4 Steps To Curing Butterflies In The Stomach by Sheri Gould

Cowardly Lion: I'd be brave as a blizzard…
Tin Woodsman: I'd be gentle as a lizard…
Scarecrow: I'd be clever as a gizzard…
Dorothy: If the Wizard is a wizard who will serve.
Scarecrow: Then I'm sure to get a brain…
Tin Woodsman: A heart…
Dorothy: A home…
Cowardly Lion: The nerve!

I found this cute little "dialogue" from "The Wizard of Oz" quite appropriate for my topic this month. And not only this dialogue specifically, but the whole way in which the problem of the cowardly lion is set up (in the movie) and resolved. His struggle is one of courage which in some ways is not so very unrelated to us as singers dealing with "nerves" or what used to be commonly referred to as "stage fright". So let's have a look at how his problem hindered him and how he found resolution to see if we can't find some help for ourselves along the way.

Why do we get nervous when we're about to sing in front of people? Like the cowardly lion, our nervousness is directly related to fear. It might seem silly to us if we break it down. We're not feeling afraid of anything per se right? What's the worst that could happen? It's not like we're in any real danger. But most of the time, I think that our fear is related to the possibility of failure. Just like in the case of the cowardly lion though, our fear is not based so much in the truth as it in a few scary monsters. A few of our monsters might be:

sounding awful

forgetting the words

being out or tune

running out of breath

being judged…etc.

Are these monsters real? Maybe, but maybe not. The more important question is, what can we do about the fears?

1. Be Prepared!

The biggest step you can take toward alleviating nervousness is to be completely prepared. The better you feel about the song(s) you're singing, the less nervous you'll be. Think about it: if you KNEW you were going to stand up there and sound amazing you wouldn't be nervous, right? That is nearly 100% true, so be prepared. Know your words. Know your stuff. Good rule of thumb is this: never sing anything in public that you haven't sung at least 100 times at home. That will also help insure you are memorized—please, please don't insult your audience by singing a song with music in front of you (unless you're playing an instrument). It communicates a lack of preparedness (investment in) and therefore a lack of caring about your audience.

Work through the difficult passages until they are no longer difficult—or at least they become manageable. If you just can't smooth out a certain section of a song the way it's written, and you can't switch the song, then consider a slight re-write: overriding principal here is-better to do something well then to be 100%true to the original. "Making it your own" surely is a better option than singing it exactly as the original but poorly. To better prepare those difficult passages, try breaking them down to a simpler form. For example, try singing through the passage on just one vowel. Try slowing it wayyy down; if you can't sing something slowly then you can't sing it sped up (correctly) either. You probably just think you're singing it correctly!

2. Record Yourself!

One of the best tools we have with regard to preparing ourselves. One way of taking some of the 'unknown' factor out of the performance, is to record ourselves. A good audio recording is worth its weight in gold to a singer. It will also help you to mentally prepare yourself for exactly what will happen during your performance. There will be less to be nervous about because you'll know exactly what you're going to sound like. Some of you may be cringing right now at that thought! Listen, the reality is that you're most likely already singing in front of people right? They already know what you sound like! They asked you to sing anyway ☺ so it probably sounds foreign to you but acceptable to them. Listening critically to a recording can also help you to 'fix' some things before you actually sing the song in front of people. So take the time to employ this very important tool.

3. Mental Mindset

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!" There is so much truth in these words. Please take some time to re-think how you approach the world of public singing. We tend to elevate the people in our audiences/congregations to some sort of status that really isn't accurate. They are just people like you and me. They are looking to experience something (what that is exactly, depends on your setting) not to judge you on your singing ability. All you need to do is the best job you can at helping them to experience what they came looking for.

Your message is what sets you apart from the instruments so make sure your have clear in your mind what exactly you're trying to communicate—then communicate it. Think less about singing and more about communicating. That can take some of the fear out of it—you know how to get a message across right?

4. Stuff Happens

I hate to say it but it's true. Even with the best of intentions and preparations, things can go wrong. In my younger days, dancing was a big part of my life. My dancing partner was my older brother. For one competition we worked especially hard. Weeks and weeks of preparation left us standing in the spotlight completely prepared to do our amazing routine. The music started and we stared blankly at each other. We both froze. We both completely forgot the routine in a momentary blank out! What were the chances of both of us forgetting t the same time?! Here's is where out preparedness paid off: we simply began to improvise. Our skills had been honed and though we had temporarily forgotten the correct order of steps, we still had the skills to dance well. In the end, our "improv" dance won us first place (and a bunch of sweaty clothes and frazzled nerves!). It was our overall skill level that n the end saved the day. So, work on your singing skills overall on a regular basis so that when push comes to shove, you have what it takes.

So in the end, just like our friend the Cowardly Lion, once the truth of his fears was exposed, he was better able to deal with them. With confidence in his ability, he was better able to tackle whatever came his way. So although we can't eliminate nervousness altogether, we can take a big bite out of it and its ability to derail us.

Oh, and did I mention PRAY!!!???