

Singing for a Lifetime

Today, I'm going to talk about three key components to enjoying optimal vocal health as we age: 1) maintaining a healthy voice and body; 2) cultivating a healthy mind and outlook; and 3) tools to maintain both, whatever your chronological age.

Some sobering facts:

Hormonal changes of the endocrine system can affect fluid levels in tissues below the larynx. Extra fluid can cause the vocal folds to change in shape and mass -- causing effortful and less efficient phonation. Hormonal changes can also impact change in vocal pitch: lower for women, higher for men. Loss of muscle tone in the vocal muscles -- both intrinsic (5 sets inside the larynx that connect cartilages) and extrinsic (neck, swallowing muscles outside the larynx) -- impacts the efficiency of phonation.

Low thyroid function can cause hoarseness, vocal fatigue, muffled quality, loss of range, a lump in the throat.

Reduction in respiratory function can be due to thorax shrinkage, a rigid, stiff rib cage, weakness of thorax/rib musculature; loss of lung elasticity. Did you know that starting at 30, 5% of vital lung capacity is lost per decade?

Also, as early as age 30, laryngeal function diminishes due to calcification, then ossification of once flexible thyroid, cricoid, and arytenoid cartilages. Membranes surrounding the folds atrophy; others grow thicker and more swollen. Secretions of the mucous membranes decrease.

Vocal fatigue is often caused by inappropriate types of sound-making and/or the duration of sound-making.

While we have no control over our chronological age, we CAN maintain and improve our psychological age with a positive outlook and positive psycho-emotional health; we CAN improve our biological age with proper nutrition, exercise, and R&R&R: Rest, Relaxation and Recreation.

Some Words of Wisdom

Take care of your bodies. For starters, monitor what, how much, and when you eat. Minimize salt and sugar intake. Alcohol, caffeine, and smoking are deterrents to healthy vocal function. Late-night eating and drinking can cause digestive tracts to release gastric hydrochloric acid into the esophagus and laryngeal areas causing acid reflux or GERD-Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease.

Regular physical exercise enhances blood and oxygen flow throughout the body. Aerobic exercise, in particular, enhances both to the brain. Regular water intake maintains healthy vocal fold lubrication. Try to maintain a 40-50% level of humidity in your homes and work spaces. Wash hands often, by now surely a habit for all of us.

Find ways to reduce tension and stress in your lives and in your bodies, i.e., meditation, yoga, Tai-Chi, reading, walking, restorative quiet time, replenishing activities (R&R&R).

Monitor your speaking voices by speaking in a comfortable pitch range and at comfortable volumes. Avoid environments with overpowering ambient noise.

Sing in an appropriate range and monitor duration and vocal stamina.

Recognize your own vocal parameters. Sing/speak in moderation. Listen to your voice, outwardly and inwardly. Vocal endurance varies considerably between individuals. The more one uses one's voice, the more wisely and economically it must be used.

Take some voice lessons, if possible. It's never too late. If you are having vocal difficulties, seek professional help, i.e., voice teacher/technician, ENT, Speech Pathologist, Otolaryngologist. Professional training and intervention can inform and help us manage the effects of aging on the voice.

Warm up your voice and activate singer's breathing before strenuous singing. This focuses the brain, engages the muscles with which we produce sound, enhances blood flow to the folds, and maintains consistent, efficient vocal fold function. Rest the voice after strenuous singing (NO talking, e.g.). Singing is athletic. Regular practice produces positive results.

Set some goals!

Vocal sound aims:

- ❖ Freely and consistently produced sound
- ❖ Pleasant to listen to
- ❖ Present enough to be heard easily
- ❖ Resonant
- ❖ Energy flows smoothly from note to note
- ❖ Vibrant, dynamic, and alive
- ❖ Flexibly expressive

Singer's alignment and breath aims:

- ❖ Maintain good posture by keeping evenly distributed weight centered over the arches of both feet, knees loose, gentle torso tuck under while elongating the spine, head centered on spine
- ❖ Suspend rib cage; keep the back of the neck long - 'book on the head'
- ❖ Breathe in through the mouth as if beginning a yawn
- ❖ Feel the body expand around the middle
- ❖ Suspend the breath just as torso is comfortably full of air
- ❖ Start the sound by just thinking to do so, w/o conscious physical effort
- ❖ Maintain the expansion around the middle for as long as the sound lasts

Some Tools: Here's How

Singer's Posture:

Using a mirror, stand with feet slightly apart, underneath hips or with one slightly ahead of the other, evenly distribute your weight centered over the arches of the feet, knees loose, lower torso tucked under (pelvis tilted forward), spine elongated, sternum comfortably elevated, shoulders open and down, head suspended over/on the spine, back of the neck long, eyes at eye level.

Breathing exercises:

1. In singer's posture, place right hand over waist, spreading fingers so that they cover the belly button and the lower abdominal area, with thumb in upper abdominal area. Take air in through mouth with nose open. Consider a 'surprise' breath without the noisy gasp. This lowers the larynx, opens the mouth and activates your abdominals. Keeping your shoulders relaxed and down and upper chest 'quiet' (like a museum bust), breathe into your hand, expanding the belly button outward, opening the ribcage and expanding upper and lower abdominals outwardly. Then hiss out slowly and steadily, maintaining the open ribcage inhalation posture, while slowly contracting lower abdominals inwardly. Try using the consonants [f], [z] in the same way.
2. Pant like a dog: large dog, medium-sized dog, small dog. Work for energized lateral pulses in (with exhales) and out (with inhales) at/from the center of the body.

Did I say **use a mirror** when practicing? Shallow breathing is clavicular: a high, up/down, vertical process. Singer's breathing is a lower, more lateral process. Rib cage expands three ways: up and down; front to back; side to side.

Six areas of relaxation to exercise and monitor:

1. **Facial muscles.** Relaxed facial muscles allow for natural expression and ease of lips and jaw for articulation of consonants and vowels.

Give the face a facial massage starting at the hairline, working fingers down along the hairline, over the temples, jaw hinge and chin. Spend a moment on the brow. Let the face remain slack.

2. **Tongue.** Stretching the tongue releases it from grabbing and tensing; a forward, down, and at rest tongue allows for clarity in vowels and an open space in the rear of the pharynx (throat). In voice use, curling, pointing, retracting, narrowing and bunching of the tongue are counter-productive.

Extend the tongue firmly outside the mouth ... hold. Release the hold on the tongue, letting it hang out of the mouth. Then let it slowly slink back inside. Repeat. Take your forefingers and make a point or use your thumbs. Place them just behind the chin bone into the soft tissue area and massage up and down.

3. **Swallowing muscles.** Relaxation of these muscles allows the larynx to remain suspended; enhances resonance in mouth and pharynx; enables smooth transitions between registers and into higher range; and allows ease of consonant articulation.

Using fingers and/or thumbs of both hands, massage/knead the tissues just inside the jaw bone line to release tension in the tongue and the muscles that connect the tongue to the jaw.

4. **Muscles of the Jaw/Mandible.** Freedom of jaw movement allows it to drop with gravity; creates space in mouth and pharynx for resonance; creates more space for transition into higher range; allows ease of inhalation and onset (initial 'attack'); provides flexibility for articulation; and helps maintain a natural, low laryngeal position in the throat.

Take hold of the jaw at the chin area with thumbs and forefingers of both hands. Gently surrender the jaw to your hands. Let hands move the jaw up and down as freely as possible. No need to open the jaw beyond the hinge. Be patient and persevere. As it becomes freer, vary the pace.

5. **Larynx.** On either side of the larynx are the 'strap' muscles. Free coordination of these muscles allows the larynx to remain stabilized in its natural low position without rigidity, which, in turn, allows the vocal folds to oscillate more freely, encouraging natural vibrato and overtones.

With both hands on either side of the larynx, gently move it from side to side. If there is any 'clicking', keep moving it gently side to side to release it. This 'clicking' is cartilage that is inflexible and is holding. Ideally, singers want a suspended larynx, free of tension.

6. **Head/Neck.** Tension in neck muscles can indicate lack of breath support, and tightens and closes the throat, preventing resonance. Jutting chin forward pulls head out of alignment; prevents dropping of the jaw; narrows the pharynx and vocal tract; causes effortful singing; and limits range and transitions between registers.

Starting with the head forward on the chest, bob it gently and slowly front and back with the mouth slack and open as you gently bob backwards imitating a 'bobbin' doll. This operates the Atlanto-Occipital (AO) joint, where the C1 vertebra fits into the spine and where the head balances on the spine. Alternate with stretching neck side to side (ear toward shoulder) to release any tension in the strap muscles. Do these several times.

Work to maintain all areas of relaxation whenever you use your voice!
KYHB: Keep Your Hands Busy

Now you are ready to vocalize!

Some Vocalizing Tips

- Sighing, humming, lip trills, rolled [r], 'raspberries', [ng], sirens, are excellent sounds that begin to coordinate sound-making with air flow. Stay within a comfortable range and at a comfortable volume while making these sounds.
- Start with simple vocalise patterns moving to more challenging ones as you vocalize. Start in middle-to-low range, working out in either direction from there. 'Conversational *mezzo-forte*' is the recommended volume. About 10-15 minutes is usually sufficient. Vary vowels; vary dynamics, vary the exercises. Check all areas of relaxation constantly. Keep Your Hands Busy: KYHB.
- Keep tongue loose and forward in the mouth, up against the bottom teeth. Moving higher in range, open the mouth by releasing the jaw downward. In addition, find space inside the mouth by cultivating a beginning 'yawn' position which raises the soft palate and lowers the back of the tongue. Avoid spreading lips horizontally or 'smiling' with the mouth. Consider an oval shape as upper range is reached. Strive for a balanced mix of brightness and richness.
- Stand and use a mirror (a full body mirror provides very helpful information), engaging your Singer's Posture when practicing for optimum results. Did I say: *check all areas of relaxation throughout vocalizing. KYHB. Observe your posture; engage your singer's breath.*

And now, the vocalises . . .

1. Mee, may, mah, mo, mu. One pitch, one breath. Work for continuity of sound, steady air flow, smooth transitions from vowel to vowel with a vibrant, but not pressed, [m] to connect them. Work slowly, aiming to use the entire supply of air intake. Move upwards and/or downwards in pitch by ½ steps. Stay in middle range. (Are your facial muscles and lips relaxed? Tongue down and free?)

2. Moo-ee, oo-ee, oo-ee, oo-ee, oo-ee. 5,4,3,2,1. Middle range. One breath. Sing both vowels on each note, working for continuity of sound, connected vocal line (*legato*) and minimal shift in the lips from [oo] to [ee]. Move up and down in pitch by ½ steps. (Is your neck free of tension? Can you bob your head?)

3. Vi-o-la 1,3,5,4,3,2,1. One breath. Sing [vee] on 1,3, [o] on 5,4,3,2 and [la] on 1. Work for consistency of tone, keeping the brightness of the [vee] in both the [o] and [a] vowels. Use the tongue, only (not the jaw) for the [l]. Shape/nuance the phrase. Work up in range by ½ steps into the upper voice. Increase energy with the singing of higher pitches. (Are your swallowing muscles free of tension?)

4. Zee, ay, ah, oh, oo. 1,3,5,8,7,5,4,2,1. One breath. Each vowel is sung on two consecutive pitches, with the [oo] on the final pitch in the pattern. Start comfortably low in the voice and work upward into the upper and high voice. Work for consistency of tone, smooth vowel transitions, *legato* line, forward-moving momentum, and more space for top-most sounds. Remember to release the jaw and create an inner yawn for more space as you move into higher voice. You can use a [v] or a rolled [r] instead of [z]. (Can your hands open/close your jaw easily, without resistance?)

5. Mee/oh or mee/ah. 5,4,3,2,1----9----1. [Mee] for 5,4,3,2,1; [oh], or [ah] for 1-9-1. One breath. Work for a brisk, rhythmic tempo, with a slight pulse on the first of every four (4) notes. Aim for clarity, flexibility, agility, without aspirating each pitch (inserting 'h'); rather, aim for legato, pulsed phrasing, direction of line. Start comfortably mid-range, and work downwards then upwards to comfortable highest pitches in the voice. (Can you gently move your larynx slightly side to side?)

6. Triplet exercise, all vowels. 1,3,5,8,10,12,11,9,7,5,4,2,1. One breath, legato, on any vowel beginning each time with a voiced consonant: vary the vowels each time. Start comfortably low in the range and work to the top and then back down. Move at a good pace, working for clarity, energized, nuanced phrasing, *legato*. For a breath challenge, repeat the pattern, all on one breath, working to keep your rib cage open through to the end of the repeated pattern. KYHB!

7. *Staccato*. All vowels. 1,3,5,8,5,3,1. Triplet feel. Start comfortably mid-range and move downwards/upwards to lower/upper range. Begin slowly until the pattern is established, then gain some speed. Strive for accuracy and a resonant 'ping' in each *staccato* note. Actively engage your breath mechanism on each and every sung pitch. (Can your ribcage remain open throughout? Can your hand over your belly button feel your inward lateral pulse contractions with each pitch?)

Any vocalises you choose to exercise and warm up your sound, your breath, and your sound-breath coordination are better than none at all. Review the vocalizing tips and apply them to your all your vocal warm up routines.

If you must sit, sit forward and tall! Keep both feet on the floor, a tucked under pelvis, a lifted upper torso, an elongated spine, relaxed, open shoulders, a centered head with the back of your neck long. When holding a score, hold it up at a level that allows Singer's Posture -- from the tail bone up, if seated -- and allows visual contact with your conductor by raising your eyes, only.

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**Recommended; accessibly written for all voice users

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