

VOCAL LESSON #4

COORDINATION

All the essential elements of singing are interrelated.

- Developing excellent resonating ability is significantly dependent upon good breathing technique.
- Breath support is dependent on good posture and muscle tone.
- Articulative skills are effective only when resonance and tone production are good.

The process of combining these singing skills into a single, coordinated vocal technique will not be completed quickly. It may take many months, or even years, before you begin to feel secure in your total singing technique. You will undoubtedly develop further if you continue to work on your vocal technique. However, in the meantime, you can thoroughly enjoy using your singing voice while it continues to develop.

Vocal Interference

To achieve a coordinated vocal technique, you must identify and eliminate problems that can limit its potential. The most common of these is muscular interference - another name for "tension." Removing muscular interference involves learning to disengage certain muscles, rather than simply to engage others. It is usually achieved through conscious relaxation. The most usual areas in which muscular interference can take place include the tongue, the muscles of the jaw and neck, and the abdominal muscles.

1. Tongue Tension:

Eight muscles control the movements of the tongue that are primarily used in speech and singing. Four of these are intrinsic (inside) and four are extrinsic (outside). General tension in the intrinsic muscles can cause inconsistent tone colour among vowels and pitch discrepancies. Tension in the extrinsic muscles causes the tongue to be pulled too far backward and downward, which produces a covered or dark tone and vocal fatigue. The following exercise may help free tension and allow the necessary relaxation to take place:

Exercise:

Rest the tip of your tongue on your lower lip. Consciously relax your jaw and tongue. Practice singing some vocal exercises or the notes of a song in this position using the "ah" or the "oh" vowel. Be aware of the extra space at the back of your mouth. Keep the same feeling as you sing normally.

2. Jaw and neck tension:

Muscular interference of the jaw and neck muscles can cause serious disturbances to tone production and undue vocal fatigue. Since so many people carry the tension of the day in their necks and shoulders, extra attention should be given to relaxation exercises for these muscles.

Exercise to help relax jaw tension:

Consciously relax your jaw, and let it drop. Concentrate on the sensations you feel when these muscles are relaxed. Memorize these sensations so you can recreate them at will. Vocalize a simple five-note descending and ascending scale with an "idiot jaw." Another exercise to release jaw tension is to sing, (using the "ah" vowel) and at the same time, gently move the jaw left and right.

3. Abdominal muscles:

Even these muscles can act as interfering muscles, if they do not relax during inhalation. Tense abdominal muscles are a very common result of nervousness during performance. What happens is a vicious cycle: the tense muscles restrict breathing, which results in inadequate breath for singing; this causes anxiety, which results in more tension; and so on.

The most effective way to avoid tension in the abdominal muscles is to take several deep breaths before beginning to sing and to develop a habit of consciously relaxing these muscles when inhaling. A psychological image that may be helpful is: when you inhale, just let your belly drop.

EXTENDING PITCH AND DYNAMIC RANGES

As vocal skills develop, your range and dynamic capabilities will tend to increase naturally. Efficient breath management is the most important element for developing a larger range and extending your dynamic abilities.

Extending pitch range:

Probably the most basic concept in extending your pitch range is that the higher you sing the more breath energy is required, and the lower you descend the less is needed. Breath support, however, must remain constant at all times. Efforts to force more and more air to reach the lowest tones will not succeed. Adding more air to the highest tones will help you to reach them.

Another helpful idea is to think of a lighter more nasally resonant voice quality when you sing up high, and a richer, fuller sound when you sing low. Be aware that you will not be able to hear the timbre of your own tone accurately, and a teacher with a keen ear can be of great help. The desired high tones should not be unpleasantly nasal, but nasally resonant - that is, rich with high overtones.

Extending dynamic range:

In the early stages of dynamic range extension, practice in the most comfortable part of your pitch range, not in the high or low extremes. Be sure your breathing technique is adequate.

Singing softly requires sophisticated breath control as the diaphragm must resist the abdominal muscles more strongly. Many singers find it easier to produce their softest tones by thinking about a light quality with a bright, forward focus and imagining the sensation of a "hum" in the tone. An effective breath technique is to consciously think of keeping the ribs expanded while singing the soft tones.

Successful loud production is the result of a combination of well-controlled breath energy and effective use of the resonance system. Possibly the most helpful concept in developing more volume in your tone is to imagine and feel a great deal of space in all of your resonators while maintaining strong support from the abdominal and back muscles. Sense an open throat, a free, humming sensation in the nasal cavities, a cathedral in the mouth and generous space in back of the tongue. Never drive the voice — achieve your loudest singing through generous size of the tone, not by brute force.