

Singing for Health #1

Hello! Rebecca here from Cappella Nova Outreach, calling everyone who loves to sing! You'll be missing your singing at the moments, so I'm offering a tip for vocal health every week until the present crisis is over. Not only is this 'something else to do' during lock-down but also a way of keeping the physical side of singing tuned-up.

Before I tell you the secret of humming, please note that full-throated singing is great for your health but it is also a super-sprayer of potentially infected droplets, so, if you're desperate to raise your voice in song, do see if you can find a space where you can sing without filling the air that your nearest and dearest might want to breathe.

That's the less good news, but here comes a non-infectious and very useful tip: humming counts as effective vocal activity and is great for vocal health and longevity! Every vocal practice should begin with humming and, to keep your vocal equipment toned and fit for purpose when this is all over, do some random humming every day. It doesn't have to be 'music', it doesn't have to be in tune, it doesn't need to make any kind of sense. You can hum while you shower, mow the lawn, walk the dog, do the ironing/gardening, hum along with the radio, or even while reading the paper (although that might be annoying for others!), and enjoy the feeling of using your voice.

Try to keep your facial muscles relaxed (don't purse your lips - practice keeping them closed with as little pressure as possible) while you hum and try not to push the sound. Gentle, happy humming will lift your mood and keep that vocal equipment in trim.

For more advanced singers, try this exercise:

Position your (very relaxed tongue) immediately behind your lower teeth and keep it there without tension.

Sing the word 'singing' quietly in that position with as little movement of the jaw as possible (the mouth needs to be slightly open for this): 'siiiiiiiiiiiiiiingiiiiiiiiingggggggg'.

The final position gives you an '-ng' with space behind (if you haven't moved your tongue!).

Staying relaxed, use that configuration to do some daily humming.

Right, that's all for this week. I wish you happy, healthy humming until next time!

Singing for Health #2

Rebecca here, again! How's the humming going? If you can make that a habit not only will your vocal equipment stay well ('use it or lose it!') but you'll be surprised how much your mood will be lifted by the endorphins released in the simple act of vocalising.

Here's this week's tip: everyone needs to breathe and people who sing do worry (often too much) about it. Here's how you can exercise your breathing muscle and get it really toned for when we're all singing together again.

The really good news is that these exercises are simple, easy to do anytime, and can also be a great help to people with breathing issues such as asthma.

What's the diaphragm? Those of you who are interested in how your body works might like to look at this:

<https://hourstv.com/diaphragm-breathing-function/>

Our lungs are enormous and most of us never come close to using their full capacity. Singers need long phrases without running out of breath and the counter-intuitive fact about singing is that bossing the breath around (trying to control it, hold on to it, pulling the stomach in etc) doesn't work. The best breathing is totally relaxed and released and toning-up the diaphragm helps with capacity (and other things which can wait for another 'tip').

First, locate the diaphragm, your 'breathing muscle':

Stand with your hands below the waist and above the hip. Take a big, slow breath (don't let your shoulders rise and try to avoid tension). Breathe deeply, filling up low down and imagine air going into your lower back.

Pretend to be a steam engine leaving the platform (gently with no force) and release the breath as follows:

‘Choo, Choo, Choo ...’ starting slowly and speeding up. Breathe again and repeat. Feel the sensation in your hands as the diaphragm moves with the breath.

This exercise wakes the muscle up and reminds it that you need it on your side for singing. There are other things you can do, too:

Pretend you have a small feather in front of your face and keep it in the air with little puffs. (Keep those hands on either side, as above, to feel the muscular response). You can also pretend you are blowing out one of those trick birthday candles!

Pant like a dog! Feel those hands move!

Have a chair nearby in case you feel light-headed. If you are not used to getting in touch with your breathing mechanism to this extent, it might take a few days for your system to adjust.

As with all vocal technique, everything should be done gently and without tension.

For more advanced singers:

Hands on either side, release the air (no bossing, remember!) in a ‘shhhhhhhh’ and after a few seconds change that without a break to a ‘...vvvvvvvvvvvv’ until the breath runs out. Feel the extra engagement from the diaphragm!

Now, take a full breath in and, as you do, stand on tiptoes with your arms extended like an old-school zombie. Stay poised for a moment and then release the breath in a hiss while slowly lowering your arms and returning your heels to the floor. That one’s not for the faint-hearted!

Enjoy your breathing, everyone, and I’ll be back next week with another singing tip. Happy vocal health!

Singing for Health #3

Hello, dear singing friends! Isn't it wonderful how using your voice helps one's mental, physical and spiritual survival during lock-down? I do hope that this is working for you.

This week's tip is hugely important, not just for singing but also for life in general. Here it is:

RELAX!

We all hold tension in our bodies. The best singing comes from a body that is relaxed, and that extra effort we sometimes put into singing by screwing up our face, tensing our shoulders, gripping our music too hard and so on actually gets in the way and consumes energy that we need for fully released singing and making the most of our voice.

Here's what we can do to help ourselves to lose the tension, beginning with a postural exercise I have borrowed from Alexander Technique:

- Stand with feet slightly apart and arms resting by your sides. Imagine that there is a cord attached to the crown of your head that comes down from the ceiling. That cord is so incredibly strong that it is holding you up (NB: not pulling you up - you are depending from it). This means that you only need the muscles required to stand, held by the cord, and everything else can be let go. Curiously, you will feel taller but without stiffness, so you're not 'standing to attention'.
- Your shoulders will fall; your hands should be like dead weights (bags of sugar!) at the ends of your arms (give them a wee shuggle and then let everything go again); locate and think about your muscle groups and let them go until you are sure that none of them are engaged that are not required for simple standing, held up by that miraculous cord; ensure that the cord is holding you from the crown and nowhere else.
- Now, memorise this feeling and try to reproduce it when you sing. I'll talk more about 'muscle memory' next time.

Why from the crown and nowhere else on your head?

This is because your voice box and larynx will adopt the ideal singing position. If the chin is raised or too far depressed when singing you put a kink in the larynx which impedes optimum tone and projection. Think of your larynx as the shape of the cardboard tube inside a loo roll – you want to preserve that perfect cylinder!

More tension dispelling exercises:

Shoulders. From the 'cord' posture do some gentle shoulder rolls in one direction and then the other. You will feel warmth in the muscles after a time. Then let go again into the fully relaxed 'cord' posture.

Neck. From the 'cord' posture turn your head from side to side, gently, with your eyes leading the way every time. Then gently roll your head round on your neck, with your mouth open and slack (so as not to pull on the vocal bits in your neck). You will feel warmth in the muscles on either side after a time. Then let go again into the fully relaxed posture.

Jaw (the most difficult to area to release from tension). From the 'cord' posture adopt the most gormless look you can manage by dropping the jaw. Wiggle your jaw from side to side (gently) and then relax. Do some gentle pretendy chewing and then relax once more into that utterly 'gormless' look. Imagine your mouth and jaw is full of dental anaesthetic! A relaxed jaw when singing makes a HUGE difference to the tone and the stamina of your vocal equipment.

NB: The finest singers do not smile (engaging the zygomatic muscles which pulls on the vocal equipment and harshens tone) as they sing – they smile between phrases, if appropriate!

Now, sing 'aaaaah' from that position and see how it feels.

How can you practice the relaxed jaw for singing? Here's an exercise to begin with:

Stand in front of a mirror and stand in the 'cord' position with a completely relaxed jaw. Place your tongue with the sides against the sides of your upper teeth with as little tension as possible. Only moving your tongue, sing 'ya, ya, ya, ya, ya ...' with NO movement of the jaw.

If your jaw moves, stop and rethink the relaxation/tension release procedure and start again. Don't let yourself off the hook - try to get the tension-free habit!

Do the same with 'la, la, la, la, la ...' For this one, the tongue should begin from just behind the upper teeth. Keep the tongue as relaxed as possible.

For advanced singers:

What's your tongue up to?

Tongue tension can really get in the way of your voice! The tongue is BIG - bigger than you think - and you don't want it sitting too far back and blocking the lovely sound you want to make. Many singers are not sure where to put it. Here's a system that works and will ensure that you sing the most beautiful vowels:

With a relaxed face and jaw, place your tongue (totally relaxed) resting, touching the back of your lower teeth. Imagine that it sits there with a slight curve, just waiting for when you need it. You can sing ALL the vowels with it in that position: ah; eh; eee; oh; oo.

Practise making all the consonants with the most minimal, relaxed and slow movements of your organs of articulation (tongue, teeth, lips, jaw, hard and soft palate) from that position. Try to avoid retracting the tongue so that it is blocking the path of the sound. Always ensure that your tongue returns to that completely relaxed starting position.

This takes some time to get used to but your voice will respond with greater vocal beauty. Next time we'll look in more detail about the open throat and the soft palate and think more about 'muscle memory'.

Singing for Health #4

Last time I mentioned a thing called 'muscle memory' and I'd like to go into that a bit more this time, particularly because there's one fundamentally important thing singers can do to help themselves which needs a bit of practice until it becomes a physical habit, or becomes permanently lodged in the 'muscle memory banks'. That is, the **open throat**.

Yes, I've used that much maligned word 'practice', but please don't let that put you off! Here's why singing through an open throat is the one thing I always hope participants will take away from any workshop or rehearsal I lead:

- It is the most fundamentally important way of ensuring vocal health and longevity because it takes the pressure off your vocal equipment.
- It means that you will produce your best voice and keep that voice for as long as you live. Once you get this habit and the muscles adapt you'll be able to sing for much longer without vocal tiredness.
- It is the means by which you can experience the most immediate health benefits of singing.

It's THAT important!

So, if you breathe and sing through an open throat, you will have a happy, healthy, rich-sounding voice.

How to get that open throat habit:

- Stand in the 'cord' posture from one of my previous tips and be as relaxed as you can. Now, imagine that you are going to take a deep drink from a mug/glass with a handle. Imagine that this drink is totally delicious and **believe** in the drink. Lift that mug/glass right up to your mouth believing that you are really about to drink. Don't allow your head to rise or go back. Feel the enormous space you have created in your throat to receive the

drink. Hold that space for a while and then relax. If you didn't get that big space, you have not believed in the drink. Go back to the start and commit your imagination to the process until it works.

- When you can find that big space, do it a few times and then hold it open for a bit longer each time as your hand returns to the totally relaxed position by your side.
- Now, without the imaginary glass, create that space for yourself and breath through it. Can you hear your breath going in? If you can, your throat is not open, so repeat all the above until the breath is silent.
- Take big breaths through the open throat, expanding from the diaphragm (see my previous tip about your breathing muscle) and imagine filling your lower back with air, then let each breath out in a big sigh with no control/conservation of air. Be free! Pour it out! Stay relaxed (cord posture) and just let that breath go.
- Once you are sure you can do this with an open throat and without bossing the breath around, do this with a sung 'aaaaah', and let it go until the breath runs out completely.
- Do a bit of this each day and then apply it to singing actual music. It will take a bit of time for 'muscle memory' to make this a habit, but we have time just now, don't we? You'll be surprised at the new tone and volume in your voice and, eventually, by new levels of vocal stamina.

How else can you get that open throat? You can try a pretendy yawn BUT do think about where your tongue is (didn't I talk about that once before?) because a yawn tends to make the back of the tongue fill the space we need for the air, so keep it relaxed with the tip just behind your lower teeth.

NB: you may find at first that you are singing shorter phrases as you are releasing the breath more readily and not trying to hold onto it, BUT

your system will adapt and you will find that you will be singing LONGER phrases than you could before, once you've really got the habit and it's become 'muscle memory'. Your voice will also get louder and richer.

For advanced singers:

What's really happening? Some of you will know already that I've actually been talking about raising the soft palate.

The best open throat position involves concentrating on raising the soft palate (one of those organs of articulation I've mentioned in a previous tip). For those of who are interested in anatomy and/or are not sure where their soft palate is:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_palate

- Imagine you are holding a precious egg in your mouth. It belongs to a rare species and may become extinct if you relax the soft palate and crush it. Attenborough will be after you with an army of conservationists, so always breathe/sing with that small, utterly precious and fragile egg in your mouth until it becomes second nature.
- Try not to relax the soft palate too much between phrase so that the breath is audible going in – if you hear your breath, that's a reminder to get that soft palate raised again!

Keep breathing, dear friends, and releasing your voices as freely as you can. Stay well and stay vocal! Next time we'll take a look at how to approach low and high notes.

Singing for Health #5

Keep it Simple... make it easy on yourself.

Hello again, vocal friends!

This time I want to talk about accessing your full range (I'll talk about ranges, voice categories and registers in a future singing bulletin). Many singers get into the habit of putting all kinds of extra physical effort into finding their low and high notes. If you know Gerald Hoffnung's cartoon The Hoffnung Festival Chorus, you'll understand what I mean about the weird physical actions people make that they think might help. Have fun looking at that (and his other musical stuff) in his book The Hoffnung Music Festival.

<http://www.fulltable.com/VTS/aoi/h/hoffnung/hoff2/aa.html>

I am the bringer of good news: to find your lowest notes NO ACTION IS REQUIRED! If you go digging for them, they just burrow away like the shyest of moles. Making faces, tensing anything, lowering your jaw to your chest, grimacing – or any of the other strange things people do **actually work against them**, so here's the one exercise that will always help you find your lowest notes:-

- Relax!

It's as simple as that. I showed you how in a previous message. Look at yourself in a mirror and (having first warmed-up with humming and so on, see previous tips) quietly run down a scale to where you find the bottom of your voice. Observe yourself – what's going on? Are there habits you need to change?

Like so much else to do with singing, **just don't boss your voice around.**

What about high notes, you ask? There's more to do here, but, once again, none of the tension or grimacing in the world is going to do it for you. Here's what you need:

- Loads of breath on board (see previous about breathing), concentrating on filling the lungs at the level of the diaphragm and filling up your lower back with air.
- An open throat (see previous).
- Stand in front of a mirror and (having first done plenty of warming-up with humming and so on, see previous tips) sing an arpeggio up and down. Pour the breath out like a sigh – don't EVER try to conserve breath. Do this a few times until fully relaxed. Take it up in pitch ...
- As you approach the highest note in the middle, slightly and smoothly expand your diaphragm (you should know where it is by now but, if it needs waking-up, do those steam engine/candle/feather exercises I gave you). Feel the extra 'support' – yes, folks, that's what we mean by that mysterious word.

Doing this may not work well at first but do persevere, concentrating on TOTAL RELAXATION until you ask for that bit of diaphragmatic 'support'. Help this to become 'muscle memory' by practising it.

Apply this to real music – any arc-shaped phrase or one that require a bit of a leap upwards. Make friends with your diaphragm and use it!

Does your voice ever crack on a high note? This is because you have (a) not completely relaxed, (b) have not taken enough breath on board, (c) have not first woken up your breathing muscle (diaphragm) and asked for its help (gently, of course, because we never achieve anything with violence), (d) have not opened your throat (see last my last tip).

A steady flow of air is vital!

You will have realised this already, but strengthening your diaphragmatic response and discovering your full breathing capacity can be a great boon in case of pulmonary illness. From asthma to Covid-

19 – this is real self-help. I got through my worst night with C-19 by visualising and concentrating on my singer's breathing.

Stay well, dear friends, and keep on singing for ALL its health benefits: physical, mental and spiritual.

Singing for Health #6

Our brains are in charge - a few words on the psychology of singing.

Most of us have an internal dialogue, that little voice in your head that can get in the way of whatever we're doing. Recent research suggests that there are rare people who don't experience this - I wonder if you're one of them? If so, I'm not sure if that makes you fortunate or not!

For the vast majority of singers, that little voice ticks us off or makes negative comments such as: 'you'll never sing that line in one breath'; 'you'll never reach that note'; 'so-and-so is singing far better than me and showing me up'; 'I don't think I'm any good' ... and more ... If we listen to that little voice and believe it, we DO run out of breath, forget good technique, imagine that we're not valuable ... etc.

We mostly dislike our own voice (unless we're Elizabeth Schwartzkopf who chose all her own recordings for Desert Island discs!), and most people enjoy other people's voices much more than their own. This is why I spend a lot of time in singing lessons reminding people how interesting their voice is as well as helping them to make it even more lovely. Getting perspective on one's own voice is difficult. Here's one way:

Listen to someone else singing and enjoy their voice/performance. Then start imagining it's *your* voice - how do your feelings change? I find I get much more critical and start to see all the flaws. I've learnt from this that we are all super-critical of ourselves and that we need to know when to switch-off the little voice in your head and stop the negative internal dialogue. We can choose to be positive or negative about our own voices (and those others, but that a whole new can of worms!).

Try this: When you want to sing a line in one breath, relax and use the breathing techniques from past 'tips', giving the inner voice a new script: 'I can sing this line in one breath - it's easy!'

When you want to reach all parts of your range (observing the techniques I mentioned last time) the inner voice should be saying: 'this is a doddle - I'm SOOOO relaxed and able to do this'.

When you find another singer intimidating, say this to yourself: 'that person's inner voice has been critical, too, s/he may feel intimidated by **me!**'. Many singers, from the beginner amateur right through to the top professional, suffer from 'imposter syndrome'. We need to get over ourselves!

Above all, be kind to yourself as well as others.

Let's start every vocalisation with a positive attitude. There are days when our voice might not seem to be going so well - just relax and let it all go, saying 'tomorrow will be better'. As Bing Crosby sang:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Qk9o_ZeR7s

Sight-reading

Here's a challenge for everyone, whether or not you can read music or not. Something we can do on our own is to have a go at sight-reading or improving/keeping-up existing skills. I'll come to beginners in a minutes, but for more experienced singers who can read music either a bit or a lot, there are loads of free scores online you can use for practice:

<https://www.cpdl.org/wiki/>

This brilliant website is full of choral music scores FREE, gratis and for nothing. Why not download a score a day and sing through it? Have some fun and at the same time keep your skills alive and, even, improve them.

For people who are beginners at sight-reading, you can find many lovely choral works on Youtube with running scores - hum and then sing along! No-one cares if you make a mistake and you can keep on going back and trying again. Concentrate on how the notes of your part look as you hum or sing along and start to associate the look of the score with

the sound you are making. It will take time and concentration, but you may find that written music starts to make more sense.

Here's a random selection to start you off:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWJRKoKrV_8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjvrT-0QKFU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HFvgjCOo70>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJrXhjt7Gwo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oeLIgzAe5sI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XITlmDJ9-Hk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cilvhB-zTfc>

If you ask Youtube for 'choral music with score', loads more will appear.

Have fun and keep singing!

Singing for Health #7

I hope you're all keeping well, dear singing friends, and that you're finding that vocalising helps to keep your spirits up by accessing the 'feel good' factor of a jolly good sing/hum/wordless noodling along with the radio - whatever you can find to release that voice. Don't forget, the voice is an essential part of YOU.

Today I'd like to talk to you about the onset of sound. If you're breathing efficiently (see previous tips about the diaphragm and letting the breath pour out without hindrance etc) and if your throat is nicely open (remember the 'drink' and the 'egg' from an earlier tip?) then how do you start the sound? Some of you may be saying 'silly question', but is it?

Let's begin with vowels: if you see a word beginning with a vowel, let's take 'alleluia' as an example, do you sometimes (or always!) begin with a bump and the feeling of a catch at the back of your throat? Do you know what I mean when I call it a 'glottal stop'?

A glottal stop is what happens when you have a build-up of air that is suddenly released. The "glottal" part tells you that this is formed by the glottis, also known as the vocal folds. In a glottal stop, the vocal cords close, air builds up behind them, then the cords open quickly, resulting in a burst of air. When you hear this from a singer, it often results in a small moment of the voice wandering around the note it is aiming for. It sounds harsh, ugly and violent. Your vocal folds HATE it and feel bullied by it!

Here's how to avoid it:

When you have opened your throat to breath and sing, don't let it close again before the onset of sound. When I spoke of 'muscle memory' before, I meant that the feeling of that openness should be practiced until it is habitual.

Take a big intake of breath from your diaphragm, filling your lower back with air, and prepare to sing 'alleluia' - with the throat still open

start the freely release air flow ahead of the voice. Try it first just with 'aaaaah'.

If that bump is still there, and if you want a fool-proof method of avoiding it, then 'stroke the cat':

Imagine the cat is at shoulder height, facing away from you. You want to stroke it from the head to the tail, towards you. Place your hand in the air in front of you, ready to stroke. Breath in and let the air go in an 'aaaah' as you stroke that imaginary cat. Repeat several times, listening to the way your voice is released without that glottal stop 'bump'.

Make sure that you truly release the breath with the voice – pour it out!

That's the vowels sorted. Starting with a consonant is easier BUT only if you produce it gently. I may say more about that later but, for now, look at the consonants at the start of something you're singing and say to yourself: is that a sing-able consonant such as 'l', 'm', 'n' etc on which I can make a pitched sound? If so, you can anticipate that at the start and have the pitch in your head so that you gently form the consonant on that pitch. This makes for more beautiful singing!

Try humming on 'l', 'm', 'n', '-ng', 'f' and 'v'. Play with making those sounds with as little facial tension as possible. Then open each open up into an 'aaaaah'. Make it gentle and lovely while at the same time fully releasing the breath.

I think that's all for now, folks, but I'll maybe have something to say about hard consonants and plosives another time. I wish you all the very best of good health and happy singing!

Singing for Health #8

Here's another bulletin about how to make your singing, whether solo or choral, more beautiful. I've already written about the importance of bodily and facial relaxation and freedom of the breath, now I'm going to ask you to join these ideas up to encourage a most important vocal concept:

Legato, or 'singing with line'.

The Italian word 'legato' sounds a bit fancy, but it is vital to the most lovely singing. It's all about smoothness and the linking-up of all the notes to form an unbroken line - a line disturbed as little as possible by the production of words.

One can begin just with the idea of the 'vocalise' - sing some tunes you know just to 'aaaaaaah', with a smooth, released air flow and no bumps between notes. Do this until you feel the line is utterly smooth. Now for words ...

It's the words that get in the way, so how do we stop them intruding too much?

Firstly, we can do our best to prevent chopping up the 'line' with explosive consonants. Last time I mentioned the 'singing' consonants of 'n', 'm', 'l' and so on. You can begin by making sure that they are always sung through without stopping the breath. Now I want to direct you towards minimising the machine-gun effect of over-produced consonants.

We've all heard people using microphones who forget the power of the plosives 'b' and 'p', sending explosions through the loudspeakers and making us wince (almost as much as when people cough into a microphone). Now imagine that's going to happen when you sing and practice minimising them by loosening the lip tension that creates the bumps. See how little lip engagement you need to make a perfectly clear 'b' or 'p'.

You can do this much more easily by thinking even harder about relaxing your face ('tips' *passim*), but here's something new to add to your facial relaxation routine:

Lip trills/raspberries: In the USA they are 'lip trills' and here they are 'raspberries' – you know what to do! Make your lips as relaxed as possible and then blow raspberries as loosely as you can with a steady, voluminous flow of air. Aim to be completely relaxed, as though your mouth is full of dental anaesthetic. When you start singing, try to keep that feeling of looseness/total relaxation throughout!

Even more percussive are 'd' and 't' and, to overcome the ugliness of these, you have to take 'thinking Italian' to a whole new level. Instead of using our usual English method of enunciating these two consonants, try doing this:

Place your (relaxed) tongue immediately behind your upper teeth. With as minimal and gentle a movement possible, use that position to create 'd' and 't'. Try singing something you know really well using this technique and feel how much smoother your singing line is.

For Advanced Singers

Consonants should always be formed before the note. In other words, each note begins with the VOWEL. This means that you need always to look ahead constantly to ensure that your organs of articulation don't need to make sudden journeys, creating those bumps and hitches that destroy the legato line.

So, if you're starting to sing with the word 'Let' as in the hymn 'Let all the world in every corner sing', you need to breathe well in advance, fix on the starting pitch, and sing the first note on the 'l' before the phrase begins and allow the '-eh' to fill the first note.

If you're starting with the word 'Tell' as in the song 'Ten green bottles', you need to breathe early and place your tongue in the 't' position (above) so that the first note is filled with the 'eh'.

Word of warning! If you make that 't' too hard, the pitch will wander around the note rather than be bang in the centre!

Once you find you can start songs/hymns (whatever you want to sing) in this way, start to apply this principle *within* the phrases.

This takes a lot of work but the result will be so lovely that it will be worth the extra effort and concentration.

Thanks for reading, folks - stay well and keep on singing!