

Vocal Education Series

Part 4 -- Vocal Technic: Fine Tuning

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In this article we look at some mental and physical processes that affect a singer's ability to maintain pitch and produce sounds of good tonal quality. It takes discipline and control of mind and body to become a "smart" singer.

Mind's eye notes.

There are three ways of "seeing" any note. First, you must physically see the note, as on the sheet of music. Then, you must "see" it in your mind's eye. In other words, you must visualize the note (hear it) in your mind before you even think of opening your mouth to sing it. Singing it is actually the third step of the process. Only when what you see, what your mind interprets, and what you sing are the same will you get truly correct music. Don't make the mistake of singing a note as you see it on paper. This skips the most important step: developing a "mind's eye" view of the music. Without that the interpretation, style, and placing of the music in its proper context are not possible. The mechanical reflex from eye to throat is merely the interpretation of a sound, not making music.

Answer: The altitude above you and the runway behind you.

The question is: "As a pilot, what are the two things you can never use?" As a singer, however, the answer to this question is "the breath you never take." Don't make the mistake of taking a smaller breath on a short phrase because you don't think you need it. Breathing a full tank of air every time should be a natural and subconscious objective of every singer.

The main reason most singers flat a note--and usually at the end of a phrase--is directly attributable to the amount of usable air left in the lungs. Therefore, the more air you have left, the easier it is to hold the pitch or sing a decrease in volume. You will be a more confident singer when you control your breathing. The confidence will show in your facial expression and you will increase your ability to "sell" the song.

Straight notes climb stairs.

Any time you are singing a sustained note, you must make a conscious effort to imagine that it is straight up a flight of stairs, not a level playing field. As you use up air, the muscles have less resistance to push against, and the normal tendency is to relax the pressure. The result is a gradual drop in pitch. If you visualize yourself climbing stairs, it will be easier to maintain the pitch.

It is much harder to sing softly than loudly.

You may have found this out early on. The wrong way to sing softly is to relax the muscles. Sure, it will sound softer, but you will have lost the control of the voice that you had when you were singing louder. The note will sound listless and without color. Perform the following test to see why it is harder to sing softly than loudly.

Sing one note loudly, then gradually decrease the volume until you can barely hear it, and then increase the volume again to its louder level. Repeat this on one breath. You will see that it is very difficult to do. In fact, it is probably one of the hardest things to master. Until you get it right, you will experience breaks in the sound, inconsistent pitch, wobbles, and even muscle spasms. All this is to show that, if you maintain constant tension on the air-supplying muscles (near the throat), it is easier to change volume without breaks or wobbles.

Rainbows and strings of pearls.

Singing masters in the era of *bel canto* used to have very descriptive terms for their craft. Two of the expressions used to describe a phrase of music seem appropriate. They would describe a musical phrase as a rainbow, where the notes were formed one after the other, in all their glory, color and splendor. Others described the musical phrase as a string of pearls coming out of the singer's mouth—separate, yet joined in making a beautiful object. The metaphors are not wasted if you consider that a musical phrase should be an integrated whole. Think of rainbows and pearls next time you find yourself singing choppy phrases.

Unkink your pipes.

Next time you stand on the risers, look at the posture of some of the men around you. It's a miracle they don't finish the evening feeling more tired than when they started. It's not because they have been on their feet for several hours but, rather, they have wasted the opportunity for invigorating exercise during rehearsal. And, what's more, the music suffers. Why? Because poor posture has inhibited efficient breathing while singing in a standing position. Those pearls mentioned earlier are going to have to a very tough time coming out of a pipe that has twists, turns, slumps, and bumps in it. So stand up straight! Make sure your airflow passages are open, relaxed, uninterrupted, and free. When you sing beautiful music, take a full breath every time and stand properly, you can actually feel a mental and physical "high" come over you, much like what a jogger feels during and after a good workout. If you finish a song more tired than when you started, you are doing something wrong.

Vowels versus consonants.

In singing, vowels carry the notes, but the consonants give it meaning. Following the string-of-pearls analogy, consider the pearls to be the vowels and the string to be the consonants. You can't have one without the other, and everything works together. Vowels should be open and expressive with the consonant transitions placed in such a way as to connect the vowel sounds in whatever way the song is to be interpreted. Of course, interpretation depends on both music and lyrics, especially lyrics. We will explore words and their meaning in Part 5.