

About Voice

In every group there are people with different skills in the use of their voices and a different degree of **awareness** about what they are doing while they are singing or speaking. This diversity is not only a positive thing but also a precious resource. Every voice is interesting because in every voice you can find the story of a person; voice can help you to understand one's fears, one's relationship with the body, with other people and the way in which a person thinks of him or herself in the world.

The voice is a very flexible instrument, maybe the most flexible we can imagine and for this reason it is very fit for throwing bridges between different people and different cultures.

If you travel around the world (even in a metaphorical sense) you can find very different ways to use the voice, but sometimes you can also find this variety not far from home: for example if you “travel” in the Italian folk music you can discover very big differences in the way the voice is used in different geographical areas. The timbre of the voice often highlights the *otherness* of a piece of music much more than the melody, the harmony or the rhythmic structures.

Here is an example. In 1964 a show of Italian folk songs (called “Bella Ciao” as the famous Italian song) was represented in Spoleto's “Festival dei due Mondi”, a very important Festival that was usually dedicated just to classical music, with very expensive tickets and a bourgeois audience. On stage there were both professional and not professional singers, like peasants or rice-workers. This choice was made to show a really different approach to the folk music. Giovanna Daffini, a rice-worker, was singing with the typical vocal emission of the rice-workers, very open in the front part of the face, very “bright”. At a certain point a woman from the audience shouted “I did not pay 1000 liras to listen to my maid singing!”.

It was not the melody or the lyrics of the song that caused this angry reaction, but the timbre of Giovanna Daffini. It was a scandal that a “non-trained” voice could be on *that* stage. Obviously this voice was “non-trained” only according to the standards of the western classical conception of how the voice must be used. Instead Giovanna Daffini was recognised by her community as one of the best singers and her repertoire her style and her vocal emission were absolutely perfect. So, the very big scandal was to put on the same level classical music and folk music and to suggest that while folk music has different aesthetic parameters, “different” doesn't mean “worse” or “less noble”. The timbre was the most evident of this parameters. So we have to consider that timbre is really a powerful thing.

There are people who use their voice in just one way because it's the typical way of their community (and maybe they can't even imagine a different way), or because they choose to sing a kind of music that needs a specific technique, so they practice maybe even all their life just to improve that sort of vocal emission. There isn't just one right way to use your voice, but really several ways. The voice is like a tree with a lot of branches: you can choose your path.

Of course there are some wrong things that you risk do with your voice, but we call “wrong” just the things that can damage your vocal cords and these things are not so difficult to avoid if you are led by a good teacher or even if you pay attention to the signals that your body sends to you while you're singing or speaking. The most important thing is that you must not feel the sensation of an effort near your larynx, which is the box where your vocal cords “live”. The sound is produced by your vocal cords, but you don't have to feel that something is happening there, while other parts of your body have to work a lot, and you have to feel it, instead. So, when you feel an effort or discomfort around your throat you better try to find another path.

If you exclude things that can hurt you, still you have a huge field of possibilities. This can really open lots of channels of communication. Each one of us has its own voice, but if we are able to search, we can find inside ourselves the voice of another person. We can make a long travel around different cultures while remaining inside our body, just exploring our voice and listening to other voices. We can find what seems to be “far from us” inside ourselves and everyone has the capability to do it, because everyone actually has everything that is needed to sing almost everything (with some practice, of course!).

So, when we sing we have lots of possibilities: but each one of us has an idea of one’s own voice that can be very hard to change, so we have to be very careful when we work on voice with groups of people. We have to test before on ourselves the experience of bracketing what we consider *our* voice and try to welcome other ways to use it. We don't have to transform the other voices to make them more similar to ours, but try to wear the others' voices and offer our voice to them as a possibility that can be chosen or not.

This challenge will give us some colours to add to our palette and we will not lose anything. For professional singers it's important to know that using the voice in different ways requires more technique. So you will not lose something, but you will learn something new, instead.

There are several things in common in every different kind of vocal emission even when certain sounds seem to be really “other” and if you change little things in your sound position you can discover a world of different sounds. Your basic technique will always be your “home”, the place where to return if you feel something uncomfortable in your throat.

Some exercises to start with

1. In a circle, standing up.

Make a big “*sigh of relief*” which is a way to enter in contact with our breath. Often we are not very aware of our breath and it's good to ask ourselves “Am I breathing?”, “What about my breath **now**?”. Starting with the *sigh of relief* is a way to try to relieve the tension, both the one possibly given by a first moment of embarrassment in starting to work with a new group of people, and the one that each one of us always carries on oneself. Remember that a lot of people have a very short breath, a “not really deep” breath and sometime saying: “please breath!” can even make things worse.

The *sigh of relief* can be big or small and we can experience both these possibilities, first without sounds and then with a sound. The *sigh of relief* is a way to exhale, just like singing.

Move the weight of your body on the toes and raise the heels while making a big *sigh of relief* with sound. The movement of the heels shakes your body and helps the sound. You can do this lifting also our toes and making some little jumps in the room (during the big *sigh of relief* with sound).

2. Walk around the room, using all the space and trying to meet other people with eyes. When you meet someone you stop the one in front of the other and

- make a *sigh of relief* together
- hold each other’s hands
- the one (X) says: “I’m [X’s name]”
- the other (Y) says: “I’m [Y’s name]”

each one repeats the name of the other

- X says: “[Y’s name]”

- Y says: “[X’s name]”

then

- *sigh of relief* together

- stop holding hands

- *sigh of relief* together

Try to meet almost all the people in the group.

3.

A.

Sitting in a circle or lying down, work on breath.

Inhale and exhale. Empty the lungs while saying “S” and try to observe both the inhalation and the exhalation.

Put one hand on your belly and one on your sternum and observe the movement of your body.

Try to “open” the belly, as if there was a reservoir of air there. Try not to lift the shoulders and the chest.

Try to do the same thing in couples: one person breathes with the S-sound and the other puts one hand on the belly and one on the lower part of the back of the companion, observing the movement of the body during the breath. Then switch roles.

After the change each couple shares her experience with the group. Try to understand your difficulties in breathing starting from the observation of your body but also of other people's bodies.

B.

A variation of the previous exercise. Position yourselves in a circle and try to empty the lungs while saying “S” first and then “M”, “N”, “L”, “V”, and “S” again. Repeat each sound 3 or 4 times. Observe the differences between the sounds in the relationship with the breath: maybe some sounds are easier, some are shorter, some cause an effort in some part of the body ecc. Try to choose a sound that is not too low: we often think that the lower is the more comfortable, but that's not true! In this exercise also start to listen and mix some sounds.

C-

An other possibility is to make the same exercise while lying on our belly, putting the forehead on the hands and trying to concentrate on the movement of your back. Feel the belly that during the inhalation goes toward the floor, while the lower part of the back moves too, toward the ceiling. Also feel the movement of shoulder blades and imagine having two wings that become bigger and bigger while you breathe.

4.

Work on your tongue.

Try to touch your chin with the point of your tongue.

Try to touch your nose with the point of your tongue.

Try to alternate the two possibilities slowly and fast, adding a sound.

Try to touch each tooth with your tongue starting from one side of the upper teeth, first on the inside and then on the outside, then do same thing on the lower teeth.

5.

Say “M” trying not to “use your throat”: you must not feel the sensation of the sound inside the throat, but imagine having an egg or a little ball into our mouth.

The aim of these images is to make people experience the sensation we have when we lift our soft palate, which is the last part of the palate we find when we “walk” back with the tongue on our palate from the teeth. If we learn to lift the palate we can gradually learn to send our sound in the “big room” behind the nose, which is our main natural resonating chamber.

Try to move the vibration of the sound on the top of your head and not on the lips or just in the throat.

Try to touch your head top or another one's head to test if there is a vibration.

Say “M” while chewing and trying to move the more muscles of the face we are able to.

Change the tune, doing a “glissando” with the M-sound, exploring high and low tunes.

“Wash our face” with the M-sound: use your hands as if you were washing our face singing “M” and massaging.

Pass the M-sound in the circle. Every person does a little improvisation with the “M” and passes the sound to the one next to him or her, who starts from the tune of the companion and goes on as he or she wants.

The exercises on the M-sound are good because in order to sing “M” with your mouth closed you are obliged to open something “inside”, that is (probably) the soft palate. Another technique to reach the same goal in a fast way is to think to a yawn with your mouth closes (singing “M” or other sounds).

6. In a circle.

Say “Ma” and “Pa” thinking the sound on your lips. You can make a little improvisation as if you were saying something using just these two sounds (every people alone toward the other people close to him or her).

7.

Pick a sound (on a comfortable tune for you) using one vowel (suggested by the conductor). Produce a long sound and imagine it going that from the lips inside the body, as the sound were something you drink. Think of the sound as a liquid coming from far away, something that you receive. It is bright, sparkling, full of diamonds, gold or silver, it drops on your vocal cords, in your larynx and it finally arrives in a big dark lake in your belly.

Usually the sound in this exercise changes and becomes much deeper and rich of harmonics.

It's not necessary to do it with just one breath, you can breath when you want, but you have to start where you stopped.

Try all together and one by one.

8. In a circle.

Pass a sound in the circle. The conductor starts a sound, passes it to the people close to him or her using also the hands. Pass it as if you were really passing something and use also your eyes. Do not stop producing the sound while passing it. There is a moment in which the voices are together trying to mix as much as possible and then you have just on voice.

The conductor has to choose sounds that are very different from each other (tune and timbre).

Then you pass the same sound but you change the vowels.

9.

Try to experience the sound “R”-, exploring different tunes. You can say a long “R” or a lot of little “R”s like many little jumps on our belly. You can do it all together or one by one, passing the sound as if you were saying something to your companion.

Make a challenge between two people in the middle of the circle: who can go higher or lower with “R”? It can be very funny.

Reading Suggestions

Gisela Rohmert: Der Sänger auf dem Weg zum Klang. Lichtenberger musikpädagogische Vorlesungen, O. Schmidt, 1994. Traduzione in Italiano: Il cantante in cammino verso il suono. Leggi e processi di autoregolamentazione nella voce del cantante, Diaste Libri, Treviso.

Kristin Linklater: Freeing the Natural Voice, New York, Drama Book Publishers, 1976
Traduzione in Italiano: La VOCE naturale. Immagini e pratiche per un uso efficace della voce e del linguaggio, Elliot, 2011