

Shaping Your Voice

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Introduction

Learning to sing properly is really difficult.

The two key components to me, making singing difficult, are (1) figuring out whether it's really you or just the room acoustics and (2) the fact that you can't really examine the parts of your body the way you would with any other instrument that don't (subjunctive, why not?) use your mouth, because what influences your tone is invisible to you.

Before continuing to read and experiment, I would like to make two recommendations.

First, make sure you have a microphone to record yourself with and a professional reflection filter behind it to make sure room acoustics don't come into play. That way, when it's wrong, it can *either* be a technical mistake *or* a creative mistake. Technical mistakes apply to all music, meaning that your singing technique or theory is off, and creative mistakes to specific kinds of music, meaning that the shape of your voice is off.

If you want to know how much acoustics can form a bad influence on what's being recorded, first sing in your medium-high range toward the wall in a typical living room. Do you notice how recorded shrill overtones tear through your eardrums? Do you want to know where they come from?

Sing straight into the corner and note how it exponentially increases your problem.

If you do have finances for a basic microphone, but not for a reflection filter, find the smallest bedroom you can find, but don't use the toilet : the toilet bowl causes nasty reflections also. And smell... Really, the smell!

Small bedrooms have pretty good dimensions for good basic relatively dry recordings.

Second, when you fix technical mistakes in terms of basic singing technique, make sure you make a list of every mistake you can make and every appropriate solution. If you correct only one mistake, you'll find that the solution to your previous mistake is a mistake in itself. The correct way of singing is the median of all problems that are also solutions.

Make sure you correct everything on the list in one go. When I corrected everything I might have done wrong in one go, I ended up where I started, and found out that my problem wasn't me, but it was the acoustics of the room.

I should note that I had been practicing singing a bit more already, without thinking about anything. At first my singing was absolute shit... The stinky smelly kind. Then I practiced and it started to sound all right within my then-minimally-explored creative limits. When you get all of the breathing issues out of the way, you're ready to go, right?

No, then there are "registers." The book on singing — technique and education — that I would like to recommend is "The Complete Handbook of Voice Training" by Richard Alderson. On top of that I would like to recommend a couple of things in this essay, that by now should be known but aren't in every singing book also not in Alderson's.

Basics are a lot more basic than most people make them out to be. A master always adheres to the basics a.k.a. sound fundamentals. Smart people learn to keep it simple after overcomplicating things. Another way of interpreting Occam's razor : in order to simplify things, you first need to sufficiently complicate them, otherwise you don't have sufficient material for a sound foundation to cut away to.

With everything in place, what we now need to do is explore basic embodiment principles as they are related to singing and the way they help shape your voice in terms of natural overtones and undertones. You need to explore different parts of your body, as in how they come into play : the mouth, the throat, and your chest.

Posture! Now sit up straight or stand up straight and look straight forward for practice. This way your body posture, that may in the future get to be a little more relaxed, doesn't even get in the way a little.

Don't you dare slump like I sometimes do, not getting that that's actually why I and you displace sounds and technique in our bodies, making parts of our bodies act up that shouldn't even be involved. You'll damage your vocal cords when you do slump, so don't do that.

Drive or distortion for instance will move down from the top of your throat, where it joins your skull, to your vocal cords and that's not just a little bad, that's really (really) bad! Drive and distortion you need to get as high up in your throat as possible, close to your soft palate, getting your mouth involved, to make sure it doesn't damage anything!

The Mouth

There's nothing poetic about how the mouth works, it's all very mechanical, but what you can do with it is poetic, so you need to understand the mechanics to support your creative expressions. It's like understanding how different kinds of paint work : they all offer a different range of interpretation, not only in what you can do with them, but also the effect of how you apply them in terms of thickness and in combination with other materials.

Lips

Lips seem like the end station of sound to most people. You just open them up and sound can come out, right? It's a bit more subtle than that.

I took practical training in Zürich and when I entered Switzerland, you could clearly tell by the way I spoke German that I'm Dutch. Standup comedians on television rightfully criticized the Dutch for thinking they could easily master languages and had high language

abilities, which stimulated me to address my problems, simply because I didn't want to speak like a dog, like us Dutch people do in foreign languages.

Years later, I run into this German guy that tells me I speak German with a Swiss accent. Real funny, but I meant to speak without an accent. This in practice doesn't exist : if you want to speak without an accent, you have to learn an accent. That way the language sounds like it's natural to you.

I try to emulate all of my Rock'n'Roll heroes in speaking English, so if I sound a bit drunk every now and then, I suppose I'm sorry.

Anyway, the difference between Swiss High-German and German High-German (High-German not being better, but the German that's spoken around the world and not just locally) is that the Swiss pronounce the words with some sharpness to them and the Germans speak German the way the French kiss, when they give a regular kiss and not a French kiss.

What do I mean by that? On my journey of discovery, what I noticed is that to let out the overtones and higher tones in general, it's important to draw back the corners of the mouth more, to accommodate your pitch. How much you do it depends on how you mean to sound.

Pressing your lips forward with an exaggerated kiss, fish mouthing your sounds, the emphasis moves toward the undertones. You can shift emphasis by changes to these positions to varying degrees to sharpen or soften your tone.

Jaw

Your jaw controls volume and varying pitches need different kinds of volume-control. Your singing should be relaxed at all times, meaning that you should never belt out your song. To sing more loudly you need to forget about putting lots of pressure behind it. Pressure also should only be used to varying degrees to shape the sound, but as soon as it influences volume, pressure is a bad thing : never use pressure for volume.

Pressure isn't something that happens in the mouth, but in the throat and chest in different ways, so to reference how you shape tone with pressure, don't forget to read the rest of the essay. For now, focus on the influence of the jaw on tone.

Lower tones simply need less room to reach pleasant volumes than high tones, but dropping your jaw will allow lower volumes also to resonate more clearly and achieve higher volumes. Lowering your jaw too much however, will limit how deep your tone can drop. Lower tones are better accommodated by slightly but not fully dropped jaws.

High tones need a lot of room to reach proper volumes and dropping your jaw sufficiently — hold on Beetlejuice, not literally on the floor unless you want others to produce the etc. — is necessary to accommodate high pitched tones. When you have a minimally pleasant volume 'O' and you now change to singing an 'Ee,' you need to drop that jaw, otherwise the air won't come out, it will be constricted, and it will sound faint and eery more than airy.

Lower tones need a more closed but definitely still open jaw. Higher tones need a jaw that's opened up more.

Tongue

As a mouth harp player this is one of the things I first investigated in terms of shaping tone, maybe too much, disregarding other parts of the mouth, throat, and chest. Even when I

focused on the tongue, I didn't immediately get what you can and what you should do. I realized what my problem was, but not how to fix it.

If one way of fixing it doesn't work, look for another : consider all options.

How can you shape and position your tongue? (1) Up, middle, down. (2) Hollow (spoon), flat, or bulging in breadth. (3) Tip of the tongue up, flat, or down. (4) Tongue pressed forward, kept in the middle, or retracted into the mouth.

All of these movements can be combined and add to the sound of your singing : your voice — the overtones and undertones and even the type of sound, smooth or somewhat overdriven, that your voice produces. When you've somewhat found what you mean to produce in terms of sound, keeping your tongue in the same position, the shape of the tongue allows you to hone your sound and skills.

What does tongue shape and position do?

Keeping the tongue up, high in your mouth, with lower tones constricts the airflow, offering a more muffled sound, limiting the number of overtones the voice seems to offer, placing more emphasis on the undertones. This means in practice that if you want to open it up again you might want to add a bit of a distorted sound to make it useful. Also, a bulging tongue instead of a hollow tongue will constrict the airflow too much, so you need to make your tongue somewhat hollow. It will feel like you're spooning it in the top of your mouth.

Ironically, for high tones you'll find that your tongue actually needs to be up in the mouth in a spooned or hollow tube fashion, otherwise you can't produce them. On the one hand this might have to do with the fact that the wave length is shorter, so you need to compress the air, and it probably also helps in counteracting them, filling them out with a bit more low-end. This however doesn't change anything in that I can't sing high tones with my tongue flat in the bottom.

More pressure by your tongue in this high position adds more drive.

Lowering your tongue to the middle or fully dropped position opens up the airflow and for as far as I can tell only accommodates for lower tones. Making your tongue hollow, flat, or bulgy in the middle or bottom of your mouth doesn't affect tone all that much, but pushing the tip of your tongue up does, eliminating overtones, muffling your sound.

Try all of it yourself.

You need to find your own tone and you need to do so specifically for every word and every phrase that you sing as a part of your song. Although the pointers as to shaping your tongue are pretty accurate, don't take my observations on tone for granted, but experiment for yourself with these features of your tongue and find how you hear your tone develop based on different interactions of the tongue-muscle with airflow.

I'm a singer that quite frankly also likes to stick his tongue out a bit to accommodate some tones. Some singers do, some don't. At first I worried about it being out there... Nobody cares. I never did, never paid attention to other singers doing it until I noticed myself doing it. Officially you don't really have to stick out the tip of your tongue as long as you just press it forward, but hey... *Some* audiences, right?

So, singing... Don't forget to record it! It will often sound different in the recording than in your head. The best in your head isn't the best in other people's ears.

Unite To Free Yourself in all Registers

One of the problems singers face that seems to elude us in a lot of ways has been described as singing in different registers, which strictly separates the different ranges of tones our voices can master, separating them as if our voice and body consist of multiple separate instruments, even though we are only one instrument, one register, that's highly pliable.

Do we need to switch registers? Do we need to take a keyboard and find where we run into problems singing every tone separately, remembering the highest tone that the lower register can muster and the next tone as the lowest that we use of the higher register? How do we change registers?

Another way of asking this is : how do I get rid of that falsetto-voice when I want to sing Rock'n'Roll or anything else with a different texture in the higher ranges? And how do we get pleasure way down below without tripping and falling?

On YouTube you'll find teachers that show you the exercise of starting at the lowest tone you can sing and gradually but speedily going up through what used to be labeled registers, all the way up to the highest tone. When I tried that, I noticed that I sang through all of the registers smoothly, without hesitation and without problems, with preservation of texture.

This basic singing exercise made me wonder why I did have problems singing in different registers and what these registers than were and why I could address them in one go when I just sang a fluently ascending tone.

The answer, as I've now come to realize, isn't that you have different origins you sing from physically, but it's the interaction of the different parts of the mouth that allow certain tones to happen or not. Instead of thinking in terms of registers, you need to think in terms of embodiment : how does the way the different parts of my mouth interact allow for all of these tones to happen?

Were people wrong in naming these different ranges registers? Not necessarily... Pulling the corners of my mouth further sideways is a little bit like pushing or pulling a number of levers on the Hammond-organ or pressing pedals on a church organ with your foot to open up registers.

However accurate the description as a parallel, calling them registers as a metaphor may be a problem. In case of singing it's going to cause problems, because we don't really have buttons, we have the shape and position of our lips, tongue, and jaw. This means that there isn't a strict physical differentiation between these so called registers in where they originate, but in how they originate instead.

To get rid of registers and open up all registers at once, merging them into one register, namely your voice, forget about the metaphor, however accurate. The metaphor was a correct first step to exploring the problem, but not the end station : the solution.

Regard the machine : your body, your mouth, throat, and chest, and note that your mouth all by itself is what allows certain ranges of tones to happen, nothing else, not even the never more than average pressure in your throat or chest. There's only one instrument when it comes to allowing tonal range to happen and that's your mouth.

Just get those corners of your mouth in position at the end of the lower register even before the first note of the higher register. It will only make for a smoother transgression including the minimally necessary preservation of tonal colors (intonation) across the spectrum. The dropping of your jaw for higher tones to my experience follows naturally. If it doesn't for you, that's okay, now you know what to do : drop that jaw.

The Throat and Chest

The throat and chest handle how open the tone is in a way similar to that of the tongue. The tongue higher up in the mouth provides a more constricted air passage. The throat and chest work in unison with the tongue for a relaxed minimally necessary airflow when the voice is meant to resonate cleanly and clearly. They work with the tongue in the same way for everything else.

A clean and clear voice quite frequently can be too harsh. As a parallel you might look at the sound of a minimally saturated tube amplifier that adds a sweetness to the tone, softening it a little bit. This is something that can really add to your singing as well and you can handle it by making your throat and chest work together properly.

By adding minimal pressure to your singing without making it forced, meaning that it still needs to feel relaxed : you should feel the kind of pressure in your throat like when you gently and comfortably press your hand against your chest. This way you soften the tone.

When you add minimal pressure in your throat, you should probably also add the same minimal but comfortable pressure with your chest to counter the restricted air passage. What you should never do, however, is add any kind of pressure anywhere that feels the least bit uncomfortable. It should all be relaxed, gentle, and comfortable.

When it comes to adding not just overdrive but distortion to your voice, it's a little bit about pressure, and very much about placement. Drive happens through pressure on multiple levels, chest, throat, and mouth, but distortion is very specific.

Distortion should be way up in your throat as close to the soft palate as you can get it, even to the extent that you'll feel it gently interact with your soft palate : that's the one place where you can safely and comfortably add distortion without hurting your vocal cords.

Distortion to me feels more like a technique that I find hard to define, than as a part of my vocal tracts.

Conclusion? No... I'll Stick to Recommendations

This is going to sound corny, but I don't have any conclusions. The conclusion, that's you doing what you do, but I do need to point something out that I pointed out before, and I really need to stress this : you don't know what you sound like unless you record it.

When I sing with drive, as in putting a minimal bit of pressure on, making way for those high overtones, hitting those high notes, it still sounds like a clean tone to me. When I record it, that's when I hear that subtle bit of drive that my voice offers. Some voices will offer more than others, but that little bit that I like, that sweet spot, it's most definitely there.

What I do notice is that it feels different when I sing with drive than when I sing with a falsetto voice. A falsetto voice doesn't really add texture to your singing and focuses more on natural clean resonance. It breaks with what my voice sounds like in lower registers. Preserving the continuity, turning all registers into one register, that really will always be my challenge.

So, record your voice. Respect the fact that your voice is your instrument, with your way being broader than in the past expected range of interpretation. It isn't *my* voice. No matter whether you're also a man or a woman or a canary, you in the end do have to make use of your body and it resonates within *your* broad range of interpretation.

If you don't feel like limiting your singing to one particular style of music, don't. Try different kinds of music. Explore.

Rock'n'Roll will have drive. Blues will be rough and ready as life is. Country may be melancholic. Opera may introduce some fat to your singing, but it will typically stay clean. Tango has a soft edge to it, sung with more of a kiss that I once mistook for a whisper, or it's a pure desperate outcry of whatever loving pain you may feel.

There's no reason for you not to sing other music. What might hold you back at first is familiarity : you need to study it, practice it, and feel it, very much like you do the music you have always listened to. Don't be afraid to go back to your beginnings. Also, try different ways of singing in different contexts to see what works and what doesn't.

And be nice to yourself and everyone around you that means to sing. And if you have a crackle in your voice and dry elbows, first go see an endocrinologist and take care of those thyroid problems you have. If you want to learn to sing you can do it, but you need to have a healthy diet. Sorry, but you need more than French fries.

Literature

Alderson, Richard (1979) "The Complete Handbook of Voice Training" : Parker Publishing Company * West Nyack, New York 10994.