

# Mature female singers: teaching tips and myths



*Mature female singers are a misunderstood and under-estimated force, says Rebecca Moseley-Morgan, a leading teacher and voice researcher.*

The Chair of Education for the British Voice Association, Moseley-Morgan has taught older women singers for almost 30 years.

She began researching the older female voice after observing anomalies between her own observations as a teacher and those in scientific literature.

Having helped many older female students sustain range, power and stamina she believes the functionality of the voice can be maintained with hard work and good, targeted teaching.

Moseley-Morgan spoke to iSingmag about her teaching career and her most recent academic paper *Vocal Competency and Health for the Mature Female*. Here is part 1 of our conversation with her.

## **What sparked your interest in teaching mature voices?**

I was home with small children (one of whom had been chronically ill), so getting back to singing work at that time was not an option. I couldn't teach children because after school times did not work with my schedule, and children nearly always seem to have colds, and my son was not allowed to come into contact with germs as he had little immunity.

People heard me singing in church and asked if I would teach them. The students were mostly mature women who sang in the many choirs in and around Oxford. I loved this work from the start. The students were such interesting people, often very high achievers in their fields and very passionate about their and what pleasure it brought to their lives. It was very different from teaching children and the routine of

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and what pleasure it brought to their lives. It was very different from teaching children and the routine of preparing them for exams.

### **What was your approach when you first started teaching mature female singers?**

Initially, I taught as I had been taught, but soon realised that this was not adequate. I started doing courses, mainly with the British Voice Association and reading whatever I could find on voice science. This was about 25 years ago and there was not so much information available as there is today.

I observed that as my teaching methods improved, my students improved, and I quickly gained a reputation for teaching the older voice. Being curious by nature, I wanted to find out what was happening. I decided to do proper academic research, I have always been a life-long learner, and during my days on the road with various opera companies, I did a degree with the Open University in music and philosophy. Around the same time, I met [Jenevora Williams](http://www.jenevorawilliams.com/) (<http://www.jenevorawilliams.com/>), and she inspired me to follow in her footsteps and start my own research. I returned to OU and did a Masters in musicology which gave me the research tools I needed. It also gave me the pathway for my own research. I did not want to try and be a scientist but do my research from the point of view of musicologist and singer.

### **What are some of the common misconceptions in the singing world about the older female voice?**

Mainly that the range will decrease, that it will become wobbly and that the tone will alter, possibly becoming harsh or shrill. The main misconception is that decline is inevitable and irreversible. My research shows that this is not true. If the muscles are targeted correctly, they will work effectively.

I have come across the following misconceptions:

1. There is nothing that can be done with an old voice
2. Many believe that the older person is not interested in the science behind the voice and uninterested in applying the science.
3. Many believe that older singers will become bored and disinterested if asked to do too much technical work.

It is necessary that every teacher has the skills to tackle the problems of the older singer.

It may take a long time to effect changes to vocal technique and to correct ingrained habits, great patience is needed. I always look for tiny improvements not perfection.

### **You were drawn to researching the older female voice because you discovered anomalies between your own observations and scientific literature on the subject. What were they?**

The literature suggested that the ageing process can mean that the mature voice may become less resilient due to a decline in respiratory system function, atrophy or bowing of the vocal folds, decline of the musculoskeletal system, ossification and calcification of the laryngeal cartilages, and/or loss of stamina, mental function and a reduction in enervation.

Across a lifespan, the human voice is subject to environmental threats such as chemical pollution, smoke and any air-borne irritants. It is also subject to emotional stress as the target organ for the experience and communication of emotion at a primal level. Additionally, the impact of menopause can cause problems for the mature voice.

Typical problems which my students complained of were:

1. Loss of range
2. Un-evenness of tone due to an inability to negotiate register changes
3. Breathing difficulties:
  1. Breathily tone
  2. Insufficient breath
  3. Poor budgeting of breath across a phrase

#### 4. Lack of understanding how to control the breath

4. Wobble
5. Vocal fatigue
6. Confusion over conflicting vocal advice from many different sources and making the wrong kind of effort in order to overcome the difficulties they were experiencing with their voices.

So, you can see, that some of these complaints could easily be the outcome of what science suggests will occur as we age. However, my own students were improving and continuing to improve.

The anomalies were not that the scientific literature was incorrect, as certainly I did observe evidence of the aging process as described in the literature. However, it is the assumption that decline is inevitable and irreversible which is where the anomalies lie. I looked at sports science literature and observed how older people were able to keep their bodies active and functioning.

The anomalies were:

1. The upper range will be lost
2. The register changes would be difficult due to calcification and ossification causing stiffness
3. That flexibility would be lost due to the calcification and ossification
4. Bowing of vocal folds would cause breathiness
5. Atrophy of the vocal folds would cause increased phonatory effort.

I found that if one targeted these areas with vocalises the function could be maintained, however, the singer needs to be really proactive with continuing to practise in between lessons. I also said I did not have a magic-wand, I could show them the way, but they had to put in the work. I reckon that the absolute minimum amount of targeted work needed is 20 minutes every other day doing the programme of work that I have given the student. This did not include time spent singing in choir or learning repertoire.

Findings from my research showed

1. Improvement in respiratory function
2. Increase in vocal range
3. Decrease in vocal effort and improved stamina
4. Increase in vocal power
5. Improved continuity and evenness of vocal tone.

#### **How did the participants in your most recent study respond to your work?**

With great enthusiasm and commitment. Some were already my students. Others have taken on my methods having been involved in the study. They all now come to me from time to time for vocal workouts. (I give lessons where I created a programme of work for a student which I record and send them away to work on it. I normally teach students once a fortnight at most to about once a month. I give them a tool-box of techniques which they can apply to whatever is happening with their voices.)

#### **How does your research work inform/influence your teaching?**

1. Mainly that I can confidently tell students that improvements can be made, if they work at it. My teaching is not only based on my experience but backed up through research.
2. If they work at it and maintain the functionality of their voices the benefits are massive
3. I have learnt how to give a student tools so they can take control over their own voices and not be reliant on a teacher who obviously is not with them all the time.
4. I am confident that functionality can be maintained, and it is normally some massive life event that ends a singing career before the voice gives up.
5. Change is normal, embrace change. We all know that some mornings we wake up feeling great other mornings groggy, this is normal. Singers need to be aware that voices change from day to day as well as year on year. It's normal. The tools I give them will deal with this.

### What further areas of voice teaching are you exploring?

The last two weeks I have been doing some work with **Kenneth Bozeman** (<http://www.kenbozeman.com>) and previously with David Howard. For about the past two years, I have been grappling with a thought that using psycho-acoustics could be a useful tool in teaching the older voice. David Howard made me aware that as a teacher, I have hunches about what I am hearing and that these hunches would be reflected in the sound. I realise now, these are things which I have learned to listen for over the past 30 years.

Following work with Kenneth Bozeman, I now understand how through analysing a voice with software such as **VoceVista** (<http://www.vocevista.com/>), I can observe these hunches translated into a visual representation of the sound. Sometimes, the software can pick these things up before the ear can. This could allow the teacher to put in place the effective teaching methods to make corrections or adjustments early, before a problem becomes ingrained. This is the line of research I am currently pursuing, and I am hugely excited about it. I would like my legacy to be the creation of tools which I can pass on to others, which will allow them to put into practise what I have learned through 30 years of teaching these wonderful mature voices.

### Have you any further thoughts on the subject of voice?

What has yet to be quantified or may be impossible to quantify, is my personal input and my passion for working with the older voice. I would like to impart this passion to other teachers, I would like them to see past the wrinkles and grey hair and embrace what can be achieved for the older singer and what benefits it can bring. This can be a very valuable part of any teaching practice.

Absolutely finally, I recently received the sad news that a student and close friend of over 20 years had lost her battle with cancer. This lady had many issues with health, but throughout all she kept singing because of the joy that it brought to her life and how it improved her quality of life and sense of well-being which helped her cope with life's challenges. She sang in several choirs, local am-dram productions and sang solo with friends in church concerts to raise money for charity. She totally epitomises the benefit of working with the ageing voice and value of my research and so I have decided to dedicate my thesis to the memory of Nannette Barker.

**Website:** [inspectorvoice.co.uk](https://www.inspectorvoice.co.uk) (<https://www.inspectorvoice.co.uk/#!>)



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