

VOCAL PRODUCTION

Lesson 1

Posture: *The Basis For All Good Singing*

This series was previously published in *The Pitch Pipe* during the mid-90s. The series was so popular during its first run we have decided to update it and bring it back for an encore.



By Betty Clipman, International Board of Directors, Houston Horizon Chorus, Region 10

Every Sweet Adeline loves to sing. Whatever we derive from our membership, it is much more rewarding for us when we sing well. Thus, we have great drive throughout our organization to do so. The better each member sings, the better the quartet or chorus sounds and the more rewarding the experience for every member.

Vocal skills are the key ingredients for all performing groups, and individual vocal lessons are the ideal way to improve; however, many of us don't

have the time or money for individual vocal instruction. Even so, there is a way to become a better singer: do-it-yourself vocal production lessons!

With this article, we begin a journey that will continue over the next several issues of *The Pitch Pipe*. The goal of the series is to present information in such a way that each reader will be able to learn and practice improved vocal production techniques, even if it is not possible to take professional vocal lessons. So let's begin ...

Posture is the basis of all good singing. When you study a musical instrument, you are first taught to hold it correctly so that you have the ability

to play it properly. The human voice is the most versatile and flexible of musical instruments. Since we sing with our whole body, it is important, and the basis of all good singing, to learn how to hold the body properly.

The ultimate goal in singing is a freely produced, rich, open and resonated sound. The vocal apparatus must be relaxed. The way the body is held – its posture – has a major impact on whether the vocal mechanism can remain relaxed and free.

Common posture problems:

1. Locking the knees – When the knees are locked, the body is off balance. This causes body tension, which creates a tense singer. Be sure to put the weight forward on the balls of the feet and keep the tail bone tucked under to help avoid inadvertent locking of the knees.

2. Swayback – Sometimes a singer tries to attain a lifted chest by pulling the shoulders back (and consequently tensing them) instead of

Vocal skills are the key ingredients for all performing groups.

using the muscles around the rib cage to lift the ribs out of the waistline. The intercostal muscles surrounding the ribcage are the muscles that should be used to lift the ribs and the sternum. When the shoulders are pulled back instead of the sternum being lifted high, and the buttocks are not tucked under but are thrust backward, swayback posture is the result. In this tense, unbalanced position, good vocal production is not possible.

3. Chest droop – As a musical phrase is sung and air is exhaled, it is easy to allow the chest to cave in and the rib cage to drop back into the waistline. At the end of the phrase, if this occurs, the singer has lost the height of the sternum. As you sing a phrase, consciously retain the height of the sternum and resist the collapse of the rib cage.

You might have other posture problems as well as these three common ones. To monitor your posture, look in a full-length mirror and compare your body alignment to the illustration here and the example photograph. Check each of the ten elements listed beside the illustration (feet, weight, knees, buttocks, etc.).

More information about proper singing posture is available from many sources; an excellent one is <http://www.dummies.com/WileyCD/A/DummiesArticle/id-2013%2Csubcat-ARTS.html>, another one is *How to Train Singers*, a book and audiotape package by Larra Browning Henderson. Both sources include many good exercises as well as vocal production theory. The book package is available through international sales.

If all singers in a chorus will practice and attain good posture, it will make a noticeable difference in the overall sound of the group. So I challenge you to master correct singing posture. When you do, you will notice a significant improvement in the quality of your voice. And you will be prepared to begin work on the next key ingredient of vocal production: breathing. We will take up that subject in the next issue of *The Pitch Pipe*.

Since we sing with our whole body, it is important, and the basis of all good singing, to learn how to hold the body properly.


Sample Exercise

Since posture is a key ingredient and the basis for all good singing, it is important for every singer to practice often enough and long enough to make correct posture a habit. Even after you consider yourself an expert, it is vital to continue to monitor your posture, because it is extremely easy to lapse into incorrect body alignment. Maintaining correct posture even for the length of one song requires considerable muscle strength and control. Regular practice sessions help build strength and endurance as well as reinforcing the techniques themselves.

Here is a simple exercise that will help you develop strength and endurance in the intercostals muscles, so that they are more able to hold the rib cage high and wide more efficiently and for longer periods of time:

- Take in a full breath through the nose, inhaling as much air as possible but without creating any tension in the chest or shoulder area. Expand the rib cage to its capacity.
- Now exhale, using a hissing sound like air escaping from a tire, as you count slowly from one to eight. Resist the inclination to allow the rib cage to collapse while exhaling; use the intercostal muscles to keep the rib cage high and wide.
- Continue to perform the exercise on a daily basis, gradually building up your exhalation time to 16 counts while main-

taining the position of a high, wide, open rib cage.

- Note that the danger in this exercise is tension and overexertion. It is easy to become tense about not allowing the rib cage to collapse. Remain conscious of keeping free of tension, constriction and tightness in the shoulder and chest areas. 

Proper singing posture, from the toes up:

- One foot slightly in front of the other, feet comfortably apart for good balance
- Weight forward on the balls of the feet, heels on floor
- Knees relaxed and flexible
- Buttocks tucked under
- Chest (sternum) lifted high and spread wide
- A feeling of the ribs being lifted up out of the waistline
- Shoulders relaxed, as if hanging on a coat hanger
- Neck relaxed, head able to move freely
- Head remains level
- Chin parallel to the floor, neither lifted nor lowered

VOCAL PRODUCTION

Lesson 2

Breath: *The Fuel For Singing*

This series was previously published in *The Pitch Pipe* during the mid-90s. The series was so popular during its first run we have decided to update it and bring it back for an encore.

By Betty Clipman, past international president, international board of directors, master director, judge specialist moderator, certified judge, Houston Horizon Chorus, Region 10



We began this series of do-it-yourself vocal production lessons in the July issue of *The Pitch Pipe* by discussing posture, the basis of all good singing, and we continue today by taking up breathing and breath support. It is important to realize that all of the subjects we will discuss in this series are interrelated: Proper posture is critical to proper breathing, and just as posture is the basis of all good singing, breath is the fuel for singing.

The tone we produce when we sing rests on a cushion of air; thus, the breath

is the fuel for the sounds we produce. We see, then, how important it is to supply the fuel properly.

The muscles involved in breathing are the intercostal muscles, including the epigastrium and the abdominal muscles, including the diaphragm. (If you are not familiar with the epigastrium, place your right hand just below your breastbone, where you can feel the inverted V of your rib cage. Make a fist with your left hand, put it to your mouth and blow gently onto the fist without allowing any air out. Your right hand will feel the epigastrium pop firmly outward.)

The lungs are where the fuel is stored, but the lungs are organs, not muscles; they are elastic, but not capable of independent movement unless the movement is initiated elsewhere. The lungs are attached to the rib cage and to the diaphragm. When the rib cage is expanded, it pulls the lungs upward and outward; when the diaphragm is lowered, it pulls the lungs downward. When the lungs are stretched in this manner, through expansion of the rib cage and lowering of the diaphragm, a partial vacuum is created and air rushes into the

lungs. If the muscles are working properly, the singer does not have to help the air into the lungs, but simply ensure that the passageway is open. It is the movement of the intercostals muscles and diaphragm that causes inhalation to occur.

What makes breathing for singing different from normal or other specialized breathing is the action of the rib cage. In normal breathing, the rib cage expands to bring in oxygen, then collapses or lowers as the breath is used. In singing, we want to create a feeling of firm support for the lungs in the intercostals and epigastric muscles, so that as we use the air the rib cage does not collapse. It is a feeling of nonviolent resistance — keeping the rib cage high and wide and not allowing the ribs to drop into the waistline. (We talked about this in the posture article in the July issue; you may want to go back and review that article.)

Practicing intercostal and epigastric breathing helps the singer because successful resistance to collapse of the rib cage gives us control of the breath, allowing us to feed the cushion of air into

the tone in a steady stream (like the control provided by the adjustable nozzle of a garden hose). Breath control provides constant support and a sense of projection of the tone being produced. We achieve that by successfully resisting collapse of the rib cage as we sing the phrase.

At the same time as we are using the intercostals to keep the rib cage high and wide, we use the abdominal muscles for support. The abdominals need to be relaxed during inhalation, so the diaphragm can be lowered completely, without resistance from below. As we sing, the diaphragm gradually lifts, pushing air up and out of the lungs as the tone is produced. Because the rib cage is kept high and wide, the diaphragm will lift gradually and we have better control of the breath.

The nonviolent resistance that keeps the rib cage from collapsing also keeps the breath from rushing out too fast. It can be compared to isometric exercises, in that we have external and internal intercostal muscles, creating a push-pull situation. We strive for balance, so we don't collapse and push air out too fast or


tense up and produce a strangled tone. With support from the abdominal muscles and resistance to collapse from the intercostals, we achieve relaxed control.

An excellent description of this feeling can be found in a book entitled *Foundations of Singing* by Van A. Christy: "Costal singing control characteristics are a lifting and widening of the lower ribs and back, an expansive feeling just

Breath control provides constant support and a sense of projection of the tone being produced

above the waistline, and a continuation of the sensation in this region to the very end of the phrase." The author later adds, "Actually, if the chest is first raised before inhalation, remains high and quiet, and the costal muscles 'hold' and function expansively, we can stop worrying about specific action of muscles involved in control of singing."

It is important to note that the resistance muscles we use in singing (the intercostals, epigastrum, etc.) are not utilized for the same functions in normal breathing situations, so they are weak. As Christy says, "Breathing for living and breathing for singing are quite different processes. The singer must learn to inhale quicker and exhale (phonate) slower than in a reflex, life-breathing situation." Thus, singers need to strengthen and develop these muscles to make them more capable of functioning for singing. The exercises included with this article will help you do that and improve your tone quality in the process!

To recap, then, breath is the fuel for singing. When we "tank up" to sing a phrase, the abdominal muscles should relax and the intercostals should expand, so that we can take in a full breath. Then, as we exhale, our intercostal muscles should be used to resist collapse of the rib cage, without tenseness, while our abdominals support the diaphragm as it gradually rises to create a steady, controlled stream of air upon which our beautiful tone floats. 

Exercises to Develop Strength in the Breathing Muscle

As you do these exercises, remember that the feeling for which we strive is nonviolent support. Keep the chest (rib cage) high and wide, with no tension.

Exercise #1

This is an exercise for intercostal strength and endurance that was also described in the July issue: Holding the chest high and wide, inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity, but without creating any tension in the chest or shoulder area. Now exhale, using a hissing sound like air escaping from a tire, as you count slowly from one to eight. Resist the inclination to allow the rib cage to collapse while exhaling; use the intercostal muscles to keep the rib cage high and wide.

Perform this exercise daily, gradually increasing your exhalation time to 16 counts. Note that the danger in this exercise is tension and overexertion. It is easy to become tense about not allowing the rib cage to collapse. Remain conscious of keeping free of

tension, constriction and tightness in the shoulders and chest.

Exercise #2

Holding the chest high and wide, inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity. Hold the breath for 10 to 15 seconds, keeping the shoulders and neck area relaxed. Remember that it is nonviolent resistance that holds the chest high. Repeat a few times each day, gradually increasing the amount of time you hold the breath until you can hold it for a full minute without tension. You can do this exercise while driving, working, etc.

Exercise #3

Holding the chest high and wide, inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity. To let the breath out, count aloud extremely slowly from one to six, with much openness and resonance in the voice, constantly feeding the tone a great deal of warm air. To keep the chest high and wide, think of expanding the rib cage again as

you begin to speak each number. Your full breath should be used up when you finish speaking the number six. Now take another full breath and begin again.

Exercise #4


This is an exercise to strengthen the abdominal muscles. Holding the chest high and wide, inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity. Now sing the following exercise, thinking about the support and control provided by the diaphragm as it slowly rises, while the chest stays high, wide and quiet. Begin on a comfortable note in your range and sing up and then down the scale, making each note staccato and using the following sounds and notes (1=do, 2=re, 3=mi, etc.):

hip	hip	hip	hip		
1	2	3	4		
hah	hah	hah	hah		
5	5	5	5		
hah	hah	hah	hah	hah	
5	4	3	2	1	

Exercise #5

To remind yourself of the proper muscular feeling when keeping the rib cage high and wide (nonviolent support), first place your right hand just below your breastbone, so you feel the inverted V of your rib cage. Make a fist with your left hand, place it against your mouth and blow gently on the fist, not allowing any air to escape. Feel the epigastric muscles pop outward with your right hand. Keep that feeling of firmness in the epigastrum as you sing the following, making all of the notes staccato:

hi	hi	hi	hi	hi
5	4	3	2	1

Now move up the scale one-half step from your starting note and repeat the exercise. Remember to keep the epigastrum firm and the chest high and wide. You should be able to feel the area below the epigastrum moving in and out. 

VOCAL PRODUCTION

Lesson 3

Phonation: *Creating the Sounds of Music*

This series was previously published in *The Pitch Pipe* during the mid-90s. The series was so popular during its first run we have decided to update it and bring it back for an encore.

By Betty Clipman, past international president, international board of directors, master director, lifetime achievement winner, judge specialists moderator, certified sound and expression judge, certified faculty, Houston Horizon Chorus, Region 10

Phonation is the act of producing vocal sound in either speech or singing. It involves the vocal folds (also called vocal cords), as well as the breathing mechanisms we have already discussed.

In addition to playing a part in the creation of sounds, the vocal folds help protect the trachea (windpipe) and respiratory system from foreign matter. They approximate, or close, when the brain signals them to do so.

Three actions cause the vocal folds to close:

- Swallowing, in which the vocal folds close so that swallowed matter is directed through the esophagus into the stomach, and not through the trachea to the lungs.

- Bearing down (as in childbirth or elimination) or lifting heavy objects, in which the vocal folds close in order to build thoracic pressure and provide strength; and
- Producing sound, in which the vocal folds close with varying levels of tension to produce the different pitches on which we sing or speak.

The first two of these actions close the vocal folds tightly, creating a high level of tension in the vocal apparatus. The production of sound, on the other hand, closes the vocal folds more loosely. When the vocal folds are closed properly for singing, there is a great degree of freedom and relaxation in the vocal apparatus.

It is nerve impulses originating in the abdominal area that help the vocal folds to close properly for singing or speech. Thus, the sound must come from the abdominal area as the abdominal muscles lift the air up and out

across the vocal folds. The process is fourfold:

- Inhalation, or breathing in;
- Suspension, a brief interlude after inhalation;
- Exhalation, or breathing out; and
- Recovery.

Phonation occurs in step three, exhalation, and the start of the sound is called the "attack." In singing, the most important word of a phrase is the first word, which requires a proper attack.

Phonation must begin with the attack occurring deep in the breathing apparatus, not in the throat. When phonation begins in the throat it is called a glottal attack, because the sound is created by the shock of the glottis closing. (The glottis is the elongated space between the cord-like edges of the vocal folds; the term is sometimes used to describe the structures that surround the space as well.)

VOCAL PRODUCTION

Lesson 4

Resonance: *Creating Good Vocal Vibes*

This series was previously published in *The Pitch Pipe* during the mid-90s. The series was so popular during its first run we have decided to update it and bring it back for an encore.

By Betty Clipman, past international president, international board of directors, master director, judge specialists moderator, certified judge, 2006 IES chair, Houston Horizon Chorus, Region 10

Resonance is the amplification and enrichment of tones produced by the voice. When we talk about resonance, we're talking about singing with fullness. Sound judges often use the terms "rich," "full," "round," and "resonant," indicating that the tones produced by the contestant had (or did not have) body and fullness.

Without resonance we produce a "thin" sound. As a matter of fact, when our tone lacks resonance we sound like little girls rather than women.

The tone we produce should ideally be like a diamond on a black velvet pillow: with the brilliance, sparkle and projection of a diamond and the warmth, richness, body and texture of black velvet. The velvet effect comes through proper resonance.

Sounds good, you say, but how do we produce resonance? What causes the tone to resonate?

The voice has four major acoustic

elements: a motor or activator (breath pressure); a primary vibrator (the vocal folds and larynx) that is set into motion by breath pressure; articulators (the tongue, lips and jaw, which we will discuss in the next article); and resonators (the pharyngeal, mouth and head cavities).

"Pharyngeal" means "of the pharynx," which is the area between the mouth and the esophagus.

There are differing opinions on the subject of the resonators. Some authorities say that resonance is created to a degree in the trachea and chest, but most agree that the pharyngeal, mouth and head cavities are the most important areas of resonance.

The amount of resonance in the voice is determined by our ability to keep the pharyngeal, mouth and head cavities



open and relaxed while we sing. The result is what we often hear referred to as an "open, freely produced tone."

To help achieve openness without tension, it is helpful for the singer to invoke mental images.

One image, known to many around the world, is the voice of the late,

great chef, Julia Child. Another, from the recent international movie, *Moulin Rouge*, is the Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of vocal resonance, Nicole Kidman.

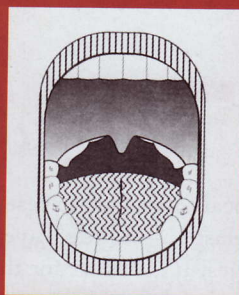
In her movie persona as Satine, a beautiful-voiced burlesque queen, Nicole Kidman speaks with a soft, almost intoxicatingly whiny voice. But she has a beautifully resonant singing voice.

Many of us sing in our speaking voices, without opening up the resonating cavities or relaxing the jaw and throat. Our aim should be to open and

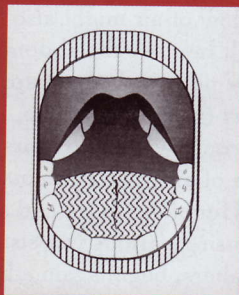
relax everything, using whatever images help us do that. Think about singing "opera vowels," if it helps.

There is one danger of concentration on opera vowels, and that is the dark "covering" of the tone that sometimes results. It is what happens when we produce black velvet without the diamond. We must remember to project the tone forward into the facial mask.

Larra Browning Henderson, in her book *How to Train Singers*, 2nd Edition (©1991, Parker Publishing Company, a division of Simon & Schuster), says that part of achieving resonance is a natural lifting of the soft palate, often referred to as using the "inside smile." She says (pp. 55-56), "Close the mouth, but not the teeth (feeling an openness in the whole oral cavity), and smile as though you were smiling at someone across the room, a smile you do not wish to be



Soft palate normal



Soft palate raised

noticed by others. You might feel a slight lifting of the cushions under the eyes and a space opening up over the soft palate — you almost feel as though you are going to break into a yawn. The soft palate goes up. (You have not pulled it up.) Both are extremely important — the cushions under the eyes and the soft palate." (*Editor's Note: How to Train Singers is currently out of print.*)

The inside smile naturally opens the entrances into the head cavities, and raises and opens the cavities themselves, creating larger chambers in which to resonate the tone. An important part of resonance is this natural lifting of the soft palate. Conscious lifting of the soft palate can create tension in the larynx and throat muscles, so the goal is to lift the face naturally, as if thinking, "ah-ha!" Rather than consciously using specific

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Exercises That Help The Singer Relax & Resonate

When we vocalize we've often put in a full workday and are carrying lots of tension. Many of us keep everyday stress in the areas that need to be relaxed and free for good vocal production: the jaw and neck. It is difficult to sing with an open, relaxed throat and jaw if we have not prepared the body properly. Here are some techniques that will help release tension. For exercises 3, 4 and 5 refer to the photo of Betty on the facing page.

Exercise 1

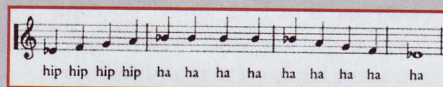
Using your fingertips, gently massage the temples, then down the sides of the face and at the jaw hinge. Relax and "let go." You may feel the urge to yawn. Massage underneath the chin, gently loosening the tongue muscles. With your face down, gently roll your head from side to side, keeping the shoulders relaxed and sternum high. Feel a stretch up the back of the neck. You should begin to feel more relaxed. Pretend you have fallen asleep in a comfortable easy chair. Let your jaw hang loose, totally relaxed. Good imager: Be on the verge of drooling.

Exercise 2

Make these sounds, which help activate the breathing and support muscles:

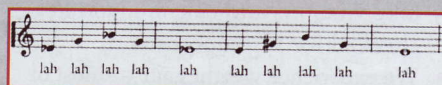
Hissing sound
"Whee" sound
S, f, ch sounds

Sing the following exercise slowly:



Exercise 3

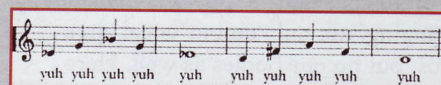
With arms raised, knuckles placed between the molars of the upper and lower jaws, elbows high, and using the inside smile, sing the following exercise. Let the jaw hang and use just the tongue. This exercise also loosens the front tongue muscles.



Exercise 4

To continue to reinforce a relaxed jaw and an open, relaxed throat, and to loosen the back tongue muscles, sing the following vocalize. The tip of the

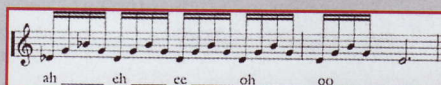
tongue should be touching the lower gum ridge and the jaw should stay relaxed. The arm position and inside smile are the same as in exercise 3.



Repeat exercise #4, using the vowel sounds: ah, eh, ee, eh, ah. Repeat again, using the vowel sounds: ah, oh, oo, oh, ah.

Exercise 5

For the final exercise, use the same arm position, inside smile and good posture. Keep the tip of the tongue touching the lower gum ridge. Allow the tongue to move freely and keep it relaxed so that movement from one vowel to the next is smooth and clear. Get the feeling of singing the vowels with the jaw relaxed, the molars apart, the inside smile and the sternum high and wide. Memorize that feeling.



Angelic Harmony



The A Cappella Angels perform in Duluth, Minnesota, as part of the 2004 Region 6 Competition.

We are excited in Thunder Bay, Ontario, to have the first Sweet Adelines International Young Women in Harmony Chorus in Region 6 — the A Cappella Angels started in the fall of 2003.

Through the efforts of the Sounds of Superior Sweet Adelines Chorus in Thunder Bay, the Young Women in Harmony Program was introduced to the community, and as a result auditions were held and the Young Women in Harmony Chorus, under the direction of Diane Crocker (a former director of the Sounds of Superior Chorus), was born. The members at the time, after much deliberation, chose the name A Cappella Angels. Our goals were to introduce the girls to the art of performing a cappella, four-part harmony arranged in the barbershop style and to have a lot of fun learning and singing.

Sounds of Superior Chorus members have helped with directing, choreography, music and encouragement.

Many exciting things have taken place. Performance opportunities have been made available to the A Cappella Angels in conjunction with the Sounds of Superior Chorus and the Men's Barbershop Chorus at several events as well as on their own. The A Cappella Angels and a quartet, Feature Presentation, participated in the Lakehead Music Festival achieving marks of 90 and 91 out of 100, winning scholarships. They were invited to perform at the 2004 Region 6 Competition in Duluth, Minnesota and received a standing ovation. There wasn't a dry eye in the house. They were thrilled to

have an opportunity to watch the Sweet Adelines chorus competition. In December 2004 they were invited to perform with Tom Jackson, a Canadian television celebrity, in Thunder Bay to do a benefit concert for the Food Bank. Judy Olson, certifice international faculty and director of Twin Cities Show Chorus, is coming to coach them in February.

The A Cappella Angels continue to grow. Starting with nine members in 2003 they now number 30. They are looking forward to many more exciting singing events in the future.

Submitted by Carol Morgan, Young Women in Harmony coordinator, Sounds of Superior Chorus, Region 6

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muscles to get the lift and open the spaces, it is better to use imagery.

Henderson also says (pg. 57), "When you use the inside smile, there is a feeling of 'dome' in the oral cavity; there is also a 'yawning up' sensation (never a 'yawning down' position, i.e., pressure on the back of the throat and larynx). The same sensation comes into the soft palate area

when one is expressing surprise with a slight gasp, and the cushions under the eyes lift."

We are after a natural way of opening up the resonators without producing tension. A related sensation in the mouth will be space. Think of the roof of the mouth feeling like an open parachute or arched cathedral ceiling. Lifting the facial muscles and achieving

the inside smile really help that happen.

One other important technique in producing a full, open, resonant sound is to keep the jaw relaxed and slightly dropped at the same time as the face is lifted to open the resonating cavities. Our focus in the exercises presented here is to provide techniques to help develop a relaxed jaw and a rich, round, open sound. *ff*

Queen's College continued from page 14

and love of quartetting that inspires us to continue the schools. The interest is there . . . just re-read the comments of some of last year's attendees. But, as in any endeavor, it takes time and money. Many volunteer hours go into the planning and implementation of this ambitious program by members of The Coronet Club. Queens' College is not a moneymaking event. Funding of the schools is from a combination of monies

set aside in the budget of The Coronet Club as well as registration fees.

Would you like to attend Queens' College in the future? No schools are planned at this time, but you can help make this possible by attending The Coronet Club show presented Friday evening at each International Convention and by encouraging others to register when future Queens' Colleges are announced. The annual show is The Coronet Club's only source of income,

so your attendance is essential. Income from registration fees is important, too. Only one of the 2004 schools was a sell-out, and expenses remain the same whether 100 or 250 singers attend.

So, here's your invitation to attend An Evening with The Champions in New Orleans during Sweet Adelines International's 60th Anniversary Convention. Enjoy your quartet champions in action. Then look ahead to the next Queens' College and register early! *ff*

VOCAL PRODUCTION

Lesson 5

Articulation: Creating Words that Communicate

This series was previously published in *The Pitch Pipe* during the mid-90s. The series was so popular during its first run we have decided to update it and bring it back for an encore. This is the last article in the series.

By Betty Clipman, *Houston Horizon*
Chorus, Region 10

Articulation is the phase of diction dealing principally with the action of the speech organs in forming consonants.

As singers, we may have heard the idea expressed that consonants are the “bones” of speech and vowels are the “flesh,” and also that “consonants are the intellectual and ugly elements while vowels are the beautiful and emotional elements” (from *Foundations of Singing* by Van A. Christy, William C. Brown Company Publishers, Dubuque, Iowa, 1979). The American Academy of Teachers of Singing adds, “The function of a consonant is to interrupt the vowel without doing violence to the tone.”

These are good images. But beautiful articulation is more than organs, bones and interruptions. It is the act of creating words that communicate the message of the song. In order to form words that will be understood, and at the same time communicate a message and

its emotions, we must remember the principles of resonance: keeping an open, relaxed throat and a rich tone.

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 that just barely interrupt the tone, we overemphasize them. In order to avoid this choppy delivery, we must keep the rich, round, resonant sound we discussed last time (April 2005 issue). This is especially true for a cappella singers.

In accompanied vocal music there needs to be greater emphasis on consonants so that words are understandable to the audience over the instrument 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 major break occurs. In fact, when a cappella singers overarticulate, the consonants stop the tone flow completely and there are “white spaces.”

Many Sweet Adelines have encountered the phrase “wall of sound” used by contest judges. In our realm of music it is synonymous with the aggregate tone flow produced by a quartet or chorus. When we overarticulate, we become tense, our singing mechanisms become tight, we

“...we must remember the principles of resonance: keeping an open, relaxed throat and a rich tone.”

overemphasize consonants and create a “picket fence” rather than a wall of sound. Remembering that the tone rests on a cushion of air and on vowel sounds, we must keep the tone flow open and relaxed,

using as little jaw action as possible in articulation.

Relaxation is a tremendously important factor. In addition to a loose, relaxed jaw, we must attempt to disconnect the jaw from the tongue and lips. The entire mouth should be loose and relaxed so as to avoid overarticulation. As Van Christy says, "Let the jaw relax so loosely that there is a feeling the singing is done without the jaw."

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. This exercise will help to produce the wall of sound to which we aspire.

As you practice proper articulation, it will be helpful to know a little more about the specific sounds associated with consonants. For instance, most consonants cannot be produced on a pitch (you cannot sing a sustained "B" sound) but there are a few that can, such as M, N, L and V. These are called voiced or singable consonants. It is important in articulation to sing *through* the voiced

consonants. These singable consonants also affect pitch; the vowel that follows will always be flat if the preceding singable consonant is under pitch.

Christy summarizes several 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.

Overarticulation 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; thus our tenors have a harder job of articulating without tensing or tightening the vocal mechanisms.

Words tell the story of a song; they make it fun and exciting and allow us to understand. So articulation is particularly important. The primary goal for the a cap-


pella singer is to achieve beautiful articulation while creating as little interruption of the tone flow as possible.

This series of articles has touched on the five physical actions necessary for good vocal production but we certainly have not discussed everything you need to know to become a great singer. The quality of our voices is directly affected by the quality of our vocal production. I encourage every Sweet Adeline to seek continued vocal

"The function of a consonant is to interrupt the vowel without doing violence to the tone."

instruction and to take advantage, with enthusiasm, of the private vocal instructions (PVI) being offered through many individual choruses and regions.

I wish everyone luck and continued vocal improvement. Singing well is much more fun than singing poorly. Each of us can experience growth as a singer and should always be making an effort to improve our vocal skills. As I often say to myself, "Be patient; God isn't through with me yet!"

We are limited as singers only by how good we think we can be. Approach singing with enthusiasm and joy. Each time you sing, try to improve and experience continued growth as a singer. 

The exercises below will help you visualize and practice proper articulation.

Exercises for Achieving Proper Articulation

Exercise 1

As a warmup, practice any tongue twisters you know: Peter Piper, for instance.

Exercise 2

Trill the tongue. (Imitate a motorcycle revving up.)

Exercise 3

In order to help keep a relaxed, constant tone flow, review and practice the five exercises for resonance that were presented in the April 2005 issue. Loosening the tongue and jaw will assist in a resonant tone flow as well as the delicate production of consonants required in a cappella singing.

Exercise 4

Practice the exercise described previously in this article, singing an entire familiar song on an open "oh" vowel sound. Try to keep the open, relaxed feeling when you add the words.