The Care and Feeding of Singing Voices

BY FRANCES N. BROCKINGTON

We often speak of “the voice” as some mysterious being apart from but resident, somehow, inside us. But “the voice” is a very real and tangible object, the result of identifiable muscles working with other muscles, with forces of nature (gravity is the chief among these), and with vibrations resounding off of hard surfaces. As a tangible reality, the voice requires tangible care.

Healthful habits, good vocal practice, and common sense are all essential elements for healthy vocal production: It is much better to practice preventive care than wearing care. Still, once damage has been done, nothing can take the place of consulting a competent vocal specialist or health care professional.

Good preventive care begins with proper attention to what I refer to as the “four food groups” necessary to nourish the voice and maintain its longevity, vibrancy, and clarity. Those four vocal food groups are warmth, water, breath, and rest. Although it’s difficult to place these in the same kind of pyramid that is now popular for forms of nourishment, we might think of rest as the broadest part of the vocal pyramid, followed in ascending and narrowing order by breath, water, and warmth—the narrowest part of the pyramid, and the starting point for these reflections.

Proper Vocal Nourishment

Warmth. The muscles that produce the voice need to be fully stretched and toned and allowed to remain that way. There are chiefly two ways to prepare these muscles for singing: vocalization (warming up) and insulation (wrapping your instrument). Careful vocalizing allows the muscles’ fuel—the blood—to be disseminated in an efficient and easy way that allows for optimum return. Insulation of the instrument, as one might expect, allows the voice to remain warm and in optimum “running” condition. So don’t laugh when you see a cantor wearing a tightly wrapped scarf or a turtleneck shirt: These are appropriate insulation.

Breath. It is commonly accepted that breath is the sustainer, projector, and protector of the voice. Sound should be initiated, propelled, and stopped with air. Proper breathing, then, is necessary to sustain the vibrancy of the voice and to cushion the muscles as they work to maintain sound. The frequently uncommon gift of common sense should prevail in determining how much air should be taken in and at what temperature—a topic we will explore at greater length below. It has always fascinated me that people have been breathing since before they saw the light of day, yet some of them can spend a lifetime learning how to breathe properly in order to sing! Singing, like living, is an action verb that you must use deeply and gently, but not violently or too high around the chest area.

Water. Water is not only the best moisturizer for the voice, it is the body’s lifeblood. While drinking eight glasses of water a day will give you a sufficient supply to

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remain alive, this amount of water is not sufficient to hydrate the vocal muscles. Here’s how to figure out just how much water those muscles need: Multiply your body weight by .666. The result is the number of glasses of water you need to hydrate your instrument well, to remain healthy, and to fend off infectious diseases. Depending on your weight, of course, that number could be formidable, but all your singing need not take place in the loo, if you space your drinking of that water appropriately throughout the day. One glass of water per hour is sufficient, if you are not singing. The water will evaporate naturally through your pores as you attend to your daily routines. But if you are singing, it is appropriate to drink about eight ounces of water for every twenty minutes of continuous singing.

Rest. It is a simple fact and a true one, and you hear it from every corner: It is important to get sufficient rest. And, truly, if we set our minds to it, getting enough rest is easy to manage. Many people who come to me for help with vocal maladies that have begun to damage—or have already done damage to—their instruments are guilty of not attending to this broadest part of the vocal food pyramid. The first question I ask people with vocal problems is: How much sleep and/or quiet time do you get? The responses are often astounding, ranging from three to five hours rest per night, with none during the day, to a casual “I don’t need much sleep.” You may not need much sleep, but your voice certainly does! It also needs quiet time during the day to rejuvenate itself.

Apart from the eyes, our vocal apparatus is the fastest healing muscle in the body, if we give it the time it needs. If we provide sufficient time, the vocal bands can begin to restore and heal themselves. One of my first prescriptions, when a client comes with complaints of hoarseness and difficulty in singing is complete rest. By that I mean three days of complete silence. That prescription can be difficult to take for people who talk often on the telephone, sing with sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses, and lead assemblies in song. But only sufficient rest will provide the needed restoration, and the result of not getting that rest can be dire. My second prescription, when a client is hoarse, is: No whispering. Whispering is often more debilitating than talking or singing, and it has the same effect on your instrument as full-throated screaming.

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Vocal Breakdown

Just as there are four major “food groups” to nourish the voice, so there are four major causes of vocal problems. Starting at the bottom and widest part of the problem pyramid, they are stress, unstable temperature, lack of or improper vocalization, and lack of preparation.

Stress. Stress is the number one debilitator of vocal production. Although people sometimes think that bad breath management, out-of-tune singing, poor tone placement, and incorrect projection do more damage, they are usually the result of poor vocal production rather than its initiators. What can one do to relieve stress? One of the first ways to relieve the results of stress on the voice is to release all of the muscles that you can consciously control. Release them, rather than relax them: Release is weightless; relaxation is weighted and heavy.

If you are not sure just which muscles are tensed, begin at the top of your body, releasing muscles in order from there. This means making sure, first, that the muscles of the forehead are released. When these muscles are tensed and raised or tensed and furrowed, they can tense the muscles around the larynx, causing vocal distress. The next area for release is the lips: Allow them to be at rest. If you can’t unclench them, open your mouth slightly, and they will release gently. Next work on the jaw area (the mandible): Close your lips gently and, while your lips are still closed, open your teeth. Your mouth position should feel like that for a closed-mouth hum. The next muscle that you should release is the tongue. Just thinking about releasing this muscle often gives it enough impetus to release itself, but if it doesn’t release immediately then put the tip of your tongue gently between your teeth with your mouth closed.

Once you have released the muscles in your head, move on to your upper torso. Lower your shoulders and release your elbows by moving them away from your body. Allow the fingers of each hand to be loose. If you are standing, release the tension in your legs by allowing a little bend in your knees. Finally, wiggle your toes! Lift them high and then press them against the floor. Allow yourself to remain in this released state for at least thirty seconds—count those seconds. Releasing the muscles this way allows a better flow of adrenaline, better blood flow, and greater ease in respiration.

A second step in relieving tension is to be aware of what can be controlled and what can’t, not only in your musculature, but in your life. If a particular situation can be easily resolved, then resolve it; if it can’t be, then accept it and do what you can to release the tension. The third step in this process is to sing—and to sing a lot. Sing your favorite hymn, song, or psalm. Sing it as many times as it takes to make you feel good again. Then sing some more. Sing this month’s entire repertoire. You’ll feel better.

Temperature. It is important that the vocal apparatus remain at a stable temperature, but if the temperature of the environment in which you are singing can’t be controlled, then control what you can. Wear a scarf around your throat. Insulate your instrument. Cover your head. You’ll be amazed at how much warmer you’ll feel! Drink warm liquids or liquids at body temperature (it doesn’t

H-E-A-L-I-N-G Exercises

After your annual vocal rest, use these exercises that follow the acronym H-E-A-L-I-N-G in order to bounce back into vocal shape for the coming year.

H Sing exercises that use the syllables “ha-ha-ha.” Sing them on one pitch; sing them in ascending and descending triads. Sing them in ascending and descending arpeggios. Speak them in excited and soft tones. Breathe them in and out.

E Sing the syllable “ee-yah” on one pitch four times, starting in the middle of the voice. Sing it on a descending five-tone major scale. Sing it in descending octaves. Enjoy the primal feel of controlled loud sound.

A Sing “ah, ah, ah” on a descending triad in the mid-range of the voice. Sing it in an ascending triad in the mid-range of the voice. Sing it on one pitch with a breath between each sound of the “ah” without consciously expelling air.

I Sing “loo” on every pitch in this exercise: 1 3 5 3 1 4 6 4 1 3 5 3 1. This exercise should be done in a moderate tempo in the middle of the voice. It can be carried as high as is comfortable.

L Sing “zip” in ascending and descending octaves. Sing it in ascending and descending five-tone major scales. Begin at the lower end of the range and ascend as high as is comfortable. These exercises are fairly quick. Next attach a “zip” on every other note of the five-tone scale. Enjoy the vibration and the ease of support.

N Sing the syllables “nn-ah, nn-oh, nn-ee” successively on one pitch in the middle upper range of the voice. Three or four half-steps is sufficient. Then sing a descending arpeggio beginning on high DO. Each descending pitch gets a syllable with nn-ah repeated at low DO.

G Sing “good, good, good, good” on a descending then on an ascending major triad. Sing it at a moderately quick tempo. Then sing this word starting on low DO; go immediately to high DO; then sing sol and mi using the same word. Begin in the lower range of the voice and ascend as high as is comfortable.

NG Sing five-tone descending major scales using the “ng” sound as the vehicle.

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make a great deal of sense to drink cold liquids and still expect to remain in optimal condition for singing. Be careful about drinking caffeinated liquids—they tend to cool and dehydrate your vocal apparatus. Breathe easily and gently; if one breathes too quickly, the air is cooled on inhalation. The slower and more gently the air is inhaled, the warmer it is. Smoke can tighten and cool muscles; if you must be around smoke, be sure that you have adequate hydration. Holding air in your mouth will also help to keep your singing apparatus warm.

Vocalization. Warm up the muscles that help you sing. Singing can be thought of as a sport: just as other athletes stretch their muscles and warm up before any activity, so should the vocal "athlete." Be sure that you give adequate attention to stretching the muscles around the neck area, the upper body, and the lower torso before you make a sound. Then give some attention to the respiration process. Remind yourself how to manage breath efficiently and how to use the muscles that coordinate with breath management. (So far, no sound has been emitted!) Next, continue with exercises that remind you of how to sing, where to sing, and what to sing. These may seem like simple reminders, but the singing process will be so much easier if you adhere to these principles.

Preparation. After you have completed all of these exercises, it would seem that you are prepared to sing. But preparation for optimum singing requires more than knowledge of the notes and the words, and even more than the preparation of your vocal apparatus. Return again to the image of singing as a physical exercise. Just as in an exercise such as gymnastics, where the gymnast should check out the apparatus she will be using before she begins her routine, you have to pay attention to all the physical elements that may affect your singing. Is the light adequate? Is the music stand or ambo at an appropriate height for the singer? If the singer will be holding a music folder, is it too heavy? Are the words and music large enough to read? Has the singer practiced walking to the singing space? If the space is elevated, has the singer determined how to negotiate a comfortable way of walking up to the space?

The Third Law

Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion is true for singers. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Every muscle that is used inefficiently will lead to the production of a sound that is less than pleasant. Attention to the elements described in this article can help offset vocal deterioration. Certainly there are other elements we must attend to that can cause vocal discomfort; among them are gastric distress, acid reflux, and other physical problems. But, in the main, most of the problem elements are covered by one or another of the categories described here.

What should you do when you realize that your voice may be unhealthy? Go down your “checklist” to determine if you’ve neglected any of the major “food groups” for vocal health or if you’ve allowed one of the problem areas to develop. For example, have you had adequate rest? If the answer is no, then go to sleep at once! Begin a vocal rest that will last at least three days. No talking, singing, and especially no whispering. Write notes, and let your answering machine do your talking. Begin a regimen of eight glasses of water per day for two days, then ten glasses of water per day for two days, nine glasses per day for two days, then return to eight glasses of water for two days. You will notice an immediate difference in your voice. Keep yourself warm and full of good food. Move your body around (this is commonly known as exercise). If you are still uncomfortable, however, then consult a health care professional or voice specialist.

Every singer should take a vocal rest once a year. After this rest use the exercises described in the box on the previous page to bounce back into vocal shape. Then you will be ready to sing healthfully once more. Sing a lot, pray a lot, and enjoy a lot as you sing. Then you will vibrate, radiate, and breathe well.