



*Iris Seesjärvi*

***Unfolding Singer's Shame:***  
*Experiences of Shame and Shaming Among*  
*Finnish Classical Singers*

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*Laulajan häpeää avaamassa: Häpeän ja häpäisyn kokemukset  
suomalaisten klassisten laulajien keskuudessa*

Tässä artikkelissa tarkastelen suomalaisten klassisten ammattilaulajien kokemuksia ja kertomuksia häpeästä ja häpäisystä lauluopintojensa ja laulu-uransa aikana. Kysyn, millaisia häpeään ja häpäisyyn liittyviä kokemuksia laulajilla on opinnoissaan ja ammattiurallaan ollut ja mihin asioihin häpeä on liittynyt. Artikkelin tutkimusmateriaali pohjaa 58 suomalaisen osallistujan, joista 49 vastasi sähköiseen kyselylomakkeeseen ja 15 osallistui haastatteluun. Vastaajien ikähaitari (kerätty viiden vuoden tarkkuudella) oli 20–79 vuotta. Osallistujista 76 % oli naisia, 22 % miehiä ja 2 % sukupuoleltaan ”muu”. Sovellan tutkimuksessa Sara Ahmedin teoriaa emootioista kulttuurisina käytänteinä ja Silvan Tomkinsin affektiteoriaa. Lisäksi sovellan vähemmässä määrin Foucault’n diskurssiteoriaa. Aineistoa tarkastellaan narratiivis-hermeneuttisen analyysin keinoin. Analyysini valossa laulajalle häpeää tuottavat asiat voidaan jakaa viiteen kategoriaan: 1) lauluääneen liittyvä häpeä, 2) kehollisuuteen, ulkonäköön sekä henkilön ominaisuuksiin liittyvä häpeä 3) laulajan identiteettiin liittyvä häpeä, 4) muiden ihmisten aiheuttama häpeä (häpäisy, seksuaalinen häirintä, henkinen väkivalta), ja 5) suomalaisen kulttuurin sekä uskonnollisen ja perhetaustan aiheuttama häpeä. Väitän, että klassisen musiikkimaailman hierarkkiset rakenteet, korkea laadullinen vaatimustaso sekä musiikilliset ja näihin liittyvät seikat aiheuttavat laulajille häpeäkokemuksia sekä laulu-uralla että jo lauluopintojen aikana. Lisäksi auktoriteettien käyttämä häpäisy vallankäytön muotona tuottaa osaltaan laulajille häpeää. Myös laulajan sisäistetty häpeä vaikuttaa häpeäkokemusten syntyyn. Nämä ”sisäiset” ja ”ulkoiset” häpeän lähteet kietoutuvat toisiinsa ja ovat vuorovai-  
kutuksessa keskenään.

# *Unfolding Singer's Shame: Experiences of Shame and Shaming Among Finnish Classical Singers*

Iris Seesjärvi  
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What kind of experiences and occasions make classical singers feel shame during and before their professional careers as well as during their preceding studies? How do these experiences affect the singer? In this article I examine shame in the career of Finnish classical singers, and I propose a new approach to studying the emotional lives of Finnish classical singers regarding shame. I am interested in discovering what kind of experiences Finnish classical singers have regarding shame and humiliation when they are studying to become singers and during their subsequent professional careers. The data for this research were collected between November 2022 and March 2023 via narrative-thematic interviews (N=15), and through an electronic survey, titled *Shame and Shame-Resilience in the Career of a Finnish Classical Singer* (N=49).<sup>1</sup> The aim was to collect, as widely as possible, the shame-related experiences of singers.

Becoming a professional classical singer takes many years of hard work in order to accomplish the level of vocal skills to be able to manage the demands of a singing career. The path of a professional singer is not straightforward and easy in most cases: competition is harsh, and even a small failure can have a negative impact on a singer's career. Additionally, shaming exercised by authority figures can make singers feel a considerable amount of shame (see Seesjärvi 2017; 2024)<sup>2</sup>. Technical requirements for classical singing and other demands such as pursuing a very high qual-

1 This article is part of my PhD research, dealing with shame and shame-resilience in the career of Finnish classical singer. As the topic is sensitive, an ethical review statement was requested from The Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the University of Turku and conducted prior to collecting the data. The Ethics Committee has given assent to the research. Methodological approach will be discussed more in detail under "Researching Singer's Shame".

2 In this article, I will refer both to my previous work (Seesjärvi 2017) and to the published version of that work (Seesjärvi 2024).

ity as a singer, perfectionism, tough competition, and few job opportunities considering the number of professionally trained singers, produce fertile ground for singers to feel shame: that is, feeling inadequate, not good enough, worthless, or being rejected.

Although shame is considered one of the central negative emotions (e.g., Brown 2006; Tomkins 2008 [1962]; Munt 2008) affecting human lives in various ways, examinations of shame have so far been somewhat absent in music research and, in particular, voice studies. As far as I know, only Tiri Schei has studied the topic of shame related to singing, both specifically and in the long term (Schei 1998; 2011; 2017).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, more research on shame would be an important contribution to the fields of music, voice studies and related areas, and is the aim of this study. I argue that there is a need to address the topic of shame as such, but it is also important to bring it into current scientific debates on music and voice studies, as the topic has been unnecessarily neglected. To this end, this article seeks to contribute to the theoretical basis for studying shame in the context of classical singing by drawing from a variety of disciplines. Moreover, studying shame in this context will also contribute to research on emotional abuse within the classical music genre (see, e.g., Bull 2019 & Ramstedt 2023b) as humiliation is one form of emotional abuse (see Felitti & Anda 2010).

The theoretical framework I am proposing in my study combines Sara Ahmed's (2004) ideas of emotions as cultural constructions and bodily experiences with the affect theory by Silvan Tomkins (2008 [1962]). However, in this article my focus is primarily on Ahmed's affect theory. Ahmed's theory of affects provides a useful approach to examine classical singers' shame as Ahmed argues that emotions are not simply individual psychological states so much "as social and cultural practices" (Ahmed 2004, 9). She also argues that emotions play a central role in the formation of social hierarchies and individual subjects (*ibid.*, 4). Ahmed's approach is here complemented by the theory of the innate and biological nature of shame proposed by Tomkins. Both starting points are important as shame as a topic is so complex that it cannot be addressed only through one theory or discipline: it is important to consider both the cultural/social and the biopsychological dimensions of shame. At least Elsbeth Probyn (2005, 11) and Sally Munt (2008, 2) have highlighted the importance of an interdis-

3 I am a classical singer and voice pedagogue and I have my own experiences of shame related to the singing voice. These experiences were the initial inspiration for me to do research about vocal shame (Seesjärvi 2013; 2017) and developing a shame sensitive singing pedagogy together with the voice teacher Demian Seesjärvi.

ciplinary approach to the study of shame. This solution inevitably means that the links to particular theories might remain superficial, meaning that I am not able to profoundly elaborate on the theories mentioned.<sup>4</sup> To a lesser extent, I also apply Michel Foucault's discourse theory (1972; 1980) when examining power-relations in the world of classical singing and how identities are formed, also in relation shame. Both Schei (2009; 2011) and music researcher Milla Tiainen (2005; 2012) have already applied Foucault's theory to singing practices.

In this article I propose that a) in the culture of classical singing and music, there are certain power\_relations that significantly contribute to singers' experiences of shame, and b) the norms and ideals existing in this musical culture make singers feel shame when not achieving the given norms and standards. I concentrate especially on two themes emerging from my research data: singer's internalized shame and shaming made by authorities. These themes are in many ways interconnected and in mutual interaction: for instance, shaming will also contribute to a singer's internalized shame. Therefore, it is necessary to deal with both together. The article consists of five sections. In the first, I will take a closer look at the existing interdisciplinary shame research and its theoretical viewpoints. In section two, I will discuss the methodological approach and data of my research. In the third and fourth sections, I will analyze experiences of shame and shaming experienced by the singers who participated in this research. In the fifth and final section I will summarize my conclusions and reflect on some further themes related to the subject.

### *Interdisciplinary Shame Research*

Shame can be described as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body. (--) When shamed, one's body seems to burn up with the negation that is perceived (self-negation); and shame impresses upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject 'being against itself'. Such a feeling of negation, which is taken on by the subject as a sign of its own failure, is usually experienced before another. (--) To be witnessed in one's failure is to be ashamed: to have one's shame witnessed is even more shaming. (Ahmed 2004, 103)

4 Indeed, I agree with Ahmed who states (2004, 18–19) that “[d]oing interdisciplinary work on emotions means accepting that we will fail to do justice to all of the intellectual histories drawn upon by the texts we read. It means accepting the possibility of error, or simply getting some things wrong.”

This definition of shame provided by Ahmed vividly illustrates the phenomenology of shame. Firstly, shame is felt in the body, which indicates its physiological dimension. Secondly, shame is a negative and painful emotion that is connected to failure, and this failure is (often) witnessed by other people. Therefore, shame is a social emotion related to other people in various ways. Tomkins (2008 [1962], 351) describes shame as “the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation”. For Tomkins, shame is one of the basic affects<sup>5</sup> that “operates ordinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated” (ibid. 353). He points out that shame reduces facial communication, while it can also be seen in the body, such as in the dropping of the eyes and head or in blushing (ibid. 352). Therefore, shame is an affect/emotion that one feels distinctly in the body (see also e.g., Ahmed 2004, Probyn 2005, Lewis 1971), and it may also affect the voice (see e.g., Seesjärvi 2024; Monti et al. 2016). Even though these physiological manifestations of shame can easily be understood as personal “attributes”, and therefore there is a temptation to interpret shame as someone’s “own,” the question is, what initially triggers shame and why. As Tomkins points out, shame can help to sustain social norms, expectations, and ideologies. If one breaks the rules and norms given in a certain (cultural, religious, etc.) context, one is exposed to shame. (Tomkins 2008 [1962], 412.) Thus, shame cannot be dealt with without taking into consideration the involved social and cultural factors (see also Ahmed 2004). It is also important to notice that shame is related to questions of identity and identity-formation (see, Ahmed 2004, 105).

Shame can be seen both as an affect and an emotion. This was especially under a discussion during the emergence of the so-called affective turn in the humanities and the social sciences in the mid-1990s; when the question of whether affect and emotion are similar or different phenomena was raised.<sup>6</sup> Some researchers, like Ahmed (2004), do not make a distinction between these terms but use them as synonyms. Moreover, Ahmed proposes: “[s]o rather than asking ‘What are emotions?’, I will

5 Tomkins divides affect as nine different innate affects, such as Surprise-Startle, Distress-Anguish, Anger-Rage, Enjoyment-Joy, Interest-Excitement, Fear-Terror, Shame-Humiliation, and The Drive Auxiliaries of Dismissal and Disgust (Tomkins 2008 [1962], xv–xx).

6 For more about an affective turn, see e.g., Gregg & Seigworth 2010: in the turn, attention was drawn to embodiment and the importance of affects and emotions in the study of arts and culture. It was also noted that emotions were not only a topic belonging to the field of psychology, but they also needed to be studied as socio-cultural phenomena.

ask, ‘What do emotions do?’ (–) Rather, I will track how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they ‘stick’ as well as move”. (Ahmed 2004, 4). In contrast, a distinction between affect and emotion is made by Tomkins, who maintains that affect is an innate (neuro)physiological reaction, whereas emotion is “the combination of whatever affect has just been triggered as it is coassembled with our memory of previous experiences of that affect”. (Tomkins 2008 [1962], xiv). In this article, I follow Ahmed’s approach and use emotion and affect as synonyms. Moreover, I consider that instead of concentrating on which terms to use it is more important to acknowledge both the biological basis and the sociocultural nature of shame.

As initially mentioned above, long-term research related to singing and shame has so far been limited in music research, with the studies of Schei making an exception (Schei 1998; 2009; 2017). Nevertheless, there are some occasional considerations of this topic in music research (see, Kurkela 1997; Levinson 2015; Reichardt 2012). Because shame as an emotion is often considered a taboo subject (e.g., Brown 2006; Scheff & Mateo 2016)<sup>7</sup>, it may seem obvious that dealing with it has been rare – or it has been dealt with in indirect ways, for instance, when examining performance anxiety<sup>8</sup> (Kenny 2010). Therefore, I argue that shame has featured in earlier music research on some level but without explicit articulation or occupying the center of attention. For example, music scholar Anna Ramstedt’s (2023a) article, “Homophily and genre boundaries: inequalities in classical music networks in Finland”, implicitly discusses shame because although the studied musicians do not refer to shame explicitly, the experiences described by Ramstedt generally cause shame, for example, if

7 As Scheff & Mateo (2016) discuss hidden shame in the research in their article, they state that most research deals with shame without addressing it directly; this verifies that shame is still being seen as taboo in modern society. Even though Scheff and Mateo point out the lack of shame research in different fields, it has in recent years been increasingly studied. Shame has been studied in the fields of psychology and social sciences (e.g., Lewis 1971; Tomkins, 1962; Nathanson 1992; Brown 2006; for Finnish research in the fields of theology and history, see Siltala 1994; Malinen 2010; Kettunen 2011; Ratinen 2014; Lidman 2011) and also from an interdisciplinary perspective (e.g., Kainulainen & Parente-Čapkova 2011).

8 See e.g., Kenny (2010). Kenny deals with the negative emotions in performance anxiety. Even though not focusing on shame, but more on anxiety and social phobia (it is mentioned once on the p. 247 when discussing anxiety), I propose shame *is* included implicitly in the text, for example, in words such as “negative cognitions”, “negative self-evaluative focus”, “negative affective state”, or when discussing a musician’s identity or possible failure (p. 433 & 435-438). Arjas also mentions that performance anxiety can intrinsically be regarded as shameful (Arjas 2002, 13).

one is excluded from social networks due to (female) gender. However, it is worth noticing that in recent years, research related to performance anxiety has taken into account shame in this context (Coşkun-Şentürk & Çırakoğlu 2018; Juncos et al. 2017; Thomson, Jaque & Baltz 2017; Paese & Egermann 2023). Shame as a topic has also been alluded to in earlier research concerning musical performance and performance anxiety (Kurkela 1994<sup>9</sup>; Arjas 2002).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, an important contribution is made by Elisa Monti, David Kidd, Linda Carroll & Emanuele Castano (2016). In their research, they show what effects attachment, emotions and trauma can have on the singing voice of singers<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, Mara Culp and Sara Jones (2020) have made an important research initiative in the field of music education with their article “Shame in Music Education: Starting the Conversation and Developing Resilience”. In addition to these, sociologist Anna Bull (2019) briefly discusses shame in her book *Class, Control, and Classical Music* when dealing with musicians in the context of mistakes made while playing music (see, e.g., 83–85).

### *Researching Singer’s Shame*

The methodological starting point of this article is hermeneutical and narrative, combining the hermeneutical theory of understanding and interpretation with the principles of narrative research. Lauri Rauhala (1990, 104) defines hermeneutics as the examination of the structure of understanding and interpreting. Since my research is concerned with singers’ stories and experiences of shame, the focus lies in understanding their experiences as related through their narratives. Narrative or story-based research is methodologically quite a fragmented field, while still united by the idea of narrative analysis (Hänninen 1999, 16). Virpi Tökkäri (2018, 68) points out that when studying experience from a narrative perspective, the idea of how experience is formed into a narrative is central.

9 Kurkela discusses shame from the psychoanalytical point of view (see 1994 e.g., 175–180).

10 Emotions related to music, such as what kinds of emotions music arouses or expresses, have also been a central subject of study in the field of music psychology (e.g., Juslin & Sloboda 2010).

11 In this research, combining two different studies, singers were musical theatre singers, choral singers, or jazz singers (see, *ibid.* 4 and 7)



The data for this research consists of interviews (n=15) and responses to an electronic survey (n=49).<sup>12</sup> The data were collected in the period between November 2022 and March 2023. The age of the participants varied between 20–74 years. There was an accuracy of five years in the question regarding age in order to increase the anonymity of the participants. Eleven women and four men participated in the interviews. In the survey, the variance between these genders was even greater: only nine men participated in the survey, whereas 39 out of the 49 participants were women with one participant stating their gender as “other”. Earlier shame research sheds light on the disparity between genders in the sense that women, on average, tend to be more shame-prone than men (see, e.g., Malinen 2010, 24). On the other hand, Teemu Ratinen (2011, 134) points out, following Ahmed’s ideas, that gendered shame is primarily due to “the cultural mechanisms by which the female gender is constructed through shame” (see also, *ibid.* 140; Kainulainen & Parente-Čapková 2011, 11). Notably, in my previous work on shame related to singing, only one of the nineteen research participants was a man (Seesjärvi 2024).

Table 1 below shows the central background information on the participants in the study. This information was requested both in the interviews and as part of the survey. There were five themes in the survey to which participants were able to answer freely: 1) experiences related to shame during their singing studies and professional career, 2) shaming and humiliation exercised by other people during the respondent’s singing studies and career, 3) ways to cope with shameful/shame-related experiences, 4) the possible influence of Finnish culture on shameful experiences, and 5) institutional practices and their possible changes in the field of classical singing. One participant wrote their answer in Swedish. All the other replies were in Finnish, and all the interviews were also held in Finnish. I recruited the participants via social media, by private messages to several singers (n= 53), through different channels (E-mail, LinkedIn, Messenger), and by means of snowball sampling. I also asked The Finnish National Opera and the Sibelius Academy at the University of Arts Helsinki as well as one music agency to distribute the invitation to participate in the research on their mailing lists.

12 Six participants had also answered the survey. They had left their contact information and I asked them if they wanted to be interviewed as well.

Participants	Survey (n=49), Interview (n=15) Altogether 58 participants
Gender	Women 76 %, men 22 %, other 2 %
Age	20–29 (9 %), 30–39 (40 %), 40–49 (29 %), 50–59 (10 %), 60–69 (10 %), 70–79 (2 %)
Singing education (some participants have chosen multiple options)	Bachelor's degree (24 %), Master's degree (69 %), Doctoral degree (artistic) 12 %, Not official training (10 %), I study at the moment (3 %)
Participant in singing competitions	Yes (91 %), No (7 %), I don't want to answer (2 %)
Duration of the singing career (years)	0–10 years (36 %), 11–20 years (43 %), 21–30 years (16 %), 31–40 years (2 %), 40–50 years (3 %)
Working currently as a singer	Yes (64 %), No (7 %), I'm not working actively anymore (17 %), Other response (12 %)
Working mainly as:	Soloist (59 %), In choir (5 %), both as soloist and in choir (36 %)

Table 1. Background information of the participants

The interviews took place either via Zoom or live in Helsinki. The average duration of the interviews was 97 minutes, from an hour to 2 hours and 20 minutes. The lengths of the survey answers varied greatly: some answers only included a few sentences, while others were over two pages long. To protect the anonymity of the participants, no pseudonyms, codes or dates of the interviews are used in the citations.

Interviews were conducted by combining a narrative approach (see, e.g., Hyvärinen 2017) with a thematic interview template, beginning with the question: “What kind of path as a singer have you had to this day?” The second question, usually after a long reply to the first, was: “What kinds of shame-related experiences have you had on this path?”. The intention was to let the interviewer talk as freely as possible without me interrupting the narrative. My focus was on listening and not interfering with the narrative with comments – although I did make occasional paralinguistic sounds (see, *ibid.* 181–183). However, during the interview I also asked about the five different themes mentioned previously if the interviewee did not raise these topics themselves. This is the main disparity between my interviewing method and the more conventional narrative interview: in the latter the researcher does not invoke themes if they are not raised by the interviewee (see, *ibid.*, 186–189). The reason to combine these interview methods stems from my position as a researcher and a classically trained singer with my own personal shame-related experiences: I wished to ensure that the participant’s own narrative would remain in focus and my experiences would not lead the conversation.

After analyzing the data, I thematized it into five different categories that are shown in Table 2:

1) shame related to the singing voice	singing technique, qualities of the voice, such as a heavy voice that causes wide vibrato, problems with high tones or the middle register, problems with intonation, physical conditions such as illness, for example reflux
2) shame related to physical appearance and person's attributes	body or different body parts, physicality per se, breathing, habitus, outlooks, body image, and age
3) shame related to the singer's identity	stage fright that also affects the singing technique, fear of making mistakes, lack of work opportunities, costumes, other difficulties related to the singer's career
4) shame caused by other people	humiliation, sexual harassment (emotional abuse)
5) shame influenced by Finnish culture	family and/or religious background; personal and cultural history (war and transgenerational traumas)

Table 2. Categories of shame

Some of the categories in Table 2 are closely interrelated. For example, shaming directed at a singer's voice (category 4) also relates to a singer's subjective shame regarding their singing voice (category 1) if the singer personally feels the voice did not meet the given requirements. As already mentioned above, in this article I focus particularly on the following themes: the singers' internalized shame and shaming performed by the authorities. Combining these two themes is relevant because, as mentioned, they interact with each other. In the next section I will explore internalized shame. However, prior to that, I will briefly describe some main themes that arose from the data.

In the data, including both the interviews and the survey answers, the participating singers described their shame-related experiences in abundant detail. Only two singers who participated in the survey maintained that they had never experienced any shame or shaming. One of these two explained that: "experiencing shame is weird per se". Based on my study's data, singers' experiences of shame can also be roughly divided into two main categories, even though these are in many ways entwined: shame regarding the singing voice itself and shame that is in different ways associated with a singer's identity or career. Singers had experienced shame regarding their singing voice and technique: vocal crises and technical problems caused shame. Elsewhere, I have termed this category as *vocal*

*shame* (see Seesjärvi, 2013; 2017; 2021). My definition shares similarities with Schei's (2017, 1) concept of *voice shame*: we both maintain that (vocal/voice) shame is related to one's own experience of having a singing voice that is not considered "good enough" while also being linked to other people in terms of how they react to one's voice. Furthermore, I have added a more detailed description of the qualities of the voice that might cause vocal shame (Seesjärvi 2024, 13 & 24). Schei (2017, 1) points out, that voice shame "presupposes internalized ideals and criteria of quality, learned through interaction with external authorities, such as parents, peers, mass media or music teachers". Therefore, our conceptions reinforce one another.

Shame related to being a singer included failing as a singer (in a role, in competitions, in entrance exams), setbacks in a career, lack of work opportunities, and poor economic situation caused by these kinds of obstacles. In addition, not "being a real musician" was mentioned, as well as perfectionism and impostor syndrome, all of which increase feelings of shame in singers. In addition to these aspects, competition and comparison made some singers feel ashamed, as well as singing other musical styles than just classical music repertoire. Indeed, in the classical music context, other musical styles may sometimes be regarded as less worthy (Bull 2019, 191; Bull & Scharff 2021, 681) and therefore, singing other than a classical repertoire may cause shame for a singer, even though they would not personally agree with such value judgements. Shame concerning age and/or physical appearance was very common especially among women. This latter category I have termed as *singer's shame* (see, Seesjärvi 2024).

In addition to both the categories introduced above, it is also useful to view shame from the point of view of *how* shame is triggered. Primarily, there are two different occasions that have made the participants of this study feel shame: either the singers start to feel shame by themselves for various reasons, or someone makes the singer feel shame by shaming and humiliating them, either explicitly or implicitly. Certainly, these two types of shame can also occur simultaneously. In both cases, something triggers a singer to feel shame. It is also possible the singer feels shame privately, without anyone noticing. This occurs, for example, when a singer feels that they have not reached a certain expected standard. There are, indeed, certain standards that define a good classical singer – both in terms of vocal and musical requirements, however, there are also requirements regarding e.g., appearance; these manifest themselves in the classical singing world and are learned during vocal studies or, at the latest, dur-

ing a singer's early professional career (see Tiainen 2005, 155; 2012; Schei 2009; 2011; Seesjärvi 2024). If a singer fails to meet these standards, one of the consequences may be shame (see also Schei 2011; Seesjärvi 2024). Therefore, shame is either situational or dispositional (see e.g., Malinen 2010, 28 for a more detailed discussion). When shame is dispositional, a singer tends to feel shame frequently. Shame is thus internalized (see *ibid.*, 32 for a more detailed discussion). In the following section I will take a closer look at internalized shame.

*“Shame stems from childhood”: Internalized shame*

Classical education taught you to hide your own, authentic voice and steered you towards a foreign, unattainable ideal. The childhood experience of being accepted only by being silent also taught me to be ashamed of my own voice. (Answer to electronic survey)

Even though psychological understandings of shame do not have a central role in this article, and I consider the particular cultural context to have a major impact on people's experiences of shame, it is nevertheless important to briefly examine some of the psychological factors involved in the phenomenon of shame. Although culture impacts how and why shame emerges, people do have an innate ability to feel shame (Tomkins 1987, 133–134; see also Malinen 2010, 32). The cultural framework shapes people's attitudes and perspectives towards shame, and people learn what is accepted behavior according to the surrounding cultural standards and norms (see, e.g., Viljanen 2011, 67).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as philosopher Agnes Heller (1985, 6) points out, shame “has played (--) an enormous part in the process of socialization”. Nevertheless, according to Tomkins (2008 [1962]; 1987), an individual's ability to feel shame is known to have so-called hardwired biological roots.

Shame can be seen as “the premier social emotion” (Scheff 2003, 239). People have a need to belong to a group and be accepted (Brown 2006). Furthermore, experiences mold people from early childhood onward. If a child grows in an environment that is harmful to their psychological development or experiences some kind of abuse or neglect, this most likely has a huge impact on their character (see, e.g., Schore 1998; Malinen

<sup>13</sup> Besides culture itself, one must also consider that time and history molds culture, and therefore people's ideas and understanding. What is regarded as shameful has varied greatly throughout history (see, e.g., Lidman 2011).

2010). According to psychologist Allan Schore (1998, 57), “primordial shame experiences play a central role in not only psychological but in neurobiological human development.” Psychological neglect in childhood causes a person to internalize shame. (Ikonen & Rechartd 1994; Tangney & Dearing 2002; see also, Tomkins 2008 [1962], 348). Shame researcher Ben Malinen (2010) states that harmful events in childhood can cause a person to become particularly shame prone.<sup>14</sup> This also affects an individual’s tendency to experience shame in terms of events coming from the “outside”. (Malinen 2010, 31.) Together with a shame-inducing environment, such as the world of classical singing at its worst, this can increase feelings of shame within the individual. In fact, negative childhood experiences can also have a negative impact on a singer’s voice (see Monti et al. 2016). Indeed, Paula Thomson and S. Victoria Jaque (2018) argue that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)<sup>15</sup> contribute to internalized shame in performing artists.

There was significant variety among the singers of this study as to whether they commented on their family background or internalized shame. If either was mentioned, the participants often described their childhood experiences, such as family background, bullying in school, religious background, negative experiences with teachers, and so on.<sup>16</sup> In addition, some participants broached the Finnish cultural context and maintained that “Finns have been raised with shame”. Some of the participants recounted that their singing voices were criticized in childhood, and this had negatively affected their self-esteem. Other participants mentioned having a strict father in their childhood family or a problematic relationship with their mother. One participant reminisced about their father who had been very oppressive toward them and that he had also later mocked the participant’s singing voice. Another singer explained that they had experienced shame as, “an emotion very deep within”, and in fact, “shame has been a core underlying feeling in my career, which has caused a lot of things to go wrong”. Yet another participant said that the

14 Malinen states, that “Tangney et al. used the term shame-proneness to describe the dispositional tendency to experience shame across a range of situations.” (Malinen 2010, 29)

15 Childhood adversity encompasses experiences such as emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, emotional and physical neglect, as well as exposure to family dysfunction, including parental separation or divorce, family members with mental illness or substance abuse, domestic violence, and family member imprisonment (see Felitti and Anda, 2010).

16 Also, cultural historical events, such as wars, that caused trauma and transgenerational in the family were discussed.

events of their childhood had caused them to feel totally unworthy and ashamed, even causing them to fear other people. These examples reflect some of the participants' experiences of internalized shame. These kinds of experiences provide a fertile ground for individuals to develop feelings of shame in later in life, and in various contexts. Similarly, Malinen (2010) states that in his study, early childhood trauma caused shame in the lives of the participants. Notably, humiliating and stigmatizing experiences in childhood were "particularly strong factors for shame inducement and the development of shame-proneness (ibid. 172).

Even though internalized shame is usually considered to develop already in childhood as part of negative early experiences, I propose that the strict demands of the classical singing world can, as such, make a singer internalize shame later during their singing studies and career. Therefore, I present some examples of the issues of which singers were found to be ashamed. The categories of shame have already been presented fully in section two. In addition, illness, such as reflux<sup>17</sup> or other forms of sickness that affect the voice caused singers to experience shame. Being sick, for example with flu or laryngitis, affects the singing voice, and resting one's voice is necessary to ensure its recovery and well-being. This often leads to work-related cancellations, which therefore impacts singers' careers on a daily basis.

Many singers reported that they had felt shame regarding their bodies. Women especially felt they were under pressure to look attractive and be thin. However, some of the men also described that they did not feel comfortable being on stage with just few clothes on, and this caused shame. On the other hand, one man recounted that he was singing in that kind of Fach, or voice type, where one did not need to be handsome. Therefore, it may also depend on the Fach whether a singer encounters certain requirements or not. One woman explained that her roles often included elderly women, witches, and so on, which made the requirements concerning physical appearance different. This did not, however, prevent her from feeling pressure about her weight. Indeed, there are certain beauty norms within the classical music world that reflect Western beauty norms in general. In Western culture, fatness is often regarded as shameful (e.g., Kyrölä 2014), and this causes, for its part, shame in singers who do not fit within the required standards. Ramstedt (2022; 2023a; 2023b; 2023c) also observes that female instrumentalists, especially violinists, are faced with

17 See Tarvainen (2021) how reflux causes problems in voice.

demands regarding Western beauty standards, such as being thin and conventionally pretty (see also, Bull 2019).

However, what the singers themselves are ashamed of cannot be separated from the “outside world”. These experiences have been influenced by childhood and adolescence (their own life history), experiences in vocal studies and during their careers. As one of the participants wrote, “Singing-related shame has also been linked to a general shame about one’s own personality”. On the other hand, it can be argued that awareness of shame is linked to growing up as a singer: learning the norms and degrees of what is required at a professional level (see Schei 2009; 2011; Tiainen 2005; 2012; Seesjärvi 2024). Therefore, singers internalize high standards in order to become a member of the classical singing community. Hence, from the Foucauldian perspective, shame can be seen as a disciplinary technique for learning the norms and the rules of a certain community (see Schei 2009; Viljanen 2011, 70).

*“Conductor belling in front of everyone”  
– shaming carried out by authorities*

But then there are those who deliberately shame and who ... use it to enhance their own power. And you can’t prepare for their attacks, because ... they have learned over the years to strike just when you don’t expect them to. (interview)

Throughout history, public shaming has been a way to impart a warning example to others not to break the given social rules. Shame punishments, such as corporeal punishment in public, a walk of shame or the pillory, have historically been used by many kinds of authorities (e.g., Lidman 2011). Indeed, hierarchies and exercising power from a position of authority are connected with shame (Heller 1985; Lehtinen 1998). If an individual breaks the social norms, they are exposed to shame and if the breaking of the rules is noticed, this can lead to humiliation carried out by others (Tomkins 2008 [1962], 412). In the context of this research, it can be postulated that if a singer breaks the norms of an “ideal singer” (such as making a mistake in the rehearsals/performance, not singing well enough, or not fitting the mold of an ideal singer in terms of their appearance), this may expose the singer to experiences of shaming. Thus, if an authority figure is not pleased with the singer or their actions, this can



result in the singer being shamed. Moreover, the fear of being exposed to shame and shaming may contribute to a singer constantly striving to do their best. The existing norms and ideals compel the singer to act in order to reach the prescribed goals as part of their identity as a singer, as argued by Tiainen (2005) and Schei (2009) when applying Michel Foucault's ideas (1972; 1980).

The singers participating in this study had had many experiences regarding humiliation perpetrated by other people, especially musical authorities. The people most often mentioned included teachers, stage directors, orchestra conductors, and choir conductors. Other people who had exercised power by humiliating the research participants were jury members in singing competitions, répétiteurs, directors of opera houses, casting directors, and music critics. Only three participants had no experienced of any kind of humiliation caused by other people. One singer recounted her experience of a shaming comment when participating in a singing competition. A member of the jury had written on a paper in a large font, "AN UGLY VOICE!!!!!!!!!" and was waving the paper in front of the singer without saying anything. What made the situation worse was that that jury member was an idol of the singer. Similar kinds of findings about shaming by authorities have been described in my previous work (Seesjärvi 2017) In the research by Bull (2019) and Ramstedt (2023a; 2023c) a considerable amount of humiliation exercised by authorities emerged. Indeed, Ramstedt (2023b) defines humiliation as one form of emotional abuse. Furthermore, journalist Sonja Saarikoski (2020a; 2020b; 2023) has discussed the culture of humiliation within the classical music genre in Finland.

In my data, shaming was not directed only at the singers' voice or vocal performance, but also, e.g., at their appearance. Sometimes, especially female singers had received inappropriate comments about their weight. One singer was told, after winning a competition, that she should lose 10 kilos to gain better work opportunities. Another participant had been told by many authority figures that her weight was the reason why she was not being successful as a singer. In addition, (female) classical musicians outside of my research have mentioned offensive and humiliating comments made by authorities about their weight (e.g., Saarikoski 2020b; Lebrecht 2014).

Almost all the participants had experienced shaming and humiliation by teachers during their singing studies: either by their own teacher or by

a colleague of their personal teacher.<sup>18</sup> One singer recounted that her teacher had called her “shit” [meaning a bad singer] to another teacher while laughing after making this comment. Apparently, the teacher made a joke of it, but it caused a great deal of shame in the singer just before a singing exam. As the rehearsals before this exam did not go well in the teacher’s opinion perhaps the teacher was worried what the colleague might think about their pupil – and therefore their own skills as a teacher – which made the teacher shame the student. Indeed, a student’s possible failure also affects the teacher because it may be seen as a sign of the teacher’s poor pedagogical skills (Seesjärvi 2021, 200). Therefore, applying Ahmed’s (2004) ideas of emotions as circulating between bodies and then “sticking” to some bodies, it can be stated that the teacher “stuck” the shame onto the student. Moreover, many participants recounted that if they wanted to change their singing teacher this caused problems with their then-current teacher. Therefore, many were afraid to tell the teachers about their decision.<sup>19</sup> One research participant described that her joy of singing disappeared, and her singing technique got worse to such an extent that she even thought about giving up singing altogether. She wanted to please her teacher, so it took six months before she was finally able to leave this teacher. She also felt shame when changing to another teacher. The former teacher’s reaction to this was such that they did not talk to the singer for half a year – not until she had had success in a singing competition. Refusing to talk and ignoring a student can also be seen as a form of shaming, and thus, emotional abuse. Moreover, fear of “letting the teacher down” by quitting is a sign of the power a teacher has over a student. A student who wants to change teachers may well invoke feelings of shame in the teacher, because this wish for a change can be interpreted as a sign that the former teacher’s teaching is somehow insufficient. If the teacher cannot deal with this, it might lead them to shame the student somehow, as exemplified above (See also Seesjärvi 2021, 200).

In the classical music world, teachers often have an enormous amount of power over the students and their possible careers, as for example Bull (2019) and Ramstedt (2023a; 2023b; 2023c) have demonstrated. Good and suitable teaching increases students’ chances to succeed as singers:

18 Also, in Ramstedt’s (2023b) and Bull’s (2019, 83–85) research musicians described negative and humiliating experiences, that is, emotional abuse, caused by their teachers. Therefore, this phenomenon is not, alas, uncommon.

19 The reason to change teacher were mostly due an inappropriate teaching that was related to singing technique and/or teacher’s pedagogical approach (that included i.e., shaming).

most of the participants pointed out that it was either because of suitable teaching and good teachers that they initially became successful as professionals – or that after finding a suitable teacher they were able to overcome technical problems and successfully pursue a career as a singer. Moreover, according to Megan Lewis, Erianne Weight, and Karin Henricks (2022, 879), a teacher's teaching methods do indeed influence students' self-efficacy, that is "self-belief with predictive power toward achievement is self-efficacy". Support provided by teachers does not only concern the singing technique but also affects the student in a more holistic way. This was apparent in my data. For instance, one singer even mentioned that one teacher was able to teach her in a way that made all her singing-related feelings of shame vanish. The teaching she received did not only concern the technical level; she felt that the teacher was able to "encounter" her on another level, supporting her identity as a singer and accepting her as a person. This example clearly demonstrated the teacher's "power" to connect with the student in a way that their singer's identity is confirmed.

Shaming often occurred when the singer in question was seen as making a mistake, and it could occur either privately or in front of other people. Sometimes, the mistakes were not even the singer's fault in the first place: one singer explained that a conductor had initially made a mistake, and because of this mistake, the singer also made a mistake. As a result, the conductor yelled at the singer for several minutes in front of everyone who attended the rehearsals. This negatively affected the singer for a long time. The effects of such experiences were usually long-lasting, causing mental and psychological distress for that particular singer. In addition, other participants recounted that sometimes they were blamed for the mistakes of conductors or stage directors. Thus, shame was again transferred for the singer to carry.

"You have good energy, but [it is] wrong for this". So, what can you say to something like that when- and then, of course: the shame is also related to the fact that ... there are 20 people around you, that you are told such things as a fact and then it's just when. ... You can't say "Well, it's not," or somehow argue against it, but it is then as if this is their experience and, on the other hand, when they are in the position of a supervisor and a sort of a boss, they have the power to say it. (interview)

Several singers felt that it was very difficult for them to defend themselves if the humiliator was an authority figure: this was because they feared

losing work opportunities (see also Ramstedt 2023c, 11). Because of this, several singers also found it difficult to defend other singers in similar circumstances. One interviewee told that she was afterwards ashamed of herself (and, also *on behalf* of the defamer for their behavior) because she was not able to defend a colleague. She regretted this later. Adapting Ahmed's (2004, 110) ideas, it can be said that an authority figure misbehaved (without shame) and therefore, the singer was ashamed, both on behalf of the defamer and for herself because she could not intervene. Another interviewee explained that once she was able to intervene to defend a colleague against a verbal attack from a director because she felt that "at this point I have nothing more to lose". Based on my data, it seems that older singers with an already accomplished career – as well as men – were able to defend themselves more easily than younger female participants.

I also felt ashamed that the director embarrassed me in front of the conductor. No one stood up in support at that moment, even though everyone saw the situation as unfair. There were also those whose profession would oblige them to support me, but in the singing world they keep silent and let it happen. (Answer to electronic survey)

Notably, many singers explained in their replies that they remembered shameful occasions very clearly. Many described that they could remember in their body how it felt when they were being shamed and humiliated. Others said that they become angry when thinking about these situations. In the interviews some singers also shed a few tears and felt emotional when revisiting such events. Many said that they felt "like being in therapy".<sup>20</sup> Singers knew that everything they discussed would be confidential, which is also the case in psychotherapy, for example. They clearly had a need to revisit events that can even be traumatic.<sup>21</sup> Many

20 I think interviewing about a sensitive topic by a researcher can function as a therapeutic encounter, even though taking a therapeutic role was not in any way my intention. To make a clear distinction between an interview setting and a therapeutic encounter, I, for instance, talked about the research before starting the interview and went through the written materials given to the participants, such as the consent form and the data protection form.

21 Even though trauma is not the focus of this article, it is nevertheless important to understand the connection between shame and trauma. Shameful events can be traumatic to the person at the worst case with long-lasting effects and also vice versa: traumatic events can be shameful to the person. (See, e.g., Malinen 2010, 87, 148.) About therapeutical dimensions of interviews, see e.g., Kiuru 2018.

of the interviewees also had a need to *name* the shamers – while knowing these names would be removed from my data. On the other hand, some said that this name should be published. Indeed, there is often a need to return the shame to the shamer (see, e.g. Malinen 2010, 20–21), even if it is not possible in most cases to direct it back at them personally. The #MeToo movement also includes this element: the shame that victims have carried within themselves is returned to the shamer when dealing with instances of shaming in public. The #MeToo movement has indeed changed things on some level, and this also appeared in the data of the present study.

Most of the singers had the experience that humiliation and shaming did not occur in collegial relationships. However, one exception was sexual harassment perpetrated by other singers. Some participants also spoke about the defamatory behavior of their older colleagues. Sexual harassment was, however, mostly exercised by authority figures:

Sexual harassment is about shaming and humiliation and as a young woman in an opera house I faced it, if not daily, then weekly. I have also experienced the shame of badly worded feedback in a teaching, choreography, or rehearsal situation, for example. This has ranged from questioning my artistic choices to outright inappropriate shouting and the violation of my bodily integrity. (Answer to electronic survey)

Six of the participants, who were all women, reported having experienced sexual harassment. In Saarikoski's (2023) article "Naisen on kuoltava"<sup>22</sup> over ten female singers recounted their experiences of sexual harassment that were long-lasting and frequent. In my research, continuous sexual harassment, or fear of being harassed, caused one of the participants to feel stress and anxiety in addition to shame. The stress she experienced was manifest as bodily symptoms and disorders. She also described that these experiences affected her desire to perform because she was tired of being under an evaluative gaze. Another, older singer, recounted that she had experienced considerable sexual harassment multiple times during her career, and these situations made her feel afraid. Once, an orchestral conductor had attacked her when she was leaving a room and when she asked him why he did such a thing he replied: "There is 'love me, fuck me' written on your forehead". This can be seen as an example of how an authority figure transfers his misconduct to the singer, claiming that

22 In English: "Woman Must Die"

she is the one causing the situation. The same participant had also experienced occasions when men had promised her to advance her singing career if she was willing to perform [sexual] “favours” for them, which she had refused. Hence, some people in authority are using their power, for example, casting to cast singers in roles based on factors other than the singers’ vocal or musical abilities.

Sexual misconduct has been increasingly addressed in the field of classical singing, alongside the other arts, after the #MeToo movement that went viral in 2017 (see e.g., Ramstedt 2023b & 2023c; Bull 2019; Saarikoski 2020a). Sometimes openly stating these issues had caused problems for the studied singers. For instance, one research participant was told that an authority figure intended to use all their power to ensure that the singer would never sing another opera role in this country, after she had complained about sexual harassment during a singing competition. As in many other contexts, this can be one of the reasons why the victims of sexual misconduct, or other misbehavior, in the culture of classical singing easily remain silent about their experiences: they are afraid of the negative impact that speaking up may have on their careers.<sup>23</sup> For freelancer-singers especially, this fear might be very real (see also Saarikoski 2023).

Even though the participants described many negative occasions related to shaming and humiliation exercised by people in authority, there were also positive narratives about good relationships with conductors. One example for instance was the reminiscence of a singer who had once worked with a conductor who was “like a big brother” and who did everything in his power to ensure that the singer would feel comfortable singing a difficult repertoire. Another participant even recounted that conductors were not usually the problem, because they care about music and therefore about the singer’s wellbeing. She claimed that the problem was mostly stage directors, who could be even “sadistic”, assuming that the singer must be shamed to acquire control over them. On the other hand, one singer was able to recount an experience of an opera production where both the conductor and the director – as well as colleagues – were highly professional, carrying out their work without any instances of humiliation. She described this as a dream production, everybody doing

<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the psychological effects of the sexual misconduct can be so severe and traumatic the victims decide to quit the field because of the severe sexual misconduct (see e.g., Typpö 2018).

their best and achieving teamwork.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, this kind of narrative is rare in my data. Conversely, several respondents maintained that the hierarchical constructions of the classical singing world are the reason why it is easy to use shame as a tool to exercise power.

### *Voice, shame, and classical singing*

In this article, I have examined the experiences of shame as related by professional classical singers and advanced singing students and based on the data collected by an electronic survey and interviews; the theoretical perspective on shame of mainly Sara Ahmed's and Silvan Tomkins was applied to the data. I have argued that there are certain power-relations and structures in the classical singing culture that make singers predisposed to experiencing shame. Moreover, it is possible that the singer's internalized shame may also contribute to these experiences. Furthermore, according to my findings the *ideals* and demands of classical singing culture produces a fertile ground for singers to experience shame: performing to a sufficiently high quality is a seeming necessity for classical singers. I focused on two themes emerging from the data: singers' internalized shame and shaming caused by authorities.

Shame is related both to acts of singing as such and to the singer as a person. As the data shows, there are both internal and external factors that make singers experience shame. However, these two kinds of experiences are in many ways intertwined. As several singers pointed out, for example, while humiliating comments are directed at one's instrument, i.e., voice (singing technique), they are simultaneously directed at the *singer* themselves. Furthermore, if a singer knows that they have somehow failed, it is usually noticed by other people too: a conductor, a director, or a critic who may have written a harsh public review. As Ahmed argues, "individual shame is bound up with community precisely because the ideals that have been failed are the ones that 'stick' others to" (Ahmed 2004, 108). Therefore, every negative comment can be experienced as being directed at the singer's body and *self* as well. For this reason, many singers state that being a singer is such a personal matter (see also, Tiainen 2005; Seesjärvi 2024). Obviously, many musicians besides singers may share these kinds of experiences regarding an intimate relationship between their identity

<sup>24</sup> It must be added that even the director had declared afterwards, that "there were no dickheads in this production."

and being a musician, even when their instrument is not as directly a part of them as the singing voice. On the other hand, shaming the singer (about their body, appearance, habitus) caused, in some cases, disruption in their singing technique, too. This highlights the psycho-psychical nature of both singing and shame.

Furthermore, the standards of classical singing as such may cause shame in singers. In relation to this, feeling shame can indicate that the singer has learned and internalized the norms, rules, and conventions of the classical singing world. This can be understood in terms of Foucault's idea of identification, which has been applied to classical singing by Tiainen (2005) and Schei (2009; 2011). Heller (1985, 6) also sees shame as a cultural instrument that socializes an individual to be a member of the given society. Therefore, I argue that this approach together with a critical examination of shaming and humiliation as acts of using power relations need to be discussed more broadly – not only in the field of (classical) singing and/or the music industry but in every hierarchical system in the field of the arts and elsewhere. Even though my qualitative data only concerns classical singers, it nevertheless clearly indicates that there is a need to change the current situation as regards experiences of shame and shaming. My findings also confirm the results of previous research on the abuse of power and emotional abuse in the field of classical music (e.g., Bull 2019; Ramstedt 2023b; 2023c).

The feedback that I have received both from the research participants and in general has made it clear that it is important to bring this subject under discussion. The results of the study can also be compared to other fields informed by similar kinds of social hierarchies, where high levels of skill are required and supply exceeds demand. Obviously, still more attention should be given to this issue in the music sector, but it would also be important and fruitful to explore the issue further in other artistic fields – as well as in academia. Moreover, it is important to consider the results of my study within the education and the professional world of (classical) music in order to create shame-reducing conventions and practices for aspiring and professional singers and thus, to increase people's psycho-physical health. Psychoeducation about shame would be essential for educators and authorities, as well as singers (and other musicians) of classical music, in order to raise awareness about shame and how to deal with it both on individual and organizational levels. For instance, guaranteeing a safe working environment is one way to prevent humiliation and shaming from happening (see also Valtasaari 2022; Ramstedt 2023b). The possibility to develop more detailed shame-reducing conventions would be



an important topic for further research. Overall, dealing with shame-related issues would undoubtedly benefit the singers' psycho-physical well-being. Lastly, the integration of a simultaneously psychological and culture sensitive approach to the study of shame within classical singing should be developed still further and applied to other areas of music research.

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### Research Material

15 interviews, collected by the author between 8.11.2022–11.3.2023.

49 answers to an electronic survey, collected by the author between 18.11.2022–19.3.2023.

All the research material is stored in the University of Turku's storage clouds, the anonymized printed material is stored in a locker and can only be accessed by the author.

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