

Voice Training

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THE LARYNX AND THROAT TENSION

In vocal pedagogy terms, an “open throat” means that the throat is free from constriction and tension. The “closed throat” is one which shows constriction and tension. Tension in the throat (whether you notice it or not) affects your voice by constricting the pharynx, raising the larynx, and tightening the sides of the throat. All of these factors result in a less than optimal sound.

To achieve an open throat, think relaxation! An effort to hold the throat open or to lift or drop anything tenses the mechanism, resulting in poor tone. If you breathe in naturally through your mouth, the throat cavity relaxes and opens, and the larynx lowers. Ideally, the singer should maintain this position of the larynx during vocalization. If the larynx raises from the position it assumed during relaxed inhalation, you can be sure there is throat tension.

When the larynx is too high the resulting sound is shrill, strident, and lacking the depth of color of the singer’s naturally produced tone. A high larynx is caused by tension in the neck muscles, the back of the tongue, and in the jaw. To determine whether or not your larynx is raising during phonation, do the following:

Using good posture, inhale in a relaxed manner, allowing the tummy to expand. Don’t gasp or force the

inhalation. Your larynx will lower slightly. Place your thumb and forefinger on the larynx. Sing an “ee” vowel on the G above middle C (female) or the G below middle C (male). If the larynx lifts as you begin to sing, this is an indication of throat and/or tongue tension.

Place 2 fingers on your larynx. Sing an octave upward from middle C. If your larynx rises on the high note, you are using throat and/or tongue tension to reach the note.

Don’t make the mistake of pushing the larynx down too low in an effort to compensate for a high larynx! When the larynx is too low, the sound will be too dark, hooty, muffled, swallowed, guttural, and heavy. The words will be hard to understand. Misguided opera singers sometimes employ this technique in an effort to sound more mature, louder, or more dramatic, resulting in “really bad opera” (and more throat tension). Just maintain the relaxed, dropped position the larynx assumes during relaxed, low, inhalation with the mouth open.

BRIDGES

Most singers experience the frustration of “voice breaks” or cracks in the vocal production, particularly when singing pop, gospel and musi-

cal theater sounds. Some singers try to compensate by forcing the voice upward from the chest register, which results in a “shouting” tone which spreads as the singer tries to sing higher, and which eventually cracks and breaks (often at the most embarrassing moments!). Other singers are taught (often by choral directors) to sing only in the “head voice” and that the chest voice is damaging. Both of these approaches are incorrect!

Correct vocal production is a balancing of the registers, employing both the chest voice (where appropriate), and the head voice, to create a “mix” which is healthy and can be used in any style of singing including Gospel, R&B, Theater, Rock, or Pop, and yes, even Opera.

The ideal is to have the larynx relaxed and stable (not pulling up, or overly low), and to maintain the adduction (closure) of the vocal cords throughout the entire range with no interference from the swallowing muscles of the throat. To achieve this ideal coordination, it is essential to study with a teacher who understands the “bridges” of the voice.

A bridge can be described as a passage from one area of the voice to another. (The Italian word is “passaggio”). Singers often experience a “break” in the voice when attempting to sing from a low area of the voice to a higher area. Conversely, sopranos who sing exclusively in head voice often become breathy and weak as they descend due to lack of “chest” in the voice. I like to use the analogy of shifting

gears in an automobile. You must shift into a lower gear when you go slowly, and smoothly transition into higher gear when you want to go faster. You wouldn't want to drive your car 65mph in first gear! Think how damaging that would be. In the voice, we learn to "shift" smoothly as we ascend through the bridges, from a more predominantly chest position to a mix of head and chest which becomes more predominantly head, and finally, head voice and super-head (really, really high).

The first bridge (shift in resonance) is the one where beltters most often tend to create tension (usually without being aware of it) in the swallowing muscles which surround the larynx, in a misguided effort to make the vocal cords stretch (or hyper-extend) to reach the desired pitch. Lots and lots of rock singers do this, and even get away with it for awhile....but be aware that if you are hoarse after a night of singing, you are doing something wrong! A voice that is properly balanced has stamina and resilience, and hoarseness is an indication that you are blasting the cords with too much air and hyper-extending the cords instead of mixing properly. As we sing higher in our range, we should begin to feel that there is a "split"- that the voice begins to shift behind the soft palate. If we don't do this correctly, the larynx will pull up and the vowel will spread and "splat".

VOCAL CORD ADDUCTION

The two fundamental elements which must be in place are the stabilized, relaxed larynx and vocal cords that "adduct", or come together. A breathy voice can indicate that the cords are not adducting properly. When your voice "breaks" or cracks,

what has happened is that the vocal cords have been blown apart due to lack of balance between air pressure and vocal cord resistance. Too many singers mistake volume for good singing. On the other hand, you need enough energy and sound to create a vibrant tone- the secret again is balance. You should never feel tension in your throat, neck, or tongue.

CHOICES, CHOICES.....

Traditional Conservatory and University training will generally develop only the head voice. Dire warnings abound regarding any use of the "vulgar" chest voice sound. On the other hand, singers who want a rock, gospel, or pop career usually try to figure it all out by themselves, and end up pushing chest voice as long as they can, and end up with nodules (growths on the vocal cord) which require surgery.

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to train yourself correctly! Due to the physics of the acoustical nature of our ears, we don't hear ourselves inside our heads as we really sound. Anyone who is even considering the possibility of a career in music should do as the professionals do- they study voice throughout their careers. Even when they are successful, they rely on the professional ears of a vocal teacher to keep them healthy vocally.

A teacher's main responsibility is to create a vocal environment where the singer can vocalize freely throughout the range with no strain, and no cracks or breaks, with a clear and powerful sound which can be applied to any style. Exercises are used which develop the strength of the inner muscles of the larynx so that the outer swallowing muscles are not tightened.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Musicianship, diction, style development and application naturally follow when the voice is balanced. Once your voice works, we apply your wonderful technique to any style you want to sing in, from classical to blues to gospel! Every style of singing has its own unique requirements. You will learn to sing "licks" and "runs" if you sing R & B, and you will learn languages, interpretation, and correct diction if your goal is Opera. You should develop your songwriting skills if you are a singer who wants a record deal. Very few artists are signed any more unless they can write songs too.

STAGE FRIGHT

Stage fright is a by-product of insecurity about whether or not your voice will work. Vocal technique develops confidence. The singer must learn to be totally connected to the text, or the meaning of the words he is singing. The goal of vocal study is to allow you to forget about your voice, so you can sing with emotion!

So, if your goal is to sing with freedom, power and ease throughout a large vocal range, with awesome vocal chops, sign up with Sing Like a Star! for your introductory session today!