

Pitch Perfect Pipes

13 Tips to Becoming a Better Singer

BY JACKIE TORTORA

■ There aren't too many hard and fast rules when it comes to singing. Most singers can feel and hear their problem spots. "If your voice feels good and sounds good, it probably is good. If it feels bad and sounds good, something is wrong," says Jeannette LoVetri, director of The Voice Workshop in New York City.

As a voice instructor for more than 35 years, LoVetri knows a thing or two about getting the most out of your voice. Similar to musicians who play instruments, singers must make sure their technique is correct to avoid injury. "If you can't make yourself sound good and feel good, go get help from a skilled singer or teacher," says LoVetri. "If that doesn't help, seek out an otolaryngologist or throat specialist and get examined right away. Vocal problems that are ignored can lead to serious issues down the road, both vocal and in general health."

If you're confident your voice is where you want it to be, there are still plenty of exercises you can do on your own to get optimal sound. LoVetri shares the following tips to ensure vocal health and improve pitch and range:

1 Breathe Easy

In order to breathe efficiently for singing, a vocalist has to have excellent postural alignment. The rib cage needs to be open, lifted, and strong, and the inhalation needs to go deep into the torso, as the lungs inflate downward and outward. The abdominal muscles should work to keep the chest lifted and open, but not be locked and hard. They should release slightly forward and down during inhalation. During exhalation, the ribs should maintain their lifted and open position through the sung sounds, while the abdominal muscles contract and lift in a slow, steady way.

2 Heads Up

The head should be level, not in front of the torso. The legs should be shoulder-width apart with the knees unlocked. The weight should be slightly forward over the balls of the feet, and the spine should feel stretched long. The neck should be loose. The upper chest should remain lifted and open at all times, and should not rise during inhalation.

3 About Face

Your face works best when your mouth and jaw can open and close easily and freely, your facial muscles can move without tension, and your eyes are relaxed and alive.



4 Relax, Just Do It

Your throat should never squeeze, tighten, or feel tired or choked up when you sing.

5 Practice Makes Perfect

You should practice for 30 to 45 minutes, at least five times per week. The best way to avoid abusing your voice is to get some singing lessons with a qualified teacher who has a track record of success and solid knowledge of vocal function *and* health. The teacher should sound good when he or she sings.

6 Timing Is Everything

Always warm up before practicing. For someone in good vocal shape, 20 minutes is enough. Less is okay for an experienced singer and more might be necessary for someone less skilled. A warm-up should consist of varied musical patterns covering the full pitch range, using various vowels and consonants, long and short patterns of notes, and varied volume levels.

7 Eat, Drink, and Be Wary

There are no hard rules regarding what you should or should not eat just prior to performing, but it's best not to eat too much, because a full stomach will interfere with inhalation. Generally, you should be well hydrated at all times because the vocal folds need to be well lubricated to function properly. This means drinking at least six to eight glasses of water per day. It might be possible to substitute herbal tea or flavored waters, but soda, coffee, and caffeinated tea should be limited, as they can have a diuretic effect.

8 Start Your Engines

Singers should warm up about one hour before going to the theater or venue, and hum lightly while at the venue until they go on stage. The warm-up depends on what you are singing. Warm up with the sounds you will sing in the performance.

9 Play It Cool

It's useful to sing soft "cooing" OOs and AHs on low pitches for about five minutes after a performance, as a cool down.

10 Reach for the Stars

If you want to raise your vocal range, sing lightly, in an easy sound, allowing your throat to relax on the way up, while gently putting more pressure on the muscles of the abdomen. If this is done carefully, it will help raise vocal range.

11 Bring It Down

If you want to develop your lower range, relax your throat as much as possible, allow the jaw to fall down, and sing sustained sounds like "ahhh" or "ohhh" at the lowest pitches you can sustain. Don't strain. Gradually try to make them sound louder by pressing harder on the belly muscles. Long slides on lip trills or tongue trills can be helpful both going up and down. Since it is possible to squeeze high notes, just singing them without some care and attention to comfort would be a bad idea. Low notes can be swallowed or pushed, if done incorrectly, and that can cause other problems. It's best to develop range slowly, a little at a time.

12 Tune Up

Most people who have difficulty matching pitch have coordination problems within the vocal system. Singers use the throat and mouth as a resonating tube, learning to tune to the pitch of various vowels and various volume levels. It is easy to have poor control over all of these ingredients, particularly in specific pitch ranges, and that will affect intonation. Training and practice should take care of this, unless the problem is severe.

13 Pick Up Good Vibrations

Vibrato is a side effect of a freely balanced vocal system that is neither very tight nor loose. It arises naturally after about two years of vocal training in most singers, as long as the singer does not suppress it. If the vibrato is too fast, too wide, or uneven, something is not balanced in the vocal system. Something is too tight or too loose, and the vibrato is reflecting that. An adept singing teacher ought to be able to correct any vocal problems that are impacting your vibrato, but the correction should be indirect.

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