

Can a singing teacher to the stars cure our critic's tuneless warble?

Ross Campbell, a professor of singing at the Royal Academy who trains the best of the best, took on his hardest challenge yet: pop writer **Will Hodgkinson**

There is one person in this world who thinks I have a fantastic singing voice: me. That's why I'm always singing in the shower, singing while hoovering the stairs, even (so I'm told) singing in my sleep. Unfortunately, everyone else is labouring under the illusion that the dulcet chimes ringing out of my mouth are akin to the yowl of a DIY bodger who has hammered a large nail into his thumb.

"They say being tone deaf is a myth. Having spent the last two decades with you I'm not so sure," said my wife last week, having failed to appreciate my unique interpretation of Neil Young's *Old Man*. The children have a more succinct response to my singing: "Shut up."

To address the situation I've come to Peterborough in Cambridgeshire to meet Ross Campbell, the author of *Singing*, a clear-headed handbook on the physical realities of how to use our voices in music. Campbell is a professor of singing at the Royal Academy of Music in London and a former opera performer, and he works with opera stars who have suffered emotional trauma and subsequent vocal breakdown, or classical singers whose vocal muscularity has changed with age, for whom what once came naturally must now be worked at. In other words, he's training the best of the best. Nonetheless, he has agreed to work with an enthusiastic amateur for an afternoon. And it turns out that, while I have been going around telling everyone how great I am, I actually think, deep down, that I suck.

"You have a tight jaw. You need to release it," Campbell says as he plays a note on the piano and tells me to hit it. "And your tongue is getting in the way, because you feel vulnerable opening up your throat. Maybe someone told you to stop singing when you were a kid, because you are unconsciously blocking your larynx, like a dog that won't let go of a bone. You are stopping yourself from singing."

“You are blocking your larynx, like a dog that won't let go of a bone”



Campbell is right. In the 1980s our primary school supplied a choir for the West End production of *Evita*. The music teacher spent every lesson training the chosen ones, while the rest of us sat in another room and amused ourselves in whatever way unsupervised 11-year-old boys will. There are no prizes for guessing which group I fell into.

"Nothing wrong with your pitch," says Campbell, words I will memorise to unleash at my family when necessary, after a bit of guidance leads to the right note. The first rule of singing, it turns out, is to listen. The brain needs time to process the note and send the information to the larynx. And as obvious as this may sound, singing is a technical process. Adele may have an incredible ability to evoke the sadness of a fiftysomething woman who has had her heart broken several times, but she is still working with muscle memory and physical training; she simply has a performer's ability to make it personal. With the endless debates on emotional content, originality, taste, style and integrity that accompany the world of rock and pop, it is easy to forget this.

"People think we sing with our mouths. Actually, the best sounds come from our throat," Campbell explains as he holds up a model of the larynx, our organ for speaking and singing. "This is your piano, your violin, your flute."

The larynx looks a lot uglier than all three. "All the notes we sing are tuned within the vocal folds in the larynx, which are two thirds the size of your little finger," Campbell says. "The larynx goes up in the neck with higher pitch, down with lower pitch, and tilts when we cry or sob."

Going from a lower to an upper register in singing is like a gear change, and one that is likely to sound like yodelling unless we cover it up through "crying", which essentially means putting feeling into a note and generally — but not always — adding vibrato. In opera and classical music the larynx is always tilted to create the crying effect.



"It is working quite well, your larynx," Campbell says as I do my best impression of a heartbroken crooner. "Your pitching is good, although do try to come back to the same note. But there is a fundamental thing we must all do: support our air flow. This is where a lot of singers fall foul. They throw too much air at singing, thinking they're getting

louder. Instead they're just destroying their voices and unbalancing natural resonances in the process."

If you try to sing with too much force you close the "false" vocal folds that sit above the true ones and can end up with nodules, as Elton John did. Campbell demonstrates how the entire body, not just the throat, is used for singing. Breathing properly means

not wasting air. We must have good posture for the larynx to have space to work properly, and we need what he calls a "Rambo neck" — using the mastoid muscles — to create stability. Rock singers in particular have a tendency to lean forward when they should be centred. Most importantly, singing goes into the body, not out. Our best resonator is the throat, so singing has to come from there, not from the mouth. As Campbell says: "Singing is a one-way street. You have to pull the sound in."

It turns out that there are a handful of ways to sing. The first is called speech quality, which is as you would expect: a style that follows the natural cadences of talking, without vibrato or emotion, but slightly sweetened. Campbell makes me sing *Happy Birthday* in speech mode and it sounds almost insulting. Then he shows how to end each line in the aforementioned crying mode, thereby creating something that does actually sound like singing.

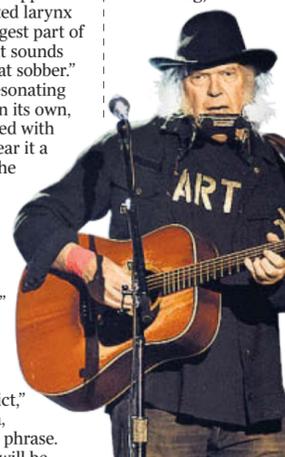
"We all love crying, don't we?" he says, displaying a kind of "happy"

crying that goes up and a sobbing — akin to crooning — that goes down. "The crying most commonly used in rock and pop puts the tilted larynx in a high position, and it is happier and richer. The sob, the tilted larynx in a low position, is the biggest part of the operatic tradition and it sounds sad. Bing Crosby was a great sobber." There is also twang. A resonating device that sounds awful on its own, this is useful when combined with other singing styles. You hear it a lot in country music, and the most jazz hands-friendly parts of musical theatre.

"Let's have a look at your twanger," Campbell suggests, and since we're getting on so famously, I say: "Why not?"

"This is a ring of muscle above the false vocal folds called your aryepiglottic sphincter, alias your twanger, which you constrict," he says. "It is used in opera, typically in the middle of a phrase. A wicked witch in a panto will be

Will Hodgkinson seeks Ross Campbell's help in improving his version of Old Man by Neil Young, below



Ross Campbell's five classic singing mistakes

■ Singing goes in, not out
Don't push your throat outward. The sound comes in. Singing is an implosion, not an explosion, even when belting.

■ Good singing uses more than just the throat
It is a misconception that only the throat is used in singing, which is tantamount to disaster. We are not singing heads. We need the support from our entire body.

■ Bad posture
Do not put the chin up and out, particularly when singing a high note. Do not lurch forward like a rock star. All the sound should be centred into the body.

■ Do not sing with your mouth
The best sounds come from the throat; that is where the information from the brain is sent. Your mouth should be loose. The jaw and tongue just get in the way.

■ Do not sing in one voice for all music
Learn to use different voice qualities in the same song, just as a painter uses colours on a palette. Twanging, crying, speech and belting are there to be mixed up.

using nasal twang." Campbell utilises twang in a way that evokes character and depth. When I do it, unwelcome visions of Kenneth Williams come to mind.

"The trick is to start with twang in a note and then take it off. You have to be careful, though. A couple of years ago the whole of the West End was doing nothing but twang. Twang suggests a higher range than you might have because the sound is thinner."

Then there is belting, tantamount to yelling and used at moments of musical climax. Think of Roger Daltrey belting his heart out on the *Who's Love, Reign O'er Me*. "You only use this in the high part of your voice," Campbell says. "It is emotionally driven and I don't introduce young singers to belting. You can damage your voice if you're not careful."

Singers generally use several voice qualities within a piece of music, often within the same phrase, and as to whether you are a soprano, a mezzo, a tenor or a baritone, Campbell recommends letting your voice tell you what it is as you develop. "You have a basic voice that gives you timbre — Tony in *West Side Story* is definitely a tenor — but you build range through training."

Finally it is time to run through a number, and what better to get a novice singer going than Elton John's pre-nodule classic *Your Song*? It doesn't take long to appreciate *Your*

Song's qualities. It bounces through a series of major and minor chords and uses the speech quality, crying and twanging forms of singing. Some notes elongate, others flow into one another, and the effect is moving. It isn't as easy to sing as it sounds. There is a lot to remember, for one thing.

"Don't pull the vowel down," Campbell says when I sing the line "It's a little bit funny" as if I'm trying to flog copies of *The Big Issue*. "Keep it light, in the upper throat. You're mangling every single note. Stop sounding miserable."

Campbell tells me something no music teacher ever did: I'm working too hard. "Opera is specific, but pop is all over the place. We speak sloppy,

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we breathe in the middle of words, it's a whole different style. Can you speak in tune? Yes, you can. Then you can sing pop."

That makes me think of Leonard Cohen, Nico, Lou Reed and other people who were not great singers as such, but brought great style and conviction to their words. And then a strange thing happens. I actually manage to sing properly, albeit briefly. In *Your Song* the line "I don't have much money, but boy, if I did" ends with three quick descending notes. I get it right — and feel strangely emotional.

"That's the best singing you've done so far, and it's not an easy line," Campbell says. "Every exercise has got to live, every exercise needs to have emotion. You need to do the technique and the feeling together because that is how you will perform."

The real revelation, after we manage to get through a passable rendition of *Your Song*, is that singing is physical. You think of singing as something character-based, personal and innate, but it is a skill to be trained in like any other. "You do need to breathe life into singing, which is the spiritual side of it," Campbell adds. "In the end, that is the most important ingredient. It's no good just being a technically great singer. You need to integrate your acting into it."

I think my performance of *Your Song* will be restricted to the bathroom for now, but I would recommend Campbell's singing tuition to anyone who has been told, at some point or other, that their voice sounds as if it is rising from the pits of Hell. Learning to sing properly is liberating. I'm completely exhausted after going a few rounds with Campbell and his piano, and not quite up there with Kiri Te Kanawa, but energised. This may be terrible news for my wife and children, but it is true: everyone can sing.

***Singing, an Extensive Handbook for all Singers and their Teachers* by Ross Campbell is published by Novordium**

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