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# The lived experience and career of an opera singer who stutters

## Kariera i przeżycia śpiewaka operowego z zaburzeniem płynności mowy

**Keywords:** stuttering, emotions, opera career, speech therapy, phenomenological research

**Słowa kluczowe:** jękanie, emocje, kariera operowa, logopedia, badania fenomenologiczne

### Abstract

The inability to communicate fluently is often accompanied by strong emotions: anger, frustration, shame and fear, however, it is not the rule. Experiencing stuttering is highly dependent on individual characteristics and personality traits. Emotional experiences of people who stutter are increasingly subject to analysis. Notwithstanding, there is a noticeable deficit of research concerning the experiences of people who stutter in daily contact with music, especially on the opera stage, hence the text presents a description of the opera singer's career and experiences.

### Streszczenie

Niepłynności mówienia w czasie komunikowania się często towarzyszą silne emocje: złość, frustracja, wstyd i strach, jednak nie jest to regułą. Doświadczenie jękania w dużym stopniu zależy od indywidualnych cech i cech osobowości. Doświadczenia emocjonalne osób jękających się coraz częściej poddawane są analizie. Zauważalny jest jednak deficyt badań dotyczących doświadczeń osób jękających się w codziennym kontakcie z muzyką, zwłaszcza na scenie operowej, stąd też w artykule przedstawiono opis kariery i przeżyć śpiewaka operowego.



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## Introduction

### The psychological sources of stuttering

Stuttering is a complex, multi-faceted disorder that affects the emotional state, personal life, and social functioning of the person who stutters [Alqhazo et al., 2017; Tichenor, Yaruss, 2019]. The mechanism of the occurrence of speech fluency disorder is still unclear and insufficiently investigated. In explaining the etiology of stuttering, an important role is played by psychological theories, which identify the roots of speech fluency disorder in emotional and psychological factors. From a historical perspective, stuttering has been explained by expectancy neurosis, resulting from the belief that speech is complex and difficult [Freund, 1966], through psychoanalytical theories [Plänkens, 1999] and as being a result of natural, developmental disfluency perpetuated in children through parental pressure and criticism [Johnson et al., 1959]. While many researchers today discuss that the etiology of stuttering is primarily biological, it is still believed that the disorder is shaped by psychological and behavioral factors [Ambrose, 2004].

In recent years, the emotions accompanying people who stutter as well as the personality traits predisposing to speech fluency disorder have become subjects of analysis. However, new research aimed at determining person with stuttering personality is inconclusive; it does not prove the existence of a typical personality model of the person with stuttering.

Some studies have established that people with impaired speech fluency are characterized by cordiality and high levels of conscientiousness. Overly conscientious people do not allow themselves to make a mistake, which in turn triggers the fear of failure [Jafari et al., 2014; Humeniuk, Tarkowski, 2019a; 2019b]. The results of other studies indicate that people with stuttering are rather agreeable, empathetic individuals with a low competitive attitude, but they are distinguished by a higher level of neuroticism, i.e. a tendency to experience negative emotions more strongly, inadequate emotional responses to stimuli and a lower ability to cope with stressful situations [Bleek et al., 2012; Humeniuk, Tarkowski, 2019a; 2019b].

### The lived experience of stuttering

Apart from speech disfluency, which hinders free communication, negative emotions (fear, anxiety, shame, etc.) are also a frequent reason why people who stutter report their willingness to participate in therapy. The inability to communicate fluently is usually accompanied by strong emotions such as anger, frustration, guilt, shame or anxiety [Alqhazo et al., 2017; Tichenor, Yaruss, 2019]. There may also appear a feeling of losing control and getting stuck [Klompas, Ross, 2004; Tichenor, Yaruss, 2018; 2019]. Emotions that accompany stuttering often lead to disturbances in behavioral, cognitive and emotional responses, which may become inadequate to the situation

[Tichenor, Yaruss, 2019]. Moreover, people with impaired speech fluency are generally characterized by increased levels of negative affect and anxiety [Ezrati-Vinacour, Levin, 2004; Blumgart, Tran, Craig, 2010]. Contrary to expectation, people who stutter less acutely may suffer from their disorder more than people whose speech disfluency is more intense and easily perceived by interlocutors [Beilby, 2014]. People who stutter often avoid oral communication situations and show little initiative during conversations [Tichenor, Yaruss, 2018]. Negative emotions that accompany stuttering often develop in people with stuttering before they engage in dialogue with their conversational partners. People with stuttering then may experience fear and anxiety, as they are aware that disfluencies in their speech may occur at any moment [Tichenor, Yaruss, 2018; 2019].

Research outcomes demonstrate that stuttering can have a negative impact on functioning in school and in professional life [Klein, Hood, 2004; Beilby, 2014]. People with stuttering expect negative judgements from their social environment more than fluent speakers, which in turn may significantly limit their functioning in various social situations [Tarkowski, 2007]. Unpleasant experiences and emotions related to stuttering have a particularly strong impact on children and adolescents, two social groups highly exposed to mental health issues [Beilby, 2014]. Stuttering can be an obstacle in choosing one's dream career path and achieving professional success. Due to communication problems, people who stutter are often forced to give up their dream job and choose occupations and specializations that will not require speaking [Hayhow, Cray, Enderby, 2002; Klein, Hood, 2004]. Stuttering can significantly reduce the quality of life by worsening mental health, affecting self-esteem and hindering daily functioning in society [Klompas, Ross, 2004; Craig, Blumgart, Tran, 2009]. It should be noted, however, that some people who stutter develop a positive approach to life and accept their disorder. Since the emotions and experiences that result from stuttering are an individual matter, there are people for whom stuttering has positive aspects and is not an obstacle in everyday life [Klompas, Ross, 2004].

Research often points to the negative impact of stuttering on the identity of the person affected by this speech disorder. As reported by Tichenor and Yaruss [2019], only a small number of their study participants believed that identity was independent of stuttering and the disorder did not define it. Most of the respondents believed that stuttering negatively affected their self-esteem, viewing the disorder almost as a curse. Some research on identity [e.g., Kathard, Norman, Pillay, 2010] also suggests that positive self-identification of people who stutter is usually the result of positive experiences early in life and the result of gaining support and understanding from the surrounding environment, including home and school. In addition, study participants highlight certain critical incidents in their lives or turning points that made them stop considering themselves inferior and disabled, and when they began to think more positively about themselves and their stuttering [Kathard, 2006].

## The study aim

At present, there are probably no systematic studies assessing the impact of stuttering on people who perform as singers or vocal artists, although we know about such individuals from public media and anecdotal data. This social group is especially interesting because of the scientific evidence that for many people with stuttering singing is a relatively stutter-free zone of life [Falk, Schreier, Russo, 2020]. We also know that music therapy, also known as melodic intonation therapy [Falk et al., 2016], is an effective treatment for some speech disorders, including stuttering. There is a complete lack of research on the impact of stuttering on the emotions and carrier of opera singers who stutter due to the small size and hermetic nature of this social group. In an attempt to address this gap in research, the present research focused on answering the following research questions: 1) How does stuttering impact the career dynamics of an opera singer? and 2) What emotions and experiences of stuttering accompany an opera singer when performing on stage?

## Research methodology

### General characteristic

In this research, the methodology of phenomenological research was used, an important philosophical direction aimed at making philosophy a hard science, based on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl [Hopkins, 2016]. Phenomenological research seeks to explore and understand the lived experience, including conscious experiences, mental states, expressed values and thoughts. Phenomenological research has gained popularity in the humanities, social sciences, and health sciences, including speech therapy [e.g. Walker, Tobbell, 2015]. This qualitative research methodology has previously been used to describe the experiences and emotions of people who stutter [e.g. Tichenor, Yaruss, 2018; 2019]. The present study follows the procedure proposed by Hycner [1985], which provides a step-by-step explanation of the process of phenomenological analysis and interpretation of interview data.

### The participant

The present study involved an opera singer named Karol<sup>1</sup>, aged 33. The man graduated with honors from a major music academy in the solo singing class and in theater studies as his second field of study. Currently, he lives in a large city in Poland and actively performs opera tenor roles on Polish and foreign stages. He was diagnosed with stuttering in his early childhood. It was suspected that his speech fluency disorder

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<sup>1</sup> The real name of the participant has been changed to Karol, inspired by the title character of the opera “Don Carlos” by G. Verdi.

was the result of the participant's forced switching to writing with the right hand. The participant knows from his mother's account that in his early childhood, when he began to speak, his speech was smooth and free of stuttering. A few years ago, Karol was admitted to Mensa International due to his above-average IQ.

### Data gathering and analysis

The participant was asked to complete a short questionnaire providing essential socio-demographic data, such as age, education, marital status and nationality. The main source of data was a semi-structured interview, conducted in conditions guaranteeing privacy and a friendly atmosphere, recorded with a voice recorder. During the interview, the participant was presented with photos from his opera performances to help him recall memories and observe his response to those pictures.

The content of the interview was analyzed in accordance with the description of the phenomenological research methodology proposed by Hycner [1985]. It is deemed that the rigorous application of a recognized research procedure had a positive effect on the quality of the present study. Before starting the analysis, the first author (KC) created a list of her own research expectations to be able to "bracket them" and thus open up to meanings directly emerging from the interview content. Subsequently, KC listened to the recording of the interview several times to obtain a holistic image of its contents and transcribed it orthographically, noting the non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects of communication.

The next stage of the analysis was to select from the content of the interview all meaningful units, and then to select all those meaningful units which were deemed significant from the point of view of the research questions. The selection of the meaningful units and the significant meaningful units was verified by the second author of the present report (RD), who acted as the research supervisor and a juror. After a series of negotiations and corrections, the meaningful significant units were combined into groups of meaningful units and named as the central themes of the interview content. The central themes and theme summaries prepared by KC were again reviewed by RD. At the final stage of the analysis, the content of the interview, now expressed as central themes, was synthesised, as recommended by Hycner [1985]. The synthesis was verified and the study participant to check whether, in his opinion, it constituted the essence of the interview content. On this basis of this verification, corrections were introduced to the theme summaries and the synthesis of the interview. The presented research received a positive opinion of the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University.

## Results

### The career dynamics and the impact of stuttering

Table 1 presents examples of the significant meaningful units that emerged in search of an answer to the research question about the dynamics of an opera singer's career and the impact of stuttering. Groups of significant meaningful units have been combined into three central themes:

- 1) turning points,
- 2) uncompromising desire for success, and
- 3) the impact of stuttering.

Table 1. Career dynamics and the impact of stuttering. Example significant meaningful units and the central themes

Themes	Meaningful units (examples)
Turning points	Luciano Pavarotti as a role model Orientation in vocal education Admission to study at the music academy
Uncompromising desire for success	Singing and stage as a life passion Dreams of success and life on a pedestal Living in the shadow of others as a life failure
The impact of stuttering	Stuttering and difficulties encountered in the realization of opera roles Reciting poems or prose on stage Choosing the right repertoire The second study area as a safety net

Source: own elaboration

**Turning points:** "it actually opened this window ... that maybe I will be able to follow in Pavarotti's footsteps ... a little"

A turning point in Karol's life was a vinyl record with arias performed by Luciano Pavarotti, which he bought at the suggestion of his mother. In his opinion, this album was the cornerstone of his singing career and Pavarotti, one of the greatest opera singers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became an inspiration and a role model. Another critical incident, as indicated by the research participant, was a single singing lesson with his vocal teacher, during which he experienced a sharp breakthrough in his vocal technique in high *tessitura*<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, his vocal education became oriented towards the tenor voice.

According to Karol, the two breakthrough moments eventually led him to choose a professional path in the field of opera singing. This decision was confirmed by his

<sup>2</sup> Tessitura (Italian: "texture") – the pitch range that most frequently occurs within a musical piece [Śledziński, Chodkowski, 1981].

successful passing of the entrance exams to a music academy, which he describes in the following way: “[...] it was like ... dotting the ‘i’ because ... still ... getting to university then, from that perspective, well ... it meant, you know ... that you won’t be, well, your average singer, right?” The university entrance exams were accompanied by some uncertainty related to stuttering. Karol emphasizes that reciting a fragment of a prose and a poem was required during the exams. Recitation in front of an audience has always been stressful for Karol:

[...] the only unpleasant thing was that they always forced me to say some verse at the academy, which I usually somehow managed to do, but I just took it as if, you know, that they were just trying, for some reason, to make me do something I don’t feel like doing [...] It always stressed me out.

The public speaking during the entrance exams to university was a big challenge that the artist, as a stutterer, had to face and which he faced successfully, which Karol strongly emphasizes when he says: “[...] at that moment it was an achievement that... there was no mistake, that suddenly I was lost for words and there was nothing I could do...”.

Uncompromising desire for success: “I always, you know, followed the principle: dream big or go home!”

During the interview, Karol repeatedly points out that singing is his greatest passion in life, which he wants to devote himself to: “[...] I really like doing it and I feel that I am in the right place and that of all the things that somehow I can do in my life this probably I can do best.” It seems that a constant desire to achieve great things accompanies him: “I always, you know, followed the principle: dream big or go home!”. The vision of being one of many is unacceptable to Karol, which he expresses as follows: “[...] when I sing with other artists, I have to spend time with them in the dressing room, listen to their stories, see what the theater looks like from the perspective of someone who, unfortunately, is one of many, then I am not going to spend my life like that”.

Karol prefers to be a soloist. This makes it possible for him to show the full potential of his voice and to have stage presence exist on stage, while group singing, in his opinion, closes the prospects for achieving vocal success, gives him a feeling of being inferior and is “a form of degradation”.

The impact of stuttering: „For me, this is not a completely different world, I have to be mindful out there about what may happen”

In his profession, Karol has to deal with difficulties resulting from stuttering. He says that singing for him “is not a completely different world”, because he has to “be mindful out there about what may happen”. In his opera singing, he sometimes

experiences a fear of stuttering, for example when performing recitatives, especially *secco*<sup>3</sup>. He then “has a feeling that the rhythm that is somewhere in the accompaniment is abandoning him” and occasionally experiences micro stutters. Starting to sing “in silence”, when the accompaniment is not heard, is also problematic, as it generates a similar level of anxiety as in the situation of starting to speak and causes minor disfluencies. Karol admits that stuttering can also happen to him during stage recitations of poems or prose. In his opinion, the need to say something using specific words or prompting a stage partner with a line, which often happens during opera performances, are situations that increase his stress level and intensify the risk of stuttering.

Being a person with stuttering has some impact on Karol’s repertoire. At the beginning of his professional career, he eagerly reached for texts that allowed him to play with intonation and acting, which in turn enabled him to recite more fluently and ensured a greater sense of comfort. This was the case, for example, during his entrance exam to a music academy, when he “took a cabaret sketch for safety”. Karol claims that over the years, the acquired experience and maturity, as well as the work put into getting familiar with the stage have improved the fluency of his speech, allowing him to select a repertoire that several years earlier, at the beginning of his career, he would consider too difficult. He puts it like this: “[...] I did some work, and age did its job, so I started to speak a little more fluently, so for example I could say a given piece quite normally, without stuttering”. According to the research participant, the severity of stuttering during his career to some extent depended on shifting luck, because “sometimes you were more relaxed, sometimes less, and sometimes it was smooth, sometimes less smooth.”

Choosing the career of an opera singer was, in Karol’s opinion, a careless choice and so uncertain that he decided to take theater studies as his second field of study, which would act as a safeguard for the future, “to have a possible lifeline”. The second field of study would offer Karol the opportunity to stay in the field of music and theater, the sphere of his interests, without however the necessity of performing on stage.

### Attitude towards stuttering, emotions, and experiences on stage

Table 2 presents examples of the significant meaningful units that emerged in search of an answer to the research question about the participant’s emotions and experiences on the stage related to stuttering. Groups of significant meaningful units have been combined into two central themes: 1) Attitude towards stuttering and 2) Emotions on stage.

3 *Secco, recitativo secco* (Italian) – A declamation accompanied by *basso continuo*, usually supported by single chords. Recitatives bear the burden of presenting dramatic action [Kowalska, 2001].



Table 2. Participant's attitude, emotions and experiences. Example significant meaningful units and central themes

Themes	Meaningful units (examples)
Attitude towards stuttering	No feeling of being marginalised Awareness of own problems and acceptance Attitude towards stuttering varies with age and experience
Emotions on stage	Stage fright related to vocal performances Fear of getting stuck Rebellion against acting under external pressure Feeling of losing control Pleasure and satisfaction from performing

Source: own elaboration

### Attitude towards and perception of disorder: "it is a matter of perspective"

Despite the presence of stuttering in his life, Karol does not remember many unpleasant situations related to it; does not remember feeling excluded or ignored by his environment because of the disorder, which he expressed in the following way: "[...] I have never felt very marginalised, that is ... I would be the life and soul of some parties". On the contrary, he stresses that, in his school days, he often experienced better treatment from teachers as a kind of compensation.

Karol believes that his approach towards stuttering results from his personality and temperament. As he puts it, he is not the kind of person who "sits in the corner at a party, won't say anything because he stutters." He claims that his personality is complicated: he has extrovert qualities and has the temperament of a sanguine. In his opinion, he is also uncompromising, impulsive and nervous. Karol stresses more than once in the interview that his attitude towards stuttering has changed with age, emotional maturity, life experience and new perspectives. He accepts his stuttering; is aware of his disorder.

### Emotions on stage: "there are however moments in my singing, when I fear getting stuck"

Karol has no doubts that stage fright and a general tension may influence his voice and intensify his stuttering. The day on which his concert is to take place is almost a lost day for him. He experiences difficulties in concentrating attention and, consequently, irritation with wasting time and inability to focus on important things. Many of the emotions accompanying Karol on stage are due to his speech disfluency. Among them, the artist mentions anxiety, fear, mental blockage and stress, caused by the specific elements of the repertoire or situations that may arise on stage.

Karol underscores the stress resulting from performing certain recitatives or opera parts imposed on him (against his will). Experienced emotions may also include irritation caused by performance errors, bad performance or a large number

of overwhelming requirements and tasks singers are burdened with during their preparation for performances and on stage. These situations also increase the risk of stuttering.

Karol enjoys being on stage and collaborating with other performers. He feels proud and satisfied with his own resourcefulness and creativity, with the ability to improvise on stage, which more than once “masked the fact that something went wrong”. He also feels enthusiasm resulting from his ability to overcome his own weaknesses and difficulties resulting from stuttering. The artist flatters himself and concludes the interview as follows: “Somehow it comes out right and, so far, no one noticed that I stuttered on the stage”.

## Discussion

The results of the present research demonstrate that the opera stage is not a stuttering-free space to an opera singer with a stuttering disorder. This conclusion is somewhat in contradiction with the common opinion, supported by research, that stuttering most often does not occur in singing [Falk, Schreier, Russo, 2020]. This study suggests, however, that while stuttering in opera singing is indeed significantly reduced, the repertoire and the opera stage may generate situations and negative emotions that increase the possibility of experiencing stuttering. The influence of negative emotional states on the severity of stuttering is well documented in the literature [Ezrati-Vinacour, Levin, 2004; Anderson, Pellowski, Conture, 2005].

In the content and structure of the vocal repertoire, there may be factors that cause the singer an increased level of anxiety about stuttering, and sometimes stuttering. One of those factors is starting singing “in silence”, i.e. without accompanying accompaniment, which is similar to starting a verbal utterance, another is performing *secco* recitatives due to their irregular rhythmic structure and declamatory character. In both cases, the singer is accompanied by a loss of sense of rhythm. These observations support the hypothesis that stuttering is a disorder related to the time and rhythmic flow of speech production [Van Riper, 1982; Wieland et al., 2015]. When speech is in sync with an external rhythmic signal (e.g., accompaniment or metronome), stuttering can be significantly alleviated [Davidow, 2013; Wieland et al., 2015].

The stage is a place where the action unfolds dynamically, often beyond the control of the performing artists. The feeling of losing control over the events on the stage, the need to say something using specific, exact words and situations when it is necessary to prompt to a stage partner with a line increase stress levels and increase the chances of stuttering. We know that stuttering is often accompanied by a sense of losing control of speech [Perkins, 1983; 1990; Tichenor, Yaruss, 2018; 2019]. Maintaining control is often understood by person with stuttering as avoiding problematic words, making their speech easier to be as fluent as possible. However, trying

to gain control of your speech may be counterproductive, because it can cause excessive tension, a struggle with oneself, which in turn leads to increased dysfluency [Klein, 2012; Tichenor, Yaruss, 2018].

One contemporary area of stuttering research is the personality and temperament of individuals who stutter [Bleek et al., 2012; Jafari et al., 2014; Humeniuk, Tarkowski, 2019a; 2019b]. The participant of the present study is distinguished by a high level of ambition and constant striving for perfectionism [cf. Humeniuk, Tarkowski, 2019a]. His character traits also include neuroticism, impulsiveness and rebelliousness, all traits mentioned in other studies on the personality of people who stutter [Bielecki, 1988; Bleek et al., 2012; Humeniuk, Tarkowski, 2019a]. Contrary to numerous studies showing that anxiety and fear relentlessly accompany stuttering, which in turn adversely impacts everyday functioning in society [Tarkowski, 2007; Błachnio, Przepiórka, 2013; Beilby, 2014; Alqhazo et al., 2017; Tichenor, Yaruss, 2019], the artist participating in the present research claims that he has never felt marginalized or disregarded. Resistance to negative experiences stemming from stuttering and effective strategies for coping with difficulties caused by stuttering have made the participant of the present study accept himself as a person with stuttering, be successful on his professional path and enjoy a high quality of life [cf. De Nardo et al., 2016; Plexico et al., 2019]. In contrast to the results of research suggesting that stuttering significantly determines career choice and development [Hayhow, Cray, Enderby, 2002; Klein, Hood, 2004], the results of this study demonstrate that it is possible to have a successful singing career despite being a person who stutters provided that the person with stuttering demonstrates high awareness of their speech impediment and strong determination in pursuing their goals. An important turning point in the life of the study participant was overcoming the difficulties associated with stuttering and passing the entrance exam to study at the music academy. Kathard [2006] points to the importance of such turning points in the lives of people who stutter.

## Conclusion

The opera stage may not be a stuttering-free zone to a vocal artist with a speech fluency disorder. The content and structure of the repertoire as well as the stage dynamics may generate situations and emotions that increase the chances of stuttering. Starting singing “in silence” and performing *secco* recitatives lead the artist to a loss of the sense of rhythm, increase anxiety levels and may trigger stuttering. Declamations and verbal interactions between artists, common on the operatic stage, are also marked by a risk of experiencing a disfluency. The dynamic events on stage, the need to use specific words or having to provide a verbal prompt to a stage partner increase stress levels and chances of stuttering. Also, performing under duress, e.g., a vocal part which is regarded by the artist as poorly matched with their vocal

ability, may also induce negative emotions and increase chances of stuttering. Stuttering can to some extent determine the choices the artist makes with respect to their repertoire. The above-mentioned findings can be explained in terms of previous research documenting the impact of negative emotional states [Ezrati-Vinacour, Levin, 2004; Anderson, Pellowski, Conture, 2005;], external rhythmic signal [Davidow, 2013; Wieland et al., 2015] and the sense of losing control of speech [Perkins, 1983; 1990; Tichenor, Yaruss, 2018; 2019] on stuttering. Resistance to negative experiences of stuttering, high awareness of one's speech impediment and strong determination in pursuing goals can increase the chances of having a successful singing career, despite the well-documented detrimental impact of stuttering on quality of life [Tarkowski, 2007; Błachnio, Przepiórka, 2013; Beilby, 2014; Alqhazo et al., 2017; Tichenor, Yaruss, 2019]. It must be remembered, however, that phenomenological research is meant to be exploratory, and the results obtained from the present study cannot be generalized to other vocal artists, immersed in different life circumstances and social contexts.

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