

Microphone Technique for Singing **Robert Higginbotham**

At first glance, a vocalists' microphone may seem just like an 'amplifier' for a voice. A tool to allow the vocalist to be heard above the backup music. Just as different amplifiers have different characteristics, microphones have different characteristics. Before delving into details a few IMPORTANT points to remember

- Never put your hands around a microphone during a vocal performance. Holding it by the body is fine, but do not let your hands come up around the microphone itself.
- All microphones respond differently at different distances. Get a feel for this when initially 'testing the microphone' (You know – 'Testing 1,2,3')
- Vocalists have different voices requiring different EQ settings on the PA. Therefore, the vocalist that is going to use a microphone should test that microphone.
- In poorly wired venues there is a possibility you will receive a shock from a microphone. The possibility is greater if you are playing an electric instrument as the p.a. system and instrument amplifier grounding may not be in synch. Incorporate checking for this condition by touching the microphone when testing it (if playing an instrument, hold any metal part of the instrument when touching the microphone)
- Never sing through a microphone, or play an electric instrument barefoot. This greatly increases the possibility of a severe, even fatal electric shock.
- Do not point a microphone directly at a p.a. speaker or a p.a. monitor as this can cause feedback.

The Basics

A microphone converts the signal it is receiving (your vocal) into an electrical impulse that is then sent to a p.a. system for amplification. If a vocalist gets too close to a microphone with a loud note (signal) it will distort at the microphone before being sent to the p.a. system, resulting in a distorted performance. Most live application microphones work best when the vocalist is an inch or two away. The vocalist needs to get a feel for these distances when testing the microphone and constantly monitor these distances during performance. Gradually move away from the microphone and listen to the effect. Gradually move to the sides of the microphone and listen to the effect. At what point does the vocal sound start to fade? At what point is the microphone not picking up the vocalist. Remember these distances. Remember that all microphones are slightly different – even two that are the same make and model.

The general rule of thumb is to "back off" the microphone a little bit when singing loud passages and get closer to the microphone when singing at lower volumes. One should also 'back off' the microphone any time they are singing harmony so that the melody stands out. In the case of multiple (i.e. three or four part) harmonies, the harmony vocalists should 'back off' just a little more to compensate for the fact there are more voices.

Unless you are whispering, you never want to be right on top of the microphone. This will almost always lead to distortion. If you are having trouble hearing yourself above the back up band it may be that the

monitor speakers (if you have them) need to be turned up. If people in the audience cannot hear you then either the p.a. system needs to be turned up or the back up band needs to come down.

As said earlier, all vocalists are different. Some project more than others. All have different tonal qualities (i.e. bassy, nasally, etc.) Different vocalists require different EQ settings (bass, midrange, treble) to best suit the individual tones of their voices. When testing, listen to your voice coming back through the p.a. system. It should not sound 'muddy', distorted, or overly trebly. It should sound clear, present, and pleasant. Experiment with different settings – drop out some of the lows (turn down the bass). How does that sound? Drop out some of the mid (turn down the midrange). How does that sound? Experiment as often as possible in this area – especially if you have, or a friend that has, a p.a. system. Not to seem overwhelming but keep in mind that not only do microphones sound different – different p.a. systems\components sound different, and rooms also sound different. So, the perfect EQ setting that you had last night, may not work with the same microphone, the same p.a. system, the next night in a different room.

Beyond the Basics

Vocalists have to soften the consonants “P” and “B” when singing through a microphone. Both these consonants can easily produce an unwanted “Popping” noise when amplified through a microphone. Listen to your lips naturally ‘pop’ as you pronounce these consonants. This is this pop that needs to be softened when singing. This takes practice.

Likewise the soft “C”, S, and Z can cause an exaggerated hissing sound through a microphone. Good singing technique dictates that a singer rarely dwells on these sounds anyway, but it is especially important to not dwell on them when singing through a microphone.

Microphones on stands are very effective at picking up the sound of someone tapping, or especially stomping, their feet on stage. Be cognizant of this when singing. This can be distracting, especially during a soft passage.

Microphones can pick up sound for a long way. If you need to say something to another band member, get far away from the microphone to say it, unless you want to share your message with the audience. Remember that unless the p.a. system is turned off during breaks, anything you say on stage can be heard by the audience if you are in close proximity to the microphone(s).

Microphones can be used for special effects too. Sometimes it may be effective to move towards or away from a microphone when holding an extended note. Or move from side to side to create a special effect. Try diminishing the natural volume of an extended note while moving closer to a microphone for an interesting effect.

Remember to turn off the p.a. system before unplugging cables from microphones to avoid ‘pops’ which can potentially damage speakers.

Never swing or otherwise move a microphone by it’s cord, unless you like buying cords. Last but not least, try not to drop a microphone. Most models don’t take to it too well.

Enjoy !