respond badly or whose health is precarious can be extremely dangerous; for example, a diabetic may take a corticosteroid without realizing that this may endanger diabetic control. A person with a tendency to bleed or one with an ulcer may take aspirin products or other anti-inflammatory medication that can lead to increased bleeding tendency. Not only may the ulcer begin to bleed, but there is also the danger of vocal cord hemorrhage as well.

The use of nonproprietary medications may also be detrimental to the professional singer. Antihistaminic decongestants taken to relieve nasal congestion can thicken mucous secretion, thus replacing one problem with another. Local sprays

containing antibiotics may cause local monilla in the mouth. Cortisone sprays can do the same with equally adverse results. Fortunately, oral oily sprays, which can create lipid pneumonia, are no longer freely dispensed. They have ended more than one career. Many ill effects can be avoided if the physician emphasizes the necessity of exercising caution and provides adequate information about the use and misuse of medication.

### **Surgical considerations**

Surgery can be particularly hazardous to the career of a professional singer. The specific indications and the urgency of the problem should be assessed on an individual basis, taking into account the total well-being of the individual. In general, the same indications for surgery apply to singers and nonsingers alike, except for the added danger that surgery may alter the singer's voice. It is not, for instance, advisable to do a routine submucous resection to improve the voice of a singer. A tonsillectomy should be judged in the same manner. Extensive postoperative scarring may occur on occasion from keloid formation. It is possible that loss of the posterior pillar with firmness of the soft palate will result from such scarring or that the velopharyngeal space will increase and air will escape transnasally during singing. These risks must be evaluated and the patient appropriately warned. Singers' careers have been shortened by a "simple tonsillectomy." Thyroid surgery must be undertaken

with great care to avoid impeded vertical motion of the larynx. Intubation requires special care to avoid trauma to the vocal folds. Respiratory impairment or recurrent laryngeal nerve damage may result from chest surgery. In abdominal surgery, the need to rebuild breath support is essential.

In this survey, I have attempted to touch briefly on various aspects of the professional singer's health, which may come to the attention of the physician and especially the laryngologist. Clearly, it has not been possible to cover the subject in detail, but only to point out the absolute necessity for caution and care.

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