

Ep #86: How to Sing Better High Notes

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.

I have a story today about learning how to sing high notes, and I hope it's useful for you.

One of the things we do when we are trying to sing high notes is we reach for them, and that usually guarantees that they come out sounding tinny and thin, and they might hurt a little bit.

It feels unfair that the more we try, the less we succeed.

There's something about the extremes of our range, whether it's a really high note or a really low note, that the best result often happens when we give up a little.

That doesn't mean that you don't try to support the note well with your body. That doesn't mean you let your body go all floppy and then see how it goes. That high note, with your floppy body, is not going to work out, I can tell you already, because of physics.

The breath pressure needed for a high note has to be high. Higher pitches are made with higher breath pressure. That breath pressure is generated by energy from the body, so you can't have a floppy body and get a high note to work out. There has to be some power somewhere.

Now, if you're singing with a really tiny throat, with a really closed throat, that will increase the breath pressure for you.

Instead of [a fuller-sounding AH], you can sing it [a tinny-sounding AH]. And the second version, [AH], I'm hardly using any effort at all

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because I've squeezed my throat closed. I'm making as small a space as possible.

But I submit to you that [the first AH], is much nicer to listen to than [the second AH], and I think if I go up from there, [an ascending scale using the fuller-sounding AH], that sounds, feels good to me.

[an ascending scale with the tinny-sounding AH] It doesn't feel terrible to me, but, I don't have very many notes after that.

And you can judge for yourself how well it sounds. I don't, it's an interesting sound. I don't know when I would use it. I don't particularly enjoy listening to it. That's my evaluation of that sound. You can let me know if you're loving it.

Let me try it again and see if I can go even higher and tell you, see if I can get to a point of aching. [another tinny-sounding example]

Yeah, see those last three? No, those are not fun. Those are not fun. They don't feel, what does fun mean? It doesn't feel like it would be easy to sustain. And it's not a sound that I want to hear. It doesn't bring joy to me. It doesn't "spark joy" as, um, Marie Kondo would say, that doesn't spark joy.

So you can make high notes with a floppy body, but they might not be the high notes that you want.

And that's all the high note singing that I'm going to be doing. So you don't, if that stressed you out, if you didn't like hearing any of that, don't worry. You're not gonna hear any more of it. From now on, it's just, I'm just gonna be talking.

So there's an art to figuring out how to generate the breath pressure for the high note, and "not trying" at the same time.

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So the story that I have to tell you was that I had an MRI done recently and it wasn't my first MRI in my life. I've been in the MRI machine before, but this one was long. It was long, and I had my voice lesson the next day.

So I'm in the MRI and I if, if you've never been in one, it's a way to take pictures of the inside of your body, and they put you on a table that slides into a tube.

If you're claustrophobic. These are really not fun. You slide into a tube and they put, earplugs in your ears and headphones over the top of that, because it's really loud.

And the machine turns on and there's some clicks, and then there's some other kinds of sounds that are really indescribable. You can go online, I think to YouTube. You could Google “MRI sounds,” and you can hear some of them, but they range from simple clicking, to a kind of banging, to a kind of EHHHH at various pitches.

I've had MRIs of different parts of my body in my life, and I've been fascinated to hear that the machine is different, the machine sounds different – the machine itself is the same, but the machine sounds different if it's my shoulder or if it's my knee. And this one was no exception.

The sounds were different, and as a way to keep my mind occupied, I was listening to the MRI, I wasn't trying to shut it out. I wasn't trying to resist hearing it. But I decided, you know, I'm here anyway. I might as well listen.

And I could hear that there were octaves. There were octaves that happened a lot. There were minor sevenths that happened a lot. There were major sevenths. There were almost minor seconds. It was almost a half step up, but not quite; almost a whole step, but not quite.

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And you might think, well, that's something only a musician would do, and you may be right about that, but I found the intellectual activity of turning it into like a music theory, an ear training test, to be really helpful.

Even if you don't do that, if you happen to be in an MRI, my advice to you would be to relax into the sound. As discordant as it is, as random as it is – there's maybe some kind of pattern somewhere that somebody understands, but if you're in it, you're not going find a pattern, really.

So it's unexpected, it's unexpected. It's out of tune. It's nothing anybody wants to hear. There's no melody. But to try to make space for it within yourself, like to make space for the sound, to let the MRI just be the best MRI it can be, and you get to witness it.

And thinking about it that way, I found myself not in Joy. I was not in Joy. I was not happy, but I was curious. I was interested and I relaxed. I relaxed into whatever sound bath, forgive the use of that term, the MRI was making for me at the time.

This is what I've got. This is what it sounds like, and to try to oh, become one with the MRI. I don't know, is that what I mean? I mean, achieving a state of mental relaxation, mental and emotional relaxation, that the sound no longer bothered me. The sound just was, and I was curious about what the sound could be labeled as.

Was that an octave? I think that was an octave. Is it gonna happen again? Oh, it did. Oh, that was an octave. Okay. And just receiving the sound rather than lying there in a tiny space, resisting every moment of it.

I will not say that I came out of that MRI machine refreshed. I was relieved to be outside of the MRI machine. I needed a walk in fresh air. I needed to sit still. I needed to close my eyes even though my eyes had been closed for however long. I needed to sit on the couch and close my

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eyes and just try to come back into myself. Leave the MRI behind, let all of those vibrations, all of that sound, leave my mind and come back to the world.

At that time, that day after the MR, I thought that's all the, there was for me to learn about the MRI. Just, *Okay, that took a long time. Wow. I am not upset. I'm not more stressed out. I'm a little tired, but I'm good. Go me. I am learning how to do this. I'm getting better at being in an MRI machine.*

And then the next day I went to my voice lesson. We are always working on high notes in my voice lesson because they're hard and because it's taken me a long time to love them.

I would say I'm an introverted person. I have very fine hearing. I hear all kinds of things I wish I couldn't hear in the world. And the sound of me being loud for years and years and years was really disruptive to my psyche.

It was hard for me to sing loud because I did not like how that felt in my body. That didn't feel safe to me. I've gotten over that. I'm now really good at being really loud, and it doesn't bother me at all.

But there's still this residual high note thing because high notes are loud. Whatever the highest sound is in any chord, that's the note that's going to be easiest to hear. Like the high notes, they're, they're just always going to be louder. Even if you're trying to sing them quietly, they're gonna be louder than everything else.

So we're always working on high notes and so I go to my voice lesson the next day. We're working on high notes, and I notice that I am trying to get them to work.

Just an aside right now, I really want you to hear, whatever singing path you're walking right now, I'm walking it too. I am not coming to you as

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the person who's got it all figured out, but as the person who's doing it day after day and noticing, and figuring it out. And I'm coming here to share with you what I've figured out, but I don't have it all figured out. I really don't.

So I notice in my lesson I'm singing high notes and I'm trying, and I'm hearing that the trying isn't working, and I'm feeling that the trying isn't working, but still I'm trying because I'm a person and we do that.

Even when we want to do things differently, we can find ourselves in an autopilot or in a, you know, in a loop that you just can't get out of.

And then it occurred to me, I remembered, I said, oh wait, listen to the MRI can I find that feeling I had the day before? Hearing those sounds that I didn't like at all, but still being able to relax and listen and accept those sounds? Let me try that.

I tried that. I could sing the high notes and they were amazing.

That was my way to stop trying, was to place a little distance between me and the sound I was making and just let it be what it was gonna be. And as soon as I did, it worked.

It's your job to figure out how to apply that to your own life.

Let me tell you some of my triggers for trying when I'm singing the high notes, and maybe that'll help you, give you some more breadcrumbs, to make use of this. If you can make use of my experience.

One of the things my brain wants is for me to be in tune and it will help my body do all kinds of things to make sure that I'm in tune. And most of those things are not helpful.

So if that's a concern of yours, that you be in tune, that was a huge lesson from the MRI. Because the MRI isn't, is not really in tune, but

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being able to withstand that, to hear those sounds, and just notice *that's not in tune* and not have that be a crisis.

It might be a journaling exercise that you need to do.

Of course we all want to sing in tune, but like, what really are the consequences of not singing in tune? If you're worried about singing in tune, the way I worry about singing in tune, you've got a story.

I sang out of tune and they laughed at me.

Various forms of, I'm afraid they're gonna reject me. It's gonna sound bad.

What are all the negative consequences of being out of tune, of singing it out of tune, and just have a look at them. It really helps me to look at them on paper and see, well, is that really gonna bring about the end of the world?

I mean, what is the worst case? It sounded bad for a minute. But then it's over.

Again, this is your own work to do, but I have found it very helpful to reinforce over years and years and years that everybody sings out of tune. Out of tune is not the end of the world. Out of tune often happens as we're finding a better way to make the sounds.

As we improve our vocal technique or expand our vocal technique, as we reach new places in our psyches with our voices, it's normal and expected that there are going to be tuning problems because you're rebalancing the instrument.

So knowing that “out of tune” isn't a problem, can we just let the voice make a sound? and see if that doesn't help the high notes feel easier.

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The other, struggle that I've had with high notes, I said earlier, is that they're loud. I've had trouble with tolerating the volume of my own voice, and one of the things that can help with that is putting your hands on the bone just in front of your ear. So you're not putting your fingers in your ear, but you're just dampening that bone right in front of your ear, with one hand or on both sides, and see if that doesn't make it easier.

By having your hand there, you're preventing the sound of your voice, the vibrations created by your voice, from vibrating through that bone, you're making yourself quieter. It's a little mute button for you.

And that might be just enough to take the edge off so that you can let your body make a louder sound and that sound is going to have a better chance of being successful. That is to say it's gonna sound better and it's gonna feel better to you if you make the sound a little bit louder or at least without recoiling from it at the same time.

And then you can play around with both hands on your face in front of your ears, try one ear and see if that's enough. And know that you may need to do this for several weeks or months to help your nervous system acclimate to the fact that when you sing those higher pitches, you're louder and it's okay. Nothing's gone wrong.

The feeling I had in my body, what my nervous system must have decided is *She's not gonna stop. This noise is gonna continue and we just, we just have to get used to it.* And so I'm now no longer bothered as much as I was. I desensitized myself to my own sound.

I can still hear myself perfectly clearly, but I'm not driving myself crazy with it anymore. Not because I'm quieter, but because I've accepted this is gonna keep happening and we're just gonna be used to it.

The third thing about high notes that has helped me is to not look at them on the paper – to work on high notes where I'm not reading them on a piece of sheet music.

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Because as soon as I see that ledger line above the staff for singing an A or a B flat, or a B or a high C or a C sharp, as soon as I see it written down, my literate brain gets involved and a friend of my literate brain, a close friend of my literate brain, is my inner critic, who just starts telling me all the old stories about how,

It's gonna hurt.

Your nervous system's gonna go tilt.

You're not gonna like how it feels.

It's gonna sound terrible.

You shouldn't bother.

You can't do that.

What are you bothering with?

That's crazy.

That's not you.

Those notes aren't for you.

So I make a point not to look at them on the paper. When I'm working on my high notes, I'm doing it with a lip trill [lip trill] away from the piece of paper.

For some reason, the piano keyboard is less triggering. You could say that in a similar way I'm looking at the keyboard, but it's not the same as seeing the notes on a musical staff on a piece of paper. But if you, if you are triggered by the piano keyboard itself, find another instrument to give you the pitch that you need.

If you use a pitch pipe, maybe you play the pitch through the pitch pipe and then sing the note an octave above, you know, so that there's no visual information at all. It's just an aural cue.

Or you could record the piano, you could record the notes that you're wanting to work on, just in a tiny little voice memo. And then you, when you want to work on either one note at a time or, I find it's more fun to

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work on a pattern, you know, something that goes up and down through that high note. You just push play and you don't, you don't have any visual information at all.

So I think those are really the big things: being freaked out by seeing it on a piece of paper, being freaked out by how loud it is to me personally, and my desire that everything I sing be perfectly tuned.

So let me know what you think. Let me know if this is helpful.

I think it's a good rule for life, that when we can't change something, we do our best to change our relationship to it and to accept it the best we can.

And that for me was what happened in the MRI machine. And that's what happens when I'm working on my high notes.

I separate myself just a little bit from me, the sound maker and me, the evaluator of the sound, and just *let's just let the instrument do what it needs to do, and not force it and not try. Let's just. See what's possible.*

So there's the moral of my story. I hope it helps.

Thank you so much for listening

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