

ORIGINAL

Putting Your Best Voice Forward

By Lin Wallin Schuller, CMVT

The music educator faces one of the most challenging areas of voice usage among the professions. Is it possible to keep enthusiasm alive throughout a week of teaching without experiencing vocal strain? With awareness and healthy voice production, it certainly is.

Here are some suggestions to assist in maintaining vocal health.

1. **PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR POSTURE AND BREATHING.** As you become fatigued you may allow your body to give in to poor posture. Try standing with knees unlocked and stretch your arms over your head. Then drop your arms and shoulders without allowing the chest to collapse. Relax your abdominal wall and breathe diaphragmatically maintaining this healthy posture.
2. **BREATHE OUT YOUR VOICE!** Release your voice with a sighing sensation using a gentle airflow raising the pitch to eliminate the "cracking" or "frying" sound in your speaking.
3. **WATER! WATER! WATER!** Your body needs to be properly hydrated. Please drink the recommended 8 - 10 glasses of water daily. Often, post nasal drip can be alleviated by increasing your water intake. Avoid caffeine as it robs your system of moisture. Be sure to use a steam vaporizer nightly as you sleep. This is especially critical during winter months when the heat in buildings and cars causes excessive dryness in the environment.
4. **AVOID EXCESSIVE THROAT CLEARING.** Use a gentle hum in medium pitch, up and down which allows you to move the offending "junk" out of the way and then swallow. You will find that this will help to eliminate a lot of early morning irritation without causing vocal abuse.
5. **AVOID COUGH DROPS AND LOZENGES.** Menthol may give you the illusion of clearing the nasal passages but it is very drying to the mouth and throat. Lozenges containing anesthetic should be used only at bedtime. A mild honey, cherry or lemon flavor drop, hard candy or mints will assist keeping the mouth moist. Water is still the best "medicine."
6. **A WORD ABOUT NASAL SPRAYS.** Saline nasal spray can effectively reduce nasal stuffiness. **AVOID** stronger preparations which "shrink" nasal membranes as they are habit forming.
7. **DON'T FIGHT NOISE WITH NOISE!** Any class can outshout you. Find other ways to gain attention, i.e. light flashing, stop sign, hand signals, echo clapping. Sometimes an effectively used soft voice is very effective.
8. **REST!** One of the most important factors in keeping your voice healthy is a rested body. This may seem like a tall order, but your voice is your career. Invest in yourself by getting sufficient rest.

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Review of McClosky Techniques

From "Your Voice At Its Best" by David Blair McClosky
Published by Boston Music Company
172 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111

RELAXATION

The following exercises are progressive, so you need to be sure to maintain each area while going to the next.

Step one: Body position

Sit comfortably upright in a straight-back chair allowing your mind to feel the relaxed sensation that you would have just before you fall asleep.

Step two: Facial muscles

With your fingertips slowly massage the facial muscles beginning at the hairline and working gently down to the jaw. Allow the jaw to hang slack with the teeth and lips slightly apart. Feel as if the only thing stopping the jaw from falling further is the skin of the cheeks.

Step three: Tongue

The tongue is the most important area of relaxation. Stretch the tongue out of the mouth downward and allow it to release slowly back into the mouth to lie "fat" against or on top of the front teeth. A grooved, retracted or curled tongue is a sign of tension. Relaxation requires an awareness of that tension and learning to let go and do "nothing."

Step four: Swallowing muscles

Using the fingers of both hands, gently massage the muscles within the jawbone beneath your tongue in an up-and-down motion. The muscles should feel very soft without firmness or lumpiness. It may take some time for these muscles to release as they tend to become very tense from incorrect vocal habits. The only time these muscles are necessarily tense is when swallowing.

Step five: Jaw

Grasp the jaw with the thumb and fingers and try to gently and slowly move the jaw up and down until it offers no resistance. Your hand needs to be in control, not the chewing

muscles. Gentleness and persistence will produce results in time. For many this will mean doing this exercise ten to fifteen times daily for a minute each time.

Step six: Larynx

A reminder at this point is important. Do not do this if the other areas are not beginning to become quite relaxed. Pay special attention to your tongue before proceeding to this step. Gently locate and hold your larynx between your thumb and two or three fingers. Try to move it gently from side to side. It should move easily. A larynx that is rigid or tense when you are silent, singing or speaking indicates tongue and/or neck tension as well as, very likely, incorrect breath support. Focus on these other areas and your larynx will begin to release. Continued moving of a stiff larynx is unproductive and can lead to discomfort. There is a potential for injury if the larynx is forcefully moved when it is very rigid.

Step seven: Neck and Shoulders

To be sure that the lower neck muscles are relaxed, allow the head to nod up and down lazily while you are maintaining all the other relaxations. Allow your shoulders to rest on your torso without lifting, hunching or pulling them back.

POSTURE AND BREATHING

To achieve proper body alignment, stand up straight, one foot slightly in advance of and apart from the other. Lightly dig your toes as if to grasp the floor with them. Tuck your hips under in the pelvic tilt position without allowing the upper part of the body to change its position. Be sure that the knees are unlocked. As you stretch the muscles of the lower back from the tip of the spine to the attachment to the lower ribs, you will feel expansion of the lower ribs at the back and a drawing in of the pelvic muscles. Keep this posture.

Alignment exercises:

Flatten the small of your back against the wall by tilting the hips under (pelvic tilt). Bend your knees to make this easier. Be sure to let your shoulders and neck relax. Avoid pulling your head back. Flattening the back is essential for three reasons: 1] the lower abdominal muscles are more firmly toned; 2] the upper abdominals are more flexible; 3] the strengthening of the intercostal and back muscles will become easier.

Breathing:

In this aligned posture, place your fingertips on the lower part of your rib cage. As you inhale through your nose with your mouth slightly open, allow the breath to enter in a relaxed way so that you feel your abdomen expands easily. Do not try to "stuff" yourself with air. If the breath is low and gentle, the rib cage will remain steady. As you release the breath, do not allow the rib cage to drop. Don't be surprised if you can't. It may take you a number of weeks to strengthen your intercostal muscles.

The amount of breath you take in may seem shallow compared to what you are used to. This sensation is normal at first. Relax the abdominal muscles as they will work automatically as long as the rib cage remains steady. A comfortable inhalation is better than "stuffing it in." Release the abdomen when inhaling. As you run out of air your rib cage wants to drop. COUNTERACTING THAT COLLAPSING TENDENCY DURING SPEECH AND SINGING IS THE MOST IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF HEALTHY VOCAL TECHNIQUE.

Acquiring the necessary strength to maintain rib cage strength for long periods requires weeks, often months of practice. Make haste slowly!

Problem Vowels

If the problem vowel is:

a - as in 'may'

TRY: **ee** - as in 'we'

a - as in 'cat'

TRY: **eh** - as in 'let'

eh - as in 'let'

TRY: **ih** - as in 'sit'

ih - as in 'sit'

TRY: **ee** - as in 'we'

ah - as in 'father'

TRY: **uh** - as in 'mother'

uh - as in 'mother'

TRY: **oo** - as in 'foot'

oo - as in 'foot'

TRY: **oo** - as in 'toot'

Problem Vowels

- ❖ After using the alternative vowel to begin the problem note, you can replace it with the original vowel, making sure to keep it in the same '**place**' as the substitute.

Problem Vowels

- ❖ Choose another vowel sound that by its acoustical nature makes it easier to sing without activating your outer muscles and causing strain or tension.

E.g.

- ❖ In the higher register, when I am singing the word ***dream***, I need to change the vowel shape to be more like ***'drim'***.

Problem Vowels

❖ Sometimes it is difficult to sing a note because the vowel you need to sing it with stays 'anchored' to the bottom of your range.

❖ In order to fix this problem you need to start singing the note with *another vowel* sound.