

When jeopardy is a risk worth taking

How the Oscars can redefine our understanding of risk

by Stuart Barr, MBA Candidate 2016/17, Judge Business School



2017 Cambridge - McKinsey Risk Prize

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When Jeopardy is a Risk Worth Taking:

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“Everyone pre-records and then lip-synchs when performing at the Oscars. Everyone. Too risky otherwise...” said Michael Seligman, producer of the 85th Academy Awards. I retorted “We always perform live. Dame Shirley Bassey never lip-synchs performances: she lives and breathes live music. She won’t do it unless we perform live”.¹

Dame Shirley Bassey is one of the most indelible voices in British popular music (Broadway Music World, 2014), with her 37 studio albums making over 135m sales (BBC, 2017), making her the best-selling British female artiste of all time. As an indication of just how central she is to 20th Century British popular culture, she has the unique distinction of having originated more James Bond film title songs than any other artiste (*Goldfinger*, *Diamonds Are Forever* and *Moonraker*).

It was thus appropriate that the 2013 Academy Awards (the “Oscars”) should invite Bassey to perform “Goldfinger” at the climax of the James Bond 50th Anniversary sequence. Broadcast live to an audience of over 40m viewers (Patten, 2013), a performance at the Oscars comes with big reward, but also immense risk: a bad performance could dent a career, and tarnish the image of the Oscars themselves. It is thus understandable that the producer would wish to minimise risk by telling artistes and the orchestra to pre-record and lip-synch. However, Bassey is an old-school performer who requires the jeopardy of live performance to create her searing intensity. Who was the producer of the Oscars to tell someone who’d performed live thousands of times that his risk as a producer outweighed her need for jeopardy?

Academic literature treats risk almost exclusively as a negative concept, to be mitigated. This essay asserts that this one-sided orthodoxy leads to an incomplete picture of risk, and seeks to chart new territory by investigating its upside, through the eyes of performers requiring “jeopardy” to perform at their best; and the balance needing to be made with traditional risk-mitigation.

It takes as its central narrative the clash between jeopardy and risk at the Oscars. A battle of business risk against artistic need. The tough Hollywood mogul against the Diva from Tiger Bay, both in their seventh decade of showbusiness. Who would win?

¹ The author was Musical Director to Dame Shirley Bassey from 2009-2015, and conducted her 2013 Oscars performance. This essay is an ethnographic study of the risk culture at the Oscars, as seen through the eyes of the conductor.

The Oscars culture – and miming

The annual awards exist to honour the highest cinematic achievement in 24 categories, ranging from Best Picture through Best Actor/Actress through to technical categories such as Best Makeup and Hairstyling. Perfection is thus the essence of the Oscars. As such, it would be of no surprise that “perfection” during the ceremony itself would be expected. The very nature of cinema is to create the illusion of a heightened reality out of a series of cut-together pieces of acting, frequently re-voiced by the actors later: the magic of cinema. With the notable exception of *Les Misérables*, where the actors singing was recorded on set, Hollywood musicals are always overdubbed. In the golden age of Hollywood, blockbusters even employed “ghost singers” such as Marni Nixon to be the screen voice of Audrey Hepburn, Sophia Loren, Natalie Wood and even some of Marilyn Monroe (Nixon & Cole, 2006). The original cast recordings of *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story* even gave star credit to the actor, despite their voice never appearing on the album. Thus, embedded in the culture of Hollywood, technical perfection was more important than authenticity of process. Audiences were used to this, so why would a “live” performance at the Oscars be any different?



Figure 1 Dolby Theatre, Hollywood, Oscars Ceremony

The ceremony

The ceremony takes place in the Hollywood’s 3,400 seater Dolby Theatre with an audience made up of award nominees, and members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The 2013 awards were hosted by the actor Seth MacFarlane, who not only did the continuity, but also sang and performed in comic sketches. Each award sequence consists of a montage of clips from each nominated film, the announcement of the winner and their acceptance speech. Time is tightly controlled, and the hosts cut off speeches that go over-

time. There are also several sequences which pay tribute to the art of cinema in general. In 2013, as well as Bassey and the Bond 50th anniversary sequence, there were live [sic] performances from the *Les Misérables* cast, Adele (*Skyfall*), Barbra Streisand (*The Way We Were*), Jennifer Hudson (*Dreamgirls*) and Catherine Zeta Jones (*Chicago*). Apart from Bassey, all performances had some pre-recorded elements in them, or were fully lip-synched.

The orchestra

Whilst an orchestra is an important part of the Oscars show for both ceremonial music and accompanying performances, it is no longer in the Dolby theatre but in Capitol Studios: 1 mile away, and connected by audio and video links. Although the primary cause of this was down to the space limitations of the Dolby theatre, it also offers the advantage that performers can easier pre-record performances. If the orchestra were in the “pit”, it would be too noticeable for them to mime along to a recording. Alternatively, the miming singer could pre-record their vocals to be broadcast over the top of live accompaniment, but in this case the orchestra need to wear headphones with a click-track in their ears (a pre-recorded click in time with the singer’s performance).

The risk involved in having the orchestra in a separate location is both technical and artistic. It relies upon data links between the locations which have extremely low latency (time lag). In the case of a data link going down, there would be no music. Artistry is also affected because the musicians and performers lose the direct sense of each other. The relationship between conductor and singer is symbiotic: a supreme team of the singer following the conductor’s beats, but the conductor reading the singer’s body language to anticipate where the performance is going. Thus, having the orchestra in a separate location brings risk to this relationship.

The live broadcast

The show is broadcast live to an estimated 40 million viewers, with delayed broadcast internationally to many more. The technical considerations of a live broadcast are complex, because it involves delivering a live feed to many different broadcasters simultaneously, each of whom run their own adverts. Thus, there needs to be continuity material provided in the theatre at every advert that lasts exactly the right amount of time to make the junction with the end of the adverts. Rehearsal is thus essential to smooth operations.

Why would a performer want to perform live?

“What happens if she goes wrong?” said Seligman. I replied “Maybe it’s the jeopardy of possibly going wrong that makes the performance so exhilarating... It’s like walking a tightrope. Which is more exciting: 20 centimetres or 20 metres high?”

From Bassey's point of view, looking a fool on stage would be a major reputational disaster. This might be by forgetting words, or singing out of tune or time. Given the career risk that involves, why would a performer run that risk?

To answer this, it's necessary to define features of live musical performance that are at stake. I argue that the finest musical performances require the performer to be in a state of "flow". This term is taken from the psychology work of Nakamura and Csikszentmihályi (2001). Csikszentmihályi's definition of six prerequisites for the state of flow (1990) translate excellently to musical performance:

1. Intense and focused concentration on the present moment
2. Merging of action and awareness
3. A loss of reflective self-consciousness
4. A sense of personal control or agency over the situation or activity
5. A distortion of temporal experience, one's subjective experience of time is altered
6. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding

However, the missing link in the above is adrenaline. Buckley's work on the experience of extreme sports (e.g. 2012) proposes a state of "rush". I argue that this amalgamation of flow and adrenalin is a very appropriate description of how live performance is experienced by the musician. It is an elevated state. Buckley's description of it as being the "peak" experience in terms of Maslow's hierarchy is very apt. Crucially, he argues that extreme sports participants take part for the rush rather than the risk. I define this as loving jeopardy: the very quality that Bassey likes.

If the performer likes the rush, what about the audience's experience?

The first upside of live performance is that it adds an authentic exhilaration to the performance (Cleveland, 2016). Authenticity is important to audiences. They go to see human beings perform, not automata. There are two clear benefits: spontaneity, and adrenalin-fuelled emotional enhancement.

"Even if she sings live, we want you to pre-record the orchestra. We need you to do it at the same speed so that we know how long till the adverts" said producer Michael Seligman. "We can't," I said. "She controls the tempo and her pauses. I create the tempo by reading her performance. Sometimes she'll pause, sometimes we'll accelerate. Every time is different. That's why she's so compelling."

Spontaneity

Spontaneity in performance can take many forms. Improvisation in popular music ranges from entirely extemporised melodies in jazz, through melismatic embellishments in gospel, to the minutiae of phrasing timing common to singers across many genres. Bassey's source of spontaneity is the latter, with varying dramatic pauses built into songs, and long notes held for differing amounts of time. At the Oscars, she put an unexpected dramatic pause on "it's the kiss of death... for Mr Goldfinger", momentarily suspending the phrase longer than the author had ever experienced, requiring the orchestra to pause. Bose (2005) noted that adrenaline causes musicians to take unexpected risks, which accords with what

happened at the end of the performance. As the song built to its climax, we both spontaneously accelerated to increase the musical tension further, without ever having rehearsed it like that before.

Sometimes spontaneity can be derived from the audience. I have experienced several “showstopping” moments with Bassey: where she began an introduction, but the audience applauded so wildly that the performance could not continue until the ovation subsided. It is a strange moment of power transfer, where control of the performance momentarily transfers from performer to audience. The conductor responds by getting the musicians to either repeat a phrase or pause until the audience is ready for her to continue. In the case of the Oscars, the ovation at Bassey’s entrance required the introductory fanfare to be repeated until she could start singing.

None of this spontaneity would have been possible with lip-syncing or orchestral pre-recording.

Adrenaline-fuelled emotional enhancement

We have evolved to secrete adrenalin in times of danger, which enables peak performance using the “fight or flight syndrome” (Cannon, 1932). Performing in front of audiences stimulates the body’s production in the same way (Albulescu, 2009). As with risk studies, research into adrenaline and performance invariably investigates the negative side of it, hence the more experiential analysis below.

From a singer’s point of view, the most significant physiological effects of adrenaline are the raising of heart and breathing rates, and mechanisms that allow the body to use muscles more effectively. However, I argue that it is adrenaline’s emotional effects that have the most impact upon the audience. Albulescu (ibid) rightly suggests that it is one of the key ingredients that gives musicians the upper edge. Cleveland (2016) refers to performance in terms of a risk that adds an “authentic exhilaration”. Authentically expressing feelings is an important part of pop music (Dolfsma, 1999), particularly in a singer renowned for the emotional intensity of her performances. Heightened emotions matter because her songs are invariably about the drama of love, life, death, betrayal and possession.

McAllister (2012, p.6) frames this authenticity through the lens of vulnerability: an understandable quality for someone performing in front of thousands of people. Combining honest vulnerability and adrenaline creates great energy, “adding intensity and electricity to the music”. She rightly notes that it is the possibility of unplanned events, mistakes, or even memory slips that establishes a connection between the audience and vulnerable performer. The apparently paradoxical qualities of vulnerability and strength are a noted feature in Bassey’s performances (Burgess, 1998, p.1). Given that it is adrenaline that fuels these qualities, it is of no surprise that performing live would show her at her best. Goldstein (2006) describes adrenaline as intensifying emotional experiences and increasing anti-fatigue and energising effects. Being able to harness adrenaline could be one reason why Bassey is still performing in her 80’s.

Is there is risk in having too much adrenaline? To understand this, McAllister (2012) refers to adrenalin in music as creating a state of anticipation or activation (p.42). This equates to the scientific term “arousal”: a term necessary to examine the Yerkes-Dodson hypothesis (1908). Working with mice, they investigated the link between arousal and (task) performance, such that performances increases in line with arousal, but only up to a point. After this, performance decreases, creating an inverted U-shape, suggesting that

performance near the top of the arousal curve will be the apogee: a “moderate” level of arousal (p.54). This area of optimum adrenaline has been researched in sports science, but barely touched in music. McAllister (2012) suggests that three variables impact upon the curve: the personality of the performer, the complexity of the skill being performed, and the degree of cognitive vs motor components in the task. If their argument translates to music, performers therefore want adrenaline to perform at their best, but not too much of it.

The upside of live performance to the performer is thus immense. The gladiatorial challenge of the situation brings out the best in the performer, and Bassegy demonstrably rises to that challenge.

Why would a producer like to minimise risk?

A full risk analysis of the Academy Awards is outside the boundaries of this essay. However, below is an analysis of the risk elements most relevant to performance risk. Unlike a profit-making company, the most pertinent risk issue is loss of reputation. With the audience being invited Academy members only, there are no ticket sales at stake. The operating income is largely derived through selling the television rights. In turn, this is funded by advertising. Any reputational loss would thus not impact immediately, but would devalue future television rights. If it draws fewer audience, the less advertisers will pay for advert slots, and the less the Oscars can charge for the rights.

With reputation being the key risk challenge, anything that detracts from the most spectacular Hollywood show in existence would be a risk factor. Factors might include the:

- calibre of live performances
- calibre of the host’s performances
- entertaining nature of the script
- overall slickness of the show
- visual design

We are concerned here only with the risk from the singer’s performance. Thus, we can identify the following risks (in descending order of magnitude):

1. Risk of catastrophic loss of content

With the orchestra being in one mile away in Capitol Studios, a key concern is the data link between the venues: thus, the pathway is duplicated for backup purposes. Other events could also break the transmission. Whilst a power outage could be mitigated by backup power supply, the complexities of the sound equipment set-up in the studio means that it is not possible to duplicate the microphones and mixing desk. Should this desk fail, then there would be no quick replacement solution. A further risk is that data link between studio and theatre could go down. To mitigate this risk, the data pathway is duplicated to provide redundancy. Had either of these catastrophic failures happened, then Bassegy would have potentially been marooned on stage and the show stopped, which would have made front page news the next day for all the wrong reasons.

2. Risk of performer error

If a performer had gone wrong/forgotten their words, then the reputation of both performer and the Oscars would have been tarnished. To prevent this, “autocue” is provided on various large tv screens in the performer’s eyeline. However, the success of the system relies upon human accuracy of following the song to scroll the text at the right rate, and the performer being able to read the words at a distance.

3. Risk of poor performance

A singer can turn in a poor performance because they sing out of tune. This is normally caused because the singer cannot hear themselves or the orchestra sufficiently. Thus, the main defence against this is sufficient technical rehearsal time to get the “foldback” balance right: either through “in ear” radio monitors, or speakers on the stage. However, this still relies upon the sound engineer hitting the right preset for the song: an error that afflicted Bassey’s performance at the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Concert in 2012.

For all the above reasons, the producer’s ultimate risk minimisation strategy would be to pre-record and lip-synch all performances, with duplicated playback systems to prevent against equipment failure.

Combining risk and jeopardy

Because the Oscars aims for the best possible show, it must allow artistes everything they need to create their best possible performances. Therefore, the producer must understand that to maximise the artistic calibre of the Oscars, artistes such as Bassey need to take risks. As such, the best possible outcome for all parties would be a bilateral framework that measured the upside and downsides of risk. Such a framework could use the standard risk metrics of impact and likelihood, but use negative and positive figures for the two sides.

The denouement

In our central narrative, who won the battle? After lengthy discussions that weighed up the upside and downside risks, we persuaded the producer to allow us to perform live. The day after the performance, the headline in the Los Angeles Times ran “Shirley Bassey save the Oscars” (Martens, 2013).

The author invites you to judge for yourself on the merits of the live performance: <https://vimeo.com/60787311>

Application to other fields

Having identified an absence of study into the upsides of risk in live performance, more research clearly needs to be carried out in this field. Potential applications include other adrenaline-fuelled areas: extreme sports and financial trading. Other areas in need of research also include professions where people have deliberately chosen professions that involve adrenaline-fuelled decision making such as the military and emergency medicine.

Hollywood could thus, unintentionally, open up a new area of study in risk management.

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Note: All uncited quotes are telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings with the producer that took place in February 2013.

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