

Ep #80: The Cure for Pitchiness is Not an App

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.

Today I want to talk about why the cure for pitchiness is not an app.

When I say “pitchiness” or “pitchy,” I'm talking about the out-of-tune that happens when we know how the song goes, but there are some notes here and there, or maybe phrases that are just not as in tune as they could be. They're disappointing.

I'm not talking about the out-of-tune singing that happens when we don't actually know how the song goes and we make our best guess and then we're wrong. That's not what I'm talking about. That's just not knowing how the song goes.

One of our greatest fears, for me and singers I know, is that we're going to sing out of tune and other people are gonna hear it.

This is a fear, even though I know, we know, that we're human and humans sing out of tune. Like, out of tune happens and it happens where other people can hear us. It's happened more times than we can count in our lives, and still we have not died of shame, but it's never too late.

Dying of shame is always a possibility. So we've, you know, singing out of tune is a worry and it's really natural to appeal to a device to help you know whether or not you're singing out of tune.

And I have found for singing, those devices are just not very effective.

For several reasons.

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So let's get into them.

For me, it starts with the fact that our whole self is the instrument. We are not playing the piano or the violin or a flute or a guitar.

The instrument we're playing when we're singing is our human body. It's inside us. It is us. And that means, in order to use it well, to produce a good result, we need to be grounded and open and curious and breathing and calm. And also energized.

It's about our whole self.

And when we are looking to a device outside of ourselves to tell us how we're doing, what I find is it pulls all of our energy up into our head, into our critical brain, into, like, our kind of hunter-gatherer mindset:

Do I get the green light? Is the needle straight up and down? Did I do it perfectly?

It pulls us up out of our body, into our head, and that is not a place that you can ever sing well from. When we're singing well, our center of gravity is low. It's around our hips, and it's a huge technical challenge to give your attention to your phone and whether it's blinking in the way that you want it to be blinking, and also stay grounded in your hips.

Using the phone for feedback puts us in a striving kind of a place that is just never helpful for singing. That's reason number one. Again, in no, particular order.

The second thing is that the feedback that the phone or the tablet is giving you is actually an interpretation of an interpretation of the sound

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that you made.

So you're singing into the microphone. Your acoustic energy is getting turned into electrical energy by the microphone. And then that electrical energy is getting digitized and interpreted by the program in the app. And then it's showing you your result. That's what I mean when I say it's an interpretation of an interpretation.

It's a little like a game of telephone. And so the answer that you're getting from the app about the sound that you're making, depending on the vowel that you're singing, depending on how loud you are singing, depending on a lot of things, it's kind of junk information. It's not, the truest possible evaluation of the pitch.

And what I've found with students who've, um, come to me having tried to improve their singing by using an app and then not getting very far, and so they come to me for lessons. What I've found is that using the app has created a whole bunch of new tension patterns in their singing – new contortions of their face and their, their throat and their body to try to get the phone to do the thing that they want it to do.

That's not the point of singing a song at all.

There's a disconnect, between the art of the song and whether or not you're getting a green light from the phone the whole time. They are a bit at odds. You can't trust the green light or the red light, or whatever color it is.

You can't trust the needle and the needle is not the song. So you're, you're spending energy, I think, in the wrong direction.

Thirdly, the device can't tell you actually how to fix what you need to fix. It's giving you, you know, a binary answer for the most part. It's in

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tune or it's not, or it's almost in tune or it's not.

It cannot tell you, is this because you've got too much tension in your upper body that it's not in tune? Is your breath under-supported? Is that the problem? Are you, directing the sound appropriately forward, or too forward? or too far back?

There are lots of variables in how we produce a tone and the phone is not gonna tell you which one of those variables is generating the result. And it can't tell you how to fix it.

And most of us, without training, left to our own devices, the chances of hitting on the right solution to fix that particular problem – they're pretty low.

The fourth reason the cure for pitchiness is not an app is because the pitchiness more often than not is coming from how we are pronouncing the words we're trying to sing, and we don't need an app to help us with that.

The tune, the melody of a song is carried by the vowels of the words. And the consonants, kind of can wreck the whole thing. The consonants contribute to pitchiness because they stop the air often, or they introduce resistance into the system.

When we pronounce the consonants, when we're singing the way we do, when we're speaking, they're generally too big, they're clunky. They interrupt the breath too much, and that's where the pitch falls. That's where things go sideways.

So if there's a section of a song that you're working on that is really pitchy, you're having a problem with it, the thing to do is not to reach for an app, but to slow it down, simplify it, sing that passage on one vowel .

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and then you can sing it alternating vowels, and then you can put the words back, and see if that doesn't clean it up and clarify it.

Especially if the song is one that you've learned by ear – you've listened to a recording over and over again – that recording itself is digitized, and when we're learning from recordings, it can be a challenge to not build in tension into our voice because we're trying to match the recording.

We are analog. The recording is digital, unless it's a record. and hooray, if you're learning from records. But most of the time, if you're listening to a song on your phone or in the car, it's digitized. And we are never gonna sound like that. It's a subtle difference, depending on how much autotune is in the recording, it can be a huge difference.

But we're often sounding pitchy because we're trying to sound like the recording and not like ourselves. And the way to fix that is not to appeal to yet another digital device to tell us how we're doing, but to slow down in the acoustic world, in the analog world, and try it on a single sound, a single vowel, even a single hum.

That can help your body figure out how it's supposed to make it through this passage. How this passage is supposed to go without the words there, and then build in the words one part at a time. First the vowels, then maybe just one consonant, turning the the section into something that's like da da da da or la la la, la.

And then putting the words, the consonants of the words in, and actually singing the sounds that the lyrics are calling for will have much better results, faster than dealing with the app.

There's one last thing to say, which is we are going to sing out of tune because we're humans. That's just reality. But when you're working on your singing, you're working on your voice, you're working on your

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relationship with your body, you do come to learn to hear yourself, to feel yourself, to become aware of the overtones that your body is making when you're singing a note. You do find a certain kind of ease, and that's where tunefulness comes from.

We honestly have to let go of the fear of singing out of tune in order to sing in tune consistently.

That doesn't seem fair, but I found it to be true. Because any extra tension, any extra anxiety in the body can work against us.

It's not a human thing to be completely without anxiety, but what I mean to say is that when we can acknowledge that there are gonna be some notes that are disappointing, and that's just gotta be okay because I'm a human and there's nothing I can do about that.

So I'm gonna try, I'm gonna make an attempt and then I'll evaluate it, and then I'll make another attempt and then I'll evaluate that.

And in that place of singing with a sense of openness and curiosity and compassion for what you're doing, rather than being worried about being in tune, you're just much more likely to sing not just in tune, but with resonance and conviction and emotion and presence and making a sound that's gonna move somebody else.

We get obsessive about whether or not we're in tune when, I mean, it's nice to hear a song that's in tune, but that isn't the only thing about a piece of music that moves other people.

You know, there's our presence, there's our conviction, there's the emotion we're trying to convey. There's a lot of other things that go into a good performance, and when we fixate on the tuning, we can miss a lot of the other parts.

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So that's what I've got. The cure for pitchiness is not an app. I would encourage you not to waste your time like that. It's not to say that the electronic devices aren't sometimes helpful, but if you want to work on your tuning. Don't go that way.

Go this way. I'm going to be teaching a class, beginning July 16th. Registration opens on July 6th.

If you're interested, send me an email with GROUP in the subject line and I'll be sure you get the information. The class is about how to warm up your voice, because learning how to warm up your voice is the way to cure straining, and pitchiness and general thinness in your tone.

Warming up, how I teach warming up, will cure you of those ills.

So if that sounds like something that would be good for you, drop me a line, GROUP in the subject line and let's work together.

I can't wait to hear you.

Thank you so much for listening.

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