

“Healthy Vocal Techniques for a Lifetime of Singing”

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This session will provide healthy vocal strategies for older singers. As we age vocally, we need to be reminded of good vocal technique. This workshop will include tips and suggestions for working with older singers in a variety of settings and improving tone production, breathe support and inner hearing.

As the voice ages it becomes increasingly more important to use proper vocal technique to prevent the deterioration of the vocal mechanism. There is only so much we can do to delay the aging process but with attention to vocal care, proper posture and breathing technique, we can certainly maintain a healthy singing voice for a much longer time period. Church and Community Choirs are a great place for our older singers to continue to participate musically in a meaningful way, but often we as directors of these groups feel that we don't have the right to “correct” the singing technique of those singing in these groups because they are there for fun or to praise God in worship. I'm here to tell you that not only should you do this, but it is imperative you do so if you want to maintain a level of performance that will keep your program thriving and growing. No one wants to sing in an ensemble that sounds “old” or “wobbly”, especially younger singers who are the life blood of your organization. Today's workshop will give you some ideas to use in your ensembles that may be helpful for you in addressing these issues.

Vocal Care

Good speaking voice characteristics

- *Well-modulated- placed correctly, forward in the head (mee mee 1, mee mee 2, etc)*
- *Pitched at the correct pitch level for your voice type*
- *Proper breath support – not speaking on residual air*
- *Without tension to the voice – tight jaw, retracted tongue, glottal strokes, and vocal fry, etc, all are bad signs*
- *Voice should have a sense of melody – don't let voice drop at the end of every sentence, keep words in a line*

Finding the optimal speaking voice range

- *Find your lowest singing pitch and then sing up the scale – do, re, mi, fa, sol, la; your optimal pitch level for speaking is somewhere between **sol and la**.*

Physical warm up of the body and the voice before speaking

- *Important to do relaxation exercises in the morning to prepare the voice for the day*
- *Do exercises for shoulders, neck, jaw, throat and tongue*

Shoulder tension- *roll shoulders forward and then backwards. You can also sit in a chair and grab the outside edge of the chair and lean the opposite way for a good stretch of the shoulders and traps.*

Neck Tension- *bring your right ear toward the right shoulder and gently place the right hand on the left side of the face for a moment. Repeat on the other side. Then bring the head forward, resting it on the collarbone and rest the hand on the back of the head. Also, lean head back gently and hold for a few seconds. Pull chin up to stretch the muscles of the front of the throat. Gently return head back to upright position.*

Face Tension – *make “extreme faces” widening the mouth and eyes as far as possible, then scrunch the muscles of the face together as small as possible.*

Jaw Tension – *massage the jaw hinge daily to release a tight jaw. Never chew gum!*

Tension in the front of the neck and throat – *Massage the muscles of the neck, under the chin, and the jaw daily.*

Tongue Tension – *do relaxation exercises for the tongue daily.*

Physical warm down of the body and the voice throughout the day

- *During the day do exercises to relieve tension in the voice – yawns, throat stretches, tongue and throat exercises, etc.*

Posture and Breathing

- **Posture rules**
 - Weight on the balls of the feet;*
 - Knees slightly bent;*
 - Buttocks pulled in and under;*
 - Torso lifted out of hip sockets;*
 - Abdomen pulled in and up;*
 - Chest held high;*
 - Shoulders back, down, and relaxed;*
 - Head level;*
 - Jaw relaxed.*

- **Basics of Diaphragmatic breathing** - 4 types of breathing
 - 1) Clavicular – from the shoulders,
 - 2) Costal – from the ribs,
 - 3) Diaphragm – from the diaphragm,
 - 4) Diacostal – combines expansion of ribs and diaphragm, this is best.
- **Breathing exercises**
 - Start with exercises that focus the air and then work to open vowels.
 - Do hisses, z's, ah's, panting like a dog, and timed breathing exercises

Warm Ups

- **Use warm ups that involve the body**
 - Ex. – “whee –oh”, using hands like bouncing a ball back and forth
 - Ex. – “I love to sing” arpeggio pattern on (sol, high do, sol, mi, do) either using a plie or bringing hands forward and one leg up as you go up to the high note
 - Ex. – Do exercises that work the coordination of the lips and tongues, do tongue twisters such as “Super Duper Double Bubble Gum” on a 5 – note scale pattern.
 - Ex. – Do rhythmically challenging exercises, including those with syncopation. Older singers didn't grow up with music that was very syncopated and generally struggle with the feel of jazz or pop music
- **Use Semi-Occluded exercises to stretch and unpress the vocal folds**

Dr. Ingo Titze, a world renowned vocal scientist, advocates vocalizing through a small straw to soothe and heal tired or swollen vocal folds. Dr. Titze recommends straw phonation as an exercise for people with tired speaking voices, to help the voice recover; it works for tired singing voices as well.

He advocates doing slides and even vocalizing songs through the straw, which must be small enough to provide resistance.

The principle is to generate supraglottic (above the glottis) pressure so that the vocal folds can stretch and un-press. This reduces the load at the level of the larynx and can help to free up the muscles so the singer gets used to using less vocal fold mass during phonation.

The increased backpressure decreases subglottic (under the glottis) pressure during phonation, allowing the vocal folds to achieve maximum stretch more easily. It also encourages a low laryngeal position, which allows the thyroid cartilage tilt necessary to stretch and elongate the vocal folds, eliminating flips and voice breaks.

The following exercises reduce air flow through the vocal folds and provide a soothing and relaxing element to vocalization by un-pressing and stretching the folds.

Lip Rolls – are made by blowing air across the lips as they are loosely vibrating or bubbling. Using your fingers on either sides of the lips can help to stabilize the vibrating lips. If this is difficult for some, a “raspberry” made by laying the tongue on the lower lip, closing the lips around the tongue, and blowing air usually works for just about anyone.

Tongue Trills – are the sound of a rolled “r”, and are made by flowing the air across a loose tongue tip.

Voiced Fricative Consonants – include TH as in the word “the”, V as in the word “vibrant”, the softer Z as in the word “azure”, and Z as in the word “zebra”. These consonants tend to reduce air and maintain a steady air flow.

Straw Phonation – using a small stirring straw, insert the straw about a half-inch into the mouth. Close the lips completely and firmly around the straw. Using an “UH” feeling in the throat, glide from very low to as high as you can comfortably go without breaking into falsetto. Do this for 1-2 minutes. Now try doing “hills”, first a low glide, then higher, and then higher still (as if gunning an engine). Be sure you are accenting with the lower body and not the throat. Keep the tongue relaxed and loose. Finally, vocalize any song with the straw in the mouth.

Hand Over Mouth – If you place your hand over your mouth and vocalize, you will feel a nice back pressure that will soothe and stretch the vocal folds. This is effective if you can’t do a lip bubble or tongue trill.

- **Work on interval accuracy**

-Do exercises such as singing the intervals – m2, M2, m3, M3, etc.

-Sing the triads Major, Minor, and Diminished – use the syllables mee, meh, mah.

- **Improve Sight Reading (which helps with intonation)**

When singers can “hear mentally” the pitch before singing, it improves intonation and helps them to not develop bad habits of “uncertain singing” or hesitant singing. Use any familiar tunes, songs, etc, and begin to systematically place solfege to them.

- **Work on inner hearing**

-Work on singing quarter steps and smaller over 2 - 4 measures.

-Use the A minor chord in open position, sing 2 measures on “noo” using quarter notes, modulate up by half steps, a cappella.

-Approach unisons from both sides – start on a unison, have groups work out a half step, and then another half step, and return to the unison by half steps.

Intonation Issues

- **Causes of intonation difficulties**
 - Acoustics or environment
 - Mental attitude
 - Physical – lack of energy or tension
 - Key and tessitura of a song
- **Inner hearing issues and physical hearing loss with age**
 - If they don't know intervals, they have to learn by rote and that invariably causes flattening over time, especially with a cappella singing.
 - Hearing loss makes it more difficult to hear all the parts around you, and singers begin to “oversing” in order to hear themselves – (Show device for hearing yourself made from PVC pipe)
- **Using physical movement to energize the tone**
 - Anything that gets the body moving while singing will help – bouncing on the balls of the feet, using hand gestures to conduct the line, etc.
- **Physical posture and support are key to singing in tune**
 - Insist on proper posture for sitting and standing while singing. It is difficult to sing with a free tone without good posture. Be sure to model good posture as well.
- **Evaluate your conducting gestures**
 - Use more lifting gestures while conducting rather than hitting gestures. This creates a more vibrant and lifted sound from the ensemble, especially at cadence points.

Senior singers often forget the “basics” of good choral singing – posture, breathing, and watching the conductor- because they are tired, they hurt physically, and they don't trust their memory to look up out of the music. Insist on excellence always. Don't settle for less.

VOCAL HYGIENE

Hydration:

- *Drink 10-12 glasses of fluids a day, preferably without ice.*
- *Avoid alcohol, caffeine and all forms of smoke. Limit spicy food.*
- *Inhale steam in shower or from hot water.*
- *House or room humidifiers (especially in dry climates).*
- *Avoid drying medications. Check with your doctor and labels. Increase fluids if they are necessary.*

Vocal Misuse or Overuse:

- *Avoid yelling, throat clearing, coughing and gargling: vibrations irritate the vocal cords.*
- *Avoid loud talking, talking too much, and talking in noisy situations.*
- *Avoid all forms of whispering, include loud “stage whispering.”*
- *Don’t sing without warming up.*
- *Don’t speak with a “glottal fry”.*

Other Helpful Hints:

- *If your throat is dry right before singing, biting the side of your tongue produces moisture in the mouth.*
- *Upper Respiratory Infections – it is OK to sing, but just don’t practice before you sing, save what you have.*
- *Lower Respiratory Infections – Don’t sing a concert or practice much, coughing causes swelling and inflammation of the vocal folds. If you have Bronchitis, don’t sing at all.*
- *Don’t sing a lot in the morning if you can help it. It is helpful to eat something and drink water before singing in the morning to wake the voice up and hydrate the vocal folds.*
- *Save your voice whenever possible—use electronic communication forms.*
- *Do not talk much or sing at the end of the day. Your body and voice are tired.*
- *Learn to speak in a healthy way.*
- *Rest your voice before and after a big singing day.*
- *Stop singing before you feel vocally tired.*
- *Learn music by playing it and/or listening to it, not singing it.*
- *Avoid ice-cold beverages while singing. Room temperature is better.*
- *Do not smoke.*
- *Manage allergies and acid reflux if applicable.*
- *Women be aware of menstrual cycles and how that affects your voice.*