



Best Blogs of 2011- My gift to You!

Dear Students and Singers

Here is a collection of the most popular and informative blogs that I wrote in 2011. It contains lots of great vocal technique and health info- my gift to you!

Happy reading and vocalizing in 2012!

Tricia's Best Blogs of 2011- All You Ever Wanted to Know About Singing and Vocal Health

Blog #1: YOUR FREE VOCAL TIP: HOW TO KEEP YOUR VOICE HEALTHY DURING COLD AND FLU SEASON!

Tricia Grey, MM

I am often asked by my students "How can I keep from getting sick, or if I do catch a cold, how can I get my voice back to normal as soon as possible?"

During the winter months, good hand washing and sanitizing are even more important. Germs are transmitted from the hands to the mucous membranes any time you touch your eyes or your nose. Carry a portable hand sanitizer with you at all times and use it frequently throughout the day. Sneeze and cough into the crook of your arm, rather than your hands, and encourage others to do likewise, to prevent the spread of germs.

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 also be aware that, because of the functioning of the epiglottis, nothing you drink actually touches the vocal cords, so the old "tea and honey" remedy, while it might feel nice, does not affect the vocal cords (although it may provide a soothing effect to the tissues of the throat).

The only way to affect the vocal cords is to inhale steam or mist onto them.

Steam or mist, if inhaled, will hydrate the cords and help minimize swelling. I encourage singers to invest in a portable facial steamer (found at any drug store) and inhale steam several times a day if you are dealing with swollen vocal cords. (Make sure you sanitize the unit daily).

I also recommend using a "NETI POT" to clear out sinus cavities. The use of a neti pot requires mixing up a saline solution that will be poured through the nasal passages. The neti pot used with a saline solution has been shown to be an effective treatment for hay fever, sinusitis, and other nasal conditions. Nasal irrigation is used by many professional singers to remedy sinus dripping.

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 address this common problem by avoiding late night eating and by sleeping with your head elevated. Check with your physician- there are new medications that may alleviate this issue for you.

If you are sick or vocally tired, you need rest. Avoid talking or even whispering. Whispering is not a healthful solution when your vocal cords are swollen. Never talk loudly or sing when your vocal cords are swollen- you may be encouraging vocal nodules. Instead, silence, rest, and steam will get you on the road to recovery. Lip and tongue trills can be helpful once you are on the road to recovery.

Instead of singing during this time, just listen to your old voice lessons. In that way, you are training "aurally" instead of "orally".

HERE'S TO A HAPPY AND HEALTHY FALL AND WINTER!

Blog #2: Vocal Training Tips- the All or Nothing Syndrome
Tricia Grey, MM

I can't count the number of times I have gotten a phone call a week or a month before the local auditions for American Idol, The Voice, or The X-Factor are held. On the other end of the conversation is someone who wants "a few lessons to get ready for the big audition".

And let's talk about the parent whose child asks them for voice lessons after viewing the glamour and fun of these shows, who pays for a few lessons and then quits because the child does not practice and they are "wasting their money". I am always appalled at the message that sends to a child- "if it's hard, don't work at it- just quit!"

All singers should know that good voice training includes exercises and is not just singing songs. Singing songs is undoubtedly more fun than practicing exercises, but will not develop, improve, or change the voice. Vocal development occurs with a scientific approach that emphasizes strengthening both the chest and head registers, and blending the upper and lower using an approach called "mix".

Parents should know that building good practice habits in a child will require a "hands on" approach, and, like eating your vegetables or brushing your teeth, may not be their child's favorite thing to do. But the results are worth it! And the fun of singing songs (well) does happen, too, but as a result or payoff of good practice habits, built over time. Perfectionism is not helpful here- rather the focus should be on helping the child (even teenagers often need help with this) improve their discipline skills, rather than an "all or nothing" (quit if they don't practice enough) approach.

It seems to me that there is a misunderstanding about how great singing happens. The most frequent misquote I hear is "either you have talent for singing or writing songs, or you don't". I think some artists promote this idea by claiming they have never studied voice, when in fact, they have studied with a teacher for years to develop and hone their craft. Apparently they would like to promote the idea that their gifts are "natural" and you shouldn't have to work at it, if you are really talented.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Any artist who has sustained a career over time has worked hard at developing and maintaining their vocal instrument (whether they admit it or not). In fact, the right vocal teacher and a good, disciplined practice routine is the primary determinant of whether an artist's voice will hold up under the rigors of daily performing and touring. And the time to start is BEFORE the career happens. By the time you are touring and having to sing daily, it's a bit difficult to correct vocal production because the voice is always tired and strained, and you are expected to perform anyway. That is why many careers fizzle before they take off- untrained singers are bound to experience vocal issues due to lack of preparation and vocal training before the career happens. Even super-talents like Adele experience vocal trauma that could have been prevented with proper training.

Good voices and solid vocal technique are built slowly, over time, using a scientific approach to exercises that build, balance, and register the voice, increasing power and control with sustained and consistent practice and work. Classical singers understand this- the idea of taking only a few lessons before a big audition would be laughable to an operatic singer. Daily discipline and practice are part of any real musician's lifestyle. I wonder why pop singers get the idea that their art form would require less?

I consider singing to be similar to athletics. Athletes understand that training their bodies and muscles is of primary importance. And staying in shape is vital. Athletes work with trainers and coaches who design workout routines that will maximize their performance ability.

In the same way, good vocal training (and let's be clear- not everyone who claims to be a voice teacher actually understands the science of vocal development) will build the small intricate muscles of the voice, so that the singer is free to emote powerfully when performing a song.

When singers are confident that the voice will always work, they become much more free and emotional in their singing. Stage fright is paralyzing to a singer, and is a result of fear that the voice might crack on high notes, or might otherwise not function correctly. This can be avoided

with good vocal training.

Another misguided approach is the person who is so "gung-ho" when they start their vocal study that they over-do it, spending hours a day on singing, usually trying to add their own incorrect version of the exercises, or making up their own exercises, or singing all their favorite songs, over and over. These people eventually burn out and get frustrated because they are trying to accomplish too much in too short a time, while failing to focus on doing the prescribed amount of vocal technique, which would have helped them more.

They usually have a specific singer in mind that they are trying to emulate, but are incorporating excessive muscle when trying to do so. They often take the teacher's instructions, but think they will speed things along if they "do more"- more hours, more loudly, make up their own ideas of vocal training, etc.

We cannot "pressure" our voices into doing what we want them to do.

The voice is a system of small muscles that can only handle so much air pressure. We want to build the stamina and power of this system by exercising the muscles, correctly, but more than an hour a day will probably start to tear down the muscles instead. If the voice feels hoarse, and continues to be hoarse on the day following a practice session, that means there is swelling, or edema, and that is an indication of doing too much, or perhaps of singing with too much volume. Professional singers whose voices are correctly developed can, of course sing for much longer periods of time. Vocal stamina is built up over time, just like everything else.

Rather than having the objective be "to get on American Idol, The Voice, or The X-Factor", a true artist's goal should be "to become the best singer I can be, over time". In today's "give it to me NOW" culture, that kind of attitude is a rarity, but that is the approach that will actually succeed. Consistency and patience combined with the right vocal technique will get you there!

I have a sign in my studio that says "There are no shortcuts to any place worth going". Daily, consistent practice of technique exercises (about a half hour per day to start) over a period of a year, will totally transform a voice. (This is only true if you are studying with a teacher who understands how to teach mix).

When you have put in the daily work, over a period of time, the payback is so incredible that you become inspired to continue on to greater heights of vocal achievement.

Here's how to practice: Record your voice lesson. Stand in front of a mirror and play the lesson. Make sure the volume level is sufficient. Sing along with the exercises on the lessons. Do not make up your own exercises, try to play along on the guitar or piano, etc. Once you have done at least a half hour of vocal exercises, you may do a song. Spend WAY more time on the exercises (at least in the beginning) than you do on songs. Songs tend to unbalance the voice and will undo all the hard work of the lesson; until you have really created those good vocal habits and they are solid, it's better to do more vocalizing than singing.

Once your technique is established you can do more and more songs, gradually building up. A less-than-ideal way to practice for the time challenged is to put the lesson on your ipod or a CD and sing along in the car. It's not as good as standing in front of a mirror but it's better than nothing. Don't try to re-create the exercises on your own- they are all done in a certain order to achieve a specific purpose. Just sing along with the lesson, energetically!

If "being a star" or "getting on American Idol, The X-Factor, or The Voice" is your only objective, you are likely to be disappointed, particularly if you have not spent a great deal of time, and invested in professional training to work toward these goals. There are a lot of people out there who have the same goals, who DO work at it daily. Remember, once you get on the show, or your band does get a record deal, now you as the vocalist are expected to deliver a flawless performance, every time. Unless you have trained and prepared for "The Olympics" of singing, you will not be much of a competitor over the long run. Getting on the show or getting a deal means nothing if you can't consistently deliver the vocal goods, under pressure, every time.

However, if your goal is to develop your particular voice and unique talent to the greatest degree possible, once you have done that, you will be amazed at the doors that will open for you! It could well be getting on to one of the shows mentioned above, or it could be learning to write your own songs and releasing your own record, (we can help you with that at Sing Like a Star), or it could be getting the lead in the high school or community theatre musical, or leading the praise team at church.

The first step is to train your vocal instrument, to work it for about 30 minutes each day, standing in front of a mirror to monitor your posture, breathing, and alignment, singing along with vocal exercises designed to address your specific voice, and where you are that day. (This is why CD programs, while helpful in some ways, don't really do much to further your vocal development- they are not designed for you personally- rather they are a "one size fits all" approach).

Take a weekly voice lesson. You cannot teach yourself to sing. Put yourself in the hands of a qualified voice trainer who understands the mix. Be patient, daily, and consistent. With the right training, and some commitment on your part, you WILL see results. And when that big opportunity comes around, you will be ready, and successful!

Blog #3: Adele, Keith Urban, John Mayer Vocal Issues- All Caused By Incorrect Vocal Technique And Overuse Of The Voice!

Tricia Grey, MM

My heart goes out to British pop star Adele, whose meteoric rise to fame has been somewhat halted by vocal problems. How well do I remember the days of being on the road with a band, and having to sing with vocal cords that were swollen due to contracting a cold or flu on the road. The road is not for the faint of heart- the pace is grueling and unfortunately for a singer there just isn't anyone who can "sub" for you when you get sick. Additionally, singers often don't get enough "down time" and rest on the road- elements that are absolutely essential in maintaining good vocal health.

Constantly changing time zones, dehydrating airplane cabin air, singing for hours at a time, talking too much in loud environments, lack of sleep, not drinking enough water, general exhaustion, and poor diet all contribute to poor vocal health and swollen vocal cords. And the effect will spiral out of control, as the singer has to force the voice through compromised vocal cords, which causes them to swell even more, and so on. It's a very slippery slope.

The two fundamental issues, in my opinion, are incorrect vocal production (technique), and overuse of the voice. Most vocal issues can be mitigated or avoided altogether by investing time and energy (preferably early in the artist's career, rather than after the problems have started to show up) in good vocal technique and training.

High on the list of vocal technique issues to address should include: learning to sing with a "mix" rather than pushing the chest voice too high, registration balancing, and learning to sing with a moderate amount of volume, rather than trying to "out-sing electricity" (ie- the band, who can always turn up the volume). In the heat of the onstage moment, with emotions and artistry at a high peak, it is very difficult to restrain oneself from pushing for volume (especially since the band is usually playing very loudly); however, singing at a moderate vocal dynamic is essential for a singer's longevity.

Then there is the choice of whether or not to attend the after hours party, even one given in your honor. For the smart singer, the smartest choice would be "not". Talking loudly over more noise and volume is the worst thing you can do after singing a show. After you have sung hard, you should be on total vocal rest (that means silence-no whispering either) for at least a day, to give the vocal mechanism a chance to recover and rebuild.

Sadly, many popular artists fail to train properly before starting a career. A foundation of good vocal technique that emphasizes register balancing and the use of the "mix" rather than pushing chest is essential.

Singer Adele (who sings mostly in her chest voice, as many pop and rock singers do) has had a plethora of vocal issues recently, and has had to cancel numerous performances. She released the following statement on her website:

"It is with deep regret that Adele has been forced to cancel her remaining live dates and promotional appearances in 2011," says her website. "She is to undergo surgery to alleviate the current issues with her throat and a full recovery is expected. As a result, doctors have ordered her to rest her voice and completely recuperate before looking to schedule any work commitments."

Many "natural" (and highly talented) singers such as Adele either don't feel they need voice lessons, or are afraid a teacher will change their unique sound. They start their careers on natural gift, which, sadly, tends to dissipate under the stresses of a career, when singing becomes a daily job. This is compounded further with the aging process, and the stress of singing longer, louder, and more often than before success happens, with little or no time for recuperation.

I try to emphasize to young singers that getting on a show such as American Idol is great, getting signed to a record deal is great, having a hit song is great; however life does change drastically at this point for a singer. Now you are expected to deliver, flawlessly and consistently, the same vocal sound that got you discovered in the first place. And without years of prior training and consistent and continued vocalizing to establish and maintain good vocal habits, this is going to be challenging, to say the least. The vocal instrument is rather fragile, and, subjected to poor vocal production, will undoubtedly degenerate over time.

Like an athlete, a singer must train the muscles properly to begin with, or they can expect to confront vocal problems sooner or later. And good vocal production must be maintained by consistent vocal workouts with an "outside set of ears"- that is, a teacher who can listen to and rebalance the voice. Since we as singers do not hear ourselves, we need to consistently entrust our precious voice to someone else who can accurately diagnose and provide proper technical training.

What are the vocal cords and how do they work?

The vocal cords (or "folds") are comprised of two folds of mucous membrane covering muscle and cartilage. Normally they open and close smoothly, adducting (coming together) on the closed

portion of the open/closed cycle. However, vocal abuse can create swelling, cysts, polyps, and nodules on the vocal cords.

With laryngitis, the vocal cords become inflamed, irritated and swollen, because of trauma to the cords. When air passes over the swollen cords, the resulting sound is distorted, creating a "hoarse" voice. With extreme swelling of the cords, the voice becomes almost inaudible. Treatment for laryngitis usually involves a foundation of vocal rest. Silently resting the cords gives the "edema" or swelling a chance to dissipate.

However if a singer continues to abuse the voice by forcing vocal sound over swollen vocal cords, a fairly easily treatable laryngitis may progress further, resulting in vocal nodules, polyps, or, as in Adele's case, vocal cord hemorrhage.

Vocal cord hemorrhage results when one of the blood vessels on the surface of the vocal cord ruptures and the soft tissues of the vocal cord fill with blood. It is considered a vocal emergency and is treated with absolute voice rest until the hemorrhage resolves. A hemorrhage left untreated or occurring repeatedly may result in scarring of the vocal folds, which is a condition that is much harder to treat and has permanent effects on voice quality. Sometimes a hemorrhage can produce a "polyp" (blood blister) on the vocal cords. Polyps can be removed with microlaryngoscopic surgery, and many singers such as Keith Urban choose to undergo this procedure. Singer John Mayer was also recently diagnosed with a granuloma (lesion) which formed on the cartilage of the larynx.

Vocal nodules are another common byproduct of overuse and abuse of the voice. Vocal cord nodules are also called Singer's Nodes, or Screamer's Nodes.

Vocal cord nodules are known as "calluses of the vocal fold." They appear on both sides of the vocal cords, typically at the midpoint, and directly face each other. Like other calluses, these lesions often diminish or disappear when overuse of the voice is discontinued. This usually means 2-6 weeks of total silence followed by vocal rehabilitation through speech therapy.

However, when the singer returns to prior vocal habits, either in speaking or in singing, nodules and other vocal woes are likely to return.

The solution is good vocal technique! It is true that "if you keep doing what you have done before, you will continue getting what you got before". Vocal habits take time to relearn and change and a singer who wants to avoid the vocal problems mentioned above would do well to establish good singing habits, and to maintain those habits by continued work with a teacher who understands registration, mix and balancing as it applies to pop and rock singing.

The right teacher won't try to change a pop singer's sound, but will enable the singer to take some vocal weight off the bottom of the voice (if they are pushing chest up too high) and instead, build and develop the upper register so that high notes can be sung in "mix", rather than hyper-extending the vocal cords to push chest voice up. With time and training, the upper register mix will sound just as strong as the chest voice does, and the singer will no longer be abusing their talent, and can enjoy a long and profitable career, with no time off needed to recover from vocal abuse.

Blog #4: WHY SINGERS NEED A VOICE TEACHER
Tricia Grey, MM

Singers cannot teach themselves to sing correctly, for two reasons. The first reason is that we don't hear ourselves accurately. Most people who hear their recorded speaking voices for the first time are astounded- the sound they hear in their head is not at all the sound that the rest of the world hears!

Secondly, the vocal apparatus is inside the larynx, so we cannot see it working. Therefore, the intelligent student or artist knows that keeping the voice aligned correctly requires consistently working with a specialist- a professional who understands the science of the voice and the art of vocal development.

Most people who try to teach themselves to sing use incorrect muscles, acquiring bad vocal habits or tendencies that eventually damage the voice. You need an expert vocal technician to properly develop your voice, and you also need the discipline to practice and vocalize daily in order to overcome previous incorrect habits and to build the muscles correctly.

What Makes A Great Teacher

To be truly effective in teaching singing, a teacher needs to understand how the "mix" works. Unfortunately there are very few voice teachers who have researched and understand the science of vocal production; most are simply passing along outdated concepts. Along with a superior vocal technique, a qualified teacher should also have extensive performing experience in the real world. If a teacher has never been a professional performer, there is a large chance that the technique they are teaching doesn't really work for them either.

The Incorrect Methods

Most incorrect and vocally damaging teaching falls into the two following categories:

"Broadway belt" methods of teaching encourage pushing the chest voice too high and hyper-extending the vocal cords. So-called "rock" teachers use this method also. This results in vocal abuse and damage, and usually, a very short career. You can sometimes "get away" with it for a short time, (when you are young) but most singers trained this way eventually get nodules (growths on the vocal cords resembling small warts, resulting from abuse of the cords). Nodules require surgery and complete vocal rest for several weeks. As soon as the singer goes back to the old incorrect vocal habits, the nodules return.

The second incorrect method is the "classical" or "choral" type of teaching, if it encourages airy, breathy and weak vocal production. These methods usually discourage the use of the chest voice, which is essential in all styles of singing. You cannot use this type of production for commercial music (Rock, R & B, Gospel) or Broadway styles because it is too weak, especially in the lower register.

Correct Vocal Training

Correct vocal training aims to develop a strong and powerful chest voice and a strong, powerful upper register, connected by a coordinated smoothly functioning bridge, so you can connect your lower register to your upper register smoothly. Your voice should sound even from the very low notes to the very high notes instead of sounding like two different voices. You should not strain as you sing high notes, your low notes should be strong and powerful, and you should have the control to sing riffs, runs, and licks for R & B and Gospel styling, or any style you prefer.

Good vocal training teaches the singer to negotiate the "bridges" of the voice (also known as

"passaggio" the part of your voice where you might tend to crack or break or strain as you go up in pitch) easily and without muscular tension. This results in the ability to easily sing in ANY style with soul, emotion, and flexibility.

Rather than confining you to a teacher's favorite vocal style, good vocal training allows you to sing freely and expressively in the style in which YOU like to sing!

The following is a brief description of how the vocal mechanism works:

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.

If 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. Re training the voice with the correct vocal exercises will teach you to use just the right amount of air, thereby creating balance between air and muscle.

Good vocal training teaches the muscles to work automatically, creating a "neuromuscular response" by the use of scientifically designed exercises that result in a relaxed and stable larynx and appropriately adducted vocal cords. This allows the singer to focus only on performing and enjoying singing, because the voice now works correctly and automatically!

Poorly trained singers often "yell", (otherwise known as "pulling chest") particularly on the higher notes of a song or when pushing for high notes. Directors and producers may demand that a singer "belt" 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 the vocal range becomes severely limited.

Traditional classical training emphasizes only the legitimate, upper register or head voice sound (for women). This limits the female singer to singing only classical music; the use of the chest voice is discouraged, so singers often cannot be heard on the lower notes, and the sound is airy, breathy, and weak. The result is an unbalanced voice that does not sound authentic singing current music. You need a strong chest voice in order to sing correctly in any style!

With correct vocal training, you will learn to "mix" and connect the registers, and to negotiate the "bridges" of your voice, (the areas of transition, where you might tend to incorrectly push chest too high, or else disconnect into a weak sound) which will allow you to sing with freedom, power and emotion in any style you choose.

Good vocal training creates a balanced production, resulting in a smooth transition from chest voice to head voice, and no voice breaks or abrupt changes in the vocal quality as you ascend in pitch.

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, or "flip". This air blast causes the cords to tighten in resistance and they jam up, and then blow open, creating an interruption in vocal sound.

At fully developed singer should be able to sing in a connected tone from the chest voice to the 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.

BRIDGES IN SINGING

You will hear me use 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", "flipping", or "breaking".

Here's how it works: 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 a sense of "reaching" for the note, or perhaps a feeling of straining to reach the pitch.

You are now in your first passage area, or "bridge". Think of this area as the passageway to your high notes. 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. Or else, they let go completely and the result is a weak, breathy sound.

However with vocal training, you will overcome these issues. Good vocal training will enable you to build a strong connection between the lower and upper registers, resulting 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!

The smartest investment in your vocal future is a weekly voice lesson and daily practice of about 30 minutes on vocal exercises, singing along with your voice lesson.

Blog #5: Vocal Training Tips- SINGING IN TUNE
Tricia Grey, MM

Why do singers 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. Pushing too hard could also cause you to go sharp, because of overcompression of the cords.

The solution is to achieve balance and coordination at lower volumes using less air pressure, and then slowly increase volume levels as your voice develops.

I occasionally work with singers in my studio who are "pitch- challenged"- that is, they cannot seem to match pitch at all. Learning to sing in tune is more challenging for these folks, but it can be done. Interestingly, many of these types of singers are also challenged when it comes to rhythm and find it difficult to know when to come in on a phrase of a song.

Ear training and rhythm training can be taught. What may seem second nature to those who have been around music throughout their lives may seem like a foreign language to those who have not had exposure to music in school from a young age. Students who have general music classes in grade school, and who have chorus and band opportunities in junior high and high school, find rhythm and pitch infinitely less challenging than students who have not had such exposure. The fact that music has been eliminated from many school curriculums is a travesty.

Singing "in tune", also known as "good intonation" is a foundational aspect of vocal production. Singing even slightly sharp or flat is likely to create the "cringe effect" in your listener.

Investing in regular voice lessons, recording yourself and listening back analytically for pitch, and putting in time at the piano or in lessons, with basic interval and ear training exercises are essential to building musicianship for singers. After all, the voice is an instrument and the singer is a musician, and musical skills for all musicians are developed with consistent practice.

Many people mistakenly think that singing is "natural" and you either have a voice or you don't. Nothing could be further from the truth; singers need to develop musicianship skills, just as all musicians do. Your vocal coordination will improve as you practice vocal 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.

Blog #6: Vocal Training Tips- ELIMINATING VOICE BREAKS
Tricia Grey, MM

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.

One reason a break occurs is that excessive air pressure builds up and forces the vocal cords open, causing the voice to crack. This "air blast" causes the cords to tighten in resistance and then release suddenly when they can no longer resist the overpowering air pressure.

Another reason for a vocal flip, or yodel, in younger or untrained singers is that they often don't sing with enough energy, or connection to the body. Singing requires coordination between the vocal cords, which must "adduct" or come together properly, the air pressure from the lungs, and the muscles of the body which must supply a certain amount of support. With new or young singers there is often little or no connection to the body.

In many vocal techniques, however, support is over-emphasized. When the muscles of the body are over-engaged, the cords are not able to resist the increased air flow, and so they "jam up" and do not function freely. Our objective in good vocal production is always balance between the vocal cords and the air pressure. As the voice matures, the cords are able to resist greater air pressure more effectively, and more powerful singing is possible.

As your technique develops you will learn to sing in a 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.

You will learn to "mix" and connect the registers, and to negotiate the "bridges" of your voice, (the areas of transition, where you might tend to incorrectly push chest too high, or else disconnect into a weak sound) which will allow you to sing with freedom, power and emotion in any style you choose.

Good vocal training creates a balanced production, resulting in a smooth transition from chest voice to head voice, and no voice breaks or abrupt changes in the vocal quality as you ascend in pitch.

Blog #7: Vocal Training Tips: Vocal Structure and Function
Tricia Grey, MM

For those who would like to understand more about the mechanics of vocal functioning, the following is a fairly brief overview:

The vocal cords (also called "folds") are located inside the larynx (pronounced "lair-inks" NOT "lar nicks"). The larynx is the small protuberance in the throat (much more pronounced in men than in women) that houses the vocal cords, which are attached from front to back. Air pressure from below causes the cords to open and close very quickly, creating sound. One objective in vocal training is to create exactly the correct amount of air pressure that will allow the cords to vibrate freely and efficiently. We are looking for a balance between air pressure and vocal cord resistance.

When the singer uses "extrinsic" or unnecessary muscles to create vocal sound (usually the muscles of the neck, throat and tongue- the swallowing mechanism), an imbalance is created. When these muscles 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 outside "help" from interfering muscles that should not be used for singing. The larynx should never be allowed to lift up to reach for high notes, and it should never be forced down to create a "darker" quality. Instead, it should remain stable and relaxed.

As the air travels up from the lungs and through the vocal cords, the cords vibrate-faster for higher pitches and slower for lower pitches. The sound is then reinforced when it reaches the cavities in the cranium, mouth, throat, and chest. This is one reason voices are so unique; each person has a different resonating system of resonating cavities in the body, and the sound is reinforced differently for each singer based on the size and shape of the spaces or cavities in the

cranium and the body.

A vitally important point to remember is that, as the pitch ascends, less vibrating mass of the vocal cords is used to create vocal sound. One reason that singers often find high notes difficult is that they try to maintain the same feeling of vocal coordination on the high pitches as on the lower pitches, in the "chest voice". This is incorrect; instead there needs to be a feeling of release into the higher registers, rather than pulling up weight. One could say that the singer needs to "release" as the pitch ascends, without entirely "letting go" of the vocal cord adduction. If you completely let go, you will then flip into falsetto.

I like to use the analogy of shifting gears in an automobile. As the driver increases speed, he must shift into higher and higher gears to avoid stressing the engine. A new driver attempting to learn to use a stick shift for the first time will take considerable practice before the gear shift becomes smooth and unnoticeable by the passengers. In the same way, an untrained singer must invest time and practice to make the transition between chest voice and head voice a smooth one, unnoticeable by the listener. This transition occurs if two things are in place- a gradual lessening of vocal cord mass and tension, and at the same time, a resonance shift or transfer, or the sound waves from the mouth and chest, to behind the soft palate and the back of the head. This is known as "split resonance".

Finally, the sound is further affected by the articulators- your lips and tongue. If the larynx and articulating system are relaxed and free from tension and muscular effort, the resulting sound will be free and aesthetically pleasing.

All of these tiny muscular coordinations can be created in the singer by the use of a scientific approach to training the voice, known as vocal technique. When good vocal technique is in place, through months or years of training, the singer is then free to focus on the emotional delivery of a song, without worrying about whether his voice will work or not. With correct training, a new "neuromuscular response" is created, (also known as a habit), which then allows the singer to become an artist.

Blog #8: Singing Lessons for Children- Article published in the AJC and in the Fulton Times
Tricia Grey, MM

Many kids (and adults) today, fueled by the unprecedented opportunities of shows like American Idol, America's Got Talent, and The Voice, dream of a career as a performer. Never before has a culture made stardom and success appear to be so accessible to so many.

However, there are many pitfalls that an aspiring singer or parent of a child who loves performing should be aware of. The first and perhaps most important is proper training.

"This is particularly true of the voice", says Tricia Grey, MM, owner of Sing Like A Star Studios in Marietta and Alpharetta. "Damage done to the vocal instrument from singing incorrectly at any age can have lifelong repercussions. If the goal is to become a performer, finding the right singing lessons and vocal coach is absolutely imperative".

Tricia Grey, MM, a native of Los Angeles, where she taught voice and sang professionally for 25 years, was recently the vocal coach for the MTV series "Made". However, this was not her first TV show of this kind; one of her early students in Los Angeles won the first season of "Starsearch", walking away with a \$100,000 dollar cash prize. And amazingly, this singer was

only 10 years old and competed against adult performers.

But vocal training is not just for aspiring professionals; anyone who loves to sing should consider vocal lessons. "I can teach anyone to sing, if they practice" says Tricia. "Many people think that singing ability is something you either have or you don't- but nothing could be further from the truth. I have had many students through the years who came to me with very little natural ability, but with tremendous discipline, drive, and work ethic, who now have professional careers!"

Whether the goal is to win the lead in the school musical, or to benefit from the self-confidence that singing provides, Tricia Grey's Sing Like a Star is the only method to consider. Tricia has a Master's degree in Music, along with over 25 years' experience as a professional singer in the competitive music industry. She is a recognized industry expert in vocal pedagogy and the developing young voice.

"It's never too soon to start lessons, if the child can focus for a half hour, and is willing to practice", says Tricia. "Kids are going to be singing, and it makes sense to give them the correct instruction from the beginning rather than allowing them to acquire years of bad habits before starting lessons. Just be aware that many teachers out there are simply passing on bad information. If they are teaching only "belting" or only "head voice", they don't know what they are doing. They need to have a solid understanding of how to teach "mix" or your child's voice may be damaged by their instruction".

If you are a the parent of young singer, whether they just like to sing for fun, or whether they have dreams of becoming a professional, the right vocal training can help make their dreams come true!

Blog #9: So You Want to be an American Idol?
Tricia Grey, MM

The huge success of American Idol worldwide has done a great thing for young singers- it has given them hope. Hope that, no matter where you come from, if you have talent and drive, you just might get to stand in front of an audience of millions, as David Archuleta, Carrie Underwood, and Kelly Clarkson did- to create a career doing what you love to do most- SING!

What most people who audition for American Idol, The Voice, America's Got Talent, or other such shows don't realize, however, is that for the vast majority of singers, a great vocal technique will make the difference between being washed out in the first round, and having the stamina to make it to the end of the competition.

It's one thing to sound great in your bedroom, at a party, or in your high school musical, and another thing entirely to have the consistency required for a professional career as a singer.

If your goal is to be a professional singer in the Rock, Pop, R & B, or Musical Theatre professions, it is very difficult to find a voice teacher who will teach you to sing in those styles. There are a lot of teachers who have gone through a degree program, but unfortunately those programs are not designed to train teachers for anything much besides classical and choral singing. You need to learn to "mix" to create the sound that will be commercially acceptable, while maintaining vocal health and longevity.

A well trained voice will be smooth and balanced, (no straining, vocal "breaks", or "flipping") with a dramatically increased vocal range, power, and vocal control.

Many times singers come in to try to correct bad habits they have acquired from years of trying to teach themselves to sing.

Singers cannot teach themselves to sing correctly, for two reasons. The first reason is that we don't hear ourselves accurately. Most people who hear their recorded speaking voices for the first time are astounded- the sound they hear in their head is not at all the sound that the rest of the world hears!

Secondly, the vocal apparatus is inside the larynx, so we cannot see it working. The intelligent artist knows that keeping the voice aligned correctly requires a professional vocal coach (throughout their careers) who understands the science of the "voice" that is, the muscles, tendons, ligaments, vocal cords- and how they are meant to function correctly.

To be effective in teaching commercial or musical theatre singing, a teacher needs to understand how the "mix" works; unfortunately there are very few voice teachers who understand the science of vocal production. They are simply passing on exercises without any understanding of correct vocal functioning, and advocate vocal methods that incorporate incorrect muscles such as the swallowing and throat muscles.

Some of these teachers have been performers (to some degree) and think this qualifies them to teach; they have little or no understanding of vocal pedagogy. Others have been trained in a university system but have little or no "real world experience".

An effective teacher needs to have a combination of superior education and performing experience in the real world.

"Broadway belt" methods of teaching encourage pushing the chest voice too high and hyper-extending the vocal cords. So-called "rock" teachers use this method also. This results in vocal abuse and damage, and usually, a very short career. You can sometimes "get away" with it for a short time, (when you are young) but most of these singers eventually get nodules (growths on the vocal cords resembling small warts, resulting from abuse of the cords). Nodules require surgery and complete vocal rest for several weeks. As soon as the singer goes back to the old (bad) vocal habits, the nodules return.

Pay attention to how your voice feels after you sing. If you are hoarse or still vocally tired the next day after a rehearsal session, you are probably using incorrect muscles, singing for too long, or perhaps singing too loudly or without good balance.

You do need a strong and powerful voice for rock and Broadway styles- and you can get that powerful sound by learning the "mix" technique. And you can do it in a healthy way, thus avoiding vocal problems in the future.

Another incorrect method is the "classical" or "choral" type of teaching that encourages airy, breathy and weak vocal production. These methods discourage the use of the chest voice, which is essential in all styles of singing. You cannot use this type of production for commercial music (Rock, R and B, Gospel) or Broadway styles because it is too weak, especially in the lower register.

The goal is to develop a strong and powerful chest voice and a strong, powerful upper register, and to connect your lower register to your upper register smoothly. Your voice should sound even

from the very low notes to the very high notes instead of sounding like two different voices.

Good vocal training teaches the singer to negotiate the "bridges" of the voice (the part of your voice where you might tend to crack or break or strain as you go up in pitch) easily and without muscular tension. This results in the ability to easily sing in any style with soul, emotion, and flexibility.

Blog #10: MORE OF YOUR VOICE QUESTIONS ANSWERED TRICIA GREY, MM

The following are some of the questions I am asked most often during lessons:

How Do The Vocal Cords 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. Very little air is required to produce an optimal tone- too much air pressure will blast the cords, causing them to jam up.

Correct vocal exercises will teach you to use just the right amount of air, creating balance between air 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.

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. The breath should be silent and free from tension.

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.

Traditional classical training emphasizes only 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, and the sound is airy, breathy, and weak. Again, the result is an unbalanced voice that does not sound authentic singing current music.

With correct vocal training however, you will learn to negotiate the "bridges" of your voice, (the areas of transition, where you might tend to incorrectly push chest too high, or else disconnect into a weak sound) which will allow you to sing with freedom, power and emotion in any style you choose.

Good training creates a balanced production that 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.

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.

When you train the voice correctly, you will learn 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, because 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?

You will hear me using 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", "flipping", 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.

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.

This is one of those places where "less is more". Good vocal training will enable you to build a strong bridge that 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 freely

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.

Similarly, pushing too hard could also cause you to go sharp (too high in pitch) because of overcompression of the vocal 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. Make sure you do a sound check and that you can hear

yourself well in the monitor mix.

When you practice songs 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 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 work very well. The main weapon against stage fright is a well trained voice and secure vocal habits built over time.

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 that 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 easy vocal 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, whispering, or singing) for two days before a 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!

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) voice lesson and daily practice of 30 minutes (on technique exercises, not songs).

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All the best,
Tricia Grey, MM
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