



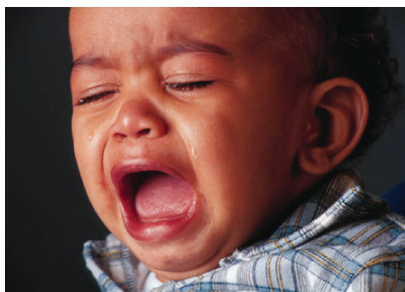
Viagra for Voice

Older Voice, Younger Sound

Judy Bellingham

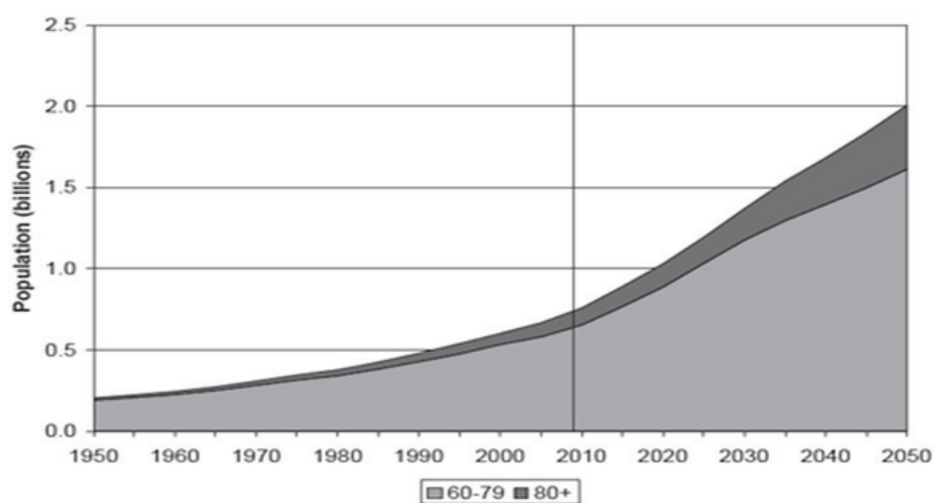
One of New Zealand's leading music educators and a widely respected singing teacher, Judy Bellingham was a very popular presenter at last year's Annual Convention. In the first of two articles for *Mastersinger* she has, by popular request, put on paper some of the contents of one of her convention sessions.

Residents in an old peoples' home or retirement village love being entertained. Of all the art forms, the most popular entertainment focuses on the voice. Elderly people enjoy hearing the sung voice, be it a child's voice or that of a mature choir, the focus is most definitely on the voice. If the song sung is one that resonates with a childhood memory, then the experience is all the more touching for the elderly listener. The voice is the one instrument with which we are born (babies are reported to have the ability cry and scream over a 5 octave range) and with which we die.



Cuno Dante, a blogger said, 'Learning to sing is a journey of self-exploration. You have to find what works in your own body, not someone else's'. As the body ages, this becomes more and more apparent, as the aging process varies from individual to individual. Thus professionals dealing with older individuals or more mature choirs need to be constantly aware that there is no longer a standard technical level which can be expected from all singers. Instead, singers need to be encouraged to ensure individual vocal maintenance, rather than group vocal assuredness.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, 'To sing or not to sing; that is the question'. Choral music of the 21st century



requires different and often more advanced choral skills than music composed in earlier times. Which of these major works is easier to sing: Brahms *A German Requiem*, Stravinsky *Requiem Canticles*, Mendelssohn *Elijah*, or Bach *Mass in B Minor*? The answer is unimportant, but what is important is that the music chosen is suitable for the type of choir that you are training.

Styles of singing change and the reasons for people wanting to sing change; more and more people of all ages are learning to sing, and this needs to be reflected in the type of choral music chosen for any one concert. Add into this mix the lowering of vocal standards within the education system, and the impact on older singers is strong and ongoing. We all know anecdotally that the population is living longer. But the facts speak for themselves. Among the countries classified by the United Nations as more developed (with a total population of 1.2 billion in 2005) the overall median age rose from 29.0 in 1950 to 37.3 in 2000, and is

forecast to rise to 45.5 by 2050.

The young girl in the left of the picture on the next page displays openness around her cheeks. They are lifted and quite plump. The bridge of her nose is high and the eyebrows are well spaced and lifted. Her eyes portray a wonderful innocence and alertness. Her mouth is small and her lips thin. Her chin is high, quite pronounced and the laryngeal area well recessed.

By the time she is older in the middle picture, there are some significant facial changes that will affect her voice. Her cheeks retain their youthful shape, which allows for continued good lift of the soft palate. The bridge of her nose has firmed and widened slightly which allows for increased access into the imposto, which gives greater vocal colour. The nose is wider and bigger allowing for good breathing through the nose. The eyes display experience of life. The lips are firmer and fuller, which will assist with diction. The chin still has an impressive and well-defined shape allowing



In the final picture, on the right, our young girl has aged dramatically. Noticeable are the wrinkles, but luckily these do not affect the singing voice! The cheeks have sunk a bit, which will compromise resonance. The bridge of the nose is pulling down towards the cheeks and this will have the effect of dampening the sound. The eyebrows appear to be wider and they also exert a downward pressure. The eyes hold a life – sadness, but her lips are still firm and round. The chin is no longer prominent and there is a considerable thickening in the laryngeal area. These facial characteristics would lead to a darker sound overall.

So, how does vocal age reveal itself? Firstly in pitch alteration – a woman's voice drops as she ages, but a man's voice goes up. Have you ever wondered why a male voice choir of mature singers does not lack for tenors? There is reduced volume and projection, and reduced vocal stamina, so Conductors need to seek a suitably sized venue that does not overpower the choir. Often older singers find noisy situations difficult and uncomfortable, so the venue needs to be well equipped backstage with quiet areas and seating. Often a vocal tremor or shakiness begins in the singing voice that is not present in the speaking voice. As we get older, parts of our body start to droop as our muscles lose their elasticity. Similarly, the tonicity of the laryngeal muscles begins to be affected, which in turn affects the voice. This change will eventually be irreversible, but the rapidity of the change can be slowed down by good and constant usage. Breathing can often be compromised by

medical conditions such as asthma, hay fever, or emphysema all of which cause the voice to be hoarse, raspy or breathy. Again these qualities will be lessened with good and frequent vocal usage. As breathing becomes more difficult and the lungs take in less breath, possibly as a result of stooped posture, a dry mouth often occurs when singing. Frequent drinking of water will alleviate this.

The choral conductor needs to be aware of all these situations and devise rehearsal strategies that allow each singer to sing to his or her potential.

The conductor needs to be ALERT to the changes that may be taking place in each individual voice in the choir.

ALERT can stand for

- A = Age
- L = Lifestyle
- E = Emotion
- R = Reflux
- T = Technique

Age

There is no one strategy for dealing with the ageing process. We must remember that chronological age and biological age are two different concepts. They change from person to person; they change in how they reveal themselves, and also in their severity. Muscular tonicity decreases with advancing age, and hearing loss may develop and almost imperceptibly increase. Another factor of age is the possible loss of teeth. There are two factors associated with tooth loss: one is the change of the facial shape, especially the jaw shape, and the other is the loss of resonant-inducing metal in any fillings that

were present in the teeth. Physical tremors and shakiness can lead to a loss of physical co-ordination that can then make the simple act of holding music stressful. Cartilages within the laryngeal musculature tend to ossify with age, thus rendering the voice less malleable. Salivary function decreases with age, which means that vocal dryness becomes a real problem. Conversely, mucous production may increase and thicken, leading to constant and annoying throat clearing. And so hydration becomes an important aspect of the older singer's life. Vocal pedagogues recommend 6 – 8 glasses of water a day. In an older person this can play havoc with their kidney function! So each individual singer within the choir needs to find their own suitable level of hydration. Another group of muscles which loses strength with age is those found in the tongue. This lack of precise tongue movement may lead to a less clear delineation of diction. Overall, brain responses are slowing down and changing, leaving singers often confused about the vocal changes they are experiencing. The best advice is 'Use it or lose it'. The choral director should develop exercises from the current repertoire to deal with these varying developing weaknesses. The 'new voice' should be discussed with pride and positivity.

Lifestyle

The 'L' of ALERT refers to the changes in the lifestyle lived by an older person. There is a level of stress about the future – it may be financial stress, emotional stress, work-related stress or familial stress. It is important to listen to the body and to listen to the voice when it complains at you. Gym bunnies know when their bodies tell them they do not want to go to the gym. As singers, we must tune into our voices and listen to what they may be telling us. Nutrition takes on a new importance. We use so much energy when we sing efficiently, so we must ensure that we eat sufficient protein to give us the requisite energy. A banana eaten at the half-time break in a rehearsal is an excellent source of energy. This area of ensuring ones' lifestyle supports all that you wish to enjoy in your life is an area where you alone are responsible for your well-being.

Emotion

Similarly with the E of ALERT, the emotion within your life affects the way you sing. Keep your emotions, not under control, but active and alive. A passive and non-responsive singer is a plastic imitation of what a choral director wants. Play mental games with yourself at each rehearsal, congratulating yourself at the end. Always imagine the eternal fount of youth keeping you happy and energized. Always think of the saying 'Effortless power, not powerful effort'. Think of your vocal heroes and try and emulate them; stand up to them. E.g., imagine what it feels like to sing like Pavarotti, or like Joan Sutherland. Extremes of emotion, be they on the positive or negative sides, are prejudicial to good vocalizing. So try not to shout, scream or retain deep-seated anger; and similarly, let go of tears or deep sadness. Facial posturing is a great help in settling emotions that may have a tendency to dominate: make your face be happy, sad, angry, frustrated, ecstatic, bored, thirsty, itchy, etc and see how very different is the response not only of your face, but also of your body language and breath in each separate facial posture!

Reflux

The R in ALERT is a symptom of the disease which is afflicting so much of the Western world in the 21st century – reflux, gastric reflux to be particular. The symptoms of gastric reflux, which are often worse in the morning, include post-nasal drip, night-time choking spells, sour acid taste in the mouth, heartburn, habitual throat clearing, common vocal harshness, phlegm build-up, sore throat, and a feeling of a lump in the throat. To avoid developing gastric reflux there are several strategies that can be employed: don't eat meals late at night, limit alcohol intake, eliminate caffeine, avoid fatty or spicy foods at any time; citrus fruit may make an existing reflux problem worse; stay well hydrated and avoid onions, chilli and fizzy drinks. This rampant disease is caused by a time-stressed society. Choir members may not have time to eat properly before a rehearsal, and so will either eat a big meal late at night, on arriving home afterwards, allowing insufficient digestion time before going to bed; or, worse still, buy a takeaway to eat after the rehearsal, followed by bed.

Technique

T for Technique takes us to the final letter in the word ALERT. As a singer, it is vital to have a technique for your voice that you understand. The next step is for you to understand how your voice is changing and adapt your technique to suit the new demands that your voice is placing on you. We must all ensure that our voices are well warmed up before we start singing, and, as we get older, this warm-up becomes more important and more varying in its scope because of the ageing of the complex muscle structure. We must concentrate on mental focus with the correct alignment of head, neck and shoulders; and the chest position, with arm sway and body sway with closed eyes for inner focus and strength. We must concentrate on vocal focus by making sirens, fire engines, and slot car noises. We must release stress by making a long [sh], [s], [wh] and [f]. Older voices understand the concept of body/mind/spirit, where the breath is the body, mental focus is the mind, and the spirit is the sound. So in these simple warm-ups we have prepared our minds and our psyche for the act of singing.

There are a number of fun daily exercises that can be done to encourage technical security and longevity. Continue/begin a daily technical vocal exercise regime that will improve, strengthen and balance your voice. This can diminish, if not eliminate any vocal tremor, and increase accuracy and stamina. Talking regularly is important if your personal circumstances dictate that you are living alone. Similarly, to read aloud for 10–15 minutes (perhaps from the newspaper) each day is hugely beneficial. The perennial 'singing in the shower' is not such a bad thing, unless you are a young potential opera singer, when this will be a very tiny means to an end! Hum on a daily basis (a healthy forward hum), and shake your head from side to side while humming to prevent strain. This can be done anywhere – supermarket, public transport etc!

As one ages, one of the most noticeable changes is in one's posture. The chart on p.11 demonstrates the postural changes that occur as the body gets older. The 'thrown forward' posture of the 9 year old is an interesting phenomenon for those teachers who specialize in training the young voice, but for the purposes of this discussion, it is the postural shapes

of the 65 and 75 year olds that claim our attention. In the lower part of the body, the position of the pelvis and hips can be seen to be moving slightly backwards. This alone may cause problems for singers who have to stand for a long time. In the upper part of the body, the most noticeable change is in the position of the rib cage and the associated lack of length and space within the laryngeal area. Shoulders have become very rounded and the chest noticeably dropped, with the head area moving forward on the neck. These changes affect breathing and resonance, so exercises need to be developed that delay the onset, or diminish the effects of the onset, of these physical changes.

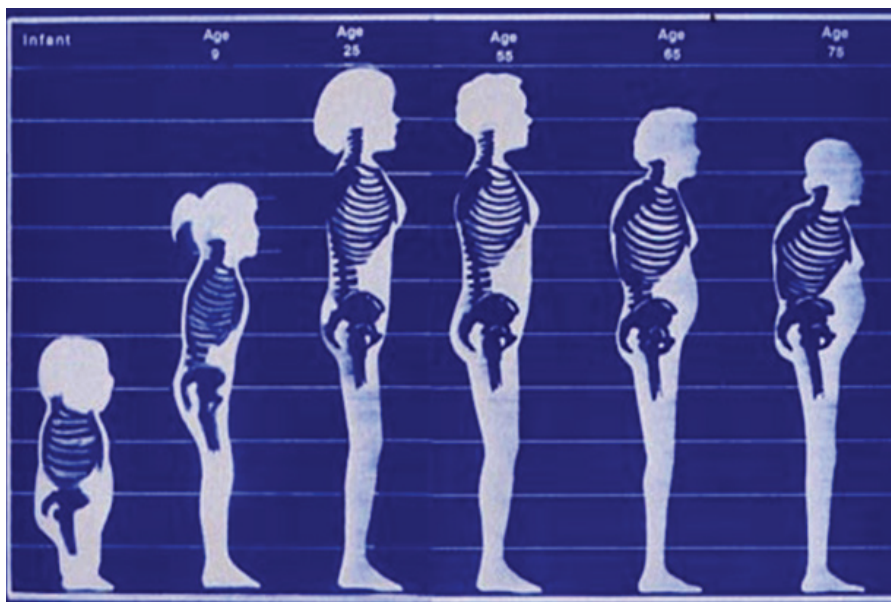
Rehearsing the process of sitting and standing exercises the muscles involved in these activities. Making muscular activity happen 'on demand' is a skill that only benefits from regular practice. Constant reminders from the conductor: 'Ears over your shoulders, shoulders over your hips, and hips over your knees' should ensure good posture for the duration of the rehearsal.

The diagram inconveniently does not contain arms. But the way that singers hold their music in their hands supported by their arms during rehearsal is also dependent on a number of factors, all affected by the ageing process.

Vision changes over the years

Singers may become long-sighted or short-sighted. Long-sighted singers may wish to hold their music a long way from their face. This could cause problems for the singers in the row in front, so the conductor would be well advised to look at spacing between the rows. Slightly more of a problem are short-sighted singers who wish to hold their music close to their faces, and in so doing give themselves little chance to watch the conductor! This is a challenge for the conductor and the size of the print in the copy he/she chooses to buy/download. With so much choral music available in the public domain, there is ample opportunity to reproduce music in differing formats that suit the singers in the choir.

With a mature choir, music could be produced in a number of different formats, suiting the different needs of the singers. As long as rehearsal numbers are constant, page numbers



can vary without upsetting the rhythm of a rehearsal as singers find their places. This system has been in place for years with blind singers using Braille copies. Once the issue of size of music has been addressed, the conductor can ensure that the music is held at a height that enables all singers to watch the conductor at all times, and also enables the audience to see the vocal enjoyment on the faces of the singers.

Muscles in the arms lose their tonicity with age. This can cause problems for the mature singer holding his or her music for a long time. Care should be taken with the oft demanded requirement for choral singers to have their music in a black folder for concerts. If these folders are provided for the choir, care should be taken that they are the lightest possible weight, while maintaining sufficient strength to hold the music. If singers are asked to provide their own black folders, then the conductor would be well advised to see exactly what singers bring with them, and therefore what singers see as suitable and manageable.

Breathing is also affected by age, as there is often a decrease in pulmonary efficiency and an increase in the incidence of emphysema. Singing may be an excellent antidote to the rapid onset of symptoms caused by such medical conditions. Loss of breath and support may be manifested in a weakened voice. This may mean that the singers have to take more frequent breaths and the conductor needs to empower them by stating that this is acceptable. This may be a situation in which staggered breathing becomes a necessity. The conductor needs to explain that

it is far better vocally and physically to breathe, rather than to constrict and squeeze in the laryngeal area in an attempt not to breathe, which may compromise vocal quality.

So work on developing exercises that are fun and create achievable challenges - e.g., hold competitions between parts, stand them back to back and ask them to breathe for each other.

The following exercises, in a number of technical areas, are designed to stimulate the conductor's imagination in developing further exercises, and will help the entire choir. This can result in a unified choral and enjoyable 'bonding session', yet a more clearly defined technical assuredness will be the outcome.

Exercises

1. Postural Exercises.

- Hold your instrument high and with majesty.
- Hold ribs high for increasing periods of time (time this and create a choir/voice part challenge)
- Hold chest similarly expanded for increasing periods of time
- Explore relevant social exercise groups within the choral rehearsal with a specialist tutor eg Pilates

2. Strengthening Exercises

- Pull up on a chair while sitting on it and maintaining a strong sound of any kind. This is a physical strengthening.
- With a smooth onset (See Exercise 7a) and a glottal stroke (say 'a apple'

to feel the glottal stroke between the two words), sing the 'ah' [a] vowel for 5 – 10 seconds, gradually increasing the time. Ensure the best vocal quality that you can!

c. Now sing the 'ee' [i] vowel for a long as you can, increasing the time on a daily basis.

3. Breathing Exercises

a. The Farinelli exercise. Breathe in silently for 4 counts, suspend the breath for 4 counts, breathe out silently for 4 count. It is important to ensure in the middle part of the exercise that the breath is suspended, not held. A held breath will cause constriction. Increase this to 4,6,6, and then 4,8,8 and even 4,10,10

b. Rolled [r]. The rolled [r] is excellent for maintaining constant breath pressure. Have a competition between parts – which voice part can keep their [r] rolling for the longest time?

c. Some people cannot roll the [r], so they can use the lip trill (like a raspberry). Create a competition between the lip trillers and the rolled [r] people!

d. Conductor to call out a random number from 1 – 20, (let's say 9), and the choir is to take 9 counts worth of breath and let it go on a [ssh] sound, and then the conductor calls out another number and on we go.

4. aw release exercise.

This is an excellent exercise for reducing tension on the jaw and mouth.

- say 'blah, blah, blah' quite rapidly. Then sing it on a descending 3rd.
- use the phrases 'blowing bubbles', 'marvellous Marmite', and 'fabulous Freddy fainted'. Then sing the phrase on each note of a descending 5th.

5. Tongue and Lip Tension

- Use the lip burrs and rolled [r] exercises already described
- Say 'red lorry, yellow lorry, red leather, yellow leather' quite rapidly. Then sing the phrase on each note of a descending 5th.

6. Vocal Fold Efficiency

a. Sing any melody, or part of a melody to a [zzz] sound. If teaching parts within a choral rehearsal this is a good way to ensure correct notes, and a lack of vocal fatigue. The [z] sound brings the vocal folds cleanly together, which is important for more mature singers as the folds tend to bow with age.

7. Onset exercises

a. Vocal sighs. Feel the preparation of the breath before the sigh escapes!
 b. Repetition of any sung note. The onset needs to be clean and sighed onto. Breathe in through slightly rounded lips and a loose jaw.
 Ex 7b can be extended to a series of repeated notes on different pitches



8. Vocal Fold Stretches

As stated earlier, the vocal folds can bow with age so any exercise which aims to strengthen and lengthen the folds is of benefit.

a. Sirens. Firstly, siren on an [ng] sound, the sound at the end of the word 'sing'. Ensure the tongue is forward with the tip touching the bottom of the lower front teeth, and the jaw is loose. Start with a small siren, vocally siren up and down, extending the range of each siren. This was a favourite nineteenth century exercise of the vocal masters.

b. Continue the sirens but on the sound 'ooh' [u]. This will continue to stretch the vocal folds. Continue to extend the vocal range of each siren.

c. Fifth and Octave Drills. Siren and then sing the interval of a fifth throughout your range, and then do the same with the interval of an octave. This is an excellent focus, stretching and resonant building exercise (a 3 in 1 exercise!).

9. Gliding Exercises

One of my favourite sayings is 'The voice works on a fast glissando'.
 a. Repeat the 'gliding on triplets' exercise at the top of the page, ensuring



that you slide from pitch to pitch! This is a simple way of ensuring that you stay 'connected to your breath'.

Ensure that you slide imperceptibly from note to note. This exercise can be sung on a vowel, lip trill, rolled[r], or [ng].

b. Say the word 'not', and then, using the vowel [o], glide up and down through the range of your voice, without any break in the voice. This encourages a forward vocal focus and an open throat. Lips should be rounded and the singer should feel some vibration on the lips. During this exercise the vocal folds are stretched, the voice remains in contact with the breath and muscle control and flexibility are maintained. Another of my favourite 3 in 1 exercises!

10. Flexibility, Agility and Range

Laughter in a variety of situations is a good test of flexibility agility and range.

a. Practise laughing quietly, uproariously, like an elephant, like a fairy, try to suppress a laugh, laugh politely. You will think of other funny situations that result in a different kind of laughter.
 b. Now sing these exercises as if laughing. They can be sung on any vowel or sound that you like. The first one is very good for extending your range, but do remember to laugh first.

**Sing what you See:
 See what you Sing**

Judy Bellingham

- A manual for self instruction, or group instruction, in the skills needed to learn to sight sing, or to improve one's sight singing, commissioned by the New Zealand Choral Federation.
- Contains over 250 graded exercises, composed by the author.

Judy Bellingham enjoys a reputation as one of New Zealand's leading music educators. She has taught in a range of schools from primary through to secondary, and is currently Senior Lecturer in Voice in the Department of Music at the University of Otago.

This book is well designed to meet the needs of a wide range of singers and instrumentalists. It takes the approach that all musicians, no matter what level of experience or ability, need to continue to work on their sight singing skills. Judy is a passionate choral director and singer herself, and she has been able to capture her natural enthusiasm and sense of fun in many of the activities contained in this text.

The approach, moving from graphic notation through to more traditional notation, is relaxed but at the same time develops skills as the various activities are worked through. Each section includes games in which developing skills are practised.

Finally it is satisfying to see traditional music theory being introduced within the text as the activities proceed. The strong experiential approach, supported by the information on music theory, will help reinforce both the practical skills and the theoretical underpinnings of music notation and theory and should allow musicians to make meaningful connections with both.

This book would be a very worthwhile addition to any teachers' or choral directors' resources. I have no hesitation in recommending it at any level.

Stuart Wise

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A limited number of copies of Judy's book is available in the UK via abcd, priced £21 including post & packing. Contact Kate Allen on 07528 382445 or email kate.allen@abcd.org.uk