

Tutoring the Voice & Basic Voice Culture Techniques

Human voice is like a pearl that can be cultured to give out its best.

The vocal chords are sensitive tissue, which vibrate to produce sound. Different pitches/scales are controlled by the higher or lower vibration of these vocal chords. Higher pitches will need higher rate of vibrations.

The technique of bringing the voice under our command is termed as "voice culture". This comes with breath control techniques, healthy body, and more importantly a sound and focused mind.

Voice culture is essentially about

- How one controls the passage of air through the vocal chords making it vibrate?
- How to effectively use the vocal chords to produce different tones?
 - It is generally believed that there are four types of tones, one that originates from the abdomen area, from chest area, chin area and head area.
 - Selection of one's pitch (range) which is most comfortable

Culturing the voice depends on the inherent texture of the voice and the genre of singing as in classical (Indian, Western), folk, light etc. The singing voice and the voice with which we speak are not the same. While speaking is an action that doesn't need any conscious effort, singing does demand. (Speaking here does not refer to speaking as in stage orations and public speaking)

Every voice is unique and beautiful. The voice needs to be understood by its owner to nourish and culture it in a way that it gets strengthened. Each voice has its traits and limitations. Voice culture must aim at reducing the shortcomings and enhancing the impressive traits of the voice.

This may not be able to be achieved in one go, and voice culture is all about a life long experimentation with the voice, and deciding what suits the person and his genre of singing best. It is a self oriented process, where the owner of the voice is the only judge. Every singer is born with a certain range and one should have a good understanding of that. The range can only be extended slightly and the attempt should be to strive to work out possibilities within that range

Children who are initiated into music must be made to understand the techniques of voice culture right at the beginning. This will greatly help and prevent creating any damage to the voice. Most children try to sing very loud. Times have changed now. Most public singing takes place through microphones and there is no need to shout. It was different in ancient times, when there used to be night long concerts and the musicians were required to sing loud to be audible.

Some basic and general voice culture techniques

1. Regular practice is "the" way to culture the voice.
2. Practicing in the right sitting posture. One should not hunch, and the shoulders should also not be kept high or let loose. The body frame should look like a bird's wings.

3. Producing the umbilical voice - remember the lines of Saint Thyagarja - 'Naabhi Hrid Kanta Rasana'. This gives immense strength to the voice. One can be sure this is achieved when the **strain of singing is felt in the stomach** and not in the voice.

4. Any article on voice culture is incomplete without breath control; after all it is the breath that makes the voice. Increased breathing capacity will enable the singer to sustain a note for a longer period and also to express variety of phrases, tonal colors and feelings on the voice. Incorrect breathing can cause disorders in voice production.

5. One must never do something that causes strain and pain. Vocal cords are very sensitive. If discomfort is felt during singing, something is wrong. It is better to improve or change the technique rather than to continue along the same line.

6. When the voice is strained or infected, complete rest and proper medication is advised. Proper medication means, intake of medicines prescribed by a doctor or a speech pathologist. Some tips - do not drink very hot or very cold water. Do not gargle with salt water when not required as salt will irritate the throat.

7. Vocal diet is part of vocal hygiene. Diet plays an important role in maintaining the voice health. Frequent sips of water, natural doses of vitamins through vegetables and fruits are good vocal diets. One must be careful to avoid those vegetables and fruits you are allergic to. Protein supplements are suggested to manage wear and tear. So milk and pulses is mandatory. Recreational and 'across-the-counter' drugs must be generally avoided. Drinking warm water, hot tea, clove in honey, ginger and pepper milk do wonders and soften the voice and avoid infection. Few drops of honey every morning is also said to help maintain sweetness of voice.

8. Nasal touch is required for a proper alignment with Shruthi, but nasal twang should not inhabit the voice completely. Open mouth singing helps reduce the nasal twang.

9. Singing lower notes with the mouth closed helps to open the voice in lower reaches. You could close your ears with the fingers while singing and listen to the feeble sound emanating from within.

10. It is difficult to focus after a tiring day, especially for working people. It is better to have music classes/practice sessions leisurely when the mind and body are under focus. In case it's unavoidable, take in a few deep breaths before you start singing/ practicing on a long day. Do not sit on empty stomach; do not load yourself as well. Having something an hour before singing is ideal.

Last but not the least, it is very important to remember that the voice is only one part of a musician....his/her music is the main part. Exceptional vidwat can compensate for any shortcomings of the voice.