

Ep #84: The Conductor Says We're Flat – What Do I Do?

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.

My name's Michèle Voillequé, and I'm a singer and a voice teacher in Berkeley, California. And yesterday I gave an hour long class called “Your Whole Self is the Instrument,” live on Zoom with students.

I thought it was recording. It wasn't. And so this isn't a replay. It's not the replay I intended to send out to the people who'd registered. It's a redo, which will be shorter because we're not going to be interacting.

So apologies to the people who attended and registered who wanted to see it all happen just as it was. That's lost forever. But I'm going to do my best to give you all the same information right now and hope you find it useful and engaging.

The jumping off point for yesterday's class came from a question that one of the attendees sent in ahead of time, which was, “When the chorus director tells us we're flat, what am I supposed to do?”

And I will answer that question in just a second. I want to give some background before I do.

One of the things that's true about our voices is that we learn to use them by imitating the people around us. We're born, we cry out, we scream, because we're cold and hungry and confused, and we keep doing that until we start to notice that the grownups are doing other things with their mouths.

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They're kind of, they're talking, sort of, and we start imitating them. And that's how we acquire language and that's how we acquire the accent of the people who are raising us.

And pretty soon, that's all kind of on autopilot. We don't have to think about how the voice works at all. It just does. We're just able to express ourselves.

Maybe we can't always find the right word, but you know, we can search around and get it to work. Sometimes we've got lisps and trouble pronouncing words, but those issues for most people resolve really quickly, and the voice is very soon on autopilot.

Those habits for speech prioritize consonants and separations between words and a certain choppiness in the delivery.

If I started talking to you like this, you might wonder, is she high? I think we'd all agree, that's not good speaking behavior. Those are singing habits applied to speech, and they sound weird. They don't sound credible. They sound like I'm a little bit of wackadoodle.

So singing habits, the behaviors that we need to in order to sing well, singing prioritizes not the consonant, but the vowel, not separation between elements, but connection between elements.

And I find as a voice teacher, my primary job is to help people grow and stabilize and enjoy a set of habits that they need for singing, so that the singing is easy, so that we don't sound pitchy, we don't feel strained, and the voice sounds full.

When we're trying to sing with speaking habits, that's what happens. We feel strained, pitchy. The voice isn't as full as it could be, and it's just not as fun. So singing prioritizes the vowel and the connection between

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elements. [A singing example] is singing, [a speaking example] is talking. Okay. I think that's probably pretty clear.

Now what makes different notes? How do we make different notes at all? Well, that has to do with the breath pressure. So getting to my student's question, “the choral conductor says, we're flat, what am I supposed to do?”

Let's first talk about what flat means.

Flat can mean a couple of things. If this, [ah], is the note that's supposed to be happening and y'all are singing, [ah], that note is flat. It's lower than the note that's intended or desired, and it sounds like the note that you're singing is coming from a bad idea you're having.

The difference between [ah], and [ah], is big enough that the choral conductor might assume that y'all just don't know what you're supposed to be doing.

Now, if this is the intended note, [ah], and y'all are singing, [ah], that's the same note, more or less, but the second version is going to sound flat to the conductor. And I think more often than not when people are flat, it's because they're singing more with their speaking habits than with their singing habits.

So the first thing to do in this situation is to check, *Am I actually trying to sing the right note at all? Am I in the ballpark?* Because, you know, we all get wrong ideas about parts we're supposed to sing.

If you're singing a wrong note because you're not sure what the right one is, you're, welcome to humanity. The thing to do is to get as clear about the note as quick as you can and do the best you can with it.

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But if you're pretty sure that you're singing the right note and the conductor is saying, “You're flat,” here's what I want you to do.

I want you to check and see how tall you feel in your body.

Are you sitting up?

Can you feel your feet on the floor?

Can you feel your seat in the seat?

Can you feel supported underneath you?

Because the difference between [ah - in tune] and [ah - flat] has something to do with how fast the air is moving, how much breath pressure you're using to create the note.

If you're kind of schlumpy, [ah], it's not as in tune, it's not as ringy as if you're upright on your sit-bones feeling tall, elongated through your spine, (let's just check what that note is supposed to be), and you're singing, [ah].

Now the other thing that's happening, the other difference between [ah] and [ah], my mouth is more closed. That's a speaking habit.

We don't tend to think that people who talk with their mouths flopping open are very credible, and we certainly don't leave our mouths hanging open when we're done. Right? That's not a speech behavior. That's a singing behavior.

The note needs enough room. Breath comes out of your lungs and goes past your vocal folds, which are in your neck, and those vocal folds vibrate and that determines what the sound is that you're making. The note is made down here. [ah].

But if you don't give it enough space in your mouth, it will change the resonance. You'll be singing with a different resonance and it can make

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the note sound flat. It can be in tune here [gesturing to my throat] and out of tune in the room, depending on what happens in your mouth.

So making sure that you're tall, you're feeling connected to the earth, you can feel that you're letting the air flow freely through your body and then check in with the direction of the sound that you're making.

A lot of us, especially in choruses, are afraid of being called out. We're afraid of sticking out of the group. We're afraid of being told we are the ones who are flat. And so we can very easily develop a habit of singing [tiny singing] just for ourselves.

It's a kind of singing where you're singing, but you're trying to decide if it sounds good enough for other people to hear it. And in doing that, you more likely, more often than not are going to sound flat outside your head.

It's a beautiful idea. The thought that we can make a sound, decide whether we like it and then let everybody else hear it. But that is not how this instrument works.

For our voices to sound as fantastic as they can, we have to sing with a direction in mind. We have to be willing to let our voice sail across the room and just know, it's not a scalpel. Nobody's gonna be left bleeding. We might be disappointed, we might be mortified, but nobody's gonna die.

In order for the sound to have a chance at sounding good at all, we have to send it across the room and we have to learn to live with the discomfort of not being guaranteed that it's going to be perfect.

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Even I don't know if all of my sounds are gonna be perfect. I just have to stand in my big girl shoes and send it out, listening of course. And then learning to adjust it quickly if it needs to be adjusted.

So in a choral environment, one of the things that might be going wrong, if your section is getting feedback that it's flat over here, consider it might have something to do with your confidence and your self-esteem and how comfortable you are in the group.

Again, I know the discomfort. It can feel like you don't wanna stick out, you don't wanna be wrong. But every conductor in the world will tell you, we can't fix it if we can't hear that it's wrong in the first place.

We can't fix it if we can't hear it.

There's nothing perfect about a note that's perfectly in tune that only you can hear, if you're singing in a chorus, and you know, the idea is that you're contributing to the group.

So all of these ideas kind of, you can see how they're mutually reinforcing, right? You wanna feel tall in your body, you wanna feel grounded to the earth, supporting your breath, and directing the sound away from you. And that will probably fix the problem.

There's maybe a little more to say about how the quality of the vowel affects whether or not it sounds like it's in tune.

So in my example of I've been singing an AH vowel, [ah], and then the one that's not quite as in tune is more like an uh, uh.

[AH] [UH]

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So that's another thing you can think, “what's the vowel that I'm supposed to be singing?”

If it's an ah, ah, can it feel really tall inside the mouth and tilted forward? Can it feel like it's going this way? Or check to see, am I swallowing it? That will make it sound flat. Even if you know the right note to be singing, if you swallow it, it will sound flat.

Same is true for [OH]

[OH OOH EE EH] That was OH OOH EE EH all being swallowed.

[OH OOH EE EH] That's OH OOH EE EH not being swallowed.

So that's what I think you should do if you're in a chorus and you're getting the feedback that “y'all are flat.” Those are the things to check in with.

And as was noted on the call, that's a lot.

So I asked this singer at the end, like, what, what's your takeaway? Like, what do you think you're gonna try in chorus to explore this idea of, am I flat or not? and they said,

“I think focused listening. Listening really carefully to hear if I'm the one who's flat, I think I need to figure out if it's me.”

And I said, yes, absolutely. Job number one. When you're getting feedback for the whole group in the chorus, you need to figure out, “does it apply to me? Does it apply to me?”

So my suggestion is to try that for, at the next rehearsal, for one or maybe two pieces that the chorus is rehearsing. And to notice, like, notice what you notice. Do I think it's me? How do I think I'm doing?

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So practicing focused listening for one or two pieces, and then let it go.

If it feels like you can sustain that level of focused listening on yourself for the rest of rehearsal, by all means go ahead and do that. But don't be surprised if after just one piece your brain is tired. It's a lot to keep track of. So doing a little bit at a time well, is better than doing nothing at all, and it's better than doing a lot with partial attention.

So even if it's only, so the chorus sings through a song and then the conductor wants to hear your vocal part sing it by itself. That would be a great moment to practice, focus, listening, and check and see, “how am I doing here?”

Because there you don't have the noise of the rest of the chorus, sorry. The music making of the rest of the chorus. It's just your section and you can really pay attention. It'll be easier to hear yourself and you can hear how you're doing.

And if you find that you're doing fine, awesome. Rock on with your bad self. And if you hear, “oh, I actually don't know these notes as well as I thought I did.” There you go. Now you know and you can go home and practice.

Learn, you know, learn what the notes are supposed to be, and so at the next rehearsal you can come in more confident, practice your focused listening again, and see how you're improving.

If you're already pretty sure that once you know it's not you, then applying any of these ideas of

feeling taller

feeling your feet on the ground

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intentionally directing the sound across the room
thinking about the vowel you're singing
can the vowel feel more forward in the mouth?
am I swallowing the vowel?
am I sharing the vowel?

I find that thinking about directing the sound across the room helps with swallowing the vowel. It's hard to swallow the vowel and direct it at the same time, so those two might fix each other.

So there's my prescription for that. And if you have any questions, please send me an email or schedule a free consultation. Let's talk about it.

The other thing that I presented yesterday was, how I think about the singing project.

These singing habits that I help my students develop, what are they actually, in sort of general terms?

I've been teaching voice for over 20 years and I've developed several different frameworks and ways of thinking about the project over time, and this is the latest iteration of that. And of course, because it's the latest, I'm excited about it.

And it's not that my other work wasn't true, I just feel like, “oh, this feels really clear. this feels really memorable. Easy to remember, easy to do.” Or, everything takes practice, so I shouldn't say easy to do, but I think it'll be good for you.

In order to sing well, we need to combine some physical skills with some mental and emotional skills so that we can sing what we want to sing, how we want to sing it. And I think this also applies to public speaking.

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The thing about speaking on a normal day, just in normal life, is that we don't need our body to help us.

In fact, for most people speaking feels like something that's just happening in your head, maybe not even in your throat. It's just something that's happening from here up. You don't need to support your speaking voice significantly at all.

Now, if you're going to give a presentation, that's when it's important to have your body under you, and that's where this framework that I'm about to share is going to apply to you.

But generally, speaking just doesn't feel like it takes that much, and that's why you're successful. That's why you've gotten as far as you have in life, is because you haven't had to think about your speech. You have an idea, you're able to express it.

So the collection of singing habits for me, boil down to A, B, C, D, and N.

The A is for anchoring and opening the pipe. The pipe where your vocal folds are, your wind pipe that is connected to your lungs, that is in a relationship with your diaphragm. Your diaphragm's in a relationship with your abdominal wall and your pelvic floor, which is held by your pelvis, supported by your legs, all the way down to your feet.

Anchoring and opening the pipe. Thinking of your whole self as an instrument. Your body is the instrument.

If we are piccolo players, we take the piccolo out of the case, put it together, play it, have an experience, have thoughts, feelings, ideas about it. If we get frustrated, we can just put the piccolo away and close

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the case and leave it there.

Our body, our whole selves are the instrument when it comes to our voice and we don't get to put it away. We're here living with it 24/7.

So A is for anchoring and opening the pipe. Thinking of your whole self as the instrument.

B is for breathing in time, simply, and just enough. Breathing in time if we're talking about singing, what I mean by that is, if a piece of music is 1, 2, 3, 4, and we need to come in on beat one, we breathe in time with the music. 1, 2, 3, [a calm breath and the singing].

Not 1, 2, 3, 4, [gasping for air and then singing], which you'll see. We all do that. Choirs do that all the time. So learning to breathe in time.

Another way to understand “in time” is also “soon enough.”

“Easily,” meaning that we don't have some kind of big rigmarole that we do. We just let the air come in, let the air into the body. It doesn't have to be a big deal.

And “just enough” meaning enough to do what is directly in front of us.

At the beginning of a song, we don't take a breath for the whole song. We need to take a breath for the first phrase, and then we get to take another breath.

Another question, it didn't come up in the class, but another question I'm often asked, “when am I supposed to breathe?” And the answer is, “whenever you run out of air.”

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If you make a habit of inhaling exactly what you need, just enough for what you need to do, you will support rather than disrupt the natural breathing of your body.

So the lungs are there to take in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide. If you're chronically tanking up, taking in too much air before you sing something, what you're singing isn't demanding enough air. You're not expelling enough carbon dioxide before you get to the end of the phrase.

You know you need to take another breath for the next one. And you take that breath, you inhale that oxygen on top of carbon dioxide that's still trying to leave your body.

And then that's where we end up breathing [gasping] and we just get more and more pressurized up here and it gets harder and harder to sing. And we start to, you can start to feel like you're drowning, like you just can't catch your breath. It's because you inhaled too much to start with.

Okay. A,B. Anchor and open the pipe. Breathe in time.

C is for connecting the breath to the body and to the sound.

Learning what it feels like to support the exhalation.

[AH]. My trunk is having to work to make sure that that note stays at that pitch. [AH], because the natural flow of air out of my lungs would make this sound. [various sighs].

Can you hear how it's higher at the beginning and then it falls off it? The pitch is higher at the beginning because the breath pressure in my lungs is higher. Then it quickly falls off because I'm not doing anything to sustain that exhalation.

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Learning to sustain that exhalation is about connecting your body to your breath, to the sound, and there's a whole lot more to say about that, but in the interest of time, D.

I've already said this, direct the sound across the room.

Although D is actually direct the sound, because there it's not always across the room where the sound needs to go, depending on the piece that you're singing, the thing that you're singing, the thing that you're trying to accomplish.

But this idea that we have control over where the sound goes, that we can direct the sound.

We can direct the sound to the roof of our mouth. We can direct the sound across the room. We can direct the sound into the floor. That's particularly useful for high notes. We can direct the sound behind us. I know I talked about swallowing sounds and that makes them sound flat, but sometimes it's really helpful to feel like you're singing that way, learning to direct the sound.

And then N is for noticing what is.

It applies to A, B, C, and D. Noticing what is, is what we need to be doing all the time when we're singing. Noticing what's happening. And then, part of noticing is asking non-judgmental questions about it and then embracing what we can playfully.

So let me give you an example.

You are singing on your own or maybe at your voice lesson, and you hear yourself make a sound and your brain offers you the idea, *What the*

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hell was that? That was, we're never, Nope. That was awful. We're not doing that again. That was bad. Bad. That was bad.

It might not be that dramatic. It could be, might not be. Some version of that.

You make a sound. It's disappointing. Your brain says, *oh, we're not gonna do that.*

Asking a non-judgmental question:

What did it need more of? or
What exactly was troubling about that sound?

If the answer you hear back from your brain is, *I don't know, it's just, it was just wrong. That was just wrong*, you now know that you're talking to your inner critic.

You now know that that sound that you just made is something that your brain cannot make any sense of. That means it's new, and this means it could be amazing, the sound you just made, that freaks you out.

This could be fantastic. And so embracing what is, embracing the fact that part of you is really not happy with what you just did, and is not giving you any useful information on how to change it.

Just don't do it again, is not helpful. I mean, it, it tells us we're talking to the inner critic, but that's not an option if you're working on improving your singing or speaking voice.

Just not doing that again without any other information? Not useful.

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But *accepting* that part of you is freaked out, and then playfully reminding yourself, *this is singing, this is goofy*.

This is a total waste of air. Not a waste of time because I'm enjoying myself, but there's no tiger. There are no scalpels. Nobody's gonna die. We're just trying to figure something out.

Would it be okay with you, little freaked out part of me? I hear you. I hear that you don't know what to make of what just happened, but if it's okay with you, I'm just gonna try it again and see how it goes and see what I can notice.

*And if it's still disappointing, maybe we can figure out **why** exactly. What's wrong with it?*

And then you try again.

So this practice of noticing what is, asking non-judgmental questions – curious, honestly curious questions about it – embracing all the truth you can find about the situation you're in, playfully, and proceeding playfully, this is how we make changes to our voice.

This is how we learn songs. This is how we learn new technique. This is how we make progress.

And, through all of the things, whether you're working on anchoring and opening the pipe or breathing better, connecting the body to the breath, to the sound, or learning how to direct the air differently, you're going to learn how to do that by noticing what's happening.

And when you can do that, you are what I call a self-sustaining singer.

You know how to provide constructive feedback to yourself.

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We will always need voice teachers and choral conductors to tell us what we sound like because we can't hear ourselves accurately. We hear ourselves through our bones and our tissues, and everybody else hears us through their ears.

So how it sounds to us is not a good measure ever, of how it sounds to them. But when you can develop a practice of using the body well, noticing how it's going, and making adjustments as you go, loving, compassionate adjustments as you go, your singing will improve and you'll feel better doing it.

I think that's the most important part, is that you feel better doing it.

So this framework, **ABCD-N** is something that I teach, to my one-on-one students and also in a group.

The group is called The Self-Sustaining Singer, and the next round will start on October 15th. The Self-Sustaining Singer is a 12 week class where I help you develop a warmup routine for your voice, for your unique situation, for your unique concerns.

This works in a group because lots of people have a lot of the same concerns.

So I teach you how to anchor and open the body. We do exercises showing you how to breathe well, how to connect the body to the breath, and how to direct the sound.

Over the course of the first six weeks or so, you're learning the theory, learning the practice, learning some exercises and patterns that you try out for yourself and see how it goes for you.

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Then the last six weeks, we are putting that into practice. You're going to be trying out a warmup routine two or three times a week and seeing how it goes, seeing how it supports the singing that you want to do in your life.

And in those last six weeks, too, you'll be invited to bring, a song or a section of a song, a verse, or a chorus to sing, and ask for feedback. And show me, show me your trouble spots, and we can develop and exercise a warmup that will help you fix those.

So from my point of view, the purpose of a warmup is not just to warm up your voice, not just to get from like zero to one, but to grow your voice over time. Your warmup shouldn't be the same for 20 years.

Your warmup should reflect the kinds of songs you want to be singing, the kinds of vocal issues you want to address, the kinds of vocal goals you wanna achieve.

So if you're interested in expanding your range, being able to sing lower notes better or higher notes better, you need stuff in your warmup to help you do that, to help you grow there over time.

There are lots of exercises on YouTube, but if you don't know why you're doing them, they are not going to do you any good and they can do you harm. So my goal with this class is to educate you about your voice, about your body, how it works, and to give you the tools to help it improve.

The next class starts October 15th, enrollment opens September 18th.

And if you want to be sure that you hear about that, make sure that you're on my email list. And you can do that by going to my website, mvmusik.com.

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That's spelled M like Mary, V like Victor, M like Mary US like Sam. IK.
Not a CA k.com.

There's a form there. You can get on my mailing list and you'll hear about how to enroll for the class when it starts.

I also teach **ABCD-N** to my private students, although it, it's not in any particular order because I start with my one on one-on-one students wherever they're at, and you know, we just, I just take you where you are and we go where you wanna go, and we pick up whatever we need to get there along the way.

If working one-on-one with me sounds more appealing, that can happen in person if you're in Berkeley or online. if you're not. Again, go to my website, mvmusik.com and sign up for a free consultation.

There'll be a short form to fill out so that I can learn more about you, and then you pick a time and we talk on Zoom or on the telephone for 20 minutes and see if we're a good fit.

You tell me about your goals. I tell you what I think and how I can help you and we just, vibe each other out, see how we'd be together.

So I think that's pretty much everything I said yesterday. I'm sorry I had to record it in sections a day later. If you have any questions, or if going to my website is too complicated, just send me an email, letters@mvmusik.com and uh, we can connect that way.

Thank you so much for your patience, for watching all the way to the end, and if we're not already connected, I hope, I hope we connect soon. Take good care.

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