

Chapter 2

Freeing the Voice through the McClosky “Six Areas of Relaxation”

*I*n a vein similar to the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method, the McClosky Technique takes a hands-on bodywork approach to achieving vocal freedom. Performing musicians, speakers, and teachers around the world have used this technique to maintain healthy, resilient voices, even under demanding conditions. The McClosky Technique specifically focuses on the muscle groups surrounding the vocal mechanism, identifying tensions and providing a process to release those tensions over time. The McClosky Technique also emphasizes postural alignment, along with efficient, easy breathing. The task for the singer or the speaker is to build new muscle memory integrating alignment, breathing, support, and phonation, free of the extraneous muscular tensions that can impair vocal freedom. This chapter introduces and explains six areas of relaxation and how these basic tools can be applied for healthy voice use.

Proper relaxation is the first step toward achieving a truly well-coordinated voice. It is the key to all that follows. Until you are able to relax the muscles in your face, tongue, jaw, throat, and neck—all of which can interfere with the muscles controlling the vocal folds themselves—your singing and speaking will be, literally, “muscle-bound.”

Every biological function involving the use of muscles relies on a balance between tension and relaxation. Most of us, in using our voices, are beset by undue muscular tightness throughout the vocal mechanism—in the throat, jaw, neck, and tongue. Unfortunately these tensions are not confined to the areas where they are needed as part of the natural muscular action

involved in the activation of the vocal folds. In fact, they are apt to predominate in the very areas where we would desire the greatest relaxation and looseness. Instead of opening the door and allowing the caged bird—our voice—its freedom, we constrict it with all sorts of fetters. Because achieving and maintaining balanced relaxation is the most vital and difficult physical element involved in singing and speaking, it is given primary emphasis and particular attention.

As detailed in the exercises that follow, the muscles of the larynx are generally divided into two groups: the *intrinsic muscles*, that is, those inside the larynx, which directly control phonation, and the *extrinsic muscles*, that is, those that move the larynx as a whole and keep it suspended in the neck. It should be your aim to relax the latter set of muscles as well as all the outer muscles above your shoulders, and then to maintain this relaxation while you make sounds. By doing this, you are clearing the way to allow the inner muscles of the larynx to function without obstruction in the production of sound. You need not worry about manipulating the inner muscles that control the vocal folds, for the mere thought of speaking or singing is enough to alert them into functioning—they operate unconsciously and not by direct manipulation. In a healthy throat, if the outer muscles are relaxed, the inner ones will take care of themselves.

“This is all very well,” you may say, “but how am I to know when these outer muscles are really relaxed?” This is easier than it may seem, because it is possible for us to feel most of these muscles with our fingers and to detect tension in them. On the other hand, we have no external tactile contact with the inner muscles. It is the muscles you can feel with your fingers that must be relaxed.

Following is the step-by-step approach to relaxing the extrinsic muscle groups surrounding the vocal mechanism, focusing on six specific areas. Not every person will have the same tensions, and in some people they are difficult to detect. However, if the person does not—at the beginning of study—become aware of where potential danger spots lie, bad habits and tension may accumulate, which in later years can cause strained singing or speaking. What may seem like a small lack of coordination now may, as we grow older, develop into a severe handicap. By following this simple plan, a person can readily detect and correct individual problems.

Preparing for the Relaxation Techniques

Sit in a comfortable position; try to cultivate an untroubled state of mind. Do not hurry. Do not press. The very essence of the exercises that follow is that they be done slowly, deliberately, without clock watching. An effective way to prepare the mind and body before beginning is through progressive relaxation. Close your eyes and allow your body to relax from the crown of your head to the bottom of your feet, consciously releasing any tensions you

notice. You are then ready to begin a series of specific exercises to achieve relaxation of the areas that can inhibit healthy phonation.

Six Exercises in Relaxation

These exercises are to be used not just *before* you begin to speak or sing, but also *during* vocal exercises, on every vowel, and finally on all pitches throughout your range. If you can achieve this at the beginning of your study, you will have conquered a major part of your technical trouble at its source. These exercises are progressive, one through six; ideally, each earlier exercise should be maintained as you proceed through the sequence.

In performing the following exercises, remember to be gentle and deliberate, without forcing. Some areas of tension may release only through repetition over time.

1. *The Muscles of the Face (see appendix A, figure 9)*

With the pads of your fingers, slowly and gently massage the facial muscles starting at your hairline and forehead, and continuing downward to your cheeks, lips, and chin. Use circular motions with both hands and feel your skin and underlying muscle yielding to the gentle movement of your fingers. Spend time on areas that feel tight, such as your eyebrows and temples. As you massage your cheeks, let your jaw hang slack with your lips and teeth slightly apart. Feel as if the only thing stopping your jaw from falling further is the skin on your face. Allow the muscles to fall into as limp a condition as possible, as if you have no expression on your face at all.

Facial muscles that do not hold tension will allow and enhance the singer's ability to project a full range of expression and emotion.

Maintaining the relaxation of these facial muscles, proceed to the next area.

2. *The Tongue (see appendix A, figure 10)*

Let your tongue soften and allow it to come forward to rest slightly out of your mouth on your lower lip, as it might if you were unconscious. It is important for your tongue to gently fall forward by releasing muscular holding, rather than by pushing it forward with muscular effort. Now stretch your tongue further out of your mouth down toward your chin, stretching it at the back. You may feel a pull under your chin. Then let it release back to lie relaxed against or on the lower lip. Repeat this several times until you feel less pull.

The tongue muscle structure is most often at fault in interfering with the free emission of the voice. The tongue is a very large mass of muscles, covering the entire floor of the mouth and extending down to

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the hyoid bone, from which the larynx is suspended. The front part of the tongue, which we can actually see in our mouth, is a very small portion compared to the much larger part that extends down the throat. If it is tensed in any way (i.e., concave in the middle, retracted from the lower teeth or the sides of the mouth, or humped toward the roof of the mouth), the singer or speaker will be in trouble. Evidence of frontal-tongue tension indicates tension at the root of the tongue, thereby creating tension in all the surrounding musculature that we are trying to release.

Relaxation requires developing an awareness of that tension, then learning to let go. Freedom of the tongue will allow clear diction and easy articulation. The tongue must move for articulation, but it can move with ease.

Maintaining the relaxed facial and tongue muscles, move on to the next area.

3. *The Swallowing (Suprahyoid) Muscles (see appendix A, figure 11)*

The swallowing muscles (*digastric* and *mylohyoid* muscles) can be felt under the chin and are the main muscles responsible for elevating the larynx. They are strong muscles, and when they contract during phonation they can cause all kinds of vocal problems.

As a test, place both index fingers together in the center of the area under your chin. Swallow and you will feel downward pressure from the action of the swallowing muscles. Any hardening here during phonation is a sure sign of tension in these muscles and in the root of the tongue, and should be eliminated. It is vitally important that this area be kept relaxed, soft, and pliable during all phases of voice production. This can be checked so easily with the fingers that there is no excuse for tension here.

Keeping your tongue relaxed in your mouth, you can massage these swallowing muscles to help them soften and release. Place your thumbs or fingers of each hand in the center area under your chin. Gently press with an up-and-down motion, alternating each hand, pushing vertically into the swallowing muscles. Move your hands slightly on either side of center, until you have massaged the entire area under your jaw, using the jawbone as a boundary. The action is like kneading bread.

Freedom of the swallowing muscles allows the larynx to stay in its naturally low position and facilitates easy onset of sound.

Maintaining relaxation in the facial, tongue, and swallowing muscles, move on to the next area.

4. The Mandible (Jaw) (see appendix A, figure 12)

Find the "jaw hinge," which is in front of the ears. This is called the *Temporomandibular Joint or (TMJ)*. There must be ease of movement in this joint, and the jaw must be able to drop without resistance.

Now take your chin between your thumb and forefinger and move it up and down, at first slowly, and eventually faster. If you have completely relaxed the hinge muscles of your jaw, this exercise will give you no trouble. On first trying it, most persons find, however, that there is resistance in the jaw, particularly when moving it back to a closed position. Involuntarily, the jaw muscles are inclined to stiffen. Not until you are able to move your jaw freely up and down without the slightest resistance will you have accomplished the aim of this exercise. Maintain all of the relaxation you have established up to this point. Do not permit concentration on one relaxing exercise to cause you to neglect the others. Above all, take it easy.

The benefits of a released jaw are consistency of resonating space, easy articulation, and freedom in the vocal tract.

5. The Larynx (see appendix A, figures 11 and 13)

Find your larynx by gently placing your fingers flat against the front of your neck. Now swallow; your fingers should feel the larynx rise and fall. With the larynx in its naturally low position, place the thumb and forefinger of one hand on either side of the larynx, and lightly move it from side to side. Eventually it will move easily without clicking. This exercise should be approached gently at all times.

The muscles that attach to the larynx (and/or the hyoid bone above it) are known as strap muscles and are responsible for keeping the larynx suspended in the throat. These strap muscles should not bind, inhibit, or pull on the larynx, so that it can maintain its natural and relaxed position during phonation.

Freedom in the strap muscles allows the larynx to perform its full range of actions for speaking or singing.

Maintaining relaxation in the facial, tongue, swallowing, and jaw muscles, and the laryngeal area, move on to the next area.

6. The Neck and Head (see appendix A, figure 13)

Allow your head to fall forward with the chin toward your chest. There is no need to pull your head down; simply release it and let it fall with the pull of gravity. You should feel the weight of your head like a bowling ball. This weight will help stretch the back of your neck, allowing those muscles to slowly lengthen and your head to fall even further forward. Now bring your head back to its balanced position atop the spine as described in the section on posture in chapter 1.

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Allow it to nod up and down lazily on the balance point while maintaining all the other relaxation areas.

Release of tension in the muscles of the neck enables a release in other muscular systems in the body, allowing the appropriate muscles to work in concert for phonation.

Practice these exercises while seated at first. Then take the standing posture you have learned and repeat them. Once you have become familiar with this routine, it is time to apply what you have learned to vocalizing.