

VOCAL LESSON #3

ARTICULATION: SINGING WORDS THAT COMMUNICATE

Singers are distinguished from other musicians in that their range of artistic expression includes a literary text.

Singing words, rather than speaking them, presents special articulative requirements. Vowels are given specific pitch and sustained according to the rhythmic dictates of the music. Thus the sung word is necessarily a distortion of the spoken one. However, if the sung word is well articulated, it will be as understandable as its spoken counterpart - and it can carry a musical expression that extends far beyond its literary meaning.

Everyday speech, particularly among Australians, tends to be quite imprecise, and varies with regional differences, accents, dialects, and the like. When speech habits are carried into song, flaws are magnified. Impure vowel sounds and unclear consonants become evident, often making it difficult to understand the words.

Over-articulation is more common in singing than in speaking, because the mouth needs to be so much more open in singing. The tongue and lips must move farther and we must work harder to move them greater distances. This is even more difficult in the high ranges.

Often, when we have become sufficiently familiar with the notes of a song and begin to think more about the words, we concentrate on articulation and our delivery becomes choppy rather than smooth and connected. Instead of forming consonants quickly and clearly, we overemphasize them. In order to avoid this choppy delivery, we must keep the rich, round, resonant sound. This is especially true for a cappella singers.

To form words that will be understood, and at the same time communicate a musical message and its emotions, we must remember the principals of resonance:

- an open, relaxed throat
- a rich tone
- pure matched vowels

Achieving An Open Relaxed Jaw and Throat During Articulation

One of the best ways to understand how to achieve an open, relaxed jaw and throat during articulation is to sing an entire song on one open vowel sound, rather than voicing the words. "Oh" is a wonderful vowel sound to use, while thinking of the operatic, cultured production of that vowel and the concept of singing "through" the vowel.

After practicing in this manner, try to keep the same open, relaxed feeling as you add the words of the song, thinking "Oh," but singing the words through the open "Oh" feeling. Ideally, the vocal line will be an almost continuous tone, as it was when you sang the vowel sound only.

While vowels are the carriers of vocal tone, consonants are the interrupters of it. The sense of the words cannot be communicated and the time and rhythm of the song cannot be accurately conveyed if the consonants are not well articulated.

In accompanied vocal music there needs to be greater emphasis on consonants so the words are understandable to the audience over the instrumental background. But, because a cappella singers perform without accompaniment, there is nothing to sustain the momentum of the sound and the message of the song when a break occurs. In fact, when a cappella singers over-articulate, the consonants stop the tone flow completely and there are "white spaces."

Since consonants shape the tone, the better the quality, intensity and continuity of the tone, the more precisely it can be articulated by accurate consonants. Quick, clear consonants do not "chop up" a singing line, but give it shape and energy.

As much time value as possible should always be given to the vowel, particularly in legato singing. Consonants should receive as little time value as possible, but sufficient strength and energy to project well.

Some rules of articulation:

- Consonants must be thought on the same pitch as the vowel they precede, to prevent the tonal attack from being scooped or flat.
- Consonants should be articulated distinctly, freely and flexibly, rapidly, and as naturally and plainly as in dramatic speech.
- Articulate the proper sound of each consonant; do not substitute one for another.
- Make vowels long, consonants short. Do not shorten the complete rhythmic length of the vowel by anticipating the ending consonant.

VOICED AND UNVOICED CONSONANTS

Voiced	Unvoiced Counterpart	Other Voiced Consonants	Other Unvoiced Consonants
v vine	f fine	l love	h hello
g got	k keep	m mine	wh when
b bit	p pit	n not	
z zip	s sip	r raise	
d dip	t tip	y you	
j jeep	ch cheap		
zh azure	sh rush		
dz leads	ts pizza		
gz eggs	x excite		
th these	th thing		

FUNDAMENTALS OF VOWELS, DIPHTHONGS, DYNAMICS

Matched Vowels:

The style of a cappella harmony that we are studying, 'Barbershop Harmony', requires that vowels be "matched." In other words, each chord should sound like one voice with four different notes.

- Vowels that are not matched cause the chord to sound out-of-tune, even if all the correct notes are being sung!
- Leads have the responsibility of setting the vowel sound.
- Harmony parts have the responsibility of matching the Lead vowels.
- When vowels are properly "matched," the barbershop chord will "Ring," i.e. audible overtones will be produced.

TEN BASIC VOWEL SOUNDS ('Australianized'):

Vowel	Sample Word	Type of Vowel
ee	as in need	Tongue
ih	as in did	Tongue
eh	as in red	Tongue
a	as in cat	Tongue
ah	as in part	Tongue
uh	as in bird	Tongue
oo	as in soot	Lip
aw	as in lawn	Lip
oh	as in moan	Lip
oo	as in moon	Lip

The type of vowel is a description of what is primarily used in forming the vowel sound. For the tongue vowels, the shape of the lips does not change much because the tongue is adjusting slightly to create the sound. For the lip vowels it's just the opposite – the tongue stays in relatively the same position and the lips adjust.

It is essential that singers sing the words with **long pure matched vowels** and **short, clean consonants**. This is the basis for excellent diction.

DIPHTHONGS

Diphthongs are a combination of second vowels sounded within a single syllable, with the greatest stress on the first one.

- Diphthongs are "turned" when going from the first vowel to the second vowel.
- If the diphthong is not "turned," the word changes, i.e. "night" sounds like "not."
- Proper turning of diphthongs is CRITICAL to the success of barbershop singing.
- Both vowels must be heard. The first or primary vowel is sustained like a normal vowel. The secondary one is treated like a clear consonant.
- The first vowel is the important vowel of the diphthong. The second vowel should be executed quickly and deliberately. You can never turn a diphthong too much, if done properly.

The most common diphthongs:

1st (sustained) vowel	2nd vowel	Examples
ah	oo	cow, round, sound
ah	ee	pie, wise, sky, mine, night
oh	ee	boy, joy, toy
eh	ee	day, away, play
oh	oo	blow, go, though
eh	r	hair, there, fair
uh	r	ever, world, girl