
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Singing in tune



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Georgina

And I'm Georgina.

Neil

[Singing badly] DO, RE, MI, FA, SOL, LA, TI, DO !

Georgina

Neil! What are you doing?! Please stop!

Neil

Oh, hi Georgina! I'm practising my singing. I'm going to do virtual karaoke tonight with some friends!

Georgina

Karaoke?! – really, Neil?! I heard you singing at the Christmas party and to be honest I think you might be **tone deaf** – you know, you can't sing in tune.

Neil

Me? Tone deaf?! I'm a nightingale! Listen: DO RE MIII !

Georgina

Between you and me, I think Neil is a bit **tone deaf**! Wait until I tell him singing is the subject of this programme.

Neil

I heard that, Georgina! And I'm glad this programme is about singing because I love it and what I lack in ability, I make up for in enthusiasm!

Georgina

I'm sure your karaoke buddies would agree with you, Neil.

Neil

That reminds me of my quiz question, Georgina. As you know, I love karaoke - meeting up with friends to sing the words of our favourite pop songs over a musical backing track. Karaoke was invented in Japan and its name is a combination of different Japanese words – but what words? What is the meaning of ‘karaoke’? Is it:

- a) machine voice?,
- b) angry cat?, or,
- c) empty orchestra?

Georgina

Well, after listening to you sing, Neil, I’m tempted to say b), angry cat, but that would be mean, so I’ll guess, a) machine voice.

Neil

OK, Georgina. I’ll take that as a compliment. But however good - or bad - my singing may be, there’s no doubt that the act of singing itself is a very complex skill, involving a huge number of processes in our bodies and brains. So what happens physically when we sing a musical note?

Georgina

Usually something unexpected in your case, Neil! So here’s Marijke Peters, presenter of BBC World Service programme, CrowdScience, to explain exactly what happens when we open our mouths to sing.

Neil

Listen out for the different body parts Marijke mentions:

Marijke Peters

Vocal folds, also called **vocal cords**, are crucial here. They’re two flaps of skin stretched across your **larynx** that vibrate when you sing and create a sound. The pitch of that sound, how high or low it is, depends on the frequency of their **vibration**, so if you want to hit the right note they need to be working properly.

Georgina

Important body parts needed to sing include the **vocal cords** - a pair of folds in the throat that move backwards and forwards when air from the lungs moves over them.

Neil

The vocal chords are stretched over the **larynx** - also known as the voice box, it’s the organ between the nose and the lungs containing the vocal folds.

Georgina

Singing is similar to what happens when you play a guitar. The vocal cords act like the guitar strings to produce a buzz or **vibration** – a continuous and quick shaking movement.

Neil

They vibrate over the larynx which, like the body of a guitar, amplifies the sound.

Georgina

So why do some people (Neil!) find it hard to sing in tune? Is it because they cannot physically reproduce sounds? Or because they hear sounds differently from the rest of us?

Neil

Well, according to psychology professor, Peter Pfordresher, it's neither. He thinks that for poor singers the problem is generally not in the ears or voice, but in their brains – specifically the connection between sound perception and muscle movement.

Georgina

So there's no hope for you?

Neil

Not necessarily. Here's Professor Pfordresher encouraging the listeners of BBC World Service's, CrowdScience:

Peter Pfordresher

I think there's reason for you to be hopeful and however accurate or inaccurate your singing is, one recommendation I would have for you is to keep singing because there is evidence that singing itself, whether accurate or inaccurate, has benefits socially and also for **stress responses**, so good reason for you **to keep it up!**

Georgina

Whether you're tone deaf or pitch perfect, there's lots of evidence for the health benefits of singing.

Neil

For one, singing strengthens your **stress responses**. Otherwise known as 'fight or flight', **stress responses** are the human body's reaction to external threats that cause an imbalance, for example pain, infection or fear.

Georgina

From operatic Pavarottis to enthusiastic karaoke fans, Professor Pfordresher thinks singers should **keep it up** – a phrase used to encourage someone to continue doing something. So, Neil, maybe you should keep singing, after all!

Neil

You've changed you tune, Georgina! Maybe you'd like to come with me to karaoke next time we're allowed out?

Georgina

Hmm, I think some practice would be a good idea, but first let's return to the quiz question. You asked me about the meaning of the Japanese word karaoke...

Neil

Right. Does karaoke mean, a) machine voice, b) angry cat, or c) empty orchestra? What did you say?

Georgina

I said a) machine voice.

Neil

Which was... the wrong answer! Karaoke actually means c) empty orchestra, or in other words, music that has the melody missing.

Georgina

Well, that's better than an angry cat, I guess! Let's recap the vocabulary starting with **tone deaf** – a way to describe someone who cannot sing in tune or hear different sounds.

Neil

Like playing a guitar string, singers use their **vocal cords** – a pair of folds in the throat that are stretched over the **larynx**, or voice box, another part of the throat, to produce a sound **vibration** - a quick, shaking movement.

Georgina

No matter how good or bad a singer you are, singing is good for your **stress responses** – the 'fight or flight' mechanism your body uses to regain inner balance.

Neil

So no matter what Georgina thinks about my singing, I'm going to **keep it up** – a phrase used to encourage someone to continue their good performance.

Georgina

That's all from us. Keep singing and join us again soon at 6 Minute English. Don't forget we also have a free app you can download from the app stores. Bye!

Neil

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

tone-deaf

unable to sing tunes accurately or recognise different notes

vocal cords

pair of folds in the throat that move backwards and forwards when air from the lungs moves over them

larynx

organ between the nose and the lungs that contains the vocal cords; otherwise known as the voice box

vibration

continuous and quick shaking movement

stress response

the human body's reaction to anything that disturbs its internal balance, for example pain, infection, fear or exercise

keep it up!

used to encourage someone to continue doing something