

# Ep #32: Vocal Takeaways from the DNC

Can't  
wait  
to hear  
you  
with  
Michèle Voillequé

**Full Episode Transcript**

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

Today, I want to share with you my vocal takeaways from the speakers at the Democratic National Convention, which just happened in the United States last week.

And I'm, I guess, *anti-trigger warning*, there's going to be no talk of politics here. So if you're on a news diet, not in the United States, don't want to think about American politics, that's just fine. This is still a safe episode for you.

What I notice in my teaching is that it's very difficult to convince students that they will sound better if they let their mouth be more open.

We have a lot of social triggers that convince us that we are prettier, more handsome, more credible, seem more intelligent if we speak with a mouth that is relatively closed.

And, that's true in many circumstances. You can't go around with your mouth hanging open and have people take you seriously. At least, at this point in the United States, that's the case. So there's good reason for wanting to maintain a small mouth.

There's also a good physiological reason for maintaining a small mouth, and that's because a lot of us just have a lot of jaw tension because we chew food and that makes the jaw tense. And we have a lot of things that we don't think are appropriate to say, and we're kind of holding them in.

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So you can have jaw tension just from regular use of your body, for survival – that is eating – and also just not feeling free to say what it is that you want to say, whenever you want to say it, and holding your mouth closed, as a habit you've developed to be a polite person.

What I noticed about the convention speakers is that their mouths were consistently more open than you might think is quote unquote “normal.” So I'd encourage you to go to YouTube and watch with the sound off the speeches of Raphael Warnock, Pete Buttigieg, Michelle Obama, Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, Tim Walz.

Pick any one of them. I did watch an awful lot of the convention, but I didn't watch all of it, so I'm not sure if this is true of every convention speaker, but I can guarantee for those, you'll see a looseness in their jaw that is not common to the rest of us on a normal day.

And that looseness in the jaw is part of what brought clarity to their speech and emotionality to their speech and conviction. And I think you will hear none of those voices got tired in the course of their presentation. And none of those voices sounded pinched in the course of the presentation.

Sometimes there was great emotionality, but I wasn't, as a voice teacher, worried about any of them, that they were hurting themselves or, “oh, this is something that their, their voice is going to have to recover from.”

Another thing you can see with the sound off – you won't see any of them breathe in a big, gasping kind of way. Their shoulders are still. They're anchored in the center of their body and they're breathing as much as they need to, to say what they need to say, but they're not over-inhaling. And they're not running out of breath at the ends of their sentences.

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Certainly, all of this is something that you need to practice as a human being in order to pull off, but I just want to say that it is learnable. We learn so much in our lives by imitating other people, by watching how other people do it and trying it that way ourselves.

We rarely ever keep a one-to-one copy of how to do something, you know, from the person we learned it from. We put our own spin on it.

But if you have any doubt about your ability to sing better, or speak better, or change the way that you use your body, give yourself the benefit of watching a good example, and knowing that it is possible, and that these people were not always this great, at speaking.

They learned. They came out of the womb without language, just like you did.

I found the breathing thing particularly noticeable with Michelle Obama. How she stood, how she paused between phrases and sentences. There was never any kind of desperate breathing thing going on. Her shoulders were still, you could tell she was anchored, really anchored in her core.

So, if you take anything away from this episode, watch her speech with the sound off. And if you haven't heard it, you should watch it with the sound on because it is also an amazing example of rhetoric – how to construct an argument, how to tell the truth, how to be yourself when you're saying something really important.

Even if you're never going to speak to millions of people on television or even more than two dozen people, it's a great example of how to be solidly in yourself, clear and truthful and compelling.

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The third thing that I want to say that I think you'll notice even with the sound off is that they were not obviously reading from a teleprompter. And this just speaks to the power of practice, of knowing what it is you're going to say, of having given yourself the benefit of many repetitions.

Not just, you know, “okay, I'll run through it a couple of times before I go on,” but many repetitions. Taking a speech out for a walk, going through it in your head as you, you're walking around the block or in, in a safe place where you don't have to spend a whole lot of attention on keeping yourself physically safe, right? So doing this on a busy street is probably not the best idea.

Taking a speech on a walk, going through it in your head in the shower, going through it from the end.

I'm not sure that everybody's speech was memorized, but they all knew exactly where they were going and the teleprompter was really just a prompter. And of course, that's what it should be. But, you know, it isn't always and we're human and, not my place to judge, right? I'm not playing on that big of a stage.

So these three things: they let their mouths be open, they were centered in their body, taking calm breaths, and they were exquisitely well-prepared. They knew exactly what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it.

And this, again, is about how their bodies were functioning. This is not about the content. You can see all of this with the sound off. And in the case of how open their mouths were, that will probably be more powerful for you as a learner to see that speaking with a more open mouth actually added to their credibility rather than took away from it.

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A couple of exercises came up in my teaching this week that I don't think I've shared on the podcast before that you might find helpful if working on your breathing and your strong, solid presence is something that's up for you right now.

One of the things that happens when we get nervous is that we start breathing very shallowly. Our chest starts to rise, we're like, the tummy gets tight, we pull our, the belly gets pulled in and we start just breathing into the very tippy-top of our lungs and we're not letting our whole trunk expand.

And with that can also come quite a lot of shoulder involvement, where you're taking a breath and your shoulders are going up and maybe they're, with every breath, your shoulders go higher and higher and they never come down again. Or maybe they're going up and down, up and down as you're breathing.

Your shoulders don't actually need to move for you to breathe at all.

So, one way to calm that, I'll tell you in just a second, but I also want to name that another thing that happens with your shoulders, if they're not moving up and down, they can also start to round forward and pull in and your pecs get really tight, and that also makes it hard to breathe, to get as much air as you might into your body and to have a feeling of low stability in your trunk.

And so a way to counteract that is to raise your arms above your head as though you're calling a touchdown in an American football game. So you've got both hands above your head and your elbows can be even with your shoulders.

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And in this position – just take a couple breaths here and notice how difficult it is to involve your shoulders in your breathing when your arms are above your head.

So if that's a problem for you, if you know that your shoulders get overly involved or you wonder, this is a great thing to practice. If you wonder if your shoulders are overly involved, put your arms above your head, take a few breaths and see how different it feels for you.

And then once you've been there for a while, maybe your arms get tired, your shoulders get tired, that's okay. A couple minutes is long enough. So you can set a timer if you want, to breathe with your arms up.

And then bring your arms down and don't collapse your shoulders. Try to maintain that width across the shoulders that you created and breathe from here, and notice how different that is.

You'll probably find that it's easier to let your belly expand as you breathe now than it was before. It's easier to involve your whole trunk in the breathing project rather than just the tippy-top of your lungs.

So that's one little exercise to try. Especially if you're singing, for example, and it's not going well, you find yourself running out of air, like it's just things are going off the rails, put your arms over your head and try it again, and see if that doesn't clarify things.

And if you get stuck, send me an email. Let me know. I'm here to help.

So the second thing that came up was feeling into your feet, how to maintain a sense of connection with the earth when, this student was singing, but it's also true with speaking.

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And a thing that was helpful was being in stocking feet and starting from a seated position, feeling your feet on the floor and then lifting your toes up, but pressing the ball of your foot into the floor.

So it's like you're asking your toes to stretch up, but really being aware of how that ball of your foot is making contact with the floor. And then letting your toes relax and doing it again. Again, pressing the ball of your foot into the floor while your toes come up.

And you can try this also standing. You might want to hold on to something if you're worried about losing your balance. You ought not to, but anytime you're trying something new and you have a worry in your brain about maybe this is going to hurt me, you want to do everything you can to resolve that worry, because it just makes it so much harder to learn when you're scared.

So in this case, standing, maybe having your hand on the back of a chair, and doing the same thing: lifting your toes up, pressing the ball of your foot into the floor. And then do that as you are singing the thing or speaking the thing that you're working on just to remind yourself, make yourself aware of your feet on the floor.

And see if that also doesn't help ground your breath, ground your energy, and add a sense of calm stability to the whole thing.

So that's what I have for you today. I have talked about loosening your jaw other places on the podcast, and I'll put a link to that in the show notes, and I'll also link the YouTubes of the speakers I mentioned. Thanks so much for listening.

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they come out. If you have a question about singing or speaking or being, please send me an email at [letters@mvmusik.com](mailto:letters@mvmusik.com).

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