

Find your voice: Release & Flexibility part 1

The note isn't the most important thing

My goal for you with the material we're going to explore over the next few weeks is that you experience greater freedom to use your voice, a deeper understanding of how to keep working with your voice once the course is finished, an array of different musical ideas to approach interpretation or composition, some tools to solve any vocal challenges you may find in material you want to sing, and that you develop your confidence and your skill.

Part of this new understanding is going to be technical-you could imagine it like building a bike or a car, and getting the brakes/wheels etc moving, and how to get them moving efficiently, with minimum strain, all the parts supporting the trajectory you want to take. And part of it is going to be musical – so once your voice is working smoothly, you can travel around to whichever notes you want to sing. You don't need prior music knowledge, and indeed, you may be able to choose notes in your head quite effectively because all of you have listened to music all your life. But it gives you more choices (and therefore more freedom) if you know where to look to create the effects you want to.

Very often, when we first start thinking about what makes a good singer, or good singing, we think about being accurate with pitch. We're instinctively nervous about being 'out of tune' and concerned with sounding good. Whilst this is a natural reaction, it's not necessarily helpful to our learning – quite often, anxiety about pitch and uncertainty about what note is going to come out next means that we are hesitant about producing sound, and while the vocal apparatus is only going at half power, it's hard to develop it or really learn how to fine tune it, because the physical feedback we receive is unclear. So don't worry if unpredictable pitches come out when you're here or practicing at home. Speaking of which – decide in advance when you're going to fit practice in, and check out the 'help no time!' cheat sheet.

You already know how to identify the difference between say, an opera singer and a folk singer. Both may be singing similar notes, but the type of sound is really different. Why is this?

It's this field of exploration I would urge you to start considering rather than just being concerned with 'am I on the right note?'

If pitch is an issue now, rest assured that there is plenty of material in what we have planned to address that, and in the long term, your confidence is going to be well served by having a broader knowledge and understanding of how breath, tone and resonance work together than by focusing just on notes. You can think of the sound that comes out of your mouth as being a product of three components:

Breath	Tone	Resonance
POWER	SOURCE	FILTER
Torso/airflow Affects volume and breath noise. Efficient use of respiratory system. Understanding diaphragm placement and movement	Larynx/true vocal folds Flexibility/strength/co-ordination/connection Health of vocal cords Musculature and habitual use	Vocal tract structures Or – where does it vibrate? eg velum, lips, tongue, jaw, nasal passages, pharynx

Try this out now and you'll see that you can create a really wide variety of sounds with ease:

-nasal/-dopey/-heavy/dark/-light

For effective (and enjoyable) use of your voice, it's essential to release tension from your face, neck, shoulders, abdomen, and doing this deliberately at the start of your warm ups is important. A physical signifier that you're working in the right way is that it feels good-there is a sense of physical wellbeing associated with singing. It does take concentration to monitor this and to keep an eye out for when your shoulders go up or your jaw goes tense. At the start, developing this awareness is much more important than singing the 'right notes'. When your body is programmed to produce sound without extraneous effort then you have many more options.

The habits you already have in speech extend into how you sing and it's worth noticing them. For example, if you lose your voice on a regular basis, there's something straining to your vocal cords about the way you habitually use your voice and what we do here will hopefully increase your understanding of that. Two common habits are to push a lot of air through the chords (=can lead to a raspy quality) and holding a lot of breath. Both of these increase the effort needed to produce sound.

Don't be intimidated by this if it seems really abstract at the moment! The more you use your voice with a directed focus of attention, the more you will see an increase in what you notice, and the more you'll be able to be your own coach. Informal recordings are useful for this, not to evaluate whether you are 'good' or not, but to listen for what you're doing – is the sound breathy? Is there a drop in power at some point in the note? Is the breath getting cut off? Etc.

To start noticing the different types of vibration and resonance you can create at will, go for an 'aaa' sound, like the word 'bat'. These wide vowel sounds will tend to pull you into thick fold or chest voice. A lot of power can be found in chest voice. Now go for an 'oooo' sound. This is a narrower vowel and will tend to pull you into head voice or 'thin fold'.

These are two sounds to remember to help you get into the right part of your voice if you're singing something and suddenly feel like you can't go high, or that you're losing power if you go low. Everyone has different unconscious habits with how they use their voice habitually and different parts of your singing voice will be more or less fully developed depending how you speak.

Whenever you're confused as to how to change your co-ordination, or the notes disappear, it could be that you're trying to go high in chest voice or trying to go really low in head voice. Referring to these sounds to 'reset' you can be helpful. **These sounds, the 'buzzing' (moving the vibration around) and using them to move up and down, is the important thing to remember from this session, along with how to think about the training that you're doing at home.**

If you have not been singing much recently, your priority is to start using and flexing those folds and allowing the sound out. Notice where you feel vibrations. Notice any restriction. If you have been singing regularly but with mixed results, identify something that you want to bring more knowledge to and focus your attention on that. If you already know what that is, make a note of it – because it'll be satisfying to look back and see how you've progressed your response to that challenge.

Our aim with developing your control and understanding of your voice is first of all to get you noticing things, then releasing and relaxing to allow the full sound out, then adjusting things on a technical level.