

50 Ways to Abuse Your Voice

A Singer's Guide to a Short Career

Second Edition

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Preface

In 1985, the author (RTS) published an article called “Ten Good Ways to Abuse Your Voice: A Singers Guide to a Short Career, Part I” in the NATS Journal (now Journal of Singing). The readers enjoyed the article, and it was followed in 1986 by “Ten More Good Ways to Abuse Your Voice: A Singers Guide to a Short Career, Part II.” Singers have continued to send comments expressing appreciation for these old articles which are now somewhat outdated. So, when Noel McPherson, owner of Compton Publishing, requested a book based on the concept of those articles, the idea seemed timely. The original articles were updated and converted into new chapters. Thirty additional chapters were added, some of which were completely new, and some of which were modified from prior writings, with the extremely popular first edition being published in 2014. When contacted about a second edition in late 2022, the senior author (RTS) recognized the timing was perfect again. This second edition contains updates, corrections and new material on the topics presented in the first edition. More topics will be discussed in a new book: “50 More Ways to Abuse Your Voice”.

Like its predecessor, the second edition is intended to provide straight-forward, accessible information to singers, highlighting common errors of omission and commission, and to provide guidance on medical issues that affect the quality and duration of an avocation or a career in singing. Unlike most of our medical writings, the chapters are short,

and they are not heavily referenced or illustrated. Interested readers can find additional information and reference source materials in our other books (a few of which were listed among the suggested readings at the end of this book) and in other sources. We hope that our readers find this work enjoyable and useful, and that the knowledge acquired through these pages helps enhance and extend their singing careers.

We acknowledge the following sources:

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Amy Rutt

Dedication

To the thousands of singers for whom we have cared over the years. We have learned as much from them as they have learned from us.

and

To our families.

Acknowledgement

S

The authors are indebted to Christina Chenes, Deborah Westergon and Lonnie Ray for their assistance in preparation of this book.

Don't warm up before you use your voice

Most trained singers will laugh at this admonition and say, "Of course I would never sing without warming up." However, the statement does not say "warm up before singing"; it says, "warm up before you use your voice." While very few trained singers would go out on stage to perform without having "warmed up," it is amazing how many singers will go through an entire day of heavy voice use in classrooms, teaching and other business situations without some preparatory vocal exercise (warmups). Unfortunately, most singers "practice" in the afternoon and evening. Yet, if that follows a day of lecturing, teaching music classes, singing in choir rehearsals, etc., the practice comes too late. It is like warming up for the first time after running a marathon. Much can be gained by voice exercises first thing in the morning. Even if a singer sings scales for only five to ten minutes to warm up, stretch and "place" the voice before beginning a day of speaking, the difference in vocal awareness, voice conservation, and control of the speaking voice may be substantial. We have personally cared for people prepared to retire from teaching or conducting because of hoarseness and vocal fatigue who have found morning vocal warmups sufficient to restore them to good voice performance.

2

Don't exercise

Singing is an athletic activity. Vocal exercise is as essential to the vocalist as exercise and conditioning of other muscle systems are to an athlete. Proper vocal practice incorporates scales and specific exercises designed to maintain and develop the vocal apparatus. Simply acting or singing songs and giving performances without routine, studious concentration on voice technique usually is not adequate for the vocal performer. Voice performance requires excellent respiratory conditioning, endurance and good general health. This is true even of recital singing, let alone opera productions in which singing is combined often with running, dancing, fencing and other taxing activities. It is also true for pop and rock singing in which intense performance may be required for 6 sets 6 nights a week, and for "Broadway" or "West End" singing which often involves 8 shows a week. Obesity, poor general conditioning, avoidance of some form of aerobic exercise regularly, and failure to maintain good abdominal and thoracic muscle strength undermine the power source of the voice and predispose the singer to voice difficulties.

Don't study singing

There are many reasons why singers choose to not study singing or to stop taking singing lessons. In general, none of them is valid. Probably the most common reason for singers to refuse voice lessons is given by “pop” singers. They often are afraid that singing lessons will make them sound “operatic” and will interfere with their style. In the hands of a good teacher, that is not true. The same basic techniques of voice production and voice preservation required of classical singers work for pop singers and may be used regardless of style. In fact, pop singers often need technical expertise at least as much as classical singers. Unfortunately, part of the blame for the “bad image” of voice teachers within the pop music community falls on the heads of our best voice teachers. Too often, elite teachers refuse to teach singers interested in pop music careers, restricting their studios to “serious” singers. This forces pop singers to study with less knowledgeable teachers, stylists who call themselves teachers, or worse. Popular singers, whose livelihoods depend upon their voices and music (and whose economic potential may be very substantial), have received less than their fair share of attention; and it is past time for expert singing teachers to reassess their willingness to teach them. Many have done so in recent years.

Another common and inappropriate reason for not studying is illness. Commonly, when we see a singer with laryngitis in our medical offices and determine that they may proceed cautiously with a performance provided other voice activities are limited, the singer will cancel their

voice lessons. The weak, sick or injured singer's voice needs supervision of technique more than ever. Singing lessons under such circumstances may be short and directed toward assuring that the singer's technique remains excellent despite deficits in auditory feedback (from "stuffy ears" caused by a cold, for example). Vocal nodules also are not a reason to stop singing lessons, although they may be a good reason to limit or stop public performance. Supervised, correct singing does not cause vocal nodules; and, in the author's (RTS) voice center, we use singing lessons routinely in association with speaking voice therapy in the treatment of vocal nodules and other benign vocal fold masses.

A third common (and equally invalid) reason for not studying is vocal experience. Even premier singers in the best opera companies continue to study and to have an objective expert monitor their voice techniques. Unfortunately, when they do not, the public usually becomes aware of it before long; and sometimes that shortsightedness leads to voice injuries that require medical or surgical care. None of us is so experienced or so expert as to be able to abandon vocal study altogether. Certainly, the young artist who is in the first years of touring will find it difficult to continue voice lessons and may underestimate their importance since they are already "successful"; but this shortsightedness eventually causes trouble in most cases. The challenges have been lessened recently by the option to take singing or acting lessons virtually, even while the performer is on tour.

Don't recognize technical problems in your singing voice

Technical errors in voices may be the primary cause of a medical voice complaint or may develop secondarily as a result of a singer's efforts to compensate for voice disturbance from another cause.

Singing should not hurt the throat. If, at the end of a voice lesson, a singer is tired and aches a bit in their lower back or abdomen, that is usually not a problem. However, if pain occurs in neck, throat or larynx, that might be a danger signal. Most often, it is caused by excessive tension in the neck and tongue that is not necessary for good singing and may be unhealthy for the voice, even leading to vocal nodules or other vocal fold pathology. Early in training, a little discomfort in the neck is not uncommon as a singer's bad technique is being corrected; but it should be minor and become progressively better and disappear during the course of training.

Hoarseness following voice lessons is also another danger signal. Hoarseness usually is caused by damage on the delicate leading edges of the vocal folds. It does not ordinarily occur after proper singing. If it occurs consistently following voice lessons, this may be an important warning.

The number of years a performer has been training their voice may be a fair index of vocal proficiency. A person who has studied voice for one

or two years is somewhat more likely to have gross technical difficulties than someone who has been studying for 20 years. However, if training has been intermittent or discontinued, or if the training has not been effective, technical problems are common even among experienced singers.

In addition, methods of technical voice use vary among voice teachers. Hence, a student who has had many teachers in a relatively brief period of time commonly has numerous technical insecurities or deficiencies that may be responsible for voice dysfunction. This is especially true if the singer has changed to a new teacher within the preceding year. The physician must be careful not to criticize the patient's current voice teacher in such circumstances. It often takes years of expert instruction to correct bad habits.

Author Biographies

Robert T. Sataloff, MD, DMA, FACS is Professor and Chair, Department of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery and Senior Associate Dean for Clinical Academic Specialties, Drexel University College of Medicine. Dr. Sataloff is Director of Otolaryngology and Communication Sciences Research at the Lankenau Institute for Medical Research, and Director of Otolaryngology Education at Lankenau Medical



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Michigan. Dr. Sataloff is Chair of the Boards of Directors of the Voice Foundation and of the American Institute for Voice and Ear Research. He also has served as Chair of the Board of Governors of Graduate Hospital; President of the American Laryngological Association, the International Association of Phonosurgery, the Pennsylvania Academy of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery, and The American Society of Geriatric Otolaryngology, and in numerous other leadership positions. Dr. Sataloff is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Voice*; Editor Emeritus of *Ear, Nose and Throat Journal*; Associate Editor of the *Journal of Singing*; on the Editorial Board of *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* and is an editorial reviewer for numerous otolaryngology journals. He has written over 1,000 publications including 72 books, and he has been awarded more than \$5 million in research funding. His H-index is 44 (as of January 2023). He has invented more than 75 laryngeal microsurgical instruments distributed currently by Integra Medical, ossicular replacement prostheses produced by Grace Medical, and a novel laryngeal prosthesis (patent pending). He holds a patent on a unique thyroplasty implant. His medical practice is limited to care of the professional voice and to otology/neurotology/skull base surgery. Dr. Sataloff has developed numerous novel surgical procedures including total temporal bone resection for formerly untreatable skull base malignancy, laryngeal microflap and mini-microflap procedures, vocal fold lipoinjection, vocal fold lipoimplantation, and others. Dr. Sataloff is recognized as one of the founders of the field of voice, having written the first modern comprehensive article on care of singers, and the first chapter and book on care of the professional voice, as well as having influenced the evolution of the field through his own efforts and through the Voice Foundation for over 4 decades. Dr. Sataloff has been recognized by Best Doctors in America (Woodward White Athens) every year since 1992, Philadelphia Magazine since 1997, and Castle Connolly's "America's Top Doctors" since 2002.

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