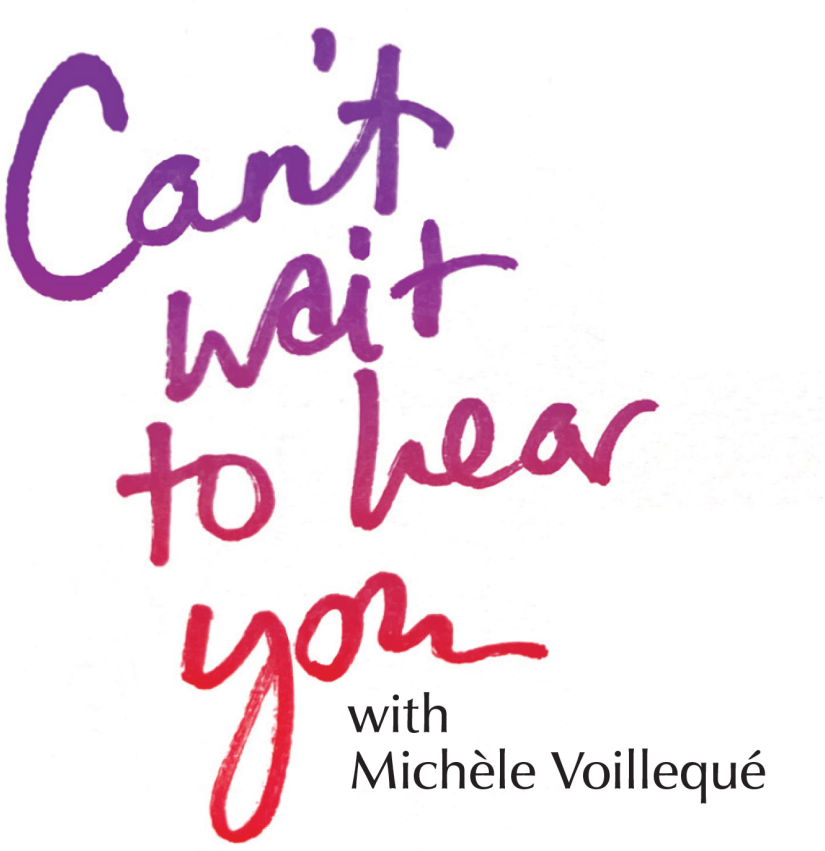
Ep #64: How to Hear Yourself



Full Episode Transcript

Ep #64: How to Hear Yourself

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 talk about how we hear ourselves when we're singing. A concern that I hear over and over and over again from students is, "I'm worried that I'm out of tune," or, "I hear that I'm out of tune." And learning how to listen to yourself as a singer is the first step to really helping with that.

And I had a bit of a revelation this week about how listening to ourselves when we're singing is different from when we're listening to ourselves when we're speaking. So I want to share that with you first.

You might respond with, "Well, duh." I don't know if this is as big a deal as for you as it is for me right now.

When I'm working with my students and I'm helping them find a new and better way to make sounds, really, really often, the first thing they say is, "Oh, I can't possibly do this in front of other people." Or, "what are they gonna think if they see me do this?"

Their mind immediately jumps to what other people will think, and I finally connected the dots about that this week.

To me it feels like, when I'm just having a normal conversation, I'm not thinking about projecting a very big voice or doing anything particularly fancy, right? The sound of my voice, if it's doing anything, it's like kind of dribbling off my chin, you know?

I'm not trying to send it all the way across the room. It's a close conversation. We're across a table, or maybe there's 10 feet between us,

but, you know, there's not a lot of space. So the sound that I'm making isn't very big.

And so when I'm listening to myself, when I'm speaking, I realized this week, that probably more than half of my attention is on the listener, is on how I'm being responded to. I'm judging my success as a speaker by the response that I'm getting from the person or the people that I'm talking to.

I'm not actually thinking about the sound of my voice really much at all, I'm just noticing its effect on them. Which is why my singing students are always leaping ahead to when we make a change with the singing voice, "Well, what are they gonna think?"

We have this habit. It's a good habit when we're talking of looking for feedback from the outside world to tell us how we're doing when we're talking. I really think it's more than half, it might even be 80% of how we assess our speaking is based on how our words are received by other people.

When we're singing, though, what other people think can have very little, must have, very little to do with what we're doing. When we're singing, the project isn't to impress other people. The project is to use our bodies as easily and efficiently as possible – that has absolutely nothing to do with them.

It has absolutely nothing to do with whether they like the song we're singing or whether they like how we're singing, whether they like our hair, the dress, whatever, you know, like all the things that you can get obsessed about when you're in a singing, performing, situation.

And even if it's just, you know, around a campfire. right? It feels a lot like a friendly conversation, the singing that we're doing. You know, it's in community. We're with friends and family, we're relaxed.

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Still, how we're singing doesn't have anything to do with whether they like it. How we're singing has to do with how we're using our body. That's what needs to be the measure of success.

That's a lot, right? Because how do you measure what you're doing inside your body, right? This is a totally new way of looking at how you evaluate the sound coming out of your body. It's so not what we're used to. It's so not our habit. And before I leave this part, I just wanna say, that habit is good.

We should notice the effect of our speech on other people. We should look to other people to tell us whether we're using the right tone of voice, when we're speaking, if we're using the right words, if we're speaking in complete sentences, if we're making sense. We should be looking for feedback from other people when we're talking.

That's the essence of communication, making use, making good use of that feedback. So please don't think I just said anything to imply that you don't have to pay any attention to the people around you when you're using your voice. No.

And in fact, when we're singing, it's helpful to pay some attention to the people around us when we're singing.

But again, I, I really think it's like 80% of the project of singing is self-focus, is maintaining attention on yourself and how you're using your body and learning to listen to yourself from the inside. That's a really valuable skill that I work with my students on all the time.

And it's a skill that, requires a certain amount of mental effort. It requires, at the beginning, more mental effort than you think it should, and that's just because you've never done it before. There really isn't anything to do about that. I haven't found a way to reduce the mental load at the beginning of this process.

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So let's get into it. How do we hear ourselves when we're singing?

I think the place to start is with me repeating something that I've said elsewhere on the podcast, but if you haven't heard it before, it's new for you. And if you have heard it before, it bears repeating.

The primary function of our voice is to keep us safe in the world. When babies are born, they're supposed to cry out. They are supposed to make an ungodly amount of noise so that they can be found and comforted and, kept safe.

And that's true for children through a lot of childhood. There is a moment at about age seven or eight when it really makes sense, or when kids really start to get the difference between an inside voice and an outside voice and they learn how to, you know, not be shrieking all of the time.

But much before the age of seven or eight, children make just an amazing amount of noise, and they don't really seem to have any self-consciousness about it. They cannot hear how loud they are until they have enough vocabulary to speak up for themselves, to say clearly what they want, to engage the power structure in, you know, a significant way.

You know, it happens at different ages for different kids, but across the board it’s really not fair I think to expect children to understand the concept of “inside voice before” they have the skills to self-advocate. And, you know, that in my experience is around, you know, age seven or eight when they really start to get the hang of it.

So, how is it that the children are so loud and their heads are not exploding? This is my question, looking at the, looking at the young people and reflecting, “Wow. I think if I were to make that much noise, it would kill me.”

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The nerve endings in their head are turned off. It's not that they lack nerve endings. It's not that that sensory information is completely unavailable. It's that the brain has turned off those nerve endings because survival is more important than being polite.

And so the process of learning to sing and learning to hear yourself when you're singing involves asking your brain to turn those nerve endings back on.

To say, "Okay, I haven't cared until this moment what sound feels like or sounds like even really as it travels through my head, but I'm interested now, Brain. I'm curious, can I feel that sound along the roof of my mouth?"

And you make a sound and you see if you can feel it along the roof of your mouth.

"I am interested Brain, can I feel that sound kind of fill up my head, like the space where my brain is? Can I feel that sound? Can I hear that sound up there in my brain, you know, like, um, like I've got, an an, not an angel halo, but like I'm Queen Elizabeth the first, you know, with her big collar behind her. You know, can I feel sound back there?"

And you ask your brain, you make a sound, and you, you see, can I feel the sound there?

And it will, it will take several repetitions. It will take a lot of asking, making sound, and noticing, "where do I feel that sound in my head?" And this is the beginning of learning to hear yourself inside your resonator, inside your head, inside your sinus cavities, inside your mouth, inside the back of your throat, inside your brain.

Some sounds feel like they're in your brain. I'm gonna show you one in a second.

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And so that curiosity, combined with tenacity and persistence, helps you wake up those nerve endings and learn to feel and hear what it's like when sound travels through your body. And that information helps you sing in better tune, with more confidence, and with a sense of mastery, because you're not looking to other people's reactions to tell you how you're doing.

Now, there is another element here, which is learning to hear yourself not only from the inside, but from what the wall across the room is telling you or what the room is telling you about your voice.

So a lot of us have the habit of singing super quietly, or singing in a very held or restricted kind of way because we have the idea that if we hear that it's wrong, we're gonna be able to fix it before anybody else can tell.

And the the bad news that I have for you is that it's too late. By then it's too late. As soon as we make the sound, everybody can hear it. And the more we try to hold it in our body, hold it with our jaw, hold it in the back of our mouth, the more likely it is to be out of tune and not satisfying to the people outside our head.

The less likely it is to have a ring, a kind of forward momentum. It's less likely to feel or sound to other people broad and generous and warm and round and enveloping, right? When we're holding the sound close, the tone doesn't get to develop as much. We're dampening it.

And sometimes a dampened sound is something you want, but most of the time it's not. Most of the time we want the sound to leave our body fly across the room, into somebody's heart and help them have a better day.

So if that's your position, if that's your habit, if this has been your survival strategy, believe me, I totally get it. It was my survival strategy for a really long time. I understand where you're coming from.

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The adjustment to make is rather than hold everything in, is to send the sound out and hear it come back to you from across the room.

Eventually, we're doing both things at the same time. We're listening carefully to inside our body, and we're feeling carefully to what the sound feels like and sounds like inside our body, but we're doing that as we're releasing the tone and sending it across the room.

We're not listening inside and then deciding to release it. We are having the courage – I'm not using that word lightly, it takes courage – we're having the courage to listen intently inside and also to what's coming back to us.

And then, using those two sets of information, deciding for ourselves how it's going for us with the singing. Is it in tune? Is it efficient? Does it feel easy? Does it sound like we want it to sound? And then, only then, do you maybe look to the people who are hearing you sing and notice whether they like it, whether they're getting it, whether they're paying attention.

I really believe it's more important for you to listen and feel from the inside and listen, listen to the sound coming back to you from the room, and self-evaluate. I think that's what makes you a good singer.

I'm not sure that other people's reactions have anything to do with whether you're actually a good singer, if that's a concern. And if you're listening to the podcast, it probably is. You're listening to me because you wanna find out how to, you wanna be a good singer, you think you're a good singer, you wanna be a better singer, you want, right?

I really think it all comes down to how much attention, useful attention you are able to pay to yourself as you're doing it.

So where to begin?

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I would start with a hum. I would start with a hum that you make with the back of your tongue. In English, it's the sound that we spell with the letters NG. It's like you said the word sing and you got stuck at the end. So if you make this hum.

NG.

Make it lightly, you don't need to bear down on it. Bearing down on it is not the point. Bearing down on it sounds like this.

NG.

Which sounds kind of like a, a bad kind of buzzer. The kind of buzzer that goes off when you've done something wrong.

The kind of sound instead that you wanna look for is like a mosquito, a mosquito that is spinning around in the middle of your brain. This is the sound, you know, this is the "listening to the middle of your brain" part that I mentioned earlier. This is the sound. It doesn't have to be high. It can be low.

NG.

But the idea is that there's a gentleness about it, but it's also solid.

The metaphorical language that's been coming to me lately is that it's a fluffy mosquito and it's spinning up. Can you notice that the sound is maybe something that you feel squarely in the middle of your head, but can you also feel it spin up?

If you're bearing down on it, it won't be spinning up. It'll be NG. You'll be bearing down. if that sound has any direction at all, it will feel, either parallel to the floor or heading toward the floor.

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And if you're making the sound, if you're aiming for fluffy mosquitoes spinning up. NG. It might feel still parallel to the floor, but again, like there's some internal height to it.

If you're working with a piece of music, here's how to apply this. you have this hum. Make it on random sounds at first. You can do swoopy, siren-y kinds of sounds like

NG.

Just to feel where that is in your head.

You'll notice that as the pitch goes up, your perception of the hum might rise in your head. And as the pitch goes down, the perception of the hum may come lower into your body, lower in your head, maybe to your chin or may, it might go all the way to your chest. That is totally fine. That's the way the world should work.

NG

And remember what I said about this being a process of asking your brain to turn on some nerve endings. Telling your brain, I wanna know what this feels like. I'm here. I'm humming. I want to know what it feels like. And so you may need more than one repetition to actually start to feel something.

If you don't feel anything, it doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. It doesn't mean that nothing's happening. It means that your brain doesn't yet believe that that sound is important enough to you to trouble you with data about it, and the only way to convince your brain that you care enough about that sound to be troubled with data about it is to just keep asking.

I've found, in a lesson, after three, four, usually fewer than half a dozen repetitions, a student will start to feel the sound in their head. So I don't

think this has to take an extraordinary amount of time. I really think you're, you can get there in 10 or 15 minutes. It might be a frustrating 10 or 15 minutes.

Again, I think I said earlier, it takes courage. It also takes tenacity, right, to pay this kind of attention, but it, it really does pay off. It's worth doing.

Because once you've got those nerve endings turned on and you continue to remind your body, remind yourself, this is what, I'm interested in what this feels like, I'm interested in what this sounds like, please give me the information – it becomes a habit and you don't have to, you don't have to ask so hard. You don't have to ask so often. Your brain's just, "Oh, this is a singing thing. This is information they want. Let's give them the information."

So how you apply this to a song is, you hum like that on the melody, choosing, it's the end of 2025, so choosing something seasonal.

NG.

So that's "Joy to the World" on an NG hum. And just notice what you feel in your head as you do that.

NG.

Some things you might look for: when you start out, you might feel the sound higher in the head, in your head, than when you end, because the pitch at the beginning of the phrase is higher than the pitch at the end.

So as you're singing that melody line, you may feel the sensations move down through your head. That's great. That's exactly what science would say should happen and that's what we want to become aware of.

The next step would be to open that NG up to a vowel.

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So what you've been doing so far is you've had the back of your tongue up, reaching the roof of your mouth and closing off your mouth to the sound. All of the sound has been coming out your nose.

If you doubt me, go ahead and make an NG and then plug your nose and notice what happens. You'll blow up your ears. You'll feel pressure in your ears. The sound will stop and you'll feel pressure inside your head.

So when I say open up the NG to a vowel, I mean bring the back of your tongue down so that now a vowel can come out of your mouth, like this,

NG
NG-AH

The first sound was just an NG, and then I moved my tongue to make an AH sound. If you do that intentionally, what I hope for you is that you'll be feeling what that NG feels like, and then you'll be feeling what that vowel feels like, and they will have something in common.

They'll have a vibration in common. They'll have a core to the tone in common. They'll have a sound in common.

Let me do this again.

NG-AH.

Now you may do this going from an NG to an AH, and the AH might feel totally different. It might sound like this.

NG-AH (a duller kind of AH)

That's an AH vowel that is resonating further back in my head than the NG was. And you can play around with that. You can try to make an AH vowel that resonates at the same level as the NG.

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So it's kind of, you might think of it as being higher.

NG-AH

And you can then, you can play around with, okay, I'm gonna make a vowel that sounds lower, not lower in pitch, but lower in resonance. Like it falls back maybe.

NG-AH, NG-AH, NG-AH

I tried to make three different versions of something falling back. You can tell me whether or not it was successful. Anyway, this is how you build awareness of what sound sounds and feels like as it travels through your head.

And when you're looking at a melody, then you sing it on NG and then you can sing it on NG plus a vowel.

So I'm not near my piano, so I'm gonna do “Joy to the World” again, but I have, I don’t know that it's gonna be in the same key as I sang it before, and I hope that's not irritating for you.

But here we go. I'll do NG first,

NG

and as I do that, I feel the sound move from higher in my head to lower in my head, and I feel it move forward a bit. As I come down the scale, I feel it moves from further back in my head, toward further forward as I come down.

Now I'm gonna add a vowel.

NG-AH, NG-AH, etch.

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And I feel that vowel did pretty much the same thing. It's, it felt higher in my head at the beginning, and it felt lower in my head at the end. And as I came down that scale, I felt like it moved kind of forward.

That's my experience. That's what it feels like to be me as I'm making these sounds.

Your experience will be similar to mine in that, I won't be at all surprised if you say the higher the sound, the higher I feel it in my head and the lower the sound, the lower I feel it in my head or in my body, right? That's science. That makes total sense. I would expect us all to be able to agree on that.

Where we're gonna disagree or where our experiences will differ is in what actually it feels like. I can't know what it feels like to be you. You're the only one who knows that.

So for me, when I'm noticing what it sounds and feels like to be singing something, I am thinking in terms of shapes. I find that shapes make sense to me. Some things sound like a triangle. Some things sound like it's a shoebox shape. Some things sound like it's a round, a generous round ball kind of a thing. That might make no sense to you and there's nothing wrong with you.

Some people feel and hear color. Some people feel and hear direction. Some people feel and hear just, like, static location, like that is squarely in the middle of the back of my throat, something like that. Or, that sound came right out my two front teeth.

All of these descriptors are valid, are good, are useful because your task as a singer, just as my task as a singer, is to build the map of our instrument. To figure out what it feels like, what it sounds like as sound travels through our body. To create a map. To get familiar with it.

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Having that map allows us a sense of mastery. It gives us mastery and it is evidence of our mastery.

We have so much more control over the kinds of sounds we make when we understand how we're doing it. And the "how we're doing it" is where the trial and error and the making a map and asking the question, what does this feel like? And then if you find something you like, can you repeat it?

That's the process of building the map, understanding your instrument, your beautiful, unique instrument. Nobody else in the world is built like you, is going to sound like you.

And that can be so frustrating, that responsibility that we have to come to know our instrument and learn how to hear ourselves and make the most of it. But I tell you, it's what the world needs.

It's what we need from you – to have the courage and the tenacity to learn how to hear yourself not in a timid, frightened way, that the sound you're making is bad, but learn how to hear yourself with courage and openness and dare I say, joy, so that we can all partake of your beautiful voice.

So that's a beginning step on how to hear yourself, starting with a hum. And I prefer NG, because that allows me to wiggle my jaw freely when I make it. My mouth can hang open, and there's a lot of relaxation and release in that sound for me.

But it is not necessarily superior to a hum that's an M where your lips are barely touching and your teeth are apart, or even an N where the tip of your tongue is against the roof of your mouth. Those are all useful for figuring out what it feels and sounds like to make sound, for you.

I wanna give you three short experiments to try to show you other ways to listen to yourself.

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The first one is to take your hands and put them in front of your ears so your, your hands are, it's like you're, you're making a stop sign with your hands, but turn your palms behind you and then put your hand right in front of your ear against your cheekbone, right? Just back by your ear.

And be singing something, and then take your hands away and notice how you sound different to yourself, how you, this is a different way of hearing.

The value here is in showing your brain that, it's not always right, and to, to show your brain that there's another place to look for information.

The regular neural pathways that we're using all the time, every day when we're talking, when you put your hands in front of your ears like that, you're changing your circumstances. You're changing the conditions of your sound-making, and that, shows your brain, oh wait, there's other information.

Similarly, making stop signs with your hands, put your hands behind your ears like you're making the international sign for "please speak up." And do that on both sides, and, sing something. And then take your hands away and notice the difference.

When you're cupping your ear, and when you're not cupping your ear, how you can hear yourself differently. These are also useful for getting to know your instrument. This is all part of the project.

And then the third exercise, which you might decide to take on as a habit, is to completely cup one ear and sing something, and notice how clearly you can hear yourself with one ear closed.

This happens a lot in choruses. Go to any community chorus, probably, any chorus of any size. The more professional, the chorus, the more often you might see this because people have had enough voice lessons that they've learned that they need to hear themselves differently, right?

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It's a really good way if you're singing in a group of people and you can't hear yourself, cover one ear and you will be able to hear your voice more clearly, and, know, make the adjustments you need to make.

It is not rude. You're not signaling to the person next to you that you think they're terrible. In most choral environments, everybody knows what's going on when somebody covers one of their ears.

You can also do that just by sticking a finger in your ear and you can compare for yourself. I have some friends who prefer to cup their hand over their ear, and others who prefer closing off their ear entirely, like literally plugging their ear with their finger.

So I hope this sets you on a path to experimenting with how you hear yourself when you're singing. I hope that there is joy and curiosity and, adventure in it for you.

I'm here if you have any questions about any of this. You can schedule a free consultation, I would love to talk to you about it. And I would love to hear if it's been helpful.

Thank you so much for listening.

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