



A Case Study of Vocal Maintenance of Singers on a National Broadway Tour

Dr. Christianne Roll and Dr. Jeanne Goffi-Fynn

The intent of this study is to understand more fully the effects of frequent travel and demanding performance schedules on vocal function and maintenance of professional singers employed on a national Broadway tour. The study is a mixed method study with multiple data points. Surveys were administered to all four participants after the last performance at each location of the tour in the US. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the participants. Due to the challenges of the Coronavirus, only four locations were utilized due to closing of venues. The lead performers were of the same national Broadway tour and were identified by the extensive singing demands of their roles coupled with a demanding tour schedule of eight shows a week.

Vocal health literature, while expanding, still has its limitations. General vocal hygiene includes hydration, balanced phonation, and a supported vocal sound with minimal effort. However, singing is highly variable, creating challenges in collection data. Most literature on vocal health is anecdotal, and there are no direct studies from a National Broadway Tour. One area of recent research is in “vocal loading” however the terminology seems mixed with terms including frequency of a vocal load, vocal effort, and vocal fatigue. These terms often appear to be used interchangeably with blurred distinctions.”¹ In Moniz’s new article, he talks about these high impact events and of balancing especially necessary in CCM styles of high impact singing.² Again, these variables are further complicated by a relentless show and touring schedule.

To create a portrait of each participant, the interviews covered the topics of vocal maintenance, vocal practice, overall health, and challenges of touring.

Our first participant, Amanda (pseudonym) is a 31-year-old female, with an MFA in acting. Prior to starting her MFA, she had vocal damage, which was treated by a top otolaryngologist in New York City. This is her first national tour, and her role requires her to sing at the extent of vocal range – sustaining a very high belt production, as well as scream. Her main strategy for vocal maintenance is steaming. She steams every night for 45 minutes before bed, and steams again when she wakes up. Sleep is also imperative – and a benefit of touring, since she has more time to sleep. Her vocal practice occurs in her dressing room, but she really credits vocal maintenance as her main strategy. Amanda said the weather was a big challenge because the tour locations happened to be in cities that were unseasonably cold and wet, so she was in that similar climate for over three months. She also found establishing a sense of home to be difficult and remedied this by setting up her nightstand in each hotel in an identical fashion. Being away from loved ones was also challenging, and she expressed relief that the tour was over, saying, “it is not for everyone.”

Joseph is a 30-year-old male, with a BFA in musical theatre. This is his first national tour, and his role requires a large singing range as well as speaking in an accent which causes different resonance strategies through the show. His main strategy for vocal maintenance is hydration. His first question in every new theatre is “where is the water? How do I get access to hot and cold water?” He warms up in his dressing room, but this routine varies based on the weather and the theatre. He also avoids eating a large meal before each show. He also credits sleep as the best way to maintain overall health, as well as a clean diet, and exercising as much as possible. He travels with an exercise bike so that he can get aerobic activity regardless of the weather. Joseph said the inconsistency of the living and working space is the biggest challenge. The location of his dressing room was different in each theatre, for example, six floors above the stage in one city. In this city, he had to leave his dressing room earlier to make his entrances on time and not out of breath. He noted that one week is not enough time in a place to establish a routine, and it is hard to find the motivation to use his free time for enriching activities.

George was a 39-year-old male, with a BFA in musical theatre. This is his second national tour, and his role requires forceful speaking as well as beautifully floated singing. His role has an hour and a half break within the show, so he must maintain his voice backstage. Unlike the rest of the participants, he drives to each city with his wife and toddler. His main strategies for vocal maintenance are hydration and reducing his vocal load and speak gingerly with his family members throughout the day. If he doesn’t, he can feel tired during the show and he knows he talked too much. He warms up in his dressing room with exercises that have adapted based on the needs of the role. He avoids eating a large meal before shows because “it feels like there is a huge weight in the place where I need to breathe. I can’t support myself the way I need to sing.” George also stressed his vegan diet and daily exercise for maintaining overall health.

George reported that traveling by car, instead of by air, was a vocal maintenance strategy. He noted that this was of utmost importance when the corona virus pandemic was starting and expressed relief to not need to fly with his family. George reported that adjusting to the weather was the biggest challenge, due to walking to the theatre in extreme conditions, and the adverse vocal effects of heat and air conditioning. He discussed adjusting to the different theatres, in terms of their acoustics and backstage spaces – again mentioning the theatre with dressing rooms on the sixth floor. He also mentioned wanting to stay up after a show and socializing but knowing that he cannot do that every night and still maintain his vocal and physical health. (Due to the impact of the coronavirus, Singer #4 was not able to complete the interview portion of this research.)

From these interviews, several commonalities emerged. The participants mainly credit hydration, sleep, reducing vocal load, and scheduling of meals as strategies for vocal maintenance. They utilize their dressing room to warm-up directly prior to performances, and this warm-up routine is adaptable. However, the participants stressed vocal maintenance as their most important strategy for professional vocal function.

For overall health, the participants all reported that daily exercise, a healthy diet, and sleep were imperative for their vocal functions. Adjusting to weather, different living spaces, and different theatre spaces were the most challenging aspects for touring.

It is also important to recognize the emotional challenges of touring that the participants expressed such as isolation and family demands, coupled with performing challenging vocal roles every day. Certainly, one expects to see more of these emotional challenges post-Covid. It is also of note that the singers were not in consistent contact with a voice teacher and did not report using voice lessons, dialogue with a voice teacher, or specific teacher guided vocal exercises as a vocal maintenance strategy. This finding presents an opportunity for voice teachers, and touring productions themselves, to be more active in providing vocal support for singers who are performing in a challenging environment.

An interesting outcome of this research is that when the participants were asked if their strategies to maintain vocal and overall health on tour were different from their behavior when they are in a non-touring show – they all responded no. As George stated: “This behavior is fundamentally ingrained in me so that I can do any work at any time.”

To add further information to the overall understanding of the singers’ vocal function on tour, the research survey consisted of five questions about the effect of the tour location, transportation, housing, theatre space, and schedule. As the results of the interviews, the weather of the tour locations had the biggest effect on the singers, when specifically compared to categories of allergies, humidity, and altitude. For housing, all categories of the survey affected the participants. The participants were active in selecting their housing in each city – aiming for spaces with kitchenettes and within walking distance to the theatre.

For the theatre space, all categories of the survey affected vocal ability. The acoustics of the theatre space could help or hinder vocal production. One participant stated, “not great acoustics. We can’t hear ourselves very well, resulting in pushing sometimes.” But the acoustics of a different theatre “were excellent for such a large house and really allowed me to not work as hard to hear or be heard.”

Two remaining categories of the survey: travel and tour schedule, were not prominently discussed by the participants in the interviews. From the survey data, the length of time in each city was perceived to have the greatest influence. The first two stops of the tour lasted for one week and the participants reported being tired from the quick turnaround coupled with a lack of sense of continuity in the city, whereas the next two stops lasted for two weeks, and this amount of time in a city created a better sense of routine.

Conclusion

Some big picture takeaways from this initial research are the participants were very focused on maintaining vocal and overall health by using hydration, sleep, diet, and exercise daily. However, this focus was fundamental to their persistence as professional musical theatre performers, and not specifically unique to their work in a national tour. Performing in a national tour can present unique emotional challenges for maintaining personal relationships and creating a sense of community.

Perhaps of most import for the voice community, singers were not relying on personal voice teachers or vocal lessons provided by the touring company to help with their vocal practice and maintenance. This absence suggests an opportunity for voice teachers and the musical theatre community to offer and advocate for more vocal support for performers on a Broadway National Tour. With the rise of Zoom lessons during Covid, it seems this option has become a reasonable solution.

Suggestions for Future Research

This research has presented a baseline of information about vocal maintenance of singers on a national tour. This research intended to include data from additional tour cities. However, due to the coronavirus, the national tour associated with this research closed in March. When this research continues, having data from additional tour locations with varied climates, a larger population of participants, and a specific interview protocol investigating the vocal demand of participants' roles will present beneficial guidelines to voice teachers, professional singers, and aspiring singers currently pursuing a musical theatre career.

¹ Eric J. Hunter et al., "Toward a Consensus Description of Vocal Effort, Vocal Load, Vocal Loading, and Vocal Fatigue," *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 63, no. 2 (February 2020): 509–532.

² Justin Moniz, "Regulating Vocal Load in High Impact Singing" *Journal of Singing* 78 (May 2022): 601-607.