VOICES:

The way you sound is an important part of who you are and the image you project to other people

— Dallyn Lynde, Citizen

By Barbara Edie
Citizen correspondent

At 4 o'clock in the afternoon I answer the telephone with that raw, raspy, early morning voice.

"Hello, Kathleen Turner?" My friend at the other end of the line inquires.

"Not quite," is the response, in a few octaves lower than my usual sound. "This cold may have given me her voice, but I still don't have her legs . . . or her movie career."

Why does a small drop in voice pitch alter the impression a person gives to others?

Thanks to a horrendous cold, my deeper, breathier vocalization, transformed a five-foot, four-inch, warm but hardly what I'd call sultry, woman into the image of Hollywood goddess.

Friends were quick to observe and comment on my new connection with actress Kathleen Turner.

"It's that voice."

Turner is a 37-year-old, tall, blonde movie star with legs up to her armpits and a voice that melts men and the ice in their drinks at the same time. She is as well known for her sonorous, seductive sound as her acting ability.

"You should be getting some great phone sex out of this," male friends suggested during my temporary new-found sound.

A deeper, fuller voice seems to be perceived as more alluring — sexier — in our society.

But cultural preferences aside, variations in pitch are influenced by gender, genetics and breathing techniques, as well as vocal cord irritation or inflammation.

On the average, the difference in pitch between men's and women's voices is almost a full octave. For example, a typical female speaking voice corresponds to three half-tones below middle C on the piano. A standard male sound registers an octave and a half tone below middle C. Biology takes credit for much of the reason why; as the popular song goes, "Papa sang bass and mama sang tenor."

Longer vocal cords

In pubescent males, the sweet soprano drops to an alto as the surge of testosterone enlarges the larynx (voice box). A larger voice box means the vocal cords vibrate more slowly.

They resonate through the nasal and oral cavities, also larger in males, to produce a deeper, stronger sound than in females — like an echo in a bigger canyon.

Men also have longer vocal cords.

"If you take the strings of a piano, you'll see the lower the note, the longer the string, and that puts men into a different range than the female voice," explains Nancy Hauser, a voice specialist and former professional singer.

A girl's voice also lowers in puberty, but the mild transition often goes unnoticed.

Once the larynx is enlarged, the effects are irreversible. Men are stuck with larger vocal chambers and deeper voices, much to the dismay of some transvestites. But men who joke or burst into an operatic falsetto after a blow to the testes have nothing to fear if they have passed puberty.

A woman on the other hand can develop an Adam's apple and a deeper voice through testosterone treatment, but she may not like the beard that goes with it.

Hauser, of Communication Dynamics in Lambeth, Ont., knows what minute changes can maximize sound and captivate a listener.

"A half step in music — dah, dah (slightly lower on the second dah) — in a speaking voice can make the difference between an OK voice and a truly dynamic voice," Hauser says in an audible but soft edged tone.

"That little bit of change, so light, is the difference between night and day in a voice."

"It's the difference between the mouse and the lion," agrees voice researcher Jacqueline Sacks.

But the acoustic variations between men and women are greater than the physical differences in vocal tracts warrant.

In feminine speech, the voice is pitched toward the upper end of the natural range, the diaphragm level is reduced and the resonance thinned.

Sounds mature

Says Sacks: "Men may try to talk as if they are bigger than they are and women may talk as if they are smaller."

A deeper voice implies authority and maturity. Hauser is convinced it was her voice that landed her a job with a prominent New York City music publisher when she was just 25 years old and knew little about the business.

"I sounded more mature than I was. I wish I could still look 25, but I'm so glad I don't sound it."

We all know about "dressing for success," says Christina Harvey, "but in first impressions it's 55 per cent appearance and 37 per cent style and sound quality of your voice. The other eight per cent is what you're saying."

Harvey owns Voice Dynamics in Toronto. She says that in the initial seconds of a first encounter, the person who is listening to you is making a lot of decisions about whether they want to continue listening — for business or for pleasure.

"Those first 12 seconds are important and there's a heightened awareness of how important voice is."

London, Ont. voice consultant Mary Dow agrees. "Voice is part of the image . . . The way you sound is an important part of who you are and the image you project to other people.

"Loosen up those lips, relax your jaw and breath deeply," she commands, in a tone slightly higher pitched than one might expect from a voice coach. Steady "aaaaaahhhhhhs and ooooooos" rise to the ceiling, followed by a rapid succession of "ooo aah ooo aah ooo aah" that soon fades to giggles. This is voice class — for about 35 post-adolescent would-be broadcasters.

A 19-year-old all-Canadian type raises his hand first when Dow asks the class, "Who gets nervous when speaking in front of people?"

He says in an already resonant voice, "Voice training gives you confidence."

Throughout the hour-long training session, Dow reminds her students to do what to most of us comes naturally: "Remember to breathe."

To improve voice resonance, people don't need to change their habit of breathing as much as their breathing habits. "North Americans are lazy breathers . . . We are not breathing properly. We're using the upper part of our chest and therefore our voices are higher," says Hauser.

The key to a lower, full-bodied sound "is resonance — the vibration of the voice." Each individual has what Hauser calls "an optimum pitch level." But it involves more than just pitch.

"In order to have resonance in the voice, you must breath from the diaphragm — the muscle below the rib cage."

As soon as pitch rises (Hauser strains to reach a high "Dorothy of Oz" tone), "The voice becomes young, thin and not as pleasant."

As soon as pitch falls, the breathing takes over and speaking is at an optimum pitch level. "The voice is now full, rich and mature sounding."

So how do I find my optimum pitch level?

There are several different techniques, says Hauser. "If you take a note and go down the scale and find that you can go further down than your speaking voice — quite a degree further down, you'll know automatically that you're not speaking at your optimum pitch."

With a cold, I was probably speaking at my optimum pitch level, she says. The chest congestion forced deep breaths — from the diaphragm — and increased the voice's resonance. Even a bad cold has its merits.

To demonstrate the point, Hauser places her hands on my rib cage. "Take a deep breath."

My shoulders rise as I inhale through my nose what I think is the maximum amount of air.

Wrong move.

If done properly, when breathing from the diaphragm, the rib cage expands but the shoulders stay stationary. And inhaling through the mouth, increases effectiveness. This technique allows a deeper breath which produces a more resonant, lower pitch voice for a longer period of speech, says Hauser.

Lower with age

Genetics and age also contribute to the way we sound. We often hear on the phone, "you sound just like your mother (or father)."

"We inherit a certain quality of the voice from our parents," says Hauser, "but you can improve on that innate quality."

She adds that in many cases, the voice gets slightly lower with age. This is due partly to relaxation — the cords may stretch or loosen, but this doesn't happen in all cases. "There are a lot of old ladies that sound like old ladies . . . and some 30 and 40 years old that sound like they're 12."

Regardless of what contributes to voice quality, is lower better?

Mike Atkinson, a social psychologist at the University of Western Ontario who researches non-verbal behavior, says, "In general a high pitched voice is perceived as happy, in both men and women."

Other studies link voice pitch to deception, says Atkinson.

"If you record lie responses, voice pitch is higher in both men and women, when the person is lying." So pitch may also be an indicator of stress.

He says there are no studies to prove that a low voice is necessarily more attractive, but adds, "It's because it's different . . . and if you look at the studies, it's more credible — more convincing."

In terms of pure voice quality, a wide range is acceptable, Atkinson says. As for his personal preferences in a woman's voice, "it makes no difference."

Shakespeare wrote: "Her voice was ever so soft, gentle and low — an excellent thing in a woman." (*King Lear*, Act V, scene 3.) A smooth, low tone may have been poetry to his ear.

So, the appeal of that "Kathleen Turner" low, smoky voice, is not a recent or unlikely phenomenon.

"It's the fullness of the voice — the roundness that is really seductive," says Hauser, "and the raspy quality."

"Do you think men find that attractive?"

"Oh yeah."

But raspiness in a voice is often temporary and more commonly caused by vocal cord inflammation or acute vocal abuse, says Dr. Paul Odell of the Ottawa Civic Hospital's department of otolaryngology.

Smoke and other environmental irritants can inflame the vocal cords, as can viral infections and allergies. But he says, "The most common cause of hoarseness is vocal abuse — from the child who screams to rock singers to school teachers who yell a lot."

Considered sexier

In cases of sustained voice strain or abuse, polyps or nodules may develop on the vocal cords, although they will often disappear when the voice abuse stops, says Odell.

He also warns that prolonged voice changes may indicate vocal tumors and should have medical attention. "If voice hoarseness lasts more than a week, someone should see you."

It's a change in voice from one level to another that is important, he adds. "There is no reason in a person's adult life why voice should change unless it's a problem."

But for those who come by a lower voice naturally, it is often seen as desirable. And it may be considered sexier simply because it's easier on the ears.

Decibels (dB) measure the loudness or intensity of sound. Loud conversation reaches levels of 50 dB, whereas quieter speech registers at 20 to 30 dB. So a lower, more resonant sound is much easier for the human ear to take.

"To wake up every day to this," Hauser says in a strident, almost sick bird call noise, "it's annoying. A lower voice is also sexy because of its warmth."

The phenomenon of phone sex seems to confirm that, indeed, a voice can seduce in the absence of physical contact. Can we all sound sexier and capitalize on a lower, richer voice?

"Everyone has the potential for a more resonant voice," says Hauser.

She says with both resonance and sincerity, "You could be Kathleen Turner."

(Barbara Edie is an Ottawa freelance writer.)

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