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June, 2020



How can we maintain good vocal condition during this prolonged time of isolation which is curtailing our usual weekly choral activity associated with church services? What does this mean, apart from the end product of beautiful singing?

Any holiday from normal routine means the comeback will have some challenges – logic suggests we need to plan a gradual comeback to prevent injury or complications down the track. Any physical activity neglected for a while, can result in a lack of fitness and the first time we begin again – oh, those muscles we forgot we had!! School teachers typically feel a vocal challenge after the summer break when returning to the classroom in February. A colleague of mine, Leon Thurman, a fantastic vocal and choral advocate from Minnesota, used to call it The Voice Hurty Blues because 5 days of continual talking after six weeks of absence from the classroom can make Week 1, Term 1 just that bit – ouch!

Well, maybe we're not quite in that category. However, when this social distancing is over, what will our voices feel like? Some of us may even live alone or have only one person we speak with daily. For church choristers, will it be like February all over again when we have not sung much since 25th December? It may be worse than the summer holiday syndrome because these weeks away from singing are extending for longer than any of us expected.....

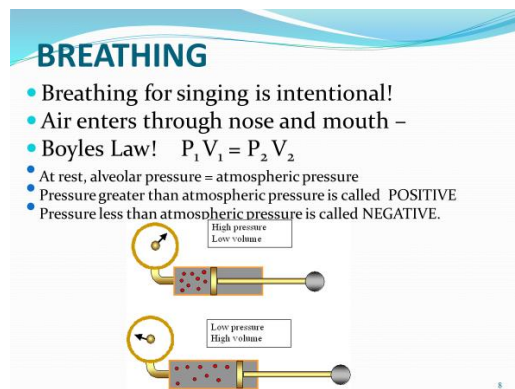
So, whenever we finally arrive for that first rehearsal and first Worship Service, it would be good to have engaged in some voicework that picks up any stitches we may have dropped in the knitting together of our vocal technique previously. This implies we should be trying to maintain our vocal health and prepare for minimal shock as we recommence regular public singing. In other words, re-establishing good vocal condition is a great idea!

Knowledge is power, so understanding what we are doing when we sing is a good starting place. This might be revision for many of you, but it will also focus us on the task at hand. And that's good. Let's start with an obvious fact – you and I only have one voice! It's the one instrument we use for phonation, that is making sound, whether it be for speaking or singing. So the way we speak can affect the way we sing and visa versa. Therefore good vocal habits apply *all day in every way* whenever we make a sound – spoken or sung.

How do we make vocal sound? It's all pretty primal really. Just consider the way we laugh or cry or grunt or sigh. But for singing, three words can cue us to make beautiful sound: THINK – LET – TRUST. It starts with the thoughtful, informed decision to make a predetermined sound. We need to think before we act; then let the action happen, and finally without second guessing ourselves, trust our intentions and the outcome. It's as easy as thatand as difficult as that!

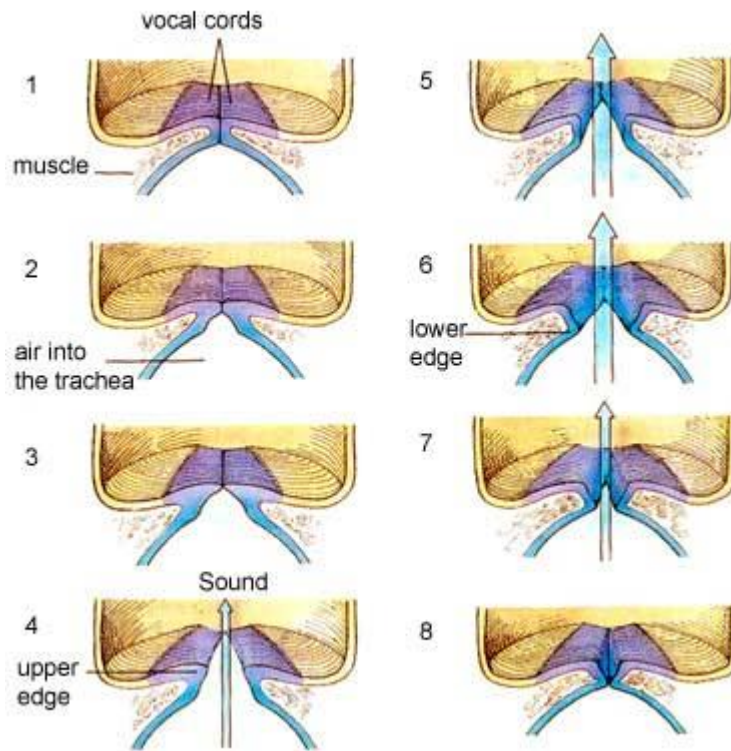
In a nutshell, your instrument is your whole body, so be prepared to *think physical!* We allow our lungs to fill with air, our bodies expand to accommodate the expansion of the lungs; then with some muscular pushing and squeezing of the lungs we create air pressure such that the breath needs to flow out of these big balloons through the wind pipes, through the larynx and mouth and into the environment. During this process the air sets the vocal folds ripple waving in the breeze and that disturbance of the air-flow forms sound waves. Those sound waves are then enhanced by the acoustic properties of our resonance spaces. We give this sound meaning firstly through our emotional intention, but mostly through the shaping of vowels and consonants we use. This is called phonation!

Whew – was that a pretty hard nutshell to crack? Here it all is again, with some added explanation.



The lung pressure created for phonation

We allow our lungs to fill with air – *we don't drag the breath in, we allow it to fall into the vacuum in our lungs*, our bodies expand to accommodate the expansion of the lungs – *release abdominal muscular tension to let the lungs expand downwards, keep the ribcage up and out, both front and back; we let our tummy go and feel space under our armpits* - then with some muscular pushing and squeezing of the lungs – *the cylinder of muscles, from all the abdominal muscles to the pelvic floor muscles to the muscles of the back and the intercostal or rib muscles, all act as ropes and pullies on the ribs and the diaphragm* – this is the way we create pressured air so that the air needs to flow out of these big balloons - *as evenly and economically as we can manage* - through the wind pipe, through the larynx and mouth and into the environment. This process sets the vocal folds ripple waving in the breeze – *creating vibration* - and that disturbance of the air-flow forms sound waves.



Vocal folds ripple waving

These sound waves are pitches which are miraculously created by the automotive system that engages the breath and the brain, then enhanced by the acoustic properties of our resonance spaces. *If you could hear the noise we make before the sound is enhanced by travelling through our beautiful resonance spaces, you'd think you were a duck calling!* We give this sound both beauty and meaning firstly through our emotional motivation – *no vocal sound happens, in speech or song without our wanting to create it, it's intention, it's colour, it's pitch, it's length etc*, but mostly through the shaping of the vowels and consonants we use to form words. *These sound waves in the shape of words and pitch reach the eardrums of the listeners and hey presto, they hear and understand us!!!*



So here's another refresher definition *What is good phonation – speaking or singing?* It starts with intention, the right mindset which then cues the process to begin: **thinking determines the whole body action, breath pressure is managed by the muscles of the torso to flow easily and consistently through to the larynx. This is where the flow of air is inhibited by the opening & closing of the vocal folds, and results in the formation of cycles per second of ripple waving that creates patterned vibrations we know as pitch (as cued by our brain). The final result is vibrant vocal tone. And in case**

you missed the point – the **BREATH** and the **BRAIN** are the two most important components of singing and not once have I talked about muscles in the throat or larynx - if you feel pain or stress in this area, you may be employing muscles unnecessarily; muscles that might be compensating for work that should be happening lower in your body to create breath pressure and breath flow.

As singers, we all need to learn to develop a kinaesthetic awareness – what it feels like when we're singing. Such awareness might suspect there is some overwork (reliance on muscle tension), it could suspect underwork (reliance on breath flow) but if we're fabulous, it may affirm that we are well balanced in our vocalising. Our challenge is to develop a balance so that we use only the necessary amount of muscle contraction energy, without engaging unnecessary muscles, in the act of phonation. Bad or unnecessary tension inhibits our best vocal outcomes, whether speaking or singing, so we should aim to release muscles that want to hold on, or tense, or over-control. We need then learn how to arrange our vocal tract so 'easily', no bad tension, as to allow the resonance and release of the vocal tone without physical or acoustic obstruction. We need to be aware of our breath management muscles, the way they support inhalation and manage exhalation. Of course, we sing on exhalation. But this is not something you can learn in one lesson – more like one lifetime, to be sure! So rather than getting totally overwhelmed by too much information, I trust that many of you are already on this journey, and we can consider continuing to explore at some other time.

Coming back to the present: can you reflect on your current vocal state and experience. There could be three scenarios – **firstly**, you don't know what's happening with your voice because you've hardly sung for months, **secondly**, you sing a lot, but in such a carefree, serendipitous way that your voice feels rested and easy but hasn't had any real tests or challenges, and **thirdly**, there might be on-going issues of vocal conditioning which existed BCV (before corona virus) which still crop up whenever you start singing now. How would we know if we need help? What are the clues, after we've been singing a bit, that tell us we're not as well coordinated vocally as we should be?

- Vocal fatigue and discomfort, even soreness in the neck-throat-jaw-tongue areas.
- A quality of tone that is breathy, pressed or edgy
- A vocal colour that seems too bright or too dark, even unpredictable
- Breaks, cracks, unevenness or instability in the vocal line disappoint you.

WHAT WE CAN DO!

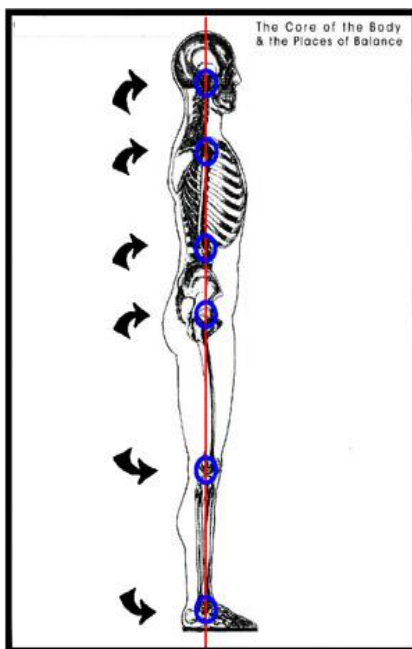
Individually, we can all learn some good habits and take on board behaviours that will support healthy well-coordinated phonation. It's so easy to drown in the myriad of suggestions that can help, but for now, here are just **Five Focus Areas**.

1. Body Alignment

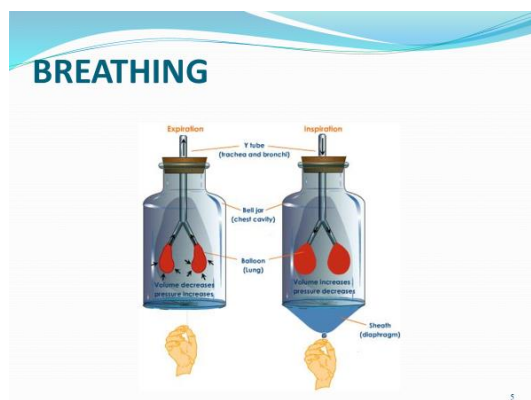
General stretching of the body can wake up the vocal instrument because your whole body is your instrument. So keep up your usual exercise routine – walking, home gym activity, etc or invent some gentle physical stretching exercises – be sensible and customise your exercise routine. But it's time to become very familiar with your own body map and especially the crucial balance points of your body that will ensure good function of the vocal instrument:

Explore with your fingers the six main points of balance in the body

1. The point where the spine and skull meet (Atlas joint)
2. The point where your waist/thorax is.
3. The point where your legs intersect with your pelvis at the hip joints (the wriggle joints).
4. The point where your legs bend at the knee joints.
5. The point where your feet articulate with your ankles
6. The point where your arms connect into the torso



2. Breath Management



Efficient inhalation is important, but managing the exhalation is what singing is all about. It's crucial - a steady flow of sound, allocation of breath for each phrase, onset, offset, appropriate engagement of breath for pitch and volume. This is a big deal, but one for another time.

Nevertheless, here's two exercises that will help focus your body, mind and voice: 1. Waste all your breath, SPLAT then ffft, ffft, ffft, ffft, ffft, ffft, dzdzd... and repeat 2. Waste all your breath, SPLAT then chant on one pitch *Old McDonald Had a Farm (cow, horse)* in one long sustained breath. Repeat and see how well you eke out the breath.

3. Preparing the Larynx

Hydration is important – sing wet, pee pale. Start every morning with a glass of water and gently gargle it down. Yes, gargling is a useful vocal tract exercise; it opens the throat and allows the water to reach as low as possible without the risk of choking.

Now, in the warm shower, morning or evening, begin with some downward hums, Pooh bear! Then move to gentle sirens using **Wee**, then **Wow**– starting on a low pitch and keep the range short; gradually extend both pitch and range according to your voice type. But keep it easy, don't blow breath but feel that you lean on the breath. Be aware that it is a balanced combination of breath energy and muscle energy that is transformed into sound. Onset with the air not with muscle – imagine skiing onto the note. Listen to the vocal quality – lower notes should be darker and full-bodied, higher notes should be lighter and less full-bodied. Enjoy the core of your tone, as if it's the red-hot glow on the wire of a sparkler, with the shimmering spatter of the surrounding light representing the complete vocal resonance. The bathroom's not only humid but probably the best acoustic spot in the house to encourage ease of phonation, so therein is high recommendation for your singing in the shower.

4. Opening the Resonance Spaces

Now, let's explore our resonance spaces. First, feel what it's like to engage the wrong coordination by swallowing!! Everything closes and rises. Now let's feel the opposite - yawn with your mouth shut! Everything inside opens and lowers, well, before it goes into spasm; so now yawn with your mouth open, releasing your jaw to swing down and back.

Now go back to a gentle siren, firstly as a **Hum**, then on **Wee**, finally on **Wow** - notice that low or soft sounds need less resonance space but high or loud sounds need more resonance space. These exercises can be done at any time you think of it! Keep exploring resonance spaces, becoming aware of the feeling of an open easy throat space! Keep your back teeth apart, not clenched as this can be a release of throat space.

5. From Speech to Song

Exercises are fine and dandy, but we all want to sing. It has been shown that a wide and even unpredictable range of vocal exercises will gradually build your vocal skill and condition, provided you remember the THINK LET TRUST statement. That's good news, because even without any instrumental support, you can improvise and create your own patterns or melodies within the following framework – a) low to high range b) soft to loud volume c) range of voice qualities from full-bodied to less full-bodied d) slow-speed to faster-speed pitch changes and volume changes. Choose a familiar anthem or hymn text, speak the words with as much inflection as brings out the meaning. Then sing the words to the **familiar** melody. Try this one - No 566 in Ancient & Modern, words by Fred Kaan, to the tune St Columba –

*Put peace into each other's hands and like a treasure hold it,
Protect it like a candle-flame, with tenderness enfold it.*

*Give thanks for strong yet tender hands Held out in trust and blessing.
Where words fall short, let hands speak out, The heights of love expressing.*

*Reach out in friendship, stay with faith In touch with those around you.
Put peace into each other's hands: The Peace that sort and found you.*

All other factors being equal (general health in particular), if your voice fatigues and becomes less responsive after singing, the demands which you are placing on your voice are greater than its current condition. So start with realistic expectations but be prepared to be repetitious in your five focus areas, and you will improve your vocal condition, with relative gains in strength, endurance, precision, evenness & expression.

Final advice:

- No more than 10 minutes of vocalising at any one time – stop before you show fatigue.
- Vocalise at least twice a day and increase this frequency as you gain confidence and condition!
- Use **familiar** repertoire, in your collection, real or remembered, especially those pieces that have always felt good to sing
- Catch your image in a mirror – how's your head position, what are your knees doing? Give a little wriggle of your hips, your knees, your head and loosen up!!

And although communal or public singing may not be back to “normal” for quite a while, the power of one is with us – you can work on your own vocal condition. So happy vocalising!

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Adele Nisbet retired from the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University in 2014 where, during more than twenty years, she held various positions including Head of Vocal Studies, Lecturer in Voice and Vocal Pedagogy, Convenor of the Choral program and Coordinator of the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Vocal Pedagogy courses. As a soprano soloist, she has performed as a recitalist and soloist with numerous choirs and orchestras. She was a founding member of the acclaimed vocal sextet JONES & CO, which performed both nationally and internationally. Adele has been a national leader in the Australian Voice Association and the Australian National Association of Teachers of Singing. She was founding editor of ANATS peer-reviewed journal, AUSTRALIAN VOICE, and was Chairperson for the highly successful International Congress of Voice Teachers held in Brisbane in 2013. As a senior AMEB examiner and frequent adjudicator at music festivals and Eisteddfods, she is a committed advocate for music education and musical performance with young people. Since 2015, she has been the Choral Director of the Saint Andrew's Uniting Church in Brisbane City and is a regular presenter for the Royal School of Church Music.