

Ep #79: The Value in Slowing Down

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.

There are two things when it comes to working on our voices that are particularly challenging, I find. The first one is dealing with it when it doesn't sound good – accepting it, living with it, being able to be with it when we are just disappointing ourselves over and over and over again.

And this happens when we've been sick, we've been coughing, and we sound like a frog, or when we've been trying to learn a piece of music or just even a phrase and it just keeps not working out or, just, you know, a regular Tuesday and we don't like the way we sound. That's a really tough moment.

There's a lot of deep disappointment that comes, that can come, when we don't like the way we sound, and unfortunately, the way sounding better works is that we have to sound bad first.

We don't get to sounding better without sounding bad. It's only by going through that, making disappointing sounds, that we start to make sounds that are less disappointing.

And I wish it were different, but it's not. Welcome to being a human being.

The other thing that's really difficult for me, I mean, has been difficult for me. I've figured it out. This nut I've cracked, but I notice is particularly challenging for my students, is slowing down.

Slowing down.

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And this has everything to do with how we use our voices on a day-to-day basis.

I've said this elsewhere in the podcast, I'm sorry if you're sick of hearing it, but I really think it's the heart of everything: how we use our voice, north of 90% of the time, probably north of 95% of the time, how we use our voice is on autopilot. We don't have to think about it. That's why we are successful in life.

That's why we have friends. That's why we have jobs. That's why we did okay in school. That's why we can learn new languages.

We don't have to think about the mechanics of using the body to make sound. And so we don't. And everybody is grateful for that because it means we speak relatively quickly, relatively fluently. We can get our point across quickly and we can move on with life.

When we have to think about how to make sound in a conversational environment, it's really tedious for the people around us, unless they are voice geeks and are interested in the process that we are in.

But, on the whole, speakers are praised for getting their ideas out quickly, succinctly, articulately, and nobody's interested in how it happens.

When it comes to singing, though, we have to be very interested in how it happens, and that means that we need to slow ourselves down and come to understand the voice as the product of a process.

When we're talking, it feels like everything is happening instantaneously. We have a thought, we express it, done.

We don't even really take a breath necessarily. A lot of us are not aware of breathing intentionally when we're speaking, and for the most part, that works out okay.

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Sometimes if we're really nervous and we forget to breathe, we start to notice that we're short of breath and kind of hyperventilating and you know, then we need to, as a way of dealing with managing performance anxiety, managing tense situations, remind ourselves that we do need to breathe when we're talking.

But, you know, those circumstances are few and far between.

I invite you to observe other people, like just in casual conversation, if you're in a group or if you can kind of watch people from across a cafe or across a park, watch how they talk.

See if you can identify when they take a breath before they speak, or are they just talking, just easily talking?

So what a breath might look like is, their chest expands, there's a big pause in the conversation while they allow air into their body. Just observe. Take a few minutes and look around the world. I think you'll find that most of us don't think about inhaling when we're speaking.

When it comes to singing, though, that breath is the beginning of the process that leads to a not-disappointing sound happening in the room.

So the breath is the first part. Then that breath leaves the lungs and passes by the vocal folds, and they start to vibrate. So that's another part of the process.

How the vocal folds vibrate, how well they vibrate, whether the tone is tense or breathy. Or, has a lot of interference, is a little strange.

So something like vocal fry, that's something that's happening at the vocal fold level. That's one way the vocal folds can behave. Another way the vocal folds can behave is “ah,” or just, you know, as I'm speaking right now. But they can also be very breathy.

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So those differences in tone are happening at the vocal fold level.

Then after the sound gets created, it travels through the body. It continues to travel up into our mouth and up into our head, but it also travels down into our chest and, and acquires some kind of resonance, some kind of timbre based on the spaces that are available for it.

And then the sound encounters our teeth and our tongue, and our jaw, and our lips and consonants get formed with it.

Do you hear how tedious this is? Like if we needed, if you needed to be aware of all of these parts before you could say a sentence like, we wouldn't. It just wouldn't happen.

But these are the component parts of the voice that we need to attend to if we are going to sing in a way, or speak in a way that isn't strained, that isn't pitchy, that feels free and easy, expressive, embodied, authentic.

Like us. Feels like us. We need to attend to these parts, and the only way to attend to the parts is to slow down and get to know them.

And that can be irritating. As I said, it can be tedious. It can feel like maybe we're not making progress fast enough.

I think, though, a big part of it is that when we are singing or speaking in public, we are paying a lot of attention to how our voice sounds outside of our body, and we're judging that and trying to change that, that sound that sound that is outside of our body, that's across the room.

And we make a lot of adjustments to try to change that sound that's outside of our body.

But it's really more effective, more true to the instrument to try to change something on the inside, to feel for what's going on on the inside,

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and make adjustments there. Can we produce the sound as easily as possible, as stress-free as possible?

There's a whole lot of tension in our head and neck and shoulders and tongue and jaw that really affect our vocal quality. Can we become aware of at least some of that and let it go, or work with it?

That's how we change what our voice sounds like outside our body by making internal changes first.

I think this makes maybe a bit more sense if we think about a wind instrument or a horn, something that we blow air into, and then a sound comes out the other end.

What the sound sounds like has everything to do with the instrument in question. Trombones sound different than tubas, which sound different than trumpets, which sound different from a clarinet or a flute, or an oboe, or a recorder.

All of those instruments sound differently in the room because of the instrument.

I'm sorry if that just seems painfully basic, but where we get kind of wrapped up and confused as humans is our whole body is the instrument. Whether we're singing or speaking, our whole body, our whole self is the instrument.

And if we want it to sound different across the room, we need to change something inside of ourselves.

And that thing that we need to change inside of ourselves is easier to identify when we slow down and look for it.

Now, the good news is that when we give attention to any part of the system, whether it's the breath or our posture, or how our throat feels –

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are we holding it open? are we squeezing it closed? – or what the sound feels like as it travels through our body – what kind of resonance can I notice in my head?

When we give our attention to any part of that – and it really is good to pick one at a time. It's hard to pay attention to all the things at once – So, when we choose one, just noticing one of those things slows the whole thing down.

It buys us time and it helps us find a curious state of mind. And it's that curiosity that is essential if we're going to figure out how to sing in a way that isn't pitchy or strained or stuck, or if we're going to find a way to speak that isn't tight, tense, not resonant, or not as resonant as we want it to be.

When people talk to me about their speaking voice, one of the things they say is they want their voice to feel effortlessly, bigger or warmer, or sometimes the word is just “more compelling.”

We create that not by having better thoughts about what it is that we're trying to do. We create that by using our body differently.

So this isn't about having talent, this is about developing specific skills. And that's more easily done when we allow ourselves time and space to know ourselves. And skills are more easily developed when we allow ourselves time and space to develop them.

You might need to take this on faith, but when we stop worrying so much about whether or not something is pretty or beautiful or compelling, and we turn our focus inward to the body and the instrument itself, “pretty,” “beautiful,” “compelling” becomes a natural result because we are playing our instrument well. We're using our body well.

But when we stay focused on whether it's pretty, whether it's beautiful, whether it's compelling, that puts us in a graspy, tense state of being that

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can only make it harder to make a pretty or a beautiful or a compelling sound.

Because again, tension in the head, neck, shoulders, tongue, jaw – tension in the body affects vocal quality.

Now you might be wondering, “how do I slow down?” because it may be the case that these component parts that I've named are not things that you're used to thinking about at all. In fact, you might not be able to remember what they are.

Let me say them again. We have the breath, we have the vocal folds, we have your general posture, we have resonance, we have your articulators – your tongue, your teeth, your lips, and your jaw.

All of those determine what your voice sounds like after it leaves your head. And a great way to practice slowing down on your own is to just take a beat before you go to use your voice in a practicing kind of situation. This is not gonna work in a conversation, but that you just take a moment and notice how you feel in yourself.

How do you physically feel? What do you need right now? Where is there tension in the body? Where is there pain in the body? Where is there tension in your heart or your mind? Where is there pain in your heart or your mind? What do you need right now?

Give yourself the grace of that question and really listen, really feel for the answer, and proceed from there.

It can be really tempting and a lot of fun to sing with complete abandon, almost with the intention of having an out-of-body experience, to sing in a way where you're not paying attention to yourself at all. You're just letting it out, letting it rip, and that can be really fun and really therapeutic.

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And if that's the only way that you relate to your voice, it's going to be very difficult to build a consistent, reliable tone. It's going to be very difficult to trust that you are going to sound good, no matter what. Because when we're singing like that, we're running away from the body.

We're using the instrument, but we're not at all conscious of it. We're trying to use the instrument and run from it at the same time. And if you think about, again, a clarinet or a tuba, how that could be. How you could play a clarinet and run from the clarinet at the same time.

It's not going to sound consistently good.

It may sound really interesting and it may feel really fun, but as a practice, we need to make peace with ourselves. We need to make peace with our body.

After that pause, for a lot of people, the easiest part to access is the breath, is to notice the breath.

There are lots of, meditation practices that teach, noticing the breath. If you take a yoga class, there's noticing the breath. If you do aerobic exercise, you're used to noticing your breath, and so that is also a great entry point to slow down and really let yourself become familiar with how your instrument works.

What kind of inhalation are you taking? What does it feel like when you breathe in? Are your shoulders going up when you breathe in? Is your belly going out when you breathe in? How are you doing it?

It's really important to just notice what your default is before you try to change it. And so that's what I would, that would be my step two after pausing and getting your, your whole self on the same page, I would then notice what it's like to be you when you're breathing.

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How do you breathe? how have you solved this problem for yourself so far? That would be a really good beginning.

Now, once we start making sound, once we get to the part where the vocal folds are involved and we're actually making noises, it's really helpful to have somebody else help you figure out what you're doing because we are inside, we are the instrument that we are trying to play, so there's a lot that we can't know about how it's working.

And so for things like vocal fold function and resonance and to some extent tension patterns in the body, it can be a lot easier for a trained eye to see your tension patterns than for you to feel them and know how to do it differently, because you've been being you for however long.

So I want to invite you to a group class that I'm going to be teaching for 12 weeks, starting in July, July 16th.

I will be teaching you how to warm up your unique body, and I'll be able to give you direct feedback about the rest of your system. Not just like good or bad feedback, but like, “try this.”

I tell you what I see and hear and can offer suggestions so that your sound making gets easier and you're singing is more satisfying and you're speaking is more satisfying, if that's a concern of yours.

If that sounds interesting to you, send me an email at letters@mvmusique.com with GROUP in the subject line, and I'll put you on the waiting list so that you can be sure to get the registration information when it's available.

Slowing down is a really big ask for any human being, especially when it comes to using the voice, and, unfortunately, that is the best way to improve it, is to first slow down enough so that we can notice it.

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So that we can analyze what we're doing and experiment with new ways of making sounds, new ways of being with the body when we're vocalizing, and then we can evaluate how that went.

Was that a good change? Should we try it again? See what it feels like?

That's all we're ever doing maybe anywhere in life, but particularly when we're, trying to improve the voice. We're noticing and we're trying something different, and we're evaluating how it went.

Which is another way of saying, noticing, and then we're trying again and noticing and trying again. That's all we're ever doing and we have to slow down to do it.

I hope this is helpful. Let me know, won't you?

Thank you so much for listening.

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