

A study into the importance of vocal health awareness for intensive rehearsal periods Professional Practice for Performance (ADPA6008) 2004913

Introduction

I found this six-week project working on WAVD'AIR to be quite challenging for my voice, I was quite disappointed with the lack of vocal stamina that I was showcasing, considering that I had few problems in the past during this degree with vocal health. I came to the realisation that the main reason for my lack of vocal stamina was because I was not used to such an intensive rehearsal period; doing full time rehearsals, with practice sessions in-between, as well as my extra-curricular activity of participating in the Birmingham Opera Company chorus. So, to figure out how to rebuild this stamina I had to take a critical look at all aspects of my general health and singing habits, this is all outlined below.

General Health

In order to really understand what was going on with my voice and why I was struggling with sustaining it during rehearsals, I had to critically analyse my general health; was there something I was or wasn't doing that was adding to these issues aside from vocal efforts? I decided that the answer was yes, I had some changes that I needed to make. For one I've never been one to drink much water which is awful for the voice as the vocal folds need to be hydrated to prevent thick mucus. "If [mucus] becomes too thick.... it irritates the pharynx and the vocal folds" [Whitehead 2013] decreasing the efficiency of your voice and increasing the chances of vocal strain. I limited the amount of caffeinated and carbonated drinks that I was consuming as they dehydrated the voice. To further aid my dehydrated vocal folds issue; I increased the number of times I would use a humidifier and steamer to daily, rather than a couple times a week, as water alone takes around 4 hours to hydrate your vocal folds meanwhile steam is practically instantaneous.

Sleep was another factor that I needed to crack down on as a night owl I would regularly go to sleep in the early hours of the morning 1 or 2am which meant that I wasn't getting enough sleep before rehearsals "The National sleep foundation says most adults should aim for seven to nine hours of sleep, or an average of eight hours" [Peters 2022] which I was often not getting based on the time I was choosing to go to bed. Another general health factor was the consideration of my hay fever on my voice. "Allergies can inflame and irritate the vocal cords, affecting their ability to produce sound." [Raleigh Capitol 2023] Due to this I started taking stronger medication for hay fever however I had to be careful as Dr. L. Arick Forrest, M.D., has noted that "most of the medications used for colds or allergies are drying and may thicken your secretions" Thankfully I found medication where this was not the case. [Whitehead 2013]. This issue was especially important as there was one rehearsal in particular right at the start of the rehearsal period where I hadn't

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remembered to take the necessary medication that morning and as a result my throat was very scratchy, and I was frequently sneezing causing my vocal cords to violently smash against each other this led to my voice being very sensitive for that rehearsal. At one point I had to stop singing all together to have good health for the following day of rehearsals.

The use of SOVT's

Previously I have drastically underestimated the importance of SOVT's in the maintenance of vocal health and stamina. "SOVT is an acronym that stands for Semi Occluded Vocal Tract, [Chelsea and Cynthia 2024] which basically means the mouth is partially open, allowing for positive back pressure and lower phonation threshold pressure; as usually the lip or a straw is creating a slight obstacle meaning the air is being recirculated in your mouth making it easier for the folds to vibrate and produce sound with less effort, minimising vocal fatigue and strain whilst also giving a nice message to your pharynx. When performed properly SOVT's have "several beneficial outcomes: glottal airflow is reduced, vocal fold collision forces are reduced, maximum-flow declination rate increases, and the vocal folds are more abducted compared to a non-SOVT position". (Titze, 2006). As well as just overall healthier singing.

In the past I would start my warmups with two simple SOVT's before going into full out voice warm ups, I would usually start with humming, and a lip trill, humming was beneficial as it was a gentle way to awaken my voice and test out how I was feeling that day, it would alert me of my voices health if I was feeling ill. Lip trills regulate airflow allowing for healthier singing "the lip trill is extremely effective at improving breath support and increasing vocal resonance. Practicing lip trill exercises can also help to release tension in the jaw, neck and shoulders." [Hall 2023] This routine, however, was usually rushed and quickly became apparent that it was no longer a sufficient regiment for an intensive rehearsal period such as WAVD'AIR. So, I started incorporating more SOVT's into my warmup regiment. This included straw phonation, ng exercises (such as with the word sing) and fricative breath exercises (such as 'sh') These are all exercises that had previously been in my arsenal however, neglected up until now as I found they were suitable for two hour practices each day but not for the seven hours of rehearsals that WAVD'AIR required.

I found ng and fricative exercises to be particularly useful as "These exercises help to reduce tension and strain in the vocal folds, allowing for a smoother sound with fewer vocal cracks. Additionally, they can improve the flexibility of the voice, making it easier to transition between different notes and to riff". [Hall 2023] I found myself using these exercises not just for warmups

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but also when I was struggling with coloratura passages such as in 'Prendero Quel Brunettino' and 'Caro Bella' When I was attempting to sing them on the written continuous ah vowel I was struggling for vocal precision of notes. When I did them with fricative exercises and different SOVT's I found it a lot easier as I had improved vocal flexibility this way. Once it was learnt I was able to sing it accurately as written without any modifications and without disturbing my duet partner in anyway.

Independent practice

Another issue that I was finding during this process was that I was so eager to get the music correct, that I was doing long independent practices of my music outside of rehearsal time, rather than doing short, targeted sessions. My singing teacher Camilla always tells me that it is important to practice regularly but over practicing in incorrect ways can have the same effect as not practicing at all and unnecessarily tiring out your voice. So, I had to take this feedback on board instead of doing my usual 2 hour straight practice I broke it up into three or four thirty minuet practices to sustain my voice. I also had to focus on how I was producing sound in these sessions, when I did not have a teacher present to correct me. My vocal placement was one area of concern during tackling new unfamiliar territory of mixed vocal singing that came about with 'How Far I'll Go' and 'Wash that man right outta my hair' I had to insure I was not making dangerous technical sacrifices "Vocal placement, or focusing the resonance of your voice is key to producing a powerful and sustainable sound, this technique enhances the brightness and clarity of the voice without physical strain" [Joubert 2024] I had to ensure that I was picturing placement of the voice in the correct area instead of throat singing which I regularly found myself accidentally slipping into. The way that I was coming into certain phrases, may have also attributed to my vocal strain "It's important to produce a clean, clear tone. This means your vocal folds must come together properly, without any gaps that cause breathiness, and vibrate efficiently, Focus on smooth, even phonation and avoid any harsh or forced attack, which can lead to vocal fatigue or damage" [Joubert 2024] too often during this project I was doing harsh forced attack entries on songs that I did not feel as confident on.

Posture

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“A correct singing posture is crucial for effective breath control and vocal projection. Stand straight with your feet shoulder-width apart to maintain balance and stability. Keep your shoulders relaxed but not slouched and align your head over your spine.” [Joubert 2024] My posture was always an area for great concern, my head was regularly out of alignment with my spine. This attributed to my vocal strain. My singing teacher and director recognised this so where they could they got my character to intentionally have a posture that is suitable for singing. I have always slipped into raising my jaw and neck when I feel uneasy with a passage of music, which always has the result of distorting the sound despite my subconscious intention of making the passage easier to sing. In ‘Cenerentola for my’ “si, si, si” entry I would always raise my head effecting the sound, so I was directed to take a selfie at this point but directly in front of me slightly down to ensure my jaw and neck remained stable. Similarly, in ‘How Far I’ll Go’ on “What’s wrong with me” I was instructed to direct the intention down to the floor rather than looking up to the heavens and questioning.

Conclusion

In Conclusion this project was extremely rewarding and entertaining I learnt so much about stage craft and how to portray a character well. Most importantly this project taught me a lot about my capabilities, what my advantages are and where I fall short. It taught me when to push myself and when to take a vocal rest day. My vocal health knowledge has greatly improved, and I know now how best to look after my voice in the next intensive rehearsal project that I may do.

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