

A Basic Guide to Vocal Exercises for Beginning Singing Teachers.  
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By far, the most frequently asked questions on my website concern the use and function of vocal exercises. There have been so many inquiries, most of them from young, aspiring voice teachers, that it seems appropriate to briefly discuss vocal exercises and their uses in this publication.

One of the main reasons for the use of vocal exercises is to establish good vocal technique. While all voice teachers agree that the study of vocal technique must address the areas of posture and alignment, respiration, phonation, registration, resonance and articulation, there is little consensus to the specific type of vocal exercises to be used for different areas of vocal technique. Vocal exercises themselves have no intrinsic value; it is how they are applied and under what conditions they are used that determine their effectiveness. The areas of vocal technique most frequently encountered in the development of the singing voice through exercises are onset, placement, resonance, breath support, phrasing, legato staccato agility, range, vowel clarity, consonants, intonation and coordination of registers.

Prephonatory exercises involving relaxation and posture and alignment are essential. Working with a student to free specific areas of tension (jaw, tongue, neck, etc.) and helping them understand the importance of a well aligned body (spine elongated, neck back, sternum out, pelvis tucked under, knees unlocked, etc.) is the first order of business.

The goal of a balanced **ONSET** or the easy initiation of tone created by the muscular equilibrium required for phonation is usually achieved with simple exercises using repeated notes with a breath in between each note. The use of voiced consonants facilitates "mask" resonance and tonal efficiency. The use of the aspirate [h] in staccato or panting exercises is often used moving quickly to an "imaginary" [h].

**PLACEMENT** refers to the physical sensations the singer feels at the moment of phonation. Exercises involving nasal consonants, the vowels [e] and [i], and staccato exercises using voiced consonants are often used to increase the singers awareness of sensations of resonance in the "mask."

The maximizing of **RESONANCE** is one of the chief goals of classical singing. Humming is generally believed to be an exercise for resonance. The colloquial affirmative "m-hmm" and the use of the nasal consonant [ng] are often used to increase sensations of resonance. The [s] followed by vowels is useful to help singers feel mask resonance.

The coordination of expiration and phonation or **BREATH SUPPORT** (management) is developed through the use of pulsation on repeated notes (a,a,a,a,etc.), staccato and the "messa di voce" (crescendo-decrescendo). Lip trills are also very helpful to develop breath management skills.

**PHRASING** is the grouping of notes into specific units for an artistic or technical purpose. Exercises used to develop legato and breath management are used to teach phrasing. Long scales, arpeggios and exercises with specifically placed breaths also develop the breath control skills necessary for long phrases.

**LEGATO** is the consistent phonation uninterrupted by changing notes or words. Legato is one of the most desirable aspects of beautiful singing. Glissando's can be helpful in introducing the idea of legato. Followed by intervallic skip, slurring between each skip. Changing vowels on a slow scale or repeated tones with a single vowel are also useful exercises.

**STACCATO** is produced much in the same way as legato but without sustaining the sound between each note. Simple scales and repeated notes with a vowel preceded by [h] or [b] and simple arpeggiated tonic chords using "hip" and "yuh" develop staccato nicely. Staccato exercises develop onset, and breath coordination, among other things.

**AGILITY**, the execution of fast moving passages with clear articulation and freedom is of primary importance in good singing, promoting flexibility and coordination. Fast arpeggios and scales, ascending and descending using the vowel [u], [a], and alternating vowels, develop agility.

**RANGE** extension is accomplished through the use of ascending and descending scales and arpeggios, using five, eight, nine eleven and sixteen tones. A variety of vowels are used alone and in combination.

**VOWEL** clarity, vowel unification and equalization, vowel differentiation, evenness of vowel etc. The production of a free, even scale throughout the range with distinct, clear vowels on every pitch is paramount to good singing. The use of a neutral tongue position from which all other vowels can be produced will develop vowel clarity. Simple arpeggios using alternating front and back vowels such as a-o-i-o, are also useful.

**CONSONANTS**, especially voiced consonants are frequently used in vocal exercises to develop coordinated onset and resonance. Scale patterns, repeated, notes, arpeggios and thirds are useful, with consonants articulated on every note. Initial, medial and final consonants should be used. Paired unvoiced and voiced consonants are beneficial. Exercises using consonants create freedom and flexibility in the articulators (jaw, tongue, and lips).

Exercises for the **COORDINATION of REGISTERS** to promote a seamless, even vocal line usually begin in the area just above or below the register "break" or passaggio. The use of two notes moving slowly from one note to the next and modulating up and down through the passaggio is helpful. A variety of vowels may be used on short scales followed by short arpeggios and interval skips. Closed vowels are often used for men in the upper passaggio (above middle c) and for women in the lower passaggio (also

above middle c). Using [u] and [a] in combination can be very useful in helping singers coordinate the registers. Descending arpeggios utilizing the head voice/falsetto and the use of "sirens" are also beneficial.

Ingo Titze, one of our foremost voice scientists, lists "The Five Best Vocal Warm-up Exercises, in Volume 57, No.3 January/February 2001 of the National Association of Teachers of Singing Journal .They are:

1. The Lip trill, tongue trill
2. Two octave pitch glides
3. Forward tongue roll and extension
4. Messa di voce (crescendo-decrescendo)
5. Staccato on arpeggios

Taking into account the criteria that we use to judge whether a tone is functional and/or beautiful (easy onset, legato, clear diction, bright/dark tone quality, excellent breath management skills, etc.), we can make decisions as to what exercises can help students achieve these goals. Making notes about what we see and hear in our initial consultation with a singer will serve as a basis for the vocalises that are developed and utilized.

Students need to understand that through the regular use of vocal exercises, a secure singing technique is an achievable goal. Young teachers will do well if are able to describe the technical criteria of the exercises in a simple and objective manner. All exercises should be tailored to fit the individual, to fulfill the need of each student. Few exercises are really needed, as long as every aspect of technique is covered. Many teachers feel that is essential to assign a specific sequence of vocal exercises. Such a sequence often follows the major areas of vocal technique: posture, respiration, phonation, resonance, support, registration, articulation, etc.

There are numerous vocalises still in print by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian singing masters: Vaccai, Concone and Marchesi to name a few, were all well known teachers and their exercises, along with those of contemporary authors such as Vennard, Miller, McKinney and Reid can help young teachers get started.

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