

## ***Voice Awareness for Women in Midlife: for Singers and Their Teachers***

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I've been a singing teacher for pretty much my entire adult life, mostly of young adults - high school and college undergraduates. I teach mainly classical and a bit of musical theater. However, in the last two years of my academic teaching career, circumstances led me back to an interest from my 40s and 50s. Though I won't repeat how it all came about, the result was a book written with two other voice teachers, Nancy Bos and Cate Frazier-Neely: *Singing Through Change: Women's Voices in Midlife, Menopause, and Beyond*. It was released in mid-April of 2020. We hope that it shines a light on a neglected phase of life and related singing pedagogy and understanding of the voice.

### *Voice and the Menopausal Transition*

In a nutshell, after 55 interviews with female singers between the ages of 40 and 88, reams of research on female voice, hormones, and conversations with voice experts, we came to the conclusion that midlife is when female singers should be on heightened "voice alert", so to speak. Now, is this advice only for women? Of course not. All singers should be vocally aware throughout life. But female bodies traverse a fundamental change, the *menopausal transition*, and most of the time it happens over a period of years between the early 40s and late 50s. Smack in the middle of the years of midlife, that is, 40 - 60. The average age of the onset of actual menopause (when 12 months have passed with no menstrual period) is 51, but the 2-10 years leading up to menopause, called *perimenopause*, is part of the process as well. And some women face earlier menopause due to removal of the ovaries, use of certain chemotherapy drugs for cancer, or other medical conditions, such as thyroid disease.

So, what does menopause have to do with singing? The so-called reproductive hormones, estrogen, progesterone and testosterone (yes, females have a little bit of testosterone) actually have receptors all over the body, including the vocal folds and other systems that support singing. When these hormones begin to fluctuate in perimenopause as the reproductive system winds down, their ratios to each other change - sometimes irregularly. Some women notice related changes in their voices during the years of perimenopause. Others become aware of more issues after the final menstrual period, when estrogen levels take a nose-dive. Common reports include loss of or difficulty with high range, deepening lower range, awkwardness in the passaggios (bridges), and a feeling of sluggishness. Please note that not all women complain of voice changes; this is one of the big mysteries! And some women are able to go with the flow, gradually adapt, enjoying a warmer and fuller quality that often accompanies the middle years. Some of these timbral changes are due to physical changes in the vocal tract as we grow a little older during midlife.

Here's where the vocal awareness comes in. Unfamiliar voice changes can be troublesome by themselves, but even subtle voice symptoms may be complicated by compensations on the part of the singer. These include tongue and jaw tension, extra postural efforts such as neck tension, and excess vocal efforts like pulling chest, pushing too much airflow, and over-opening the jaw. These compensations are not consciously made so singers should not feel guilty about going down this road. Compensations are as "natural" a response as favoring the good leg over an injured one. That said, it's important to identify compensations and address them so that singing isn't further hindered by these habits. A return to the basics is a good idea and will help a voice that "doesn't know if it's coming or going" remain as centered as possible during a time of instability. A creative and flexible teacher will help the singer healthily adapt and find repertoire that is suitable for the present time. Keep in mind that it's best to follow the voice to where it is now versus super-imposing the voice as it was 10 years ago.

For those who do encounter concerning voice changes, the good news is that it is likely, once menopause is established, and the body and voice grow accustomed to a new, more level hormonal landscape, the voice will likely stabilize. Then the priority is to keep singing healthily to maintain vocal longevity.

### *Midlife is Complex*

Even though many women breeze right through the menopausal transition with few or no voice complaints, in our book-writing project we learned that midlife can present other challenges that may affect how the voice fares. First, it's a busy and potentially stress-filled time: women may be dealing with work, teenage children, and elderly parents who need help, and so on. Demands on time can make practicing and voice maintenance more difficult to prioritize. Help your student find ways to vocalize in the "corners" of the day. For instance, a great time to do vocal warm-ups is in the shower and while blow-drying your hair. You may need to remind your students that daily stress can find its way to the larynx. Encourage them to be aware of throat tension or the feeling of a lump in the throat. Simple deep breathing, centering thoughts, and perhaps a bit of gentle massage around the larynx may be the best way to begin the lesson or practice session.

In our population of interviews, a few women reported vocal injuries. Midlife singers may need a voice health review, reminding them that "pushing through" at a choir rehearsal or gig when the voice is in sub-optimal condition due to illness, fatigue or hormonal changes isn't the best choice. High demands on the voice in these circumstances may be the final component of a vocal "perfect storm" and may lead to a voice injury. Sometimes, it's best to just say no, find a sub, and take some time off for recuperation of voice and body.

### *Other Midlife Issues*

And finally, midlife is a time when women may encounter lifestyle and health changes that can produce effects on voice. People who have been vocally active but who change their work to something quiet, like data entry, or who now live alone will need to generate voice use on a daily basis. The vocal mechanism thrives on regular and reasonable use. Reading out loud, making phone calls versus only texting, talking to a pet or to the TV can help keep the voice stronger.

Good medical care is important during the midlife phase. Thyroid issues affect women more often than men, and some of the symptoms of thyroid imbalance, including voice changes, actually resemble menopausal symptoms. Medications should be checked for potential voice effects, including blood pressure medicines, inhaled drugs for asthma, to name just a couple. Reflux (GERD or LPRD) may be more common in midlife. Of course, if voice problems don't respond to sensitive teaching or relative voice rest over 2-3 weeks, a visit to a laryngologist or an ENT with experience in treating voice is the next step. Singing teachers can serve as springboards for important discussions about voice health and are in a position to refer to excellent voice caregivers when appropriate.

### *Teachers as Allies*

I was lucky enough to have an effective and supportive voice teacher during a time of midlife voice changes. My co-authors and I suggest that taking voice lessons starting when a woman is in her late 30s or early 40s is a great way to keep tabs on the voice and to reap the many benefits of singing during what can be a complex but transformative time of life. And, one silver lining from our present COVID status is that online training is easier to access than ever before, so women who are busy with midlife affairs should be able to more conveniently reach out for lessons. Our goal: to keep women singing well and healthily through midlife and beyond!