

Singer without a voice Nora Fischer: “What’s wrong with me?”

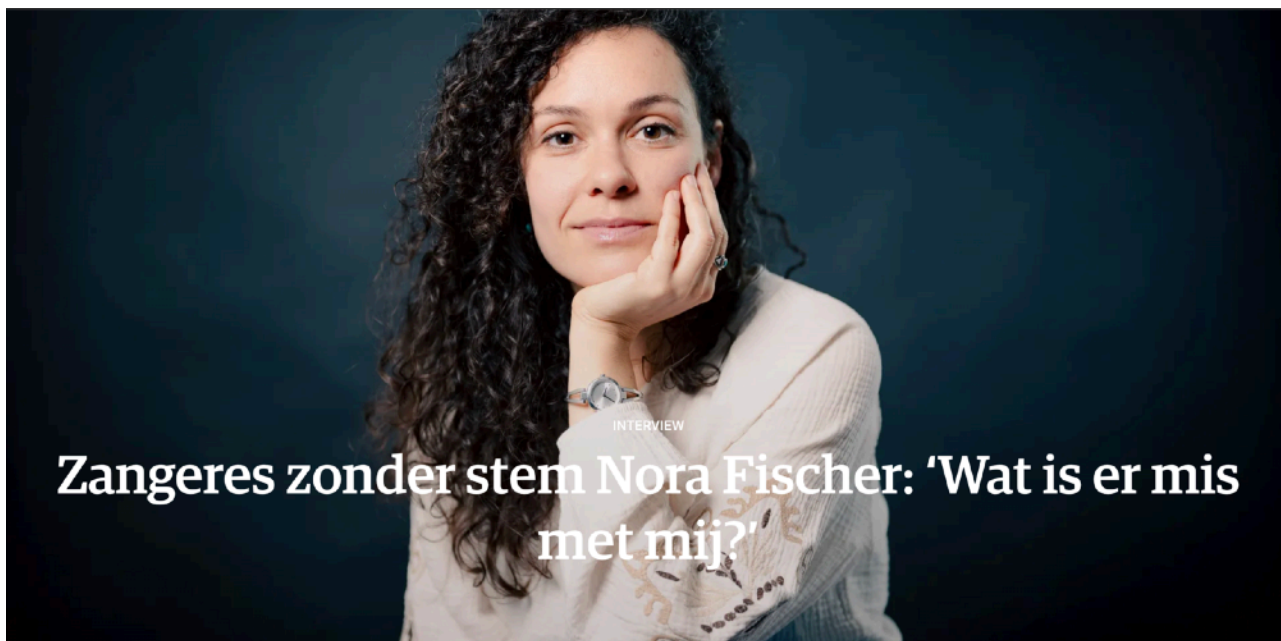


Photo: Bram Petraeus

Nora Fischer was a soprano singer, but she lost her voice. In her book *Hoogspanning* (Tightrope), she recounts how her enjoyment of singing turned into fear. In *The Hour*, she talks to Pieter van der Wielen about the importance of being allowed to fail.

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Nora Fischer is one of the most famous singers in classical music in the Netherlands. She has performed on the most beautiful stages, worked with renowned musicians, and been widely praised for her rebellious repertoire and her extraordinary voice. But one day, she could no longer sing; her voice was blocked. She has written a book about how this happened and what happened next: *Hoogspanning* (Tightrope). In the podcast *Het Uur*, Pieter van der Wielen talks to Fischer about the judgmental voice in her head and what might be causing it: Her sister? Being Jewish? Capitalism? Calvinism? Patriarchy? The performance society? Social media? Her answer: the system.

*This is an edited version of the conversation Pieter van der Wielen had with Nora Fisher for *Het Uur*, NRC's weekly interview podcast. Listen to and follow *Het Uur* via [nrc.nl](#), the *NRC Audio* app, or another podcast platform. The interview can also be [viewed on YouTube](#).*

I find the classical world intimidating, even as a visitor, when I go to the Concertgebouw.

There you are, your face on posters all over the city, announced alongside a famous conductor, an entire orchestra. Another thirty people staring at you. All those people with expectations. That's a lot of pressure.

"That's a lot of pressure, and the funny thing is: when you see Federer playing tennis, everyone knows: 'It's not just a physical game, it's also a mental game. You have to do something under a lot

of pressure that you actually need to be physically relaxed for. Only top musicians understand how incredibly difficult that is. And because of that, you sit there alone, fretting about how scary you find it, but you can't really share that with people. And then it just gets bigger."

Is the moment when you call your management and say, "I can't do this anymore," a kind of liberation?

"The first time I brought it up, my management said, 'Once people know you have a problem with your voice, you'll never get rid of that stigma. People will always see you through that lens.' So basically, they wanted to protect me from that stigma. At the same time, that put me in a bind, because I had nowhere to go. I couldn't cancel, because then I would apparently be throwing my career away. But then again, I was going to do my own project at The Proms, in London. Those were pretty much the biggest gigs you can do in this scene, and I also knew that if I did it, I would fail."

You had to fail, no matter what.

"It was really a choice between two evils. And under that pressure, you try to free your voice again. Of course, that's not going to work. The higher you climb, the more you can't fail. And I think that if you can't fail, you can't be an artist."

You grew up in a musical family. Your father is a world-famous conductor who was away from home a lot. He was also a bit of an idol to you. Your mother worked in music, and from a very young age you sat in those big halls watching and listening to the stage.

"Definitely. My parents, and their parents, were all high-level classical musicians and very successful. But even there, things aren't black and white. It was a very artistic, creative hotbed, where I was already playing operas at a young age. There was a lot of creativity in our home and the bar was set very high. Sometimes that's a gift and sometimes it's a curse. It's both."

But it is true, of course, that when parents compliment a child, they can unconsciously teach the child that love is conditional. If the child is very musical and receives a lot of compliments for it, the child thinks: my parents love me.

"And at the same time, I think: there are so many opinions about parenting. Of course, I was a very talented child and received a lot of applause from my parents for that. But I don't think that was a bad thing. I think it's more that we are so vulnerable as human beings and ultimately want to be loved. Stepping into the spotlight and discovering that there is something you can do that suddenly earns you an enormous amount of love: that can be a pitfall. Look, something happens the moment you decide to go professional; suddenly you have to start earning money with it. Then you have to be asked to perform at venues. Then you have to build a career. Then you have to sell yourself. Then you have to show what you're doing on social media."

It also comes across as a very nice family you come from. With a father who is very open-minded, who raises you with an image of self-reliance, rebelliousness. He is Hungarian and he doesn't think the Dutch are warm-blooded enough. I actually found it very funny.

"I also come from a very interesting, fascinating, vibrant, artistic, creative family. And I think that I couldn't have had my career, in which I've always done quite rebellious things, without my upbringing. Because I really learned at home to question everything. Not to do anything just because people say that's the way it should be done."

Not choosing the beaten path. Because from the moment you enter the conservatory, it doesn't fit to be trained as a classical singer in the more conventional method. You don't really like those voices, you find the repertoire boring. You were also expelled from the conservatory. I thought that was so funny.

"I loved the notes on paper, but I didn't like that voice with its big vibrato and thick sound. I always thought: 'Can't you just sing that music in a very subtle and beautiful way, so that it doesn't sound so forced? But no, it had to be that way. I also wanted to sing all kinds of strange modern music, and that wasn't allowed. I think I had too many ideas of my own for that institute. Then they said something like, 'We can't work with you.'"

Those are exactly the things you were so praised for later on. Your collaborations with other genres, your innovative repertoire, your own way of singing, the freedom in your voice.

"Yes, ironic. I've often thought that I was actually very happy that I was kicked out. I think that's why I've been able to do all those things. That I've been able to maintain a kind of freedom in my voice and in my interpretation, and remain true to that."

Your sister plays a big role in your book. You were very close, you really grew up together. As well as being sisters, you were each other's best friends. That relationship came under a lot of pressure, partly because of your sister's mental state. One of the things you describe is that you feel permanently guilty about your success.

"It was a kind of mirror. My sister suffered from depression and had a really dark inner world. She was five years older than me and was my role model. I always wanted to dance in front of the camera and perform; I was very much a glitter girl. Because my sister, whom I looked up to so much, didn't have that herself, I developed a kind of conviction: 'Oh, that's frivolous and superficial, she's profound and really philosophical. She's so concerned with the suffering in the world and that's apparently how it should be. My expressionist urge is apparently bad.'



Photos: Bram Petraeus

“Then I did indeed have a fairly successful career, and she had a lot of trouble keeping up with what life demands of you. And in that sense, we became such opposites that it became painful. It became something I wanted to keep from her; I wanted to stay close to her.”

When you had an exciting moment or a great success, did you keep it to yourself?

"I often didn't want to share it with her because I didn't want to increase the distance between us. I wanted to stay close to her. When I was standing on those huge stages, I was afraid of her judgment. I was afraid to see myself through her eyes, I was afraid that I was that frivolous girl again. Very often we think that the people around us have judgments about us. We are often so afraid of those judgments that we fill them in for them without actually testing whether they are true. I did that with my sister; I constantly filled in her judgment of me, when in almost all cases that wasn't the case at all. She was very proud of me, she loved what I did, she showed it to her friends. But I had this inner conviction... I did that with my parents too, a lot. Instead of maybe asking them.

Your sister studied Nietzsche. At one point, you also started to delve into philosophy, and the subject was precisely the gaze of the other.

"I wrote my philosophy thesis on that, on Foucault and the panopticon. That's a prison model where the prisoners are in cells and someone could always be watching from the tower in the middle. Because of the way it's designed, you can never be sure whether you're being observed or not. Actually, that's how we live in society. As a young student, I already thought, 'I recognize myself in this.' When I was around twenty, I wrote in my diary that I always felt like eyes were watching me. I've always felt that strongly."

Any idea why that might be?

“Maybe it's because of my family background, where the bar is set so high. Divorced parents, moving countries, having dual nationality, a Jewish background. There are many reasons why I've felt like an outsider in life. That gives you an extra feeling of: I have to do well. And once that seed is planted, you develop it further.”

Wasn't that philosophy thesis a way to connect with your sister?

"Absolutely. I went to study philosophy, mainly because my sister was also studying philosophy. And I was just so preoccupied with 'I want to present the version of myself that will be approved'. So I went to the conservatory for my parents and studied musicology for all my ancestors. And then philosophy for my sister. I just tried to tick all the boxes: who do I have to do well for? I started doing all kinds of different styles: modern, classical, crossovers... Because, yes, everyone had to think it was cool. I developed myself so broadly just to make sure I kept as many people on board as possible."

I once spoke to someone who knew everything about winti, and in the winti belief system, there is a concept that you have to wash the gazes off yourself. If you have been looked at a lot, those gazes stick to you. You have to free yourself from the sticky gazes of others through rituals.

“Haha. Well, maybe I should do a good winti ritual.”

But your sister—I found that a very beautiful and moving part of your book—says at one point that she had considered taking her own life, but didn't do it for your sake. You also find a letter she had already written to leave behind. On the one hand, it was a confirmation of your deep bond, but it was also a very alarming moment.

“It was indeed partly a relief that she hadn't done it, but also a responsibility. That her mental state was in a way my responsibility, that I had to keep her head above water. I think I've always felt that way.”

It's an almost unbearable responsibility.

“That was pretty intense, yes.”

We talked earlier about your greatest fear coming true. This is also a great fear that ultimately came true. After your sister's death, you don't feel what you should feel. It's more complex, more layered.

"Yes, another taboo. So little is said about suicide and so little about how to deal with it as a survivor. There is very little guidance. All I could think was, 'Oh, I'm supposed to feel really bad now. Everyone thinks I feel really bad and that life is now very dark.' But that wasn't how I felt. I also felt relief, because for 37 years it had been a kind of threat that was also very difficult for her and for us in many moments. In German, you have the word *Freitod*, and I found that very meaningful. It says something different than suicide. There is also an element of freeing yourself, and I felt that too. I also felt a kind of guilt about that. “Am I allowed to feel that?” I also had a kind of freeze, I could hardly feel my emotions anymore. I tried to cry, but didn't know where to get it from. And I started thinking a lot, my head was racing. It was very confusing not to be experiencing the things that seemed to be expected from me after what had happened.”



Photo: Bram Petraeus

Again, “those others.” Remarkable: even at such a sad moment, when you should be the focus of everyone's attention and love, it's still about meeting expectations.

“Apparently, that runs very deep. Am I allowed to feel that liberation? And is that okay? Am I betraying her? Am I a very bad sister? Don't I have any feelings? What's wrong with me? Am I some kind of cold refrigerator? Those are the kinds of feelings I had.”

I think a lot of people feel that way.

"That's also because our society has no idea about grief. We don't talk about death. We pretend that death isn't allowed to exist, especially not in our lives. The only connotation we have with death is negative and bad and sad and dark and gloomy and black; you want to avoid it at all costs. But it's part of life and it also has many colors. We shouldn't avoid it. That's also why I dedicated the book to my sister.

"For me, after she took her own life, it was incredibly important not to just go on with my life as it was, but sadder. I had a really strong feeling: ‘No, there's a very big lesson to be learned here.’ Again, that systemic thing: I didn't see her despair, which led her to take her own life, as something individual. Western psychology has a very individualistic way of looking at people's problems: ‘What was her individual problem? Could we have helped her?’ But in my eyes, she was part of a system that can drive you to such despair. And that's what I wanted to look at.

"Also because at exactly the same time, I completely collapsed, couldn't sing anymore, and had to cancel everything. That made me feel: something bigger is being told to me here. Almost to honor her, I want her death not to be in vain. I want to break that open. I want to talk about it. What happens to two girls who are starting out in life, full of joy, full of energy... How can they reach the point where one becomes completely stuck, can no longer sing, has to cancel all her performances, and the other rejects life altogether? What is happening here? I wanted to look at the systemic nature of it."

You come from a family of Holocaust survivors. There is also a kind of pressure behind that. As if you almost have to make amends, as if you have to keep something alive. A tradition, perhaps also the Jewish tradition of always having to carve out a place for yourself. By being good at what you do. Pressure to perform. But you also mention other things: man-woman, for example, but also the whole performance society. There are many things to point to. You rightly say: it's systemic.

"I wanted to know: who took that away from us? The only problem is: there is no one person to point to. It's an endless sum. It starts with your parents. No, actually, it's their parents. No, it's the Holocaust. No, it's capitalism. No, it's Calvinism. No, it's Western society. It's the pressure to perform, the market mindset, the school system where we get a grade for everything. It's social media. It's... It's... It never really ends.

“We live in a society where we are constantly being told from all sides that we have to do everything right. And yes, I ended up in a kind of whirlpool of finger-pointing, until I finally had to admit: it's too much. But it is important to see that. Again: I can't solve this on my own, but it's about how we treat each other.”

Do you know what I found so enjoyable in your book? That at one point you join an amateur choir. You hope they won't find out you're a professional singer, you're just standing there with a few people singing *Strawberry Fields* behind a piano.

“That was very interesting because I was suddenly surrounded by a circle of people who were

having nothing but fun.”

Actually, that's a relief.

“Yes, I really went looking to rediscover that lightness and that fun and that pure connection with that creativity.”

As a counterpart to *Freitod*, you mention *Freileben*. That should also be possible.

“Exactly, because I thought: if *Freitod* exists, I also want to understand what *Freileben* could be. Because that's not how I feel, I thought right after my sister died.”

And have you figured that out now?

"Look, I wouldn't want to pretend it's some kind of Disney story: well, I've thrown it all off now and I'm an enlightened person. Absolutely not, because again, I live in this society. But it is true that I have really returned to that source. I have also rediscovered it enormously in my writing. I have enjoyed doing that so much. It was as if I was back in a candy store as a child: just fiddling around until it was just right. Not out of fear of failure, but out of healthy perfectionism.

“I found a lot of pleasure in that again. That's really the difference: that I now know very well where that source is and I protect it like a lion. If I feel that it's being eaten away at, I don't just let it happen anymore. I think I've built a kind of wall around that pleasure, within which I protect myself.”

