

YOUR VOICE QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY TRICIA GREY, MMus



How does my voice work?

The vocal cords (or folds) are located inside the larynx, or “adam’s apple”, and are attached from front to back. Air pressure causes the cords to open and close very quickly, creating sound. REMEMBER, very little air is required to produce an optimal tone- too much air pressure will blast the cords, causing them to jam up.

SLS exercises will teach you to use just the amount of air, creating BALANCE between air right and muscle. When the muscles outside the larynx tighten in an effort to control pitch or dynamics, external and unnecessary MUSCULAR TENSION is created which causes the larynx to rise and prevents the vocal cords from vibrating freely. In correct vocal production, the larynx stays in a relaxed and stable position, allowing the cords to easily adjust for pitch and dynamic requirements without any outside “help” from those muscles which should not be used for singing. The larynx should never be forced up to reach high notes, or forced down to create a “darker” quality. Instead, it should remain stable and relaxed.

So, air travels up from the lungs and through the vocal cords, which vibrate faster for higher pitches and slower for lower ones.

Then the sound is reinforced when it reaches the cavities in your cranium. This is one reason voices are so unique- each person has a different resonating system of “holes in the head” and the sound is reinforced differently for each singer, based on the size and shape of those spaces above your larynx.

Finally, the sound is further affected by your articulators- your lips and tongue. If your larynx is relaxed and free from muscular effort, your lips and tongue are free to do the job they were meant to do.

How should I breathe?

First, stand with relaxed but erect posture, chest “comfortably high”. Maintain an open stance and attitude, which will allow your body to function freely and without tension. When you take a breath, the lower part of the trunk of the body expands easily, as your ribs expand. Don’t “gasp” the air or allow the shoulders and chest to rise.

What is “belting”? Do I need to be able to “belt” to be successful in popular music?

Poorly trained singers often “yell”, particularly on the higher notes of a song, or when pushing for high notes. Directors and producers may demand that a singer belt out a song for greater dramatic effect. When a singer sings entirely in chest voice, pushing for the high notes and spreading the vowel, the results are; swollen vocal cords (which may develop nodules), distorted pronunciation, a decrease in vocal quality and control, and an inevitably shortened career. Belting, using ONLY the chest voice, is unhealthy because you are using muscle to force the vocal cords to function in a way in which they were not designed to be used. The voice is not balanced, and range is severely limited. Obviously, this is not a good thing. Traditional classical training emphasizes only

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the legitimate sound, which limits the singer to singing only classical music; the use of the chest voice is discouraged, so singers often cannot be heard on the lower notes. Again, the result is an unbalanced voice which does not sound authentic singing current music. This is also not a good thing. With SLS training however, you will learn to negotiate the “bridges” of your voice, which will allow you to sing with freedom, power and emotion in any style you choose. SLS creates a BALANCED production which results in a smooth transition from chest voice to head voice, and NO BREAKS or abrupt changes in the vocal quality as you ascend in pitch while the vocal cords remain adducted, or connected. THIS is a GOOD thing!

Why does my voice crack when I sing high notes?

Almost every untrained singer experiences “voice breaks”. Some singers deal with the break by forcing the chest voice up, other singers are taught to sing in only the head voice, staying away from chest voice altogether, and others simply lower the keys of songs to avoid high notes. None of these solutions are correct, and all can result in limited choices in song material and an ultimately deteriorating instrument.

A break occurs when excessive air builds up and forces the vocal cords open, causing the voice to crack. This “air blast” causes the cords to tighten in resistance and they jam up. SLS teaches you to sing in an easy CONNECTED tone from your chest voice to your highest notes with no strain, because the correct amount of air is sent to the cords, allowing coordination to occur between the vocal cords and the air. Many singers make the mistake of thinking “more is better” when it comes to high notes, so they push harder and blast more air. Actually, the cords should thin and “zip up” on higher notes if they are sung correctly, and less of the cord is vibrating, far less air is needed than most singers think is necessary! Too much air blast and pushing will cause your voice to crack. Achieving balance and coordination will enable you to sing high notes easily and consistently!

What is a “bridge”? How do I know where my “bridge” starts?

Throughout the program you will hear terms like “registration”, “head voice”, “middle voice”, “chest voice”, “mix”, “breaks”, “bridges”. All of these terms refer to the coordinating of the voice as a singer ascends or descends in pitch. Bridges reveal changes in vocal coordination and occur in relatively predictable parts of the scale. If the bridges are not negotiated smoothly there may be an abrupt disconnection and interruption of vocal tone, known as “cracking” or “breaking”.

The chest voice is your lower voice, which most people use for speaking. It feels as though the tones are coming straight out of your mouth when you sing, and you if you place your hand on your chest as you sing a note, you will feel vibration in your chest. As you sing a scale starting from your lowest note ascending upward, you will notice at a certain point that you will begin to feel that you have to choose between disconnecting into falsetto, (which is a lighter, more airy sound which can not blend or connect to the chest voice), or yelling, straining, and reaching for higher notes, which sounds bad, hurts a lot, and damages your voice.

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You are now in your first passage area. Think of this area as the passageway or bridge to your high notes! Men will generally experience three of these passage areas, and women have at least four. Sopranos with extended range may have as many as six! This first “bridge” is a critical area of the voice because this is where your outer muscles are most likely to try to “help” the process, by pulling and tightening in order to stretch the vocal cords to reach the higher pitch. So what do you do?

First of all, RELAX! This is one of those places where “less is more”. Your SLS training will enable you to build a strong bridge which will result in a smooth transition from the chest voice upward. With a good mix, or “middle” voice, you will ultimately be able to go up and down the entire range of your voice no with breaks, no uncomfortable weakening of volume or intensity, and best of all, a healthy flexible voice that will enable you to sing in ANY STYLE! You must allow the vocal cords to thin so the larynx can function without assistance from other interfering muscles. Rather than pushing harder, forcing air, and yelling, you will stay in a connected, somewhat lighter-feeling position that allows the sound to be balanced as you easily ascend higher in pitch. Remember, what you hear inside your head is not what the rest of the world hears! So, when you are mixing, you may think you sound wimpy and small. Perhaps in the beginning your sound may in fact be less loud than yelling in chest was, but, if you have patience and work on your coordination, power will follow! Just stay connected, and don’t push!

Why do I sometimes sing out of tune?

Singing out of tune means that you are not singing the pitch accurately- you are either “flat” (too low) or “sharp” (too high).

Often singers who belt with too much chest voice sing flat-a common result of carrying too much weight up and reaching for high notes. The solution is to use less air pressure and volume, so you can find and develop the “middle voice”. Similarly, pushing too hard can cause you to go sharp when too much air blasts against the cords. The solution is to achieve balance and coordination at lower volumes using less air pressure.

Your vocal coordination will improve as you practice the exercises, and your voice will be able to negotiate the desired pitches more efficiently and with more agility. Studying an instrument such as piano or guitar, and taking ear training and theory lessons from a qualified teacher will also help your ability to hear pitch. Pitch problems can also be caused by the sheer volume you are surrounded with onstage. The solution here is to invest in really good stage monitors, and to make sure your voice is prominent in the mix. In-ear monitors are great. A great microphone won’t fix pitch problems, but your voice will sound much better on an excellent microphone!

Remember, when you practice at home, don’t turn up the volume on your karaoke machine as high as it will go! This just causes you to strain, and creates bad habits instead of good ones. Keep the accompaniment volume at a medium volume-enough to hear the track, but not so loud you start to push! Any time you feel the building of air pressure in your throat, back off the volume!

What can I do about stage fright?

You may not realize this, but most performers (including professionals) become nervous before a show. Just allow yourself to be nervous, and use that energy to boost your

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performance on stage. You can tell yourself that what you are feeling is really excitement and that you can't wait to get out there and perform! Allow yourself to have fun on stage, and your audience will have fun watching you. Most seasoned performers have a pre-show routine that works for them- whether it's meditation, stretching, deep breathing, running in place, or standing on your head, find what works for you! Lip trills are awesome....

What about diet and health habits?

Anything that can affect your health, body, skin or mood can affect your singing. The most important element (other than good technique) is WATER. The vocal cords need to remain hydrated (wet) in order to function optimally. Most people do not drink enough plain water, and singers need to drink more water than the average person in order to maintain vocal health. The motto is "pee pale". That's right, the more clearly you tinkle, the happier your vocal cords are! Air conditioning and heating units take moisture out of the air, affecting the hydration of the cords. Inhaling steam or cool mist will help replace the lost water.

You should be aware that nothing you drink actually touches the vocal cords, so the old "tea and honey" remedy, while it might feel nice, doesn't ever reach the vocal cords. Liquids which are swallowed go down a different pipe in the body! Steam or mist, if inhaled, will hydrate the cords, and help minimize swelling. Humidity, steam, mist, drinking water, and warmth are good for the vocal cords; smoke, pollen, dry air, air conditioning and heating, caffeine, alcohol and drugs are dehydrating and therefore BAD for them!

Some singers find that dairy products like milk or cheese cause thick mucus, so these products should be avoided on performance days. Allergies are also mucus producing, but you should avoid most antihistamines because they are too drying. If you must take them, counter the dehydrating effects with plenty of water and steam. Breathing through a warm wet towel will do in an emergency, as will inhaling steam from boiling water, or the local gym's steam room.

Acid reflux is a problem many people do not even know they have. It occurs when stomach acid regurgitates up onto your esophagus, touching your vocal cords and damaging the cords and surrounding tissue. You can prevent this common problem by avoiding late night eating, and by sleeping with your head elevated. Check with your physician- there are new medications which may alleviate this issue for you.

Make sure you get plenty of rest, and minimize the effects of cord swelling by warming up properly using SLS exercises. Speaking loudly, conversing for long periods of time, or talking on a pitch which is too high or too low are all very wearing on your voice. Avoid shouting at parties and sporting events, particularly outdoor events. When you do this, you are constricting the muscles around your larynx to push the sound. Conversely, whispering is not great for you either! It irritates the vocal cords by pushing air through them. If your voice is tired or you are hoarse, STOP TALKING! Many performing artists are on complete vocal rest (that means no talking OR singing) for two days before a

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performance. Of course you should avoid smoking, alcohol, and drugs. If you want to be a great singer, you need every cell in your body functioning in top form! We know you know this, but we thought a little reminder wouldn't hurt...

Finally, it really does help to be physically active and fit. Dance lessons will help you with stage movement, and will make you more graceful onstage. Aerobic exercise, stretching and weight training will not only make you look and feel better, but will reduce stress. Maintaining a physical fitness regimen is a smart investment of your time.

An even smarter investment in your vocal future is a weekly (or twice weekly) SLS voice lesson and daily practice!