

Voices and devices - A studio note

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In my studio, seven devices, some large and some small, keep me company when I work with voices. This miscellany of objects is equally useful for students working with their singing or speaking voice.

Teachers, coaches, therapists – we're all magpies at heart, borrowing ideas, techniques and approaches from each other, as we work towards effective, effortless, emotionally and physically connected phonation. Conferences, professional development seminars and informal associations with voice professionals are all great swap-meet opportunities for us to cross-pollinate what we know and practice. It was at places like these that I picked up the ideas for some of these devices. Others came through reading the professional literature. Still others I invented when I just didn't know what else I could do to assist a flailing student.

Here, then, are my seven little helpers:

1. A step platform



A nice stout one (because some of my students are, also). The sort of simple step used for Step Aerobics.

INSTRUCTIONS: (a) Stand behind the step. Sing until you get to that high note you dread. At the same time as you go for that note, step energetically up onto the step. Step back onto the floor afterwards.

(b) Keep stepping up and down, on and off the step whilst singing your song or speaking your monologue. There's no need to do it in time to the music.

WHY: (a) Engagement of torso support musculature simultaneously with the singing of the dreaded high note often does the trick and produces an effortless surprise.

(b) Simple, repetitive physical activity guarantees a higher level of phonatory energy in a lacklustre song or monologue. It's common to see students underestimate the amount of sub-glottal pressure needed for a given voice task.

2. A kazoo



An ancient, time-honoured noisemaker (it may be stretching things to call it an 'instrument'), the kazoo is said to belong to that group of historic instruments called 'mirlitons' which have vibrating membranes. Often employed by guitarists in the rock and pop idioms, especially if they fear they can't sing, and want to vocalize along to 'Sitting on the dock of the bay', and similar gems.

INSTRUCTIONS: Sing 'ooh' (/u/) into the wider end of the kazoo. (Note: Blowing doesn't work. A kazoo relies on its player's phonation for pitch.)

WHY?: Sounds made by a kazoo, however silly they seem, demand a high and consistent level of subglottal breath pressure. If a student singer is underestimating the amount of breath pressure needed for a song, the kazoo becomes a fine assistant. Get a singer with a limp, under-energised tone to start a song phrase with kazoo and – half-way through and without stopping – ask them to remove the kazoo and continue singing in English. If she's singing the first phrase of the chorus of Gershwin's 'Someone to watch over me', what you'll hear is something like 'Bzz bzz bzz bzz bzz I'M LONGING TO SEE'. Amazement all round.

Another big advantage in using the kazoo is that everyone, from diva to drongo, sounds equally tacky. Students are unable to be self-critical about their tone. [Reference: Snodgrass]



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3. A plastic bottle of water and a straw

Specifics are needed here. A small (600ml) water bottle is preferable. An ordinary drinking straw is best. Half-fill the bottle with water.

INSTRUCTIONS: Sing 'ooh' (/u/) down the straw, forcefully enough to blow **lots** of bubbles through the water. (Now you know why it's sensible to only half-fill the bottle.) You can sing technical exercises or songs into the straw – but all of it will be on the 'ooh' (/u/) vowel.

WHY?: Three good things happen simultaneously when the bottle-and-straw is employed - *Because of the instruction to sing 'ooh' forcefully and create lots of bubbles in the water, there is a deconstriction effect in the pharynx. *Just as with the kazoo, this little exercise automatically optimizes subglottal pressure. * Bottle-and-straw phonation automatically recruits the complex network of musculature which effects support of sung sound.

[References: Finnegan et al., Titze (2002; 2006; 2010), Wilson. (2004)]



4. A big Swiss ball

Use the size of ball that is most comfortable for sitting on (around 75cm seems to be a good standard size).

INSTRUCTIONS: (a) Sit on the ball and bounce very gently up and down whilst speaking or singing.

(b) Lie face-down on the ball, centreing the ball over your abdominal area. Put your hands on the floor (elbows straightened) to steady yourself. Legs straight out behind you. Now speak or sing.

(c) Lie on your back, with your head and spine level on the floor,

and keep the ball moving using only your hands and your knees, whilst speaking or singing.

WHY?: (a) Little bounces promote automatic alignment of head and spine without deploying extrinsic muscular tension, whilst effecting efficient recruitment of the network of muscular structures which support phonation.

(b) Vocal sound will focus into the 'mask' area. Proprioceptive awareness of the role of support musculature is enhanced by direct abdominal contact with the ball.

(c) There's a germ of Catherine Fitzmaurice's 'dying cockroach' exercise here, as described by Joan Melton (Melton & Tom, 2003). The head and spine maintain easy, healthy alignment during the small but continuous movements through the shoulder and hip joints. This joint activity frees associated muscle structures which sometimes hold tension and thereby inhibit free speaking or singing.



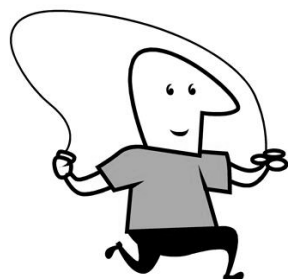
5. A Thera-Band

Thera-Bands are straps of stretchy rubber of various lengths, usually around 15cm wide, and colour-coded to show the degree of their resistance. Often used in Pilates work (rehabilitative or biomechanical maintenance) as well as some gym fitness programmes.

INSTRUCTIONS: Tie the ends of the Thera-Band together, so that it forms a loop.

With arms at your side, bend your elbows to a right angle (90°) so your hands are in front of your body, with palms facing each other. The loop of the Thera-Band should not be as wide as the distance between your hands. Place the looped Thera-Band over your hands and stretch it out. Now sing... and on the high note you were dreading, stretch the Thera-Band to the fullest width you possibly can. Try to keep the Thera-Band at waist level.

WHY?: Do it, and you'll soon know why. The effort required to extend the band as fully as possible automatically recruits a cohort of upper-torso muscles that singers can tend to forget about.

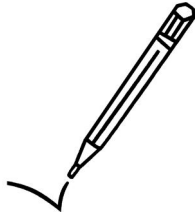


6. A skipping rope

At its simplest, a goodly length of sash cord or similar. Fancy handles optional.

INSTRUCTIONS: Skip whilst singing or speaking.

WHY?: You could probably guess what this achieves for your phonatory output if you've been reading the above explanations. Interestingly, male students will frequently take to this activity with surprising ferocity. (Skipping is a favourite cardio fitness activity for boxing or gym training.) For those faint-hearted souls who complain that their voice gets wobbly when they skip, I remind them that music theatre performers have to do the equivalent of this (and more) in performance, whilst engaging me in an utterly convincing story.



7. A Pencil

Actors who have worked with me will wearily parrot one of my pet sayings, 'I don't trust an actor without a pencil.' But an ordinary pencil (not a propelling pencil, not a pen) has another use beyond writing.

INSTRUCTIONS: Gently hold the pencil transversely between your teeth. (This should cause no bite marks to appear on the pencil.) Now sing, preferably a technical exercise or song on a vowel sound only (consonants may sound funny).

WHY?: This tends to instantly release pharyngeal constriction, enabling a clearer, more open tone.

In sharing my list of devices with you, I'm well aware that many accomplished singing teachers and voice coaches will already be using these items, or similar, in their practice. In no way am I claiming unique insights here. It is, nevertheless, useful for all of us who tend the health and efficiency of the human voice to share our practices and practical discoveries.

FOOTNOTE: A couple of recent references to people who train singers with direct reference to the physical tasks associated with singing:

- a. At the most recent NATS Conference (51st; Salt Lake City, Utah, July 2010), Veera Khare Asher had a poster session entitled 'Pilates2Voice™: Integrating Pilates Training into the Voice Studio'. This seems to have been based on the research work she did for her recent DMA at the University of Nevada.
- b. I spotted early references to the work of Angela Caine, and made brief mention of them in an earlier *AVA VoicePrint* (Wilson, 2007). This performer and singing teacher, now relocated to Diss Norfolk (UK), has an excellent website (<http://www.voicegym.co.uk>) with much information about her research, practices and programmes. (Caine, 1998).

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