

Money Notes



HOW TO SING HIGH, LOUD,

HEALTHY, AND FOREVER

Meredith Colby

INTRODUCING NEURO-VOCAL, THE NEW METHOD BASED ON BRAIN SCIENCE

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in a way barely different from the way operatic tenors hit their glamour notes at the end of the arias. This is the sound of a “chest up” blend and is perfectly healthy when executed properly, a fact demonstrated by centuries of successful operatic tenors. And Stevie Wonder. I’m pretty sure that the complaint lodged by classical teachers who refer to this technique as “belting” is based on their cultural bias.

There’s a huge difference between these two definitions of the word belting when it comes to microphone singing of any kind. And that, my friends, is why you won’t see that word in this book. It’s a word without a real definition, so it’s not really helpful.

WHY SINGERS GET VOCAL PROBLEMS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM

I know there’s a lot of information out there warning singers of all the dangers that can befall their voices. It’s enough to make a person paranoid! Or just want to ignore everything. A lot of the reason that you hear so much about celebrity vocal problems, besides the news cycle being desperate for content, is that we know so much more now than we used to. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the use of digital laryngeal stroboscopy has become commonplace. So instead of relying on experience and a pair of eyeballs examining the throat with a little circular mirror, doctors can stick a little camera right down in there, next to the vocal folds. There’s nothing that thing can’t see. Together with a good doc, it can catch the tiniest anomaly or problem. Most importantly, the laryngoscope can show the behavior of the vocal folds. The result is that diagnoses of vocal problems are more specific and accurate, and issues are identified much earlier than they used to be.

Always be aware that different people come with different physiological and genetic makeups. Your voice might naturally be more or less susceptible to vocal fatigue or damage than the average person’s. It’s nothing to freak out about, but it is something to be aware of so you can make decisions that are right for you.

The focus of this book isn’t vocal problems, so I’m not going to devote space to them. There are many books and internet resources available to give you more information than you ever wanted to know about vocal problems. But I will tell you this: if in the wake of seeing your doctor your problem still persists, please go see another doctor. I have heard more stories than I care to count from new students who were underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed on their initial exam. A healthy voice singing with a healthy technique should feel divine. Anything short of that is worth fighting to fix.

Vocal trouble is almost entirely avoidable. There are basically four things that get singers into trouble: using a bigger hammer, ignoring the signs, vocal trauma and overuse.

USING A BIGGER HAMMER

It's the answer to the question, "What should I do if it doesn't fit?" In other words, if something isn't working, the bigger hammer will force it to work. Exerting force against something that isn't moving will make it move. While this is often true, you may well end up with your square peg in a round hole, wedged in there so tightly that it's stuck for good.

You might be the owner of a Bigger Hammer, which you pull out every time you have to hit a high note. If the high note in question is in your range, then you give it all you've got and force it out. If it's even one half step beyond your range then you're out of luck. It ain't gonna happen. Other indications you might be this kind of singer are that you tell people you can't sing softly or have "no high notes," that you frequently lose your voice after gigs, or that you've noticed your range getting smaller. If any or all of these describe you, then I assure you that your vocal problems won't change until you do.

Solution: study this method or take at least enough voice lessons to learn how to use other tools. Not a hammer.

IGNORING THE SIGNS

Your voice will let you know when all is not well. If it feels or sounds different from the way it's always felt or sounded, you should pay attention. If it hasn't changed

Can Anybody Sing #4a

When "*Can anybody sing?*" really means "*Am I silly to imagine I could (or deserve to) improve my singing?*"

Answer: No

Say it again, ya'll. No, you are not silly for thinking you could improve your singing.

You might be thinking:

I don't deserve it. You think you aren't special enough to sing well. (It is a pretty glamorous hobby, after all.)

Bring this little demon out into the light and watch it shrink like a slug in salt. Once you say this secret out loud—once you own it—you'll probably find that it loses its power. Deserve to sing well? Plug in any other word and watch that balloon deflate. Do you have to deserve to dance, ski, draw, skateboard, game, knit, canoe, garden, jog, roller skate, or paint well? Of course not! Those are skills anybody with a desire to can learn, cultivate, and gain pleasure from. So is singing.

I shouldn't spend that kind of money and/or time on something with no extrinsic value.

It's often easier to justify the purchase of something in the *Stuff* category than the *Enhance My Life Experience* category. It takes a little bit of faith to invest in any kind of personal growth, singing included. It takes no faith at all to buy a new kitchen table. But the table, while functional, isn't exactly enriching. Also, you will have to get rid of it at some point. Your personal growth will inform and enhance your experiences every day for the rest of your life.

after two weeks of babying your voice, you should see either an ear, nose, and throat (ENT) doctor or a laryngologist, ideally one who specializes in helping singers. Whatever you do, don't ignore the signs of vocal strain or injury.

Typical signs of vocal problems include:

- Hoarseness, or laryngitis, that doesn't go away after a few days.
- Persistent morning hoarseness that clears up as the day goes on.
- Loss of range.
- Feeling like you have to clear your throat all the time.
- A husky tone that either developed over time or seemed to come on rather suddenly.
- Your voice "dropping out" when you sing.
- Getting vocally tired sooner than usual.
- Feeling like you have a lump in your throat all the time.
- Getting laryngitis often.

There are many things that can lead to these symptoms. Some need only a simple fix, like being able to hear yourself at rehearsal or not eating late at night, and will heal up in short order. Some may require more serious attention and you'll have to be sensitive to them for your entire singing career. And there's everything else in between.

Solution: pay attention, and give yourself permission to care about taking care of your voice.

VOCAL TRAUMA

Vocal trauma can be either a one-time thing—screaming at basketball game or a particularly hellish gig, for instance—or it can result from an ongoing behavior like constant talking on an unnaturally low pitch, as we often do on the office phone, or speaking loudly and often to large, unruly groups such as school classrooms or sports teams. The former is usually easy to identify. If you know you've had a vocally stressful situation and you took vocal rest for a day or two—speaking as little as possible (silence would be ideal) and drinking lots of liquids—you'd probably be fine. The latter is an ongoing situation or habit that you have to be aware of and change. Simple as that. It might be an easy fix; sitting up straight in your office chair or using a lavalier microphone when you're speaking to a group, for instance. It might be more complicated than that or have a deeper root cause.

Solution: a good speech therapist or voice teacher (or both) can help you. Ask your ENT doctor for a referral.

OVERUSE

Overuse is really, really common with singers. No surprise: we tend to be pretty gregarious people. But the fact is, if you compromise or damage your voice because you talk too much, too loudly, or both, then you'll have to deal with it. The trouble will probably show up in the form of one or more of the symptoms listed above, and if it doesn't go away after two weeks you should go see an ENT. If that doc doesn't help you, go see another.

IT DOESN'T MEAN YOU WERE NAUGHTY

Having healthy singing technique can help a singer avoid these problems, but it's not a cure-all. People get vocal problems. People who use their voices a lot get vocal problems more often than people who don't. Baseball pitchers get shoulder problems. Office workers get carpal tunnel syndrome. Carpenters get back problems. It just stands to reason. It doesn't have to mean you're a bad singer or that your voice teacher has led you astray. Go to a voice doctor, speech therapist, or voice teacher and work with him or her to figure out what it does mean. Because voice problems are almost always a result of behavior, you can change your behavior to keep your voice healthy in the future.

STICK UP FOR YOUR VOICE

This section is for everyone, but especially for singers in bands.

You don't want to be a whiner. You want to be a team player. You might not have any formal music training, and you might feel embarrassed or inadequate about that. So when something isn't working, you suck it up. You just sing louder, even though you can't really hear yourself. Or maybe you sing songs that are too high or too low and leave your voice feeling sore and strained. Or maybe you know you're vocally spent, but the rest of the band wants to keep rehearsing so you keep on singing.

It's time to reframe the "whiner" or "diva" ideas in a way that lets you stick up for yourself and your voice. The rest of the band doesn't have to understand why the song should be in a higher key, why it needs to invest in in-ear monitors for you or why you need a ten-minute vocal rest every hour. They just need to do it. You need to tell them, because nobody else will.

Look, they can go out and buy new instruments if they trash theirs. You can't. You're stuck with yours. And if you trash it, everyone loses. So find a way to advocate for yourself as a singer in a way that works for you, give everyone a little time to get used to the new you, and enjoy your singing!