

Ep #81: Pretty is a Matter of Opinion

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 how pretty is a matter of opinion.

A lot of my students, particularly women, when they first come to me have a very a definite idea of what “pretty,” in air quotes, sounds like. They've decided for themselves what “pretty” is, a lot of the time.

Some of the time, they've been given a definition of “pretty” from a choral director or from their family or their loved ones or their friends, and that definition of “pretty” isn't actually functional.

What I mean is, if they keep singing in that “pretty” way for years and years and years and years, their voice is not going to grow to be as powerful as it might.

And it's not going to last as long as it might and not going to feel as comfortable to use as it might, because “pretty,” particularly when it comes to women's voices, tends to be associated with a certain breathiness and a certain head quality that is almost disembodied.

No, I would even go so far as to say that it is disembodied from the body. And singing forever that way is not great for the voice. It's not how the equipment was designed to be used, you could think of it that way.

And it's quite compelling. We like it when people tell us we have a “pretty” voice. Everybody wants a “pretty” voice, I think. Maybe not everybody.

Ep #81: Pretty is a Matter of Opinion

When I was getting a divorce, I hired an attorney and the attorney that I hired spoke barely above a whisper and with a little bit of gravel in his voice.

And he was not a very tall man, but because I had to lean in across the table to hear him, when he would speak in this very low, very serious voice, he scared the crap out of me. I was so glad that he was my attorney, because the thought of having him as an adversary, I did not care for. I didn't even want to imagine that.

And it turned out we didn't need to go to court. We had as amicable a divorce as a couple could have, I think in the end. And we are friends now. We can travel together now. We continued to co-parent. It all worked out great.

I only bring up my attorney as an example of somebody who had no interest in being, his voice being labeled “pretty.” He wanted his voice to be effective and affecting and powerful, even in a quiet way, and unforgettable.

I didn't ask him, but that's the effect his voice had on me and those are all things that we could want, too, in addition to “pretty.”

We want to be powerful, we want to be remembered, we want to be effective, and we want to motivate other people. We want to be affecting, we want people to feel things when we sing a song. We want to make 'em cry, we want to make 'em laugh, we want to engage them in whatever it is that we're doing.

So when I say that “pretty” is a matter of opinion – you already know that, of course – but it's to shock you into reflection about the difference between what's “pretty” and what's “functional,” because what's pretty can be just so hard to let go of, because it's something that we absolutely want.

Ep #81: Pretty is a Matter of Opinion

And it's a bit of a leap of faith to trust that “functional” ends up “pretty.” Functional ends up beautiful and compelling and memorable and powerful and affecting and effective. Functional will get you there, but if your goal is just “pretty,” it's really hit or miss and it's a lot of miss.

I said that if you sing in a pretty way, it's not sustainable throughout a life.

The example that I'm going to give you is that of the female choral singer who, her whole life, has not wanted to stick out, has wanted to blend. In choruses we're always encouraged to blend with our section. She's always wanted to blend.

She hasn't wanted to stick out. She's never wanted to be a soloist. She's just loving singing in the choir and she's sung in the choir like this [really breathy singing] – really pretty and hard to sustain that level of breathiness over a lifetime.

That really pretty sound turns into a warble later in life. That kind of vibrato, it sounds like a vibrato, but it's a very wide vibrato and it's uncontrollable, and that's because there's been a lot of tension in the body to maintain this very pretty [really breathy singing].

And at some point the vocal folds just can't sustain that level of tension anymore, and it just all gives out. And what we end up with is something that's more like [really warbly singing].

Something like that, which might have a practical application or artistic application in the world. It's not that that sound is wholly awful, but it's not a sound that a lot of us would call “pretty,” and as the producer of the sound, it can be really frustrating because you feel like now you have no control over what's coming out.

And it's at that moment that a lot of those women stop going to choruses, stop going to chorus rehearsal. They decide, “Oh, I'm done now I'm not

Ep #81: Pretty is a Matter of Opinion

a singer anymore,” or they transition. Sometimes you can develop a warble in the higher part of your voice, if you've been singing soprano, for example, if you've been singing the higher voice part for most of your life, and that's where the warble will show up.

But if you go to the alto part or the tenor part, one of the middle parts that are lower in your range, you can sing more in a speak-y way and the voice has more stability. And so lots of people find another place in the chorus, but it's hard. It's a hard transition.

We have so much self-identification with how we sound.

Not every soprano is happy to become an alto. Lots of sopranos just disappear, and not every alto is happy to become a tenor. Lots of altos disappear, and that's just sad. It doesn't have to be that way.

You don't have to lose your community. This is preventable, which is why I teach voice the way that I do, from a functional perspective.

How is your body working? What's it like literally to be you as you're singing, as you're producing sound? Are you doing it in the freest, easiest, most efficient way?

When we talk about efficiency when it comes to singing, what we mean is how much air gets turned into tone. [AH] is more efficient than [ah], the second sound has a lot of breathiness. That's a lot of air that isn't getting turned into tone. That's inefficient. And in the long run, singing with a really breathy voice is just not good for your body.

We hear a lot of breathy singing, a lot of pretty singing in a lot of pop music, and can be really compelling. It can be really heart wrenching, emotional. It can have all the feelings in it, and those can be songs that you know, you wanna listen to over and over again 'cause they move you so much.

Ep #81: Pretty is a Matter of Opinion

And that kind of singing, singing breathily into a microphone that is three or four inches from your mouth is a very different project than singing breathily in a chorus with the intent of contributing to a sound that is filling an entire room.

The singing breathily in a chorus is a higher stress activity. Your voice is working harder, usually, doing that than when you're singing breathily into a microphone, because the sound only has to go as far as the microphone. And then the rest is the sound engineer's business.

But in a chorus, we are being encouraged by the conductor to bring our whole selves to the project to fill the room.

When you're trying to bring your whole self but not stick out at the same time, you can hear where the tension comes from. And how trying to sing [ha ha]. Trying to make that loud with a really, in a really breathy way. [Ha ha].

I've really trained my voice to not be breathy, so as soon as I start to get loud, my sound gets very efficient, but what I can tell you that I feel in my throat as I try to sustain that breathy tone at a larger volume, it doesn't feel good.

It feels like I'm blowing too hard. The voice feels rough. It's not as easy and fun and I dunno, compelling for me as the sound-maker to sing, [a solid tone] that feels like I could do it all day. There's no effort, there's no painful effort involved. Of course there is physical effort involved, but I don't feel like I'm gonna get myself in trouble.

I'm not going to wear myself out singing with a clean, clear, focused tone.

The vision that I hold for my students a lot when they can't quite believe it, is that when they start to sing with a more focused, functional tone that beauty is going to follow. Because at first, singing with more focus

Ep #81: Pretty is a Matter of Opinion

to them often sounds ugly. It sounds wrong. It sounds too loud. It sounds not right for the song. It doesn't sound like the recording of the pop song that they're singing right now.

Of course it won't because they're not singing into a microphone. They're singing into a room. The Pop Star is again, singing breathily into a microphone. We are never gonna be able to sound like that in our living rooms.

Pop stars sound the way they do, in large part, because of the magic of sound engineering.

So, at the beginning stages of learning how to use your body more effectively for singing, there can be a lot of resistance, just because the sounds that you're making, they don't sound “pretty.” They don't sound like anything that anybody would wanna hear.

And the brain is offering those critiques, it's important to know to keep you safe.

One of the things that happens when you start playing around with how you sing or speak is you are going to make sounds that you've never made before. And that for me, as the teacher, is really exciting because that's when I start to hear, “oh, this is what this body can do!”

And sometimes that's exciting for the student, at first. Most of the time, it's more terrifying. They've never heard themselves make that sound before, and the part of their brain that's invested in keeping them safe starts firing off,

That's wrong. Stop. Nobody wants to hear that. That can't possibly be right. We need to cut this out right now. Just tries to shut it down immediately because it's not the kind of singing that you've been praised for.

Ep #81: Pretty is a Matter of Opinion

What I wanna say today is the kind of singing you've been praised for might not be the only kind of singing that you're capable of, and it might not even be the best singing that you're capable of.

If you happen to be singing and playing around and find yourself making a new kind of sound that feels really good, and it sounds really strange or not quite right, or you don't know what to make of it, I want you to consider that you might have stumbled on part of your next step.

You've stumbled on some gold hidden in you that we can bring out with practice, and convince your brain that it's safe and it's actually going to be spectacular.

That's what I've got for you today.

Thank you so much for listening.

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