

Ep #59: Moving from Silent to Singing

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.

One of the things I'm particularly good at is helping people move from silent to singing. And by “silent” I don't mean that they never speak, they never make a sound at all, but just that they want to be singers. They don't feel like they're singers now. When they're in company and other people are singing, they are silent.

They keep their mouths closed. They stand for the hymns in church maybe, but they don't open their mouths. They might hum along to a Christmas carol, but they're not gonna open up and sing the words.

This is a group of people that I work with a lot and that I'm particularly gifted with because as you might have heard in other places on the podcast, when I was in fifth grade, my classroom teacher asked me to “mouth the words.”

And for years I thought, although I loved to sing, I was convinced that I had a voice that nobody wanted to hear. And it took me getting coaxed into attending a community chorus as an alto because I could read music.

I played the violin through my childhood and you know, through high school. And I play it again now. I stopped for a long time – that's another story.

Anyway, because I played the violin, this person who convinced me to come to the community chorus said, “You can be an alto. You can read music. We need people who can read music. Come be an alto.”

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And so I started singing.

But I know a lot about the fear and the trepidation and the inhibition that comes when you're silent. When you're feeling like silent is how it's best for everybody that you remain.

And so I wanna talk today about how we move from silent to singing – an outline of the process. And we're not gonna be talking about vocal exercises today, but more mental exercises, more personal reflection kinds of exercises, because that is way more important than you might have ever considered.

That's where the bulk of the work is, actually, getting from silent to singing. Once you consider yourself a “singing person,” there's a lot of other technique and stuff that we can start to talk about and engage, but moving you from silent – it takes some gumption, it takes some courage on your part.

So let's just get started.

It's important to know that the way we hold our body, the way we use our body for singing is completely different than how we use our body for speaking and for being considered a credible human on the planet.

Learning to sing, I have found, is basically a de-civilizing process.

We need to learn how to let our mouths hang open. We need to learn to let our jaw relax. We need to stop smiling. We need to use a ridiculous amount of air. We need to elongate the vowels of the words to the point where it might not even feel like your native language anymore, if you were singing in your native language. We need to basically adopt a set of habits that are completely counter to being taken seriously as a speaker.

That's what I mean when I say it's de-civilizing. If you take these habits into the bank, for example, they're not gonna give you a loan. You take

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these habits out on a date, your jaw hanging open, the date's gonna end pretty quickly.

So those habits, when we first start trying them on, they can feel really threatening, and they can feel very difficult to do, partly because the muscles that we need to relax are naturally very tense, or more tense than they need to be for singing anyway.

And there's also a part of our brain that is sending off alarm bells saying that we are doing something that's threatening. We're doing something that's gonna get us in trouble. We're doing something that might even get us killed.

Our brain is really, it really does go there. It can really feel like if you use too much air, like, you might actually die. That's not unheard of.

And so, because the process of using the body for singing is so different than for speaking and can feel so threatening, it's really important that we spend time thinking about why we wanna be singing in the first place.

You really do need to sell yourself on it before you can take good solid steps.

So why, **why would you want to be singing?**

The answers that I hear from my students are things like:

My whole family sings and I feel left out.

We go to a family camp and there's always campfire singing and I just, I wanna feel confident enough to do that.

I wanna sound good when I go to karaoke. I'm not ready to do karaoke and sound bad. When I do karaoke, I want it to be good.

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I wanna feel that spotlight on my face and to feel proud of it.

And another thing I hear is, I just wanna know what I'm capable of. I really think I could do this. I just wanna know what I'm capable of.

So what's your why? Why do you wanna move from silent to singing? Why do you wanna be singing?

The next question is, **what do you want to be singing?** Do you have an idea of like, songs that you love, songs that, I don't know, just make you feel amazing? Do you wanna be singing opera? Do you wanna be singing musicals? Do you wanna be just singing along to the radio? Folk songs? Do you write your own songs and wish you felt confident enough to sing them?

What do you wanna be singing?

And it's okay if that list seems completely irresponsible or unachievable right now.

So speaking to you as a person who's moving from silent to singing, and you think you'd love to sing Puccini, and that just sounds ridiculous to you, that's not ridiculous. That's not ridiculous.

You wanna sing along to the radio? Also not ridiculous.

Let yourself make the list. Own the list. It's okay. You don't have to know how to get there, but we do need to know where you wanna go. What do you wanna be singing?

And if you can't think of anything, which is also not unheard of, many times actually, I mean, with many students I've encountered that.

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Like, I'm asking what kinds of songs would you like to sing? And they draw a total blank. Because their brain is so convinced that they really shouldn't be singing or they just don't know any songs. They can't think of any songs, especially when I ask them.

Of course, as soon as they leave the lesson, they can think of a zillion songs. But in the studio, no, they can't think of anything.

So give yourself some time to make the list, right? But see what you can do to make it.

The next question is, **who do you imagine you will be when you are singing?**

Can you see yourself singing? Can you see yourself at the campfire? Can you see yourself on stage? Can you see yourself with the friends in the car? Can you see yourself at karaoke?

Who is that person? That person will be different than the person you are now. The person who's singing is definitely different than the person who's silent.

What's true about them? What are they wearing? Who are their friends? Where do they live? How do they spend their time? Do they have the same job that you do? What's their favorite artist, visual artist or musical artist? How different are they from you?

The more time you can spend fleshing out that person, and fleshing out that why, and fleshing out that list of what you would like to sing and really make it tangible for yourself, like you can see it written down on a piece of paper or you make a collage of the things –

so maybe there's a big poster board or you start a Pinterest board or you do something to make it tangible for you – the more time you can spend thinking about why you wanna sing, what you wanna sing and who

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you're gonna be once you are singing, those thoughts, that work, is laying breadcrumbs for you to your future self.

It will make stepping into that person, into that singer identity easier. It's not fluff work. It might feel like fluff. It might feel like fun. I hope it feels like fun, but it really does, make a difference. And it's okay to change your mind.

You know, you can add and subtract whatever you want. This is entirely your project. This is about you and what you think you're capable of. Who do you wanna be?

Another thing to think about is, **what are your resources?** And by that I mean who are the people in your life now who are singing and who are the people in your life who were singing?

Were you sung to as a child? Was there singing in school? What's your earliest memory of being sung to? And can you remember what those songs were?

And it's okay if you can't, if you were never sung to, you probably heard music at one point or another. What was it? What can you first remember hearing?

And this information goes under, the title of resources. Who is singing now? Who was singing then? What's the music now? What was the music then that you came in contact with, that fills you up, that helps you feel alive and makes you wanna sing?

And then there's a list of people who will support you. Who you think would be open to singing with you and/or helping you learn to sing.

And then expanding that resource list to include, do you play an instrument? Did you ever take piano lessons? What did you like about them? Or did you like nothing about them?

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What about music do you feel like you already understand?

To be clear, you don't have to understand anything about music in order to move from silent to singing, but if you do understand something about music, that's something that we should write down, celebrate, lift up and keep in mind, because it will come in handy.

When we're about to do something that we've never done before or we've tried before and it didn't work, or we've put it off, right? When we're moving out of a stuck place, it really helps to know why we're doing it, and what we're hoping to get out of it, and what resources we already have at our disposal that will help us.

That's the pre-work, that's the self-reflective work that I want you to do to put fuel in your tank for this project.

And then I want to give you some simple – you can do these at home – exercises right now that will get you making sound and understanding how your voice works.

The first of those exercises is blowing bubbles in a bit of water through a drinking straw.

If you're like me, this takes me back to Dairy Queen and getting yelled at for blowing bubbles in my Coke through my straw – because that's that's just rude. I don't know, that's just not something that we should do in public and it so tickles me that I get to do this as part of my job.

So you get a straw. It doesn't matter how wide the straw, lots of people have metal straws at home now, that'll be fine. Or any kind of drinking straw. Put about an inch of water in the bottom of a glass.

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I would recommend a tall glass until you develop some control, because as you do this exercise, you might wind up with water all over your face if you blow really hard.

So about an inch of water in a very tall glass and blowing bubbles.

First blowing bubbles without using your voice at all, just blowing bubbles and then blow bubbles while you make a sound. And that could sound like I'm going to use a lip trill, so here's blowing bubbles with no voice, and here's blowing bubbles with my voice.

Something like that, or you can make the sound [a short siren sound] so you're blowing into the straw and turning your voice on and just enjoying what that feels like.

For most people. It feels pretty silly. It feels pretty fun, and this is a really useful way to warm up your voice and to show yourself how your voice works – how your singing voice works.

Because as speakers, everything is happening all the time, at once. Air's coming up from our lungs, our vocal folds are getting set into vibration. We're shaping that sound with our tongue, our lips, and our teeth, and then we're being understood or not being understood. We're thinking about what we wanna say next.

There's all of this stuff going on all, all at once, and it's really helpful when you're moving from silent to singing to break it down to the smallest component parts.

The first part is air leaving your lungs, and that's you just blowing air through the straw and making bubbles. The next part is air coming up from your lungs, blowing it through the straw, into the water, making bubbles, but turning your voice on while you do that, and just see if you can enjoy that.

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See if that can be fun. See if you can get yourself in trouble. That would be the first thing.

A second thing I would encourage you to do is, begin to notice your breath. And I know that instruction can sound tyrannical, because there are yoga classes, there are meditation classes, there are like all kinds of people all over the world telling you to “notice your breath.”

And you know, by now it's like, “thank you, no.” And I'm sorry. It really does help you sing better when you can learn to notice your breath.

So try this, take a breath in and let your belly feel really big, like Santa Claus, and let that air leave your lungs and let your belly relax.

So you breathe in, make a big Santa Claus belly and breathe out. Let that belly relax. And try that maybe for five breaths in a row, and then let it go and try it again tomorrow.

Just five simple breaths: breathing in, feeling your belly get big, breathing out, feeling your belly relax. And you get bonus points if you can let your shoulders not help you. If you can let your shoulders just be free and easy.

Why these two exercises?

The main project for singing, the big thing that we need to learn how to do, is how to direct a free flowing stream of air through an open and grounded space.

The open and grounded space is the space of our body and that free flowing stream of air, that's coming up from our lungs, and we control that free flowing stream of air from the trunk, from the belly.

Using the straw, blowing bubbles with the straw, gives you a visual representation of your breath. You can watch it come out in the bubbles.

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That's the air. The air is getting turned into bubbles. It's a great visualization.

And using your voice as you use the straw shows you that your voice looks the same. You'll notice that your voice, whether your voice is on or off, when you're blowing bubbles with the straw, the bubbles look pretty much the same.

And the Santa Claus breath exercise is to show you where your belly is, where your trunk is, where you can find more room in your body to take in air and use that air for singing.

If you'd like to learn more about how to move from silent to singing, let me encourage you to join my email list. I send out email every week about singing, using the body well for singing and speaking. And that's also how I announce my upcoming classes.

And no matter when you're hearing this podcast episode, there will probably be an upcoming class listed on my website and advertised through my email.

If you're on my email list, you get to know about it without having to remember to go to my website to look for it.

So there's a link to join my email list in the show notes. And when you do that, you get access to a free 20-minute video training on more about these beginning steps for how to use your body well for singing.

It's called Yes, You Can Sound Better, and it's available right on the homepage of my website.

I do hope this podcast episode is helpful. I hope it's given you a lot to think about and a couple of things to try, and I'd love to hear how it goes.

Thanks so much for listening.

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