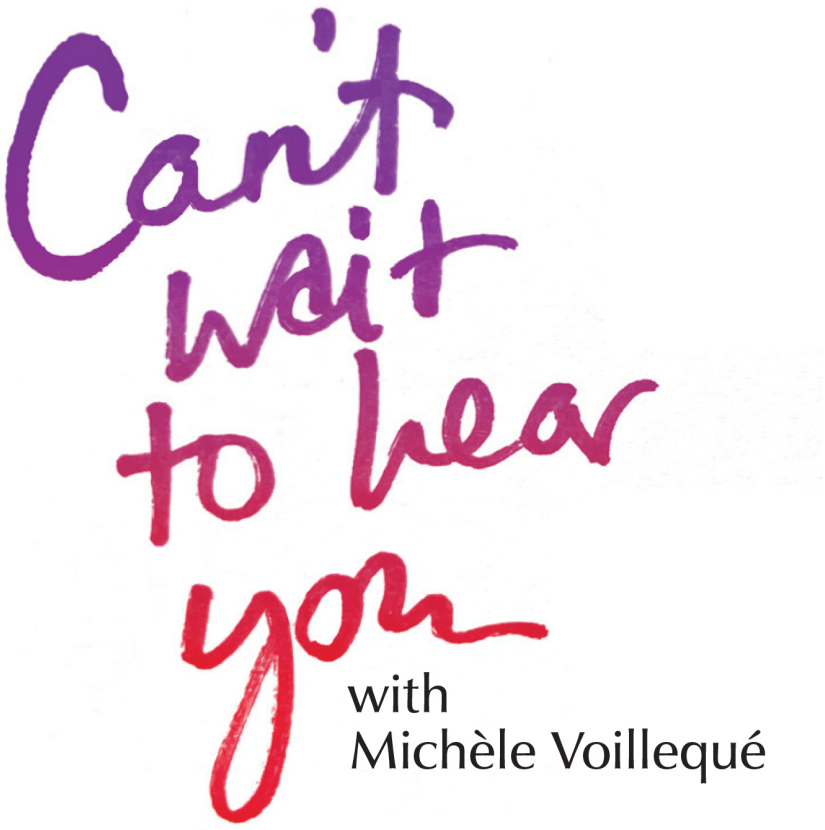
Ep #57: Why Flat and Nasal Often Happen Together



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.

Two really common complaints that I hear from people about their voices are that they sound “flat” and that they sound “nasal,” and often those complaints come together: “I sound flat and nasal.”

And I wanna talk today about why that is. Why is it that flat and nasal often happen together?

Because I think hearing me talk about it might help, if you're having this problem, it might help you troubleshoot what's going on with your voice and help you understand what you need to do in order to make some better sounds.

So let's start by first defining some terms. The word “flat,” when it comes to singing, can mean a couple of different things. It can mean that we haven't sung the target pitch, we haven't hit the right note and we've missed the note by being too low.

When we miss a note by singing too high a pitch that's referred to as “sharp,” when we're flat, it means that we haven't quite made it all the way up to the pitch.

In written sheet music, there are flats and sharps, there are symbols that indicate what kind of a note to sing. So that's another context in which you might've heard the word “flat.”

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“Flat” can also refer to a tone that isn't ringing, it’s just kind of dull. “Flat” can also mean dull. It can also mean unenergized, which maybe is a synonym for dull. It can also mean “boring.”

When people say they sound flat, usually they're talking about the pitch not being high enough. They're in the realm of the right note, but they're not exactly singing the right note. So that's how I'm gonna be using it today, and also to refer to a note that’s maybe dull.

And in terms of “nasal,” what that refers to is a kind of resonance, a kind of tone, so a nasally kind of tone. It sounds like all the air’s or most of the air is coming outta my nose, so this is a nasally tone. Some people find that charming, other people find it grating.

Nasal isn't necessarily good or bad. Flat, “You're flat,” is rarely a compliment. In fact, I'm struggling to think of a moment when it is a compliment when it comes to singing.

Being flat is a bad thing. Having a tone that's nasal could be bad, could be good, depends on what you're looking for. But in this conversation today, I'm gonna contrast the word “nasal” with the word “open” Because that's how we talk about different kinds of vowels.

For example, French has nasal vowels. [I demonstrate two examples], and French also has open vowels. English has open vowels. [I demonstrate two examples], that kind of a sound. So those are the two ends of the spectrum when it comes to “nasal.”

When we’re talking about singing flat or singing in tune, we're talking about hitting a particular pitch. So let me just take a moment to talk about what it takes to hit any pitch at all.

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So, a note, [sung note] is the note it is because of the amount of breath pressure that's traveling through the instrument. It's created with higher breath pressure than, [a lower note than the first one].

So the higher the pitch, the higher the breath pressure required in order for it to exist, in order for it to happen at all.

And unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, because it's hard to imagine how this wouldn't be very awkward, we don't have little meters on our throat or in our brain that tell us when we're generating the right breath pressure for the note that we wanna sing.

Like I can't tell you, [singing], I can't tell you what I did to make that note. I had a thought that I would make that note, and then I generated the breath pressure I needed to make that note and it worked out.

And that, that happened because I've sung a lot and I've, I've just practiced it a lot. At this point, it's something that's happening unconsciously, and it's something that we get a feel for over time, by singing and just learning what it feels like to make different notes.

So this isn't something that you can point to and know exactly, are you doing it right, before you even start, right? It's the kind of thing where you just have to try and listen to the result and see if you like it.

So most of us, when we start singing, we try to control that breath pressure in our mouth and in our throat. We try to manipulate something in our mouth or our throat to get the breath pressure, to get it to sound "right." And we do that because that's where it feels like we have control.

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We're used to speaking, we're used to controlling things in our mouths, and then controlling the pressure in our throat, it feels like that's, that's where things are really happening.

This is a decision. This is a way of trying to control the pitch that makes total sense based on our lives as speakers, but it's fundamentally a bad decision. It's not, the path that we're going to want for the long term.

Because trying to control the sound we're making by squeezing our throat or by tightening the jaw, it does work some of the time. It does work in some situations. But as a long-term strategy, it is doomed to failure.

It's simply not possible to sing freely in tune with a generous, open sound if you're squeezing your throat and clenching your jaw to control that sound. It just doesn't work.

I'm using the word generous intentionally because our best singing comes when we have a feeling of letting go, of sending air through our body up and out through our body without constricting it, without worrying about what it's gonna sound like, without trying to save any of the air for later. We just generously open and release the tone.

And this is contrasted with constricting or controlling the tone in our mouth and or in our throat. Again, the best singing comes from a place of generosity and courage, trust, trusting that what comes out is gonna be fine, rather than trying to fix it and manipulate it on the way through our body.

When a note is flat, it's flat for one or two or both reasons. The first reason it's flat has to do with there not being sufficient breath pressure to create the pitch that was intended.

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So maybe the note that we wanna sing is, [singing], but we sing [singing a lower pitch]. We don't get there and I didn't get there. [Singing again] I didn't get there with [singing a lower pitch] because I didn't generate enough breath pressure.

And then the second reason that a note might sound flat, we could be generating enough breath pressure, but we could be failing to access the right kind of resonance that allows the pitch to ring.

So, that is the difference between [clear-sounding singing] and [duller-sounding singing].

Those were created with pretty much the same amount of breath pressure, but the first one [clear-sounding singing], is leaving my body easily. [Duller-sounding singing] is kind of trapped in the back.

It's kind of lost its way and that can sound flat. That can sound dull outside my head. It sounds dull inside my head. And it can also sound like the pitch isn't high enough. It can also sound too low outside my head.

So that's the thing that we're trying to fix when we say we sound “flat.” That's what we're working on.

Now what do I mean when I say a pitch rings in our head? A pitch develops a ring when we can get the bones of our face and head to vibrate, not just our teeth.

So you probably don't notice it, but your teeth are vibrating all the time when you speak. Most of how we hear ourselves when we're talking is actually through our teeth. I've said this before, forgive me if you've, you're tired of hearing it, but, how we hear ourselves is mostly through our bones and our tissues.

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The sound of our voice is created in our throat, and then it travels in all directions: up the body, down the body, forward in the body, and backward in the body.

And it's not like we're deaf to it until it comes in our ears. We're actually hearing our voice immediately as soon as we make it, and that's, most of what we're hearing is how the sound is traveling through our bones and our tissues.

And the main bones when we're speaking that we're hearing, that we're listening to, as it were, are the jaw and the teeth.

So let me break this down a little bit more. When we sing, air comes up from our lungs into our throat, past the vocal folds, and at that point it gets turned into sound.

And you can feel this by saying something really simple. Put your hand on your throat, and say something, and you'll be able to feel there's a place that vibrates more than other places. That's where your vocal folds are. That's the, place in your body where the sound is getting created.

And then that sound vibrates everything around it, as I said. And the first big bone that that sound hits is your jaw, and right after that, your teeth.

And when we're speaking, it can feel like the process of sound-making just stops there. The sound hits our jaw and our teeth, and then it just kind of dribbles off of our chin and then we're done.

But for a singing sound or an orating sound, the kind of speaking that's more like preaching, we need to access the bones above our teeth and the spaces above our mouth in order to project our voice with any degree of success.

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And so the next big bone above your teeth is the hard palate, is the roof of your mouth, that your upper teeth grow out of.

When we can make a sound that vibrates the roof of our mouth, that wiggling bone wiggles the air in our sinus cavities – not just in our nose, but all the way up the front of the face, in our cheeks, in our forehead, and also the part of our skull that is our temple, and along the sides of our face, near our ears, the top of the skull, the back of the head, all of that can vibrate.

And it's easier to vibrate it when we direct the sound toward the roof of our mouth, and those vibrations are what contribute to a ringing and well-tuned sound.

That ringing, though, only happens when we are controlling the airflow from our trunk, from the belly, and engaging our diaphragm. We cannot create a ringing sound in our head, a truly freely ringing sound in our head by squeezing our throat and keeping our mouth closed to control the pitch. We need to engage the muscles below our chin.

We need to sing from all the way down, all the way down in our belly, to our pelvic floor, and if we're standing, we need to sing all the way down from our feet.

It's really common for humans, when we hear that we're singing a note that's flat, it's not quite high enough, or it sounds kind of dull, lots and lots of us instinctively try to move the sound forward in our body because that a sound that's more forward is more likely to ring.

Again, it's the difference between [clear-sounding singing] and [duller-sounding singing]. The first one, I'm directing it forward, it's got a bit of a ring. The other one, it's kind of stuck inside my mouth and it actually

kind of feels like it's going backwards. It doesn't feel like it's traveling out my mouth so much as it's trying to escape out the back of my head.

Most of us when we are creating a pitch and we think it's too low or it's dull, we instinctively move it forward.

But if you are creating that pitch without good breath support, without using your trunk, if you're just grabbing in your throat, when you move that pitch forward, the only place it can go is strait into your nose because the jaw is too tense, the throat is too closed, and, the only open space available is here, is in the nose.

So, let me see if I can demonstrate that. So here's, [singing], that's me moving an open sound forward into my nose. You might hear that it didn't change the pitch, it just changed quality, which is why flat and nasal go together.

Because if the note is already under-supported, just moving it forward is not gonna change the note because the note, the pitch, the sound itself, is created by a stream of air. If you want the pitch to be higher, you have to change the air first.

So getting yourself out of this situation where you sound flat and nasal, the first place you gotta look is, what are you doing with your breath? What's your belly doing? How's your belly? That would be my first question. Where do you feel the effort for creating the pitch?

And if you feel the effort for creating the pitch in your throat or in your tongue or in your jaw, the wrong part of your body is efforting. And to find the right part of the the body to effort, you need to look to your belly button, and take a breath that expands, the center of your body, that expands your trunk.

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You might've heard this being called a “belly breath” in a yoga class or a meditation class. It's the kind of breath that allows your belly to expand. Take some breaths there, just simple breaths, and then try to sing a note, any note you want, but as you sing that note, let your belly feel big rather than pulling in and getting tight.

And see if by singing just a note, one note, you can cultivate this sense of your trunk doing more work than your throat.

Anytime we can feel something going on in our throat when we're singing, that's usually a sign that we’re doing it wrong. One of the great things about having a human body is, when you're singing, if your throat hurts, you're doing it wrong. That's always true. You can, you can take that to the bank.

So the next part of “Flat and Nasal,” the next place to look for help is how loose is your jaw? How open is your mouth? How far apart are your teeth when you're singing?

If you can get your teeth further apart, it will be harder to make that nasal tone. It won't make the nasal tone impossible, but it will open up more space inside your head for the sound to travel through.

And connected to that looser feeling in your jaw is a lifted feeling at the back of your throat, the kind of lifted feeling that you get when you yawn.

Some of my students describe this as “finding the joker's smile" along the back of their throat and lifting that part, that's the soft palate, developing some flexibility and strength in your soft palate will make it less likely that your default sound will be a nasal one, because when your soft palate is lifted, that opens up more resonance spaces and makes a purely nasal tone impossible.

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So nasal tones happen when the space in the mouth is too small. Flat tones happen when the breath creating the note is too little, under-energized.

So hopefully that gives you a path to walk down, a path to experiment with, in little bits.

Really important is that “flat” and “nasal” often come together for really good reasons. Usually when people are trying to sing just like they speak, that's when flat and nasal happens, because most of us speak with very small mouths and with a great deal of control.

And that’s really good for speaking. Speaking with control is, that's what we call being articulate. That's what we call being easily understood. That's what we call being somebody who's easy to relate to, a good person. Right?

But when we're singing, we need a much more open mouth and we need a much greater sense of freedom.

I almost wanna say “loss of control” or “letting go of control,” and I'm aware of how scary and unpredictable and maybe unhelpful that sounds. So, if freedom feels better to you, let's go with that word.

So you're not alone. If this is happening, you are a normal person and it's totally fixable. It doesn't mean you don't have talent, it just means you don't know how to use your body to its best advantage yet, and that is totally learnable.

So I really hope this has been helpful. Thanks so much for listening.

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