

**Performance Anxiety And Stress Coping Strategies For Choral Conductors****Özlem ONUK NATONKSI****Abstract**

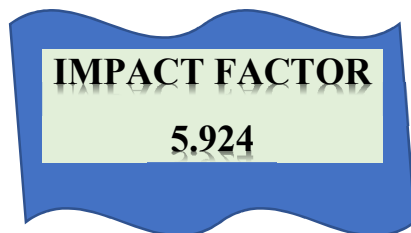
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This qualitative literature review examines the distinct psychological and pedagogical dimensions of performance anxiety encountered by choral conductors. While performance anxiety has been extensively examined in relation to soloists and instrumentalists, the particular pressures placed on conductors such as their high visibility, leadership responsibilities, and emotional labor remain underexplored. Addressing both the artistic and psychosocial aspects of conducting, this review analyzes the cognitive, physiological, and behavioral components of performance anxiety, as well as coping strategies employed by conductors (e.g., cognitive restructuring, somatic relaxation, breathing techniques, mindfulness practices, mentoring, and self-reflection). The study is grounded in theoretical frameworks such as Hochschild's concept of emotional labor, Kenny's model of music performance anxiety, and Gumm's leadership style theory. Consequently, this review underscores the need for enhanced pedagogical support for choral conductors and provides practical recommendations for music education programs.

Keywords: Choral conducting, performance anxiety, leadership, music performance, coping strategies, psychological resilience, mindfulness.

Introduction

Choral conducting is more than the act of musical direction; it is a multifaceted discipline encompassing pedagogical leadership, group coordination, and the public representation of musical



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performance. The conductor not only makes artistic decisions but also fosters emotional and social connections among choir members, guiding the collective musical experience. As such, the profession requires not only technical proficiency but also emotional labor and psychological resilience (Jansson et al., 2019; Aufegger, 2017; Biasutti, 2013).

Although performance anxiety has often been studied in relation to soloists or instrumentalists, the stress experienced by conductors within their leadership roles remains relatively underexplored (Kenny, 2011). Yet conductors are accountable not only for their own performance but also for ensuring the technical, emotional, and aesthetic coherence of the ensemble (Stohtert, 2012; Jansson et al., 2019; Aufegger, 2017; Biasutti, 2013).

A conductor's physical cues posture, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact profoundly influence both the musical quality and the motivational atmosphere within the ensemble. This heightened visibility creates significant emotional and cognitive pressure during performance (Aufegger et al., 2016). Thus, performance anxiety among choral conductors must be regarded as a unique phenomenon, intricately connected to both individual psychological responses and the complex demands of musical leadership (Waybright, 2006).

This review investigates how choral conductors experience performance anxiety, identifies its underlying causes, and examines coping mechanisms. Its aim is to reframe conducting as a profession that demands both musical expertise and emotional labor, thereby enhancing pedagogical understanding and support for conductors within the field of music education.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literature review methodology, systematically analyzing both national and international academic sources related to performance anxiety in choral conductors. The review focuses on research that explores themes such as music performance anxiety, leadership in musical settings, emotional labor, and psychological coping strategies. Sources were selected using content analysis methods to identify key concepts and recurring patterns within the literature.

Artistic and Leadership Components of Choral Conducting

Choral conducting is a multifaceted discipline that integrates technical musical skills with emotional, cognitive, and social leadership. The conductor acts both as an artistic interpreter and a facilitator of communication, motivation, and psychological cohesion within the ensemble. While guiding the musical interpretation of a piece, the conductor is also responsible for



maintaining the emotional tone of the group and ensuring member coordination (Jansson et al., 2019; Aufegger, 2017; Biasutti, 2013).

Conducting requires the simultaneous management of aesthetic decision-making and group dynamics during performance. Especially in polyphonic settings, achieving balance among voice parts, guiding dynamic changes, and creating expressive unity requires both technical proficiency and intuitive leadership. In this context, the conductor emerges not only as a musical leader but also as an ethical, pedagogical, and emotional figure. This layered role entails cultivating social trust within the group while offering a psychologically safe environment for individual expression (Head, 2017; Abrahams, 2017).

The conductor's representational responsibilities extend beyond the stage. By fostering emotional trust during rehearsals and promoting respectful communication, the conductor shapes both the collective sound and the psychological climate of the ensemble (Jaque et al., 2015). As such, the conductor is not merely a technical authority but also a "psychosocial representative." The ensemble's artistic success and emotional coherence are closely tied to the conductor's leadership style (Schletter, 2020).

Moreover, the conductor's visibility during a performance is more prominent than that of most other musical performers. Consequently, performance anxiety can manifest not only as individual stress but also as a perceived collective responsibility. Yet, despite this, the unique experiences of choral conductors have often been overlooked in the academic literature (Schletter, 2020). This gap highlights a significant need for research and pedagogical support in both conducting education and performance psychology (Jansson et al., 2019; Litman, 2006; Jaque et al., 2015).

In conclusion, choral conducting should be understood not merely as technical expertise but as a holistic leadership practice that encompasses ethical, pedagogical, and psychosocial dimensions. Therefore, the training of choral conductors should extend beyond musical competence to include emotional intelligence, interpersonal communication, and group management skills (Jansson et al., 2019; Litman, 2006; Jaque et al., 2015).

Conceptual Framework

This section discusses the key concepts and theoretical approaches used to understand the experience of performance anxiety in choral conductors. The central concepts of the study include performance anxiety, emotional labor, leadership and representational load, and the psychological components of music performance. A conceptual foundation has been established within the framework of both music psychology and social psychology.



Performance Anxiety and Its Components

Performance anxiety refers to the intense arousal, tension, fear, and self-evaluative pressure an individual may experience before or during a public performance. This condition relates not only to aesthetic evaluation but also to the perceived threat of public scrutiny arising from heightened social visibility. According to Kenny (2011), performance anxiety consists of three primary components: a) Cognitive responses (e.g., worry, negative self-talk, feelings of inadequacy), b) Physiological responses (e.g., sweating, heart palpitations, dry mouth), and c) Behavioral responses (e.g., avoiding eye contact, motor disruption, performance avoidance).

In this context, performance anxiety is not merely “stage fright”; it is deeply linked to how individuals evaluate their own competence, recall past experiences, and assign meaning to the act of performing. Research suggests that negative past experiences, high external expectations, and perfectionistic tendencies can significantly heighten anxiety levels (Jaque et al., 2015; Diaz, 2018). Although most research has focused on solo performers such as instrumentalists and vocalists, choral conductors have received limited attention. Yet the conductor’s role encompasses more than onstage presence; it includes managing the entire musical process, representing the ensemble, and facilitating artistic coherence. Conductors are responsible not only for their own gestures and posture but also for maintaining group motivation, emotional tone, and musical unity (Schletter, 2020; Aufegger et al., 2017).

Therefore, the performance anxiety experienced by choral conductors extends beyond individual concerns. It includes dimensions of leadership, public representation, and collective responsibility. This calls for a dual-level analysis personal and interpersonal of anxiety in conducting roles. Furthermore, as aesthetic decision-makers and emotional moderators, conductors shape the entire psychological environment of the ensemble. Their anxiety, thus, is not isolated but shared, subtly influencing group dynamics (Litman, 2006; Waybright, 2006; Biasutti & Concina, 2014).

Conducting and Leadership Approaches

Choral conducting is a complex form of leadership that extends beyond musical interpretation. The conductor not only chooses repertoire and manages gestural expression and dynamic balance but also facilitates group cohesion, emotional climate, and motivation. Leadership styles may range from traditional, authoritative models to more autonomy-supportive, participatory approaches. These styles directly affect not only musical outcomes but also the psychological well-being and safety of choir members.



Jansson et al. (2019) argue that conducting competencies cannot be limited to technical skills; interpersonal capacities such as empathy, transparent communication, and trust-building are essential in today's choral environments. Aufegger et al. (2016) highlight the psychological demands of representational responsibility, describing it as a form of "visible leadership" that requires strong emotional resilience. In this sense, the conductor is both a creative visionary and a psychological guide.

From a pedagogical perspective, Abrahams (2017) and Head (2017) propose that today's conductor should not only interpret music but also serve as an ethical facilitator and educational leader. This expanded view of leadership repositions the conductor as a figure of both aesthetic influence and social transformation, capable of shaping inclusive and emotionally intelligent ensemble cultures.

Emotional Labor and Representational Load

Arlie Hochschild's (1983) concept of *emotional labor* offers a valuable lens through which to understand the complex emotional demands placed on choral conductors. Emotional labor involves managing internal emotional states, displaying specific emotions, and self-regulating in accordance with professional expectations. Conductors often suppress frustration during rehearsals or mask anxiety before performances, maintaining a composed and motivating persona in front of the ensemble.

This emotional regulation places a burden not only on conductors' musical capacities but also on their psychological endurance. Aufegger et al. (2017) emphasize that conductors frequently carry an invisible emotional load, leading to psychological fatigue or burnout, especially when outlets for expressing such pressures are limited. As both internal group moderators and public representatives of their ensembles, conductors navigate emotional demands across multiple relational levels.

Jaque et al. (2015) further suggest that conductors experience elevated neurophysiological stress levels not only during performance but also in relation to the institutional or cultural roles they embody. In this regard, emotional labor is not merely a personal coping challenge but a representational issue, shaped by broader structural, social, and symbolic dimensions of musical leadership.

Psychological Resilience and Anxiety in the Choral Context

Choral conducting reveals that leadership in musical settings requires not only technical expertise but also high levels of emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal resilience. Conductors function as artistic leaders who guide ensemble cohesion, manage motivation, and engage with external



stakeholders such as audiences and institutions. These multidimensional responsibilities become particularly taxing in high-stakes scenarios such as public concerts, competitions, or ceremonial performances.

Research by Biasutti and Concina (2014) indicates that music educators and conductors are especially vulnerable to emotional fatigue and stress in emotionally intensive environments.

For choral conductors, this pressure is not limited to the performance itself it extends to preparation processes, group management, and navigating administrative expectations.

In this context, psychological resilience becomes a crucial asset for sustainable and effective leadership. Strengthening resilience can be achieved through practices such as community support, mindfulness, somatic awareness, self-reflection, and experience-sharing. These strategies not only benefit the individual conductor's well-being but also positively influence the ensemble's emotional climate (Aufegger et al., 2017; Miles, 2018).

Performance anxiety in choral conductors manifests differently at various stages of the performance cycle, shaped by both personal and interpersonal stressors. Common sources of anxiety include fear of insufficient preparation, concerns about group cohesion, and the technical difficulty of the repertoire. Additionally, lack of engagement during rehearsals or distractions during live performance may increase cognitive load and disrupt attention.

External expectations from audiences, juries, or institutional figures also intensify the feeling of being scrutinized, triggering excessive self-monitoring. This can result in physiological symptoms such as shaking, dry mouth, or vocal instability further reinforcing anxiety and disrupting expressive control. Such symptoms may compromise gesture clarity, eye contact, and emotional connectivity with both choir and audience. Consequently, performance anxiety is not only an individual experience but a group-affecting phenomenon that impacts both communication and performance integrity.

Coping Strategies for Performance Anxiety Cognitive Restructuring

Cognitive restructuring is among the most widely used psychological interventions for managing performance anxiety (Curtiss et al., 2021). It involves identifying and challenging automatic, often irrational, thought patterns related to performance, and replacing them with more balanced and constructive alternatives (Kenny, 2011). In socially visible and cognitively demanding professions such as choral conducting, internal dialogues significantly influence performance quality.



Common cognitive distortions include thoughts like “What if I fail?”, “The audience will think I’m incompetent,” or “The choir expects me to be flawless.” These internal narratives heighten anxiety and disrupt both physical coordination and mental clarity (Diaz, 2018). The aim of cognitive restructuring is to replace such self-defeating thoughts with realistic alternatives for example, “A single mistake doesn’t define my entire performance” or “The audience seeks connection, not perfection.”

The process typically unfolds in three stages: (1) identifying automatic thoughts, (2) evaluating their validity, and (3) developing alternative, functional beliefs. This intervention can be especially effective when supported by mentoring or cognitive-behavioral therapy (Aufegger et al., 2017; Joy Stanborough, 2023).

For choral conductors, cognitive restructuring is a powerful technique for reducing performance-related self-criticism and enhancing self-efficacy. Integrating this strategy into the rehearsal process can help conductors cultivate a more grounded and focused presence, especially in high-pressure situations.

Diaphragmatic Breathing Exercise (Abdominal Breathing)

Diaphragmatic breathing, also known as abdominal breathing, involves deep, slow inhalations through the diaphragm rather than the chest. This technique activates the parasympathetic nervous system, reduces heart rate, and lowers cortisol levels the body’s primary stress hormone. For choral conductors, practicing diaphragmatic breathing before a performance can alleviate physical symptoms of anxiety such as trembling or vocal instability, thereby enhancing vocal and gestural control (Hopper et al., 2019; Bentley et al., 2023; Diaz, 2018).

Box Breathing

Box breathing is a structured technique used to regulate stress, anxiety, and autonomic arousal. It consists of four equal phases: inhaling, holding the breath, exhaling, and holding again each typically lasting four seconds (4–4–4–4 model), though durations may be adjusted to the individual’s comfort level (Grossman et al., 2004).

This method stimulates the vagus nerve, promoting parasympathetic activation and helping to reduce cortisol levels and heart rate (Jerath et al., 2006). The steady rhythm not only facilitates physical relaxation but also supports emotional regulation and mental clarity (Felson, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2021).

For conductors, box breathing is particularly beneficial in managing pre-performance stress, which often arises from simultaneous artistic decision-making, high visibility, and emotional



responsibility. Short sessions immediately before rehearsal or performance can help synchronize internal tempo with the musical flow, support expressive gestures, and improve focus (Aufegger et al., 2017; Valentine et al., 1995).

When combined with cognitive restructuring, breathing-based strategies create a holistic framework for managing performance anxiety, especially for musicians in leadership roles (Kenny, 2011).

Body Scan Meditation

Body scan meditation is a foundational practice in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs. It involves systematically directing awareness to different areas of the body to observe physical sensations without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Goyal et al., 2014). For choral conductors, this technique can enhance physical awareness, reduce pre-performance stress, and restore the natural fluidity of gesture and facial expression.

Body scans can be performed lying down or in a seated position. For those prone to drowsiness, sitting upright may help maintain alertness.

Steps:

1. Find a comfortable seated or lying position.
2. Close your eyes and take a deep breath.
3. Focus attention on the body as a whole.
4. Begin scanning from the head or toes, observing areas of tension, tingling, or discomfort.
5. Gradually shift attention through the body neck, shoulders, chest, abdomen, etc. without trying to change the sensations.
6. If the mind wanders, gently bring attention back to the body.
7. After completing the scan, slowly open your eyes and allow the body to readjust before standing.

Research indicates that regular practice of body scanning reduces cortisol levels, lowers heart rate, and significantly improves anxiety scores (de Vibe et al., 2013; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Lardone et al., 2018). For conductors, releasing muscular tension particularly in the shoulders, jaw, and



neck can lead to more expressive and efficient conducting gestures. Additionally, this practice cultivates internal focus and enhances non-verbal communication with the choir, especially during high-stress performance situations.

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), also known as “psychological acupressure,” combines principles of cognitive restructuring with somatic stimulation. The method involves gently tapping on specific acupressure points on the body while voicing affirmations. EFT has shown promise in reducing anxiety, especially in performance contexts (Church, 2009; Clond, 2016; Salas et al., 2020).

Three-Step Process:

1. **Issue Identification:** The individual identifies the core emotional issue (e.g., “My heart races before going on stage”) and rates its intensity on a scale from 0 to 10.
2. **Affirmation Phrase:** While tapping the side of the hand (karate point), the person repeats an affirmation such as, “Even though I feel anxious before performing, I deeply and completely accept myself.”
3. **Tapping Sequence:** Tapping continues on acupressure points (e.g., eyebrow, side of the eye, under the nose, chin, collarbone, underarm), accompanied by emotionally relevant phrases (e.g., “This anxiety,” “I want to feel grounded,” “I can get through this”). After each round, the intensity is re-evaluated.

Empirical studies suggest that EFT reduces cortisol levels, heart rate variability, and subjective anxiety (Church et al., 2012; Stapleton et al., 2019). Pilot research in musical performance settings supports EFT’s efficacy in addressing stage fright, self-doubt, and critical internal dialogue.

For choral conductors, EFT can be particularly useful in the following contexts:

- Managing acute physical symptoms before performance (e.g., trembling, dry mouth)
- Navigating high-stakes concerts or juried performances
- Addressing the “pressure of visibility” on stage

Moreover, by fostering self-regulation in the conductor, EFT can indirectly promote emotional cohesion within the ensemble. Since the conductor’s emotional state profoundly influences



group dynamics, body-based techniques like EFT contribute not only to personal well-being but also to the ensemble's collective stability.

Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique, developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander in the late 19th century, is a method of body awareness that aims to identify and re-pattern habitual muscular tension, improving the individual's spatial coordination and postural efficiency (Cacciatore et al., 2020). It focuses particularly on optimizing the relationship between the head, neck, and spine, helping individuals release unnecessary effort and enhance the quality of movement and breath coordination.

Practitioners of the Alexander Technique guide individuals in recognizing maladaptive movement habits, promoting efficient use of the musculoskeletal system, and reducing tension patterns that interfere with natural movement (Parent, 2007; Valentine et al., 1995).

In the context of choral conducting, the technique supports the development of fluid and expressive gestures while preventing overexertion. It is especially valuable in addressing physical stressors associated with prolonged standing, repetitive arm movements, and high attentional demand. Regular practice can help conductors maintain postural integrity, improve breathing control, and convey musical intentions more economically and effectively (Stothert, 2020).

Feldenkrais Method

The Feldenkrais Method, developed by Moshe Feldenkrais, is a somatic education system grounded in the principles of neuroplasticity. Its primary goal is to enhance bodily awareness and reprogram habitual movement patterns through gentle, mindful exploration. The method comprises two main components: "Awareness Through Movement" (group lessons guided by verbal instruction) and "Functional Integration" (individual sessions involving tactile guidance) (Sholl, 2022).

Feldenkrais-based practices promote postural reorganization, balance, and improved coordination via the central nervous system. Rather than imposing idealized forms, the method works with the body's own capacity for self-correction and adaptation through subtle, exploratory movement (Paparo, 2021).

For choral conductors, the Feldenkrais Method offers tools to prevent physical tension, enhance gestural fluidity, and expand kinesthetic awareness. It encourages the development of responsive, grounded movement especially useful in dynamic performance environments. Furthermore, it supports conscious stage presence and fosters embodied decision-making during conducting (Jaque et al., 2015).

**Mentorship and Self-Reflection**

Two of the most effective strategies for reducing performance anxiety in choral conductors are mentorship and self-reflection. Both approaches emphasize experiential learning, personal awareness, and the internalization of leadership identity. In addition to improving performance quality, they foster self-efficacy, psychological resilience, and emotional regulation (Aufegger, 2017; Diaz, 2018).

Mentorship involves a structured relationship in which an experienced conductor supports a less experienced colleague by sharing knowledge, pedagogical insight, and coping strategies. Mentors can guide mentees in repertoire selection, rehearsal planning, stress management, and the psychological aspects of public performance. Stothert (2020) highlights that mentorship alleviates professional isolation among novice conductors and enhances self-confidence by providing reflective feedback.

Self-reflection, on the other hand, entails a systematic review of one's own performance, strengths, and areas for growth. Tools such as video recordings, journaling, voice analysis, and structured reflection questions support this process. According to Kenny (2011), the ability to recognize progress and internalize success is critical in overcoming performance anxiety. Self-reflection encourages a shift from external validation to internal evaluation, helping conductors develop an autonomous sense of leadership and competence.

When applied together, mentorship and self-reflection offer a synergistic approach that reduces professional stress, cultivates emotional insight, and strengthens the conductor's ability to manage performance demands effectively.

Discussion

The findings of this review suggest that performance anxiety among choral conductors must be understood not merely as an individual psychological condition but as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by leadership roles, emotional labor, and public representation. While most literature on performance anxiety focuses on soloists and instrumentalists (Kenny, 2011), the conductor's experience encompasses additional pressures: managing ensemble dynamics, embodying musical vision, and maintaining representational presence under scrutiny (Aufegger et al., 2017; Jaque et al., 2015).



Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor offers a valuable framework for understanding how conductors must regulate their internal emotional states while leading the group through expressive and interpersonal challenges. The conductor's nonverbal communication including gestures, facial expressions, posture, and vocal tone directly influences both the perceived quality of performance and the emotional climate of the choir.

This review also shows that coping strategies such as cognitive restructuring, breath-based relaxation techniques, mindfulness practices, and somatic approaches (e.g., Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method) yield significant benefits in managing anxiety and enhancing physical and mental readiness (Diaz, 2018; Valentine et al., 1995; Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Additionally, mentorship and self-reflection contribute to the development of internalized leadership and sustainable performance practices. These methods foster self-awareness and emotional autonomy, helping conductors manage not only individual anxiety but also group dynamics and external expectations (Stohtert, 2020).

Based on these findings, it is recommended that choral conducting education programs integrate training in emotional resilience, stage psychology, and anxiety management. Structured mentoring systems and reflective tools such as performance journals, peerobservation, and video analysis can strengthen pedagogical development and promote long-term well-being in professional practice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This review offers a holistic perspective on the performance anxiety experienced by choral conductors, highlighting that this anxiety is not simply an individual psychological issue but a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by leadership responsibilities, emotional labor, and representational pressures. Reframing performance anxiety within the broader context of conducting beyond the narrow focus on the moment of performance enhances our understanding of the conductor's emotional regulation, interpersonal dynamics, and artistic leadership.

The findings indicate that coping strategies such as cognitive restructuring and somatic techniques (e.g., diaphragmatic breathing, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method) are not only effective but also pedagogically transferable. These approaches can be systematically taught and practiced within conducting education programs to promote both musical and psychological readiness.

Based on the evidence presented in this review, the following recommendations are proposed:

- a) Integrate psychological training such as CBT-based anxiety management into choral conducting and music education curricula.



- b) Develop mentorship programs for conductors at different career stages, promoting experiential knowledge sharing and professional resilience.
- c) Encourage self-reflective practices, including performance journals, video analysis, and peer feedback, to enhance self-awareness and leadership growth.
- d) Offer workshops focused on somatic awareness, mindfulness, and breathing techniques to support physical and emotional flexibility in performance settings.

In conclusion, choral conducting should be recognized not only as an artistic discipline but also as a psychosocial and pedagogical leadership practice. Supporting conductors on emotional, cognitive, and educational levels is essential for the sustainability of their role and the overall well-being of the ensemble.

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