

Giving your voice carrying power

These notes are intended to support and follow up a workshop on vocal carrying power, and practical experience is really the only way to explore this aspect of your voice. But I hope you will be reminded of some of the things we talked about and did together.

It is important to consider this subject in a positive and helpful way. Think in terms of intensity, staying power, singing further, singing more clearly, reaching your audience, sustaining power. Using words like 'louder' or 'more volume' are not helpful and may even be damaging.

We are able to use two almost opposite systems for making our voices carry. If there is an emergency, you will automatically use a great deal of muscular force to shout as loudly as possible. This is effective for the short term, but sustained use of this system will quickly tire and damage your voice. You only need to think back to a time when you have yelled at a sporting event, or shouted above a high level of background noise. You 'lost your voice'. It was damaged and it took a while to recover.

To give our voices carrying power, we should start from a state of relaxation. When our bodies are relaxed then the muscles can move in an efficient and coordinated way, we can use our breath to support our voices and we can use the resonators in our bodies to amplify the sound. This does not tire our muscles and hurt our voices.

It can be quite a challenge to change habits that may have been with you for a long time. However, in order for the song to reach out to people emotionally, audibly and safely, you will need to develop good vocal carrying power. All the advice here is underpinned by all the other aspects of good voice development, which include posture, quality of movement, stamina, breath support and control, keeping the voice fit and healthy &c.

- Stand up and clench your toes. You can feel the tension flowing up through your legs and into your body, shoulders and neck. It is tension like this which clamps down on our voices and stops the sound carrying.
- Sit in a stable posture (feet flat on floor, bottom back in the corner of the chair, back straight, hands resting on lap, eyes shut, facing forward). Take 5-10 minutes to relax your body, taking that feeling of easy looseness from your head down to your feet.
- Keep checking back to make sure you are relaxed throughout the exercise, especially loose jaw, tongue and lips.
- Feel the gentle flow of breath and the movements of your tummy and ribs.
- Allow a small 'mmm' to sound on the outflow of breath. (Keep loose.)
- Allow that sound to build slightly. You should take several breaths at each stage to maintain and really experience the sound. Do not overfill your lungs or push too much breath out. Keep everything loose and easy.
- Feel the vibration in your head – that is as far as the sound goes.
- Gradually take the sound so that it vibrates on your face – lips, cheeks, nose, forehead.
- Put your hand in front of your face and place the sound on your hand. (Check for loose, relaxed body.)
- Put your hand down and visualise a point about 3 metres away. Vibrate your sound to that point.

- Float the sound to the door of the room you are sitting in. Visualise the vibrations on the door.
- Place your sound in the room next door and set the air vibrating.
- Allow your sound to carry to the house next door, or the end of the garden. (Check for loose easy body, jaw, tongue & lips.)
- Let your sound envelop your town and roll out over the countryside beyond.
- Open your eyes and continue releasing your sound.
- Slowly and gently stand up and walk around. (If you feel light headed, sit down again and return to normal breathing.)
- There are many more progressive steps from this point. This sequence takes a while, but is very effective for finding your 'carrying voice' from a position of relaxation.

Another good sound to use is 'ngaaa' (that is the sound that comes at the end of 'ring', followed by 'ah'.) This allows your mouth to open loosely.

This is, of course, an exercise. But the sounds and body patterns that you practise can be transferred into your singing, even when you are standing in front of an audience, moving around or playing an instrument.

Below are some other ideas that I will mention briefly to help you in giving your voice carrying power. Thanks must go to Chris Coe, Frankie Armstrong, and many others too!

- Explore and use your resonators – chest, larynx, pharynx, mouth, nose, sinuses – in fact all the tissues of your body are involved in vibration.
- Use all your breath to make sound and reduce 'breathiness' in your voice.
- Use clear articulation.
- Allow yourself to 'lean' on the vowel sounds.
- You may need to slow down a little. Your sound will be travelling further and needs extra time to do that.
- Take account of the effect the room has. Things like curtains, carpets, furnishings and people will absorb the sound. Other spaces will reverberate more. The general rule is that you should raise the pitch (i.e. sing a little higher) in an absorbent space, and lower it in a reverberant place.
- Do an acoustic 'sound check' before you perform. Get used to the feel of the room and how your voice sounds in it. Ask a friend to listen at the back and let you know if you need to adjust the carrying power of your voice. Of course, it will alter a little when people are there and the air is warm and moist.
- Use silence and pausing to enable listeners to catch up with the meaning of your words.
- Think your voice to the back wall of the space, and beyond, while maintaining relaxation.
- Some places will require you to use microphones, which raise many other issues. But you should still use voice from a position of relaxation rather than tension.

I'll end with a voice health warning. Many of us go to the Internet for information, and I like to keep up with what is being said there about voice. Much of the information about 'voice projection' is incomplete, inaccurate and potentially damaging. Please only follow advice from a properly qualified and experienced voice practitioner.