

Ep #70: Why It's All About the Breath

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

Can't Wait to Hear You – a podcast with Michèle Voillequé

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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 talk about what people mean when they say, "Oh, singing, it's all about the breath." Often people just leave it at that. They say "it's all about the breath," like it isn't about anything else, and that I disagree with.

I think it's about more than the breath, but there is some truth in the phrase, "It's all about the breath," and I want to talk about that today as a way of showing you what skills we need to develop as singers and as speakers when it comes to just making a sound at all.

The fancy word for that would be phonation or voicing – the simplest part of the project, just making a sound at all, and how that relates to the breath.

Your vocal folds work like a valve. They can close and keep air trapped in the lungs. You know, when you hold your breath with your mouth open, it's your vocal folds that are preventing air from leaving your body.

They're closed, but most of the time when our vocal folds are closed, they're vibrating. They're not completely closed. They're closed just enough so that they can make a sound.

And how that sound begins has to do with how much we're pressing on them.

Now, this is where talking about the voice gets a little bit sticky because we don't actually have direct conscious control over our vocal folds. How this whole thing is working is we're having an idea or an intention

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about the kind of sound that we want to make, and then the body is just figuring it out.

One of the things we can control is our breath, and that's part of where "it's all about the breath" comes from, because that's the thing in the system that we have ready access to. We can affect that.

We don't have direct control over the vocal folds, but we can, change how they behave based on our ideas and intentions about the kinds of sounds we want to make.

So when I decide that I want to speak very breathily to you, what's happening with my vocal folds is that I'm not forcing them together. In fact, to make this sound, I'm thinking about trying to keep my throat as wide and open as possible, and just the sense that breath is just flowing through my body

And I'm not pressing on it as I might when I talk to you like this. And I can keep talking like this and you'll get the impression that I'm maybe really angry about something.

In those two examples, I have an intention of creating a lot of space and letting a lot of air flow through. And in the second one I'm thinking about literally pressing down.

The name for that kind of sound is "pressed phonation." It's, we actually refer to it as being "pressed." And, together with that idea of pressing, the breath changes too.

In some ways it's kind of a chicken and an egg argument, right? Is it the breath or is it me thinking about the different sounds that I wanna make? And I think they both come together.

There's no making a different, or a new or a better sound without having some kind of idea in your mind about what that will sound like. And

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there's also no realize realization of that idea without a breath to go with it.

I wanna back up a little bit, or, or maybe it's just a side step to tell you about how the voice works at all.

Your vocal folds are – we used to call them vocal chords, and it's the same body part. I think we started calling them vocal folds because cameras got better and we got to see them work in real time.

You know, we weren't just looking at cadavers anymore and they seem they're more like folds, so we call them folds.

Anyway, your vocal folds are about the size of your thumbnail and you've got one on other side of your throat. And what happens when we're speaking or singing is that they are in the way of the air that's coming up from our lungs.

Air leaves your lungs and it passes by the vocal folds, passes through them and they come together and they vibrate.

And how much air is coming through does correlate to the amount of sound that's being made. If I only let a little bit of air out, the sound won't be very big. But if I allow more air, I can make a louder sound.

And also what's happening as I increase my volume, the volume of air, and with my intention of creating a louder sound, the amount of vocal fold muscle that's engaged increases.

We often talk about voices like it has a very muscular tone, a very muscly tone. That's not wrong. It's also not a metaphor. It's actually true. When I talk to you like this, there's more of my vocal folds that are engaged, they're thicker and more of them is touching as I'm making this sound.

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And then there's less of them touching and less of them engaged when I'm making this sound, and those changes happen together with a change in breath, pressure with a change in how I'm using my air.

So people say, "Singing, oh, it's all about the breath." Well, you can already hear it's not, it's also about the muscles and it's about how those two things relate. But why they're saying it's all about the breath is because the muscles don't move before the air shows up.

We need the breath to be flowing. We need the air moving in order for the muscles to vibrate. You cannot make a sound without moving air first, and so when we're thinking about first principles, when you're wondering, like, where do I start to improve my voice? That's why the advice so often is, "start with your breath," because without your breath, there is no voice.

Step one is, air, and then sound follows. There can only be sound if there is flowing air. That might sound really simple, but try to let it sink in because it's not our everyday experience of our bodies.

Going through just a normal day and using your voice for talking, if you're healthy, everything's happening automatically. We don't have that experience of it's "air first and then sound." It sounds like it all comes together. It all happens at once. And that's not actually true.

So, it might sound simple, but you might find yourself forgetting that. And a way to understand this, a way to hear this is for me to demonstrate something called, the different kinds of vocal onset.

So vocal onset, those are the words we use to describe the moment that the vocal folds start to make sound the moment the air hits them. How does the sound begin?

And so a breathy onset. HHHHi. You can hear the air moving before my voice starts, there is a sound, there's a breathy sound. There's a whispery

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sound HHHH that's happening, and then the vowel. HHHHi, hhhhow are you? And if I do that in a higher register. HHHHi, hhhhow are you? You can hear I'm not entirely warmed up.

HHHHi, hhhhow are you? Do you hear how it's, it's breathy and then the sound starts and it's a little bit rough? A breathy onset for singing is sometimes useful, but as like a daily practice, it's hard to make consistent.

The opposite of a breathy onset is something called a hard onset. And that's like, when you think about saying, "uh-oh, uh-oh" where there's a little bit of pressure. You don't hear the air first, and in fact the air kind of builds up before the vocal folds start vibrating.

So, try that: Uh-oh. HHHHi. Uh-oh. HHHHi. And just contrast those two. That's the breathy and that's a hard onset. Also, nothing wrong with a hard onset, but again, like a breathy onset, it can be tiring, especially when singing.

There are lots of hard onsets in speech. Depending on the language you're speaking, it's really common to hear them. In fact, I just noticed myself when before I said the word "it's," and "in fact," not totally hard, but also not totally soft either.

As you can imagine, there is a middle way. There's a middle path, and we call that balanced, which I find kind of irritating. I mean, it does adequately describe what we're going for, but it's like, well, it's the Goldilocks story, right? This one's too hot, this one's too cold. This one's just right. And it was just right for Goldilocks.

Same is true with a balanced onset for a voice. It's just right for the particular person, for the particular voice in question. You can't go buy one at the store. You know, you can't install it. It's something that you find yourself in your relationship with your breath and your voice and

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your being.

So a balanced onset is neither breathy nor hard. I'll show you breathy and then I'll show you hard and then I'll show you balanced and maybe that'll make it clear.

HHHAAh.

‘Ah.

Ah.

So that was breathy, hard and then balanced. And for me, what goes on in my brain – because again, the kind of sound we make has to do with the intention we have – what I'm thinking about when I want to make a sound with a balanced onset is that my spine is very long. And I imagine that the sound isn't dribbling out of my mouth, off my chin, but is traveling through my whole head before it leaves my body.

Neither of those thoughts has anything to do with the vocal folds, which are actually making the balanced onset, and I understand that this may be frustrating for you, but again, we don't have direct control over the vocal folds.

So a lot of working on the voice is finding metaphors, analogies, images, things that will help us create the kind of sound that we want. So for me, when I'm thinking about a balanced onset, I'm thinking about my spine being really long, about the sound filling up my whole head before it leaves my body, not just dribbling off my chin.

And I'm thinking that my trunk, my torso is really round and really... mm and a kind of softness, it's not squishy, but it's, well, ebullient, that's an emotion, that's not a sensation, but just the kind of round, soft, floaty kind of feeling in my torso.

And those three ideas make it really easy for me to find, “Ah,” is balanced. ‘Ah, is hard. It's really subtle, isn't it? The distinction, here's

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hard that's too hard. 'Ah, and that almost throws me into a kind of shouty, quality because the vocal folds are too thick and they're pressing too hard together.'

Another lesson that people take from the phrase, "Oh, singing, it's all about the breath," is they assume that if they're not making it to the end of a long phrase, that that is because they don't have enough air for it.

And maybe sometimes that's true. But I find more often than not, it's, it's not about not having the air as just not knowing how to use it.

As speakers, just everyday people living our lives, we are not accustomed to needing to take deep, low breaths in order for the voice to work. The voice works really well with very little air.

So when we go to do something that stretches us, like singing a long phrase or like giving a big speech, we don't have the muscles developed to sustain that.

And we, we try to sing the long phrase by squeezing at our shoulders or the top of our chest rather than engaging our abs, our pelvic floor to support the breath, to make the sound, the kind of sound that we want.

Long notes are kind of all about the breath in that they're all about how we use our body to support the breath.

One of the ways you can notice that in yourself is just, in your next conversation with somebody, consciously notice your inhalation before you say something next.

And it might mean that there's a pause in the conversation and that might feel a little awkward. So you might wanna try this with a friend or tell the person you're talking with that you're working on this. But actually make an effort to notice yourself inhale.

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A lot of us don't actually inhale before we start speaking, particularly in conversations where there's a lot of banter or it's just one thing after another. You know, the breathing's on automatic pilot and it's going well and we need to say something, and so we say the thing.

That behavior doesn't translate to oratory or singing at all. In order to make an effective public speech or to sing well, really with any longevity, we need to become aware of that inhalation, that actual taking in of air before we use it to make a sound.

So in that way, it is true, singing is all about the breath. I think the conclusion I'm coming to is, or maybe you hear me coming to, is singing is somewhat about the breath, but we can't do it without it. We absolutely cannot sing without air. We cannot speak without air.

So what do you do if you wanna work on it?

You know, singing's all about the breath, you wanna sing better, how are you gonna work on your breath? I'm gonna come around to my favorite answer and the exercise I just gave you: start by noticing.

Start by noticing your breath when you're talking, when you're singing. What does it feel like in your body?

Practice that breathy onset, that HHHHi, and just feel what that's like to have a breathy sound, and then all of a sudden it's solid.

And notice whether there's something that feels like it has to grab in order for that to work. There shouldn't be any kind of grabbing required for your voice to start making sound, for your voice, your vocal folds to start to phonate.

It really is in the brain. I want a breathy sound. And then I want, I wanna say a really breathy HHHHi. I want to sound like Marilyn Monroe. HHHHi, hhhhow are you? And you can try it at different pitch levels.

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You can try Elmo pretending to be Marilyn. HHHHi, hhhhow are you?

And you can try a giant, trying to be Marilyn. HHHHi, hhhhow are you?

And just feel what that's like in your body, how your vocal folds can work without you pressing on them at all, and how your breath starts the whole thing going.

I really hope this is helpful. The breath and singing and speaking is a huge topic. I hope I've managed to clarify a small part of it for you, and that these exercises and explorations are helpful for you. Please let me know. Send me an email. I really wanna hear about it, and thank you so much for listening.

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