

## Discovering Your Voice

**I**F YOU think you'd love to be able to play a musical instrument, you don't have to look too far. Did you know that most of us possess our own musical instruments – built right into our bodies? I'm talking about your voice.

Many of you may think you couldn't carry a tune if your life depended on it, but the voice is considered the original musical instrument. Believe it or not, nearly anyone who can speak can sing since, in many respects, singing is merely a form of sustained speech. Now, not everybody can sing like the late Luciano Pavarotti, but we all have the capacity to create lyrical sounds of music with our individual vocal instruments.

Most of us can recall a childhood experience when we were cruelly teased for one reason or the other. We may carry that cruelty for a lifetime; such self-created insecurity inhibits our voice. I know many would rather stand in front of hundreds of people in a bathing suit than give a speech or croon a note for even one person.

Discovering one's voice can be a tricky thing. As a professional singing/voice teacher, I teach a specific technique to improve the function of the vocal instrument, but no two students are the same. Personalities run the gamut, so understanding each of my students on a deep psychological level helps me learn how to design each lesson for them. I believe I can teach almost anyone to improve his/her vocal instrument. It is extremely rewarding when students achieve their goals and are pleased with their progress; this only enhances their growth.

Generally, I feel the main goal and the first step in learning to sing is to relinquish your inhibited voice. To relinquish that is to relinquish a part of your soul. Sometimes that can be a bit scary because you may feel your voice is not your best asset. But it can also be very therapeutic and euphoric. There are studies that suggest sound waves produced by the human voice can be healing, mentally and physically.

As a professional singer, I will

always study my music and take lessons to improve and reassess my voice as I go through the many stages of my life mentally, physically and professionally. Because the voice is part of our bodies, and we may feel differently mentally and physically from day to day, our voice will mirror those differences.

Our voice paints our personality, it expresses our emotional state. We all need and want to be heard in any capacity; our voice is the most powerful expression of ourselves and our paramount tool of communication – in spoken word or in song.

There is not a human culture that does not sing. Not only is singing ancient and universal, in some cultures, it is an important function in matters vital to the individual, social group, or religion and isn't just for entertainment. Primitive man sang to invoke his gods, celebrate his accomplishments and recount his history. There are even cultures that regard singing as such an awesome act that they have created myths about how they were sung into existence.

How did we take speech and transfer it into a lyrical line? It is suggested the earliest singing was individualistic and improvisatory, a simple imitation of the sounds heard in nature. The use of the voice as a lyrical expression continued to evolve as humans evolved and society became established; thus, lyrical expression has become indispensable in every society. Song is used to express devotion in religion, to soothe, it is used in advertising, as entertainment and escapism as well as to enhance our lives.

Know that your voice and your music should be shared and not be purely self-indulgent. As a

**VIRGIN'S VOICE:** Opera Australia's soprano Leanne Kenneally, center in a saree, portrays the virgin goddess Leila while Michael Lewis plays the part of Zurga during the final rehearsal of Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers" at the Sydney Opera House in September. Bizet composed "The Pearl Fishers" in 1863, when he was only 25, and set the play in ancient Ceylon.



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## Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny

vocal artist, I do not sing to indulge in the sound of my voice. I purely sing to evoke transcendence in others – to bring forth emotions in others that only song has the ability to do.

Many times, at small informal gatherings I am asked to “sing something” and I know this is because an operatic talent can be quite unique, though, at times, I must admit I feel like “Geeta the Circus Freak Show.” Let me tell you, I get more nervous about impromptu singing for a small party than singing in a huge concert hall where music has its place and time. Nevertheless, I will never turn down the opportunity to educate and to inspire with my craft as it is truly an honor to do so and my responsibility as a musical artist.

In those minutes where I share my sound waves, I have noticed spellbound faces of mixed, intrigued emotions; smiles, tears and, after the experience, many compliments and hugs and kisses. And I will inform you, experienced singers know when praise is false and when it is true.

The most important thing I realize with each experience – large or small – is that I hold the fragility and complexity of the human spirit in my vocalism. I realize over and over again music can tear down the walls our egos build for us. So, I encourage you to find your voice in a literal or figurative way.

### INTERESTING FACTS

Most people have an understanding of where their vocal folds are located and how sound is produced, but here are some interesting facts about the physiology of our voice and how the spoken voice transitions to the singing voice.

#### **Where and what are the vocal folds**

**(vocal cords):** The vocal folds are organs of the larynx. The larynx is a series of cartilages and is a valve between the trachea and the root of the tongue. The folds are located just above the windpipe. Generally, vocal folds open to breathe and close to speak. Upon humming, speaking or singing, the vocal folds vibrate as does the larynx. If you place your fingers around the cartilage in the middle of your throat and speak or sing, you can feel the vibrations created by your breath against the vocal folds.

**What do vocal folds look like:** The vocal folds consist of two wedge-shaped pinkish bundles of muscles with white ligament edges, with the entire organ covered by a mucous membrane. Vocal folds can vary in size and length, especially between men and women. The vocal folds function from a complex tensing and relaxing mechanism. They are quite intriguing as they can shorten themselves, contract laterally, vary the length and thickness of a vibrating segment and even make a part tense while the rest is relaxed. No man-made instrument can rival the engineering of our vocal folds.

**Why is water so important:** The reason drinking lots of water is recommended for singers and speakers is because it serves two purposes. When singers or speakers take their expansive breaths to achieve phonation (voice produced by means of vocal fold vibration), it can dry the throat and the mouth and this can cause irritation in the throat. Also, the vocal folds are protected and surrounded by a mucous membrane which is composed mostly of water. A singer or speaker must keep their bodies hydrated to

maintain that thick, protective mucous membrane. Dehydration and overuse of the vocal folds can cause hoarseness or damage the folds.

**Pitching the voice:** The pitch or frequency of the sound is dictated by how far apart the vocal folds are. Breath from the lungs builds up behind the vocal folds, creating pressure. This air pressure causes the vocal folds to vibrate and make sound. The wider apart the vocal folds, the more air is allowed through, creating a deeper or lower sound. High sounds are created by the folds being close together with much more air pressure behind.

**Breathing for singing:** The creation of vocal sounds begins with breath. Breathing in everyday life is a subconscious bodily function that occurs naturally; however, the singer must have control of the intake and exhalation of breath to achieve maximum results from the voice. Singers must also learn to control or pace their breath for diversity in pitch, volume and musical phrasing. Breath support comes from the controlled use of the diaphragm and the muscles of the stomach, waist and back, with the additional use of techniques involved in the posture of the body and the awareness of the hard and soft palates of the mouth.

*Source: The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice by Barbara M. Doscher, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.*

Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny is a professional classical singer, actor and teacher. She believes her self-expression is most powerful and resourceful through using her vocal instrument in music.

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