

Ep #72: The Power of Your Presence

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.

Leading when you're not in charge, part two. I am going to start with a story.

I was driving to Berkeley from San Francisco in the morning, not a lot of traffic, and I noticed as I got on the Bay Bridge that we were all going 66 miles an hour. Absolutely everybody. We were all going 66 miles an hour, and I thought, “That’s really unusual,” because usually some of us, myself included, are zooming along faster than that.

Now, if you're not familiar with the San Francisco Bay Area, the speed limit on the bridge is 50 miles an hour, and it is not unusual to see people at 66 miles an hour, anywhere up to 75.

80 is too fast. 80 is pretty darn fast, but definitely in the seventies is something that you'll see, when it's possible. You know, when there isn't a lot of traffic, it's an early morning or late night.

And after a while, I noticed, because he changed lanes, that there was a California Highway Patrol car on the bridge with us, just, four or five cars ahead of me, and that's why we're all going 66 miles an hour.

He's, he, they, I didn't see who was driving, the patrol car is holding us to 66 miles an hour. They weren't after an emergency, no flashing lights, they just happened to be crossing the Bay Bridge and I'm pretty sure that's just what their job was that morning, just to remind us all that that 67 is too fast.

Now, why wouldn't the patrol car pick 50 miles an hour? That is actually the speed limit. The patrol car is driving at a speed that they should be

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

Ep #72: The Power of Your Presence

ticketing us for. The patrol car is leading us in a way that is against the law. Why?

And then I just imagined for myself, well, if the patrol car tried to insist on 50 miles an hour, nobody would stand for it because nobody goes 50 miles an hour on the Bay Bridge.

Maybe their speedometer said 65 and mine said 66. And 65 is a common speed limit, like we know we shouldn't drive faster than 65.

I think the patrol car knew that if they drove 50, everybody else would continue to drive too quickly, and them driving 50 might actually create an unsafe situation on the bridge.

So they opt for a middle path.

And, the patrol car and I had the same plans. I got off of the highway at Berkeley and they continued on, but they were regulating traffic on Highway 80 also, where the speed limit, I believe is actually 65 miles an hour.

And they were not changing lanes, like not trying to slow everybody down, but just by their presence reminding everybody, “you don't wanna be the one to get a ticket.”

And it's interesting, right? Why wouldn't anyone want a ticket?

Well, we don't want the hassle. We don't want the expense. We want to arrive safely at our destination. We like the idea that there are traffic laws. Maybe we don't follow them all the time, but we do like the idea of a speed limit. We like the safety that that provides.

But in these times, it is not hard for me to imagine a world where there's the patrol car, there's the California Highway Patrol going 66 miles an

Ep #72: The Power of Your Presence

hour, and everybody else is just like, “F you. I'm gonna go as fast as I wanna go.”

And if everybody goes as fast as they wanna go, there's no way that the patrol car can give everybody a ticket, right? But that isn't happening.

We see the patrol car and we're like, “Right. Yeah. This is fine. 66. This is good. I'm good. Thank you for reminding me. It's a beautiful, sunny day. Where do I think I'm in a hurry to?”

There's a lesson in leadership here and in discernment. I'm not sure exactly if “choosing your battles” is the right phrase that I want, but there is something about that, right? Simply by one's presence, you can affect the behavior of a group of people.

Here's how this could relate to choral singing.

It is really uncommon for a singer to get all of her needs met in the choral environment. Part of it is that you're in a group of people and it's just really not likely that the needs of the entire group of people line up with all of your personal needs.

So within the choral environment, we're always making accommodations. Maybe the rehearsal moves too quickly, maybe it moves too slowly. Maybe we're feeling lost in the music or, or maybe we're, “We had this two weeks ago. Why do we keep going over it?” Right? That there's that level of frustration.

There's the temperature of the room. There's how the chairs are arranged. There's who you're sitting next to and whether you can see the conductor.

There are all kinds of things happening in a choral rehearsal that may not be to your perfect satisfaction, and we learn to deal with that. That's just a feature of being in a chorus. That's not a bug, that's just one of the

Ep #72: The Power of Your Presence

things, feeling mildly irritated is one of the things that comes with being in a chorus.

I think we have to accept that as the baseline, and when we can accept knowing that not everything is going to be to our perfect satisfaction, it's a lot easier to be happier and comfortable in a choral environment.

So accepting that, there is going to be mild irritation, sometimes there's more than mild irritation, and that's where this leadership question comes from my students. “Who do I need to be? How do I need to be in this environment? How can I be helpful?”

“I'm feeling irritated. I know that I'm irritated for a good reason, right? It would be so much better if my section came in on time. It would be so much better if we really knew these notes.”

Right? It's good hearted. It's a good hearted irritation. It's not just being irritated because it's not the way you personally want it to be.

I think there's something about finding the middle way, and I think finding your own middle way comes when you can be really clear about what you love about this environment, about this particular chorus or choir, this particular piece that you're working on, this moment – what do you really love about it? Like, why do you wanna be there at all?

When you're singing in a chorus and it's in tune, like, does that just allow your whole body to relax in a way that you just can't find anywhere else?

Do you love the idea of making something that's on a piece of paper come to life again? Maybe you're singing music that was written by somebody who's no longer living, and do you just love the mystery and the mysticism of that, that these black dots on a piece of paper I'm bringing that to, I'm helping to bring that to life? That alchemy, that mystery, of written music is that the thing for you?

Ep #72: The Power of Your Presence

Is it just being in a room full of other warm bodies, hearing their voices, feeling their voices in your body, feeling their warmth and that connection, and just knowing that you're in a group and you're making a beautiful sound, often enough.

What is it that has brought you there? Because that will tell you what your next step is.

And let me go back to the patrol car as an example.

What's brought the patrol car there onto the Bay Bridge is a desire to keep everybody safe, to help everybody be safe, to more or less observe the speed limit, to drive well today.

The patrol car is there so that everybody can drive safely. The patrol car is making the decision to hold people to 66 miles an hour, even though the speed limit is 50. Knowing that a typical speed on the bridge is even faster than that, holding people to 66 is going to increase the safety.

It's not perfect. 50 miles an hour would be perfect, but we'll settle for 66. 66 is good enough. 66 creates safety.

If you're there for community, if that's your answer and you're feeling frustrated, the solution might be to open your heart even more, to make even more room to grow an even greater capacity to be irritated by other people.

If you're there for tunefulness and beautiful harmonies, the solution in yourself might be to open your ears even more. So that even if you're sitting with somebody, near someone who is not singing in tune and it's making you crazy, to open your ears beyond that person and to hear another voice or another group of voices in the room with whom you can sing in harmony, where you can hear how your part fits and lean into that.

Ep #72: The Power of Your Presence

If you're seated next to somebody and they're really not singing the right notes, and it's making it hard for you to sing the right notes, you're probably gonna have to do work at home to make sure that you're solid on your part so that you know when you're in rehearsal whether or not you're right or you have a better idea, because really we can't change other people.

But I tell you that if you are consistently singing the right notes, other people will follow along. They will hear that, and they will appreciate that, and they will do their best to match you.

But if you're kind of wimpy about it, if you're sure you know the right notes, but then you get in this context and you don't sing out and you're just kind of, "Ugh, I don't know. I thought I knew my part, but I don't know my part anymore, and now I'm frustrated and now I'm hardly, I'm hardly singing at all because I don't wanna be wrong," the growth is taking the risk of being wrong, trusting your work, trusting your practicing.

Trust your ear and sing out just a little bit more because if you're pretty sure you're right and other people are lost, if you can just be a little bit braver, the whole group will get it so much faster.

If you're there because you love how it feels when you're making music and you love the idea of bringing something to life, from a piece of paper, right? You just love embodying somebody's idea, someone you don't even know. You never met them personally, but you just love the thought of doing them this favor of bringing their music back, where people can hear it and you're in the group and it's just not going as well as you'd like it to, and you just feel so frustrated about it, I think the answer is to embody that music even more.

Observe the dynamics in the music even before the director points them out. Start shaping lines. Start singing full phrases. Obviously not in,

Ep #72: The Power of Your Presence

don't contradict the conductor if you are given a different direction, but if you really love this idea of bringing music to life, let that come through you.

Pull that up from your feet, from the earth, pull that up and send it out, and just be that person. You can go first. You can be the first one to be dancing with the music.

You don't need to wait for permission or an invitation.

If you bring more of what you love up and out of you and into the room, you will be leading even though you're not in charge. You will be making a difference. You will be influencing the behavior of other people simply by your presence, and you will feel so much better.

Write to me if this isn't true. Write to me, if it's true or if it isn't true, but especially if it's not true, write to me. Let's talk about this. I think you will feel less frustration. I think you'll feel more full of life and love and purpose and music and community, just, full of joy, full of everything good when you bring it up and out and into the room.

It sounds like an emptying, right? Bringing something up from within you and bringing it out into the room. It sounds like you're emptying yourself into the room, but actually what happens is when you bring all that you love, all that you, the things you most value, when you keep track of that and you share that with other people, it actually amplifies it and it fills you up more.

And if this isn't true for you, I really wanna talk to you, not to convince you, but to hear about what your experience is.

For myself, I find this approach to be really personally fulfilling and it is not easy.

Ep #72: The Power of Your Presence

I am asking myself to find more patience, more calm, more acceptance, broader shoulders, better musicianship. I'm asking myself to grow in these situations where I'm not getting what I want or what I need.

Rather than asking somebody else to give it to me, I'm asking, well, why am I here in the first place and let me bring more of that.

It's work and it's worthy work.

It makes you a better singer. It makes you a better person. It makes you a better group member. It forces you to grow.

So this is what I have for you today. Do let me know what you think about it.

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