



# OVERCOMING SPEECH ANXIETY WITH...**MUSIC**

In the 2011 movie, *The King's Speech*, Colin Firth plays George VI, who, through no choice of his own, became the monarch of the United Kingdom when his brother abdicated the throne. It was 1939, and Great Britain had just declared war on Germany. The film centers on the relationship between the new king, a born stutterer, and his speech coach, played by Geoffrey Rush.

Part of King George's responsibility was to speak to his subjects live through a new device called the radio. Terrified at the need to connect with his subjects, he would have preferred to live in the shadows. However, in wartime England, silence was not an option. The King of the world's oldest monarchy needed to be seen—and more importantly, heard. The British people wanted to know that their king supported their efforts to fight in World War II and rid the world of the evil lurking across the English Channel. Fearing the embarrassment and shame of his debilitating stutter, King George felt defeated from the onset. He was painfully aware that if he didn't confront his fears, he would be crushed under the weight of his countrymen's expectations.

I see a lot of King George in many of my clients. While most don't have the same physical challenges to overcome as George VI did, they often employ a handful of missteps, in terms of voice and body language that weaken their stage presence. When asked to present something forcefully and compellingly, they feel inadequate and not up to task. They can't seem to shake off the nervous tension that erodes their confidence and inhibits their success.

When you watch the finale of the movie, you see King George in a studio about to broadcast his first major wartime speech on the radio. Nervous and looking as if he were heading toward his own execution, he faces the challenge of his life head on. Standing next to him is his speech coach, who helps to conduct this important solo of a speech presentation. Ultimately the King delivers the final speech far exceeding his own and others' expectations. But how?

## THE MUSICALITY OF SPEAKING

Megan Washington, one of Australia's premier singer/songwriters delivered an extremely compelling and moving TED talk that addressed this very concept: the musicality and the importance of pitch in speaking. In her bold talk – which earned an enthusiastic standing ovation from the audience – Megan begins speaking with an obvious speech impediment, making it difficult at times for her to complete a fluid thought.

For over eight minutes Megan addresses the difficulty her speech impediment has caused in her life and how she's learned to trick her brain to avoid major stutter moments by

changing words last minute and avoiding certain combinations such as, “st.” She also spoke to a form of therapy called, “smooth speech” where you essentially sing what you want to say – involving pitch and phrasing to deliver your message without a stutter. Which explains how the end of her speech is truly amazing and impressive: while playing the piano, Megan sings and there is absolutely no sign of her speech impediment.

This is the same idea present in *The King's Speech*; with the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh symphony playing in the background, we see the King's coach and protégé in action. The King spoke; the coach conducted. By varying the pitch and pace, word for word, the king delivers a masterful speech at a moment in time when both men had so much to gain or lose from his performance. Like Megan Washington, The King of England, a born stutterer, learned to exceed his own expectations in the face of adversity – by incorporating the fluidity of music in speech.

## PITCHING YOUR MESSAGE LIKE A PRO

These inspiring examples prove that anyone can choose to confront their fears and climb the ladder of success. Luckily, many of us don't have the challenge of serious speech impediments getting in the way of delivering our presentations. However, that doesn't mean this concept of pitch and musicality can help each of us deliver more compelling speeches.

A continual change of pitch and tempo eliminates monotony – makes it more interesting to listen to. It also provides a great deal of force to your message. Most actors will tell you that change of pace is one of the best tools an actor has. Study the great ones (Meryl Streep comes to mind) and listen closely to the way they speak. You can listen to them talk about any given topic and it will sound interesting. This change applies not only to words, but phrases, sentences, as well as entire sections of their speeches. The more you change the pace, pitch, and tempo, the more likely you'll be able to hammer home your key points. Change your pace often, in every combination possible, like an actor, and you will likely see impressive results.

So, no matter your unique speech impediment – whether linguistic or rooted solely in fear – remember you can overcome it. Try thinking of your next presentation in terms of music, full of phrasing, differing pitches, and deliver a story worth listening to. If The King of England and Megan Washington could do it, you can too.