

Introduction to Singing Technique Session 1/4

Monday 6th July, 7.30pm

Everyone's voice is unique. I don't subscribe to a particular 'school' of singing technique, because in my 25 years of teaching singing, I have found exceptions to nearly every 'rule' that the proponents of schools of technique have suggested. What may be right for one singer may be totally the wrong advice for another. Part of the reason for this is that as singers we are never starting from a neutral position of voice use. The ways in which we use our voices in daily life have a huge effect on where we are starting from when we begin to sing. Health conditions, environmental factors, medications, our level of hydration and even what we have had to eat can affect our voices. Our voices also reflect our personalities and emotions.

My aim as a singing teacher is to help each individual singer find a healthy, comfortable, efficient and flexible way of habitually using their voice. This means meeting each singer where they are on any day and working with the voices which are actually in my teaching studio on that day. Please don't worry if you are not having a 'good singing day' for any of these sessions. Part of our job during this month of exploration is to work out why some days may be better than others, and to try to give you some tools which will help turn any singing day into a better singing day.

Online teaching has been a revelation to me over the past months. I am very much enjoying it, but it does have certain limitations. It isn't going to be possible for me to hear each of you sing individually and to make an assessment of everyone's singing during the time we have available. For this reason, I need everyone taking part in the sessions to follow some simple guidelines which are:

Singing should feel comfortable and pleasurable. If something feels uncomfortable or, worse, painful, please STOP. It is normal to feel muscle effort and muscle fatigue when trying new things, but it can be an indication that you have done enough. If you are worried, please ask.

Please let me know by using the chat function in Zoom if you are struggling with any aspect of what we are doing, or if you have a question. If you would prefer to tell me privately, without everyone being able to read it, please email me after the session. Bear in mind that if you need clarification about something, other people are also likely to benefit from it so please ask lots of questions. My email address is rachelnicholls@me.com

These sessions are designed to be helpful for as many of you as possible. Please bear in mind any medical advice you have received from any health professional. If you know that you have a medical condition which may affect aspects of your voice use, please be extra careful. For example, if you have a jaw which tends to lock when opening your mouth fully, make sure you don't go beyond your comfort zone when we are exploring jaw position.

If you have a regular singing teacher, it is likely that he or she will know your voice better than I do. If anything I say conflicts with the personal advice you have been given, please feel free to ask me about it.

If you have any concerns about anything we do during the sessions and would like further help, please get in touch. I will answer questions by email. If you feel you would like a more in-depth one-to-one discussion about any aspect of singing, please enquire about arranging this by email.

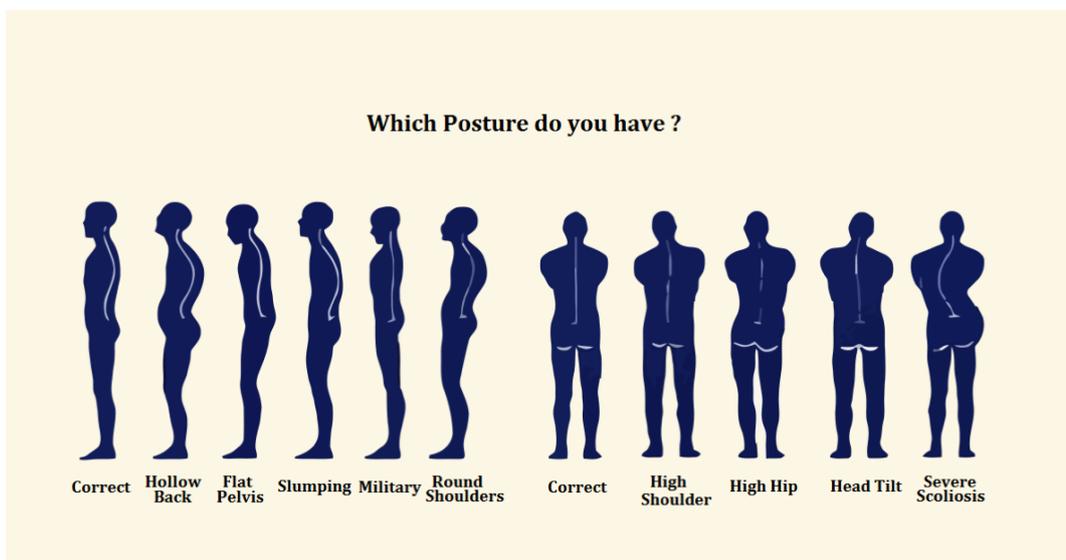
EVERYDAY ME TO 'SINGER' ME

Singing places different demands on our bodies than speaking. Everyone has a different starting point in terms of their level of muscular tension and energy, but what is true for all of us, is that focusing on our postural alignment for a few moments, and returning to check it continually during the course is likely to have a positive effect on our singing.

Your voice will work at its best if you can centre your voice box directly over your windpipe. When your posture is optimised for singing, it's rather like hitting a tennis ball with the sweet spot of a tennis racquet. You'll find that your voice becomes more resonant and centered. Good posture though, is more than the relationship between your neck and your torso. It starts from the feet up.

EXERCISE 1.

Have a look at the diagram below. Be honest, and think about which of the pictures might be most like you. In the pictures showing the view of the body from the back, you can see how the head/neck relationship and the neck/torso relationship can be affected by issues lower down.



Sometimes, postural issues can be structural, which means we can't do anything about them with improved use, but many issues can be overcome with awareness and improved bodily use. Very deeply ingrained patterns of muscle use can be unlearned and unpicked given patience.

Stand with your feet hip distance apart and come up onto your tiptoes. Now place your heels back down, but try to stop your weight from going into your heels - keep your weight over the middle of your feet. Now think of your knees being directly over the top of your feet, your hips over your knees, your shoulders over your hips and your head completely in the middle. Make sure you aren't jutting your chin forwards or tucking it down. Notice where your eyeline is when you have your head really centred. Now imagine you are holding your choir music. Find a comfortable place which enables you to see your music but does not affect your head or neck position. For anyone who uses varifocals, it is definitely worth discussing your choral singing with your optician, and making sure your glasses are adjusted to work best when your posture is optimised.

For anyone who is a fan of wearing high-heels for concerts, I'd encourage you to practise in them to see what effect wearing them has on your posture. If possible, sing in flat shoes. It's also really important to establish a really good sitting singing position when we are singing in a choir, so let's look at that for a moment too. Sit on a hard chair rather than on the settee. Make

sure you aren't slumping. Think about that head/neck relationship and make sure you can breathe comfortably. Notice your eyeline again, and work out where you would hold your music. Remember this position as I'll encourage you to return to it throughout the course.

EFFORT AND TENSION

Broadly speaking, effort is fine, and tension is bad. Sometimes the two can be confusing. Maintaining the postural alignment we've just discussed might be a bit effortful, for example, but it's still a really good idea. However, when effort gets too much, it tends to cause tension in muscles other than the ones the effort is directed at.

EXERCISE 2

Put your forefinger to your thumb and maintain the lightest contact possible. Let's call this effort level 1. Now press as hard as possible. We're going to call this effort level 10.

- Can you feel the effort moving into your arm, your shoulder, your torso, your neck?
- What happened to your breath?

You can see from this experiment that sometimes trying too hard can cause tension where we don't want it. If you find yourself holding tension as a result of too high an effort level, there are some things which can help:

To release tension held in your throat, *breathe* keeping the throat open and relaxed and/or *siren*.

To release tension in your facial muscles, give them a gentle *stretch* and a *massage*.

To release tension in the body from breathing or supporting, or sustaining alignment, *walk*.

To release tension in the tongue, *roll* it around your mouth in each direction.

To release tension in the jaw, *stretch* and *chew*.

ATTRACTOR STATES

So, we've looked a little bit at our posture which is symptomatic often of the way we use our bodies in everyday life. Understanding our natural speaking voice, and thinking about how we use our voices every day is also very important. Understanding your vocal characteristics, or your *attractor state* is the first step towards having control over your singing voice.

What Sort of Voice User Are You?

Does your job involve using your voice? How many hours a day do you spend talking? In person? In a projected way to large groups of people? On the telephone? On Zoom? Most of us spend longer each day talking than we do singing, and our muscles will have developed in certain ways because of the way in which we use our voices daily.

EXERCISE 3

Read the following passage of text and listen to yourself as you speak at a comfortable volume as if you were talking to a friend in the same room:

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white,
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porph'ry font:
The firefly wakens:
Waken thou with me.

THERE ARE NO WRONG ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS. WE ARE JUST OBSERVING.

Do you naturally speak on a high or a low pitch?
How resonant is your speaking voice - can you hear any twang in it?
Can you hear air in your speaking voice?
Do you sound authoritative or sympathetic? Enthusiastic or calm?

The natural characteristics and qualities of your speaking voice often have an effect on what you find easy and what you find challenging when it comes to using your singing voice.

EXERCISE 4

Of course, we don't speak in the same tone of voice all the time. Now recite your telephone number as if:

You are very sad and explaining to someone their goldfish has died;
You are in a noisy pub and trying to get the barman to hear your order;
You are embarrassed about being heard talking on your phone on the train.

Within the natural range in terms of pitch and tone quality of your speaking voice you have many colours to choose from. This connection between voice quality and emotion is part of the psychology of singing, and also part of the psychology of listening.

EXERCISE 5

Identify the emotion being expressed while I recite my telephone number. Is it

Anger?
Sorrow?
Excitement?

We will be tapping in to these emotional connections when we talk about creating different tone qualities in our singing later in the course.

POWER, SOURCE, FILTER

Everyone's voice is unique, but the majority of voices work in broadly the same way. The model of sound production which we are going to explore over the next weeks is that of power, source, filter.

Your power is your air.

Your source is your vocal folds.

Your filter is everything above your vocal folds.

Let's talk about **POWER**.

Singing requires more air than talking. This is part of the reason we aren't allowed to do it in groups at the moment. So although breathing is the most natural thing in the world, we need to do an exaggerated form of our natural breathing for singing.

EXERCISE 6

Take a deep breath and notice what happens in your body. Again, THERE ARE NO WRONG ANSWERS.

Did you lift your shoulders?

Did you make a noise?

Did you feel your chest expand?

Did you feel any movement lower down in your abdomen?

Did you breathe through your nose or through your mouth, or both?

Often we are told to "breathe in" to get into a pair of tight trousers. Let's unpick that for a minute and see where it might be misleading. We would possibly want to pull our abdominal muscles in, but if we breathe in we are filling ourselves up with air so we are actually going to be getting *bigger* not smaller.

For singing, we need to take in a significant amount of air, particularly for a long phrase. This means filling up the bottoms of our lungs as well as the bit at the top. For this to happen, our abdominal contents need to move as low down as possible in our bodies which means our abdominal muscles **MUST NOT BE PULLED IN TIGHTLY** when we take our in-breath. Forget for a minute everything you have been told in pilates, in yoga, in the gym or at ballet lessons when you were 8. Let your tummy muscles completely relax. Now repeat exercise 4 and see if you notice a difference.

It's worth having a little reminder about postural alignment at this point. Particularly important for breathing is not to lock your knees and to make sure that your back isn't too arched.

EXERCISE 7

Keeping your throat open and your breath as quiet as possible, try breathing in just through your mouth when you take a deep breath in. How does this feel?

Now just through your nose.

Now through a combination of mouth and nose.

Different people find different things most comfortable and there is no one right way of doing it. If you try and breathe just through your nose quickly you will sniff though which is not ideal, particularly if the whole choir is doing it. I find breathing slowly though my mouth and nose helps me with activating some of the other muscles in my 'filter' which help me create my best sound. Experiment with this idea and see what works best for you.

EXERCISE 8

Place a hand on your abdomen, breathe in with loose abdominals. Now hiss out to a count of 10.

Now do the same thing, but consciously pull in your abdominal muscles from belly button to spine as you hiss as if you are trying to squeeze in to that tight pair of trousers.

Now pulse from your abdominal muscles for each count - ssssSSSSSSsssssSSSSSSsssssSSSSSS feel how you can control your airflow. You aren't consciously controlling your diaphragm but you are controlling the muscles around it and regulating your airflow. This is very important for singing and this constitutes the first component of *SUPPORT*.

EXERCISE 8

Now let's add some voice to this exercise. We will be working with the following sounds:

- VVVVV,
- ZZZZZ,
- JJJJJ,
- WWWHHHH,

These are what is known as "semi-occluded" sounds. Working with these is very beneficial for your vocal folds, so in using them you are warming up your SOURCE very safely and effectively.

We are going to pulse with our abdominal muscles ten times on each sound.

EXERCISE 9

Now we are going to add some pitch to these sounds with the following exercise:

The musical notation for Exercise 9 consists of two systems. The first system is for Soprano/Alto and Tenor/Bass. The Soprano/Alto part is written in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The Tenor/Bass part is written in bass clef with a common time signature (C). Both parts feature a vocal line with a series of notes and a piano accompaniment line. The second system is for Soprano/Alto and Tenor/Bass. The Soprano/Alto part is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The Tenor/Bass part is written in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). Both parts feature a vocal line with a series of notes and a piano accompaniment line. The number '5' is written above the first measure of the Soprano/Alto part in the second system.

Keep your hand on your abdomen throughout and try to take in as much air as you will need silently for each phrase.

EXERCISE 10

Now we're going to do longer phrases. This will take more air, so make sure you breathe more deeply, but don't take so much air in that you feel you are holding it high in the body. You don't have any muscles to control it in your upper chest which means that your air will all come out into the tone and in a rush, leaving you will less for the end of the phrase if you "over-fill". Try and make the gentle pull-in from navel to spine last for the whole of each phrase.

The musical score for Exercise 10 is written for Soprano/Alto and Tenor/Bass. It consists of two systems of music. The first system starts in C major and moves to B-flat major. The Soprano/Alto part has lyrics 'Vvvvv' and 'Zzzzzzzz'. The Tenor/Bass part has lyrics 'Jjjjjjjjj' and 'Wwwhhh'. The second system starts in B major and moves to B-flat major. The Soprano/Alto part has lyrics 'Jjjjjjjjj' and 'Wwwhhh'. The Tenor/Bass part has lyrics 'Jjjjjjjjj' and 'Wwwhhh'.

Remember that your throat does not need to get involved with breathing at all. If it is open and relaxed, breathing in and out is easy. You *can* use your throat to control your airflow.

EXERCISE 11

Breathe in and then sing on a comfortable pitch to an ah vowel. Stop the sound by closing your throat.

What do you notice?

Was the end of the sound gentle or was it an abrupt cut-off?

Controlling your airflow with your throat is *never* a good idea, so try not to. The speed of your airflow should be controlled by your abdominal muscles, not your throat.

EXERCISE 12

Breathe in and then sing on a comfortable pitch to an ah vowel. Stop the sound by reducing your airflow using your abdominal muscles.

What do you notice?

Was the end of the sound gentle or was it an abrupt cut-off?

This is the way to control your breath.

That is really all we need to say about breathing for the moment. Only take in as much as you need. Keep the abdominal muscles relaxed for breathing in, and increasingly toned while you breathe out. Release them each time. Longer phrases need more breath, but try not to over-fill. Don't let your throat become involved.

NOW LET'S LOOK BRIEFLY AT **SOURCE**

You can't feel your vocal folds. If you can feel a sensation in your throat while singing, it is an indicator that you might be holding some muscle tension in your throat, or using it to control your airflow.

EXERCISE 13

Say the following:

“Uh-oh”
 “Hey!”
 “You!”

These demonstrate the three different forms of onset of the sound.

GLOTTAL ONSET

This is when we build up breath pressure with the throat closed, and release it suddenly. Remember how I said controlling your airflow from your throat was never a good idea? It really isn't a good idea. Glottal onsets are very tiring for your voice. Try to limit them for when they are essential for clarity of text and make them very, very gently with the majority of the control happening in the abdominal muscles.

BREATHY ONSET

This is when the air starts before the note. When we have an “h” in our text we need this one. It's also the opposite of the glottal onset, so if you have a tendency to use the glottal it can be a helpful way of unpicking this.

SIMULTANEOUS ONSET

The “holy grail” of onsets. The air and the sound start absolutely at the same time. Getting this right gives you the best possible chance of making your best sound. This is because everything has to be working well and relaxed for this onset to happen. It can be easier using a “y” to begin with, so let's practise it firstly to the word “you” and then to an “oo” vowel.

EXERCISE 14

SOPRANO
ALTO

TENOR
BASS

5

you you you you you you you you

oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo

We're going to repeat the exercise. This time, make sure that you don't make a glottal offset of the sound either - so make sure you don't close your throat to stop the sound.

Now I'd like us to practise exercise 14 again doing a simultaneous onset on each of the five pure Italian vowels. You may find it easier on some than on others. We'll start by using a Y each time just like with did with the oo. In fact we'll start with "you"

then:

"Yoh"
"Yah"
"Yeh"
"Yee"

CONSTRICTION AND RETRACTION

Sitting in your larynx just above your True Vocal Folds are your False Vocal Folds. Their function is to protect your airway. Human instinct is to close them and protect the airway during strenuous activity such as:

lifting something heavy
childbirth
another bodily function we might prefer not to talk about that rhymes with "moo-ing"

Stress can also lead to us constricting our false vocal folds. Imagine you are singing a very loud piece in a very important concert. It is possible that a combination of being nervous and trying extra hard to sing as loudly as you can might mean you constrict your false vocal folds for both reasons. This will make you very tired very quickly and will make your throat feel uncomfortable and tight. It will also play a part in controlling or restricting your airflow.

EXERCISE 15

1. Grunt silently as if you are lifting something very heavy. Feel the constriction.
2. Now laugh "Hee hee hee" with strong H's but no voice until all the air is gone from your lungs, let your breath in as a recoil breath once your lungs are empty.
3. Now release your tongue from the "Hee" position, but keep your throat in the laughing position. Breathe in and out silently, maintaining this super open, "giggly" throat.

This is *retraction* - *the opposite of constriction*. For comfortable singing, I would like you to think about retraction ALL THE TIME.

Now let's sing some scales and some arpeggios, making sure we always have:

- Good alignment
- Abdominal release between phrases - SPLAT
- Retraction
- Silent in-breath
- Abdominal control of the airflow
- Open, relaxed throat- NOT controlling the airflow.

I'm not going to write these out, because I would like all of you to focus on your sound, and on the physical sensation of making the sound, not on reading the music.

Have a go at the folksongs on my YouTube channel this week, and some of the part songs too if you like, trying to think about your alignment, breathing, onset and retraction.