

THE 10 MOST COMMON PROBLEMS OF SINGERS

In dealing with the physical production of the singing voice, one encounters many problems, *all of which are interrelated*, and often addressed simultaneously. The ten problems listed below are prevalent in different types of singers, regardless of training and experience.

- 1. POOR POSTURE:** The efficient alignment of the body is of primary importance to voice production. Problems in posture range from "collapse" of the chest and rib cage, with corresponding downward "fall" of the head and neck, to the hyper-extended, "stiff" posture of some singers, that results in tension throughout the entire body. Effective posture evolves from the kinesthetic awareness, that may be developed through the study of a physical discipline such as Hatha yoga or Alexander Technique.
- 2. POOR BREATHING AND INAPPROPRIATE BREATH SUPPORT:** Some beginning voice students seem to "gas" for air, and exhibit clavicular or shallow breathing patterns. Trained singers, on the other hand, use primarily diaphragmatic breath support. The muscles of the lower back and abdomen are consciously engaged, in conjunction with lowering of the diaphragm. As the breath stream is utilized for phonation, there should be little tension in the larynx itself. Sometimes, in an attempt to increase loudness (projection), a well-trained singer may over-support or "push" the airstream. This extra effort may affect vocal quality by producing undesirable harmonics.
- 3. HARD GLOTTAL OR "ASPIRATE" ATTACK:** "Attack" or "onset" (a preferable term for singers) occurs with the initiation of phonation. Some singers (possibly related to poor speech habits) use a glottal attack, which is too hard (produced by too much tension in closure, hyper adduction. Vocal cord nodules may develop with habitual use of a hard glottal attack. The opposite problem is the "aspirate" attack, in which excessive air is released prior to phonation. While this type of attack rarely damages the vocal cords, it causes a breathy tone quality. (This technique may, however, be utilized to help correct a hard glottal attack).
- 4. POOR TONE QUALITY:** Many terms are commonly used to describe a singer's tone, and among those familiar to singers are: clear, rich, resonant, bright, . . . dark, rough, thin, breathy, and nasal. Although, "good tone" is highly subjective, according to the type of singing and personal preference of the listener, in general, a tone that is "clear" (without extra "noise") and "resonant" (abundant in harmonic partials) is acknowledged as "healthy" and naturally will have sufficient intensity for projection without electric amplification. Opera singers strive to develop a "ring" (acoustic resonance at 2,500-3,000 Hz), that enables the voice to project over a full orchestra, even in a large hall. However, for other styles of singing, the use of amplification may allow a singer the choice of employing a less acoustically efficient vocal tone for reasons of artistic expression. A breathy tone, for example, may be perceived by the listener as "intimate" or "sexy", and even a "rough" sound, such as was used by Louis Armstrong (false vocal cord voice), may represent a the unique persona of a performer.
- 5. LIMITED PITCH RANGE, DIFFICULTY IN REGISTER TRANSITION:**
All singing voices exhibit an optimal pitch range. Typically, untrained voices have narrower pitch range than trained singers, due to lack of "register" development. The term "register" is used to describe a series of tones that are produced by similar mechanical gestures of vocal fold vibration, glottal and pharyngeal shape, and related air pressure. Some common designations of registers are the "head" register, "chest" register, "falsetto", etc.
Singing requires transitions from one register to another, each of these transitions is called a "passaggio" ("passageway"). Lack of coordination of the laryngeal musculature with the breath support may result in a "register break", or obvious shift from one tone quality to another. Untrained male voices and female "belters" tend to "break" into falsetto/head voice in the upper range. Regardless of the style of singing, a "blend", or smooth transition between the registers is desirable.

6. LACK OF FLEXIBILITY, AGILITY, EASE OF PRODUCTION,

ENDURANCE: Traditional voice training in the 18th-19th century "bel canto" ("beautiful singing") method places emphasis on vocal flexibility or agility – for example, the singer's ability to execute rapid scales and arpeggios. Virtuoso technique demands excellent aural conceptual ability, coordination of an abundant airstream with energetic diaphragmatic support (sometimes perceived as "pulsations of the epigastrium"), and clear, resonant tone quality. The use of rapid melodic passages in vocal training helps to develop a relaxed, yet vital voice production, that contributes to the development of increased vocal endurance.

7. POOR ARTICULATION: Pronunciation with excessive tension in the jaw, lips, palate, etc., adversely affects the tonal production of the voice. Problems of articulation also occur when singers carry certain speech habits into singing.

The longer duration of vowel sounds in singing necessitates modification of pronunciation; the increased "opening" of certain vowels in the high soprano voice, or elongation of the first vowel in a diphthong, are examples. Retroflex and velar consonants (such as the American "r" and "l") need careful modification to allow sufficient pharyngeal opening for best resonance, and the over anticipation of nasal consonants ("m", "n", "ng") may result in a "stiff" soft palate and unpleasant tone.

8. LACK OF DISCIPLINE, COMMITMENT, COMPLIANCE: As any athlete knows, regular practice is essential for optimal development and performance. Unfortunately, the need for disciplined training is not always apparent to singers. Furthermore, "artistic temperament" may contribute to a lack of compliance with the advice of teachers on issues of vocal technical development. When a teacher's advice is contrary to a singer's own established ideas and work habits, the singer may tend to overwork, overperform, or simply "try too hard" in practice. The singer's practice and performance regimen must be sensible, productive, and acceptable to both teacher and student alike.

9. POOR HEALTH, HYGIENE, VOCAL ABUSE: Many students ignore common sense and good vocal hygiene. The physical demands of singing necessitate optimal health, beginning with adequate rest, aerobic exercise, a moderate diet (and alcohol consumption), and absolute avoidance of smoking. College voice students often test the limits of their vocal health by overindulgence in "partying", alcohol or drugs, and by screaming at sports events. Many singers are careful with their voices but abuse their voice by employing poor speaking technique (see, for example, Bogart-Bacall Syndrome in this issue). Professional singers who travel are frequently confronted with changes in their sleep and eating patterns. (Specifically, singers should avoid talking excessively on airplanes that are both noisy and dry). Performing in dry, dusty concert halls, or singing over the din in smoke-filled clubs increases the risk of vocal fatigue and infection. A minor cold or allergy can be devastating to a professional singer, who is obliged to perform with swollen (edematous) vocal cords. Good vocal hygiene, good travel habits, and vigilant protection of one's instrument (good judgment) is an important responsibility of every singer.

10. POOR SELF-IMAGE, LACK OF CONFIDENCE: Although many singers appear to have "healthy egos" and may display the aggressive behavior that is known as "prima donna" temperament, such behavior is a cover-up for anxiety and/or insecurity. Since the slightest aberration - phlegm, for example - can result in momentary loss of voice (even in the greatest of performers!), singers often feel that they are always in a state of vulnerability. Despite unpredictability in vocal performance, the singer does gain confidence through repeated performance and increased self awareness.

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