

KEEPING YOUR VOICE IN SHAPE DURING LOCKDOWN

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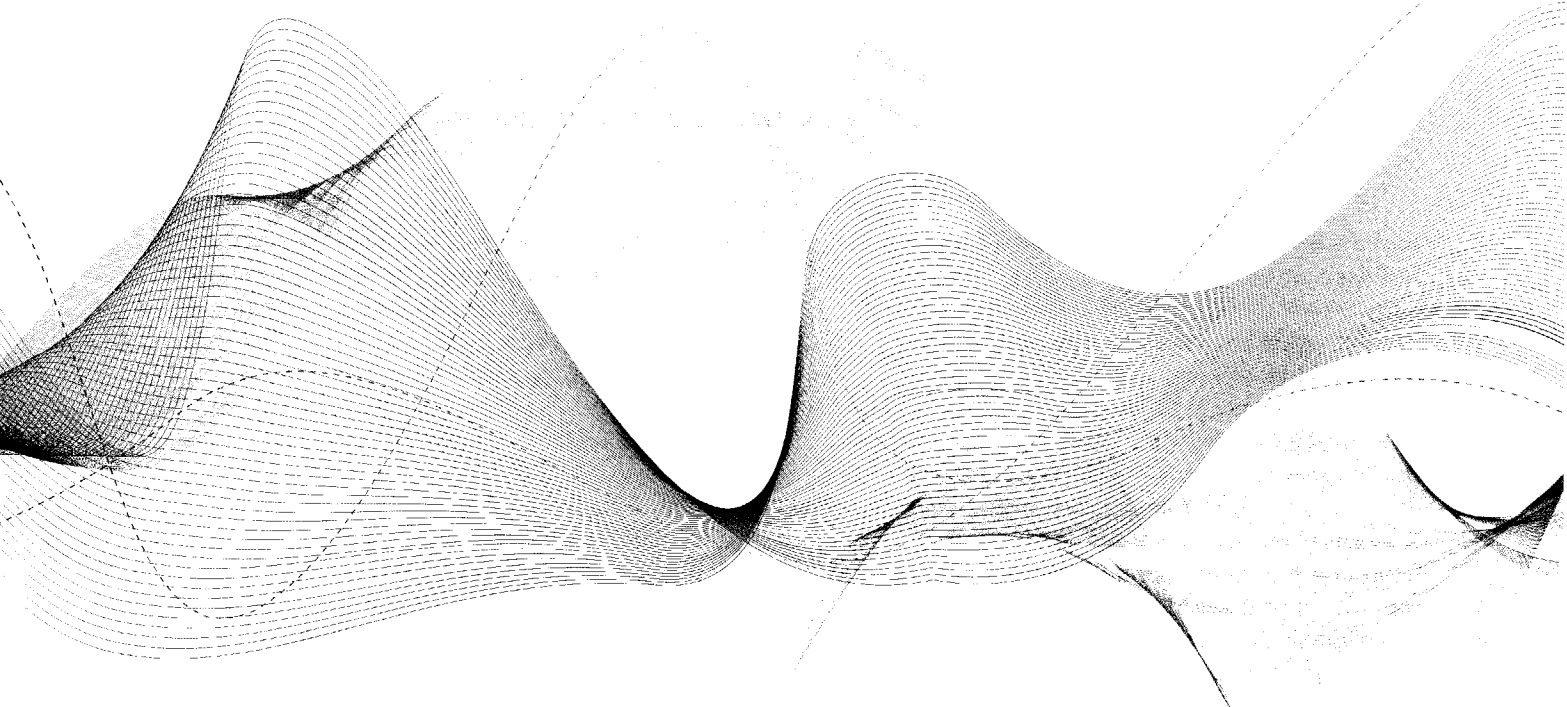
The Covid-19 pandemic has changed our lives beyond imagining. Zoom, Google Meet, Apple FaceTime and Microsoft Teams are now an accepted part of life; no more hours of travelling by train or car, no close contact with our families. Many questions and many fears have arisen, not least whether choirs will ever sing together again. There has been much conjecture around the notion that singers, standing so close to one another and expelling the virus, may be super-spreaders. Until scientists can give us more accurate information as to how far these droplets travel and at what risk to others, we need to stay safe and keep our voices inside our homes.

This must not mean, however, that we stop singing. Singing is good for us: among other benefits, it exercises the brain, encourages us to breathe well, keeps the tongue agile and is relaxing. Moreover, we can't expect to go straight back to singing well if we haven't done it for some time. You are a singing athlete and your voice requires practice to stay in

shape. After the summer holidays, choirs often take two to three weeks to return to pre-holiday standards. So, what can we do to keep our voices in shape during this time and keep up our enthusiasm for singing when we are on our own?

POSTURE IN THE AGE OF THE DEVICE

Before you start singing in online choir rehearsals or singing lessons, make sure that your electronic device is at the correct height so your head and shoulders are in line with the screen. You may need to put your device on a music stand balanced on some books to achieve this, but it's important not to be looking down at the screen because you will squash your larynx. Posture needs addressing all the time, so have a mirror nearby to check your head, neck, shoulders and upper body, and make sure that your knees are not locked. If you are having to record your singing to a click track, be aware that trying to hit the exact beat may make you feel anxious and allow tension to creep into your body.



VOCALIZING

Sirening regularly to an ‘ng’ sound keeps the vocal folds flexible and will avoid breaks creeping into your sound. Start low in your range and slide up; then try the other way around. Be gentle with your voice. Remember that carpets and curtains absorb sound, and that it’s easy to drive the voice too hard if the room in which you are singing lacks resonance. Be conscious that we all like to hear a little bit of feedback and will push to get it. After all, don’t we love to sing in a church that has a wonderful acoustic?

Singing down the scale to ‘ning ning’ helps to maintain the resonance in the sound as well as humming a song, a hymn or an anthem to an ‘n’ sound, feeling where the resonance is placed in the voice. Open out into an audible sound like an ‘oo’ and eventually sing the words.

Ask yourself whether you are singing in tune and driving your voice. When working with children I often get them to do ‘elephant ears’ so that they can hear themselves. In fact, it is a good exercise for all ages. To do this, place the palms of your hands upright and in front of your ears but facing backwards towards the wall behind you. This dampens the sound travelling through the jawbone up to the ears and helps you to hear what someone else listening in the room would hear.

LOCKDOWN PROBLEMS AND PITFALLS

Be aware of tongue root tension. Pulling the tongue back into the throat can fool our ear into thinking that we are making a rich and mature sound when actually we are restricting the free movement of the larynx. Have a look at some online videos of the larynx to

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see how much and how freely it moves during healthy singing.

Place your thumb underneath your chin and say 'yah yah yah yah yah'. Feel the movement of your tongue and experiment with trying to speak and move your tongue, but without it becoming hard, tense or pressing down on top of your larynx. Repeat this exercise, now *singing* 'yah yah yah yah yah', continuing to register and release any tongue root tension as you sing. Roll your tongue around your mouth (over your teeth and right to the corners, top and bottom) and moving your tongue up and down and from side to side to keep it flexible. This is a great exercise to do while washing up.

Does your sound seem flat or dull at times? Your soft palate, the bit of tissue at the top and back of your mouth, may be dropped, which can interfere with your tone. Try singing a hymn or a section of an anthem to the vowels only and with your nose pinched. If your sound is a bit nasal and lacks ring, then your soft palate may have dropped. Sniff firmly three times and, smiling, pant like a dog, feeling a lifting sensation at the back and top of your mouth behind your nose. Repeat your singing with your nose pinched, paying particular attention to that lifted sensation at the back of your mouth behind your nose. Experiment with your sound. Try imagining singing to your teeth and then to the back of your head and see how this changes your sound. Maybe record yourself so that you can hear the difference in your sound more objectively.

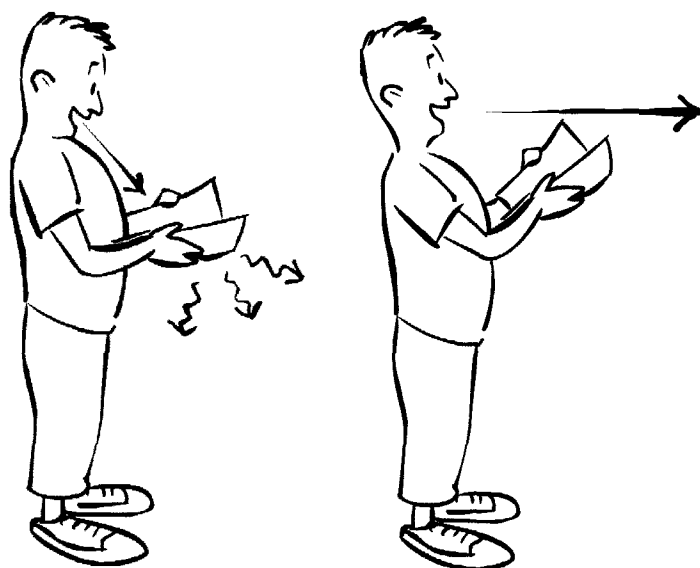
It can be easy to forget to be expressive when you are singing to a device and not to an audience. Remember to summon the feeling and emotion

behind what you are trying to convey and tell the story of your song. Use facial expression to enhance the communication of your voice and imagine your audience in front of you as you sing.

Be aware that you may accidentally force your voice when you are recording against a click track or singing along to an accompaniment because the recording may be too loud in your ears. Young children in particular may need some help and guidance from parents with this, so if you are helping a child who is singing, check the level of the recording that they are listening to before they make their own recording.

Finally, choir leaders may wish to consider how they can tell if their singers are falling into bad habits when rehearsing online but with sound muted. The answer is that you can't get a clear idea of how your singers are developing unless you have a recording of their work, so perhaps ask them to record themselves singing a tricky section and offer them some (positive) feedback to keep them motivated and improving.

Crucially, we must not forget those who have sung in their local church choirs for many years but who do not have access to Wi-Fi and online rehearsals. These times may have dealt them a devastating blow in preventing them from having contact with others through singing, so perhaps consider popping round some CDs of popular hymns that they could sing along with. Help them feel remembered and involved. I have known many singers in their late 80s and early 90s who still enjoy singing in their church choir and they must not be put out to grass and forgotten about, not least because singing is so good for us in older age.



How you hold your music or electronic device affects your posture and can cause problems when you sing. It is important not to be looking down at the screen because you will squash your larynx. Make sure that your electronic device is at the correct height so your head and shoulders are in line with the screen

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IMPROVEMENT DURING LOCKDOWN

'I don't want to sing again,' said my 75-year-old pupil who has sung in choirs for over 30 years. 'I'm getting no pleasure singing in virtual choirs. I want to hear the other voices around me, feel the buzz, the harmonies, be with my friends. Is this the end for we oldies?' Many of us may sympathize with these sentiments; however, this pupil was able to turn around her experience of lockdown by having some online individual singing lessons with great results. She has particularly enjoyed the feedback she was given when she sent me a recording, and she is now sharing those recordings with her children and grandchildren who are thrilled to share with her in the experience. This has boosted her confidence so that she is now solo singing, something she never imagined she was capable of doing in her younger years.

Similarly, over the past three months, I have watched several young choristers taking part in Sunday worship, whether it be singing a hymn by themselves, reading from the Bible or reading the prayers with all of their family. The boost in confidence that I have seen in these children is

immeasurable. These young singers are the musicians of the future and it has been fantastic for them to feel that they have achieved something in this lockdown period.

ONLINE RESOURCES

If you would like to have some individual lessons to enhance your lockdown singing experience, the RSCM can help you. The beauty of this strange time is that you don't need to travel miles for a consultation lesson: you can have it online. There are also many great resources online that you may want to explore. Over the past months I have put together a series of six webinars on vocal technique, offering tips and exercises to all singers, school music teachers and choir leaders. These are available to purchase on the RSCM's shop at www.rscmshop.com/features/rscm-webinars.

Finally, in these often difficult times, I am reminded of Psalm 89.1, which has great personal meaning to me as a teacher: 'My song shall be alway of the loving-kindness of the Lord : with my mouth will I ever be showing thy truth from one generation to another.'

We'll get through this. Keep singing!
