

The 10 Most Common Problems of Singers

From the Center for Voice Disorders of Wake Forest University

By Teresa Radomski*

1. POOR POSTURE

The efficient alignment of the body is of primary importance to voice production. Problems in posture range from collapse of the chest and rib cage with corresponding downward fall of the head and neck, to the hyper-extended, stiff posture of some singers that results in tension throughout the entire body.

2. POOR BREATHING AND INAPPROPRIATE BREATH SUPPORT

Some beginning voice students gasp for air and exhibit clavicular [shoulder] or shallow breathing patterns. Trained singers, on the other hand, use primarily diaphragmatic breath support. The muscles of the lower back and abdomen are engaged, in conjunction with lowering the diaphragm. As the breath stream is utilized for phonation, there should be little tension in the larynx itself.

3. HARD GLOTTAL OR ASPIRATE ATTACK

Attack occurs with the initiation of phonation: Some singers use a glottal attack, which is too hard (produced by too much tension in closure), hyper adduction. Vocal cord nodules may develop with habitual use of a hard glottal attack. The opposite problem is the aspirate attack, in which excessive air is released prior to phonation.

4. POOR TONE QUALITY

Many terms are commonly used to describe a singer's tone. Among those familiar to singers are: clear, rich, resonant, bright, dark, rough, thin, breathy, and nasal. Although, good tone is highly subjective, according to the type of singing and personal preference of the listener; in general, a tone that is "clear" (without extra noise) and "resonant" (abundant in harmonic partials) is acknowledged as healthy and naturally will have sufficient intensity for projection without electronic amplification.

5. LIMITED PITCH RANGE, DIFFICULTY IN REGISTER TRANSITION

All singing voices exhibit an optimal pitch range. The term "register" is used to describe a series of tones that are produced by similar mechanical gestures of vocal fold vibration, glottal and pharyngeal shape, and related air pressure. Some common designations of registers are the "head" register, "chest" register, "falsetto", etc. Singing requires transitions from one register to another. Lack of coordination of the laryngeal musculature with the breath support may result in a register break, or obvious shift from one tone quality to another. Regardless of the style of singing, a blend, or smooth transition between registers, is desirable.

6. LACK OF FLEXIBILITY, AGILITY, EASE OF PRODUCTION, ENDURANCE

Traditional voice training in the 18th-19th century bel canto method [*smooth singing*] places emphasis on vocal flexibility or agility. The use of rapid melodic passages in vocal training helps to develop a relaxed, yet vital voice production, that contributes to the development of increased vocal endurance.

7. POOR ARTICULATION

Pronunciation with excessive tension in the jaw, lips, palate, etc., adversely affects the tonal production of the voice. The longer duration of vowel sounds in singing necessitates modification of pronunciation. Retroflex and velar consonants (such as American "r" and "i") need careful modification to allow sufficient pharyngeal opening for best resonance, and the over-anticipation of nasal consonants ("m," "n," "ng") may result in a stiff soft palate and unpleasant tone.

8. LACK OF DISCIPLINE, COMMITMENT, COMPLIANCE

Any athlete knows, regular practice is essential for optimal development and performance. Unfortunately, the need for disciplined training is not always apparent to singers. When a teacher's advice is contrary to a singer's own established ideas, the singer may tend to overwork, over-perform, or simply try too hard in practice. The singer's practice and performance regimen must be sensible, productive, and acceptable to both teacher and student alike.

9. POOR HEALTH, HYGIENE, VOCAL ABUSE

Many students ignore common sense and good vocal hygiene. The physical demands of singing necessitate optimal health, beginning with adequate rest, aerobic exercise, a moderate diet (and alcohol consumption), and absolute avoidance of smoking. Many singers are careful with their voices but abuse their voice by employing poor speaking technique. Performing in dry, dusty concert halls, or singing over the din in smoke filled clubs increases the risk of vocal fatigue and infection. A minor cold or allergy can be devastating to a professional singer.

10. POOR SELF-IMAGE, LACK OF CONFIDENCE

Since the slightest aberration-phlegm, for example-can result in momentary loss of voice (even in the greatest of performers), singers often feel that they are always in a state of vulnerability. Despite unpredictability in vocal performance, the singer does gain confidence through repeated performance and increased self-awareness.

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