

Learning to Sing

with Opera Star Carol Vaness

By Bridget Paolucci

Think of some of your favorite singers. When you listen, they can make you happy or sad, peaceful or angry. They can make you relax or want to get up and dance. Talented singers have the power to affect us in many ways -- emotionally, physically, and mentally.

But becoming a great singer isn't as easy as listening to one. It takes practice, dedication, and strong lungs! Just ask the well-known American opera star Carol Vaness.

At the Metropolitan Opera in New York City where she often sings, Carol's voice must be loud enough to be heard by four thousand people. It must reach every person in the theater, *without* a microphone, even when she's singing softly. The reason Carol can project her voice that far is the way she breathes.

"When you breathe, it's like a swimmer taking a deep breath before going underwater," Carol explains. "You have to take a lot of air into your lungs."

According to Carol, the main difference between pop singing and opera is "how you breathe, how much air you take in, and how you control it coming out. Regular singing is more like speaking, and it's a lot softer.

"When I sing for children, they're often surprised by how the vibrations strike their ears—like waves on a beach," Carol says. "In opera, the air doesn't just go out of your mouth—it vibrates in your head and your chest, the way a guitar vibrates when it's played."

Ever since she started piano lessons at age ten, Carol has loved music. As she got older, she decided to become a music teacher. When she went to college, she took singing lessons as part of her studies. Her voice teacher discovered that nineteen-year-old Carol had an exceptionally beautiful soprano voice—the highest singing voice for women.

Carol decided to make opera her goal, not only because she loved to sing but also because she loved the drama. Opera is a play in which the characters *sing* the words instead of speaking them. The stories of opera can be tragic or comical. They can be personal stories about two people falling in love or grand stories about kings and queens who lived long ago. As the characters in an opera sing, the emotions expressed by words and music come to life.



Extravagant costumes and beautiful songs help turn Carol into a star

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“I get to dress up in gorgeous gowns and play hundreds of different characters,” says


Carol, who studied for eight years and learned several languages before she was ready for her debut.¹


“The queen, the evil sorceress, the poor seamstress—these are characters that are fun to play.” Today, Carol performs throughout the United States and Europe as she has done for almost twenty years. But she has never forgotten why she started singing in the first place.


“Put your heart into your singing and enjoy it,” says Carol, “because singing is a great joy. That’s why I sing. In fact, that’s why everybody sings.”


Sing Like a Pro


Not everyone wants to be an opera singer, but almost anyone can learn to sing better. Carol Vaness offers this advice to anyone who wants to improve his or her singing skills.

 Practice deep breathing: relax your shoulders, take a deep breath (like a swimmer), and then let the breath come out slowly.

 To check that you’re breathing correctly, lie down on the floor, put your hand on your abdomen,² and take a deep breath. Your hand should rise—not fall—as you breathe in. When you breathe out, make a hissing sound so that the air comes out slowly. You’ll feel your abdominal muscles move. That’s the way air should come out when you’re singing.

 If you’re singing in the school chorus, don’t try to sing louder than the person next to you. You will only strain your voice. Instead, listen to that person and sing together.

 When you have to sing high notes in school, listen to the note that the teacher gives you for pitch, and think of that note before you sing. When you’re alone, sing “ooo” softly for three or four notes up the scale and then back down. Sing those notes a little higher each time. As you practice, the notes will become easier to reach.

 Try not to yell when you sing. Yelling is fun on the playground, but singing is about making music.

¹ **debut:** first public performance

² **abdomen:** part of the body where the stomach is located