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Chapter 8: Maintaining Vocal Health

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IF SINGERS WERE to sing only when they feel completely healthy and stress free, many of us would never be able to make a living performing. That is why it is important to prevent problems by knowing yourself, your voice, your limits, and how to take care of yourself.

VOCAL HEALTH GUIDELINES

If singing hurts, don't sing.

As simple as this sounds many singers get caught up in the moment and don't listen to their bodies when they are tired and should rest vocally. Disregard for your own vocal health, combined with pressure from a music director or bandleader to rehearse songs repeatedly, can tire or strain your voice.

Pain in your larynx can be a sign of a problem. Singers experiencing pain, huskiness, or hoarseness and loss of high range should see a throat specialist (laryngologist) experienced in working with singers. Performing arts venues, music colleges, conservatories,

and other singers can usually refer you to such a doctor. Often, general “ear, nose, and throat” doctors (otolaryngologists) do not have the specialized expertise in performing-arts medicine to optimally help vocalists.

Singers should watch for signs of vocal cord swelling, characterized by slight hoarseness or raspiness, a speaking voice that feels higher and huskier than normal, and a vocal quality that sounds coarse and less than clean. Frequently, there is a loss of high range, the upper passaggio (chapter 5) feels unstable, and you need more breath support than normal because of inefficient vocal cord vibrations due to swelling. A virus can cause this type of problem, as can overuse of your voice.

If you have what seems to be more than a simple cold, consult a qualified specialist for advice and treatment.

Sometimes, when singers suspect a problem beyond a cold, they delay going to a doctor because they don’t want a serious vocal problem to be confirmed. Don’t delay! Go to a laryngologist who works with singers. A skilled specialist will be more sensitive to your personal feelings about your singing. They can offer advice regarding any upcoming singing engagements.

Singing over a cold.

There are times when you can sing with a cold and times when you should absolutely rest your voice. When an occasional cold comes on, you can rely on breath support and body awareness to get through rehearsals and concerts without exacerbating fatigue or doing permanent damage.

You can usually sing over a cold if you have nasal congestion but no throat symptoms. You might have a bit of nasality to your tone, but in general, congestion can be sung over (or through). The first line of treatment for your singing voice is moisture. Drink a lot of water to keep your vocal tract mucus thin. Inhaling steam seems to be helpful for the same reason. Cough drops can keep you from coughing to the point of hoarseness, but the sugar and menthol in them can dry you out. Caffeine, alco-

hol, and smoking should be avoided because these are all drying to your voice and body. Herbal teas (caffeine-free) can be soothing and add moisture back to your system as well.

Sprays that numb throat pain are usually not recommended for singers. Throat pain indicates that you should not be singing. Singing while you are numbing your throat pain with sprays, aspirin, ibuprofen, acetaminophen, or anything else, can be a recipe for problems. Consult your doctor for advice about the use of any medication.

When you have a cold, focus on your breath support, and pay close attention to your voice for any signs of fatigue.

Choose your repertoire carefully, and avoid music that is unusually taxing in range or intensity.

If you need to change the key of a song, do it. It is not an artistic compromise to transpose pop songs into a comfortable range. Many contemporary singers are men with unusually high ranges, such as Stevie Wonder and Sting, or women with high belt voices, such as Whitney Houston and Celine Dion. Work to extend your range with scale patterns and exercises. But remember that some songs may not be right for your voice, no matter how much you like them.

Develop your own unique voice.

You should listen to great singers, study them, transcribe and sing great solos, listen to phrasing, and try to figure out what makes these singers unique. But remember that it is not vocally healthy to continually imitate others to the exclusion of developing your own voice. Voices often don't fully mature until singers are in their mid-twenties or even into their thirties, so be patient and don't force your voice.

Pay attention to the way you speak.

Over the course of a day, most of us speak far more than we sing, and as singers, we need to be aware of how we use our voices in speech. Beyond being a means of

communication, your voice is a vital part of your personality and psyche, and you should treat it with care.

Singers can be gregarious, outgoing, and emotional people. Because your instrument produces both your speaking and singing voice, it follows that your singing can be negatively affected by poor speaking habits. To prevent this, employ touch-distance talking.⁴ Only speak to those who are within an arm's length, or touching distance, away. This will help you control the urge to shout and prevent unnecessary strain on your voice.

In American culture, people tend to speak in lower pitched, less resonant voices, perhaps because they are associated with strength, seriousness, and intelligence. While this characterization of a low or husky voice especially affects the way women speak, many men also speak in a lower voice than is comfortable in order to command respect or convey a businesslike seriousness. This can be detrimental to singing, dragging down your voice and making your muscles work harder than necessary to produce sound.

Singers who habitually speak too low can adversely affect their tone production. The tendency to speak too low can make a singer timid about singing high notes. You can benefit from observing yourself and your speech habits for patterns that may be wearing to your voice.

Check where you tend to pitch your voice by speaking a phrase and finding its approximate pitch on the piano. Try to elongate a syllable and find a range where your speaking voice lies. If you speak much lower than you sing, imagine that you are elevating the focus of your speaking voice from chest resonance to more nasal resonance rather than raising your pitch. You may find that this results in a slight pitch change, but that it feels and sounds more natural than actually trying to speak at a higher pitch. Make sure you are phonating clearly. In addition, support your speaking voice as if you were singing, using a steady flow of breath. Avoid making unusual sounds.

Whispering is tiring to your vocal cords, so don't make the mistake of thinking it con-

⁴ Burk, K. "Reducing Vocal Abuse: 'I've Got to Be Me.'" *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, vol. 22 (Rockville, MD: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association), pp. 173–178.

serves your voice. You can actually strain your voice by whispering when you should be resting vocally.

Avoid prolonged talking around noise, dust and smoke.

Performing

Performing environments such as theaters, clubs, and bars are often dusty, smoky, and noisy—all things to be avoided by singers. While this is often out of your control, you can do some things to help prevent vocal burnout.

1. Avoid smoky areas.

Do your best to avoid smoke filled rooms and don't hang around smoky areas on your breaks.

2. Keep quiet on breaks.

Talking over background music and other noise makes you talk louder than normal and can lead to vocal strain.

3. Avoid alcohol and caffeine while performing.

Your vocal cords should be well lubricated for your voice to function best. Alcohol and caffeine dry your body and vocal mechanism, so it is best to avoid them when you are performing. Alcohol can also limit your judgment about how loud you are singing, impair your ability to sing in tune, and lead to unnecessary strain. Drinks containing alcohol and caffeine can also lead to reflux laryngitis (see page 96).

Travelling

In cars, airplanes, trains, and other vehicles, background noise forces you to speak louder than normal, which can be detrimental to your voice.

1. Airplanes

The air on planes is typically very dry and recycled throughout the plane—conditions that dehydrate the vocal mechanism and body. Responding to a talkative seatmate on

a long flight can wear out your voice. Drinking alcohol can compound this wear and tear.

Before travelling, prepare your body by super-hydrating, drinking eight to ten glasses of water a day for several days beforehand.

2. Cars

It is one thing to sing along to the radio as you drive in a car, and quite another to practice there. Background noise makes you have to sing louder to hear yourself. Your posture is compromised by the car seat, so you are not as likely to support your voice adequately. It is more productive to practice in a place where you can really hear yourself and concentrate on what you are doing.

Avoid throat clearing.

Throat clearing is hard to avoid when you have a stubborn spot of thick mucus rattling around and you're trying to sing. But when you clear your throat, you not only remove the bothersome mucus, you can irritate the leading edges of your vocal cords. This makes your body produce more mucus to protect them. It becomes a circular problem, so coughing and throat clearing should be avoided. When practicing, try to sing the mucus off. If you must clear your throat, do it gently, and avoid habitual throat clearing.

If you have severe coughing spasms caused by bronchial irritation, see a doctor. You might benefit from medication that controls coughing, thereby minimizing irritation to your vocal cords. A doctor's treatment may also involve antibiotics, reflux treatment, or mucus-thinning medications, such as guaifenesin. Be aware that many over-the-counter decongestants have the tendency to dry out your vocal cords.

Develop good rehearsal habits.

Warming up before rehearsals will help you avoid straining your voice. During a long rehearsal, be sure to take breaks, drink plenty of water, use a well-positioned monitor that lets you hear yourself sing with an amplified band, and conserve your voice by

marking (see page 102) when necessary. Do not schedule a long rehearsal the evening before or the day of a performance; this can take the freshness out of your voice.

Stay physically fit.

Your body is your instrument. Whatever you do to improve the health of your body and mind eventually shows up in your voice as increased vitality and energy. Singing is physically demanding, and maintaining good health is essential to career success. Physical exercise can help you stay physically and mentally alert, as well as have more energy.

Drink water.

Make sure to drink six to eight 8 oz. glasses of water per day. Drinking plenty of water can help your voice function better because your vocal cords must be well lubricated to vibrate without too much friction. The water you drink does not go immediately to your vocal cords. Although you feel the immediate relief of water in your throat, water goes to your stomach and passes through your entire system before hydrating your vocal cords. It takes time for this to happen, so be sure to drink water before you feel thirsty.

The two best ways to increase water intake are:

1. Carry a 16 oz. water bottle with you to sip on frequently, and refill it three or four times a day.
2. Drink two 8 oz. glasses of water before each meal and before you go to sleep.

You will have to urinate frequently when you begin to increase your water intake. However, once your body becomes accustomed to it, the urge to urinate often diminishes. Drinks with alcohol and caffeine may contain water but should not be counted toward your daily water intake because of their drying effect on your body.

Eat well-balanced meals.

Eat lightly and well in advance of a performance. Large amounts of food and liquid take up space in your body and may interfere with breath management. Milk prod-

ucts can cause excessive mucus production and should be avoided before singing, if it affects you adversely.

Reflux occurs when the contents of your stomach migrate back into the esophagus and throat causing inflammation. Singers sensitive to reflux react to a number of foods and drinks that can impact their vocal condition and singing by causing *reflux laryngitis*. Singers are particularly prone to reflux due to the high abdominal pressure that is used in breath support.

Dr. Steven Zeitels, director of the Division of Laryngology at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary in Boston, notes that most individuals with laryngeal reflux do not have heartburn, as is commonly thought. Reflux increases the mucus production often associated with throat clearing, produces an ill-defined feeling of fullness in the throat, and can cause hoarseness, chronic coughing, and difficulty in swallowing. Consuming soda, citrus, spicy foods, caffeine, and alcohol can precipitate and aggravate reflux. Singers should consult with a laryngologist if this is suspected to be a problem.

Eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia plague many people, especially women, and can ruin your voice and health. In a music career, appearance can be considered very important and singers sometimes take desperate measures to be thin. Laxative abuse, bingeing and purging, starving, and abusing weight-loss drugs can sap your vitality and strength. Repeated vomiting erodes the lining of your throat and mouth and irritates your throat. Because these urges can become uncontrollable and seriously affect your health, if you think you have an eating disorder, get professional help.

Get plenty of rest.

Everyone has different needs for sleep. Know how much sleep you need to function best and maintain a regular sleep schedule as much as you can. Rest your voice whenever possible. Schedule time to unwind during your day. This will help you have renewed energy when you need to sing. Don't wait until you burn out before you schedule down-time away from stressful activities.

If you sing with an amplified band, always use a microphone.

Singers who cannot hear themselves tend to compensate by over-singing. This is a sure way to wear out your voice. Use a microphone when singing with an amplified band. Position yourself so you can hear your voice from an amp or monitor.

Keep your microphone in a separate bag that's easy to locate in your living space. This will be your gig bag, ready to go at a moment's notice. All you have to do is grab it and go. In addition to your microphone, it should contain a mic cord and XLR-to-1/4 inch transformer for connecting to a guitar or keyboard amp. Find out about the sound system, monitor, and other equipment in the performance space so you will know what to bring.

Pay attention to common medications, including contraceptive pills.

Only a trained doctor or voice specialist can evaluate your need for medications. Ask your doctor about prescription and nonprescription medications and their effects on your voice. Antihistamines, aspirin, and other common medicines can affect your vocal health.

In some women, birth control pills affect the mass of the vocal cords, resulting in less flexibility and loss of high range. The levels of hormones in these drugs vary according to brand and dosage, as does their effect on individual women's voices. If you are already taking birth control pills and experience changes in your voice, consult your doctor. However, it is best to consult a laryngologist before beginning these medications.

Do not smoke.

Any singer who is serious about having a career in music should not smoke.

Smoking has long been known to cause emphysema and cancer of the mouth and vocal tract. It irritates vocal tract membranes and your vocal cords. When these membranes are dry and irritated from the chemicals in smoke, your body tries to compensate with secretions. These make you need to clear your throat, which causes further irritation.

Take care of yourself.

Many singers complain of being sick with various colds and illnesses all year long. But if they examine their daily voice use, practice habits, and vocal hygiene, the most basic elements of maintaining good health are being slighted or ignored.

TIPS FOR HEALTHY LIVING

- Eat a variety of healthful foods including whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.
- Get enough sleep at regular hours.
- Stick to a moderate exercise routine.
- Wash your hands with soap and warm water frequently.
- Drink six to eight 8 oz. glasses of water each day.

You only have one voice.

Some singers seem to be able to scream constantly and still sustain a successful career in rock music. Others can have a single incident of voice abuse and end up with vocal cord nodules. The limits of safe vocal use vary greatly from person to person. How you take care of yourself, and your overall health, vitality, and attitude, have a major affect on your singing.

Learn what it takes for your voice to be in peak shape and ready to sing. Learn what triggers stress for you; it can sap your energy and make you susceptible to illness. Know your tendencies for talking too much, drinking, and other excesses. Self-knowledge is one of the keys to maintaining your voice.

Some singers purposely try to add huskiness to their voices by screaming, smoking, or drinking because they see this sound as desirable for singing rock music. Such singers can end up with no voice at all. Tearing down your voice is not the way to add character. Instead, build it by learning how to sing and exploring all the possibilities of your instrument. Gain performance experience and interpret your songs with sincere

emotion, rather than manipulating your voice in a way that can permanently damage and limit your vocal possibilities.

Voices and bodies that are abused eventually will show the wear and tear. Not everyone recovers or can continue singing once they develop problems.

Possible causes of nodules, polyps, and chronic laryngitis

Many factors can contribute to the development of vocal cord nodules, polyps, and chronic laryngitis. The list below is intended to show some of the possible causes and contributing factors to these serious vocal maladies.

NON-SINGING FACTORS

- Shouting, screaming, and yelling, including cheerleading.
- Poor speaking habits.
- Repeated straining as when lifting heavy objects.
- Talking over background noise at concerts and clubs, or in airplanes and cars.
- Making odd noises with your voice.
- Reflux.
- Smoking.
- Excessive coughing and habitual throat clearing.
- Excessive dryness of the vocal mechanism caused by your environment, lack of adequate hydration, medications, or over-consumption of alcohol and/or caffeine.

SINGING FACTORS

- Not warming up.
- Singing at the extremes of your range for long periods.

- Imitating other singers to the exclusion of developing your own voice.
- Singing without adequate amplification.
- Insufficient breath support.
- Pushing your voice when overtired or sick.
- Overusing your voice.

MARKING FOR VOICE CONSERVATION

Marking is a way of singing that helps you save your voice during rehearsals. To mark a melody, sing just the first few notes of a phrase, and mentally sing the other notes. Raise the lowest and lower the highest notes in your song by an octave (octave displacement) to avoid the extremes of your range. Men can use falsetto to approach high notes. All singing should be light when you are marking.

Marking saves your voice by minimizing its use. It should be used when you are not feeling well, or during rehearsals scheduled just before a performance. Too much practicing before a performance can take the freshness out of your voice. In theater music, singers mark during lighting and technical rehearsals, when it is not important for them to sing at full volume.

Singers often have strong emotions when performing and become carried away by the moment, losing self-control and singing full voice when they should be resting, so listen to your body.

The marking examples are intended to give singers an idea of how to conserve their voices. Notice how the examples eliminate high notes, condensing the melody to a smaller range and omitting every other phrase.

The altered melodies suggested for marking might be too low for tenors and high sopranos. Adjust markings and song keys to suit your voice. There are no set rules. Marking is successful if you benefit from rehearsal while conserving your voice.

TIPS FOR MARKING

What to do when marking

1. Warm up lightly first.
2. Maintain energetic breath support.
3. Sing only the first few words of a phrase, singing the rest mentally.
4. Displace notes at the high and low extremes of your range by an octave to avoid straining. Plan this in advance.
5. Men can sing high notes in falsetto when marking.
6. Always sing lightly when marking.

What to avoid when marking

1. Don't sing everything down an octave.
2. Don't whisper or withhold breath support.
3. Don't lose concentration.
4. Don't succumb to pressure from peers or directors and sing full voice against the advice of your doctor.
5. Don't mark all of the time. You should sing a concert, recital, or other long performance using your full voice several times over a period of several weeks or longer to make sure you are familiar with phrasing and breath pacing, and to help you develop stamina.