From Perfect to Present: Reframing Music Performance Anxiety as a Pathway to Flow through Emotional and Somatic Awareness in Perfectionist Vocalists

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Introduction

Great musical performances require much precision to reproduce the structure, intonation, tempo, and articulation of the composition in both live or recorded settings (Horisawa et al., 2025). The discipline required to achieve and maintain this precision can be a source of pressure for musicians. This aspiration to produce great performances, along with its associated stressors, can underlie perfectionist standards linked to Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) in musicians (Butković et al., 2023). MPA is a performance-related psychological condition marked by excessive worry and fear of evaluation, which can impair both confidence and focus. It often presents itself through somatic symptoms such as muscle tension, irregular breathing, and increased heart rate, alongside psychological symptoms such as self-doubt, intrusive thoughts, and heightened emotional distress, triggered by both internal pressures and external demands and expectations (Butković et al., 2023; Deyong, 2021). For vocalists, whose musical instrument is their own body, MPA is particularly significant because psychological states directly influence the physiological processes of sound production (Deyong, 2021).

Vocalists in different genres experience unique performance pressures. Classical vocalists strive for clarity and power, contemporary commercial music singers portray emotion and personality characteristics through their voice, while musical theatre singers blend vocal technique with movement and acting (Henshaw & Collyer, 2022). Across all genres, singers rely on the coordination of their physical body, vocal timbre, human emotion, and the musical composition in the successful production of a musical performance (Henshaw & Collyer, 2022). Mental states such as stress or heightened emotion become a part of the psychophysiological system the vocalist must coordinate during a performance (Deyong, 2021). How a vocalist

relates and responds to these different states can markedly alter his or her performance, for better or worse.

Perfectionism often underlies these experiences where inflexible standards and fear of mistakes can magnify the intensity of MPA and hinder the vocalist from expressing themselves freely (Butković et al., 2023). Research shows that perfectionism is strongly associated with social anxiety and rigid thinking patterns, where even minor errors can be perceived as failure (Burns & Fedewa, 2005; Ferber et al., 2024). In musical performances where pressure is inevitable, this mindset can foster chronic self-monitoring, hypervigilance, and self-criticism (DiBartolo, 2024), ultimately compromising the psychological well-being and artistry of the musician. While perfectionism may be a source of rigorous preparation, it often creates barriers to the flow and emotional authenticity that make musical performances meaningful.

By adopting the lens of excellencism (Gaudreau, 2019), MPA can become conceptualized as part of an adaptive, regulatory process within the holistic framework of a vocal performance, rather than solely as a pathological condition. Excellencism is a concept that emphasizes striving for high yet realistic standards through engaged, flexible effort, in contrast with the rigid and fear-driven patterns of perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). This approach aligns with principles of psychological flexibility and growth mindset, where performers are encouraged to see mistakes as feedback for future improvement rather than a failure that defines them as an artist (Dweck, 2006; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). This perspective shift has been shown to reduce the risk of burnout and emotional exhaustion while fostering resilience in performances (Hill et al., 2010). A related notion in the literature is that of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), a state of complete absorption where skill and challenge are balanced, resulting in deep focus and loss of self-consciousness. Flow supports artistry by

transforming performance from a stage of judgment into one of authentic expression (Kenny, 2011), with research showing that mastery- and growth-oriented mindsets are associated with lower MPA and greater fulfillment in performance (McPherson & McCormick, 2006; Osborne et al., 2024). Taken together, the research on excellencism and flow suggest potential for a model of optimal musical performance, where physical body, voice, emotion, and technique are balanced. Achieving this often depends on somatic and emotional regulation where techniques like breath control, postural alignment, and muscle relaxation can not only mitigate MPA symptoms but also create conditions that can foster flow (Deyong, 2021; Spahn et al., 2021).

The aim of this study is therefore to review the existing literature on MPA, perfectionism, excellencism, and flow. This capstone intends to shift emphasis from pathology to strength, and position MPA not only as a potential detriment for vocalists but as a challenging dynamic process that, when guided by excellencism and the cultivation of flow states through regulation, can be transformed into a resource for achieving artistic excellence in vocal performance.

Methodology

To investigate the relationship between MPA and flow states in perfectionist vocalists, and to identify relevant emotional and somatic regulation strategies, the academic databases and scholarly search engines used include PsychINFO, PubMed, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus. Some of these were mainly accessed through the City University of Seattle library, and the rest were accessed independently. Materials used were peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, and book chapters published between 1990 and 2025. While the goal was to prioritize finding studies published within the last five years to ensure recency and relevance of information, some foundational concepts published earlier were also included due to their significant theoretical and practical contributions. Studies addressing MPA, perfectionism, flow states, emotion regulation

and somatic techniques within a performance context were prioritized, while those unrelated to music or performance contexts were eliminated. Articles that lacked empirical or theoretical grounding and solely focused on instrumentalists without transferable insights to vocal performance were also removed. Studies were screened for methodological rigor by considering sample size, clarity of research design, and strength of theoretical contributions, and then synthesized thematically to highlight points of convergence and divergence across findings. The search terms, as shown in Table 1, were strategically combined to capture the overlap between the constructs of this study.

Areas	Keywords
MPA	Music performance anxiety, performance anxiety
Perfectionism	Perfectionism, perfectionist, perfectionist vocalist, perfectionist musician
Excellencism	Excellencism, performance
Flow States	Flow, flow state, peak performance
Somatic Regulation	Somatic regulation, somatic strategies, body awareness, music performance
Emotional Regulation	Emotion regulation, emotional regulation

Table 1 **- Keywords for Literature Review**

Initial searches returned a high number of studies linking MPA and perfectionism in musicians generally, but not many specifically address vocalists. Similarly, there was limited literature linking perfectionism and flow states, which led to a search back to the broader musician population to extract insights relevant to vocalists. To address this gap, literature from similar fields such as sports psychology, dance performance, and theatre was included. Searching for studies focused on vocalists was a challenge in itself, as most literature on flow in musicians mostly leaned toward instrumentalists and required further interpretation to translate the idea into the context of vocal performances. Additionally, with the overwhelming amount of studies on perfectionism and MPA, the selected studies were deliberately reviewed to ensure the

intersection of both concepts. A few studies were retained only to help explain each concept in isolation from the other.

From an ethical perspective, the literature review did not involve direct human participants. While the topic resonates with personal experience as a perfectionist vocalist, a conscious effort was made to maintain academic objectivity and minimize potential bias throughout the research process. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of relying on secondary data, including the potential for researcher bias in the interpretation of results and discussions, the constraints inherent in existing methodologies, and the lack of direct longitudinal or context-specific insight. With the topic being related to music, the discussion was intentionally framed within the scope of general counselling and psychotherapy, consistent with established approaches used in general professional practice. References and implications to the specialized field of music therapy were intentionally excluded to preserve a clear distinction between both disciplines.

Regarding clinical applications of this research: Ethical considerations include confidentiality, stigma, cultural sensitivity, and the protection of vulnerable populations. For example, the multiple identities of a service provider as a psychotherapist, performance coach, and musician require clear delineation at the outset of any professional contract. The clarification of these multiple roles includes the description of the responsibilities of the services offered and the limitations of each to the best of both parties' abilities. One example might be the acknowledgment of the therapeutic role grounded in the maintenance of the client's right to confidentiality concerning materials discussed in private therapy sessions, as distinct from the coaching role which might occur privately or publicly but in either case is focused on the client's performance techniques rather than personal experience, and finally the service provider's

identity as an artist in her own right which might bear greater or lesser relevance on the professional contract established between the service provider and the client. These clarifications allow the client and service provider to better navigate situations involving potentially conflicting roles. For example, therapists who are constantly present at public performances may have higher chances of crossing paths with clients. Similarly, if a therapist happens to attend a public event headlined by a musician client who predominantly seeks the therapist's services for personal psychotherapy, discussing these scenarios in advance can help preserve the integrity of the therapeutic relationship. Beyond confidentiality, therapists working with musicians recognize the possibility of professional stigma that might impact some clients' decisions to seek mental health supports of any description. Finally, the diversity of cultural backgrounds among musicians requires clinicians to avoid imposing uniform models of care and instead, adopt approaches that respect and respond to individual cultural contexts and artistic preferences.

Literature Review

Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)

Despite numerous experiences in the spotlight, musicians frequently experience fear of judgment and scrutiny from the audience (Lin, 2019). While some degree of this fear is a normal part of performance preparation, more intense manifestations of these symptoms can be classified as MPA. MPA is more than just feeling nervous around a performance— it is a debilitating experience among both professional and amateur musicians (Lin, 2019; Spahn et al., 2021), characterized by physiological, cognitive, and emotional issues that can occur before, during, or after a performance (Cohen & Bodner, 2019). While most studies describe MPA from a pathological lens, Herman and Clark (2023) highlight the adaptive functions of MPA for musicians. They explain that MPA, when viewed through the lens of the body's natural anxiety

response, serves as an adaptive function by heightening the musician's awareness of performance demands and stressors. This heightened sensitivity can help performers identify areas that require further preparation, focus attention on critical aspects of the performance, and promote vigilance that can enhance readiness rather than hinder performance (Herman & Clark, 2023). The growing awareness of how MPA affects vocalists has led to the development of more strategies to manage symptoms before, during, and after a performance. Some identified strategies include psychoeducation for musicians on how their bodies react to MPA (Herman & Clark, 2023), cognitive-behavioral strategies to handle criticism (Gök & Yalçinkaya-Alkar, 2024), and emotional regulation to manage better the physiological activation induced by MPA (Racine et al., 2025).

One of the leading causes of MPA is perfectionism (Gök &Yalçinkaya-Alkar, 2024). Perfectionism is known to stem from irrational beliefs that frequently link with maladaptive behaviours and many psychopathologies such as depression and anxiety (Burns & Fedewa, 2005). Musicians showcase their skills and talent in front of an audience within a limited time frame, which can generate intense pressure. When this pressure is internalized solely as a need to prove one's competence to oneself, an audience, or critics and evaluators, the focus shifts from authentic musical expression to the fear of making mistakes or falling short of expectations. This mindset can interfere with a musician's ability to be fully present. In contrast, a musician who aims to share their skill, connect with the music, or communicate their piece on a personal level may deliver the same high standards without succumbing to the debilitating effects of perfectionism. Gök and Yalçinkaya-Alkar (2024) note that this self-imposed expectation for flawless execution can lead to unrealistic expectations of delivering perfect performances consistently. Ferber et al. (2024) link perfectionism to social anxiety through both self-imposed

and socially prescribed performance standards. The rigid and self-defeating internal dialogue is what distinguishes perfectionism from a healthier pursuit of excellence.

Rather than making music as a therapeutic and fulfilling experience, the constant exposure to highly competitive environments can promote discomfort and significant functional impairment to the performer during and around their performance (Matei & Ginsborg, 2017). When left unchecked, these pressures often reinforce the rigid standards and harsh self-evaluations that fuel maladaptive perfectionism.

Perfectionist standards frequently manifest in the form of MPA, particularly for vocalists whose musical instrument *is* the psychophysiological state of their own body. MPA affects both the body and mind as it disrupts breath support, muscle coordination, and emotional expression, all of which are crucial to vocal performance. Defined as a persistent experience of apprehension related to performing in front of other people, MPA often results in physiological symptoms such as trembling, shallow breathing, and muscle tension, as well as cognitive symptoms like intrusive thoughts and self-doubt (Cohen & Bodner, 2019). For vocalists whose technique depends on the practiced coordination of breath, posture, and resonance, MPA can hijack the body in ways that directly sabotage the performance. Both professional and non-professional musicians experience MPA in various ways, usually influenced by the level of their skill and technique (Spahn et al., 2021). MPA can manifest as overly tensed muscles, restricted diaphragmatic support, and reduced vocal control, which creates a feedback loop in which anxiety breeds technical instability that further reinforces anxiety (Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). Unlike stage fright, which is commonly associated and mistaken as MPA due to its somatic manifestations right before a performance, MPA lingers even outside performances (Willis, 2018), which creates psychological distress over time and impacts the overall well-being of the individual (Spahn et

al., 2021). MPA causes functional impairment (McNeil at el., 2022), meeting the diagnostic criteria of a subtype of Social Anxiety Disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fifth Edition, Text Revised (DSM-5-TR),* characterized by an intense fear of negative evaluation (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Kenny (2011) identifies three common causes of MPA: self-imposed pressure, excessive arousal, and inadequate preparation. High-achieving, perfectionist performers often exacerbate these by tying their self-worth to a flawless execution. Instead of tuning into the body's subtle feedback systems and using them to regulate arousal, perfectionist vocalists may suppress discomfort, overcorrect, or hyper-monitor themselves in ways that hinder presence and impair musicality.

Aside from being described as a maladaptive experience for a performer, MPA also has some implications for adaptability. Herman and Clark (2023) emphasize that some forms of arousal are actually beneficial, suggesting the functionality of the nervous system as it enhances energy, attention, and performance. Given the nature of our human bodies to react to stress and pressure through physiological arousal, there is a window of opportunity to take advantage of this rather than eliminating anxiety completely. The ability to differentiate between helpful and unhelpful arousal states becomes particularly important for vocalists whose body awareness can increase as they accumulate more experiences in the limelight. Performers can also utilize rehearsals where they can prepare not just for the technicality of their art, but also the awareness and regulation of their psychological and physiological reactions.

For a performer who strives for excellence yet may still encounter a gap between their reality and their ideal performance outcome, MPA interacts closely with perfectionism, shaping the intensity and experience of a performer's anxiety. McNeil et al. (2022) outline *Personal standards perfectionism* (PSP), the drive for high self-imposed standards, and *evaluative*

concerns perfectionism (ECP), as dimensions of perfectionism that interact with MPA. While PSP is typically linked to conscientiousness and achievement, and ECP to maladaptive self-criticism, both have been positively associated with MPA in classical musicians (McNeil et al., 2022). The strong connection between ECP and MPA suggests that musicians with high evaluative concerns experience intensified MPA as the perceived value of the importance of their performance increases, reflecting the crippling effect of socially prescribed expectations. On the other hand, the small but significant relationship between PSP and MPA suggests that self-imposed standards can also heighten anxiety, especially when the stakes of the performance are high. Kamushadze et al. (2021) propose another model of perfectionism, with *self-evaluative perfectionism* (SEP) being a maladaptive facet motivated by rumination, need for approval, concern over mistakes, and parental pressure, and *conscientious perfectionism* (CP) as an adaptive facet driven by organization, striving for excellence, and high standards for others. Both factors highlight the value of performing under evaluative circumstances, where the former would be driven by external factors, and the latter by internal factors. There are benefits of perfectionism driven by internal and external factors that are rarely without psychological cost, as the traits that motivate the performer to prepare meticulously can also amplify the cognitive, emotional, and somatic symptoms of MPA.

Perfectionism as a Barrier to Presence in a Vocal Performance

When MPA triggers physiological symptoms in vocalists (Cohen & Bodner, 2019), it compromises their primary instrument and in turn, their overall performance. Vocalists describe body tension, shaking legs, and having less deeper breaths which hinders the ability to sing effectively (Lewis and Hendricks, 2022). The somatic manifestations of MPA can stem from perfectionist standards where a performer perceives a significant gap between their current

performance and their expectations (Gök & Yalçinkaya-Alkar, 2024). Self-efficacy beliefs also play a role in this performance, where vocalists with high self-efficacy beliefs reported lower MPA symptoms (Lewis and Hendricks, 2022).

Self-destructive criticism, excessive worry, and feelings of loss of control are among the most significant barriers to flow and are strongly linked to heightened performance anxiety (Moral-Bofill et al., 2022). Perfectionism, particularly in maladaptive forms, can also disrupt the attainment of flow by diverting attention toward perceived flaws and mistakes rather than the art of making music itself (Kamushadze et al., 2021). This creates a cycle in which anxiety heightens self-surveillance, and self-surveillance amplifies anxiety, leaving little room for the performer to remain present in the music.

Similarly, Ferber et al. (2024) found across multiple studies the strong link between perfectionism and social anxiety, often rooted in the belief that others demand flawless execution, where even minor mistakes would mean failure. This finding exemplifies black or white thinking, an unhelpful and rigid thinking style, commonly associated with perfectionism (Burns & Fedewa, 2005), which thrives in high-stakes environments like the music industry, where precision and accuracy are essential (Gök & Yalçinkaya-Alkar, 2024). In this context, perfectionism becomes a double-edged sword. While it may motivate rigorous preparation, it also fosters factors that exacerbate MPA — chronic self-monitoring, hypervigilance, and self-criticism (DiBartolo, 2024; Ferber et al., 2024), which can be detrimental to the mental health and overall well-being of the performer especially in the long-term (Arbinaga, 2023).

Vocalists in particular are uniquely vulnerable to this dynamic due to the intimate connection between the voice and the body. Because the body *is* the instrument, physiological factors, such as heart rate and breathing, impact psychological factors, which altogether directly

impact overall vocal performance (Cheng, 2020). Henshaw and Collyer (2022) highlight how vocalists across classical, musical theatre, and contemporary genres all depend on the integration of technical skill, emotion, and physical awareness. Anxiety can easily disrupt this integration, manifesting somatically through shallow breathing, muscle tension, and vocal instability (Deyong, 2021; Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). In more complex cases, vocalists with unresolved psychological trauma report somatic symptoms such as clenched jaws, throat tension, and auditory hypersensitivity that are often unresolved by medical treatment but successfully addressed in psychotherapy (Jaworski Koriath, 2023). The vocalists in this study reported the impacts of their symptoms on their performances, which in turn have affected their self-efficacy and confidence in carrying out successful vocal performances in the future. These studies collectively emphasize the importance of the mind-body connection is musical performance, while also illustrating how MPA and perfectionism can interfere with this relationship by disrupting the performer's focus and mental state.

Perfectionist vocalists can find themselves in a paradox where psychological stress triggers somatic symptoms that impair vocal performance, further compromising the physiological coordination necessary for optimal vocal performance (Deyong, 2021; Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). Heightened self-consciousness often manifests in the body as tension, shallow breathing, or vocal strain, which not only interferes with sound production but also amplifies the anxiety that caused the symptoms in the first place (Matei & Ginsborg, 2017). As the fear of judgment intensifies, so does the tendency to mentally leave the moment, as if the perception of others preoccupies the performer in place of presence in the moment. This internal preoccupation reflects what Hill et al. (2010) describe as the link between perfectionism and burnout, where emotional exhaustion diminishes both focus and confidence on stage. Consequently, this barrier

to presence not only impairs technical execution but also blocks access to emotional authenticity and flow, the very qualities that make vocal performances resonant and compelling (Butković et al., 2023). Through this, perfectionism is not merely a personality trait or a set of self-imposed standards; it is in itself a psychological barrier that prevents vocalists from being present in their expression of art.

The music industry, being a constantly high-performing artistic environment, has long normalized perfectionism, but this mindset can take a psychological toll, especially on vocalists, by disrupting both technical execution and the emotional presence needed for a meaningful music performance. The perfectionist who sets nearly impossible standards out of fear of judgment and internalized pressure (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; DiBartolo, 2024), paradoxically distances themselves from the very excellence they strive for. This ongoing self-monitoring leaves little space for presence, spontaneity, or focus and trust in one's skills and talent. Given these outcomes, there is a growing need to reframe the narrative around setting performance standards. Conscientious perfectionism, in contrast to self-evaluative perfectionism, is defined by Kamushadze et al. (2021) as an adaptive facet that aims for excellence, which aligns with the concept of *excellencism*. Excellencism offers a more adaptive and healthier alternative, which preserves high aspirations but releases the performer from the rigid and self-punishing perfectionist standards they set for themselves (Gaudreau, 2019). The following section explores this shift in depth, proposing excellencism as a healthier, more sustainable mindset for vocalists seeking artistic growth and psychological well-being.

Reframing Perfectionism with Excellencism

The construct of excellencism presents a more sustainable alternative to the often maladaptive nature of perfectionism. Perfectionism involves an inflexible pursuit of

unrealistically high standards, driven by fear of failure and excessive criticism (Flett & Hewitt, 2002), while excellencism promotes the pursuit of high yet achievable standards through engaged, adaptive, and flexible effort (Gaudreau, 2019). Excellencism supports a striving orientation that is grounded in reality, opposite to the compulsive, self-defeating feedback loop that perfectionists often fall into. Instead of the paralyzing fear of falling short, it upholds many aspirational qualities associated with striving for greatness, including discipline, diligence and motivation. Perfectionists may see failure as a personal flaw, while those who practice excellencism frame it as valuable feedback for personal growth for future opportunities. To further explore the overlap between perfectionism and excellencism, it is helpful to examine the dimensions of perfectionism and consider how they align with the principles of excellencism. Stoeber & Otto (2006) classify perfectionism into *perfectionistic striving* and *perfectionistic concern,* where the positive associations of the former can reframe the term into "healthy perfectionism" and the negative associations of the latter into "unhealthy perfectionism". Excellencism comes close to the concept of perfectionistic striving but allows for satisfaction and closure upon the completion of a task (Gaudreau, 2019), contrary to the ongoing dissatisfaction that comes with perfectionistic striving (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Gaudreau (2019) further implies that perfectionism is an "extreme case within excellencism" given that perfectionism and excellencism go hand in hand, while excellence is achievable without perfectionistic strivings. This distinction can be beneficial for artists to understand as it bridges the gap between performance anxiety and a genuine, artistic performance that allows vocalists to express their art without excessive fear of scrutiny holding them back.

At its core, excellencism aligns closely with the principles of psychological flexibility, growth mindset, and sustainability of performance. Vocalists operating within the "excellencism"

framework recognize that setbacks and variability are integral to the learning process. Rather than avoiding discomfort or perfection, they remain committed to their values and goals while adapting strategies when necessary (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Hill et al. (2010) found that perfectionism has a strong link to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and performance anxiety. When the perspective that failures are definitive of the performer shifts into making more room for improvement, there is an internal challenge to one's ability rather than expending energy worrying about outcomes and perceptions of others. Dweck (2006) has a similar concept, the growth mindset theory, which encourages performers to invest in effort and strategies rather than protect a fragile image of competence. The former builds a stronger and more sustainable foundation for both personal and professional development and self-improvement without compromising mental health.

One of the most transformative aspects of excellencism (Gaudreau, 2019) is the way it reshapes the vocalist's focus on the artistry itself. Rather than approaching the stage as a ground to prove technicality and gather external validation, the vocalist with an excellentist orientation makes it their playground for artistic expression. This perspective shift transforms the nature of performance anxiety, where instead of struggling with judgment paralysis, the performer engages in the act of storytelling through music (Kenny, 2011). Studies show that musicians who adopt a growth and mastery mindset paired with consistent self-reflection report lower levels of MPA and greater fulfillment in their performance (Osborne et al., 2014; McPherson & McCormick, 2006). Excellencism supports this by anchoring self-worth not in flawless execution, but in commitment to growth and improvement, and developing a genuine connection with the audience.

Excellencism therefore highlights how goals can be both at high standards while being attainable, sustainable, and growth oriented. Unlike perfectionism, excellencism allows room for human variability and prioritizes continuous improvement over flawless execution. Gaudreau (2019) further contextualizes perfectionism as a narrower form of excellencism, believing that perfectionism is still aimed at excellence but burdened by the unrealistic expectation of flawlessness. With the music industry undeniably entailing various levels of pressure, vocalists can maintain a standard with realistic expectations as they execute performances with aspirations toward excellence rather than perfection. Reframing performance anxiety as a reflection of the pursuit of excellence is consistent with a general trend in recent research, shifting from a focus on the elimination of MPA toward the facilitation of optimal psychological states to promote presence and engagement during a performance (Spahn et al., 2021). One model for understanding these optimal states is Csikzentmihalyi's and colleagues' (e.g., 1996) work on *flow*.

Cultivating Presence in Vocal Performance Through Flow States

Flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1996) is a state of total immersion in an activity, characterized by reduced self-consciousness, complete absorption in the task, and an intrinsically rewarding optimal experience. This state is familiar to most performing musicians. For vocalists, flow can represent the pinnacle of musical engagement, where technical skills and genuine artistic expression merge. Noting how physiological responses directly influence the voice as an instrument, flow states rely on emotional and somatic readiness. Vocalists rely heavily on some somatic techniques such as breath control, muscle relaxation, and posture to support vocal technique and manage psychological tension (Deyong, 2021). Functional coping strategies such as managing physiological agitation and unease, breath regulation, and intentional relaxation

after stressful experiences can help restore the body's equilibrium and foster conditions conducive to entering flow states (Spahn et al., 2021).

Flow is a state of being completely immersed in the experience of a performance characterized by a diminished awareness of their external environment (Spahn et al., 2021). Contextualizing flow together with MPA, they seem to be on opposing ends of a spectrum, where MPA lies on the pathological side while flow implies a positive and enjoyable experience. Cohen & Bodner (2019) also found that MPA is negatively associated with flow. There are benefits to identifying how to minimize the impacts of MPA alone, but there also seems to be considerable benefit in utilizing and facilitating a flow state, which in turn reduces the effects of MPA and promotes optimal performance. Inducing a flow state offers a low-cost, non-invasive strategy for reducing MPA (de Figueiredo Rocha, 2021). To provide further depth to the understanding of flow states, Guyon et al. (2022) conducted a study that suggests analyzing dimensions of a flow state rather than as a global score. Flamini (2020) also studied the flow experiences of vocalists, utilizing the different dimensions of flow, and found that mindfulness practices play a significant role in inducing flow states, as well as highlighting the importance of mentors in the flow experience of their students. Both internal and external environments play a huge role in the experience of a vocalist during high-pressure performance. In this study, we focus on the internal world of the vocalist and explore somatic and emotional strategies that keep the perfectionist and anxious vocalist grounded and open to a more positive experience during their performance.

Despite suggestions that MPA and perfectionism have some features that hinder vocalists from experiencing flow during a performance, MPA and flow are not mutually exclusive. A study by Spahn et al. (2021) investigated 363 professional and non-professional musicians using

questionnaires that measured their anxiety levels before and after performing in front of large audiences, and their flow experiences during those performances. While the study confirmed a generally negative correlation between flow and MPA, it also revealed that moderate levels of anxiety could coexist with, and even contribute to, the heightened focus necessary for flow, particularly in musicians skilled with coping strategies. found that moderate levels of anxiety can sometimes coexist or even contribute to the heightened focus needed for flow, especially for a vocalist skilled with coping strategies. These findings suggest that anxiety does not always function as a purely detrimental factor. When managed effectively, it can sharpen concentration, heighten alertness, and direct the performer's attention toward the task at hand (Spahn et al., 2021). Performing before hundreds of spectators naturally triggers the body's stress response, but when vocalists learn to redirect this arousal into fuel for focus and expression, it transforms a liability into an asset. For perfectionist musicians, this shift can serve not only as a powerful coping mechanism against the debilitating impacts of MPA, but also as a pathway towards more authentic flow experiences during a musical performance.

Emotional and Somatic Regulation Strategies for Presence

Given the deeply intertwined nature of the mind and body in vocal performances, both somatic and emotional regulation strategies are essential for managing the complex interplay of perfectionism, MPA, and flow. Jiang and Tong (2024) found that high-quality flow experiences together with a strong sense of self-esteem are associated with reduced MPA tendencies during performances. Their findings further reinforce evidence that flow is negatively correlated with MPA (Spahn et al., 2021), showing that increased levels of self-esteem and flow experiences correspond with decreased reports of MPA (Jiang & Tong, 2024). This study further demonstrates how anxiety, when approached with effective somatic and psychological strategies,

can serve as a springboard towards the attainment of flow states. Conversely, once a vocalist has entered into a flow state, the reduced self-consciousness it fosters can eventually tame anxious thoughts. Cohen and Bodner (2019) further support a dual strategy for performance optimization by minimizing MPA symptoms while actively cultivating positive psychological skills such as imagery, mindfulness, and mental rehearsal. The interplay between MPA and positive psychological skills provides a dynamic space for exploring and facilitating flow states, supporting the idea of Spahn et al. (2021) to utilize and redirect energy from performance anxiety rather than eliminating it.

Some emotions may tap deeper into trauma stored in the body, which may activate a different set of somatic and psychological symptoms (Jaworski Koriath, 2023). For these more intense symptoms as well as their less severe embodied counterparts, somatic strategies are important given the voice's reliance on physiological coordination. Salivation is increasingly noticeable approaching a performance because of physiological arousal, and beta-blockers were identified as an effective pharmacological intervention to manage this symptom (Matei & Ginsbort, 2017). Breathwork provides singers with tools to regulate their autonomic nervous system, lowering physiological arousal while supporting healthy vocal production and enhancing control under pressure (Deyong, 2021). Body mapping strengthens performers' kinesthetic awareness by helping them identify and correct inefficient or maladaptive movement patterns, which reduces unnecessary muscular tension and supports a more comfortable sound production (Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). Relaxation techniques such as the Alexander Technique, defined by Klein et al. (2014) as "a psycho-physical method to help release unnecessary muscle tension and re-educates non-beneficial movement patterns through intentional inhibition of unwanted habitual behaviours", specifically target habitual postural and muscular tension, promoting balanced alignment and ease

of movement, both of which counteract the physical strain that perfectionism and MPA often impose on the body (Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). The aforementioned techniques which directly support physiological functions highlight the importance of maintaining the performer's physical foundation, as it serves as the basis upon which all other aspects of performance rest. Because every muscle and mechanism from breath support to jaw release contributes to vocal sound production, even small imbalances can have huge impacts to performance. When integrated with emotional regulation strategies, these somatic approaches ensure that the body and mind are synchronized and allows the vocalist to maintain physiological efficiency and emotional stability.

Specific approaches and techniques can be used to address particular challenges or performance requirements. For instance, breath support helps regulate airflow and manage physiological arousal, preventing shallow breathing patterns that often accompany anxiety and compromise vocal stability (Spahn et al. 20210). Muscle release techniques facilitate the reduction of tension in areas such as the jaw, shoulders and throat, mitigating the physical strain that perfectionism and MPA often impose on the body, and restoring optimal vocal resonance (Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). Vocal freedom, attained through practices such as body mapping, postural alignment, and the Alexander Technique, supports greater ease and flexibility in sound production to reduce the likelihood of constriction or vocal fatigue (Klein et al., 2014; Deyong; 2021; Flamini, 2020). Together, these various techniques prepare the body and support the vocalist's attempt at being fully present and attaining a flow state (Spahn et al., 2021; Flamini, 2020). Fostering self-efficacy together with these practices can also strengthen the vocalist's confidence and perceived control, which serve as protective factors against the disruptive effects of anxiety (Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). Collectively, these studies highlight how the vocalist's instrument goes beyond the voice. As the vessel for both sound and expression, the body's

relationship with the voice becomes a decisive force in shaping the depth, quality, and overall impact of a vocal performance.

On an emotional level, vocalists describe positive and negative responses to their emotions in their performances (Sweet & Parker, 2018). Participants described insecurity, fear, and anxiety as primary factors that kept them away from pursuing more challenging opportunities, while some felt empowered and proud, which reinforced their experience. Within a limited time frame, a vocalist has various internal experiences which all play a role in how they show up or manage their performance. Critically, several studies suggest that the same physiological and cognitive arousal underlying MPA— such as increased heart rate, heightened focus, and sharpened awareness— can be perceived as performance-enhancing resources rather than obstacles (Cohen & Bodner, 2019; Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). Additionally, Kamushadze et al. (2021) found that dispositional flow fully mediated the relationship between CP and psychological well-being. When vocalists learn to reinterpret arousal as energy that supports resonance, projection, and expressivity, they shift from battling against their own bodies to collaborating with them. This reframing not only reduces the disruptive effects of anxiety but also strengthens the somatic and emotional foundations necessary for flow. In this way, the pressures of performance are not eliminated but transformed into fuel for presence and a more satisfying vocal experience.

Perfectionist vocalists may find a challenge in reframing performances from a test of flawlessness to an opportunity for genuine expression, but this can be incorporated with their technical skill training and improved through time. Flamini (2020) emphasizes the value of consistent training in psychological techniques such as focused attention, breath control, and mindfulness to enable vocalists to enter into flow states more readily and sustain them during

performances. In vocal performances, these physical factors may include focusing on musical phrasing, emotionally connecting to the lyrics to convey a story, or bringing awareness to bodily sensations of resonance. By identifying how their body is responding to the performance at the present moment, the vocalist can open a pathway to a more fulfilling vocal performance. Similarly, Guyon et al. (2022) highlight that flow can be enhanced through structured interventions that promote self-awareness and emotional regulation, helping vocalists balance technical demands with expressive freedom. Perfectionist vocalists dealing with MPA symptoms have the chance to work through these challenges over time, which can ultimately transform how they connect with both the stage and their voice.

Away from the limelight and the rehearsal space, therapy can be a safe space for performers as they work with a skilled practitioner who can support them in their exploration of perfectionism and MPA. Within sessions, therapists can guide clients through inner work such as cognitive reframing or acceptance-based exercises to help them confront self-critical thoughts in real time (Ferber et al., 2024;, 2019). Importantly, practitioners can also equip clients with concrete regulation skills such as breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, or mindfulness strategies that can be practiced independently (Matei & Ginsborg, 2017; Deyong, 2021; Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). This transfer of skills beyond the therapy room is particularly vital for vocalists since performance-related anxiety typically arises in high-pressure, real-world contexts where immediate and direct therapeutic support is unavailable (Arbinaga, 2023). By cultivating both insight and practical self-regulation skills and strategies, therapists can help vocalists build confidence in their ability to manage challenges under the pressure of the spotlight (Moral-Bofill et al., 2022). Additionally, the knowledge and awareness of the

psychological aspect of performing may also be beneficial for music teachers to have as they impart excellentist ideals to their students.

Cognitive approaches such as reframing maladaptive perfectionist beliefs into more flexible, self-compassionate, and acceptance-based mindsets can help shift the mindset of performers from rigid self-criticism toward psychological flexibility (Ferber et al., 2024; Werner, 2019), which is a cornerstone of excellencism (Gaudreau, 2019). By practicing self-compassion, vocalists can reduce the fear of judgment and harsh self-evaluation that often fuels anxiety and disrupts flow (Moral-Bofill et al., 2022; Arbinaga, 2023; Warner, 2019). Therapeutic interventions such as cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), mindfulness-based therapy, cognitive restructuring, and exposure therapy help manage MPA symptoms (Matei & Ginsbort, 2017).

Each of these modalities offer distinct strengths. CBT equips performers with practical tools to identify and reframe irrational or perfectionistic thinking, which reduces the catastrophic thinking often underlying MPA (Matei & Ginsborg, 2017). ACT emphasizes acceptance and values-driven action enabling performers to acknowledge anxiety without avoidance while staying committed to their goals as an artist (Juncos et al., 2017; Werner, 2019). Mindfulness approaches strengthen present-moment awareness and reduce ruminative self-focus which supports flow and reduces evaluative anxiety (Moral-Bofill et al., 2022). Cognitive restructuring directly targets maladaptive beliefs tied to perfectionism, encouraging healthier interpretations of mistakes as growth opportunities (Ferber et al., 2024). Finally, exposure-based techniques gradually desensitize performers to anxiety-inducing contexts, providing opportunities to practice regulation skills under real conditions (Matei & Ginsborg, 2017). Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy (VRET) has also emerged as a promising tool to allow performers to confront

anxiety-provoking performance situations in immersive, controlled environments, which has shown to reduce MPA symptoms effectively (Bellinger et al., 2023; van Zyl, 2020).

Hybrid interventions that combine digital platforms with somatic practices further enhance performance regulation by integrating physiological awareness with coping strategies (Wang, 2024). For example, certain treatment modalities utilizing biofeedback make use of mobile applications equipped with wearable sensors provide real-time reporting on stress and arousal levels, enabling vocalists to implement adaptive strategies during rehearsals or live performance (Wang, 2024). These interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in addressing MPA and perfectionism, with ACT emerging as particularly promising (Juncos et al., 2017; Werner, 2019). Recent advancements in digital and hybrid interventions have also created new avenues for addressing MPA in vocalists, offering flexible and accessible options for psychological support. Online ACT programs, for example, promote mindfulness on top of the acknowledgment of MPA symptoms (Juncos et al., 2017). While most of these interventions and strategies primarily address the cognitive dimensions of MPA and perfectionism, some also encompass emotional components. Additional approaches have been identified to specifically target these emotional challenges.

Interpersonally, effective emotional regulation involves processing fears around external evaluation and the vulnerability inherent in performing. Vocalists are often acutely aware of the presence and judgment of an audience and an evaluating team, which can amplify perfectionist tendencies and fuel performance anxiety (Moral-Bofill et al., 2022). These fears extend beyond technical execution to concerns about stage presence and the perception of one's artistic identity (Lewis & Hendricks, 2022). By cultivating interpersonal regulation skills such as reframing audience evaluation as engagement instead of judgement, performers can begin to reduce the

intensity of this external pressure. This reframing not only diminishes the sense of threat posed by the audience but also transforms the social dynamic of performance into one of shared artistic experience. Such a shift creates a psychological environment that is more conducive to entering and sustaining flow states, where attention is absorbed in the act of music-making rather than in consistent self-monitoring (Jiang & Tong, 2024).

Intrapersonally, techniques that encourage emotional awareness and acceptance instead of avoidance empower vocalists to engage fully with their feelings without becoming overwhelmed (Gross, 2015; Herman & Clark, 2023). These strategies would be especially beneficial for performers who immerse themselves in the emotional expression of song lyrics, where they can strike a balance between artistic performance and emotional expression. Avoidance strategies, though temporarily protective, often magnify stress and restrict authentic expression. For instance, some musical pieces carry significant emotional weight through their lyrics and musical arrangement. A vocalist may naturally respond to this by expressing tears or physical gestures that embody the emotion of the piece. However, performers who fear that such expressions could ruin the performance may suppress or avoid them altogether, thereby disrupting presence and reducing the likelihood of flow. Acceptance-based approaches, by contrast, normalize emotional responses as part of the performance process. For vocalists, this means acknowledging feelings of fear, excitement, or vulnerability, and allowing these emotions to inform rather than inhibit their performance. Intrapersonal regulation is particularly variable for singers who immerse themselves in the emotional expression of song lyrics, where a delicate balance must be maintained between technical control and emotional presence. By integrating awareness and acceptance, performers create room for emotions to enrich their vocal delivery, laying a stronger foundation for presence and flow. Taken together, greater interpersonal and

intrapersonal awareness develops emotional openness and thereby facilitates smoother and more consistent transitions into flow states where the performer's attention can rest on artistic expression (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Jiang & Tong, 2024).By integrating cognitive reframing, emotional acceptance, and somatic regulation, vocalists have a holistic framework to navigate the pressures of performance with resilience and adaptability. With cognitive reframing, vocalists have the opportunity to reinterpret perfectionist thoughts in more flexible and constructive ways, reducing the grip of rigid self-criticism while maintaining commitment to excellence. Emotional acceptance further supports this process by helping vocalists acknowledge anxiety as a natural part of performing rather than resisting it, which eventually transforms nervous energy into creative presence onstage. Somatic regulation anchors these psychological shifts in the body, as techniques such as breath support, postural alignment, and muscle release ensure that the voice flows freely and is responsive and adaptive under pressure. This integrated strategy, either learned independently or safely unpacked and rehearsed with a therapist, not only mitigates the detrimental effects of maladaptive perfectionism and MPA, but also actively prepares the performer to enter and sustain a flow state. This approach also allows the performer to still uphold high standards while fostering a healthier relationship with vocal performance.

Clinical Implications

This literature review highlights the importance of both somatic and psychological dimensions of MPA and perfectionism in vocalists, and positions the nature of perfectionism towards a more positive light consistent with the concept of excellencism. In clinical practice, these insights can be applied to develop interventions that integrate cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation with body awareness. Primary barriers posed by perfectionism include the tendency to foster rigid self-criticism, unrealistic standards, and fear of failure, which can

heighten anxiety and minimize expressive freedom. Vocalists who relate to their MPA through a perfectionistic lens will often struggle with cycles of self-doubt, disrupted concentration, and physical strain. Accordingly, vocalists can benefit from understanding how perfectionism shows up to sabotage their performance. With this awareness, they can manage perfectionism instead of letting it manage them by shifting from self-critical states towards presence and flow.

Practitioners with clients from this population can employ ACT to foster psychological flexibility, the ability to remain open to present-moment experiences even when they are uncomfortable while still acting in alignment with one's values (Juncos et al., 2017). For vocalists, this flexibility is especially valuable by how it helps disengage from rigid perfectionistic thoughts to reduce the impacts of MPA and allow more opportunities for an adaptive performance experience. When paired with somatic strategies such as breathwork, progressive muscle relaxation, and body mapping (Deyong, 2021; Lewis & Hendricks, 2022), ACT emphasizes acceptance grounded in tangible bodily practices that help regulate arousal and reduce muscle tension. Clients can benefit from a skilled practitioner who can help them with inner work during sessions and teach them regulation skills that they can practice on their own, particularly in performance-related situations.

Specific clients who may benefit from these strategies and interventions include conservatory students, professional and non-professional vocalists, and competitive choral singers, who are frequently exposed to heightened performance demands and perfectionistic standards. A group-based intervention may offer vocalists an avenue to practice these skills in a supportive environment that mirrors the evaluative nature of live performance. Such an intervention might entail a structured combination of psychoeducation about perfectionism and MPA, experiential exercises that promote emotional regulation and mindfulness, cognitive-

behavioural techniques to identify and reframe maladaptive thoughts, and simulated performance opportunities where participants can apply coping strategies in real time. Additionally, when vocalists are given the opportunity to assume an audience role, they learn through a modelling strategy as they observe and learn how peers manage their own symptoms when they perform. Discussions amongst themselves can also help normalize anxiety, foster perspective-taking, and reduce self-critical distortions. Peer feedback and reflective discussion following performances both as performers and observers may further strengthen self-awareness, resilience, and adaptive coping skills. Importantly, given the variety of norms surrounding perfectionism, emotional expression, and artistic vulnerability, group-based interventions may help address cultural differences in how performance anxiety is expressed and managed.

From a broader lens, these findings have implications for the development of funding and training proposals for programs within music institutions to ensure that resources are allocated to evidence-based psychological support for performers. By reframing MPA not as a personal flaw but as a modifiable experience along a spectrum toward flow, clinicians can empower vocalists to view performances as a space for presence rather than perfection. Music teachers and vocal coaches may also benefit from understanding this process to equip them with the skill set to teach psychological coping mechanisms on top of technical skills.

Ultimately, by bridging the somatic, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of performance, interventions informed by these insights offer a pathway for vocalists to navigate perfectionism and MPA in a manner that promotes both resilience and expressive authenticity. Future research might explore longitudinal outcomes of such integrated interventions, variations in effectiveness across genres, and culturally specific adaptations to optimize accessibility for diverse vocal populations.

Conclusion

Performances can be nerve-wracking for a performer, but it comes with the package along with constant evaluation and scrutiny from the public. Musicians cannot control the feedback and criticisms they receive, only how they respond to them. This study intends to not only reframe the natural occurrence of perfectionism and MPA into a more positive experience leading to flow, but also remind vocalists and vocal teachers that technical knowledge and skill can only do so much. Some of the concerns that hinder performers from attaining an optimal performance may boil down to fundamental factors such as the individual's physical and mental state. The art of vocal performance entails more than just holding the microphone or singing tunes in front of people. More vocalists may benefit from studies that would zone in on their niche population. Additionally, future studies could fill in the gaps in the link between flow and peak performance models and explore neurodivergent perspectives. This stems from the idea that flow has a domain on the appropriate allocation of energy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996); hence, neurodivergent musicians may benefit from further exploration in this aspect. In practice, shifting the focus from symptom management to practicing mindfulness and self-compassion can be a good start for vocalists to sustain a healthy mental state and relationship with music performances while maintaining exceptional artistic standards. In the end, what lingers after the final note is not the flawlessness of the song, but the vocalist's power to transform their song into a story that connects and shares the experience with those who listen.

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