

YOUR INSTRUMENT IS YOUR BODY

THE SINGER IS THE INSTRUMENT. You are the trumpet, the cello, the guitar, the keyboard. Your body, your entire body becomes the instrument. Vocalists are given an instrument at birth, like it or not. No refund, no return. If a singer is not happy with the way his voice sounds, he can't walk over to another larynx. You have to work with what you are given. Singers are both the instrument and the player. You are always with your instrument every moment of every day.

Every time you open your mouth to sing, the sum total of all the events of the past weeks will be known. Were you laughing or crying or talking or whispering? Were you in all kinds of temperatures, from dry heat to winter chills, or hot muggy weather to ice cold air-conditioned rooms? Were there any bumps or bruises or broken bones? Did you eat a lot of fruits and vegetables or did you eat pizza? Did you drink water and juice or did you drink soda and beer? All these things, and many more, contribute to the health and condition of your instrument.

There are certain physical elements that contribute to the sound of your voice. The size and thickness of your vocal folds, combined with the size and shape of your mouth, nasal and pharyngeal cavities (the pharynx is the tube-like section of the throat just above your larynx), create the blueprint of your sound. When these factors complement each other and the person wants to sing, they are a "gifted" singer. Many people may have been born with great vocal instruments but will never know it because they have no desire to sing. The rest of us have to take what we were given at birth, and build it into a better instrument. All you need is the desire.

Other than structure, the sound is also shaped by the operation of the instrument. Here's where the hard work pays off. The operation of the voice is just like any other instrument. A sound is produced by a coordinated effort of muscles and cartilages and this is the one adjustable factor. You can change what mother nature gave you by developing and strengthening the way the muscles perform. This is the only hope for those of us who were not born with the perfect voice. Training the vocal muscles, whether you figure it out yourself or study with someone, is needed to enhance the sound created by a larynx that lacks the right proportions. Just because the gifted singer can get away with more, doesn't mean they wouldn't benefit from being responsible about it.

How to keep a healthy voice

The relationship between good health and being in good voice is why singers are noted hypochondriacs, but I've never known a good musician that wasn't finicky about the care of their instrument. We all have a tremendous power inside us for preventive maintenance. All it takes is a little knowledge about how the body operates. Develop your instincts to recognize the warning signs.

MENTAL ATTITUDE

THERE IS NOTHING MORE POWERFUL THAN YOUR OPINION OF YOURSELF. In the end that statement makes or breaks every singer. Many singers have a hard time saying what they like about their voice. They're only ready with the list of things that need to be fixed. Everyone's list is different, but it all comes from the same need to make singing something that's difficult or distant. Your belief can, and will, stop you cold from improving your voice. Every tension in your body stems from a belief that the tension is necessary. Simply put, the mind feeds the tensions which restrict the voice.

KEEP YOUR VOICE HYDRATED

Remember the larynx requires constant lubrication to stay flexible. When you become dehydrated, the throat is one of the first areas to suffer. The body, or should I say your support system, doesn't care that you're a singer. You need to take care of your body first in order to have healthy vocal membranes.

Water is a necessity of life. The flexibility and vibrancy of your instrument depend upon the water level in your system. Of course, everything you drink contains water, but the other contents of the drink will decide if water is gained or lost in the digesting process. Some liquids, like coffee, pop, and alcohol require more water to break down than the drink provides. Fruits, natural fruit juice, and spring water provide the best source of water.

When you sing and tense the walls of the throat the saliva ducts are restricted. Very soon you'll feel you need to take a drink of something between every song, or sometimes during the song. It's the tension that makes you feel thirsty not the lack of body fluids. When you drink water, it takes about fifteen to twenty minutes for it to travel through the system to wet your throat. Learning to relax the walls of the throat will allow the fluids to flow freely and keep your larynx wet.

Cells flush some of their waste away via the water in your system. The more water in your body, the more opportunity there is to clean out. Sweat and urine are the two best garbage dumps you have and they both require water. When you are dehydrated, the body loses its cleansing ability, and the toxicity level in your cells will rise. The body will channel the water in your system to where it is needed most. This is why your throat and lips become so dry when you have a cold. The mucous membranes (larynx, nose and throat) are the first areas to be short changed when the body needs water elsewhere to flush out an impurity. It never hurts to overcompensate the protection water provides, and it's such a simple thing to do.

THINGS TO AVOID

SMOKING

I'll bet this one is no surprise, even if you're a smoker. You don't have to be a genius to see the harm that drawing hot smoke over delicate membranes causes, but still you continue. Here are the facts as they relate to singers.

The larynx is made of mucous membranes and needs constant protection from drying out. Cigarette smoke burns away the protective lubrication that coats the larynx. This also includes the air in a smoke filled club. Second-hand smoke can be just as damaging, especially if you are singing in a smoky environment. Even though the aerobic action of singing does help to cleanse the lungs, you should take extra precautions to insure you don't suffer any repercussions. Lots of water is needed to help cleanse the chemicals that made their way into your blood stream. The body is an incredible machine when it comes to getting rid of toxins.

Some people are more sensitive to smoke than others, but we all are aware when the smoke in the room gets to the point where your eyes burn. The inner walls of the sinus cavities in most people are also affected. When the lining of the sinus cavity is stimulated, it sets off a discharge of extra mucus so the smoke won't dry out the membranes. This means your instrument will have an extra thick blanket of mucus covering it, dampening its ability to vibrate. When you sing, you'll feel this as a lack of response or flexibility, causing you to push harder than you should.

Attempting to sing with a coated larynx is like trying to play piano with mittens on. You'll be able to create some sound but at a great disadvantage. The protective mucus is there for a reason but that sure doesn't help the singer.

If you are a smoker, the cilia that line the walls of the throat are burned away. These little hairs are there to lift phlegm and mucus up and away from the lungs. Without them the only method left is to cough. This is what is known as smoker's cough, and it's no option for a singer.

The action of coughing closely resembles your hands being clapped together with your arms starting as far apart as you can get them and moving in as fast as you can. Bang! And that's just one cough. You'll need lots more to get all the junk out of your lungs. Bang, bang, bang. The constant explosion of the cough causes the two vocal folds to swell. The voice relies on the folds' ability to make a nice clean seal to resist air. The swollen membranes resemble balloons and makes a very poor resistor. This sloppy seal lets air leak by and this creates a breathy sound. When you try to correct the sound, you force the two folds together which causes damage to their edges. The more you force these membranes, the more heat is generated due to the friction of the vibrating muscles. Heat means the folds will swell more and you find yourself in a degenerating cycle - the harder you try, the more damage you cause.

The voice runs on wind power and smoking obviously impedes the lungs' ability. It also leeches many vitamins out of your system to lower your overall immunity against illness.

Smoking pot is worse than smoking cigarettes. All the same things apply to pot as with cigarettes, and more. Smoking one joint equals twenty cigarettes. The smoke is heavy with resins and hotter because its' unfiltered. The vocal folds are burned and dried quicker in addition to the effect of the THC on your brain. Singing is a physical activity and requires lots of coordination.

DO I HAVE TO PRACTICE?

Deep down inside everyone knows that if they practice, they'll improve. Singing is a workout of small and large muscles and requires a great deal of co-ordination. Although you use your voice constantly, it's not challenged to grow and develop during normal speech. Actually, the way you talk is where you get most of your bad vocal habits. Small muscle activity is much harder to develop than larger muscles. The difficulty is in isolating the small from the larger, more dominant muscles.

The most important thing to remember when you practice is that you're not "singing," you're *vocalizing*. I use two separate terms because you need to be clear about which one you're doing. When you vocalize your only concern is the way the instrument

(your body) is working, not how you sound. When you're singing, your thoughts should be focused on emotion and performance.

Don't waste your time trying to sound good when you're vocalizing. It's like worrying about how you look when you're jogging or working out. This is the time for exploring and taking chances. It's a good idea to find a place where no one can hear you (or do it in a group like a vocal music class so everyone can feel vulnerable together), so you feel free to let yourself go. That is the fastest way for your voice to grow.

Muscles have memory. They can be taught what to do and will store the memory as a chemical change in the cells. Muscles don't have brains, so they never decide whether an action is good or bad. Repetition reinforces the muscles' memory. Even if you think you never practice, every time you talk you send a message to the same muscles you use to sing. You can either make this work for, or against you.

WHAT SHOULD I VOCALIZE?

It's not what you vocalize, it's how. Remember the exercises aren't magic, they provide an opportunity for a muscle to change or grow. Your understanding of what's going on mechanically while you're doing an exercise is very important. The combination promotes the most change.

Pick a single issue and focus on it. Don't try to fix everything at once, it's more productive to move one step at a time. Reading about how your voice works will help you decide what to work on first. You should choose an exercise based on what it does and where you need the growth.

I always think the best place to start is with your breathing. While working, pay close attention to how your body is reacting, then notice if it has done anything for your voice. Wherever you feel a resistance to an exercise is where you need to work. For example, if you're trying to get the diaphragm to be more active and you notice your stomach is tight, you should work on stretching those muscles before moving to anything else.

Once you've gained some ability with your breathing, switch to the larynx. During the first vocal exercises your attention should still be on breathing. How did your body react to making sound? The answer tells you what you should work on next. Let's say the minute you vocalized a scale your jaw or stomach tensed. Even if you got these muscles to relax in your breathing exercises they may have to be taught to stay released all over again.

Your practice routine should progress in steps like building blocks. Start with the most basic exercise. There are no trophies given out for jumping ahead and trying something above your ability. Always begin at a comfortable pitch and volume. Remember not to judge yourself by how you sound. You can monitor your progress by the amount of effort it requires to do something. When an exercise gets easier it means you've developed, and it's time to move on to something more challenging.

You can increase the difficulty of a workout a couple of ways. As an exercise becomes easier, turn up the volume. See how loud you can vocalize and still remain relaxed. Any tension you add defeats the exercise, so take yourself to the point where you struggle, and stay there until you feel at ease. You should also explore the boundaries of your range, making sure not to increase tension. Or you can stay within a comfortable pitch and volume and move on to other exercises, checking to see which ones cause problems. Whichever way you choose to build, you know you're doing the right exercise if it's difficult. What point is there spending time on things you do well? Do that when you sing.

ALL ABOUT YOUR WORLD TIP SHEET

1. YOUR BODY IS YOUR INSTRUMENT. GIVE IT THE CARE IT REQUIRES, AND IT WILL RESPOND BETTER.
2. EAT TO LIVE, INSTEAD OF LIVING TO EAT.
3. DON'T SMOKE.
4. ALWAYS MAINTAIN A HIGH LEVEL OF WATER IN YOUR BODY.
5. FORGIVE YOURSELF FOR YOUR INABILITIES, THEN COMMIT TO IMPROVE THEM.
6. SWIMMING IS THE BEST OVERALL EXERCISE.
7. A FLEXIBLE BODY MEANS A FLEXIBLE VOICE.
8. ALLOWING RESONANCE PROVIDES POWER WITHOUT THE PUSH.
9. VOCALIZE WHEN YOU PRACTICE, SING WHEN YOU PERFORM.
10. BELIEVE IN YOURSELF!!!

Vocal Music

Name: _____

Write your answers in complete sentences and be prepared to hand them in.

1. What is meant by the statement, "The singer is the instrument"?
2. What are some of the advantages of always having your instrument (your voice) with you?
3. What are some of the disadvantages of always having your instrument (your voice) with you?
4. Describe some of the physical elements that contribute to the sound of your voice.
5. What can you do to improve on what Mother Nature provided you with in the singing department.
6. Explain how mental attitude contributes to improving or hindering your vocal production.
7. Explain the importance of consuming enough liquids to ensure a healthy voice.
8. How long does it take for a sip of water to travel through your digestive system and get to your dry throat?
9. Explain some of the problems created by smoking.
10. Why is practising so important to develop your voice?
11. What's the difference between singing and vocalizing?
12. Explain a few ways vocalizing can help you develop your voice.