

### The Price of Perfection

Anyone connected in any way with performing artists is acutely aware of the daily stress in their lives. If confirmation of the price that is paid for this unrelenting pressure is needed, one can turn to the impressive survey undertaken by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM), selected results of which are reported in this issue of MPPA. Although all of the data are of interest, I would like to concentrate here on that portion that most clearly relates to tension in the lives of the respondents. Arguably one could say that a significant percentage of the reported 82% incidence of medical problems in the 220-plus respondents are stress-related.

Although only 17% admitted to depression, 21% were worried by their own use of alcohol and 20% by their use of prescription and nonprescription drugs. Nearly one fourth of the group complained of stage fright, and for 16% it was a significant problem, an unhappy circumstance when one earns one's living in performance! William Safire, in an essay in the *New York Times* entitled "Emphasis on Stress", made light of what he referred to as "the socialization of stress and its vogue selection as the root of all modern health evil." Lest we be guilty of perpetuating this sin, I would like to dissect the stress of the performing artist and briefly consider what I believe to be one of its most crucial components, the stress on and of the pursuit of perfection.

In other forms of artistry there is not this absolute standard; we are not as inclined to judge mistakes in painting or in poetry. But from the earliest moment when a child picks up a musical instrument or attends a first dance class, there is an unyielding standard established and with it an implied prohibition of error. Farther down the

educational path is the conservatory with its intensified level of commitment, practice and competition. Although its contents may have been less than startling, the title of Judith Kogan's recent book, *Nothing But the Best: The Quest for Perfection at the Juilliard School*, says it all. What are the values being instilled into these future performers? If they, the students, are to be described as artists, how important is perfection as opposed to creativity and individuality, and does overemphasis on perfectionism spell future emotional and physical illness that might be prevented? A physician may be on somewhat shallow ground venturing into the hallowed domains of our major conservatories, but if we are charged to preserve and protect the health of their students and graduates, it is difficult to avoid looking at all the issues.

Jascha Heifitz, who died recently at the venerable age of 86, in many ways set the standards for all violinists to follow. But as Harold Schonberg noted in a eulogy in the *New York Times* of the pre-eminent violinist:

He was indeed a playing machine. Nobody had that security, that muscular relaxation, that silken sound, that perfection of pitch. From him audiences expected perfection, and that bothered him . . . Heifitz was convinced . . . that audiences filled his halls just to see if he ever made a mistake.

There have been superstars who have succeeded in spite of regularly sacrificing accuracy in favor of musicality and artistry, but they have been the exceptions and not the rule. This is not a plea for inaccuracy that distracts from accuracy. However, judging note perfection requires less thought and sophistication on the part of audiences and professionals alike than does the critical judging of the totality of performance. Perhaps we as physicians need

to educate audiences about the stresses and illnesses produced by excessive practice in the "quest for perfection" so that performers will be judged and succeed or fail on something more than a shallow definition of perfection.

Although all of the facts of the case are presumably not known by the general public and the cause may well have been multifaceted, it is hard not to look in this context at the recent tragic death of Patrick Bissell, the fine principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre, from drug abuse. The well-publicized incidence of eating disorders among female dancers is also, at least in part, testimony to the kind of rigidity and quest for perfection that has also been accepted as intrinsic to the world of ballet. Although there cannot be much room for error in dance performance, might there not be approaches other than those used currently in training that would prove more supportive of the needs of individual dancers so that they would be less inclined to self-destructive behavior?

It would be presumptuous to say that I have the answers to these troubling problems. However, it seems clear that to avoid risking the well-being and lives of our performing artists, physicians must assist the schools, the performing arts organizations, and even the audiences to examine the consequences of their ways. Responsible documentation, as provided by the ICSOM survey, is one such way to obtain appropriate information to help in this evaluation process. One would hope that the obituary columns will not have to serve as another warning before there is a willingness to band together in an attempt to find some solutions to the stress of the performing artist.

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