As a music teacher, I use my voice to communicate both technical and aesthetic information. I also use my voice as a musical instrument. When my voice is tired, I find my job increasingly difficult. Basic communication becomes difficult, a strain, and I often have to alter my teaching to accommodate my limited vocal capacity. Does this sound familiar? If it does, you may be suffering from vocal fatigue or vocal abuse. In addition, your students may be suffering just as much as you!

In the spring of 2004, I completed a case study of an elementary general music teacher who suffered from long term vocal problems. As a result of decreased vocal capacity, my friend altered her curriculum to compensate for the fact that she could not serve as a healthy vocal model in her classes. Over time, singing became less and less of a focus for her. In addition, classroom management became problematic during times when her voice was in a weakened state.

Other general music teachers and choral directors who experience vocal problems also report being forced to alter their teaching methods; the music curriculum and student behavior can be negatively affected when teachers suffer from voice problems.

Much research has been undertaken on the prevalence of vocal problems among teachers. In addition, music teachers have been found to be suffering from a higher incidence of vocal problems than the general population. One would think music teachers should receive additional training and coursework in vocal health and vocal preservation…right? Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs vary greatly, and many teachers only begin to suffer from vocal fatigue and other vocal ailments once they are working in the classroom. Ongoing training and voice therapy are rarely available.

If you are concerned about your voice (and you should be!), there are a number of voice professionals who specialize in working with music teachers. If you believe your singing habits are the culprit, you would benefit tremendously from taking lessons with a well-respected voice teacher. It may be that with improved singing technique, your voice will improve and no further evaluation will be needed.

Teachers who have significant vocal distress should be evaluated by an ear, nose and throat (ENT) physician, also called an otolaryngologist. Your ENT can diagnose vocal problems and will recommend therapy if needed. Speech and language pathologists can provide speech therapy and an initial evaluation of your voice. Regardless of whom you see, if you are struggling, don’t wait. Do not neglect yourself! Your voice is to be treasured and appreciated. Why? It is your means of communicating and teaching. So what should an active teacher do to preserve his or her voice and keep kids singing?

**Warm-up your voice**

Go through a series of vocalises before you start teaching each day. The more you warm-up your voice, the better prepared you will be for a full day of teaching. When we warm-up with our students in a class or a rehearsal, we are focused on them. Warming up on your own will allow you to center yourself and put the focus on you and your vocal freedom.

Hum in the car on the way to work; speak in a conversational tone before using your teaching voice; go through vocal exercises—think back to your voice lessons in college—on a regular basis.
Use lip buzzes regularly to find a balance between tone and airflow. Exercises should be done throughout the range, starting in a comfortable area in your voice, to help strengthen and maintain your flexibility. A flexible voice is also a healthy voice, allowing you to use it in whatever capacity is desired. A well-planned and thorough warm-up period will keep your voice in good shape for the intensive vocal workout you engage in each day.

Stay hydrated throughout the day

Systemic hydration is very important for music teachers and other professional voice users. When we are properly hydrated, we ensure that we have an appropriate mucosal lining on and around our vocal folds. This aids in healthy vocal production.

Having enough to drink is easier said than done when teaching schedules often include several classes in a row without a break. If this is the case, “tank up” with water before school and right before your lunch break. Schedule drinking water into your day. Keep a water bottle in your classroom; sip early and often! Also, avoid caffeinated and alcoholic beverages. They have a drying effect on your voice.

Plan activities which involve less talking

Try guided listening lessons with a recording you have wanted to share; enlist a student to read or sing the directions for an activity.

Vocal music teachers have had training in how to sing correctly, but training in how to speak freely and at one’s optimal pitch is often not included in teacher training programs. It may be that you sing more naturally and without strain than you speak. Your singing voice might be a healthier avenue to communicate information, musical and otherwise, to students than your speaking voice. Remember to avoid yelling!

Be aggressive when teaching schedules are decided

Music classes can be a last-minute consideration when teaching schedules are developed by a principal even though music teachers often work with the greatest number of students in a school. Speak with your administrator and express your concerns about your vocal health and the need for a manageable schedule. Having even a small break between classes gives you and your voice a chance to rest and regroup. You may even have time to go to the bathroom and get a drink—what luxuries!

Seek professional help

Find a highly regarded, skilled voice teacher. Consult a speech therapist or an ENT. The condition of our voices, not unlike the health of our bodies, changes over time. Different circumstances, personal and professional, may be impacting the way you use your voice or the type of teaching you are engaged in. If you suspect you are abusing your voice or suffering in any way from work-related vocal problems, seek professional help from a voice care professional. Become well informed about voice production and vocal health. See the resource list below.

Internet Resources Related to Vocal Health

- National Center for Voice and Speech  
  <http://www.ncvs.org/>
- National Voice Center Referral Database  
  <http://www.gbmc.org/voice/national.cfm>
- The VoiceCare Network  
  <http://www.voicecarenetwork.org/>
- The Voice Foundation  
  <http://www.voicefoundation.org/>
- The National Association of Teachers of Singing  
  <http://www.nats.org/>
- The New York Eye and Ear Infirmary  
  <http://www.nyee.edu/cfv-larynx-disorders.html>
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
  <http://www.asha.org/default.htm>

The Bottom line

Your voice is your instrument and your number one teaching tool. If you are experiencing vocal fatigue or other voice problems, your students’ learning and behavior may be impacted. If your vocal capacity becomes limited, so might the opportunities your students have to express themselves musically.

General nutrition and wellness are important for teachers in relation to vocal health. The more you do to better care for your voice, the better you will feel in many areas of your life.
Teachers who implement healthy vocal hygiene and conservation practices run the risk of being able to teach and sing for a lifetime!

There are periods in history when change is necessary and other periods when it is better to keep everything for the time as it is. The art of life is to be in the rhythm of your age.

—Oswald Mosley (1896–1980), British politician and philosopher

Rhythmic Integrity in the Choral Rehearsal: A Bag of Tricks and More

by

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Robert Shaw, the legendary conductor, was tenacious in his pursuit of precise rhythm in every ensemble he conducted. From attacks and releases to the placement of diphthongs and consonants, Shaw instilled a sense of rhythmic integrity with all of the musicians under his direction. I believe one of the keys to his great success was his belief that choirs shouldn’t merely feel the rhythm; they needed to think carefully about what defined the various rhythmic components of any work. The use of count-singing became an important tool for developing group musicianship in any Robert Shaw chorus.

Count-singing is the practice of rehearsing a choral work on counts rather than singing the text. Singers use a number on every beat containing a pitch, thus engaging the singer for the entire length of long notes. When subdividing rhythms for eighth note patterns in duple time, singers should sing 1 & 2 & etc. Shaw replaced the number “three” with the syllable “tee” to make the tongue move faster and not slow the rhythm on that beat. For greater rhythmic definition, singers should count sixteenth notes as 1 ee & ah, 2 ee & ah, 3 ee & ah, etc. To perform a cut-off more accurately, singers should place the appropriate consonant on the rest following the last pitch, for example, 1 & 2 & 3 & “t”, if the rest is on 4 and the concluding consonant is “t.” Variations on this method should also be utilized for all compound meters.

Understanding and having a method for solving counting problems is vital to the musical health of an ensemble.

Rushing or Dragging Tempi

• Accent “ee”
• Metronome
• Get physical
• Telegraph
• Recording
• Slow down
• Fewer beats
• Count 8

Accent “ee.” Start with count-singing. By accenting the second sixteenth note in a beat group, stress is taken away from the down beat in any beat group. Singers are forced to think about the forward motion of the music.

Metronome. If singers are having difficulty internalizing a steady beat, impose an external beat. An amplified metronome can make them aware of when the tempo starts to pull ahead or fall behind.

Get physical. An ensemble often rushes a tempo because singers have not internalized the steady beat. Marching in place can be a way to use large body movement to internalize beats. A variation is to stand in a circle and face the center. Instead of marching in place (left-right left-right), step sideways (left foot to the left, then right foot moves to touch left foot, repeat same motion) so that the circle rotates in a clockwise motion to the beat.

Telegraph. Have singers place their right hand on the shoulder of the person beside them. Gently use the forefinger of the right