



Six Week Singing Course – Educator’s Notes

What are these notes?

This set of notes is intended to provide an educator with enough resource material to teach a successful 6 week Singing Course either as a recruitment initiative or as a course in basic vocal technique to your existing chorus members.

These notes go together with a simpler set of Course Notes which, it is intended, should be given to every participant as reminder of what they have learned.

Structure

The notes are structured on a week by week basis to deliver a course on the basics of good vocal technique over a period of 6 weeks.

There are some preliminary notes about the structure and organization of the course followed by a section for each week.

Content

These notes contain ideas for exercises that the students can perform to reinforce the learning process.

In addition, there is much background material to help you, as an educator, understand the purpose behind each exercise. **It is left to you to decide how much of this background material you deliver to the students.** There are diagrams and technical words and phrases which you may feel are best omitted especially if you do not feel comfortable using them.

Sometimes, there are several exercises to demonstrate a single concept. As an educator, you should be comfortable with all of these but, if there is an exercise you are not comfortable with, don't use it. Find something you are more comfortable with and use that instead.

The important thing is the end result; a chorus that sings with well supported, freely produced, resonant sound. It is, perhaps, not so important at this level, that they understand exactly what is going on or that they know the technically correct words and phrases to describe it.

Layout

Anything in a double-line outline is an exercise that the students can do.

Exercise

Anything else is background and supporting information for your benefit as the educator.

Acknowledgements

The design of this course and the course notes are a joint effort between Paula Williams, Mike Taylor, and Neil Watkins.

Thanks are also due Gillyanne Kayes for her work in the book "Singing and the Actor".

Course Overview

1. For the six weeks of the course, some part of your rehearsal evening, usually the first hour or so, will be devoted to the Singing Course. The course can be delivered to the guests separately (resources permitting) or to the assembled company, chorus and guests. (but it does no harm for the chorus to revise the basics once in a while!)
2. Be prepared with guest packs to hand out to your visitors. These should contain, at least, the music for the song to be learnt (see footnote) and the first week's course notes. On the first evening, do a voice placement exercise to get the guests into roughly the right voice part. Here is a quick and cheerful method that seems to work remarkably well.

- i Get everyone to one end of the hall and get them to sing up a scale, in unison, starting from a comfortable middle range note.
- ii Tell them to move to the other end of the hall, when they can't get any higher. This leaves the tenors behind.
- iii Now get those that moved to the other end to sing down a scale from a comfortable middle range note.
- iv Tell them to move to the middle of the hall, when they can't get any lower. This leaves the basses behind.
- v You now have tenors at one end and basses at the other with everyone else in the middle.
- vi Addressing the middle group, tell them that anyone who reads music, plays an instrument or already sings in a choir is a baritone. Yup, it works!
- vii Everyone else is a lead.

3. Each week will follow a similar pattern as follows.

- i A physical warm-up. You may or may not already do this but it is a good idea to do some stretching exercises, at least. It's a chance to loosen up and have a bit of fun.
- ii A vocal warm up. Some very simple warm ups will do, particularly if you can use something that you used the previous week in the craft session, as that will reinforce the learning process.
- iii A craft session – A 20 minute session on good vocal technique. **This is the core of the course** and these notes cover the material. Guest handouts will remind them of what they did.
- iv A section rehearsal – You will have chosen a song to work on¹. This is a 20 minute slot for them to learn it in sections.
- v "Riser time". 20 minutes on the risers to polish the section work and remind them of the vocal craft they have learned.

4. Week 6, vowels and consonants, may be considered optional. You may want to use this week as a general revision, especially if your final show is the same week.
5. On the last night of the course (which might be either the 6th or the 7th week), stage a mini-show which will feature the chorus, any quartets you might have and, as top billing, the combined chorus + guests singing the song you have worked on (at least twice!).

¹ You should choose **one song** which is simple and achievable. The emphasis is on learning to sing not learning songs. Simple rounds and tags are a useful addition to the vocal warm-up.

Week 1. Introduction

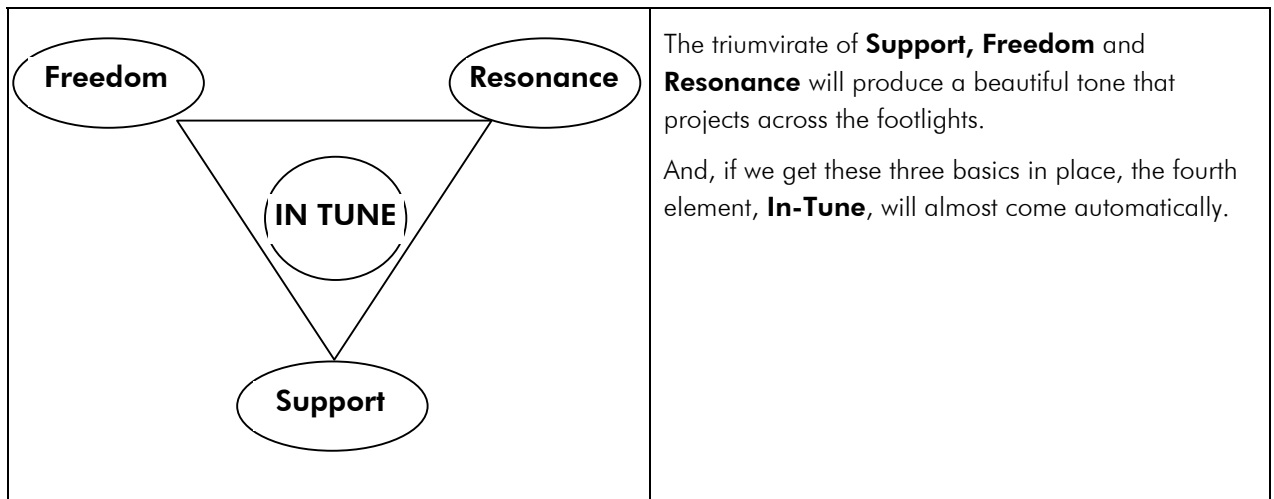
After all the introductory stuff, signing people in, handing out guest packs, quick overview of the course and the voice placement exercise, you probably won't have the full 20 minutes for a craft session. Nevertheless, you can introduce them to some basic concepts and help them find bits of their anatomy that are important.

1.1 What's important in singing?

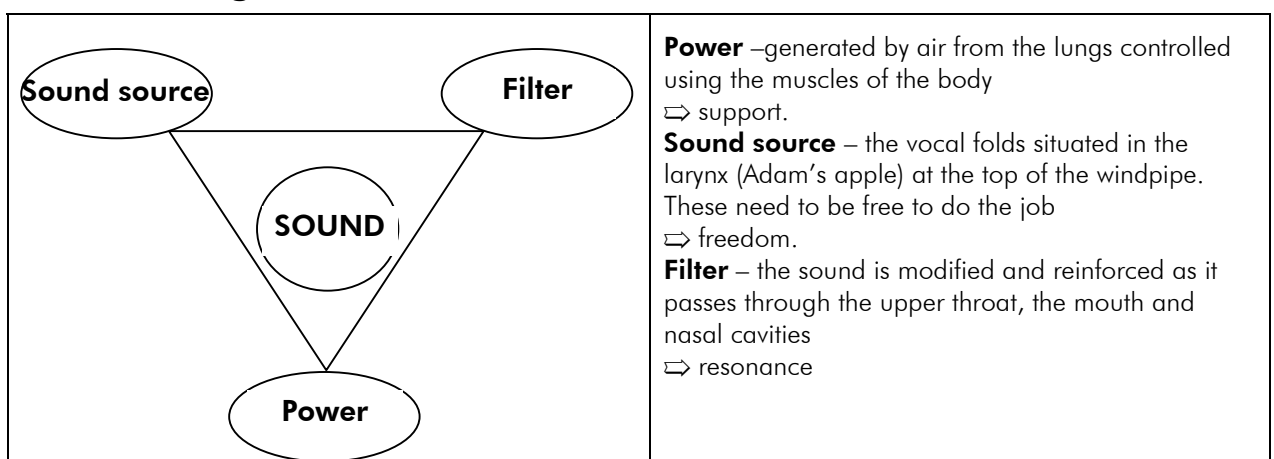
Beautiful singing requires air. An inhalation fills the lungs with air and then it is up to the singer to make sure that this air is delivered to the vocal cords in a continuous and controlled fashion (SUPPORT) until the next inhalation. This requires good posture and muscular effort.

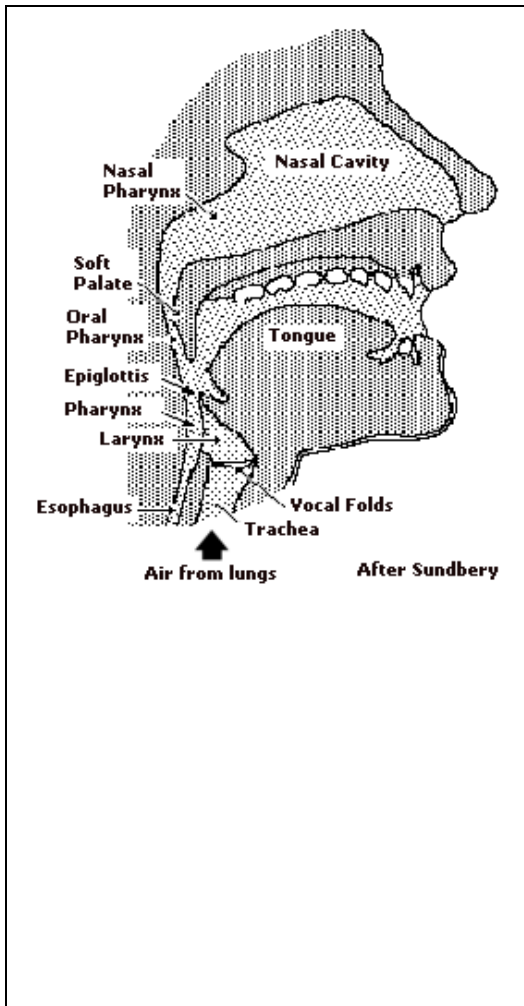
Beautiful singing requires something to make the sound. The vocal cords do this by vibrating when air passes between them. They need the freedom to do this without interference from unnecessary tension or constriction of the passages (FREEDOM).

Beautiful singing requires that the sound produced by the vocal cords be modified, enhanced and magnified by the chambers in the body, mostly in the throat, mouth and behind the eyes and nose. The size and shape of these will determine how beautiful the sound is and how well it carries to the listener (RESONANCE).



1.2 Making sound





Power – sound source generated by breath from the lungs. Good singing requires good airflow. Without breath you cannot get vibrations. It also relies on good support (power control)– both airflow, breath management and using the muscles of the body to assist the work of the voice box (larynx).

Sound source - the tone is created in the larynx at the top of the wind pipe and is where we find the vocal folds. The two vocal folds produce vibrations when they close against the breath. They open and close together many times per second according to the note we are singing. If we sing a middle C the vocal folds are closing and opening 262 times per second! As we breathe out a stream of air hits the closed vocal folds and is chopped up into smaller puffs of air – as the vocal folds open and close.

Filter – The vocal tract that shapes and amplifies the sound. The sound is modified by the resonating qualities of the tube and, depending on how you shape your resonators, you can change the quality of the sound produced.

- There is space above the larynx – the laryngo pharynx
- Space in the mouth – the oro-pharynx
- Space in the nose – naso-pharynx

1.3 Locating the vocal folds

1. Uh oh - clap hands on each sound – feel a glottal stop in the throat.
2. Go to make the sound again but stop. Notice you are stopping the breath. Can you feel the stop? Where is it? In the larynx! You are holding the breath behind the vocal folds.
3. Now release the stop. What do you notice? You will probably hear a little pop. This is the sound of the glottis, the space between the two vocal folds opening and letting the air out.

1.4 Locating the Soft Palate

This is really important because it can filter the sound, sending it out through the nose or through the mouth or both together. It plays an important role in the quality of resonance.

1. Breathe in and out through the nose.
2. Sing 'sing' hold the ng. What do you feel? Where is the tongue? It's probably raised at the back and touching something at the back of the mouth...that's the soft palate.
3. Whilst singing the ng sound, pinch the nose. What happens? The sound stops! That indicates that the soft palate is lowered and all the air is leaving through the nose.

Week 2. Posture and Breathing

2.1 Posture

Singing is a whole body exercise! Good posture is more important than you think. Good singing posture has an immediate effect on the sound we produce – a comfortable stance enables you to support the vocal instrument in the right position to allow maximum resonance. Your posture provides a ‘scaffolding’ for the body which will support it without subjecting the vocal mechanism to any tension.

1. Feet slightly apart, knees relaxed (not locked), shoulders relaxed but back (do the shoulder lift see where they go naturally when you release them).
2. Rock slightly side to side and forward and backwards. Feel the weight being transferred from foot to foot and from heel to toe. Find the central position where the weight is evenly distributed. That’s the one.
3. Try standing with your back against a wall: heels, bottom, shoulder blades, and head all touching the wall. Notice your posture. That’s it!
4. Stand with a singer’s posture – Stand proud and tall, imagine you are puppet with a string coming out the top of your head from the crown of your hair - see how the tube gets longer!
5. Sing with the knees freed, then locked. Notice the tension added to the sound. Free them again, and keep it that way.

2.2 Breathing for singing

- The aim of good breathing for singing is to control the air pressure at the vocal folds.
- There are many different approaches to breathing in singing so it can be confusing – don’t worry.
- Good breathing depends on good posture! Stand like a singer all the time. This makes taking and using efficient breath easier.
- The main difference between normal breathing and breathing for singing is the quick intake and slow, controlled release in the latter.

2.3 Getting the air in, efficiently - the recoil breath

When you sing you need to inhale quickly. Here is an exercise to help you find where the breath needs to go.

2.3.1 The recoil breath

1. Put one hand over your belly button
2. Without breathing in first - breathe out sharply on pshhh – use the hand to send the abdomen right back towards the back bone
Concentrate on active exhalation
Don’t worry about using up all the air.
3. Notice that if you wait and allow your abdominal wall to relax at the end of the sound, the abdomen will bounce outwards and you will have breathed in.
The recoil allows the breath to ‘drop in’.
4. Keep the shoulders relaxed and down – tension in this area may affect the freedom in the larynx.
5. Make sure the throat is open to allow the air in – try to take the breath as silently as possible.

Week 3. Vocal Freedom

This one simple idea can transform your singing!

The voice will sound free if there is a clear, open space in the larynx above the vocal folds.

Unfortunately the space has a tendency to close and constrict unless we actively work to keep it open.

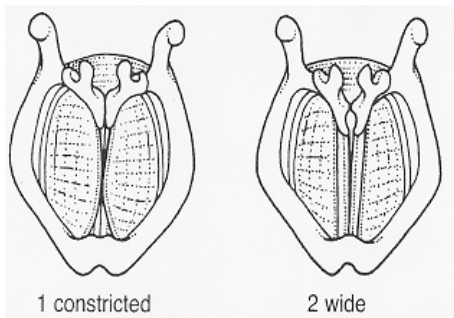
Constriction occurs at difficult bits in the song:

- High/low notes
- fast notes
- at the end of the breath
- loud or long notes
- in performance – when we are nervous
- Most of the time, in fact!

3.1 What is constriction?

Above the vocal folds there is another set of muscles, called the false folds, which clamp shut to close off access to the lungs as a safety measure in response to stress conditions. It is a perfectly natural body response to stress.

By closing shut, these false folds constrict the air passage above the vocal folds preventing free production of sound.



Here, the larynx is viewed from above.

When constricted, the false folds are closed and obstruct the air way.

When open, the false folds are retracted and you can see the vocal folds underneath.

3.2 Feeling constriction

1. Try this... Place both hands under the chair and try to lift you and the chair off the ground. What do you feel? This is complete constriction
2. Now make a whispered hissing sound in the larynx. (Remember the Exorcist!) Notice what's happening the larynx....notice the closure of your throat and the air pushing up from your abdomen.

Combat constriction with the silent laugh!

3.3 The silent laugh

1. Silent laugh – think of something that makes you smile hold the feeling of the inner smile. What do you notice? (A sense of widening in the larynx).
2. Let this develop into a chuckle
3. Silent - feel the sensation/ monitor effort
4. Now breathe in and out/chew – keep the jaw relaxed/check posture/walk about/silent breathing

The opening up of the space in the larynx is called retraction of the false folds.

3.4 Singing with and without constriction

1. Sing ahhh, and whilst singing deliberately add constriction then take it away
2. Still singing, actively retract by using the silent laugh
3. Sing 3 notes of a scale up and down on ahhh, with and without the silent laugh
4. Do this high and low in the range – you have to laugh harder.

Singing freely takes effort but the aim is to make the sound, sound effort free!

3.5 How to monitor retraction while you are breathing?

1. Put your fingers in or your hands over your ears to block the sound
2. Breathe in and out. Do you here the sound of your breathing?
3. If you do, try to open the throat more until you hear nothing.

3.6 How to monitor if you are singing with retraction?

1. Monitor yourself every time you breath in the course of a song.
2. If you hear noisy breathing - the larynx is constricted.

At each breath-point in the song, instead of taking a breath, have a silent laugh. You will find the air has gone in anyway!

Week 4. Support

4.1 Anchoring – the voice body connection

A supported sound is firm, in control, and not wavering involuntarily in pitch or volume. Anchoring involves muscular effort, but must never make the voice sound forced, muscular, or effortful. We can choose to use anchoring techniques to add control to the voice during quiet passages or when we want to sing with volume and energy.

The idea is to create firm scaffolding around the vocal instrument, so you can control the voice, while the voice remains free.

4.2 Torso anchoring

1. Ski-poles exercise to locate muscles – Imagine planting ski-poles in the ground which are then stuck. Attempting to pull them up engages the muscles of the back.
2. Supporting each other in pairs – Stand opposite a partner holding both wrists. With arms bent at the elbow pull against each other. Don't lean back - feel the muscles of the back engaging.
3. Imagine squeezing oranges under your armpits.
4. Turn the arms in their sockets keeping them close to you

4.3 Internal anchoring

1. Flaring nostrils – imagine the smell of something you really like
2. Bite a toffee apple, your teeth stick. Pull them out of the apple with the upper jaw, while relaxing the lower jaw.

4.4 External anchoring

1. Do the head pat! Push down a little with your hand on the crown of your head and push up a little with your head
2. Imagine you are putting on a swimming cap!

Vitally Important Note:

Notice that every time you engage muscles to anchor the voice, there is a tendency for constriction to creep back in. You need to use the silent laugh each time to combat this, actively.

There is a constant balance to strike between the muscles which need to work to support the voice, and adding undesirable tension into the vocal quality.

If you find you can't make a free sound while using muscles in the head and neck, just relax everything above the chest, until you master head and neck anchoring.

Week 5. Resonance

5.1 What is it?

**It's when the tone is produced freely and easily,
and has fullness, richness and carrying power.**

The secret to resonance is to experiment with the sounds you can make, recognise resonance in your own voice, and develop it.

5.2 Recognising it

When you sing with resonance the sound is richer and bigger with no more effort or airflow.
It's not the same as singing louder by increasing the air pressure.

5.3 Achieving it

There are lots of ways to access resonance. We'll start with direct understanding of the mechanics, and then use some imagery.

Have a look at the diagram from Week 1. There we looked at the idea that the vocal tract shapes and amplifies the sound. The next sections explain this more.

5.4 The mechanics of resonance

5.4.1 The Soft Palate

A key ingredient in establishing a good resonant tone is being in touch with what is happening to the soft palate. The soft palate can be tensed, raised, depressed or relaxed. It is really important because it can filter the sound, sending it out through the nose or through the mouth or both together. It is like a doorway between the nose and the mouth, and plays a vital role in the quality of resonance.

5.4.2 Locating the Soft Palate

1. Breathe in and out through the nose
2. Sing 'sing' hold the ng. What do you feel? Where is the tongue? Touching something at the back of the mouth...that's the soft palate.
3. Whilst the singing the ng sound, pinch the nose. What happens? The sound has stopped! This is a sign that you have opened the nasal port.
4. Now sing 'sing' hold the ng... after pinching your nose sing 'geee'.
5. What happens this time? The pressure inside the nose releases and the sound comes out of your mouth. This is a sign that you have closed the nasal port

The idea is to create space in the back of the mouth. Think about the sound lifting up and over the roof of the mouth and hitting the front teeth! Don't worry about getting the sound out. If you create the right sound inside the mouth it will get out all by itself!

6. Keep the jaw and tongue relaxed; tongue lightly touching the lower gum ridge. Don't open the jaw too wide.

Keeping the soft palate high, along with good posture in head and neck, is essential to establishing a resonant tone, free from nasality.

You may hear singers talk about the **placement** of the sound. This is a way of finding resonance by *feeling* the sound in different places. In particular, forward placement is akin to a bright, focussed sound.

5.5 The imagery of resonance

Physiological note : There aren't really big open spaces at the back of the head, but sometimes pretending there are can help the sound resonate. 😊

5.5.1 The resonant breath (Fat Ah's)

In this exercise the breath you inhale is imagined to be going into the head, not the lungs. First, feel the cool air coating your teeth, next filling your cheek bones, then feel it flooding to the top and back of your head. Feel how the sound rings when you have all that air in you head!

Sing first of all: ah

Now sing: Ah

Finally try: AH

Silly... but it works.

5.5.2 Bite the apple

If you imagine taking a bite of an apple, then sing, this can produce a nice bright resonant tone. Notice how the sound is aimed at the back of the front teeth and the top lip flared. (See also head and neck anchoring)

5.5.3 Hot potato

Imagine a hot potato at the back of your mouth. Notice how much space this is creating. The soft palate is nice and high. The larynx is lower, which will create a darker sound.

5.6 Exploring resonance

When you start experimenting with resonance, you find that it's not just a tap which turns resonance on and off. There are lots of different favours of resonance. In fact saying "sing with resonance" is like saying "paint in colour": that's where the choices start.

There are lots of ways to experiment with the different resonators. Your voice may have naturally high and bright, or low and dark resonance. Making extreme noises with your voice is a way of finding what you can do. Ultimately you aim to enrich the voice by adding both high and low resonances. You can choose which type of resonance best fits the mood of the song or parts of the song you are singing.

5.6.1 Finding low resonances (chest, dark)

1. Sing with a deep sobbing quality
2. Say holey-moley.
3. Sing like Paul Robeson, i.e. with a bass operatic quality
4. Cry – oh dear

5.6.2 Finding high resonances (bright, twang)

1. Cackle like a happy witch
2. Nyah, nyah ny, nyah nyah (year 5 – the real meannies)
3. Quack like a nasty duck, baa like a lamb
4. Bubble...nnn...Have...Ah, Ee, Oh, etc (aside: use this to transfer bright ringy sound from one vowel to another)

5.6.3 Advanced stuff

Try singing with both bright and dark resonance at the same time!

Week 6. Vowels and Articulation

6.1 Revise basic craft

Remember to:

1. Stand like a successful singer
2. Laugh silently to retract the false folds
3. Breathe in and out easily
4. Relax the jaw
5. Support the sound – air flow (muscles of the abdominal wall) and the work of the Larynx(anchoring)

6.2 Finding the right jaw space

1. Put your fingers on the hinge of the jaw – open the mouth slowly notice what happens – put your thumbs underneath the jaw notice what happens. You should feel tension as other muscles come into play. (We don't want this!)
2. Reset the jaw now do it again – open the mouth just enough to let the jaw 'hang'. (This is the position we want, and no wider!)

6.3 Kinds of sounds

6.3.1 Vowels

One of the most important elements in choral blend and in expanded sound is unity of vowel sound. The vowels are elongated while the consonants are often de-emphasised.

General rules for good vowels.

1. Think tall
2. Keep the tongue against the lowers gum ridge
3. Keep the lips off the front teeth
4. Open the mouth enough to let the sound come out but not too much so as to add tension to the external muscles (Resonance is inside - you cannot push the sound out)

Particular vowels

5. The most practiced singing vowels are EE, EH, AH, AW and OO. They are larger in vocal shape, more resonant and fuller in volume than other vowels.
6. We can also add in UH (as in "love"), IH (as in "this"), and AA (as in "cat"). These are not as round and resonant as the first group of vowels.

6.3.2 Diphthongs

Some vowels are not pure; you seem to have to change them at some point to make them work.

1. 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.

6.3.3 Consonants

The vowels carry the sound but the consonants carry the meaning!

We need to make use of consonants when we sing otherwise the words don't make sense. But our challenge is to use them just enough so as to make meaning from the words but not too much so they interrupt the flow of music.

Some consonants can be softened like the 't' in little.

Some consonants are singable – like m, n, ng, l. They help to connect one vowel to another and help the music to flow.

1. Say, very slowly, the phrase "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas". Notice which consonants are singable (and help you join one vowel to the next) and which are not. You may need to 'chew' the phrase to get the point.
2. Now, try singing the same phrase, with good vocal technique. Use the singable consonants to join the words together and try to soften the non-singable ones.