

# Characteristics of Phonatory Function in Singers and Nonsingers With Vocal Fold Nodules

\*†Cara E. Stepp, †‡§James T. Heaton, †§Tara K. Stadelman-Cohen, †Maia N. Braden, †Marie E. Jetté, and \*†‡§Robert E. Hillman, \*Cambridge and †‡§Boston, Massachusetts

**Summary: Purpose.** The goals of this study were to determine if there were significant differences between singers and nonsingers in the morphology of vocal nodules and the associated impact on vocal function.

**Method.** Participants were 10 professionally trained singers with nodules, eight nonsingers with nodules, and 10 individuals with healthy normal voice (controls). Surface electromyography (sEMG) from three anterior neck locations and acoustic rise times for vowels /a/ and /i/ were measured in all the participants. In individuals with nodules, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, glottal airflow, and nodule location and size were also measured.

**Results.** There were no significant differences between singers and nonsingers with nodules in terms of airflow, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, nodule size, or nodule location. In nonsingers with nodules, airflow and nodule size were significantly correlated, but were not significantly correlated in singers. Vowel rise times and sEMG during vocal tasks did not differentiate among nodule and control groups. Sternocleidomastoid sEMG during initiation of the vowel /a/ was statistically significantly stronger in nonsingers with nodules relative to singers with nodules and controls.

**Conclusions.** Nodule morphology did not differ between singers and nonsingers, although some behavioral aspects of phonation differed between the groups.

**Key Words:** Vocal hyperfunction—Vocal nodules—Neck surface electromyography.

## INTRODUCTION

A frequently occurring cause of hoarseness is vocal fold nodules.<sup>1</sup> Vocal fold nodules are benign lesions, clinically defined as small protuberances located between the anterior and middle third of the vocal fold.<sup>2–4</sup> They are described as being gray, white, or pearl in color and bilateral,<sup>2,3</sup> and can impede complete closure of the glottis leading to breathy voice production.<sup>1</sup>

Although nodules occur in a variety of occupations, they are commonly found in singers (operationally defined here as individuals with professional training in singing).<sup>5</sup> There has been some question as to whether nodules in singers and nonsingers have a common etiology and/or presentation.<sup>6</sup> Previous studies have compared singers and nonsingers with nodules with respect to nodule size and location, and acoustic and aerodynamic measures. Peppard et al<sup>6</sup> rated vocal fold mass on an equal-appearing interval scale from 1 to 6, finding that 10 nonsingers had significantly larger nodules than 10 singers. In a retrospective qualitative review of 312 professional voice users (eg, singers, teachers, and actors) reporting with voice defects, Sedláčková (1961)<sup>7</sup> reported a trend toward differences in size, shape, and location of the nodules seen in singers and nonsingers.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Sedláčková observed that singers' nodules tend to be small, pale/white, and located at the anterior third of the of the vocal fold, whereas nodules in nonsingers tend to be larger, sitting on a larger base, having a gel-like

appearance, and located further posterior. However, no study has confirmed these observations with scientific study.

When compared with nonsingers, singers are much more attuned to their voices, and thus they are more likely to seek treatment in the early stages of formation, when the nodules are relatively small. Further, singers are trained to adapt to day-to-day changes in their vocal mechanism to produce their best voice, making them likely to use differing compensatory mechanisms than nonsingers. These confounding behavioral factors make it potentially difficult to elucidate possible anatomical differences between nodules in singers versus nonsingers.

One possible difference between singers and nonsingers is the role of vocal hyperfunction in both nodule formation and the resulting compensation. Vocal hyperfunction refers to “conditions of abuse and/or misuse of the vocal mechanism due to excessive and/or ‘imbalanced’ muscular forces,”<sup>8</sup> characterized by excessive laryngeal and paralaryngeal tension,<sup>2,9–12</sup> and commonly accompanies voice disorders. For many years, the development of most benign lesions on the vocal fold surface has been assumed to be related to hyperfunctional behavior or phonotrauma.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in 1962, Godfrey Arnold wrote, “vocal nodules and polyps represent a local tissue reaction to the mental strain imposed by inappropriate emotional adjustment to the demands made by society.”<sup>14</sup> However, much is still unknown about the underlying mechanisms of vocal hyperfunction and its role in developing organic disorders.<sup>13</sup> Given the extensive vocal demands of singers, it is possible that vocal hyperfunction plays a smaller role, and that nodule formation is more typically caused by greater vocal use.

The objective measures of airflow and vocal efficiency have been examined in singers and nonsingers. Peppard et al<sup>6</sup> found that singers with nodules performed similarly to nonsingers without nodules on a selection of acoustic and aerodynamic measures, and even outperformed these individuals on maximum performance tasks such as maximum phonation time and maximum frequency range. The glottal airflow magnitude

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From the \*Harvard-MIT Division of Health Science & Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts; †Massachusetts General Hospital Center for Laryngeal Surgery and Voice Rehabilitation, Boston, Massachusetts; ‡Harvard Medical School Department of Surgery, Boston, Massachusetts; and the §MGH Institute of Health Professions School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, Boston, Massachusetts.

Address correspondence and reprint requests to Cara E. Stepp, PhD, Computer Science & Engineering, University of Washington, Box 352350, Seattle, WA 98195-2350. E-mail: cstepp@alum.mit.edu

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(referred to simply as airflow and typically reported in units of L/s) represents the magnitude of airflow through the glottis during vocal fold oscillation. Airflow values have been reported for both singers and nonsingers with nodules and healthy normal voice.<sup>6</sup> Results indicated that mean airflow values did not differ between singers with nodules and those without, but that nonsingers with nodules had significantly greater airflow values than nonsingers with healthy normal voice. Airflow values for all the participants were found to be significantly correlated ( $R^2 = 0.20$ ) with subjective ratings of nodule mass viewed during endoscopy; however, correlations were not calculated within singer and nonsinger categories, leaving the question as to whether airflow values are more or less indicative of nodule size in the two populations.

Vocal efficiency is the ratio of acoustic power to aerodynamic power, calculated as the ratio of vocal intensity to the product of the airflow and subglottal pressure. Jiang et al<sup>15</sup> reported significant differences in the vocal efficiency measures of individuals with nodules and individuals with healthy normal voice at various vocal intensities. However, no comments were made regarding the singing training of these individuals, nor were measures of nodule size indicated. In an unpublished Master's thesis, Fulton<sup>16</sup> explored the vocal characteristics of 10 vocally normal females who were trained singers relative to 10 vocally normal females who were nonsingers, finding no significant differences between the vocal efficiency measures of the two groups when producing vowels at typical pitch and loudness levels. It is unclear, however, if this lack of difference in healthy normal speakers is relevant in a population of individuals with nodules. Further, measures of vocal efficiency have not been shown to be reliable indicators of vocal dysfunction in individuals with nodules.<sup>8</sup> Hillman et al noted that the sensitivity of this ratio to indicate vocal dysfunction was compromised by elevated levels of both translottal pressure and airflow, leading to vocal efficiencies in the normal range.

Some possible objective indicators of vocal hyperfunction include the aero-acoustic measure of dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, acoustic rise times, and anterior neck surface electromyography (sEMG). Subglottal pressure is the driving force behind vocalization, and abnormally high values of subglottal pressure can indicate inefficient valving of the glottal airstream. However, given the inherent relationship between subglottal pressure and sound pressure level (SPL),<sup>17</sup> using raw estimates of subglottal pressure is unlikely to be specific to vocal hyperfunction. Here, we chose to investigate the ratio of SPL to subglottal pressure, often represented in units of dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O. This measure attempts to normalize the subglottal pressure used by the produced SPL, and is associated with the level of effort necessary to achieve phonation.

A common perceptual correlate of vocal hyperfunction is hard glottal attack, which is a method of vowel initiation perceptually "characterized by rapid and complete adduction of the vocal folds before the initiation of phonation."<sup>1 (p78)</sup> A retrospective study by Morrison et al found that 65% of patients with hyperfunction presented with hard glottal attack.<sup>18</sup> Further, comparison of the frequency of hard glottal attack in vocal disorders thought to be related to vocal hyperfunction found higher

frequencies of hard glottal attack in all the groups with voice disorder when compared with a control group of individuals with healthy normal voice.<sup>19</sup> Although clinical practice continues to rely on broad auditory perception to characterize glottal attack, more objective methods do exist (see Ref. 20 for review). Peters et al<sup>21</sup> calculated the rise time of the acoustic signals of vowel production and found a correlation of  $-0.69$  with auditory perceptual ratings of voice onset abruptness, indicating the usefulness of vowel rise time as an objective measure of glottal attack.

sEMG has been studied in attempts to objectively quantify neck muscle tension. Redenbaugh and Reich<sup>22</sup> measured mean neck sEMG of seven individuals with healthy normal voice and seven "hyperfunctional" individuals, finding that the individuals with disordered voice had significantly greater mean normalized neck sEMG during phonation than individuals with healthy normal voice. The sEMG signal corresponded with a single electrode position, centered over the thyrohyoid membrane, a recording position likely to sample electrical activity from the sternohyoid and possibly cricothyroid muscles during production of vowels and a reading passage. The disordered population in their study was varied, consisting of seven individuals with very different clinical presentation, history, and even sex (five women, two men), and the data collection method was relatively rudimentary. The sEMG signals were amplified, filtered, and integrated (2-second interval) in real time, with the integrated values displayed onscreen only and recorded by hand. Moreover, their study did not comment on the past singing training of participants, which could have significant effects on the use of the extrinsic musculature for speech. For instance, in a study of four professional, classically trained singers (baritones) and four nonsingers producing the vowel /a/ at seven frequency points between 90 and 350 Hz, qualitative differences between frequency and laryngeal height were found.<sup>23</sup> In this prior study, nonsingers tended to increase laryngeal height with increases in fundamental frequency, whereas singers tended to keep their larynges below their resting heights for all the fundamental frequencies. Although this study may largely account for technical differences through classical training in respect to laryngeal position, it is possible that singers use their extrinsic laryngeal musculature in very different ways than nonsingers to attempt to compensate for their vocal pathology.

The purpose of the present study was to determine if there are significant differences in phonatory function between singers and nonsingers with vocal nodules. Particular attention was paid to the possible role of vocal hyperfunction by collecting measures of airflow, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, normalized nodule size and location, acoustic vowel rise times, and anterior neck sEMG measures.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 10 adult females with a history of professional singing training and active singing engagement diagnosed with vocal fold nodules before any therapeutic intervention (mean age = 19.7 years, SD = 0.8 years), eight adult females diagnosed with vocal fold nodules before any

therapeutic intervention with no history of singing training (mean age = 34.1 years, SD = 12.1 years), and 10 adult females with healthy normal voice (mean age = 23.8 years, SD = 2.0 years) to act as experimental controls. The group of singers with nodules was composed of working professional singers and full-time college or graduate students enrolled in voice training/singing programs. On the basis of self-report, their primary styles of singing were musical theater (N = 6), pop (N = 2), gospel (N = 1), and opera (N = 1). Individuals recruited with healthy normal voice were volunteers with no voice-related complaints and were screened for abnormal pathology of the larynx using trans-oral or trans-nasal endoscopy with stroboscopy. Although two of these 10 individuals sang for pleasure, none were professionally trained. Participants with nodules were diagnosed based on comprehensive voice evaluation procedures that included endoscopic, acoustic, aerodynamic, and perceptual assessment by a team composed of a laryngologist and one or more certified speech-language pathologists, and images of their vocal folds were collected *via* standard trans-oral endoscopy with stroboscopy.

### Recording procedure

Recordings consisted of a brief vocal assessment of each participant including three trials of the vowels /a/ and /i/, read speech (The Rainbow Passage,<sup>24</sup> six read CAPE-V sentences<sup>25</sup>), and spontaneous running speech. Spontaneous speech was elicited by questions from the investigator or a speech-language pathologist, asking the participant to describe their voice issues (if relevant), or describe what they did the previous weekend (or similar). After completion of these speech tasks, maximal voluntary contraction (MVC) maneuvers were performed. These consisted of asking the participants to perform neck contraction against manual resistance for the purpose of normalizing sEMG data (see *Data analysis*). Each participant provided two to three maximum contractions, each lasting 2–3 seconds.

Simultaneous anterior neck sEMG and acoustic signals from a lavalier microphone (Sennheiser MKE2-P-K, Wedemark, Germany) were recorded digitally with Delsys (Delsys, Boston, MA) hardware (Bagnoli Desktop System; Delsys) and software (*EMGworks 3.3*, Delsys) at 20 kHz. The sEMG was recorded and analyzed in view of current European standards.<sup>26</sup> Participants' necks were prepared for electrode placement by cleaning the neck surface with an alcohol pad and "peeling" with tape (exfoliation) to reduce electrode-skin impedance, noise, DC voltages, and motion artifacts. The anterior neck sEMG was recorded with three Delsys 3.1 double-differential surface electrodes placed parallel to the underlying muscle fibers of the (1) thyrohyoid, omohyoid, and sternohyoid muscles, (2) cricothyroid and sternohyoid muscles, and (3) sternocleidomastoid muscle. The Delsys 3.1 double-differential surface electrodes consisted of three 10-mm long and 1-mm wide silver bars with interelectrode distances of 10 mm.

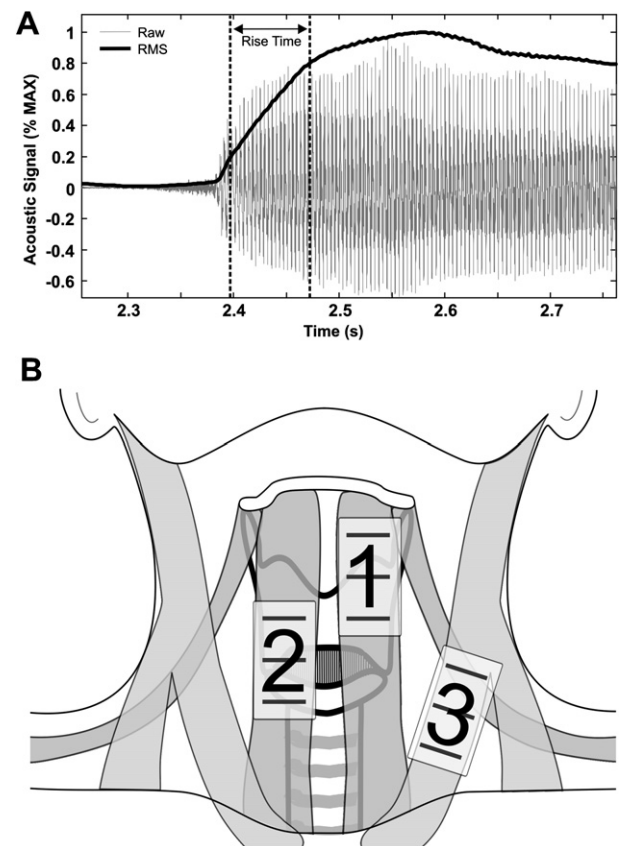
Electrode 1 was centered about 1 cm lateral to the anterior neck midline, as far superior as was possible without impeding jaw opening of the participant. Electrode 2 was centered on the gap between the cricoid and thyroid cartilages of the larynx, and centered at 1 cm lateral to the midline, contralateral to

Electrode 1. Electrode 3 was centered one-third of the distance from the sternal notch of each participant to his or her mastoid process (following Ref. 27). See Panel B of *Figure 1* for a schematic of electrode placements. A ground electrode was placed on the superior aspect of the participant's left shoulder. The sEMG signals were preamplified and filtered using Delsys Bagnoli systems set to a gain of 1000 and a band-pass filter with roll-off frequencies of 20 and 450 Hz.

Individuals with nodules underwent aerodynamic voice assessment with the Phonatory Aerodynamic System (Kay-PENTAX, Lincoln Park, NJ). The participants produced a series of /pæ/ vocalizations at a comfortable pitch and loudness, while the oral airflow was measured with a face mask and pneumotachograph, intra-oral air pressure was sensed with a translabially placed catheter, and the acoustic signal was recorded with a microphone.

### Data analysis

The mean of the root-mean-squared (RMS) values of anterior neck sEMG data computed in 1-second windows (no overlap) was calculated for the entire length of all completed vocal tasks using custom *MATLAB* (Mathworks Inc., Natick, MA) software. Intrinsic laryngeal musculature is most active during

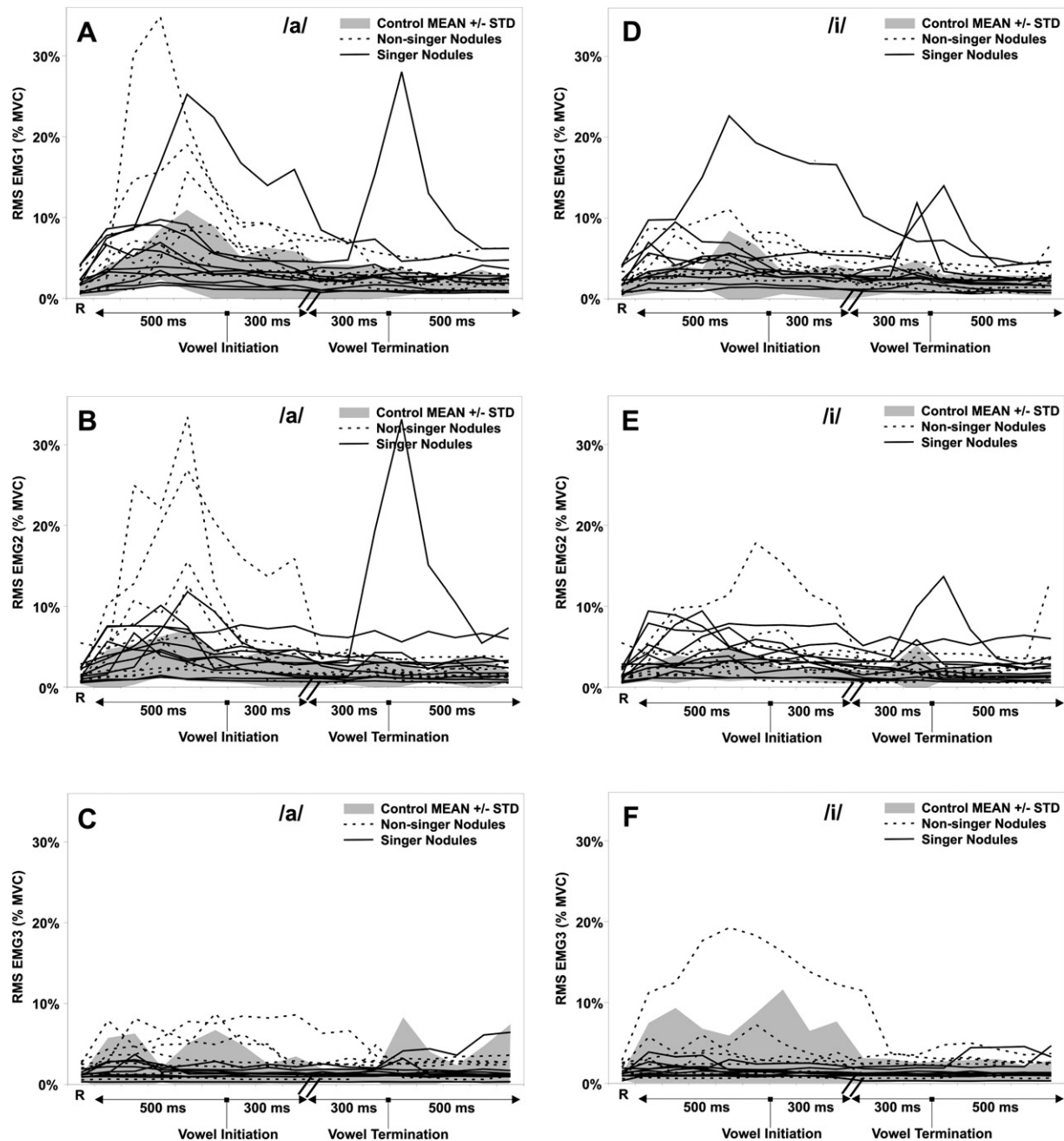


**FIGURE 1.** Panel A: An example of the calculation of the acoustic rise time for a production of the vowel /a/. The thin line shows the raw acoustic signal, and the thick line shows the RMS of the acoustic signal. The acoustic signals are plotted as a function of the maximum values for clear display. Panel B: Schematic of sEMG electrode recording locations.

vowel initiation and cessation relative to the steady-state portion of the vowel.<sup>28,29</sup> Thus, for the production of the vowels /a/ and /i/, the RMS was also calculated for 100-millisecond windows (no overlap) during the 500 milliseconds before and 300 milliseconds after vowel initiation, and during the 300 milliseconds before and 500 milliseconds after vowel termination. To compare anterior neck sEMG gathered among participants, the variability associated with neck surface electrode contact and placement was minimized by normalizing the sEMG to the MVC reference contraction

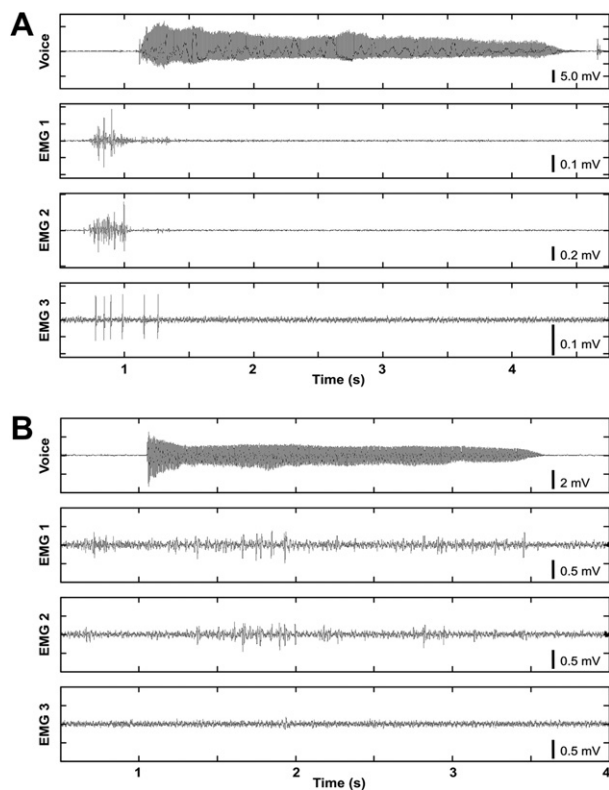
(calculated as the maximum RMS in a 1-second window). It has been shown that for anterior neck musculature, the MVC reference is more reliable than submaximal reference contractions.<sup>30</sup> For this reason, all of the sEMG data presented here are in terms of % MVC.

The air pressure, airflow, and acoustic signals acquired during aerodynamic voice assessment were digitized and analyzed with the Phonatory Aerodynamic System to produce indirect estimates of subglottal air pressure (cm H<sub>2</sub>O), glottal airflow (L/s) and SPL (dB). The ratio of the SPL in dB SPL to the



**FIGURE 2.** The anterior neck sEMG recorded from positions 1, 2, and 3, averaged in 100-ms segments during the 500 ms before and 300 ms after vowel initiation, and the 300 ms before and 500 ms after vowel termination for the vowels /a/ and /i/. The shaded area indicates  $\pm$ one standard deviation from the mean of the participants with healthy normal voice. Individual data for individuals with nodules are shown. Singers are shown in the solid line, whereas nonsingers are shown in the broken line. The initial data point labeled with an “R” indicates sEMG at rest for reference.

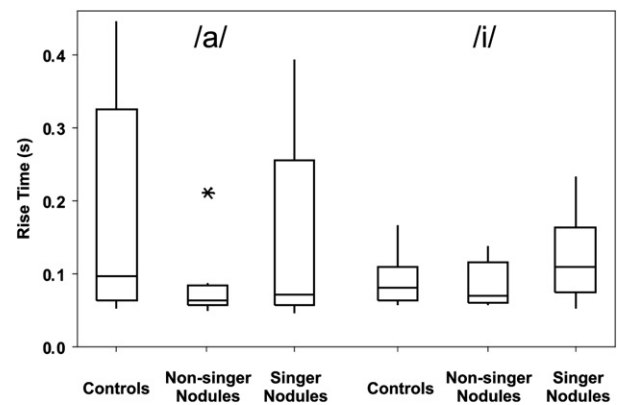




**FIGURE 3.** Two examples of the raw acoustic signals and anterior neck sEMG leading up to the production of the vowel /a/. Panel A shows the signals of a nonsinger with nodules. Panel B shows the signals of a participant with healthy normal voice.

subglottal air pressure was also calculated as a first order estimate of vocal efficiency.<sup>31</sup>

To find an acoustic correlate for abruptness of attack, the acoustic rise times of the vowels /a/ and /i/ were measured by analyzing the acoustic signals similarly to the method used in Peters et al.<sup>21</sup> Peters et al.<sup>21</sup> defined the rise time of the acoustic signal as the time needed for an envelope of the acoustic signal to go from 10% to 90% of the maximum amplitude. To implement this method, the RMS of the acoustic signal in 80-millisecond rectangular windows was calculated in intervals of 2.5 milliseconds (97% overlap). Because of the disordered nature of the voice signals being analyzed and the irregularity of the acoustic signals, the window size used here was modified from the method used by Peters et al.<sup>21</sup> to be 80 milliseconds rather than 40 milliseconds, the slope initiation was defined as 20% of the maximum amplitude rather than 10%, and the



**FIGURE 4.** Boxplots of the acoustic rise time for vowels /a/ and /i/. Horizontal box lines indicate the lower and upper quartiles of the data, with the centerline marking the data median. Vertical whiskers extend from the boxes to the minimum and maximum values of each data set. The asterisk marks a data observation falling more than 1.5 times the interquartile range higher than the third quartile.

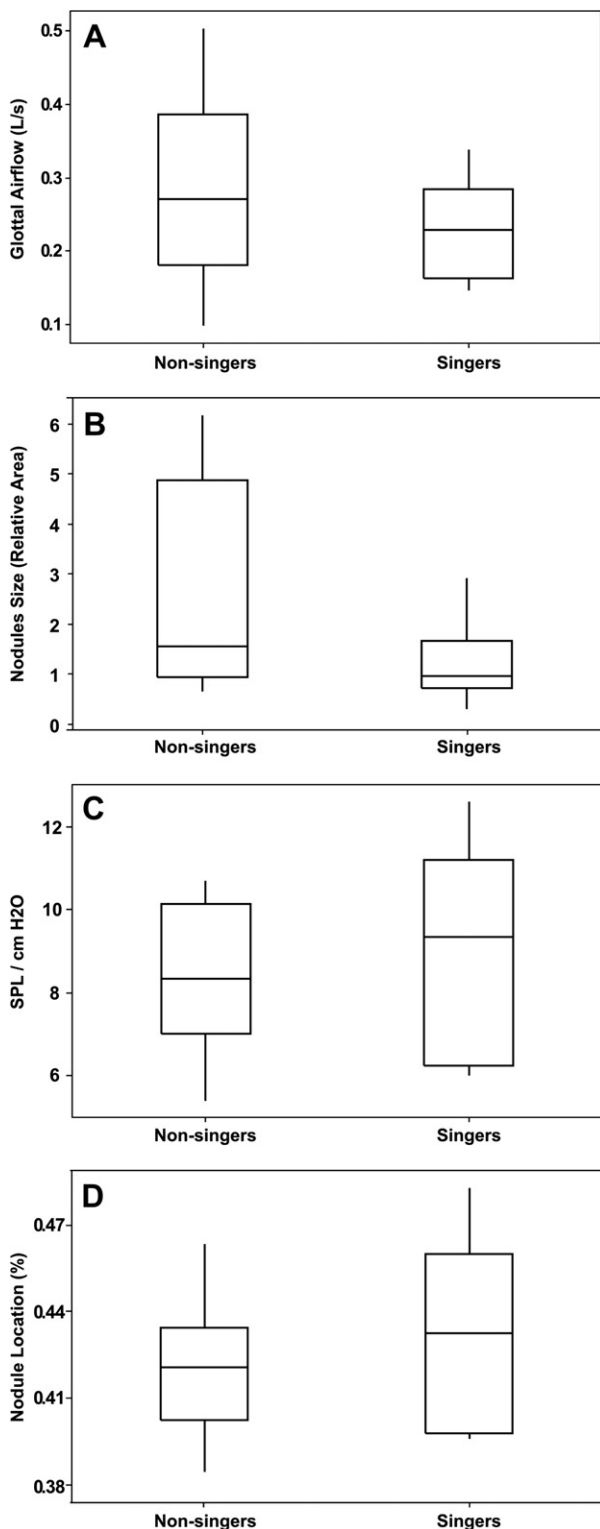
slope termination was defined as 80% of the maximum amplitude rather than 90%. An example of the rise time for a vowel production is shown in Panel A of Figure 1.

For the individuals with nodules, a representative digital still was taken from their trans-oral stroboscopy exam. Stills were chosen to maximize image quality, while showing the full extent of the vocal folds during abduction. The vocal fold stills were analyzed using custom *MATLAB* software that allowed for the following landmarks to be marked (in pixels): the length of each vocal fold (right and left) from the anterior commissure to and including the vocal process of the arytenoid cartilage, the distance from the center of each nodule (right and left) to the anterior commissure, and the visible extent (area) of each nodule (right and left). The marked extent of each nodule was based on the visible changes to the vocal fold surface. In some more mild cases, the area defined as the nodule consisted of only the raised protrusion above the smooth edge of the vocal fold. In more extreme cases, distinct fibrovascular changes to the vocal fold could be seen lateral to the raised surface of the nodule, and these changes were included as part of the extent of the nodule. The nodule location (anterior-posterior) for each participant was defined as the mean of the ratios of the distance from each nodule to the anterior commissure to the total length of the vocal fold. The nodule size was calculated as the mean of the two nodule extents normalized by the mean of the length of the two vocal folds.

**TABLE 1.**  
**Correlations Between Acoustic Rise Time and Electromyographic Measures in All Participants (Controls With Healthy Normal Voice, Singers With Nodules, and Nonsingers With Nodules)**

sEMG 500 msec Before /a/ Initiation	$T_r$ /a/	sEMG 500 msec Before /i/ Initiation	$T_r$ /i/
EMG1	-0.084 (0.582)	EMG1	0.331 (0.086)
EMG2	-0.240 (0.218)	EMG2	-0.085 (0.668)
EMG3	-0.152 (0.459)	EMG3	-0.112 (0.587)

Notes: Associated *P* values for the Pearson's correlations are shown in parentheses. The linear rise time (s) is abbreviated as  $T_r$  during vowels /a/ and /i/.



**FIGURE 5.** Boxplots of the airflow (Panel A), nodule size (Panel B), vocal dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O (Panel C), and nodule location (Panel D) in individuals with vocal fold nodules. Horizontal box lines indicate the lower and upper quartiles of the data, with the centerline marking the data median. Vertical whiskers extend from the boxes to the minimum and maximum values of each data set. “Relative area” refers to the approximation of the nodule size, which was calculated as the mean of the two hand-marked nodule extents normalized by the mean of the length of the two vocal folds (pixels<sup>2</sup>/pixels).

*Minitab* Statistical Software (Minitab Inc., State College, PA) was used to calculate Pearson’s correlations, analysis of variance (ANOVA), Tukey simultaneous *t* tests, and Student’s *t* tests. Effects showing *P* < 0.05 were considered statistically significant. Statistical testing of differences between singers and nonsingers with vocal nodules using Student’s *t* tests was not adjusted for alpha inflation because of the exploratory nature of this study.

**RESULTS**

**Mean anterior neck sEMG and acoustic rise time in all the participants**

The mean anterior neck sEMG at recording positions 1, 2, and 3 during the production of all vocal tasks was analyzed with a two-factor ANOVA by group and vocal task, which failed to find a statistically significant effect of group (control, singer nodules, nonsinger nodules) for any anterior neck sEMG location, but did find a statistically significant effect of vocal task (rest, /a/, /i/, high /a/, low /a/, read sentences, read paragraph, and spontaneous speech) for all the three recording locations (EMG1; EMG2; EMG3). The mean anterior neck sEMG at all three recording positions tended to be lower during rest and production of the vowels /a/ and /i/, and higher during both read and spontaneous speech production.

The anterior neck sEMG recorded from positions 1, 2, and 3 was averaged in 100-millisecond segments during the 500 milliseconds before and 300 milliseconds after vowel initiation, and the 300 milliseconds before and 500 milliseconds after vowel termination. The results of this analysis are shown as a function of group and vowel (/a/ and /i/) in Figure 2. On the basis of the trends seen in the vowel initiation, a one-factor ANOVA of the mean anterior neck sEMG at recording positions 1, 2, and 3 during the 500 milliseconds before vowel production was performed; however, it failed to find a statistically significant effect of group (control, singer nodules, nonsinger nodules) for both vowels (/a/ and /i/) and all recording positions (1, 2, and 3), with the exception of recording position 3 before the vowel /a/, which showed a statistically significant effect of group. Tukey simultaneous *t* tests showed a statistically significant difference between the anterior neck sEMG at recording position 3 before /a/ between the controls (mean = 0.015% MVC) and nonsingers with nodules (mean = 0.037% MVC) and between the singers with nodules (mean = 0.015% MVC) and nonsingers with nodules. No statistically significant difference was found between controls and singers with nodules. Example traces of the raw voice and anterior neck sEMG data for one control participant and one nonsinger with nodules are shown in Figure 3.

A one-factor ANOVA of the acoustic rise time during vowel production (/a/ and /i/) failed to find a statistically significant effect of group (control, singers with nodules, nonsingers with nodules). However, a general trend was seen in the acoustic rise time measure for both vowels, suggesting smaller rise times (more abrupt voice onset) for nonsingers with nodules relative to the singers with nodules and controls. Boxplots of the acoustic rise time measures in the three groups are shown in Figure 4.

Correlations between acoustic rise time and the anterior neck sEMG at recording positions 1, 2, and 3, 500 milliseconds before vowel production are shown for all the groups in Table 1. No statistically significant correlations were found between any of the rise time measures and anterior neck sEMG measures, and correlations were generally weak with  $R^2$  values ranging from 0.01 to 0.11.

### Airflow, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, and measures of nodule size and location in singers and nonsingers with vocal nodules

Student's  $t$  tests on airflow, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, and nodule size and location did not show statistically significant (two-sided) differences between singers and nonsingers with nodules. There was a trend, however, for larger nodule size and greater airflow in nonsingers relative to singers. Boxplots of the airflow, vocal dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, and nodule size and location for the two groups are shown in Figure 5.

### Correlations between measures in singers and nonsingers with vocal nodules

Correlations among vowel rise time measures, anterior neck sEMG before vowel production, airflow, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, nodule location, and nodule size in all the individuals with nodules (singers and nonsingers) are shown in Table 2. Statistically significant correlations were found between a number of the anterior neck sEMG measures, and between airflow and nodule size.

Correlations among vowel rise time measures, anterior neck sEMG before vowel production, airflow, vocal dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, nodule location, and nodule size were calculated separately in nonsingers and singers with nodules and are shown in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. In nonsingers, statistically significant correlations were found between a number of the anterior neck sEMG measures, and between dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O and EMG3 before /a/, airflow and EMG3 before /a/, airflow and nodule size, and airflow and vocal dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O. In singers, statistically significant correlations were found between a number of the anterior neck sEMG measures, and between airflow and linear rise time for /i/, nodule size and EMG3 before /i/, and dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O and EMG3 before /a/.

## DISCUSSION

Contrary to previous speculation,<sup>7</sup> and findings,<sup>6</sup> quantitative measures of nodule morphology did not differ between singers and nonsingers. However, there were differences seen between singers and nonsingers with nodules with respect to some behavioral descriptors of phonation. Specifically, short-term trends in sEMG differed between singers and nonsingers with nodules, as did the relationship between airflow and nodule size. These results suggest possible differences in compensatory behaviors between singers and nonsingers with nodules, and suggest future directions for research into sEMG measures in these populations.

**TABLE 2.**  
Correlations Between Acoustic, Aerodynamic, and Electromyographic Measures in Individuals With Nodules (Both Singers and Nonsingers)

Measure	$T_r$ /a/	$T_r$ /i/	$E_1$ /a/	$E_1$ /i/	$E_2$ /a/	$E_2$ /i/	$E_3$ /a/	$E_3$ /i/	$N_{loc}$	$N_{size}$	SPL/ $P_s$	Flow
$T_r$ /a/												
$T_r$ /i/	0.214 (0.394)											
$E_1$ /a/	-0.139 (0.582)	0.288 (0.246)										
$E_1$ /i/	-0.175 (0.487)	0.400 (0.100)	0.622 (0.006)									
$E_2$ /a/	-0.271 (0.276)	-0.034 (0.895)	0.683 (0.002)	0.183 (0.467)								
$E_2$ /i/	-0.211 (0.402)	-0.204 (0.417)	-0.028 (0.911)	0.131 (0.603)	0.506 (0.032)							
$E_3$ /a/	-0.094 (0.728)	-0.033 (0.904)	0.522 (0.038)	0.062 (0.821)	0.768 (0.001)	0.363 (0.167)						
$E_3$ /i/	-0.150 (0.578)	-0.203 (0.451)	0.328 (0.215)	0.265 (0.320)	0.288 (0.280)	0.167 (0.537)	0.697 (0.003)					
$N_{loc}$	-0.392 (0.108)	0.213 (0.395)	0.045 (0.858)	0.076 (0.766)	0.107 (0.672)	0.263 (0.291)	-0.217 (0.419)	-0.218 (0.417)				
$N_{size}$	-0.289 (0.245)	-0.105 (0.680)	-0.221 (0.379)	-0.216 (0.388)	-0.277 (0.265)	-0.247 (0.323)	-0.145 (0.592)	-0.026 (0.925)	0.108 (0.669)			
SPL/ $P_s$	-0.128 (0.613)	-0.086 (0.733)	0.036 (0.887)	0.216 (0.390)	0.131 (0.606)	0.088 (0.728)	-0.013 (0.961)	0.047 (0.864)	-0.264 (0.290)	-0.439 (0.068)		
Flow	-0.043 (0.867)	0.244 (0.328)	-0.123 (0.625)	0.035 (0.891)	-0.335 (0.174)	-0.292 (0.240)	-0.373 (0.154)	-0.416 (0.109)	0.173 (0.493)	0.624 (0.006)	-0.465 (0.052)	

Notes: Associated  $P$  values for the Pearson's correlations are shown in parentheses. Bold text highlights the parameters for which a correlation significant at the  $P \leq 0.05$  level was found. Abbreviations:  $T_r$ , rise time (s) during vowels /a/ and /i/;  $E_{1-3}$ , sEMG at recording locations 1–3 in the 500 ms before vowel initiation (% MVC);  $N_{loc}$ , nodule location (% vocal fold length);  $N_{size}$ , nodule size (square pixels/pixels of vocal fold length); SPL/ $P_s$ , dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O; Flow, glottal airflow magnitude (L/s).

**TABLE 3.**  
**Correlations Between Acoustic, Aerodynamic, and Electromyographic Measures in Individuals With Nodules Who are Nonsingers**

Measure	$T_r$ /a/	$T_r$ /i/	$E_1$ /a/	$E_1$ /i/	$E_2$ /a/	$E_2$ /i/	$E_3$ /a/	$E_3$ /i/	$N_{loc}$	$N_{size}$	SPL/ $P_s$	Flow
$T_r$ /a/	0.441 (0.274)											
$T_r$ /i/	-0.181 (0.668)	0.372 (0.363)										
$E_1$ /a/	-0.231 (0.582)	-0.423 (0.296)	0.336 (0.416)									
$E_1$ /i/	-0.240 (0.567)	0.243 (0.562)	0.716 (0.046)	0.105 (0.805)								
$E_2$ /a/	-0.099 (0.815)	-0.299 (0.472)	-0.137 (0.746)	0.127 (0.764)	0.532 (0.174)							
$E_2$ /i/	0.078 (0.868)	0.321 (0.483)	0.637 (0.124)	0.424 (0.343)	0.758 (0.048)	0.463 (0.295)						
$E_3$ /a/	-0.099 (0.832)	-0.188 (0.687)	0.326 (0.475)	.893 (0.007)	0.127 (0.785)	0.159 (0.733)	0.617 (0.140)					
$E_3$ /i/	-0.614 (0.105)	-0.147 (0.728)	0.267 (0.523)	-0.181 (0.668)	0.201 (0.633)	-0.174 (0.680)	-0.385 (0.393)	-0.359 (0.429)				
$N_{loc}$	-0.185 (0.660)	0.080 (0.851)	-0.369 (0.369)	-0.160 (0.705)	-0.579 (0.132)	-0.517 (0.190)	-0.671 (0.099)	-0.285 (0.535)	0.096 (0.822)			
$N_{size}$	-0.140 (0.741)	-0.164 (0.699)	0.272 (0.515)	0.465 (0.246)	0.505 (0.202)	0.538 (0.169)	0.824 (0.023)	0.531 (0.220)	-0.526 (0.181)	-0.396 (0.331)		
SPL/ $P_s$	0.189 (0.654)	0.103 (0.807)	-0.501 (0.206)	-0.565 (0.145)	-0.607 (0.110)	-0.480 (0.229)	-0.935 (0.002)	-0.749 (0.053)	0.281 (0.499)	0.714 (0.047)	-0.786 (0.021)	
Flow												

Notes: Associated  $P$  values for the Pearson's correlations are shown in parentheses. Bold text highlights the parameters for which a correlation significant at the  $P \leq 0.05$  level was found. Abbreviations:  $T_r$ , rise time (s) during vowels /a/ and /i/;  $E_{1-3}$ , sEMG at recording locations 1–3 in the 500 ms before vowel initiation (% MVC);  $N_{loc}$ , nodule location (% vocal fold length);  $N_{size}$ , nodule size (square pixels/pixels of vocal fold length); SPL/ $P_s$ , dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O; Flow, glottal airflow magnitude (L/s).

**Nodule size and location**

Surprisingly, no significant differences in nodule size or location were seen between singers and nonsingers with nodules (see Figure 5). There were, however, notable trends for nonsingers with nodules to have larger nodule size relative to singers. This trend is consistent with the work of Peppard et al<sup>6</sup> who found significantly larger nodules in nonsingers relative to singers (as measured with a qualitative six-point scale). Nodule location in the two groups ranged between 38% and 48% of vocal fold length (more anterior), with no obvious trend for a difference between singers and nonsingers. These findings do not support the qualitative observations of Sedláčková<sup>7</sup>, who postulated that the nodules of singers were located more anteriorly than those of nonsingers.

**Aerodynamic and acoustic measures**

Although not significant, nonsingers tended to have greater airflow relative to singers, similar to Peppard et al<sup>6</sup> who found significantly higher airflow in nonsingers with nodules relative to singers with nodules. Measures of glottal airflow were consistently higher than values seen in a normal population (range = 0.09–0.2 L/s)<sup>32</sup>; however, most values for glottal airflow were somewhat lower than those seen previously in two individuals with nodules, who reported with airflow values of 0.41 and 0.49 L/s.<sup>8</sup> Measures of dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O can be estimated for the two individuals with nodules studied by Hillman et al<sup>8</sup> as 8.5 and 8.6 dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, based on their reported SPLs and subglottic pressures. These values compare well with the values seen in our participants.

Although no statistically significant differences were seen among the groups in the acoustic rise times, the acoustic rise time measure for both vowels trended toward smaller values for nonsingers with nodules relative to the singers with nodules and to controls (see Figure 4). This measure has not been previously explored in these populations. Future work with more repetitions of this measure in individuals should be performed to follow-up on the trend found here.

**Anterior neck sEMG**

Although no differences were seen in the mean anterior neck sEMG at any of the three recording positions during the entire extent of all vocal tasks, some interesting trends were noted during the shorter time scale surrounding vowel initiation and termination. These trends were observed in the anterior neck sEMG activity at all three recording locations (see Figure 2), indicating that perhaps some nonsingers with nodules are recruiting neck musculature during vowel production to a greater degree than controls. However, only the anterior neck sEMG at recording position 3 before the vowel /a/ showed a statistically significant effect of group, with nonsingers with nodules showing higher anterior neck sEMG than controls and singers with nodules. Thus, RMS sEMG measures did not show specificity for the presence of nodules in singers or nonsingers, which is consistent with the large degree of variability seen here in both individuals with nodules and controls (cf. Figure 2).



**TABLE 4.**  
**Correlations Between Acoustic, Aerodynamic, and Electromyographic Measures in Individuals With Nodules Who are Singers**

Measure	$T_r$ /a/	$T_r$ /i/	$E_1$ /a/	$E_1$ /i/	$E_2$ /a/	$E_2$ /i/	$E_3$ /a/	$E_3$ /i/	$N_{loc}$	$N_{size}$	SPL/ $P_s$	Flow
$T_r$ /a/	0.060 (0.869)											
$T_r$ /i/	-0.008 (0.983)	0.538 (0.109)										
$E_1$ /a/	-0.188 (0.603)	0.588 (0.074)	0.941 (<0.001)									
$E_1$ /i/	-0.277 (0.438)	0.079 (0.828)	0.591 (0.072)	0.549 (0.100)								
$E_2$ /a/	-0.306 (0.389)	-0.194 (0.591)	0.104 (0.775)	0.154 (0.671)	0.771 (0.009)							
$E_2$ /i/	0.306 (0.424)	0.296 (0.440)	-0.132 (0.734)	-0.241 (0.532)	0.252 (0.513)	0.370 (0.327)						
$E_3$ /a/	0.140 (0.720)	0.057 (0.884)	-0.332 (0.382)	-0.413 (0.270)	0.074 (0.849)	0.440 (0.236)	0.859 (0.003)					
$E_3$ /i/	-0.500 (0.141)	0.234 (0.515)	0.031 (0.932)	0.142 (0.695)	0.453 (0.188)	0.623 (0.054)	0.255 (0.508)	0.388 (0.302)				
$N_{loc}$	-0.375 (0.286)	-0.005 (0.989)	-0.455 (0.186)	-0.453 (0.189)	-0.037 (0.920)	0.311 (0.381)	0.557 (0.119)	0.783 (0.013)	0.544 (0.104)			
$N_{size}$	-0.216 (0.549)	-0.164 (0.650)	-0.038 (0.917)	0.149 (0.681)	-0.137 (0.705)	-0.238 (0.508)	-0.667 (0.050)	-0.753 (0.019)	-0.233 (0.517)	-0.625 (0.053)		
SPL/ $P_s$	-0.026 (0.943)	0.752 (0.012)	0.323 (0.363)	0.497 (0.143)	-0.095 (0.794)	0.002 (0.996)	0.095 (0.807)	0.095 (0.807)	0.299 (0.401)	0.088 (0.809)	-0.140 (0.699)	
Flow												

Notes: Associated  $P$  values for the Pearson's correlations are shown in parentheses. Bold text highlights the parameters for which a correlation significant at the  $P \leq 0.05$  level was found.

Abbreviations:  $T_r$ , rise time (s) during vowels /a/ and /i/;  $E_{1-3}$ , sEMG at recording locations 1–3 in the 500 ms before vowel initiation (% MVC);  $N_{loc}$ , nodule location (% vocal fold length);  $N_{size}$ , nodule size (square pixels/pixels of vocal fold length); SPL/ $P_s$ , dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O; Flow, glottal airflow magnitude (L/s).

Our sEMG results are inconsistent with those of Redenbaugh and Reich.<sup>22</sup> Their study examined seven individuals with hyperfunctionally related voice disorders (two individuals with vocal contact ulcers, two individuals with vocal nodules, and three individuals with vocal fold erythema) relative to seven controls, finding increased normalized anterior neck sEMG during speech in individuals with vocal hyperfunction relative to controls.<sup>22</sup> Apart from the previous issues regarding outdated methodology raised in the introduction, our only explanation for this discrepancy is a difference in the methodology used during the elicitation of MVC used for normalization. Here, each participant was asked to provide two to three maximum contractions lasting 2–3 seconds each. The maximum RMS sEMG for any 1-second window was used for sEMG normalization. Redenbaugh and Reich<sup>22</sup> elicited the MVC by having participants exert a “maximal” force over 15 seconds, the mean of which was used for normalization. This methodology should result in lowered MVC values, but the degree to which a 15-second “maximal” task could differentially affect a disordered group relative to controls is unknown.

### Correlations among measures

Correlations among vowel rise time measures, anterior neck sEMG before vowel production, airflow, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, nodule location, and nodule size in all individuals with nodules (singers and nonsingers) showed significant correlations between anterior neck sEMG measures, and also between airflow and nodule size. The correlations among anterior neck sEMG measures indicate that individuals who use extrinsic laryngeal musculature and sternocleidomastoid (SCM) before voicing tend to do so nonspecifically. Their tendency appears to be to use muscles beneath all of the recording locations during voicing, rather than just particular areas. The significant correlation between airflow and nodule size ( $R = 0.62$ ) is consistent with the previous finding of Peppard et al,<sup>6</sup> that airflow values were significantly correlated with subjective ratings of nodule mass viewed during endoscopy ( $R = 0.45$ ).

When correlations among measures were examined separately in nonsingers and singers, there were a few interesting differences. In nonsingers, the anterior neck sEMG at electrode 3 (SCM) before the vowel /a/ was significantly correlated with dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O ( $R = 0.82$ ) and airflow ( $R = -0.94$ ). Further, airflow was significantly correlated with nodule size ( $R = 0.71$ ) and dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O ( $R = -0.79$ ). One interpretation of this set of correlations is that in nonsingers, there is less efficient compensation for glottal insufficiency. Specifically, nonsingers show a high positive correlation between airflow and nodule size, indicating that the size of the nodule is a major factor in glottal closure. Further, airflow is negatively correlated with dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, suggesting that nonsingers may be using increasingly inappropriately high subglottal pressures to achieve conversational SPLs in cases of increased airflow. The fact that the anterior neck sEMG at electrode 3 (SCM) before the vowel /a/ was significantly correlated with dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O ( $R = 0.82$ ) and airflow ( $R = -0.94$ ) suggests that less vocally impaired individuals may use more anterior neck sEMG before production of /a/. Without further study, it is

difficult to predict whether this is a result of compensatory techniques or causative behaviors.

In singers, significant correlations were found between the anterior neck sEMG at electrode 3 (SCM) before the vowel /i/ and nodule size, sEMG at electrode 3 (SCM) before the vowels /a/ and /i/ and dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, and airflow and the linear rise time for /i/. Some of the differences in correlations between singers and nonsingers indicate that there may be more efficient compensation for glottal insufficiency in singers. Specifically, unlike nonsingers, singers showed no significant correlation between airflow and nodule size. Interestingly, a significant correlation was seen between sEMG at electrode 3 (SCM) before the vowels /a/ and /i/ with dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O ( $R = -0.67$  and  $R = -0.75$ , respectively), possibly suggesting that individuals with decreased dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O are using increased SCM, contrary to the pattern seen in nonsingers. Further, the sEMG at electrode 3 (SCM) during the vowel /i/ was significantly correlated with nodule size ( $R = 0.78$ ), suggesting that individuals with larger nodules were more likely to attempt to compensate with the SCM. Another interesting correlation seen in singers (and not in nonsingers) was the significant correlation between the linear rise time before the vowel /i/ and airflow ( $R = 0.75$ ). This correlation suggests that singers who use “soft” or “easy” onset (associated with large rise times) may adapt a learned breathy style during sustained phonation, leading to increased steady-state airflow values.

One further factor that could affect correlations in singers with nodules is their typical style of singing. While singing, the classical or operatic style is associated with lower subglottal pressures and a lower closed quotient than is the musical theater style.<sup>33,34</sup> Assuming that these singing tendencies carry over into speech, they could affect some of the correlations noted in this group. Most obviously, style of singing offers an alternative explanation for the lack of correlation in singers between airflow and size of nodules. Many of the singers with nodules who were musical theater singers presented with the largest nodules. Given that musical theater singers typically phonate with a higher closed quotient during singing (thereby reducing flow), this underlying relationship could have offset the expected correspondence between airflow and size of nodules, and could explain the lack of correlation between the two seen here in singers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Nodule morphology did not differ between singers and nonsingers, although some behavioral aspects of phonation differed between the groups. Specifically, no significant differences in airflow, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, nodule size, or nodule location were seen between singers and nonsingers with nodules. Correlations among vowel rise time measures, anterior neck sEMG before vowel production, airflow, dB SPL/cm H<sub>2</sub>O, nodule location, and nodule size in all individuals with nodules (singers and nonsingers) showed significant correlations between anterior neck sEMG measures, and also between airflow and nodule size. When correlations among measures were examined separately in nonsingers and singers, some differences were seen.

Some of the differences in correlations between singers and nonsingers indicate that there may be more efficient compensation for glottal insufficiency in singers. In singers, no significant correlation was seen between airflow and nodule size, whereas nonsingers showed a high correlation between airflow and nodule size ( $R = 0.71$ ), indicating that the size of the nodule was a major factor in glottal closure.

Overall, anterior neck sEMG during vocal tasks and acoustic rise time measures did not differentiate singers or nonsingers with nodules from healthy controls, indicating that neither of these objective measures show specificity for the presence of nodules in singers or nonsingers. However, these objective measures could be useful for assessing inappropriate phonatory behaviors noted in some individuals with nodules. Future work should be performed to assess the utility of biofeedback based on these measures over the course of voice therapy through rehabilitation.

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