

What is Vocal Weight (Part 1)

Many teachers use the term “vocal weight”, but without a clear definition the student is often left confused about this concept or aspect of the voice. So what the heck is “vocal weight” exactly and how does it affect singing?

Well, I'll tell ya. Vocal weight is defined as “too much thicker vocal fold mass used too high in pitch often involving taking one register higher than it is designed to function in pitch” Very technical sounding isn't it? But what the heck does all that mean?

In order to achieve “balance” in your registers you're going to have to get rid of that weight as you go higher in pitch. My goal in this post is to define the problems associated with too much vocal weight and offer healthy and corrective solutions, so that you don't struggle in the higher ranges. Sounds like fun right?

Now don't get me wrong, vocal weight doesn't always have to be negative. Lower voiced singers need to learn to add vocal weight when moving down toward the middle register in order to gain a fullness of tone in that range of their voice. That being said, they still have to drop it as they move higher. Taking too much vocal weight higher in pitch is never healthy for the voice.

The results of excessive vocal weight are many and can include:

1. a loss of access to higher notes
2. a choking feeling when sustaining higher notes
3. tuning problems
4. imbalance in registration
5. a general lack of vocal freedom

All of these issues are common complaints of many singers I encounter while teaching and the solutions can be multi-faceted, requiring the use of several problem-solving skills. Dragging vocal weight upward is usually due to a lack or improper employment of head voice as the singer moves up in pitch. It's like dragging an anchor into your upper range. Not cool.

Healthy negotiation of the registers is a result of employing the finer or thinner edges of the folds in combination with an open pharyngeal or “acoustic” space. Whew - that was a mouthful. It gets less technical as I go on – I promise!

How do you know if you are dragging that anchor? You'll know when the registers are out of balance because your voice feels tense, either from overly light (disconnected) technique or the overly heavy approach (depressed larynx).

Using too much vocal can result in the following vocal problems:

1. flattening of pitch
2. difficulty going into upper ranges without pushing too much breath pressure.

3. vowel distortion, caused by tongue tension
4. inability to sing high and softly
5. spread or throaty tones at specific pitches
6. breath management issues (lack of correct vocal fold approximation)
7. vibrato problems (often a overly fast vibrato or wobbly sound)
8. general tongue tension or retraction of the tongue
9. inability to sing a smooth (legato) line due to abrupt changes in breath flow
10. over darkening of the voice OR over lightening of the voice
11. forward thrust of the jaw
12. general over singing due to lack of resonance.

So how do we fix all that? Stay tuned for part two.

Until next time,
Kevin Richards