

Workshop on Teaching the Aging Voice
For the 55th NATS National Conference
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9 am Saturday, June 3, 2018

If you want to avoid the weaker, scratchier, old-person speaking voice, sing regularly. Singing, just like exercise, becomes much more important over time. It will help maintain and build stronger breath and more warmth and energy in your speaking voice.

Singing, alone and in choirs, has wide-reaching health benefits for everyone, including release of oxytocin and serotonin, increased production of immunoglobulin to fight infections, less need of pain medications, improved pulmonary function, fewer symptoms of depression, and a brighter outlook on life. These benefits are even more important from the sixth decade onward. At the same time, the advancing decades bring physical and vocal challenges for all voice professionals.

With the right care, and knowing what to expect down the road, you can keep your voice as long as you wish and help others extend their vocal range and abilities.

What You Are Dealing With:

Ossification of the laryngeal cartilages:

- Hyoid begins to ossify at the age of 2
- Cricoid and thyroid begin to ossify at 20
- Arytenoid cartilages begin to ossify in the 30s
- Except for cuneiform and corniculate cartilages on the thyroid cartilage, the laryngeal skeleton ossifies by 65 in both men and women.

This ossification strengthens the voice in the thirties and forties, but can become a challenge as those tiny joints continue to harden. Ossification effects flexibility and range.

The aging process also causes changes in the laryngeal cartilages with the breakdown of collagen fibers, and changes in the cricoarytenoid joint surface, along with changes in the muscles of the inner parts of the larynx, the covering of the vocal folds, and the way the nerves tell the larynx what to do.

Menopause and Pharmaceuticals:

In 1999, Jean Abitbol, MD and his wife, Béatrice, were the first to discover receptors for estrogen on the vocal folds, and how the cells are almost identical to those in the cervix.

- Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is controversial, and effects a woman's top range.
- Only take androgens for "energy" if you are quite fond of a low, rough sound. The change is irreversible.
- Look closely at the side-effects for all your medications.
- Diabetes oral medications are tricky, as are fluctuating blood sugars.

Gravelly sound (intermittent dysphonia) in that mine-field for women, the lower passaggio:

- Thickening of the cover of the vocal folds can cause huskiness in the middle voice.
- Dryness due to atrophy of the mucus glands under and near the vocal folds.

Some causes of wobble:

- Changes in the neuromuscular reactivity, both in the larynx and throughout the body.
- Alterations in glottal closure, from laryngeal tension, and/or stopping or pushing breath.
- Compensatory tension in the tongue, jaw and neck.

Be consistent with practice, listen to your body and don't push air or hope your throat can support the tone. The exercise of regular singing helps keep a wobble at bay.

What Can Be Done?

Balancing and breathing:

Resting Expiratory Level, or REL.

- The body prefers the lungs to be 40% full, and returns to the REL automatically.
- When you take a big breath, the body will expel most of it as fast as possible.
- The trick is not using up air too fast, so the ribs respond to the airflow without collapsing, and making sure the breath is still flowing during the second half of each phrase.

Look to the back hinge of the jaw. It should be loose, and float like a gondola on the water.

- Tension in the jaw or a 'heavy' jaw will hinder your ability to breathe.
- Tension in the jaw, tongue, back of the neck, and shoulders stop the free flow of air and therefore your voice, and can cause "gravel".

Facial massage, awareness, and some vocal exercises:

Releasing tension and becoming aware of breath are more important than any one vocal exercise. You are countering old, ingrained habits and compensating mechanisms that the body will no longer tolerate. Each singer's needs will be individual. These are a few general exercises, and we will cover more as time allows:

- “Turtle” breath for the strap muscles.
- Breathe in to a count of 4, out to a count of 8, feeling the breath move the ribs.
- Siren on an “hng” as in ‘sing’ or ‘hung’, increasing the range of the circles.
- Creaking, both up and down.
- Bowling for vowels, and Basketball vowels to work on energized ‘call’.
- Practice the difference between “call” and “shout” (coo-coo / you-hoo / who-ee / ogni / ogno).
- Om (ah-oh-ooo-mmmm) feeling the vibration in different parts of your head and body, especially buzzing between the ears and in the upper skull (pituitary area).
- Feel the buzz from ‘hng’ in your upper skull, slide to an /i/ (ee) and /a/ (ah)

Semi-occluded vocal tract exercises (SOVT)

- Lip buzzes, tongue trills, closed /u/, fricatives, ng, m,n,v, z
- When the mouth is partially closed, back pressure reflects at the lips to help the folds vibrate with more ease and less muscular effort.
- Singing through a straw into water shows you what your airflow is doing.