

# The Art of Singing

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About six months ago, Alana finally started taking singing lessons. She's wanted to sing ever since she was a young girl, and now she was finally realizing her dream. Today she auditioned for the lead role in her school's production of *Annie*.

When Alana's mother took her to see *Annie*, Alana became inspired to really try singing. *Annie* was performed at an old theater called The Palace. The Palace isn't like the big multiplex movie theater downtown. For one thing, it was built in 1922 and is considered a historical building. For another, it only has one screen.

The stage at The Palace is decorated in an ornate fashion with red velvet curtains as tall as an oak tree. The Palace only has a lobby and one room with a stage. The room is very big and the sound echoes through the whole venue. If you were a loud opera singer, you could perform here and would not need a microphone.

Alana's favorite thing about The Palace was a series of giant brass pipes high up on the wall. To her, they looked like a row of teeth. Alana later learned some history about them. As it turned out, they were part of a great big pipe organ.

Back when the theater was first built, movies didn't have sound. So someone would sit at the edge of the stage and play songs on the organ. That way, there would be music to go with the movie. These were silent movies, but they didn't call them "silent" back then. Many people didn't think there would be a kind of movie with sound. When movies with sound came out, they called them "Talkies." Only then did the once regular movies become known as "Silent Films."

Alana found out that the organ stopped functioning in the 1960s. Now it's just a decoration because the music comes from the movie itself.

When Alana first saw *Annie*, she knew she wanted to audition for the lead role at some time in

her life. She went home and sang “Tomorrow.” She recorded herself singing and listened back to it, but it didn’t sound as good as she thought it had in her head.

Her mother explained that singing is a musical talent, like playing any instrument. “You can’t just pick up a trombone or a guitar and start playing it, can you?”

“No, of course not!”

“Well, your voice is also an instrument. You need to learn how to use it.”

At school, Alana joined a band and the glee club. She learned how to read sheet music and sing scales. She also learned how to sing harmony and improvise with other students.

As Alana learned how to be a better singer, she learned different techniques. If she held her mouth open in certain ways, she could make different sounds. She could open her mouth wide and create an open, bright note. Or, she could push her bottom jaw out and make her voice sound higher. Sometimes, she would scrunch up her face and create a nasal sound. She loved to experiment with different sounds.

One day her music teacher gave her an assignment to write down her five favorite female singers of the 20th and 21st centuries. Alana realized she didn’t actually know a lot of singers, so she went to the local library and took out some CDs to listen to. She wanted to take full advantage of the library’s extensive CD collection.

These were the five artists she took out of the library:

Aretha Franklin

Janis Joplin

Billie Holiday

Whitney Houston

Bjork

Each of these women has a very different style of singing. They are all from different times and

eras. Billie Holiday was popular in the 1940s, whereas Janis Joplin was popular in the 1960s. Janis performed at the famous Woodstock music festival. Whitney Houston had her first radio hit in the 1980s. Bjork is from Iceland and became popular in the early 2000s.

First, Alana put on Aretha Franklin. Aretha is affectionately known as the Queen of Soul. The song “Respect” came on. She belted out the letters, “R-E-S-P-E-C-T.” Her voice was high pitched and clear. Alana tried to emulate it, but she couldn’t do it. It just sounded like she was screaming. This is because her range wasn’t high enough.

A “range” represented a certain amount of tones. It is the distance between the lowest note and the highest note a person can sing. Most people cannot sing as high and as powerfully as Aretha Franklin can.

When Alana tried to hit these high notes, it didn’t sound the same. She lost a lot of power in her voice. Aretha sings high notes very loudly, but Alana sounded soft and operatic. She realized that there is a very good reason for which Aretha is known as the Queen of Soul. “She’s amazing!” Alana thought.

Then, Alana put on some Billie Holiday. An old jazz song called “Stormy Weather” played. When she began, her voice sounded high pitched and a little scratchy, but then she hit the word “weather” and suddenly it was really low. It resonated in her chest. Alana tried to recreate this. She loosened her neck and shoulders and then breathed in from above her belly with the diaphragm.

Alana watched her belly get bigger and smaller as she breathed. She pushed with a breathy cry: “we-aaaaather.” She thought that it sounded pretty good.

Alana ran through the other female artists, doing the same thing. She listened to their voices and tried to copy them. Alana thought that Bjork sounded kind of silly, whispering and screeching like a child. Janis Joplin screamed from her heart and soul. Whitney Houston sang powerfully and clearly, like the echoes of a church choir.

Each singer has a different voice because they form the notes in a different way. The human voice is amazing and elastic. It can stretch in so many different ways. In fact, a person can make different sounds just by choosing where to push the sound. In singing, this is called “placement.” People can make a note through their nose, their chest, or various locations throughout their upper body.

As Alana experimented with different ways of singing, she got more comfortable with what her own voice naturally sounded like. And around this time, it was announced that her school would in fact be producing their own performance of *Annie*. Alana wanted the lead!

When she auditioned for Annie, she sang very powerfully. She let all the notes resonate from her vocal chords and echo around in her head.

“The sun’ll come out... tomorrow!” she belted out. “You’re only... a dayyy... a... wayyyyy!”

Her music teacher applauded.

“Alana, you’ve been working hard to become a better singer, and it shows. Congratulations. You’ve got the lead role! You’re our new Annie!”

When Alana heard this, her dream came true. But she knew her dream didn’t just happen because she wished and hoped it would. She’d been taking lessons and working hard. Finally, the hard work had paid off. She walked home whistling a happy little song.