

Vocal Health After College

by Matthew Markham



Maintaining vocal health and technique after your college years can be a challenge, but it must remain a priority. While you were pursuing your music education degrees in college (and for some of you, graduate school), you most likely had a weekly voice lesson, sang in at least one choir every weekday, and spent a lot of time in the practice room. Some of you may have even prepared and performed a junior, senior, and/or graduate recital and performed in opera productions. Some of you may have participated in voice competitions such as the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) Student Auditions. Bottom line is that as a music student, you were receiving consistent vocal training and were most likely being taught how to sing with solid and healthy vocal techniques. These years of formal training were challenging, exciting, memorable, and were intended to serve as the foundation and impetus for

your future as a music educator. But what happens when you receive your degree(s), and you are suddenly 5 years into teaching high school choir, and you realize that your voice isn't functioning in the same way that it was in that senior recital or in that memorable production of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*? What happens to your speaking voice by the end of the day, end of the week, or by the end of the semester? If any of these questions resonate with you, then look no further. I would like to provide you with some tools that I have learned over the years as a singer, voice teacher, and music educator – and as someone who has been in your shoes.

Former late night television host David Letterman was famous for his Top Ten Lists. In that vein, I would like to offer the “Top 10 Tips to Maintain Vocal Health after College!” Here we go, starting with number 10!

10. Choral teachers are singers, and singers are vocal athletes; therefore, you must start with stretching. It is important to begin the teaching day and each rehearsal with physical stretching. Whether you are teaching a choir rehearsal at 8am or 1pm, it is important for you as the teacher (as well as your students) to get the body moving before phonating. Stretch the arms up to the ceiling to expand the ribcage, do neck releasing exercises, head rolls, arm circles, knee bends, and (if you are daring) incorporate simple yoga moves such as downward dog into your class and daily stretching routine. The body is the instrument, and it is essential that you warmup your body for the rehearsal at hand.
9. Allow the ‘breath’ to do the work for you. You may recall from your collegiate voice studies that ‘breath’ is one of the most important aspects of singing, and that you must take a singer’s breath. Proper inhalation occurs when you allow the abdominal wall to release and the ribcage to expand, which in turn allows the diaphragm to contract. This type of inhalation sets up the correct coordination necessary for efficient airflow in singing, which is essentially, exhalation. There are many exercises you can do to find this expansion: sitting in a chair backwards and allowing the release of the abs and ribcage, squatting down in a frog position, assuming positions found in yoga, etc. Of course, inhalation is only one side of the coin. The other is exhalation and allowing the coordination of the muscles of inspiration and expiration to do their job as you allow the flow of air to do the work for you while singing. Lip trills are a wonderful and practical way to find this coordination in the body.
8. Warm up for at least 5 minutes every day before you begin teaching. While this time frame may pale in comparison to the 2 hours you used to spend in the practice room in college, taking 5 minutes to do lip trills, raspberries, vocal sighs, humming on [m] or [n], vocalization on [v] fricative on short scales, and 5-note and 9-note scales on [i], [e], [a], [o], and [u] will set you in good stead for a day of teaching, speaking, and demonstrating. I recommend that you begin in the middle part of your voice and then work the extremities. Just as an athlete stretches before a game, a teacher of singing must begin the workday with vocal stretching and warmups.
7. Cool down for at least 5 minutes every day after you are done teaching. Much ink has been spilled on vocal exercises to warm up the voice, but not much is mentioned when it comes to cooling the voice down.

Simple sighing exercises from head voice down or lip trills and humming on descending passages can alleviate any tension that has manifested over the course of the day. These should begin in the middle to upper part of the voice and progress downward in pitch. Just as an athlete might sit in the sauna or hot tub after an intense workout, a teacher of singing should cool down the voice with these simple and easy exercises.

6. Grab a straw! Incorporate semi-occluded vocal tract (SOVT) exercises such as straw phonation throughout your teaching day and in between classes or rehearsals. Renowned voice scientist Dr. Ingo Titze began straw phonation as a therapeutic tool for public speakers and singers. You may find an excellent overview of Dr. Titze demonstrating straw phonation and explaining the pedagogical benefits of it on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xYDvwvmBIM>. So, keep a straw with you and sing through it on scales, vocal slides, and even phrases from repertoire. Straw phonation can also alleviate a tired throat. By spending 30 seconds throughout the day with your straw, you can save on hours of unwanted vocal fatigue. Other examples of SOVT's include singing through a cup, lip trills, tongue trills, raspberries, singing on [m], [n], [z], or [v]. "The principal benefit from semi-occluded exercises is the positive back pressure by the smaller aperture that helps the vocal folds vibrate and "gear shift" easily. While relaxation is achieved, they provide a positive coordination between the vocal tract position, and as such, can be used to create specific desired habits."(VoiceScienceWorks. (n.d.))
5. Develop an accurate Body Map. It is first important to have a correct map of the body and know where the parts exist: diaphragm, lungs, vocal folds, external intercostal muscles etc. "Inclusive awareness and an accurate Body Map are effective proof against problems that plague singers, truly protecting singers over a lifetime. Human beings are naturally self-correcting, and our Body Maps are no exception. When singers return to the richness of their own sensations, and when they apprehend and honor their actual structures, they find balance, freedom, and, with practice, mastery." (Barbara Conable. "The Structures and Movement of Breathing." p.13-14). If you believe that your lungs are down in your stomach rather than anywhere you have shoulder blade, or that high notes emerge from your head and low notes from your chest rather than originating from the source of the horizontally positioned vocal folds housed within the larynx, then the coordination of the system cannot function as efficiently or correctly as intended. By having an accurate body map, you will learn to sing more freely and use vocabulary with your students that is more accurate and efficient.
4. Vocal Health is dependent on physical and mental health. It is the responsibility of the singer to cultivate and nurture each of these factors in pursuit of a free and authentic voice. The body is the instrument, and it must be treated with great care. Adequate sleep, vocal rest, hydration, balanced diet, and exercise are essential for the physical conditions required for healthy singing. Yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi, and/or body work such as Feldenkrais or Alexander work is encouraged. Mental health includes your emotional, psychological, and social well-being and has a direct impact on the voice and your overall health. It is important to speak to a therapist, counselor, or psychiatrist if necessary.
3. Continue studying with a voice teacher. Just because you have earned your music degree doesn't mean that you are done taking lessons for the rest of your life. Just as you would take your car in for an oil and filter change and tire rotation, you should see a voice teacher regularly for maintenance. Every voice teacher has something new and different to offer, and you owe it to yourself to continue honing your skills and inhabiting a healthy technique. Your voice changes as you age, and it is important to continue cultivating your vocal growth and health. You might find that setting goals such as singing in a community choir, church choir, annual walk-in Messiah, or perhaps an annual recital will keep you motivated to continue voice lessons with a reputable teacher in your area.
2. Get involved and stay current with modern trends! By attending conferences, seminars, and workshops on a state, regional, or national level, you will be exposed to the latest research and developments in voice pedagogy and music education. Perhaps most importantly, these professional development opportunities can rejuvenate you and allow you to discover topics that will excite you artistically, professionally, and pedagogically. Remember the excitement you felt upon going to college and beginning your musical studies? This type of excitement can happen throughout your life if you put

yourself out there and continue to set goals, evolve, and grow. As the current President of the Wisconsin Chapter of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (WI NATS), I would be remiss if I did not encourage you to join the state chapter and national organization. As a NATS member, you will have a built-in network of colleagues, voice professors, private voice teachers, and other choral directors throughout the state and country. If you teach privately, you will be able to register high school students for the annual Student Auditions which provides students with valuable feedback from voice teachers throughout the state. There are many other wonderful opportunities for professional development, and you will receive the quarterly issues of the NATS Journal of Singing.

1. Get out of the box! I mean this quite literally. Traveling, seeing the world, taking that vacation or weekend get-away, getting off of social media and going for a hike or a bike ride can inspire creativity and rejuvenate your artistry. As a teacher, you are constantly giving your all to your students, and it is important that you take care of yourself and nurture the part of you that chose to go into music in the first place. Richard Palmer in “The Courage to Teach” states “that it is the self that teaches.” Expanding your horizons by taking on new challenges, gaining different perspectives by starting yoga or tennis, or writing or drawing can unleash creativity within you. Getting outside of the bubble of music can add more color and range to your teaching and singing. You might remember that in college when you would go home for the summer, that you ended up singing better than you did during the semester? That you were lying on the beach when you put two and two together and realized, “Oh, that’s what my voice professor meant!” Balance is key and taking chances by getting out of the box sometimes leads us to greater musical and teaching possibilities.

In a recent masterclass given during the 2nd annual Active and Integrative Music Education (AIME) conference at the University of Wisconsin Stevens-Point, I worked with two high school choral teachers who were 5-6 years out of their formal training. Both were excellent singers who had received music education degrees from reputable institutions but were experiencing vocal fatigue and some technical challenges because of their grueling teaching schedules and demands. We worked specifically on numbers 6 and 9 of the “Top 10 Tips” in this masterclass. It is my hope that their comments from their experience might resonate with you.

“It was liberating to get back on stage and use my voice in the way that I studied in college. With being a secondary music educator, I have been focusing on increasing student engagement by incorporating more relevant songs that my students enjoy. To help students convey the difference in style each piece has, I vocally demonstrate what we are looking for. This strategy allows my students to hear the difference between what they are doing and what we are working towards. As a result, I had begun experiencing a faster sense of fatigue in my voice at the end of the day. Being able to work in this masterclass helped me remember that despite this need for demonstrating a variety of styles in my classroom, the basics can help us find our voice that we had worked to achieve throughout college. Once you realign yourself in those techniques, teaching the other vocal styles can become less tiring. The technique from the masterclass that had the biggest impact on me involved a chair. Dr. Markham instructed me to use the chair by sitting on it backwards and hugging it, so the backrest was in contact with my chest. This exercise helped me to ground my support so that I could relax the tension I carried in my upper body. Upon the inhalation, I felt more expansion in my back and sides. As a result, my vocal range expanded higher with less tension in the sound. After experiencing that feeling with the chair, I was able to transfer that same technique into the way I sang while standing. Though it seems simple, this one task helped me realign my voice and is a technique I now use in my classroom to help students find their voice in each style of repertoire.” (Participant 1)

“I really enjoyed participating in Dr. Markham’s voice masterclass. I’ve been teaching for 6 years, and I can tell my voice is not in the same healthy state it was in college. Dr. Markham did a wonderful job helping me through some vocal cracks I’ve been experiencing in my upper range by having me sing through a straw. I now have more confidence on stage.” (Participant 2)

By adhering to the “Top 10 List” above and relating to the experiences of the two choral teachers from my masterclass, it is my hope that you will find yourself more fulfilled as an artist and inspired as an educator as you continue your career, just as the solid foundation of your formal training intended. Remember that you are not

alone, and that all your college peers with whom you once commiserated on theory assignments and upcoming class projects, are the same ones now out in the world making a difference in high school choirs every day. Reach out to them, stay connected, and encourage each other to stay the fight and stay strong as you hold each other accountable in maintaining vocal health and technique, especially after college.

Biography

Matthew Markham is Associate Professor of Voice at the UW-Stevens Point and was recently a winner of the University Excellence Award in Teaching. He has enjoyed an active performing career and has performed in concert venues including Weill Hall in NYC and Suk Hall in Prague. In the field of music research, Dr. Markham was a national recipient of the Theodore Presser Grant which supported his research on the compositions of Czech composer Petr Eben. Dr. Markham was published in the January/February 2015 NATS Journal of Singing: "Petr Eben's Písň z Těšínska: A Guide for Singers, Teachers, and Coaches." He holds the Doctor of Music and Bachelor of Music degrees in Voice Performance from Florida State University and the Master of Music degree in Voice Performance and Pedagogy from Westminster Choir College. Dr. Markham spends his summers teaching on the voice faculty at the International Lyric Academy in Italy.