

Introduction

Congratulations

- You have chosen to 'sacrifice' six of your precious Tuesday evenings to join our Singing Course and we think you should be applauded for that.
- Singers are happy people, they live longer, they are healthier and they make friends easier. (Disclaimer: The evidence for these things is all anecdotal and not supported, as far as we know, by scientific research. Anyway, if any of them are not true, we think they ought to be!)
- For this week and for the next five weeks, you will warm up, learn vocal craft and sing with Velvet Harmony and that ought to be worth a few bob.

How it will work

- Velvet Harmony normally rehearse here on a Tuesday night from 7.45pm to 10.30pm. For the next six weeks, though, the first hour and a half of that time will be devoted to our singing course. At 9.15pm, or thereabouts, the course will finish and Velvet Harmony will continue until 10.30pm with their normal rehearsal schedule. You are free to leave at 9.15pm but, if you'd like to stay and listen to the chorus rehearse, you are more than welcome. We love singing to an audience.
- Over the period of the course we will be learning a song. The only people who already know this song are the four section leaders and the Musical Director. Everyone else is starting from scratch! We will use this song to put our knowledge into practice and we will sing it as part of a mini-concert, on the final evening of the course.
- On the first week, you will be given a quick voice test. This is not to see if you are any good! It is only to determine which voice part (basically soprano or alto) is your natural range. We don't want to damage anyone's voice by putting her in the wrong place.
- Each week will follow a similar pattern as follows.
 - A physical warm up. We do this just to shed the cares of the day and to loosen up a bit.
 - A vocal warm up. Just as athletes do some exercises before getting serious, the voice needs coaxing into action.
 - A craft session. Each week we will address a different aspect of singing and do some exercises so that we can feel what happens and understand the need for it. There is a handout for each week and these are attached.
 - A section rehearsal. We split into the four voice parts and spend 15-20 minutes learning notes to a section of the new song.
 - On the risers. Everyone back together again where we put the song together and try out some of our craft.
 - Coffee and end of session.
- On the final week, you are asked and encouraged to bring friends and family along to witness the results of your hard work. We will do a slightly shortened class and then stage a mini-concert where Velvet Harmony will sing a few songs and then ask you to join us on the risers to perform the new song that you have learned.

And afterwards

What you do with your new found skills is, of course, up to you. We just hope that you enjoy our course and that you don't let the time you spent with us go to waste. Find somewhere to express yourself in song and don't forget where we are should you want to come back.

Week 1: Posture and Breathing

Singing is a whole-body exercise, every part of you is involved.

- The structure of your body needs to take care of the hard work of keeping you upright
- Your lungs provide the air which will cause your vocal folds (cords) to vibrate. Your back muscles, chest muscles and diaphragm must be free to control that air.
- The air must have a free passage to your vocal folds.
- Your vocal folds must be free of any interference other than the air passing through them.
- The passage of the air from the vocal folds to the outside must be unencumbered.

Rule #1: Stand up straight!

- Feet slightly apart below the shoulders, knees relaxed (not locked), bottom above your feet, shoulders above your bottom, head square (not tilted).
- Stand with your back against a wall: heels, bottom, shoulder blades and head all touching the wall. That's about right!
- Imagine you're a big industrial chimney. Your feet are the foundations and the chimney rises straight above them.

Some adjustments

- Rock forward until your weight is on the balls of your feet. Rock back until it is being taken by your heels. Now find the mid-position where the weight is equally taken by the balls and the heel. That's the right place.
- Raise your arms in front of you until they are pointing straight upwards. This lifts and expands the chest. Now lower the arms slowly to the side but retain the raised chest position. The raised and expanded chest position is ideal for singing because you don't have to waste energy expanding the chest every time you breathe.

Rule #2: Breathing should be easy, quick and silent

- Provided you are standing properly, all you need to do is get out of the way and your body will do the rest. You don't have to suck air in – your lungs will take care of it.
- The tongue needs to be rested and flat in the bottom of the mouth. It's huge and it will get in the way if you let it.
- An 'inner smile' will get the 'false folds' out of the way. These are muscles just above the larynx which help to keep food out of the lungs but they can also get in the way of breathing.
- Breathe at the beginning of a phrase, not at the end. This helps to maintain tension from the previous phrase and also aids a precise onset to the next phrase.

Now the ugly bit

- If you are standing correctly, when you breathe in the chest can't expand (it's already expanded remember) so something else has to give. The diaphragm moves down to create more chest room but, of course, your other bits and pieces (stomach, liver etc) are all in the way. So what happens to that stuff? Well, it pushes your tummy out. Horrible, isn't it. Breathe in – tummy comes out; breathe out – tummy goes back in again. If this happens, it shows that you're using correct diaphragmatic breathing.
- Get in touch with your diaphragm when you go to bed. While you are lying on your back, breathe in deeply half a dozen times. It's almost impossible to do anything other than correct diaphragmatic breathing like this so it's a good way to find out how it feels (but do warn any company you might have).

Week 2: The Vocal Mechanism

Revision

Stand up straight, be a chimney, breathe from the diaphragm

Some anatomy stuff

- The muscles of your abdomen and chest force air from your lungs between the vocal folds causing them to vibrate. The vibrations are modified by the throat, tongue and mouth and amplified by resonant chambers in the chest, throat and head to produce the sound that the audience hears.
- A rising diaphragm, balanced by the muscles in the back and chest, controls the exhalation of air from the lungs so that you don't exhale all in one go. This balancing act ensures that the air leaves the lungs in a continuous and constant flow and produces 'well supported' sound.
- The air passes up the windpipe until it meets the vocal folds. It passes through (across) the vocal folds and up the throat into the mouth. The passage of the air must be unencumbered by anything except the vocal folds themselves. Standing up straight, with the head level, the tongue flat and out of the way and an inner smile will make sure that there is no constriction. This results in 'freely-produced' sound.
- If the vocal folds are closed tight, no air passes and no sound is made. If the vocal folds are open, all the air passes and the only sound is of the wind rustling in your throat! The vocal folds must be closed enough together so that they offer some resistance to the air which will cause them to vibrate and produce a sound. The feeble sound produced has pitch but not much else. It has to be amplified and this is done in the resonant cavities of the chest, throat and mouth but, most important of all, in the head behind the eyes and nose (the mask). These work much like the body of a violin or guitar. This results in a 'resonant' sound.

The Sound triumverate

- The Holy Grail of choral singing, and especially of close harmony, is a sound that is
 - well-supported,
 - freely-produced,
 - resonant.

Well-supported

- Keep the chest expanded. Don't allow the shoulders to rise and fall.
- Allow the tummy to move in and out. You shouldn't have to force it, it will do it all by itself, you just have to let it.
- Engage the muscles of the lower back to help control the support provided by the diaphragm.
- For more support, move something. Anything!

Freely-produced

- Stand up straight!
- Be a chimney. The air goes straight up.
- Produce an inner smile to eliminate constrictions in the throat.
- Let the tongue lie at rest, flat in the bottom of the mouth, tip on the lower gum ridge.
- Sing 'on the breath'. Don't hold the breath and then release it (glottal onset). Don't start breathing out before you make the sound (breathy onset). The sound and the breath should happen at the same time (simultaneous onset).

Resonant

- Next week!

Week 3: Resonance

Revision

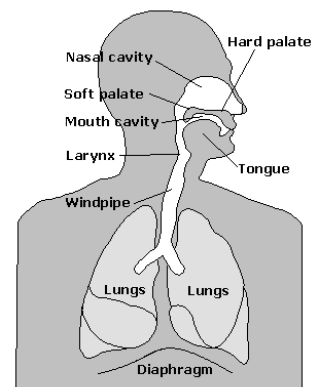
Stand up straight, be a chimney, breathe from the diaphragm. Use the diaphragm and back muscles to support the sound. Tongue flat, inner smile and simultaneous onset will result in well supported and freely produced sound.

Resonance. What is it?

- It's a fullness and richness of sound that's exciting to listen to.
- It's the carrying quality of the sound that enables it to be heard at a distance.
- It's the overtone content of the sound!
- It's the quality that enables the sound to blend with other similar voices and produce solid harmonies that support each other.

How do I produce it?

- Practice, practice and more practice.
- First of all, everything else has to be in place. Revise again.
- Then you have to take that sound and let it bounce around a bit, mostly inside the head up behind the eyes and nose.
- To let it resonate inside the head, you have to make sure that not too much air is going out through the nose (otherwise it'll just wash the sound out before anything interesting has happened)
- The "hung-ah" exercise demonstrates the lift of the soft palate that is needed to close off the nasal cavities from the mouth.
- Try to imagine 90% air out through the mouth and 10% out through the nose.
- Pinch the nose while you are singing. If the sound changes dramatically, you have too much air going out through the nose. The sound shouldn't change much at all.
- Try to imagine lifting the sound from the back of the throat over the top of the mouth to the mask. Lift it up and over.
- Too much air through the mouth will sound like you are shouting. Too much air through the nose will wash away the resonance.
- Establish the sound and then imagine filling your mouth with it. Don't worry about getting the sound 'out'. Worry about creating the right sound inside and then it will get out all by itself.
- Use visual images now and again to remind you to keep the sound up and over.



The lips and teeth: The final frontier

- The sound is produced by the vocal folds, modified by the throat, tongue and mouth, amplified by the resonant cavities and carried by the breath to the lips, where it is consigned to the atmosphere. Everything that needs to be done has been done by the time it gets there. The only thing the lips and teeth can do is get in the way!
- No stress, no strain. Allow the lips to come together in an 'at rest' position. This is as wide as your mouth should ever get! Don't allow any tension in the cheek muscles. Never pull the lips sideways. The cheeks should be a stress free zone. Stress creates constriction.
- The mouth should open enough to let the sound out without getting in the way. But, don't use muscles to force it open further than is comfortable. These muscles are connected to the throat and will create constriction in the sound.
- The mouth is always tall, never wide.

Week 4: Carrying the Sound: Vowels

Revision

Stand up straight, be a chimney, breathe from the diaphragm. Use the diaphragm and back muscles to support the sound. Tongue flat, inner smile and simultaneous onset will result in well supported and freely produced sound. Up and over into the mask – resonance.

Vowels - All of them

- Apart from a few 'singable' consonants, all of the sound we make is carried on the vowels.
- There are 16 recognisably different vowel sounds and two unstressed vowels (in square brackets[.]).

Tongue front arch	Mouth		Central vowels		Mouth	Tongue back arch
highest	most closed	beat	[about] [bother]	fool	most closed	highest
↓	↓	b ^{it}		fu ^{el}	↓	↓
		ba ^{it}		fu ^{ll}		
		be ^t		fo ^{al}		
		bu ^{tt}		bi rd		
		ba ^t		fa ^{ll}		
		bi ^{te}		fo ^{ll}		
		ba rd		fo ^{ul}		
lowest	most open			most open	lowest	

Singing them.

- Revise weeks 1 to 3 and then do it again.
- For any vowel, sing Ah and think the vowel. This is another way of saying that the internal mechanism (the windpipe, the throat, the back of the mouth) needs to be open and relaxed. It doesn't take very much to turn an Ah into something else; a little bit of tongue mostly which just modifies the size and shape of the mouth cavity to change the sound.
- Do not either close or open the mouth more than is comfortable. There should be no tension in the cheek or jaw muscles. An 'ah' is as wide as is comfortable and no wider. An 'oo' is small and round but not protruding like a fish! An 'ee' is not wide and thin, it is more squarish.
- Aim all vowels up and over into the mask.

Diphthongs

- Some vowels are pure – you can sing them forever. Try singing oo (fool), ah (bard) and ee (feel).
- Some vowels are not pure, you seem to have to change them at some point to make them work. Try singing I (bite), ow (foul) and o (foal). The secret of success is to think the vowel through to the very end and make the adjustment at the very end. Do not change too soon or you will be making a different sound to everyone else! The first part is called the 'target' vowel and you can think of the second part almost as a consonant i.e. don't let it get in the way.
- Some sounds are even more complicated. Try singing the word 'our'. This contains the diphthong ou (foul) but also has that 'r' at the end. Try singing the target vowel sound, change it to the diphthong and then just raise the back of the tongue to produce the 'r'. Not easy, especially when we all need to do it together.

Week 5: Carrying the meaning: Consonants

Revision

Stand up straight, be a chimney, breathe from the diaphragm. Use the diaphragm and back muscles to support the sound. Inner smile to breathe easily and remove constriction. Tongue flat and simultaneous onset will result in well supported and freely produced sound. Up and over into the mask → resonance. Sing ah, think vowel.

Some consonants - Hindering the sound

- It is not possible to make music on many consonants. Think about t, p, d and k which are little percussive sounds. Think about f, v and th which are just a lot of air. Think about s and z which sound like a snake slithering through the grass.
- These consonants must be present and enunciated otherwise the words don't make sense. But, only just enough and no more. Think of flicking a knife through a stream of water from a tap. The water is the sound produced on the vowels. The flick of the knife, which doesn't disturb the flow, is the consonants.
- Some consonants can be softened without any loss of comprehension. So the word 'little', for instance, can stray towards 'liddle' where the consonant is produced by raising the tongue rather than closing the teeth. This helps to maintain continuous sound and disguises slight differences in timing between the singers in the group.

Other consonants - Helping the sound

- Some consonants are singable → you can produce a tone on them. Think about m, n, l and ng.
- These consonants can often be slightly over-emphasised because they will help get you from one vowel to the next without interrupting the flow of sound. They can often be sung as if they were another syllable.

Conveying the words

- A vowel does not a word make! Vowels must be separated by consonants and those consonants must be articulated but we don't have to let them get in the way of the sound.
- Our style often attracts the audience comment → "It was so nice to be able to hear all the words!"
- BUT

..... is not enough!

- Hearing the words does not necessarily mean that we understand their meaning!
- Music, or our style of music anyway, is not an intellectual activity. We don't want our audience to have to ponder on the meaning of a song, they should know without having to think about it.
- If the song is sad, the audience should weep with us. If it is happy, they should be smiling with us. If it's rhythmic, we want them to tap their feet.
- Music communicates directly to the heart. The vowels are the carrier of that communication but the consonants express the emotion.
- Just play with the word 'love' for a minute and understand how the way the first letter is enunciated can determine just what that word means. Now play with the word 'tender' and see how the 'n' in the middle and the 'r' at the end affect the 'feeling' you get from that word.
- It's not enough for the audience to know the meaning of the words, they have to know what the words mean.

Week 6: Bringing it all back home

Stand up straight, be a chimney. Inner smile to remove constriction and breathe silently. Breathe into your tummy. Use the diaphragm and back muscles to support the column of air and balance it against the vocal folds. Tongue flat, soft palate up and simultaneous onset will result in well supported and freely produced sound. Up and over into the mask – resonance. Sing ah, think vowel. Soften hard consonants, use singable consonants. Express the meaning, not just the words.

Nearly There

- Put the rest of the world aside for tonight we SING!

Communicating with the audience

- Something like 70% of communication between people is visual, the other 30% is aural (the bit that we've just spent five weeks perfecting!)
- Imagine that the audience is deaf! They still want to get the message.
- Imagine the audience is blind. They want to hear how you feel.
- Imagine, at the beginning of the performance, that you throw the audience a rope. They will grab it. You pull it tight and make sure it stays tight. Every so often you have to give it a tug and persuade the audience to tug back. Don't give them an excuse to drop it.

Visuals help aural

- Good posture not only looks good but is essential for good vocal production (revise week 1).
- Occasional small body movement is not only permissible, it is essential. This is one way that you express yourself visually. Body language is a powerful communicator. It also, incidentally, allows you to reset your posture so that you don't become 'planted' or stiff which would inhibit the free production of sound.
- Facial expression is another powerful communicator. Try saying "I love you" with a frown and then say it again with a smile. A lifted face will produce a lifted sound and encourage you to aim through the mask (revise week 3).
- Raising the cheek bones gives you an 'interested' look. It conveys the impression that you mean what you say. It also increases the size of the resonant cavities in the head and you should know by now what that will do! It encourages you to think 'up' which is good for resonant sound but will also help to prevent going flat. "Hang the notes on your cheek bones".

Just remember

- Singing is a whole-body exercise, every part of you is involved.
- We all have the same physical bits. All of us have the capability to become great singers. We just have to learn to use the bits we've got.
- None of us are 'stuck' with our voice. We can all do better. We can sing beautiful or we can sing ugly. It's our choice
- Good singing is good singing, whatever style you choose to sing. Our style of close harmony requires a little sacrifice of 'self' to enable each of us to contribute to the chorale sound. We also, generally, sing more 'joined up' than many other styles but these are minor details compared to the over-riding issue of making well-supported, freely produced and resonant sound.

Now. Just get out there and sing!