**Transcript of "Aging of the Voice"**

**NATS Chat with Dr. Albert Merati - November 6, 2011**

This is the transcript from the November 6, 2011 NATS Chat with guest [Dr. Albert L. Merati](http://www.amazon.com/s?ie=UTF8&x=0&ref_=nb_sb_noss&y=0&field-keywords=albert%20l.%20merati&url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&_encoding=UTF8&tag=wwwnatsorg-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=390957), noted [laryngologist](http://depts.washington.edu/otoweb/faculty/mds/merati.htm). NATS Chat host Dr. Kari Ragan moderated a discussion on the "Aging of the Voice." Dr. Merati is Professor at [University of Washington](http://www.washington.edu/) and Chief of Laryngology Service, [Department of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery](http://depts.washington.edu/otoweb/index.htm). at [UW Medical Center](http://uwmedicine.washington.edu/Patient-Care/Locations/UWMC/Campus/Getting-to-UW-Medical-Center/Pages/default.aspx). His areas of expertise are care of the professional voice, swallowing dysfunction, airway diseases, vocal fold paralysis, and airway stenosis.

Please join us for future chats, which are held in the NATS Chat Room on the NATS website. All are welcome to attend.

**Dr. Merati:** Most aging voice problems are multifactorial. Rarely is it just one thing. Medications are a big issue, for example.

**Kari Ragan:** Any particular medications we should ask our students about

**Dr. Merati:** The key medications are those that affect dryness. The effect of dehydration on PTP - phonation threshold pressure - is significant.

**JS:** what medications would those be?

**Dr. Merati:** many of the issues involved with aging are generic - the joints of the larynx are just like those elsewhere in the body and are susceptible to arthritis, for example

**Kari Ragan:** So continuing to vocalize as we age seems crucial?

**ginny:** ++What about the 75+ question re having to sing lower?

**Dr. Merati:** With regard to pitch change, men often lose muscle mass and have thin cords; the pitch increases

**Carol Ann:** Is vocal fold bowing linked to aging more that to other factors?

**Kari Ragan:** We had a question on FB about estrogen loss and its affects on the vocal folds.

**humbletenor:** What age is affected by hydration factors? I'm not aware other hydration issues in my body (at 53)

**apack:** so for men, the pitch is raised, and for women it is lowered?

**Beebye:** What about older women and pitch difficulties ? Can anything be done for that ?

**Carol Ann:** Is vocal fold bowing linked to aging more that to other factors?

**apack:** so for men, the pitch is raised, and for women it is lowered?

**Dr. Merati:** also, generally speaking females take on vocal fold mass (if they develop abnormalities, many don't get this)....and their pitch decreases. Particularly if there has been any smoking.

**hummingbird:** I also want to hear about estrogen loss.

**75plus:** I found myself getting hoarse after a three hour choir rehearsal when I sang my lifelong soprano range. I feel more comfortable and don't get hoarse singing in the first alto range, but dislike tessituras around middle C to the F above. I am grateful when the first alto part gets up into the second soprano range now and then. I had stopped doing solo work about 15 years ago for a variety of reasons, and am enjoying choral singing. I notice also that the power of my voice is less, which is OK in choirs, and that indeed, hydration is absolutely critical to maintaining good tone and stamina.

**apack:** would one be able to keep their vocal range as they age if they continue to practice good vocal health and vocalized often?

**Heather:** I've heard singers that are amazing into their later years because they worked technique regularly.

**75plus:** I agree. As long as I can breathe I intend to singing somewhere. I just wish I had more time to vocalize. I'll have to retire from full time teaching to get that.

**nikkengirl:** It seems that the age factor varies tremendously from singer to singer and that good vocal habits help to extend the good singing life tremendously. I'm 73 and still have the top of the range pretty much in tact.

**75plus:** I think if I had not had certain health challenges more than 20 years ago my top range would be better than it is now.

**cofojess:** nikkengirl, do you vocalize/sing regularly?

**HSteacher:** what steps can be taken to control/slow down widening vibrato?

**Dr. Merati:** I think the way to look at voice in the aging performer is not to focus on the whole person; the larynx is often nearly normal. That having been said, paradoxically, it is best to asses the vocal organ itself first but having the larynx examined. Every other system should be considered - vocal fatigue may reflect alterations of chest wall mechanics, respiratory mechanics, posture, joint dysfunction, etc....

**75plus:** I do notice that the more often I sing the better my voice is.

**JS:** Can you discuss the effect of Parkinsons on the voice and ways to strengthen it? I am currently teaching a 49 year old man with parksinsons

**Sandy:** What about gender differences in the aging voice long past menopause?

**Peggy Billman K:** I'd love Dr. Merati to answer the question about widening vibrato

**Barbara Jean Ca:** I'd also love to hear an answer about the effect of the loss of estrogen on the vocal folds

**Sandy:** Or indeed the differences in the timeline of stability changes between men and women?

**catrrine:** I am 66 and have had my esophagus operated on twice. I teach a lot, but only sing solo about once a month. I never know when my voice will work and I have lost my soft singing abilities- it's very discouraging after a long life of performing and singing so freely.

**Sandy:** Catrrine, that will certainly have an effect on your resonance. It must be very frustrating indeed.

**Barbara Jean Ca:** My soft singing came back after working only head voice for 3 months, then slowly reintegrating the chest voice. Worked great.

**Miss Sharon:** yes, I have heard that too Barbara!

**catrrine:** I'll try that. thanks

**Craig E Tompkin:** I've also heard that Barbara!

**nikkengirl:** Well, while Dr. Merati is trying to get on board, are any other "aging singers" experiencing more problems in the lower end of their voices. I have no problems in the top, but have real trouble between middle C and F.

**hummingbird:** I noticed changes a year after menopause, which for me happened at age 45! I have a hiatal hernia and GERD as well, but I seem to need to drink so much more water than before...and be more strict about my diet.

**catrrine:** yes, the blending there is tricky and not dependable in performance

**Sandy:** I'm 53 and have noted that my passagio has shifted up. My higher notes do seem easier than my lower notes which is a change.

**Palouse SLP:** Sandy, is this the same as Lessoc Madsen Resonant Voice Therapy?

**Sandy:** Palouse. Yes. it is.

**Barbara Jean Ca:** As Jeanie LoVetri explained to me this summer, the voice in menopause overbalances on the chest side, so you have to strengthen the head voice and reintegrate. That being said, my primo passaggio has moved up a bit,

**Dr. Merati:** Estrogen, estrogen, estrogen. Always with the estrogen.

**Kari Ragan:** Dr. Merati is not able to read posts. We are doing our best to work around this. My apologies. Hang in with us for a bit longer.

**Dr. Merati:** Just kidding.

**Dr. Merati:** Estrogen may have some impact on the fluid dynamics within the vocal fold reinke's space

**Barbara Jean Ca:** but if I allow it to go up too far I get into trouble, better to keep strengthening the head and resist the move up of the passaggio, I think

**hummingbird:** I have no problem with my head voice because I teach early childhood music. I'm always singing high and light for the kids to model appropriately.

**Dr. Merati:** If there is more fluid or mass, the airflow needed to support vibration goes up, and the "feel" of the voice is different to the singer, even if the sound to the listener is the same.

**apack:** so the blended lower-middle range is what tends to be the most difficult in the aging voice?

**Barbara Jean Ca:** My voice went into tilt when I went off HRT, so I think that Estrogen is important for a professional singer, especially. Abitbol in France says all professional singers should be on HRT

**Miss Sharon:** That must be why the straw exercise works so well!

**hummingbird:** I seem to be more sensitive to foods, allergens, unknown things cause my vocal folds to temporarily react, swell or get hoarse. I eat no dairy or wheat or gluten or tomatoes, etc.

**Dr. Merati:** if they are getting some androgen (any relative of testosterone) , this may have irreversible (or if you are lucky, reversible) effects on the voice by way of impacting the muscle itself or the fluid retention in the cord.

**Maxine Graboyes:** I am 69 years old and take Premarin 3 days a week for osteoporosis. I think it helps keep the voice "young".

**Dr. Merati:** If you are lucky, the cords are swollen and it is the reversible kind of androgen effect; if you are unlucky, it is irreversible. This effect is idiosyncratic - ie it doesn't happen to everyone.

**Katy Peterson:** Can we hear some ideas with widening vibrato?

**lmc:** What can be done about the low "gravel" sound in the aging voice? ( An extension of the fry upward in the range.)

**nikkengirl:** As a breast cancer survivor, I am quite wary of hrt?

**Craig E Tompkin:** I'm wondering about the stiffening (ossification) of the cartilages. Is there any kind of voice change associated with that?

**cofojess:** I often hear a "dual" pitch in older men's voices, is that vocal fry?

**Dr. Merati:** With regard to Parkinson's it has many devastating effects (of course) on the person but specifically with the voice, regulation of closure is a problem. There is a tremor (different from essential tremor a la Hepburn) but generally a hypophonia (weak voice)

**Dr. Merati:** This , hwoever, responds to therapy (the LEE SILVERMAN technique). Vocal fold augmentation, in my experience (vocal fold injecion, implantation) can be quite helpful in selected cases but this is not a popular belief.

**75plus:** i thought my problem between middle C and F, which never existed before I had a thyroidectomy at age 52, was the cause. I'm interested to hear that others have that same problem. it's the most challenging thing about singing first alto now; I don't want to use chest tone to achieve more volume. Some lessons to reinforce keeping the forward resonance with good support really made a difference. Even teachers can get into bad habits if no one gives them feedback about their singing.

**75plus:** Between Middle C and F is the big challenge for me,

**nikkengirl:** There are a lot of aging singers out there!

**fldiva:** Dr. M. What is your opinion of bioidentical or natural hormones versus synthetic HRT perscriptions

**Wobble:** I noticed a question on widening vibrato and what to do. This is of interest to me as well.

**hummingbird:** Perhaps this topic should be repeated...and maybe several times with narrower focus...?

**Miss Sharon:** that's a good idea

**cofojess:** I'm also interested in this, as well as the split pitch/dual pitch in older men's voices

**Kari Ragan:** Dr. Merati has not been able to see questions so we've found a way around it. But he's back on.

**Dr. Merati:** Hi I don't know anything about the various hormones, (bio identicals) good question.

**Craig E Tompkin:** Good idea Hummingbird!

**Dr. Merati:** With regard to vibrato, (sorry if this is a repeat answer) most untrained patients come in complaining of this really have a worsening warble.

**Sandy:** I'm also interested in knowing if anyone has cervical spurs and what that has done to vocal quality and stability.

**humbletenor:** Is the warble a muscle fatigue, degeneration or related aging issue?

**Dr. Merati:** With regard to trained folks ( ie here), my guess (and it is that) is that widening vibrato reflects more difficulty maintaining that crucial balance bewteen contact and flow at the vocal folds - even slight loss of neural control, airflow regulation etc...will alter the vibrato

**Miss Sharon:** Are we talking "warble" or "wobble"?

**hummingbird:** I also want to address the emotional aspects of the aging voice. Even when I have a respiratory infection and cannot sing, I seem to get down. Nothing bothers me more than not being able to use my voice. And now, hearing my 20 year old daughter sing so beautifully, I really feel the difference between how easy it used to be to sing and now....that its more challenging.

**Dr. Merati:** I many be out of line here- please inform me if I am but to me warble is just bad technique.

**Dr. Merati:** See how much I know - I called it warble! Wobble of course.

**Maxine Graboyes:** Dr. Merati, how does vocal fold paresis manifest itself with regard to singing voice?

**HeatherB:** I teach several older ladies who are lifelong singers and I think that daily technique work is the key to avoiding the wobble - one began with me in the fall after not really singing except in church for many years. I think that the intensive vocal exercises have helped her some.

**Wobble:** As a mid-60's lifelong singer , I find my voice getting weaker and weaker , my vibrato wider and am having pitch problems as well. I am a breast cancer survivor too so HRT for me. Other than vocalizing daily, is there anything I can do to strengthen my voice ??

**Miss Sharon:** thanks for clarifying Dr. Merati!

**catrrine:** I agree-warble is bad technique. I've helped students in their 60's, and 70's with this.

**Dr. Merati:** By they way, since I can't really see what is going on, please feel free to email me questions later at [amerati@uw.edu](mailto:amerati@uw.edu)

**Kari Ragan:** I think we should try to reschedule Dr. Merati since there seems to be so much interest.

**Sandy:** Is there any difference in the longevity of the classical versus the jazz vocal system, just out of interest?

**75plus:** Hummingbird, I agree the emotional aspects of having a voice that is not functioning as well as previously can be devastating.

**Kari Ragan:** We're almost out of time tonight. Maybe one of our future NATS Chat Teacher talks could be turned into Part 2 "Aging Voice. Dr. Merati has agreed.

**fldiva:** I would be very interested in communicating further with the ladies who have used HRT or natural hormones to support their voice through menopause. fldiva07@yahoo.com

**75plus:** Reschedule this. We have several topics. Perhaps we could have several session, and limit each to one of the topics

**Dr. Merati:** I think some of the best generic advice to folks interested in maintaining healthy singing over the years is to 1. Stay hydrated 2. question the medicines you are on 3. seek attention if you have questions

**Wanda:** Thanks, Doc!

**HeatherB:** from what I have seen though, the upper range for sopranos becomes an issue. It's hard to tell how much of it is hormone / aging related and how much is technique. Both ladies tend to have a bit of tension above G5 but if you're used to those notes being easier then some tension when they don't pop out easily might be expected. Any thoughts??

**Wobble:** Thank you doctor and fellow singers !

**nikkengirl:** If Dr. Merati is not conversant with HRT and hormone issues that might be a good topic for a specialist in that area.

**Kari Ragan:** We are going to wrap it up. Both Dr. Merati and I are having a lot of technical difficulties.

**HeatherB:** yes, more time in another session!! Great information

**Craig E Tompkin:** Men don't have the hormonal issues that women have, although the structural changes are very similar I believe.

**Miss Sharon:** Ok, thanks Kari--we appreciate your efforts!

**Kari Ragan:** Thank-you all for joining us! PLEASE attend again. I hope to reschedule Dr. Merati for a future chat.