

teaching

JANUARY 2012 VOLUME 19, NUMBER 4

music

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MUSIC EDUCATION WEEK 2012 p. 23



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Voice Savers

for Music Teachers

A voice pathologist offers 10 tips to prevent hoarseness, throat pain, and vocal fatigue

By Starr Cookman

Music teachers are in a class all their own when it comes to voice use. These elite vocal athletes require stamina, strength, and flexibility from their voices day in, day out for hours at a time. Voice rehabilitation clinics and research show that music education ranks high among the professions most commonly affected by voice problems, which is probably no surprise to anyone reading this. Hoarseness (particularly by the end of the week), throat discomfort, and vocal fatigue are the usual symptoms. The causes? Vocal misuse and overuse, most likely dehydration, and lack of rest. Music teachers are prone to swelling, polyps, and nodules on their vocal cords as well as hyperfunction of the muscles in and around the voice box.

Unfortunately, music teachers don't typically learn about speaking-voice optimization and care during their college years, which places them at a huge occupational risk because they regularly endure back-to-back hours of demanding vocal rigor, often over background noise

and typically to groups of more than 30 children. I've sat across the therapy table from many music teachers afflicted with career-altering voice problems who cope with constant throat pain and hoarseness that interfere with the job they dearly love. I wish these professional superheroes had had information early on in their careers to help prevent vocal problems.

Along those lines, here are 10 tips to improve your vocal health in the classroom and to reduce my caseload.

1 Use a personal amplifier at all times when teaching in your classroom, as well as when running rehearsals in the auditorium, gym, or cafeteria. If you're involved in recess, bus, or lunch duty, by all means use it then too. I usually recommend the Chattervox by Siemens or the SoniVox by Griffin Technologies. These amplifiers are battery-operated and fully transportable. The only cord runs from the headset microphone down to the speaker, which is held in a fanny pack-

style holder (not the pinnacle of fashion, true, and it does hearken back to '90s-era tourists, but it's worth it). Keeping the microphone close to your mouth is key. This is the single most important and effective thing you can do to save your voice. A voice amplifier can reduce fatigue, pain, and hoarseness. Begin using one before you develop problems, to elongate the life of your voice and possibly free your voice up for those singing jobs you've been avoiding because you're just too tired.

2 Use recorded music or videos to break up sections of oral teaching longer than two hours and give yourself a much-needed voice nap.

3 Draw on music students with strong voices as singing models for the rest of the section. This will not only reduce your vocal load, but it will also provide a daily opportunity for your section leaders to perform.



Don't...

Reach forward with your face or wear a big grin



Do...

Keep your chin back and smile with your eyes

4 **Avoid additional singing commitments** outside work until you're able to get to Friday afternoon without vocal hoarseness, laryngeal pain, or vocal fatigue.

5 **Don't push through laryngitis** or teach while you're sick to avoid using a substitute. Vocal cords are at even greater risk for permanent damage if

you use them while they're swollen. It's much better to miss one or two days to rest your cords when you're ill than to face the ramifications of disability due to permanent damage to your voice. Harsh, I know. But I've seen too many music teachers face a premature end to their careers due to voice problems, and it's heartbreaking. Most are able to rehabilitate, but it's a long road.

6 **Use nonvocal means for classroom management.** Establish simple tunes to signify transition points in your class. Use lights, bells, whistles, hand signals, feedback from your voice amplification system . . . whatever works.

7 **Warm up your body, breath, and voice** on the morning of each teaching day. Stress held unconsciously in your body often negatively affects vocal function. Stretching and releasing the muscles of your neck, jaw, and shoulders can help counteract this.

8 **Be aware of your posture while you teach.** A common mistake teachers unconsciously make is to reach forward with their faces to connect with their students. Another is to use a "perma-grin" to convey an open and supportive personality. Unfortunately, both of these postures introduce problems for the voice. Both the chin jutting forward and the smile may encourage your larynx to ride high in the neck. Correct your chin-jut throughout the day by positioning your ears over your shoulders, and smile more with your eyes than with your lips.

9 **Keep your system hydrated.** Find ways to get to the bathroom so you can drink enough water throughout the day to make your urine pale yellow. Avoiding diuretics (caffeine) can be helpful in managing your bladder. Sipping water, rather than gulping all at once, and gradually increasing your water intake over a week or so can also help reduce the need to frequent the bathroom at inconvenient times.

10 **Check in with a singing teacher** or singing voice specialist to be sure you're using good technique when singing for students. Even the most accomplished singers need a teacher to provide feedback on habituated tension in their technique. When singing for students, teachers often manipulate their voices to sound more like the children. To provide a good vocal model, a pure, nonvibrato sound may be used. In and of itself, this isn't necessarily harmful. It's of great importance, however, that you consult with a singing teacher and demonstrate how you're singing in the classroom. You may be able to make some simple adjustments that will save your voice.

Are You Ready?

The January NAFME member monthly special features the 2012 Music In Our Schools Month® (MIOSM®) Lapel Stickers. Your students will love using these 1-1/2" square colorful stickers. Whether on clothes, books, or bags, they will raise awareness of music in your school!

In January only, NAFME members can purchase the MIOSM lapel stickers (500 per pack) for only \$7.50 – half off the regular price!



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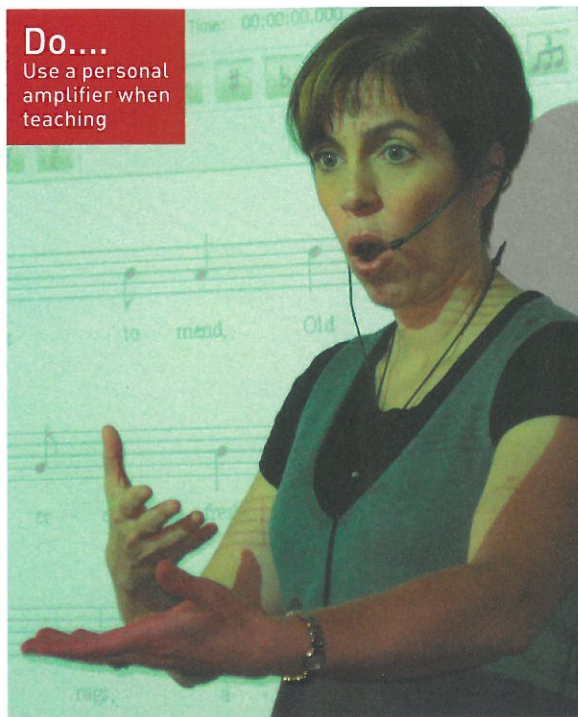
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Do....
Use a personal amplifier when teaching



FURTHER READING

The following articles from NAFME publications offer additional information about keeping your voice healthy.

■ "Should I Use a Classroom Microphone? Pros, Cons, and Other Considerations for the Preservation of Vocal Health in Music Teachers," *Music Educators Journal*, December 2010.

■ "The Relationship between the Physical Aspects of Voice Production and Optimal Vocal Health," *Music Educators Journal*, January 2008.

■ "Music Shouldn't Hurt," *Teaching Music*, October 2011.

What to Avoid

Irritants in the environment can affect the tissue of the vocal folds. Everything we breathe passes through them. Cigarette or cigar smoke, stage smoke, and artificial fog can irritate the vocal cords or worse. Likewise, chemical fumes from cleaning supplies, nail polish remover, paint, and paint thinner; dust; mold; and other air-borne allergens can have a negative effect. Super-dry environments, such as airplanes or rooms with forced-air heating, take their toll as well. As the dry or smoky air passes over the moist vocal folds, it robs them of their moisture, making vibration more difficult.

Anything that contributes to dehydration in your body can also contribute to vocal fold dryness. Alcohol, caffeine, and some medications are common contributors to dehydration. If you consume alcohol and caffeine, try to do so in moderation and increase the amount of water you drink to keep your body hydrated; for example, drink an extra glass of water for every glass of wine. To check the drying effects of your medications, the National Center for Voice & Speech maintains a list of medications and how they affect your voice (ncvs.org/rx.html).

Our own bodies create too much mucus and/or acid near our vocal folds,

which can cause problems with vocal clarity and comfort. A surprisingly common vocal fold irritant, acid reflux—or more particularly laryngopharyngeal reflux (LPR), which occurs primarily at the level of the throat—can cause redness, irritation, and swelling of the vocal folds. Sometimes LPR can affect us without obvious reflux symptoms, displaying only as hoarseness or excessive phlegm. With postnasal drip, secretions often land on or near the vocal folds, causing irritation and frequent coughing, which can lead to vocal injury. A doctor can help with both LPR and postnasal drip.

Don't take your voice for granted. With a few precautions and an awareness of your vocal health, you can keep voice problems at bay while pursuing a rewarding music teaching career.

Starr Cookman is a voice/speech pathologist and assistant professor at the University of Connecticut Health Center, coauthor of *The Voice Book: Caring For, Protecting and Improving*

Your Voice (Chicago Review Press, 2009), and cocreator of the Laryngeal Teaching Series DVDs (loveyourvoice.com). She also teaches music part-time at a small Montessori school in Connecticut.



Irritants like smoke, mold, and alcohol are some of the things to avoid.