

Episode 52: Ingela Onstad

Sat, Feb 25, 2023 8:14PM • 58:27

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, feel, practising, life, oftentimes, therapist, anxiety, clients, thought, therapy, performance, colleague, performer, musicians, struggles, mental health, brain, professional, career, question

SPEAKERS

Becca, Hattie, Ingela

Hattie 00:00

Before we start introducing our guest for this week, just wanted to give a bit of a message and say Happy New Year. And just a huge thank you for sticking around and listening throughout the last year, because we really appreciate you and really appreciate all the support we've had. So please, if you haven't already, do head over to our Instagram, as well as our Patreon, Twitter and Facebook, please do rate and leave a review if you're listening on Apple, because it really helps us out a lot. Also, remember to recommend us to someone if you think they might enjoy our conversations here. And most importantly, always, please feel free to say hi, if you have an idea or a comment or a suggestion, get in touch with us either on Instagram or on email via thingsmusiciansdonttalkabout@gmail.com. So now we have the admin over with, today we're coming with a fascinating conversation with Ingela Onstad, who is a psychotherapist and a performance coach, as well as being a professional soprano. Both Rebecca and I have been really interested in getting to know a musician who's also trained as a psychotherapist. And we were really curious to understand how Ingela deals with boundaries in her job. So we explore all of this on this episode, asking for Ingela's insight into diversifying musician life, becoming more than just singer and also kind of adding to her career by helping people through this therapeutic lens. So without further ado, let's get on to this really awesome conversation we had with Ingela Onstad.

Becca 02:06

All righty! Hello, everybody. Today we are with the amazing Ingela Onstad. How are you today Ingela?

Ingela 02:13

I'm doing very well, thank you.

Becca 02:16

Great! It's a pleasure to have you on the podcast, and thanks so much for getting in touch with us.

Hattie 02:20

How's everything with you? Whereabouts are you calling us from?

Ingela 02:25

I live in Albuquerque, New Mexico in the United States, so I am seven hours earlier than you. So I have a beautiful sunny day here in the morning.

Hattie 02:34

In terms of kind of you and what you do day-to-day and all of that kind of thing, maybe start with, you know telling us a bit about about you and the work that you do at the moment, and maybe you know, how it ties into the conversation we're trying to have here as well.

Ingela 02:52

Sure. Well, I originally reached out to you because I tend to always be looking for podcasts that are about the performing arts, and especially about mental health and the performing arts, so this just seemed like a perfect fit. What I do currently is I have a business called Courageous Artistry. And the goal of this business is to work with performing artists of all kinds, but I'm a musician myself, so I, I tend to have a lot of musicians on my roster to help them with all issues surrounding mental health and the arts. And I came to this via both a career first as an opera singer - I lived in Germany for a decade - and then moving back to the States, I decided to pivot into psychotherapy. So then I was a psychotherapist for a while well, technically I still am, I still am licenced, but I'm no longer practising. And then it really struck me that I had so many friends and colleagues in the arts who would reach out to me, oftentimes rather last minute to ask questions such as, "oh, my gosh, I have an audition tomorrow and I'm panicking," or "I'm playing a concerto tomorrow, and I'm panicking and I need your help. What should I do?" And as it dawned on me that we don't really have any very specific services for mental health in the arts. I think perhaps a few training programmes in the world, to help people become maybe a performance anxiety specialist. But in the United States, I'm not really actually aware of anything in particular, more likely you would do sports psychology, and then you might specialise in becoming a person who serves artists. But I realised very quickly with the bounds of my therapy licence that do not let me practice therapy outside my state boundaries, and obviously, New Mexico is just one of many states in the United States, that I was not able to do therapy with performing artists. New Mexico is a very large state geographically, but very small population-wise, and it turns out that I know most of the artists here anyway, so they might not want to be speaking to me about their most private struggles anyhow. So I, after some research, I realised that I could do a lot of a lot of very similar services. There are some major differences, but some very similar work, if I were to call myself a coach. In order to do so as a therapist, I had to get an extra certification, and I had to be approved by a board, so that I was still protecting my therapy licence. You likely know this already, but just for your listeners who don't know this, anybody can call themselves a coach. You do not need any certification whatsoever to call yourself a coach. Now, this doesn't mean that people who don't have any certifications aren't possibly doing a good job, but it was very important to me that I not only protected my licence, but that I also was helping my clients understand that I'm not in this role, I'm not acting as your therapist, that's a different role. But of course, I draw from a wealth of knowledge that is, you know, empirically-supported and based in science and research, which is very important to me. I think some of the more maybe alternative, or as we often say, here in the States, "woowoo" practices can also be incredibly helpful for people. But I like to think I'm mainly science with a dash of "woo". So you know, I want to help people, I want to help encourage people in whatever way that they most relate to, but I know for myself, it was

very empowering to understand how our biology and physiology impacts our mental health, and then how that also impacts our mental health, specifically, in the career of performance, which is so high pressure, and has so many challenges. And really, most often the comments I get from the clients I work with, and is oftentimes something like this "well Ingela, I have had a therapist, and it was very, very helpful in many ways, but while they really really didn't understand my performing career, and it almost felt like I couldn't speak with him about that because the comments they would make about it were so far off base that I just stopped bringing it up anymore." So I think many performers end up in mental health therapy for various reasons, which is wonderful, right? If we, especially if we have some major mental health struggles, we need to get those treated, and we need the support for those before we can maybe think about how to excel in our craft. But, you know, then it comes to a certain point where maybe we have a therapist, and maybe we've done some good work on our mental health. But we're still having all of these issues that are very performance specific. So I like to think that's where I come in. And I it also happens that I, I work with other professionals. Just incidentally, I had a lot of other people in my life approaching me saying, "well, I need help with public speaking. Could, could you help me with that?" And so I end up having some attorneys that I work with, and other professionals in corporate scenarios, but artists are really where my heart is.

Becca 07:53

We've noticed...as much as yeah, we've come across a lot of mental health specialists tied into the arts in some way in the UK, there still seems to be a huge gap for performance-based help, essentially. Where ... Where did your motivation come from? This must be the most basic question that you ask ... that you get asked all the time. But where does your motivation come from to help people in this way?

Ingela 08:20

Actually, I don't know if I've ever been asked that question, so thank you for asking, surprisingly!

Becca 08:25

What?!

Ingela 08:26

You know ... I know! What? Right? It's a very good question. As I'm sure both of you will fully understand and relate to, music was really the only thing for me for most of my life. I was very single-mindedly focused on having a performance career. And I recognised that it was going to be a hard journey. And with a lot of luck and being in the right place at the right time, and certain doors opening for me as well, as you know, a bunch of perseverance and hard work, I was able to make my living as a professional singer for a period in my life, which had always been my goal. I thought, when I was younger, "if I could just make a full time living at this for a while, I can consider this to be a total win." And so some things changed my life in my early 30s. And I decided to leave Germany after having been there for 10 years. And I knew when I returned to the United States that my career would never look the same, because obviously the system here is so different. You're a freelancer, you're not in a Fest position, in one of these coveted positions, you know, that much of Western Europe has. So I realised I didn't want to be a freelancer anymore. And I was really kind of at a loss. I didn't know what else I liked to do, because my whole life had been about performing. And I had, you know, moved to Canada first for my studies and then moved to Germany. And I, you know, I'd made so many sacrifices

and big steps in order to try to accomplish these goals. But I, I enrolled in a Master's degree back at home because ... and don't get me wrong, I believe the degrees are very, very valuable. But at the time, I wasn't thinking I really wanted to go into academia. But I thought, "well, if I get a Master's degree, it buys me two years of time to figure out what my next step is. And if I want to go into academia, I will know after this Master's degree," but I sort of viewed it as a soft landing for myself back in the States, reestablishing myself in this community and figuring out what I wanted to do next. I had always known that I was a person who other people came to, to, you know, I was I was the confidant of many, many people in my life. And I had played that role ever since I could remember. And it was a very comfortable role for me. You know, I think every friend group or every everybody who knows that one person or multiple people in their lives, where you're the person who people come to when they're in distress, and you're good at listening, and you're good at giving feedback, or reflecting things to people. So that had always been something that I had done so naturally. And you know, we oftentimes have these aspects of our personality, when something comes so naturally to us, we have a hard time recognising it as a strength, or recognising it as something different or, you know, a different skill set than other people may have. So, I very quickly thought, "well, maybe I could become a therapist or a counsellor." And I had to look into that degree programme. I didn't want to have to start all over with another bachelor's degree, but it turned out even with, you know, my degrees in music, I could get a Master of Arts degree in mental health counselling. And I volunteered at a crisis hotline for about two years, just to see if that type of intensity of the work was okay for me because it's one thing to, you know, talk with your girlfriends over coffee or glass of wine about a crisis in their lives. It's another thing to be working with perfect strangers, to be working with people who are severely challenged by their mental health issues, including being suicidal. So you know, I had to kind of test the waters at first but I found I really enjoyed it. And even though it's hard work, and strenuous emotionally in many ways, turns out I'm pretty well suited for it. So I think my motivation was just "how, how can I find another type of work outside of music that makes me feel equally fulfilled and equally passionate, something that doesn't feel like work?" Something that, you know, don't get me wrong, we all have our days, right? But, you know, something that feels like, even the hard parts of this work are things that I'm totally willing to do, or to slog through, sort of like the way of you practising as a singer, right? I don't love to practice. Once I get practising, oftentimes, I do enjoy it. But I usually have to kind of give myself a kick in the behind, to motivate myself to go into the practice room and get started for the day. I'm not just not one of these natural practicers. So yeah, and I feel very fortunate, very lucky that this career suits me as well as it does. And then I get to do this work that has a lot of meaning for me. In a mental health sense, you know, when you were an opera singer at well, full time, sort of in Germany, and even now, to a certain extent, are there elements to it that you say, impacted your mental health in any sort of way that you are happy sharing or talking about? Yes, definitely. I'm an open book. So feel free to ask whatever you would like. I will disclose that I have never had any major, major mental health struggles. So that is one thing that you know, I have gone through periods of depression and anxiety in my life, and perhaps it would have been able to be clinically diagnosed at the time. But I wasn't even getting help for it at that time. I was just sort of putting my nose to the grindstone and figuring that, it just meant I needed to work harder, or I just needed to continue perfecting my technique, and then I would feel confident or less anxious. And I think one of the greatest shames about our current state of education, and I do believe this even starts from a very early age, unless we have an extraordinarily gifted and aware teacher or teachers in our lives or mentors, I do believe we're sold a bit of a bill of goods, stating that your artistic confidence and maybe even artistic prowess comes from being very technically proficient, as if those

two things go hand in hand: if you're technically proficient, you will also be calm and confident and able to conquer every mountain laid in front of you. And I think oftentimes, especially the higher level you go in your training, the metaphor I often use is we don't feel very comfortable talking about our struggles, whether it's just sort of your everyday stage fright, or its lack of confidence, because it's a little bit like one drop of blood in the water in a pool of sharks is how we feel, I think, where "if I let anybody know about this, I'm toast, it's over for me, right? If a teacher or mentor or a colleague knows how much I'm struggling, how much I doubt myself, how high my anxiety levels are, etc, then I will no longer be taken seriously as a professional." For me my anxiety, I think, at the time, probably all through my studies and all the way into my life in Germany, and even now, I noticed it ... I have a Beethoven nine this weekend, and the soprano solo and Beethoven nine is just a bunch of screaming. And it's not very comfortable for me, and it's very fatiguing and it's not very much to sing, but it is incredibly hard for me. And so I just notice how much mental work and emotional work I have to do to be able to cope with these things. But I do have a sort of a couple blog posts that I wrote about this on my website. I think at the time, I wasn't even able to label it as anxiety, because it was just sort of normal. You were standing so close to it, you can't even see it anymore. And I think for me, it really manifested in feeling like I was never, I wasn't good enough yet. Meaning ... And then that meant I wasn't ready yet. So it was always this kind of concept of I'm not ready for that yet. I'm not good enough, yet. I passed up some really stunning opportunities, that looking back, you know, we all try not to have regrets, but inevitably, we always have a few in our lives. I look back and think of how many opportunities I passed up believing that I wasn't ready yet. And really, who would have known if I was ready yet? Who was to decide that? But I just kept thinking I'm not good enough yet. And I think I held myself back in many ways. So, you know, if I took this to a regular psychologist or therapist, I'm not sure if they would classify that necessarily as some type of disorder. But it really is truly a type of anxiety, a type of fear, feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence, etc. I would notice a lot in colleagues as well. And perhaps this is just something that I'm generally sort of attuned to because of my own personal makeup and personality characteristics, but I was always observing how anxiety especially manifested in other colleagues. So a classic example I give is I can think of a particular colleague who would always be so stunning in rehearsals, I mean, just singing the snot out of all of these roles and just really killing it. And then we would get to, you know, tech week, and we would get to this, Sitzprobe and the final dress rehearsals, the orchestra rehearsals, and little by little this colleague, and I'm not even going to name a gender in case this person ever listens to this. This colleague would dwindle. The closer we got to opening night, the worse this colleague would sing, and then this colleague would always be sick. Now whether this was brought on just by their own fear, or whether it was truly sick, but it happened, just time, show after show after show after show, years and years of this, and after a while, you have to wonder, are you bringing this on yourself? Are you so I'm anxious that you're making yourself sick? And then sure enough, opening night would come and either somebody would have to step in front of the curtain and say, "So and so is indisposed tonight, but it's choosing to sing anyways." Or they would have to call in the last minute replacement to fill in for opening night and for the first few performances. And this person would never ever ever sing as well as they did in rehearsals. And then this wasn't the only person obviously, you'd see this in a lot of different colleagues in a lot of different ways. But it was always fascinating to me just how comfortable we could feel in rehearsals and then when it came time for performance, or auditioning, there was ... there's no difference in our technique at that time. It's all about how the fear and anxiety is manifesting in our bodies and our minds and our emotions and then having an impact on us of course, not only physically but mentally and emotionally as well.

Hattie 17:42

In a mental health sense, you know, when you were an opera singer, well, full time, sort of in Germany, and even now, to a certain extent, are there elements to it that you say, impacted your mental health in any sort of way that you are happy sharing or talking about?

Ingela 17:47

Yes, definitely. I'm an open book. So feel free to ask whatever you would like, I will disclose that I have never had any major, major mental health struggles. So that is one thing that you know, I have gone through periods of depression and anxiety in my life, and perhaps it would have been able to be clinically diagnosed at the time. But I wasn't even getting help for it. At that time, I was just sort of putting my nose to the grindstone and figuring that, it just meant I needed to work harder, or I just needed to continue perfecting my technique, and then I would feel confident or less anxious. And I think one of the greatest shames about our current state of education, and I do believe this even starts from a very early age, unless we have an extraordinarily gifted and aware teacher or teachers in our lives or mentors, I do believe we're sold a bit of a bill of goods, stating that your artistic confidence and maybe even artistic prowess comes from being very technically proficient, as if those two things go hand in hand: if you're technically proficient, you will also be calm and confident and able to conquer every mountain laid in front of you. And I think oftentimes, especially the higher level you go in your training, the metaphor I often use is we don't feel very comfortable talking about our struggles, whether it's just sort of your everyday stage fright, or its lack of confidence, because it's a little bit like one drop of blood in the water in a pool of sharks is how we feel, I think, where "if I let anybody know about this, I'm toast, it's over for me, right? If a if a teacher or mentor or a colleague knows how much I'm struggling, how much I doubt myself, how high my anxiety levels are, etc, then I will no longer be taken seriously as a professional." For me my anxiety, I think, at the time, probably all through my studies and all the way into my life in Germany, and even now, I noticed it ... I have a Beethoven nine this weekend, and the soprano solo and Beethoven nine is just a bunch of screaming. And it's not very comfortable for me, and it's very fatiguing and it's not very much to sing, but it is incredibly hard for me. And so I just notice how much mental work and emotional work I have to do to be able to cope with these things. But I do have a sort of a couple blog posts that I wrote about this on my website. I think at the time, I wasn't even able to label it as anxiety, because it was just sort of normal. You were standing so close to it, you can't even see it anymore. And I think for me, it really manifested in feeling like I was never, I wasn't good enough yet. Meaning ... And then that meant I wasn't ready yet. So it was always this kind of concept of I'm not ready for that yet. I'm not good enough, yet. I passed up some really stunning opportunities, that looking back, you know, we all try not to have regrets, but inevitably, we always have a few in our lives. I look back and think of how many opportunities I passed up believing that I wasn't ready yet. And really, who would have known if I was ready yet? Who was to decide that? But I just kept thinking I'm not good enough yet. And I think I held myself back in many ways. So, you know, if I took this to a regular psychologist or therapist, I'm not sure if they would classify that necessarily as some type of disorder. But it really is truly a type of anxiety, a type of fear, feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence, etc. I would notice a lot in colleagues as well. And perhaps this is just something that I'm generally sort of attuned to because of my own personal makeup and personality characteristics, but I was always observing how anxiety especially manifested in other colleagues. So a classic example I give is I can think of a particular colleague who would always be so stunning in rehearsals, I mean, just

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Becca 18:49

Would you say that anxiety is the biggest thing that you're you help your clients with or are there other, more major...?

Ingela 19:00

I would say that, you know, the sort of the definition I like to give between coaching and therapy, and it's a little bit more complicated than this, but I think this sums it up in just a few bite-sized pieces: with therapy, oftentimes we are functioning below our, let's call it "midline", or I hate to use the word normal, but let's just call it for right now quote unquote "normal" levels when we're sort of below our baseline. And we're wondering why and we're trying to figure it out. Now, when you come to therapy, oftentimes what happens is we delve into the past. What has gone on in your lifetime that has impacted you, brought you to this point, are there any types of traumas? Has there been any abuse? Are there mental health issues in our families? What does our family of origin look like? What do our relationships look like? What is our self-care? And by self-care, I don't mean bubble baths and face masks, I mean, literal, how's our sleep? How's our nutrition? Are we moving our bodies? Do we have good habits around media etc.? So oftentimes, we're looking at sort of the foundational levels of the human and we're trying to figure out, some ... give them some insight into perhaps why they feel the way they do. Now, oftentimes, this is also a matter of figuring out that this person has dealt pretty well with their challenges in life, but may have some chemical imbalances that are going on that they really need medical help with, at which point then we involve a physician, and if they're open and willing, then you know, we're talking about medication in conjunction with therapy. But I often view therapy as a sort of 'past to present' process. And I like to view coaching as a present to future process. Clients, most often I would say do come to me because they are feeling anxious about specific areas of their performance life. If they were having overall very high anxiety in their lives, we might classify that as a Generalised Anxiety Disorder. And if they hadn't yet received help and treatment for that with a therapist or psychologist or psychiatrist, I would likely urge them to do that first and then to come back to me, because if a person is

really, really functioning below their baseline, me as a coach sitting here saying, "Okay, how can we focus on your goals in the future?" That's just ... it's going to be too much for them. It's just going to feel yucky and overwhelming. They're going to feel like they're failing when they're working with me. And so for the most part, its ... clients are coming to me with specific anxieties, or maybe I would call them specific ways in which they are stuck or holding themselves back and right, depression can also manifest this way that we don't feel like we have the energy to do things or we also feel too low or too lacking confidence in order to take positive steps forward in our lives. But you know, sometimes people will come to me, and they're not performers, and they will want just sort of more general life coaching things in which we just take an area, look at all the areas of their life and figure out, where would you like to see progress and improvement? And how can I help support you in creating some accountability or maybe some structure? Maybe being able to break large goals down into itty bitty baby steps so that we feel like we're making progress, because I think no matter who, who it is, I think every human relates to having a lot of goals and sometimes just feeling really overwhelmed with how to get anywhere with any of these goals. And then we just sort of "hooh!", give up and sit down and say, "I just can't do any of it, because it all seems so massive. I don't even know where to begin." So outside eyes, like mine can come in and take a look and say, "oh, okay, how can we design just the the smallest step for you so that you can move forward and feel like you're creating momentum?"

Becca 23:02

Would you say that having not all your eggs in one basket in singing has made ... has helped you enjoy singing more or has helped relieve the performance anxiety?

Ingela 23:12

Definitely! I think if I was dependent on this to pay every bill, I mean, this especially hit me like a tonne of bricks when I ... when we went through the pandemic, and my husband is also a singer, but he is ... his his main full time job as a voice professor at the University here. So we both just felt so fortunate that, you know, oftentimes I think we had looked at our friends and colleagues who are still doing it full time, and perhaps had feelings of jealousy and envy, like, "oh, wouldn't it be nice if we could be jetting off to gigs and you know, doing all this fun stuff? It looks so sparkly and fun from the outside." And then we, once the pandemic hit, we just were both so grateful that that was not the case, and that we didn't have to both worry about all of our income drying up. We don't receive a lot of information or maybe, maybe the better way to say it is a lot of positive modelling, from people in this profession, who have multiple jobs, that are all fulfilling to them. So you know, I think oftentimes, we feel like, "well, I just have to pick up these little jobs here and there to pay the bills while I'm pursuing my craft." Those of us who are able to make some semblance of a career in it and pay enough of our bills to get by, we are very, very fortunate. And, you know, it's been very fulfilling to me...I hope I'm answering your question here, to have something that I find very fun and exciting that really challenges me. Running a business is also no joke, it has a lot of ups and downs, a lot of challenges. It is not ... it's, it's been a real challenge to me but it's been a very exciting challenge and I wouldn't change a minute of it. And I kind of view my singing career the same way. It has had so much challenge and emotional ups and downs and strife and struggle and tears, and anger and all of the things, but I wouldn't change it for the world. So you know, I ... my wish for everyone is that they can find, if they're not able to make their living full time at performing, that they can find something that they find fun and challenging to do, that allows them enough flexibility that they can also do so.

Hattie 25:30

Yeah, it's so important for me to hear that from someone like you, who does clearly have such a passion for both things, and is like, very comfortable in that. And I don't know, if that's how you always felt whether, in the start, you did feel like, "Oh, I'm giving too much to one thing. You know, the other thing is lacking or, or I'm you know, I'm worried that people don't think I'm taking singing as seriously or whatever."

Ingela 25:53

Sure.

Hattie 25:54

But I think the life that you lead, you know, for a lot of musicians who have many different skills, it's realistic in a lot of ways and it's quite exciting, you know, to have the thought of like, "it's possible to do both, it can be really fulfilling to do both, and also can relieve some financial pressure as well."

Becca 26:16

I wondered because I even talking to a few people recently who have maybe doing other things on the side post pandemic, even.. uh "even". And they're like, "I don't want to tell anybody that I'm doing this other stuff, because they might take me less seriously." Did you have any element of "I've gotta keep one side of this on the down low so that people take me more seriously"?

Ingela 26:43

You know, I definitely still even to this day... Well, it's maybe been a while since I've had that struggle. But um, I think what it was for me is, you know, and every country is different, too. So I think in the States, you are, there are less jobs for artists. And even you know, while the UK perhaps doesn't have as many jobs as Germany and Austria, I think it still has more more opportunities, but at the same time, you also have a lot of highly talented people who are living there with whom you're competing against. At the beginning, when I first moved back here and went through this just huge change in my life of divorce and leaving the career that I had worked so hard to attain and you know, but doing this willingly and intentionally, kind of shifting my perspective and my priorities in my life, it was very important to me that I still can feel like a singer because, as I can say once again, in the pandemic, I barely sang at all. I didn't have any gigs and It made me realise that some of the only reason I ever practice is because somebody's paying me to do so. Right? I was like "wow, I didn't... I didn't realise that ever since I had, ever since I was young, the only reason I was really practising was either because I had to prepare for a lesson that I was paying for, or because someone was paying me to do a gig and I'd better show up and do a good job." So I realised I lacked very, I lacked any internal motivation, all of my motivation to practice was always very external. Yet, it was good to have that realisation and for me to ask the question, "if the world never returns back to any semblance of performing," because I think we all had our death, doom, disaster moments in the pandemic, "would I be able to be satisfied? You know, what, why do I sing? Would I just sing for myself? Would I be motivated enough to just sing duets at home with my husband, just for the joy of it?" And you know, I still don't know all the answer to all of these questions. But yeah, there's something about being seen as a professional or being taken seriously as a professional that is understandably important to all of us. And I kind of, I guess, had to be very aware

and mindful about steps that I could take both externally and internally, to continue viewing myself as professional. Because if we're waiting for the outside world to give us their stamp of approval, we will wait forever. And we will always build it up in our minds, that "so and so must not be approving of us", and "so and so is likely thinking this of us." Right, we all get into these very vicious cycles of what we call in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, 'mind reading', where we're, we are literally pretending that we know what everybody's thinking and what they're saying about us. It's very dangerous, but we all do it. We also get into this, you know, projection into the future of "this is how things are going to be". Sometimes we call that 'fortune telling', right, "Oh, then it'll be like this, and then it'll look like this. And then this won't go my way, et cetera." So I think one of the gifts that I've learned through my years of going to school for to be a therapist, and then doing therapy and doing my own therapy and becoming a coach, is I'm very aware of my thought patterns now, much more aware than I used to be. I'm aware that our brains are just producing thoughts, you know, 10s, of 1000s of thoughts per day, and most of them are a pile of you know what. They are just so much garbage, because our brain is constantly trying to make meaning from our environment, but also our brains have a predilection for negativity, because it ensures our survival. So our brain is very much a sort of negativity machine, always viewing the world through poo-coloured glasses and never trying to, you know, we don't want to, we feel scared to feel hopeful or to feel positive, because ... lest we be disappointed, and our brain is also great at going into power saving mode and shutting us down from taking steps and risks, because our brain still thinks that we're living in, you know, times of feast and famine, and that tomorrow might come famine, and we need calories. Our brain takes 20% of our daily calories. So with that in mind, it really loves to prevent us from stretching ourselves too much or trying new things. But I feel like I'm kind of off on a tangent now. But back to your original question, for me some important steps that I just took, and I decided for myself, were going to help me, I decided that whatever thing I was doing meant that I was a professional performer. No matter what the paycheck was, no matter what the organisation was, because what a professional performer is, is actually not a universal truth that exists that we can look up in some truth book somewhere. It is based on someone's opinion. So we are here as highly-trained musicians with degrees under our belt, and all of this ... all these hopes and aspirations. We are here believing that the whole world and this is an a, you know, one of these thought fallacies, doesn't take us seriously as a professional musician, because we had to get some type of day job. Meanwhile, my friends who are not performers still very much view me as a professional singer, and if they're introducing me to a friend of theirs, they will literally lead with "this is my friend Ingela. She's an opera singer." And then I feel like I have to give these qualifiers like, "Well, I'm not really singing full time anymore." And I can just kind of watch myself go into that explanation cycle. Meanwhile, the people we're talking with have no idea about any of this. And I could just say, "Yes, I am a professional singer." Period. Right? Because I ...

Hattie 32:21

Among other things.

Ingela 32:22

... feel myself that way. Amongst other things, right?

Hattie 32:24

If you wanna know, but maybe you don't.

Ingela 32:26

Exactly, and then we could just say "yes, I am a professional." If we're not working on these things from the inside out, then no matter what level we are at or what we achieve, it will never be good enough, because there's always going to be the next level or the first chair in this greater orchestra or whatever it is that we deem better than where we are. So for me, it's a lot of just mental work that I do to believe that I'm still a professional to take myself seriously, first and foremost? To view the gigs I have no matter what the paycheck or what the, you know, level of organisation. As serious gigs, I put them all on my website. Sometimes it helps me to look back at my resume, and go, "wow, I actually have done a lot of things," because sometimes I forget that, you know, I, I have some stuff under my belt. But I think there are a lot of practices, I guess, to sum all of this up, there are a lot of practices that we can do, no matter And is it easy to fit everything in in a day to you know, work a day job or run a business or be a parent or and then also practise? Yeah, it is. But I don't know ... Other people watch a lot of TV and I spend a lot of time working on my music and my website and you know, planning things for gigs and such in my spare time. So it's just it's a choice, I guess, is the best way to put it. H what stage we are in our performance career. And it's you who decides whether you are a professional or not. And even if you don't have one paying gig right now, you can still decide that you are a professional, you're just a professional who is currently also pursuing other paths and goals.

Hattie 33:40

I have a question, maybe it's not quite so relevant to your life now, but for when you were a practising psychotherapist, a lot about a lot of the importance of psychotherapy is about the client, kind of having like a therapist having sort of anonymity, and them not knowing you know, who exactly they are, or, or anything really to do with their life. And it's very important for the boundary, you know... I think you probably already know what's coming. Because you do have this career as well, and you know, that there are, you know, you have this great career as an opera singer, they look up your name, that's what they see. Maybe even you enjoy writing about your life, your experience, maybe you know, you have an online presence in some way. You know, how did you find that boundary? And what's your opinion on that boundary? I'm really curious, because even you know, Rebecca is currently training, counselling, training and I've considered it myself. And it's like, that's the thing I worry about. I love being open online. I'm a musician, and I've got all these recordings and stuff. What if my client, future clients will see all this? You know, what could that mean?

Ingela 34:58

Sure. Well, this is, you know, this is an area where I'm sure many people will have very many different opinions so I'll just tell you mine. When I was practising only as a psychotherapist, one of the things that I found most stifling about the profession, and most challenging about the profession was exactly what you just mentioned. I felt like I couldn't bring my whole self into session, it was almost like, I was putting on a therapist costume, and then walking in the door. And I'm a relatively extroverted person. I'm probably, you know, I re-... I probably recharge alone, but I like people, I like being around people. I'm very much an open book about my life. I am not shy or afraid to talk about personal things. I like relating to people, I like going deep on those emotional levels. Now, of course, as a therapist, it would be fully inappropriate if we turned everything around on ourselves and said, "Oh, well, let me tell you about this time that that similar thing happened to me." We would never want to do that. But I also know from

being a client myself that sometimes you wonder who the therapist is as a person, and it has such professional distance and remove, oftentimes, necessarily so, that it can feel I think a lot of clients wonder about their therapists and also wonder, "do they like me? Do they, do they find me boring when I'm going on and on about my life? Do they understand? Do they really understand?" You know what, and as I mentioned before, a lot of my you know, a lot of my clients will tell me, "I'm so glad that you understand what my life looks like, because I really truly feel seen and heard." So for me, exiting psychotherapy was a, you know, a risk that I took, because this is a ... I could have stayed, I could have made a very stable living as a psychotherapist. But I felt like I was cutting off one part of myself. And perhaps I could have worked on that. But according to traditional rules and training in psychotherapy, there are very good reasons why we should be more anonymous, and why we should not make the session about ourselves. But I will tell you, it really hurt my heart oftentimes, to for example, when I left my agency where I had been working, I had clients who I had been seeing sometimes for four years on a weekly basis. That depth of relationship that you have with that person, for many of my clients, I think that was the deepest and most connected relationship that they had in their lives oftentimes, in that point, just depending on who they were and where they came from. And then for me to leave and tell them I was leaving, I gave them months and months of notice, but to tell them I was leaving, and to tell them, legally, we can't have any contact now for two years. It just felt like such a punch in the gut, you know, and so there are a lot of issues and maybe I'm just more of a rebel or a rule breaker at heart, but I didn't like that. I didn't like that I couldn't be myself. And no, I'm not going to be friends with these clients but the great thing about coaching, for me, is that some of these people come to me because they've met me somewhere else, and I can work with them. But if they, if they were a friend of a friend, they couldn't, I couldn't be their therapist. That'd be inappropriate. Umm it'd be what we call dual relationships. It would just be inappropriate boundaries. You know, while I think it is, this is a fantastic and very noble profession and I'm glad that you are both, you know, either involved or considering it, those are some of the challenges. And some people will feel more comfortable with that than others. But I think because I have this whole other aspect to my experience as a performer, especially, I wanted to go somewhere, I wanted to have a profession where I really felt like I could use all aspects of myself, and, you know, share some of my personal experiences, or some of my other clients' personal experiences without breaking confidentiality, you know, say, "Oh, well, I have a client who also struggles with something similar. And let me tell you about something that helped them." While I want to keep my clients' issues and struggles front and centre. I don't miss having to worry, "did I just say too much? Did I just share too much?" Or also worry, "Am I being too cold? Am I being too removed? Am I being too impersonal?" So that that is a constant line that therapists have to balance that can I think is trickier for some than others.

Hattie 39:32

And you spoke at the beginning about there being, I suppose the words that came to me, was when you were talking about your friends contacting you before a performance, and requiring a sort of mental health performance first aid, I suppose. And for that sort of situation, if someone is looking for a kind of first aid thing in the moment of severe anxiety, what are your kind of ...Yeah,

Ingela 40:04

Quick Tips.

Hattie 40:05

Quick Tips! I dunno!

Ingela 40:08

Yes. And that's that's probably the most common question that I get asked from people, which is perfectly valid to want to know, because there are some quick things we can do. But I always also like to just underline again, and again and again, that these things take time. And it's a process, and it is building skills and tools. And when we are highly agitated, and in high states of fight, flight or fear, or fight, flight or freeze, rather, our prefrontal cortex, which is the most sort of human aware, rational, logical part of our brain is losing blood flow. And our animal brain, our lizard brain, gains blood flow. So we have to be practising these things when we are in a calmer state, in order to remember to do them in the more agitated state. But I think the quickest tip I usually give for people, and this works really well for me too, I will use it when I am ... literally this is when I am always doing it. I'm driving in my car to the gig and I'm in my dress, in the car, or my dress is hanging in the back seat. And I'm double checking to make sure I have my score and my black folder and did I put my high heels in the bag? And did I, do I have my water? And am I on time? And inevitably, I noticed my heart rate increasing and I'm driving and then I'm thinking as I'm driving, "Oh, no. What if there's an accident? What if I get stuck in traffic?" And my anxiety starts to ramp up even more. And I'm very aware of the way that that manifests in my body. And then here's what I'll do. I call this a hissing breath. But it's really sometimes referred to as a double exhale breath. I will take in a really easy inhale through my nose, and then hisssss or blow like I'm blowing through a straw out, effectively extending the length of my exhale so that it is at least twice as long as my inhale. The nice thing about the hissing or the blowing through a straw, is that it damns back the exhale enough that you don't have to count. You just have to create a smaller aperture and then *hisses* the breath leaves at a slower rate. Now by doing this, when we, for whatever reason, just because of the way we're built, when we do a longer exhale than inhale, that stimulates our vagus nerve, which I'm sure both of you are familiar with, which is responsible for getting us into rest and digest or the calmer part of our nervous system, also known as the parasympathetic. So any type of vagus nerve exercise can be great, but ssss, just this simple breath. And I'll just do it again and again as I'm driving, and I will ... I prefer to do the hiss, because it's almost like it gives my brain enough of something to focus on, I hear it and I'm sort of listening to the sound. And it's like, it helps take me out of that fear moment and just focus on something else. I have literally sat on stage before, you know, often I think most often the types of gigs I do anymore, I don't do very much opera, I do more concert work. So as the soprano soloist, I'm sitting there, as you both know, in front of the orchestra, oftentimes just sitting, with my music in my lap, waiting for the soprano solo section, or the trio or whatever it is that I'm about to do. And sometimes I will be sitting there for 30 minutes before anything happens, but I have to sit there and just look like I'm calm and pleasant and you know, smiling at the audience and looking engaged when really everything in my body is telling me to run. So I will sit there and you know, I don't ... I don't know if your listeners, anybody listening will get this, but I will smile at the audience as I normally do just sort of a little pleasant smile on my face, so that I'm not looking terrified, and I will do my hiss, or my blowing out through the smallest, smallest little escape in my lips. And I'm just looking at the audience, but I'm extending my exhale. And this will automatically drop our heart rate. Now, does it make us feel totally Zen and relaxed and chilled? No, because we're still in a high stress situation, but even just that moment of having this much control over our nervous system is very empowering. And puts us back in the driver's seat of our experience. on

Hattie 44:15

I think another part of the performing experience, I think is quite often beforehand to have this huge anxiety and a lot of my experiences, if you're a perfectionist, afterwards, there can be a feeling of depression if say it didn't go as well.

Ingela 44:33

Yes.

Hattie 44:34

...as it wanted. And it only just struck me right now. I'm like, "wow, like, quite often, we experience these two very intense emotions, like in one quite short space of time." So I'm wondering if you have anything for you, if you haven't performed well, for you or, you know, whatever... How do you get over that, like absolute depression, self hatred, wanting to just erase your life feeling of...

Ingela 45:01

Oh, believe me, I've had literal performances where I sat down after my solo and thought "that was the worst thing I've ever done, and I'm quitting singing tomorrow." You know, so I have been there, I have definitely been there. So I wouldn't want anybody, because I know I've done this at times, to sort of berate themselves for being such a perfectionist or work on becoming less perfectionistic. I think we just need to work on becoming differently perfectionistic perhaps. Our constant ... it's our ability to constantly assess what needs improvement, that allows us to be very, very high functioning peak performers at the top of our game, etc. Kind of like Olympians, they're not going around going "wow, I'm just so good at everything. This is so amazing." Right? They, they are done with their game, done with their match, whatever it is, and they look back and they say "what can I do better next time?" So what I will say is pre- performance, I like to encourage people to set some intentions, and not to set some intentions necessarily about how you want to perform or that tricky passage or that high note or whatever it is you're worried about, but to actually set intentions of how you would like to feel either emotionally or physically. So one that I often use, and especially, I hate it well, you know, we always say 'post pandemic', obviously, we're still not there. Let's say in the endemic stages of things, is I want to really feel grateful to be there and to have the opportunity because there was a time that I didn't know if I would ever sing professionally again, right? So when I have a gig now, I try to feel ... I try to remind myself to feel grateful. And I also want to feel present. I don't want it to slip by me so quickly, that I walk off stage and go "Whoa, what the heck just happened? I don't even know. I had an out of body experience." And I also want to oftentimes, I'll set an intention to feel engaged, to feel like ... to remind myself that I'm there to give the audience some brief respite from the troubles of their days. And not all of them will like me, some will like me, some will feel neutral about me, some will dislike me and if I can accept that, R I it helps me think "I'm here for the people who who need this right now." So it sort of, it helps put me out of my own perfectionistic tendencies and put me in the mode of what it is I'm actually here to do, which is to create beauty for people to take up ... take part in, to be the vessel for this, you know, universal beauty that gets to flow through us as musicians. Afterwards, and this is ... this takes some mental discipline, you walk off stage or you leave the pit or whatever it is that you're doing, and you train your brain to say, "hmm brain, what do we think went well tonight?" Because I can guarantee you, probably 95% of what you did was pretty darn good. And you are hyper focusing on the 5 to 10%

that you think didn't go well. And how often have you done something and thought it was terrible, and thought that everybody heard it or saw it, and then somebody who you trust very much comes up to you afterwards and is like, "what?! I didn't even notice what you're talking about." So we, we hyper focus, and we overly-magnify all of our perceived flaws and faults, and we don't look at any of the things that we've done well. So you know, sometimes we can't get out of that depression, and that's fair, too. Sometimes I exit stage and I just have to go cry for a while or I have to go home and cry for a while and, you know, go "woe is me, I'm quitting tomorrow" and have my husband help talk me down. You know, but, but and that's okay, too, right? We can feel our feelings and recover from it. But I would suggest that even then, at a certain point, you try to look back on it, really, I think in a way, like like an Olympian would. Olympians don't get to where they're going because they cry on the couch about it. You know, they...at some point, they have to say, "Okay, what went well here? What can I be proud of? What have I been improving on that did go well?" And the things that didn't go well, what type of help or support do I need to get past that? And I think oftentimes, for us, it's I need more help and support ... it's not necessarily... it might sometimes be technical, obviously. But I'd say a lot of it is going to be mental, we just get so focused on the technical aspect of things.

Becca 49:17

I think you're so right. I think that a lot of people will benefit from hearing what you've got to say. And yeah, if people do want to find you online, your blog, your website, all this kind of stuff, where can people find you?

Ingela 49:36

Yes, thank you for asking, I ... probably the easiest way to get in touch with me is through my website, which is just courageousartistry.com. You can message me through there. If you join my email list, there should be a little box that pops up for you to join my list, not only do you get a free download which is a PDF guide, to some anxiety ... I call them anxiety busting routines, maybe I call them anxiety busting rituals, I can't remember ... for pre-performance times to help you build a little toolkit. But then you'll also be on my mailing list and I do a lot of free webinars. I do a lot of guest appearances in lots of different places. So, you know, I like to be very, very realistic. Not everybody can afford my private services. And I charge what I charge, and I'm comfortable with what I charge. It takes some work to get there because you just want to help people, but I have to be able to charge for my services because no insurance is going to pay me for what I do. And I realise that that not everybody out there in the world, especially artists, can necessarily afford my services. But I do work really hard to provide a lot of free content, a lot of free material, free webinars workshops. I do ... this year, I've been doing one monthly 'Office Hours appointment' where people can just pop in and ask me questions, and then otherwise, I'm on Instagram and Facebook and TikTok @courageousartistry. And I'm also on LinkedIn. A lot of musicians aren't on there, but you can find me on LinkedIn under Ingela Onstad.

Becca 51:03

Amazing, thank you so much.

Hattie 51:06

Thank you!

Becca 51:06

And what we like we've started asking our guests for some reason unbeknownst to us, have you... Well, we'll start first so you have time to think, but have you had a little little win or something that you've been happy with this week? Because we tend to focus ... on our podcast, we tend to focus on like, not the negative stuff but like, very deep stuff, so Hattie, we'll get we'll start with you. Spring it on you - have you had a little win this week? Because I also need to think about mine.

Hattie 51:32

Oh, no. She always does this.

Ingela 51:36

I can actually go first if you'd like.

Hattie 51:39

I actually thought "I bet you have a great, really exciting thing to say."

Ingela 51:43

Well, because I'm very much in the mindset of helping my clients with this, so I can come up with wins very quickly because I work at focusing on them, right?

Hattie 51:50

Oh yeah! You're well-practised at it.

Ingela 51:53

Okay, well my win is: I had a family emergency last week. My father had a surgery and things didn't go quite as planned. He's okay now but it turned into a totally different process than the one we had been expecting. I had to go to another city. You know, get an AirBnb, visit the hospital all the time, and I, as I mentioned, have this Beethoven's Ninth Symphony coming up this coming weekend. So my win is that I worked really hard mentally. I wasn't practising while I was helping take care of my father, right? But my win mentally is I both ... I did a couple things. I checked in with a couple other sopranos to see if they were available to sing next weekend, so that had I wanted to, I could have said, "I can't do it, I need to bow out because of family emergency, but here are some other people." So I gave myself permission to take the pressure off and say, "If I don't want to do this, somebody else can and that's okay." But then I also sort of thought to myself, "well, I've worked really hard on this, and I want a chance to do it. So what can I do in the next ... in the last few days, and over the next week, what is possible for me?" And I did a lot of listening and visualising with the piece. And I think that really helped me and today I'm feeling fairly confident about it. I'm 95% sure that I'm not going to call in the other soprano, and that I'm actually going to go through with it even though, you know, I ... my whole practice schedule, of course got got thrown off with it so it's not ... I'm not as prepared as I would like to be. But it is what it is.

Becca 53:27

I hope you have fun!

Hattie 53:28

That's amazing.

Ingela 53:29

Oh, thank you. Thank you. I hope so too.

Hattie 53:32

I'm so glad your father's alright as well. That must have really, yeah, really, really scary.

Ingela 53:37

It was stressful, yes.

Hattie 53:38

Yeah. Oh my gosh. I mean, I have thought of one. So, I ... when was it? Was it yesterday? It must have been yesterday. I picked up my cello to practise, which is not something I do super regularly at the moment, but when I do it, it's very much spontaneous thing. And yesterday, I picked it up, and I started playing. And it started because I wanted to, like, try and learn this, like pop song. And then it turned into me just like getting my bow out and trying to play things that I used to play and stuff, and it was really ... it was you know, it was pretty bad, like I was not playing well, like I've lost a lot of technical ability. I'm not anywhere near like, the sort of great performer I was...you know, if I really had time to to put back into it, I have faith that, you know, I could be but it's not what I want at the moment. But it was the fact that I didn't feel depressed about that, I actually found it like really, like light-hearted and quite funny. Which was an interesting emotion for me to like experience to do with my playing. I was like, "it's actually really hilarious how, how kind of terrible it is, but I actually ... I love that, like I'm really enjoying how funny I'm finding this." Because the cello now doesn't feel like "oh, if I'm not hugely up there, I don't like that emotion of depression and like shame and stuff. It's like actually not being up there can be quite a hilarious experience."

Ingela 55:17

I love that.

Hattie 55:18

So yeah.

Becca 55:19

That's great.

Hattie 55:20

Thank you.

Ingela 55:21

No, I really love that because it's ... that the the torture that you would ordinarily feel over it is self-created, isn't it? So you decided to ...

Hattie 55:31

Yeah.

Ingela 55:31

...change the channel. You just decided to think differently about it and then you got to have a different emotional experience.

Hattie 55:38

Yeah, like a really light-hearted experience that I'd never had before, having taken a break and played like shit.

Ingela 55:45

I love it.

Hattie 55:46

So it was nice. Rebecca, it's your turn!

Becca 55:49

Urmmm I've been trying to decide which of my many wins this week...

Ingela 55:55

Ooh!

Becca 55:57

I think my one comes from today, my boyfriend got through to the second round of an audition, and we had a good chat about it, and I was really excited, but I ... you know, because I'm going through auditions and stuff at the moment as well, and it was quite a win for me to feel excited for him and not jealous and not guilty that I hadn't played, and it was just like a nice like, "yeah, like, you really want this job. And I'm really happy for you." And there's actually no hint of "I need to go practise now or something." And that was like, "Yeah, this is cool!"

Ingela 56:30

Good for you. That's hard to do, isn't it?

Hattie 56:32

That's so cool.

Becca 56:33

Yeah.

Ingela 56:33

And I think that really speaks to our scarcity mindset with things. We often feel like there's just not enough to go around, so if somebody else gets something, that means I don't have something, when really it's, I think, better to try to view things as plentiful and abundant. And if he has an opportunity, that's wonderful. That means opportunities exist for me as well.

Becca 56:54

Yeah, exactly. I don't even play the tuba! You know. I couldn't go for that job. Why would I be jealous?

Ingela 57:02

I know I mean, my husband is a singer too, and you know, I'm not a... I'm not a baritone but I get jealous sometimes you know?

Hattie 57:12

Well it looks like it's beer o'clock.

Becca 57:13

Yeah, I just got brought a beer!

Ingela 57:14

Yeah, now I'm jealous!

Hattie 57:20

Well, Ingela, it's been like one of the greatest pleasures to speak to you.

Ingela 57:24

Aww thank you both so much.

Hattie 57:24

And I have a whole page of just like things that I wrote down that you said that I just didn't wanna forget. Noo, thank you so much.

Ingela 57:33

Thank you both for what you're doing out here in the world for all of your fellow performers. You're having very important conversations, and they require a lot of vulnerability and openness on your part, which I know is scary to do oftentimes, but I think the more we do it, the less scary it becomes. And if somebody is judging us for our emotions or for our experiences, let that be their problem.

Becca 57:56

Woo!

Hattie 57:57

Yeah!

Becca 57:58

That could be our tagline.

Hattie 58:00

There we go.