

# Training Changing Voices

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## **Prerequisites:**

Teachers and students must be willing to make weird noises without tension or stress.

It is also important to have a concept of how healthy adolescent singing should sound. You need a tonal concept against which you judge what you are hearing. If what you hear from your students is not what you want, do something to change it!

There is no need to be too precious. Students do far more extreme things with their voices at sporting matches and in the playground than we would ever even think of doing in the studio.

## **What is happening?**

Bodies are getting much bigger very quickly. Vocal folds increase in length and mass considerably more than girls (hence the “Adam’s apple”). According to David Jorlett, the muscles which control pitch develop slower than the vocal folds. Therefore, a boy will use the same muscular effort that he used to for a certain pitch but a completely unexpected pitch will come out! Often, coordination learnt over years will unravel leading to significant awkwardness in many previously easy activities. Clapping rhythms and walking beats is often less correct at the start of grade 8 than it was at the end of grade 7. Coordinating the operation of the ‘lengthener’ and ‘shortener’ muscles becomes a considerable challenge for many.

Some voices change gradually, some dramatically; some lose individual notes at times. Some jump from treble range to bass baritone range seemingly overnight (me). Often as the singer descends from head voice downwards, he will miss an octave and ‘land’ an octave lower and not notice. This is called the ‘deceptive octave’.

## **What complicates issues?**

Hormonal and emotional changes can lead to a loss of confidence, a strong fear of being embarrassed in front of friends, a desire to fit gender stereotypes and a desire to appear cool in front of girls.

## **What is to be done?**

### **Persist.**

It would be unthinkable for a boy to leave a school without the ability to play Rugby League, Rugby Union or Soccer. Why is it acceptable for a boy to leave school without being able to sing? The only person who can change this is you.

**Create and enforce a safe environment.** You must be stronger than the bullies. This means you must be a courageous teacher.

**Demystify the process.** Both boys and girls are very interested (if you don't rave on) in what is actually happening to their bodies. It is reassuring for boys and instructive for girls to learn that a "crack" in the male voice is just part of the growth process, that the male larynx is growing twice as large as the female, that the male will have a head voice and a chest voice and will be able to sing up with the girls as well as using his new chest voice range. Boys love to hear that their voices can change gear from head to chest voice especially if their big brother is learning to drive a manual car. It is important for boys to know that their voice will settle and that some days some notes won't work. It is important for girls to realise that their voices might lower a little in range and that the huskiness from which they suffer from will pass. Once they know what is going on tell them to get over it and on with the job. It is essential that all the children know that modern research has found that it is best to sing through the voice change and not to "rest" the voice as was taught in the past.

### **Teacher talk:**

It is unwise to tell students something is good when it is not. Students can tell if you are not being accurate. In my view, saying "that was wonderful" when it is not, simply encourages students not to trust your judgement.

I suggest accurately describing the singing (and the singing is not the singer. There are lots of wonderful people who are not wonderful singers). There is a difference between "you are flat" and "that was flat". Accurate, descriptive feedback is far more useful. Perhaps the singing was well in tune and in time but sounded tight and harsh.

Once the singing is accurately described try to develop the singing. It is important for us to have solutions for our singers. It is counterproductive to simply criticise the singers without offering a solution. Instead of saying "its flat" "its out of tune", or simply "again", say "try this". If you try a number of ideas and none of them work be honest, say, "that didn't work" and go ask a colleague for some more ideas and try them another day.

Remember to be excited at every improvement but remember that improvement is not the arrival, its just a step on an infinite journey to better singing, better musicianship, better artistry and more joy!

However, there are times when in all honesty the problem with the singing is a lack of effort. That is probably the time to say that the singing does not accurately reflect the singer. eg "You are all better than that - don't show people your second best effort".

## **Remediation of Vocal Problems**

You can often, within a song, make a significant difference by singing on a different sound or by incorporating movement designed to improve the singing.

### **Establishing Breath support and posture:**

Walk the beat. This is essential so that your singer develops the ability to stay in time with the backing track, accompanist or band, apart from its tendency to stop the singer holding their breath.

Bounce while singing with a high sternum

Sing with hands above heads

Sing on a fricative: RRR, BBB, VVV or JJJ

Sensing the “low breath”; Stand tall, hands above heads, squat, breath out hard and let the air fall in to the body. Feel the movement of the body as the diaphragm lowers.

Any of the accent method breathing exercises – particularly the fricative exercises.

### **Nasality:**

Remember there is a difference between twang which can be quite healthy and singing through a leaking alveolar port. If the problem is the latter, try

Singing on N ga. and feel the opening and closing of the port at the back of the nose.

(This is from the Estill material)

### **Breathiness -**

Sometimes this is caused by uneven growth of the vocal folds during puberty but, even in this situation, have them listen for a clean sound so that they do not habituate a breathy tone. Use gentle glottal strokes to get the vocal folds to meet properly but do this with great care in a group situation.

### **Dark and flat sound: Often flat in pitch.**

Repeat the song on “Ning” “Nyee” or “Nyeah” to get the ‘placement’ more forward.

Check that the tongue is not interfering with the sound.

Check that the cheek bones are high - that there is a stretch along the zygomatic arch.

This can be achieved with an excited facial expression but check that the vowels do not spread sideways because of an overly horizontal mouth position.

### **Overbright and strident sound:**

Add a puckering of the lips and realise that vowels are made with the tongue more than the lips. eg. Sing EEE with a sideways mouth and then a vertical mouth.

Check that the inner mouth space is large -it should feel like the beginning of a yawn.

## **Flat or tight singing across the passagio or a 'hole' in the voice where there is no sound:**

Sometimes the hole is there because of a growth spurt during puberty and the problem will fix itself if good singing habits are followed with patience. In a class context the occasional hole in the vocal range should not matter as someone at any given time will have all the notes needed for learning to occur. This would suggest the teaching of changing voice boys in small groups rather than individually so that lessons could be more musically enjoyable as more notes are available.

Continual downward patterns from "head" to "chest" are a tried and true way of improving coordination across the passagio.

Descending sighs from "Head Voice" (lengthener muscle dominant) to "Chest Voice" (Shortener muscle dominant) are also very beneficial. Try on a mid vowel such as AH. (See videos of Westminster Choir college rehearsals).

Try singing to a back vowel with a "d" or a "y" at the start of the sound to try to stop the tongue sitting on the voice. eg. "you" or "do"

Check for tongue root and jaw tension. Massage the jaw while singing. Sing to RRR if possible. Sing with tongue poked out, Sing and poke your tongue out like a lizard every few notes. Sing while wobbling the tongue out of the mouth. Unfortunately, most tongue root tension exercises look unseemly! These are exercises of Lesley Purvis. Geoff Ashenden also suggests Thee Theh Thah Tho Thoo. This is working for me at present.

Singing on fricatives generally is helpful. Eg. BBBB, VVV, JJJ. They help the singer work out how much sub glottal pressure is needed to make the voice work at different pitches.

Check height of posture - lift the head off the bottom molars (a better description than 'drop your jaw' from Lesley Purvis)

Change the starting pitch and sing below or above the passagio if things are really uncomfortable there. Careful choice of repertoire and flexible use of different keys is essential. By definition, we can't expect a changing voice to stay the same week by week. We can sing repertoire away from the passagio, or which only goes into the passagio for short periods, then deal with the passagio in exercises. Gordon Harris, an expert studio teacher in this area has an excellent article in the ANATS journal which provides excellent advice on repertoire for changing voices.

Bring the lips around the sound ('pucker') as students enter the awkward part of their range. Increasing the "length of the pipe" above the larynx by bringing the lips forward can change the resonances that are causing the discomfort. Traditionally this is called "vowel modification".

For boys in particular use Swanson's descending 5ths and Noel Ancell's excellent exercises.

The use of head voice with boys is also wonderfully helpful. Get them “over” the sound of head voice in the first lesson and use it in every lesson.

## **General Pitch Inaccuracy**

There are two basic reasons for pitch inaccuracy;

1) Inability to aurally perceive pitch; this is cured by aural training. Exercises such as drawing the pitch of songs in the air with the teacher. Developing inner hearing and the like. There are courses offered in this area by Sound Thinking Australia run by Dr. James Cuskelly.

2) Physiological difficulties in matching pitch. It simply is hard to coordinate the new voice. Remember Thurmann’s dictum that the brain learns by “target practice”. It is very valuable to sing a short motif to the singer, they sing back wrongly, you sing back what they sang. This gives biofeedback to the singer. ie; When I do this, a certain pitch comes out –not the one I wanted – but I will be closer next time. After a while of doing this often, the singer gets closer and closer and then becomes a pitch matching person.

Remember that it is easier for a beginning singer to match a pattern of pitches rather than an individual note. That is why the folk song repertoire is so useful. The pieces are often short with an achievable range. If the singer is reasonably accurate but sloppy, try singing short , detached, only the beginning of each note to “do” while pitch pointing.

## **Problems with High Notes/Range Extension**

Determine when to change gear in the voice from ‘chest’ to ‘head’ this can change weekly.

Point to the high note as if it is directly in front of you.

Squat down when singing the high note (to stop locking the knees and ensure connection to the support)

Spread hands apart in an expansive gesture during the phrase

Jump in the air and sing the note on landing - the distraction method.

Pretend you are a weight lifter and lift the weights with a very straight back while singing the phrase (be careful of undue tension with this exercise)

Step forward when the high note occurs throwing the hands open in an operatic gesture.

Imitate throwing a Frisbee while singing the phrase.

Change the key of the song

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