

If you owned a 200-year old violin, you wouldn't neglect or abuse it. Yet many of us neglect or abuse our very own precious musical instrument: our vocal cords. I think most of us do so unwittingly, and I'm sure we do so unintentionally. Here's some advice I've gathered about taking care of our vocal cords.

### Things you can do for yourself, for free (mostly):

1. **Hydration.** Water is great; warm herbal tea is even better (heat is soothing). Caffeine dehydrates, so be wary of using it to wake yourself up, even at a dance weekend. (At least balance it off with extra water.) Begin the hydration process 24 hours before the performance. Keep a water bottle with you while you're calling, too.
2. **Posture.** Leaning forward strains your vocal cords. And what do we all do when we are calling and we get excited? We lean into the microphone. Instant, guaranteed vocal strain. To prevent this, set up your microphone so that you have to stand up straight and tall to call into it. Step right up to it, so that if you lean forward, you will bump into it. If necessary, get a friend to watch (or better yet, videotape you) while you are calling to see whether you lean your head forward, and if so, when.
3. **Breathing.** Proper breath support can alleviate vocal strain, as well. Here are a few breathing exercises; regular practice will re-train your body to breathe this way automatically (though it may take some time).
  - Sit or stand somewhere comfortable. Get as relaxed as you can, but with good posture -- no slouching! Breathe in, and focus on making your belly to expand WITHOUT ALLOWING YOUR SHOULDERS TO RISE. You want to fill up the lowest part of your lungs, not the part in your rib cage. You should even feel your lower back expanding. Put your hands on your abdomen, if you need to, to feel it expand. When you have a belly full of air, use your abdominal muscles to push the air back out. When you are confident that you can breathe into and out of your abdomen, allow your rib cage to fill with air, too – but always fill your abdomen first. Continue doing this, daily, for a month or more, until you take deep breaths this way automatically.
  - When you are taking deep breaths, try these simple variations:
    - i. Breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4, breathe out for 4, hold for 4, repeat.
    - ii. Breathe in for 4, breathe out for 8. Taking longer to exhale calms your body, soothes your nerves, and increases breath support and capacity.
    - iii. Breathe in slowly through the nose and exhale quickly through the mouth. Taking longer to inhale energizes your body.
  - Practice calling while you are lying on your back, with one hand on your abdomen. (Just try it!)
  - When you're calling and you want to make sure that you are breathing correctly, put one hand on your abdomen. You will be able to feel when your sound production comes from your abdomen, not from your throat.

4. **Let technology work for you.** Another easy way to strain your vocal cords is to shout. This is why we use microphones. But some of us are in the habit of shouting, even into a microphone. What happens when we do that? The sound person (if they are paying any attention at all) turns our microphone DOWN. Meaning that then we *have to* shout in order to be heard. This is counterproductive, and completely avoidable. First, trust your sound person – you should never have to shout to be heard. So don't shout. If dancers tell you they can't hear you (and you are using proper breath support, so you know that you are projecting your voice), tell the sound person. He or she can either boost your signal or bring the band's signal down. The latter is more difficult – their levels are set so that the band's instruments are balanced with each other – but this is the sound person's job. If the dancers can't hear you (and you are projecting your voice), the sound person needs to make adjustments.

Sometimes it's hard to trust that the dancers can hear us, because we can't hear ourselves. There are two fairly simple solutions to this:

- Use a caller's monitor. If the sound person has a separate small monitor that you can use, use it. That way you will hear your voice, amplified, coming straight at you while you call. If you start shouting, you'll hear it. And you'll want to stop, because shouting doesn't sound so good.
- If a caller's monitor isn't available, use a wireless microphone and *go out on to the dance floor, in front of the speakers*. That way, you'll hear exactly what the dancers hear. You'll be able to tell just how well they can hear you. You will sacrifice some ability to see the dancers, but you can usually find a chair to stand on to solve that problem. If the dances where you regularly call don't have a wireless mic for you, get one. Your vocal cords are worth the investment.

### **Things you can do that might cost you some money:**

1. **See a voice therapist.** Think physical therapy for your vocal cords. A voice therapist will work with you to understand how you use your voice, teach you what you can do differently, and will also teach you strategies for vocal *efficiency*. Bonus: your health insurance may cover this.
2. **Get lessons in the Alexander Technique** (<http://www.alexandertechnique.com>). From the website: "F.M. Alexander (1869-1955) was an Australian actor who began to experience chronic laryngitis whenever he performed. When his doctors could not help him, Alexander discovered a solution on his own. [...] His health improved to such an extent that his friends and several of the doctors he had consulted earlier persuaded him to teach others what he had learned."
3. **Take voice lessons.** I have used singing squares (and the right teachers) to learn about vocal sound production, breathing technique, and posture from people who are trained in the use of the voice as an instrument. The right teachers, for me, were people who were willing to work with my repertoire of songs and were open to focusing on my learning goals.