



Ballad of the tone deaf

In which our correspondent admits to a lifetime of lip-synching, but learns that, apparently, anyone can be taught to sing in tune. BY PAMELA STIRLING

Sing
Sing a song
Sing out loud, sing out... flat

Nah, that doesn't sound right. But, then, an awful lot of the singing in this country doesn't sound right, does it? This is possibly the only nation where hardly anyone knows the second verse of the national anthem - and that's a *good* thing.

This might sound singist. But I'm putting my hand up as one of the main culprits. I have to reason to believe, however, that I am not the only New Zealander to be banned from singing "Happy Birthday". I am possibly the only one to have also incurred a two-year suspension for an incident involving Christmas carols. And there was a regrettable moment during the rugby test against Wales when my rendering of the words "Hear our voices we entreat"

... well, it's not exactly bloody confidence-building when the national anthem draws to the attention of hysterical tourists the fact that, when it comes to singing, some of us just happen to be, sniff, other-abled.

The thing is, it's starting to get downright embarrassing when a group of Kiwis - one that doesn't include kapa haka members - travels overseas and is asked to sing. We typically launch with great gusto into "We are the boys from down the farm, we really know our cheese ..." Now, it's tragic enough that the most uplifting lyrics New Zealanders can be guaranteed to know are "And boy, it's got a *moidy* taste!" But all too often what happens is someone gets sentimental and the song somehow stumbles on to become a mumbled medley involving "Pokarekareana". The full lyrics to which are "Pokarekareana Something Something Roto-rua".

In a karaoke world where even the formerly inhibited Japanese can not only belt out songs such as "Satisfaction" but also seem to know all the lyrics to every song ever written - admittedly, the words to songs such as Paul McCartney's "My Love" turn out to be simply "woe woe woe woe woe woe woe woe woe woe" - our little attempts at singing just don't get that chorus of approval any more.

What makes it worse is that there is often, as at funerals, one New Zealander in the group who can really warble. Just to prove it, that person will hold a note longer than a car horn going through Wellington's Mt Victoria Tunnel. At this stage everyone else's voices start losing mo-mo-mentum and the whole thing lurches along like a minibus with transmission problems.

So why can't we display the spine-tlingling might of Welsh vocal power at a

footy match? Or experience the extraordinary emotion of sitting in church pews, such as those in New York or Alabama as black choirs belt out songs so elevating that you walk away as high as you'll ever get?

The answer from every music expert I ask is that we *can do* that - everyone can be taught to sing in tune; only one in a million is truly tone deaf. Most singing ability comes down to what the traffic cop told the soloist who asked, "How do you get to Albert Hall?" His answer? "Practice, practice, practice."

But that sounds way too hard. Many of us are so convinced we can't sing that we are not about to sign up for lessons with the kind of music teachers who wave little sticks in front of choirs. That's possibly because it was one of those little sticks that first drew attention to our propensity to sing slightly amended lyrics at school. Instead of "moment of peace, brief arctic bloom" it might - admit it - have come out on occasion as "moment of peace, brief farted boom".

But that's nothing compared to the humiliation of that moment when the teacher frowns and starts scanning the children in front of her singing a high-pitched version of something like "Frere Jacques". The teacher becomes fixated: somewhere in this joyous jumble of notes is a steady off-key drone. Strong and self-assured, but seriously off-key. The teacher stops the choir. On the occasion this happened to my class, the teacher, a nun, requested not unkindly that I sing a little bit of me song solo. Then she paused for a very long time and said, "Hmmm." It was immediately clear to me and my entire standard-two class that what she really meant was, "What the [short bad word] have we got here?"

And so began my long lip-synching career. It's not often these days that a girl hears the whispered words, "Can't you just fake it?", but it does happen.

Still, singing badly does have its upside. When you've been put on-hold for 15 minutes by the power company, it's immensely gratifying to be able to say, when someone finally comes online, "I'll be with you in just a moment" and then launch into your own tuneless hold music: "Oh-oo-oh that don't impress me much ..."

But I secretly long to be able to sing without inflicting pain. And one afternoon recently when I was listening to Wayne Mowat on National Radio - other people sing along to music stations in their car, I listen to Mowat - I was all ears when he introduced a singing teacher who until recently could not sing and yet was now claiming that anyone can sing. By the time Mikal Nielsen had finished demonstrating to Mowat some of his relaxation and breathing techniques, I was singing along.

So. La te doh.

Not singing well, oh (short bad word) no. But no worse man Leonard Cohen or Bob Dylan. In fact, very *like* Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan. But, by the time that I had got hold of Nielsen's book and CD and done one run-through of the 55-minute CD, I was away. Singing in tune.

"I want all New Zealanders to start singing again," says Nielsen. "We've become silent consumers of music." The culture of music learning has become so formal and rigid that in some suburbs all you hear is little hands sawing away at violins. "People have stopped whistling and humming in the street. People used to sing as they worked." We need to improvise more; come up with "The Ballad of the Policy Wonks".

ONE OF THE MAIN CULPRITS in stopping people singing, says Nielsen, is the song "Happy Birthday". "It's actually a very difficult song to sing. It uses a full octave range and most New Zealanders wouldn't be able to sing any more than an octave and a half - we're capable of eight. If the person who starts it doesn't start at a pitch suitable for you, you're going to run into trouble at that note a little bit down the track where people get to 'happy bir...' and drop out. If people are confident, they could just harmonise and stay on the note 'happy birthday dear bum bum'. But the easiest thing would be to change the song. The tune of 'Amazing Grace' is easier because it only spans five notes. It has no semitones, it's pentatonic."

The only musical term I would apply to the prospect of singing "Amazing Grace" is catatonic. But Nielsen assures me that it's "easier than 'Happy Birthday', 'Twinkle Twinkle' and 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', all of which have semitones."

Nielsen is attuned to the problems of people like me because he has been there himself. Born in Denmark and now based in Hawke's Bay, Nielsen spent half his life in "vocal imprisonment": too scared of failure to sing aloud. He once, during his early career in banking and computers, screwed up the courage to go to a singing teacher in Paris. But he was so tense, "my shoulders were nearly at my ears". It not until taking courses with Australia's Chris James and England's Michael Deason-Barrow,

that Nielsen reconnected with the "natural singing voice I was born with". Within 12 months he was teaching people to sing.

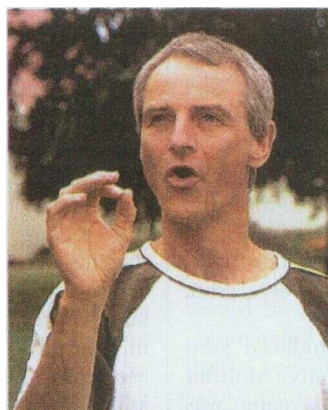
How? "First, I give people permission to yawn. It's a big no-no to yawn in public, but it forces you to breathe into your diaphragm: the main breathing muscle. Nine out of 10 New Zealanders do not breathe properly. My breathing was shocking. When you're breathing, the tummy should be moving out. For most people, it's the other way around.

"The most simple and powerful tools are big breaths, followed by a sigh, a 'letting-go' sound - aaaaaaaah or a groan. Imagine a bottle being filled with water. The water goes in at the top, but the bottle fills up from the bottom. Use the same image for your breath."

Most of us have a tight throat, says Nielsen. The best thing there is to hum. Feel the vibrations in your body. Listen to how the timbre of your voice changes as you play with sounds - such as the 'oo' as in "you", 'ah' as in groaning and 'ee' as in "me". His potent toning exercises "can be done in the car, anywhere", says Nielsen. "Okay, *not* in a bank queue."

Initially, you don't have to worry about singing in tune. "In my courses if you're out of tune, I say, 'Sing louder!' just being given permission to sing out of tune is often enough to bring people into tune."

Renowned Australasian singing teacher Tony Backhouse tells of beginners like me starting



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- MIKAL NIELSEN, SINGING TEACHER

the vocal workshops he conducts here (www.tonybackhouse.com.au) with "folded arms, furrowed brows and tight lips". After 45 minutes they're howling, stamping and singing four-part harmony.

The problem with learning how to sing is knowing how to stop. Having mastered "Happy Birthday", I find myself singing it every day (Elvis's birthday, birthday of the push-up bra, so many festive occasions). Others at home join in. The whole song takes maybe a minute. Afterwards, we sit around, looking nonchalant, until the tension is unbearable and someone grins and starts up again: "Happy ...". By nightfall, we're hoarse. Can't sing. •

Mikal Nielsen's website: mm.soundseasy.co.nz