

Marvin Gaye

April 2, 1939 – April 1, 1984

Music is one of the closest link-ups with God that we can probably experience. I think it's a common vibrating tone of the musical notes that holds all life together.



Marvin Gaye! What a versatile voice! It allowed him to express so many personality facets; the cynic, the romantic, the social activist, the lover... oh yes... the lover!

Gaye famously had a four octave range and he exploited every last bit of it. I want to talk about the way he used his upper register and the purity and pre-autotune pitch perfection of that sound.

Have a listen to the single version of 'I Heard It Through The Grapevine'. You'll notice several times when Gaye sweeps

effortlessly up to some beautiful high notes. The first one is on the word 'guy' in the first verse. It jumps out to us from nowhere. That cry on 'guy' expresses all the anguish that the lyric needs; the pain of the jilted lover. But how does he leap up there and back down again with such ease. Well, firstly, he knows he's gonna do it. He's ready and prepared. His abdominal muscles were primed and ready for the extra little thrust necessary, his larynx was primed to tip into the slightly different angle needed for the upper register, he heard the note inside his head before he went for it.

All of this is second nature for some singers, others need to work at it. But we can ALL do it! Being prepared is so important. Know where you're going! Then you can be the boss of your voice rather than feeling like it's dictating terms to you. If you're not physically prepared and charged for big changes of pitch or volume how can you expect to do them seamlessly? Above all, the main reason for the beauty and clarity and ease (yes, once you're prepared it does feel easy) of those high notes is the beautifully pure vowel shaping. Remember this word: diphthongs. It's gonna come up a lot! A diphthong happens when a word changes shape in your mouth half way through. It can often happen on an 'i' or 'Ay' sound - so it could happen on Marvin's lyric 'guy' but it doesn't. It doesn't sound as 2 different sounds 'Gah' and 'Eeeye' . It sounds only as 'Gáaaa'. Listen to the sound of the word. No diphthongs there. It is a simple gáaaa. And likewise in the 2nd verse he leaves beautifully up an octave on the word 'you'. The shape of that 'yoooooo' could

be sung by Pavarotti! One simple shape through the sound. Not 'yoooo' 'w'. No ending to the sound. No full stop on a different mouth shape.

EXERCISE

Let's find your perfect high notes! Sing a note that's high for you, not right at the top of your range but one which comes out higher than your speaking range. If you're not sure where that is, say the word 'yeah'. Now say it loud as if you've heard some fantastic news! Take the pitch up; say 'yeah' as if you've just won the lottery! Higher! It's a lot of money! Is that as high as you're speaking range will go? Now imagine you've climbed a mountain and you've reached the top. Give a triumphant 'whoop!'. If you haven't already, take it higher than the 'yeah'. Take it into your upper register. It's not a word any more. It's just a whoop! How high can you whoop? Stand up, use your whole body, punch your fist in the air and whoop! Are you feeling a sensation of rush in your abdomen as the sound comes out? Think about the powerful rush when you sneeze or - sorry to mention this but it might help - when you throw up! Those are the muscles that naturally get behind your voice in those triumphant or distressing moments when you're not thinking, when there are no words, when only a 'whoop' or an 'áaaaaaaaaaaa' will do!

They are the muscles that will kick in if you're in danger. In a life or death moment, your fight or flight impulses will help you

cry ‘héeeeeeeeeelp’ with added super-power. And, if you learn to harness them, those are the muscles that will get behind your breath when you sing those high notes. These combined with the perfect facial, nasal and throat shaping on that beautifully pure vowel will guarantee pitch perfection!

Now it’s time to figure out your best shapes. Marvin can help you. Make a written note of when he sings each gorgeous high note in ‘Grapevine’. Listen to his sound. Try to emulate all the ‘sound-shapes’ he makes on that high, head voice note. Try a few different high notes. These ‘sound shapes’ aren’t something to look at and copy. You *listen* and copy until it sounds like a similar ‘shape’ of sound. Your tongue will change position, the back of your throat may well rise up, your eyebrows may rise, your cheeks lift and spread out. And never forget the abdominal energy which sends that breath up and through the larynx.

What if you struggle to even *hear* if you’ve reached the right note? That’s about training your ears. And we’ve never been better tooled up to do that. Nearly all of us have recording devices in our phones and recording yourself repeatedly, then listening carefully is a great way to improve. I’ve used this system with students and it takes time and concerted effort. But it works! Pitch-challenged students can get better at spotting when they’re out of tune and then work to change it.

Sing a song, record yourself and listen very carefully. I mean VERY carefully. Make a written note of places where you're not happy with the pitch. If you literally can't hear them at all, don't worry. Have a session with a musical friend and ask them to point out when you go sharp (too high) or flat (too low). Don't be hurt or upset and don't ask them for any other critique. This is just an exercise you are doing. It's just like learning any other skill. You may need to call on the help of a friend with more experience 'pitch ears' a few times but eventually you will start to spot pitching issues yourself. Then, when you know the notes you're not pitching correctly, you're halfway there. Now, you just need to practise moving to the notes again and again. Sing the song with special attention to those notes and intervals, record yourself, listen again and repeat. Use all the skills above; the breath control, the shaping of the vowel shape. You will get there. Just as dyslexics can eventually read, pitch-challenged people CAN eventually sing in tune. It will take longer for more than for others. That's not fair. But - as we know - life isn't fair. If you stick with it you will get there!