

Ep #82: Does Style Matter When We're Warming Up?

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.

One of the students in my group class, The Self-Sustaining Singer, asked this week – it's really great. So the question was,

"Michèle, there are all kinds of styles of music. There's classical music, there's choral music, opera, folk music, jazz, blues, rock and roll, contemporary pop, musical theater. Shouldn't the way that you're warming up your voice have something to do with the kind of music that you're gonna sing?"

And my answer in the class, which I stand by is "no." And then today I have a little caveat. That's a, that's a tiny bit of a yes.

My answer is no. The kind of music you're gonna sing is not something we're thinking about when we're warming up, because my goal for you, as you're warming up, is to find your biggest, most glorious, most efficient and beautiful sound, and then we decide what to do with it.

Whatever style of music you're going to be singing, I don't want you to be shrinking yourself to make that work.

I want you to bring your fullest best self to whatever it is that you're doing. And some music requires a different level of breath support, say. Opera doesn't necessarily demand the same amount of breath support as a folk song, for example. But I want you to find your best connection to your breath before you sing anything.

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And then if it turns out that you don't need as much air, or you don't need as deep of a breath, or to engage as much muscular support for your repertoire as you do for the warmup, well then, all that you've done is made your body stronger than you need.

And that's what I want. I want you to be stronger than you need. Not barely strong enough or almost strong enough to sing what you wanna sing. I want you to be stronger than you need.

When you've got that buffer, when you've got a little bit of headroom, then you can make artistic choices and have the capacity to execute on them.

Now here's where this gets a little sticky, maybe, when you're working with me, because I'm going to ask you to explore your whole self, your whole voice. I wanna hear the whole thing. I wanna hear the loud bits, even if you think they sound terrible, I wanna hear the high bits, even if you think they sound shriek-y, I wanna hear the low bits. Even if you feel like they disappear into nothing. I wanna hear the whole thing.

And then we can make it all better. Hold it all – this is all a part of you, and we're going to make it all stronger, clearer, more efficient, more easily produced, more beautiful, more amazing, more integrated, more available for you to use, whatever you wanna sing.

And that can be a little psychologically threatening when we imagine ourselves to be smaller than that, or if we think that we're going to be rejected.

For example, if you're thinking, *“I have to sound ‘pretty’ in order to be loved. Everything that comes out of my mouth needs to sound amazing as I define it in order for it to be okay.”*

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When you're honestly working on your voice, you're gonna make some sounds that are not good. You're gonna make some sounds that are to you, honestly appalling, and you're gonna make some sounds that we both agree, that was not very effective.

But it's in sounding not so good that you learn how to sound the best you possibly can.

And so it does take courage,

“Michèle, if I just wanna sing a little crappy folk song, do I really have to warm up my voice as though I'm going to be singing opera?”

No, you don't. No, you don't have to. And the little folk song will be better if you do, because you'll be bringing more of yourself to it.

One of the questions, that I ask myself when I am warming my own self up is, *how am I feeling today?*

And if you want to see a video of me warming myself up after a whole month of not singing, you can go to my website. There's a blog post about it with a video of me working with my voice for the first time after a month.

In that video, I ask myself the question, I check in, *how am I feeling?*

How am I feeling emotionally? Because how we're feeling emotionally has everything to do with our voice. The voice is a very sensitive instrument. It's very emotional itself. The voice is how we get our needs met. It's how we express our opinions. Do I really need to go on about this?

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The voice is the first thing that fails when we're upset or, gets strange sounding if we're really excited about something. It just might get, you know, it just might get very high. All of a sudden. We're talking up here because we're really excited.

The voice, it reflects how we are, how we are doing. How we're feeling, and I think it's really important before you warm up or as part of your warmup to check in with yourself, how are you feeling emotionally?

And if you can try to locate in your body where those emotions are residing. If you are feeling sad, for example, or disappointed, for me, that often just resides in my chest. My chest feels tight. And knowing that, say as I'm going to warm up, *I'm feeling a little down, I'm feeling a little disappointed*, as I'm warming up my voice and my body, I can check in with that front of my chest and gently work to open it.

Or just know that's a place where my body is holding energy, it's holding there, and maybe if I'm gentle and attentive, I can get that energy to move. I can get that to feel a little less stuck. Not because I need to feel happy in order to warm up. I just need to know what I'm feeling in order to warm up as effectively as I can.

Also, like, physical pain. If you've got grumpy hips or grumpy knees, or you slept funny and your neck is weird, right? That's important to acknowledge.

Not letting that stop you, but being attentive as you are warming up your voice and moving sound through your body, that sound is vibration, that sound, it's not ultrasound 'cause we can hear it, but that vibration can be loosening, can be soothing, can help the muscles let go if they need to let go.

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So for me, the process of warming up the voice is about checking in with our capacity in several areas. First, as I was just talking about, our emotional capacity, how are we feeling today? What's it like to be us. And our physical capacity. You know, what's tense, what's loose? What do we have energy for?

Also, our musical capacity – what can I hear today? What am I open to hearing in myself? What songs do I have running through my head? What subtleties are available to me today? What dynamic ranges, what kinds of tunes? what am I wanting today? What is my soul wanting to hear and make?

And then, of course, our vocal capacity. What is the voice actually capable of doing?

I think it's helpful to separate the project into those areas because it's easier to problem-solve.

It's never the case that you are just a crappy person and that's why you can't sing. You know, just God didn't favor you. The moon and the stars are misaligned, and today is not your day.

It's never the case that you are a hundred percent worthless as a singer, even if you're not a singer right now. I wanna make this clear. **If you have a human body. Singing is available to you. Singing is a function of the human body.**

It is something that you can learn how to do. It is something you can improve. It is something that you can embrace. You might not want to, that's another question, but if you have a human body, singing is available for you.

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Now, is every piece of vocal music in the world available to you? No. You have your own personality, your own tastes, and your own instrument.

Not every song is for every body, but as you explore your body's capacities and your own interests and your own heart, you will find the songs that are for you to sing, that are meant for you, that are healing for you, that bring joy to other people.

But we start with you. We don't start with the songs.

We start with you – your body, your heart, your feet, your breath, and your sound.

So as a functional voice teacher, I'm focused on your sound. I'm focused on, on you. And whatever songs may be, whatever songs may come, we will find them. We will get there. They will be beautiful. But first we start with you.

Most Friday mornings I am on a Zoom call with veterans at the San Francisco VA Medical Center. Before the pandemic, I directed a chorus there and during the pandemic we transitioned to Zoom calls where a recreation therapist carries me around on an iPad and I visit people one-on-one rather than working with a big group of singers.

And so we talk about music and life, and I share YouTube videos of their favorite songs through the Zoom meeting. And this last Friday, one of my veterans who's in his mid-nineties, sang me an Eddie Fisher song and it was just, well, it's always, I find it's always lovely to be sung to, and he told me this story of taking dance classes.

He went to an Arthur Murray school because he wanted to learn to tango. And after three tango lessons, the dance teacher approached him

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and said, "You know, I don't think the tango is for you." And he was absolutely crest fallen, broken hearted. I don't think he's learned to tango since.

Anyway, I said, "That is so sad. Do you foxtrot?" and he said, "Of course! Of course I foxtrot!"

I understand the dance teacher's perspective. The class is strictly for tango, and maybe he didn't have the skills or the temperament or the capacity to comprehend the tango in the way the teacher thought it would be good for him, or the way the teacher needed him to understand the tango at that moment.

But you know, it's, it, he never went back to it, and that just breaks my heart. And I think that's happened to a lot of people about singing. You might've tried to sing a song and it just didn't feel right, and so you write off the whole project.

It was so gratifying to me to hear that he foxtrotted, that he didn't put off dancing altogether. He's the kind of person where you could tell he was a dancer, even in his mid-nineties, he has a vitality and a musicianship and a musicality about him that, prompted me to ask the question.

So, I'm not a tango teacher. I'm not an opera teacher. I'm not a musical theater teacher. I'm not a funk teacher. I'm a functional voice teacher and whatever songs you wanna bring, it's my job to help you find the parts of you that will bring them to life in your most glorious, efficient, beautiful way.

I'll put the link to the video of me warming up after a month in the show notes. You can check that out if you like. It took a certain amount of courage to make it. And if you're interested in studying with me, The Self-Sustaining singer will open again for enrollment before the end of

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this year.

Send me an email with group in the subject line. I'll put you on the wait list and you can find out exactly when enrollment opens again.

That's it for today.

Thank you so much for listening.

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