

Creative Resilience in Classical Singing: Integrating Psychological Flexibility, Expressive Agency, Identity, and Repertoire Narratives

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Abstract: *Classical vocal performance requires exceptional technical mastery, interpretive depth, and psychological endurance. Yet the very conditions that support artistry, including rigorous training, high public visibility, and continuous evaluative pressure, also heighten vulnerability to music performance anxiety and stress-related burnout. This conceptual paper introduces the Creative Resilience Model (CRM), a comprehensive framework explaining how singers can achieve sustainable artistry. Drawing on psychological flexibility theory, self-determination theory, and contemporary identity research, the CRM highlights three mutually reinforcing capacities: mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work. Rather than viewing resilience as mere recovery from adversity, the model conceives it as a dynamic process of creative growth. Two contrasting Lieder, Beethoven's *Adelaide* and Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, are used to illustrate how repertoire functions as a laboratory for resilience. The paper offers a research agenda and practical recommendations for studio pedagogy, conservatoire curricula, and institutional policy, shifting the focus from symptom management to long-term artistic flourishing.*

Keywords: Creative Resilience; Psychological Flexibility; Expressive Agency; Performer Identity; Classical Singing

1. Introduction

Classical vocal performance is one of the most demanding forms of music-making, requiring singers to combine refined vocal technique, textual and stylistic interpretation, and emotionally authentic communication with audiences. Performers operate under intense public scrutiny and high evaluative pressure, conditions that foster artistic excellence but also create vulnerability to music performance anxiety (MPA) and career burnout (Burin et al., 2019; Yoshie et al., 2009). Anxiety can impair attention, compromise memory retrieval, and diminish expressivity, ultimately affecting both performance quality and professional longevity (Derakshan & Eysenck, 2009).

Sustained artistry depends not only on technical skill but also on self-regulated learning, which includes planning, monitoring, and evaluating practice (McPherson et al., 2017; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). While deliberate practice is indispensable for expertise, it can become a source of stress if not balanced by healthy motivational and emotional processes. At the same time, the expressive dimension of singing—the ability to convey emotion and meaning through subtle vocal color and phrasing—is central to how audiences evaluate success (Coutinho et al.,

2014; Sundberg, 1998; Sundberg et al., 2021). Yet research rarely integrates the psychological demands of practice, the pressures of performance, and the centrality of expressive communication into a single theoretical framework.

Recent developments in psychology and music education provide conceptual tools for such integration. Psychological flexibility, which is the capacity to remain present and act in accordance with personal values despite difficult thoughts or feelings, has shown promise in reducing performance anxiety and enhancing well-being (Chełkowska-Zacharewicz & Baran, 2023). Creative resilience extends the notion of resilience beyond recovery, framing it as the ability to transform challenges into opportunities for growth and innovation (Solymosi & Schulkin, 2024). Meanwhile, scholarship on performer identity underscores the importance of a coherent artistic self-concept for motivation and career sustainability (Pellegrino, 2009).

Despite their relevance, these strands of research remain largely separate. Models of MPA tend to focus on risk factors and treatment (Spahn, 2015), self-regulated learning emphasizes cognitive strategies over identity work, and studies of performer identity rarely specify mechanisms for emotion regulation or expressive agency (Peistaraitė & Clark, 2020). A holistic synthesis is therefore needed to explain how singers maintain expressive vitality and psychological well-being throughout their careers.

This article addresses that need by proposing the Creative Resilience Model (CRM). The CRM conceptualizes sustainable artistry as the interaction of three capacities: mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work. Mindset flexibility enables performers to accept and work with anxiety rather than suppress it. Expressive agency empowers them to take interpretive risks and communicate meaningfully with audiences. Identity work integrates personal experiences with professional roles, providing a long-term narrative that supports motivation and artistic coherence. Together these elements form a dynamic system in which growth in any single dimension reinforces the others.

To demonstrate the practical relevance of this model, the paper analyzes two iconic Lieder: Beethoven's *Adelaide* and Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*. These works present contrasting expressive challenges that illuminate different facets of creative resilience. The article also outlines a research agenda and offers pedagogical and policy recommendations for higher music education and the professional singing world.

The sections that follow review relevant literature, present the Creative Resilience Model in detail, apply it to the chosen repertoire, and discuss implications for pedagogy, institutional policy, and future research. By reframing resilience as creative growth rather than mere stress recovery, the model offers a foundation for both theoretical advancement and evidence-based practice in the training and support of classical singers.

2. Conceptual Background

The Creative Resilience Model (CRM) builds on three complementary research strands: psychological flexibility, creative resilience, and performer identity with expressive agency. Each offers insight into how classical singers can sustain artistic vitality under conditions of high cognitive, emotional, and social demand.

2.1 Psychological Flexibility

Psychological flexibility refers to the ability to remain present and act in alignment with personally chosen values while accepting difficult internal experiences (Kashdan et al., 2020). Rather than attempting to suppress anxiety or intrusive thoughts, flexible individuals acknowledge such experiences and continue value-directed action. In performance contexts, this approach is increasingly seen as protective against music performance anxiety (MPA), a condition that affects many professional singers (Bakhtiari et al., 2025).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) provides one tested framework for building psychological flexibility. Randomized controlled trials show that ACT significantly reduces MPA and enhances expressive quality in music students (Juncos & Markman, 2016; Viator et al., 2024). Qualitative studies indicate similar benefits for classical singers, who report improved focus and richer emotional communication when applying acceptance-based strategies (Czajkowski, 2018; Czajkowski et al., 2021; Mahony et al., 2022). Flexible performers are better able to redirect attention from disruptive bodily sensations or negative thoughts toward musical goals such as timbral color, diction, and phrasing.

This ability supports all phases of a singer's career. During preparation it encourages an exploratory mindset that treats technical challenges as opportunities for learning. During performance it allows the performer to transform arousal into expressive energy rather than viewing it as a threat. Across the career span it promotes adaptability to changing voice types, professional roles, and market conditions.

2.2 Creative Resilience

Resilience was once defined narrowly as the capacity to bounce back from adversity. Contemporary perspectives describe it as a dynamic process of adaptation and growth (Kaye-Kauderer et al., 2021; Masten, 2007; Sturgeon, 2016; Windle, 2011). In artistic domains, the related concept of creative resilience captures the capacity to turn obstacles into sources of innovation (Masten, 2007). This includes not only coping with acute stress but also cultivating positive emotions that broaden cognitive and behavioral repertoires.

For singers, creative resilience is essential. Classical vocal careers involve constant auditions, physical strain, and fluctuating employment (Kegelaers et al., 2021). Successful singers use adversity as a catalyst for expressive and professional development. For example, a cancelled recital can inspire digital performance projects, or vocal changes over time can lead to exploration of new repertoire and interpretive depth.

Research in positive psychology supports this view. Flow theory highlights intrinsically rewarding states that sustain motivation, while studies of deliberate practice show that adaptive coping predicts both technical excellence and well-being (Petosa & Holtz, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2018). Creative resilience thus combines emotional regulation, metacognitive strategy, and meaning making. It is a skill set that enables singers to remain artistically productive even when facing setbacks.

2.3 Performer Identity and Expressive Agency

A robust performer identity integrates personal experiences with professional aspirations, providing a narrative that supports motivation and persistence (Haraldsen et al., 2021; Walker & Caprar, 2020). Identity construction is an ongoing, socially embedded process shaped by interactions with teachers, peers, audiences, and cultural traditions. Singers with strong and

flexible identities are more likely to sustain long-term careers and to interpret challenges as opportunities for growth (Connell et al., 2020; Oakland et al., 2014).

Expressive agency is closely related to identity. It refers to the performer's sense of authorship over interpretive decisions such as tempo, dynamics, and timbral color. Research shows that musicians communicate emotions most convincingly when they combine score fidelity with personally meaningful artistic choices. Expressive agency counters perfectionism by shifting attention from error avoidance to meaning-making, which strengthens intrinsic motivation and reduces the negative impact of MPA (Osborne, 2013; Tang & Ryan, 2020)

2.4 Toward an Integrated View

Although psychological flexibility, creative resilience, and performer identity with expressive agency can be examined separately, they are best understood as interconnected. Flexibility provides the mental space for identity exploration and interpretive risk-taking. Creative resilience supplies the adaptive strategies and positive emotions that reinforce identity growth. A secure performer identity, in turn, anchors flexibility and resilience by offering a coherent sense of artistic purpose. Together these processes create a self-reinforcing system that supports sustainable artistry.

This synthesis lays the conceptual groundwork for the Creative Resilience Model presented in Section 3. By framing resilience as creative adaptation rather than simple stress recovery, the model integrates mental health, motivation, and expressive communication into a unified explanation of how classical singers thrive over time.

3. Creative Resilience Model

The Creative Resilience Model (CRM) conceptualizes sustainable artistry in classical singing as a dynamic interaction of mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work. This section outlines the model's structure, explains each dimension, and formulates propositions for empirical testing.

3.1 Model Overview

The CRM proposes that growth in any one of the three capacities strengthens the others through positive feedback loops. Psychological theories of acceptance, motivation, and musician identity all suggest that when performers stay present with emotions, take ownership of expressive choices, and weave experiences into a coherent self-narrative, they develop long-term resilience and creativity (Lamont, 2012; López-Íñiguez et al., 2022). The model views resilience not merely as recovery from stress but as an ongoing process of creative adaptation.

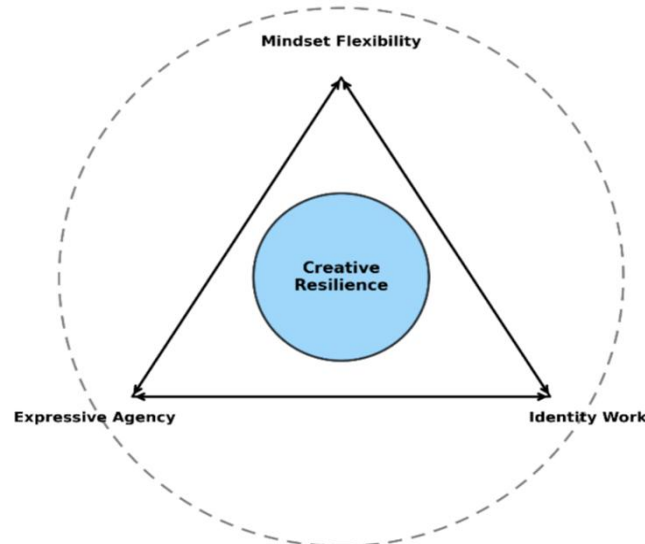


Figure 1: Creative Resilience Model: Mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work interact reciprocally to generate creative resilience within a broader musical context (pedagogy, repertoire, audience)

3.2 Mindset Flexibility

Mindset flexibility is the ability to accept difficult internal experiences and maintain value-driven action. Singers with this skill notice anxiety-related sensations without letting them derail performance. During preparation it encourages an exploratory approach to technical challenges. On stage it transforms physiological arousal into expressive energy. Over a career it supports adaptation to changing vocal resources and market conditions. Evidence from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy shows that enhancing psychological flexibility lowers music performance anxiety and improves expressive quality (Clarke et al., 2020; Juncos et al., 2017).

3.3 Expressive Agency

Expressive agency is the performer's sense of authorship over interpretive decisions such as tempo, dynamics, and timbre (Cancino-Chacón et al., 2018). It affirms the singer as an artist who communicates meaning rather than simply reproducing notes. High expressive agency shifts attention from error avoidance to audience connection, countering perfectionism and supporting intrinsic motivation. It flourishes when performers are free to experiment with phrasing and dramatic gesture in rehearsal and live performance (Moelants et al., 2012).

3.4 Identity Work

Identity work is the ongoing integration of personal experiences with professional roles into a coherent artistic self. This evolving narrative provides purpose and resilience in the face of success or disappointment (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Strategies such as reflective journaling, mentorship, and autobiographical storytelling help singers align repertoire choices with life themes, reinforcing motivation and sustaining careers.

3.5 Interplay of the Three Dimensions

The CRM emphasizes the interplay of its three core dimensions. Mindset flexibility creates the mental space for expressive risk-taking. Expressive agency enriches identity work by producing vivid artistic experiences that feed personal meaning. A strong performer identity stabilizes flexibility and agency by anchoring daily challenges in a long-term artistic vision. Together these interactions create self-reinforcing growth cycles.

3.6 Testable Propositions

The following propositions guide empirical research:

- **P1:** Higher psychological flexibility predicts stronger expressive agency and lower music performance anxiety.
- **P2:** Identity-aligned repertoire selection enhances creative resilience and long-term motivation.
- **P3:** Expressive agency mediates the relationship between practice-related stress and artistic fulfillment.
- **P4:** Growth in any one CRM dimension triggers positive feedback loops that strengthen the other dimensions.

These propositions can be examined through longitudinal surveys, experimental interventions, and mixed-method designs. These propositions lead to a visual synthesis of the model.

3.7 Conceptual Diagram

Figure 1 presents the Creative Resilience Model as an integrated framework. The diagram highlights how mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work reinforce one another and how these core processes are embedded within the broader musical context. Arrows connect each vertex in all directions, representing reciprocal influence. At the center lies creative resilience as the emergent outcome. Around the triangle a permeable circle labeled musical context reminds us that repertoire, pedagogy, and audience culture shape every aspect of the system.

3.8 Summary

By combining psychological flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work into a single dynamic framework, the CRM explains how classical singers convert challenges into opportunities for lifelong artistic development. The next section illustrates the model in practice through analyses of two contrasting Lieder by Beethoven and Schubert.

4. Repertoire as Identity Catalyst

Repertoire selection is not only a matter of technical suitability or stylistic preference; it is a psychological and narrative act that shapes a singer's evolving artistic self. Within the Creative Resilience Model (CRM), repertoire functions as a living laboratory where mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work converge. Two canonical Lieder illustrate this process: Beethoven's *Adelaide* and Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*.

4.1 Beethoven's *Adelaide*

Composed in 1795 and based on a poem by Matthisson, *Adelaide* portrays an idealized beloved whose image transforms the natural world and ultimately promises spiritual reunion. The music unfolds in a long arch, moving from tranquil contemplation to radiant climax. Performing *Adelaide* supports mindset flexibility by asking singers to maintain steady focus as tension gradually mounts. Acceptance-based rehearsal techniques, such as brief mindfulness pauses, help singers transform the physiological arousal of sustained crescendos into expressive intensity (Czajkowski & Greasley, 2015; Tan et al., 2020). The piece also fosters expressive agency through opportunities for individualized tempo shading and dynamic nuance, while its theme of transcendent love nourishes identity work, inviting singers to connect performance with personal aspirations and artistic ideals.

4.2 Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*

Schubert's 1814 setting of Gretchen's monologue from Goethe's *Faust* presents a more volatile emotional world. The incessant spinning-wheel accompaniment mirrors obsessive desire, while sudden modulations depict psychological turmoil. To perform this work convincingly, singers must practice rapid emotion regulation, accepting and channeling heightened arousal without letting it destabilize technique (Emmons & Thomas, 2008). The Lied also invites bold interpretive choices in phrasing and gesture, strengthening expressive agency, and its dramatic portrayal of longing and vulnerability can stimulate deep identity reflection, helping singers integrate personal experiences of passion or uncertainty into their artistry.

4.3 Comparative Insight and Pedagogical Use

Viewed together, *Adelaide* and *Gretchen am Spinnrade* reveal how contrasting repertoire cultivates complementary facets of creative resilience. *Adelaide* rewards long-arc control and contemplative expressivity, while *Gretchen* develops quick adaptive responses and dramatic immediacy. Teachers can sequence such contrasting works in curricula to help students practice a wide range of cognitive and emotional strategies. Reflective assignments—such as repertoire journals or guided peer discussions, allow singers to articulate the personal significance of each piece, reinforcing identity work. Collaborative rehearsal with pianists encourages co-created phrasing and balances fidelity to the score with artistic freedom (Bishop & Goebel, 2020).

By framing repertoire as a site of psychological and artistic experimentation, the CRM transforms canonical works into engines of growth. Singers do not merely interpret these masterpieces; they use them to compose the evolving narrative of their own creative lives.

5. Pedagogical and Institutional Implications

The Creative Resilience Model (CRM) highlights three interdependent capacities—mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work—that sustain long-term artistry. Translating these ideas into practice requires innovation in studio teaching, curriculum design, and institutional culture.

5.1 Studio Teaching

Voice studios are crucial for developing mental skills alongside vocal technique. Teachers can integrate brief mindfulness or acceptance exercises into warm-ups to help students notice performance anxiety without resistance (Mahony et al., 2022). Reflective debriefing at the end of lessons enables singers to reframe mistakes as opportunities for growth, reinforcing mindset flexibility and intrinsic motivation.

5.2 Curriculum and Assessment

Conservatoires and music departments can nurture expressive agency by embedding student-led recitals and collaborative rehearsal projects in the curriculum. These experiences give singers freedom to shape interpretive decisions, balancing fidelity to the score with personal expression. Assessment can include reflective portfolios and audience feedback, ensuring that growth in communication and creativity is valued alongside technical accuracy (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005).

5.3 Identity Formation and Career Development

Identity work can be strengthened through mentoring schemes, life-story interviews, and repertoire journals that connect personal narratives to artistic goals. Career services can

broaden students' vision of professional life by emphasizing diverse, portfolio-based careers (Lehker & Furlong, 2006). Such approaches prepare singers to adapt as their voices and the music industry evolve.

5.4 Institutional Culture and Well-being

Institutions must embed mental health literacy and ready access to counseling into their structures. Celebrating innovative recitals, community engagement, and cross-genre projects signals that creativity and well-being are institutional priorities. Policies that reward experimentation and collaboration cultivate resilience and reduce the stigma around performance anxiety (Fuller & Vu, 2011).

5.5 Policy Implications

Cultural policymakers can reinforce these efforts by funding grants and residencies that combine artistic innovation with psychological support. By linking financial incentives to mental health and creativity, funding bodies encourage practices that align with the CRM and promote sustainable careers (Azoulay et al., 2011).

5.6 Summary

By aligning studio practices, curricula, and institutional policies with the CRM, educators and cultural leaders can help singers transform everyday training and performance into a process of lifelong creative growth.

6. Research Agenda

The Creative Resilience Model (CRM) proposes that mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work interact to foster sustainable artistry. Future research should test and refine this model through diverse methodologies.

6.1 Longitudinal and Mixed-Method Studies

Long-term studies can examine how changes in one CRM dimension influence the others. Validated scales of psychological flexibility, expressive agency, and performer identity can be administered across semesters to reveal developmental patterns. Qualitative interviews and reflective journals can capture nuanced experiences that surveys may miss (Meyer & Willis, 2019).

6.2 Experimental and Physiological Investigations

Randomized controlled trials could test whether acceptance-based mental skills training reduces music performance anxiety and enhances expressive communication compared to standard vocal coaching (Shaw et al., 2020). Physiological measures such as heart-rate variability and cortisol can provide objective indicators of stress regulation (Vogel et al., 2018).

6.3 Cross-Cultural and Lifespan Perspectives

Comparative studies across musical cultures and career stages can show how social context shapes creative resilience (Munroe, 2022). Research on mature and retired singers can reveal how resilience evolves when voices and professional roles change.

6.4 Educational and Policy Evaluation

Evaluations of curriculum reforms, mentoring schemes, and funding models will clarify how institutional practices promote or hinder the CRM's three capacities. Mixed-method designs

can connect individual outcomes to broader educational or policy environments (Sosulski & Lawrence, 2008).

By integrating longitudinal, experimental, and cross-cultural approaches, future research will consolidate the CRM as an evidence-based framework for sustainable classical singing.

7. Conclusion

This paper introduced the Creative Resilience Model as an integrated explanation of how classical singers maintain long-term artistic vitality. Drawing on psychological flexibility, creative resilience, and performer identity research, the model identifies three interacting capacities, namely mindset flexibility, expressive agency, and identity work, as the foundation of sustainable artistry. The paper demonstrated the model's application through analyses of Beethoven's *Adelaide* and Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, showing how contrasting repertoire cultivates complementary aspects of resilience. It also proposed pedagogical and institutional strategies to foster these capacities and outlined a research agenda to test and refine the model.

By reframing resilience as creative growth rather than mere recovery from stress, the CRM offers performers, educators, and policymakers a roadmap for sustaining expressive power and psychological well-being throughout a singer's career.

While the Creative Resilience Model focuses on classical vocal performance, its conceptual reach may extend beyond this tradition. The current discussion draws primarily on Western art-music practices and German Lied repertoire, which may not fully represent the aesthetic values, pedagogical methods, or identity processes found in non-Western or popular vocal genres. Future research should examine how the model adapts to diverse musical cultures, including popular, jazz, folk, and non-European classical traditions, and test its propositions in cross-cultural and multilingual settings. Investigating different age groups, career stages, and community-based music practices will also help determine the model's wider applicability. Addressing these questions can enrich the model, refine its constructs, and ensure its relevance to the global diversity of vocal performance.

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Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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