

♪ Eight ways to help you sing with line, on pitch and with more ease ♪

1. Sing on a relaxed and open breath

Practice these steps to experience how it feels to sing with a relaxed breath. First -

Pant like a dog - this opens the ribs and encourages deep breathing
Yawn - opens the throat. Experience and retain that feeling of space!
Tongue - flat, tip touches inside bottom teeth
Mouth - nice open oval, jaw relaxed

Now, take a deep, easy, breath - in and out 3 times
Next breathe in and out - make a sound, any sound, on the out-breath
Next breathe in and out - sing any note as you release the breath, ie no catching.

Listen to your breath:-

Are you catching and holding your breath between intake and voicing (this is very common)?
Are you snatching your breath, that is not breathing early enough?
Are you breathing from your abdomen or higher? Can you feel your ribs, back and front, expand as you breathe in (abdominal breathing)?

Try again, this time speaking a phrase, not singing. Now, keeping that same sense of relaxed breathing, sing the same phrase.

The quality of your out-breath depends upon the quality of your in-breath. Aim to open your mouth and breathe on the beat before your note.

2. Relaxed open posture

If you can bear it, use a mirror to learn your secret singing habits. You will be surprised! These are all very common:-

Do you have and keep an open oval mouth shape, or does your mouth narrow as you reach the end of a phrase or line, or once you have passed a high note?
Does your bottom lip tuck in as you sing higher?
Is your jaw relaxed or is it working heavily?
Is your tongue relaxed at all times, or does it rise and tighten as you sing higher notes?
Do your eyebrows shoot up as you sing higher?
Do you physically rise up when singing?
Do you raise or jut your chin out when singing?
Are your shoulders relaxed and do they stay "down" as you sing?

Any sign of tension in your face and body and excess movement will affect your breath and create tightness in your throat and tongue; that will in turn affect your voice.

 *An exercise for the brave hearted: In front of a mirror, put your tongue out and rest it on your bottom lip. With tongue and jaw relaxed, sing on a vowel a set of ascending notes 1 3 5 7 5 3 1. The aim is to keep the tongue very relaxed as you sing higher... it will want to retract, narrowing the space in your throat. Repeat until you can control the tongue movement. Then try again, aiming for the same sensation, but with tongue relaxed inside the mouth.*

 *Exercise: On an easy breath and open throat, say Aah, Ai(r), Ih, Oh, Oo - the aim is to keep that sense of space in the throat for all vowel sounds. Then sing these sounds - keep the throat space, jaw relaxed and moving minimally. Check using a mirror.*

3. Air support and legato

Singing smoothly/legato/ through the line results in a) using your air more efficiently b) reducing vocal fatigue and c) keeping you in tune. Think of sound spinning on air throughout the whole length of a phrase/line. It might help to visualise a ball spinning in front of you, or use your hands to create that feeling of continuous movement - your smooth, steady breath is making and sustaining that spin.

On long sustained notes, it is essential to keep the note alive and pulsing, ie you must keep feeding it with air... if not, it will go flat.

 *Exercise: Take a couple of lines with long notes from current repertoire and sing only the vowels (omit consonants). This is harder to do than it seems! Repeat until you develop a strong sense of flow through the line, and only then re-introduce the consonants, aiming to produce the same feeling and sound.*

4. Staying in tune

None of us choose to sing flat. Do you listen to your voice and regularly check your tuning? This practice will help you to identify any problems and, with repetition, understand and correct them.

If you don't have a piano, no problem - you can find a virtual piano online (eg Apronus.com) or download a virtual piano App. There are many. And, in the absence of rehearsal tracks or recordings, you can also use these virtual instruments to learn your notes. Please do ask if you need any help with finding or using one of these tools. Additionally, you will find plenty of advice online, exercises and so on, on how to sing on pitch with consistency. Just type into a search engine, for example Google, a phrase such as "singing flat" or even better "singing on pitch"!

Remember - intervals between rising notes are wider than you think, and narrower between descending notes. Think UP.

Ask yourself - do I make every note count? In other words, am I putting the same effort into every note and phrase, or do I 'relax' vocally, for example when coming down from a high note, or at the end of a phrase? This is really common, and what may be happening is that a) you are not supporting all the notes fully (ie not putting the same amount of air through them or b) your throat is not open and the vowel sound is not pure, or c) BOTH. Singing well requires energy, stamina and focus.

Be brave! If you are tentative, it *will* affect your energy and inevitably pitch. Aim to sing with confidence.

 *Exercise: To check for pitch, take a couple of phrases with descending notes, sing them unaccompanied and then check your last note using a keyboard, piano or equivalent. Repeat and correct.*

 *Exercise: 1. Play a note on the piano. 2. Now hear it in your head. 3. Next prepare to sing that particular note ie open your mouth, create the space in your throat and mouth needed for that pitch, but don't sing, just be aware of how that feels. 5. Now maintaining that same feel sing it, approaching the note from above.*

Try another higher note, be aware of the increased stretch and space as you go higher. Use this technique - ie hearing and feeling the space/stretch needed for your note - to boost the confidence necessary for making a secure entry.

5. Negotiating high passages

Remember to release! When we sing long or repeated high passages, the vocal chords tighten/shorten. How to counteract this? During a pause take a deep low breath (pant or yawn if no one is watching!), relax and regain that feeling of the open space in your throat. If possible, make a Hooo breath.

Do you find yourself coughing during or after singing high? That is a sign of strain - likely causes are that you are pushing when you should opening up space, you are tightening instead of relaxing, or that you are not using enough air support, possibly a combination of all three!

Remember that, as you sing higher, your vocal chords will vibrate more and more rapidly. For them to function properly, they need a supply of strong steady air... and with higher notes, **faster** air. Voice cracking on high notes? Probably due to insufficient air.

Think ahead, so that you are ready - with good breath support, a relaxed face/jaw/tongue and the space necessary for high notes - and mark up passages with reminders that will help you prepare.

👉 Approach low notes leading up to higher notes as though they are high.

👉 When singing passages that move from high to low, then high again, avoid “sinking” into the low notes. Instead, keep thinking high - keep that sense of space in your throat and the air spinning in readiness for the higher notes.

👉 When singing very high in your voice, you may need to modify some vowels to maintain space and create the optimum sound - examples below. Some consonants can also be particularly tricky on high notes, so need adjustment. But, with the combination of good air support, correct vowel and consonant use, you may be surprised to find that you can sing high with greater ease and produce a better sound.

🎵 *Exercise: Choose a few phrases from current repertoire and experiment with these 3 ideas, then bring them all together. Start by speaking the phrase, not on pitch but using your singer's airflow. Move to incorporating pitch when you feel ready. Repeat and listen carefully.*

6. Vowels and consonants

You may have heard the expression “singing on or through the vowel”. Vowels are a singer's friend because they keep your air spinning. With consonants, the picture is mixed. You can sing through this first group and use the consonant to really focus your pitch (eg Vvv or Fff or Rrr):-

F V R S SH CH J Z M N

Whereas these tend to interrupt your airflow:-

B D T hard G (as in god) K and hard C, P

So, we want to maximise vowels and be aware of and manage the impact of consonants.

Knowing your accent will help. Understanding how your regional accent affects vowel and consonant sounds in normal speech will help you to adapt these to singing. For example, some accents favour diphthongs or heavy consonants which can be a problem in singing.

 Practice speaking your lines, without pitch, but using your singer's airflow. Aim for the smoothest line possible and, as you experiment, you will start to appreciate how modifying vowels and consonants (see examples below) help to produce a better sound with a more even airflow.

Aim to keep the jaw relaxed throughout.

Here are some examples of how to modify vowels and consonants, drawing on recent repertoire. Try them out - first speak, then sing, the phrase as you would normally, then using the modified sounds

 Seiber folksong "By a river ... "

B is an explosive sound, and it's followed by a diphthong ("aye" sound), so this is a difficult opening sound. Practice repeating the B until you produce a softer sound - try putting a vowel before it eg ABABABA with this aim. Then, try BaBaBa.

For the diphthong, use an AH-IH sound - with a long AH, followed by a short IH.

Now put them together, spoken not sung, aiming for a smooth line and plenty of air. Then repeat, but on pitch.

Another tip - think of the vowel shape that follows the consonant and prepare to sing that sound, rather than the B sound. So in this example, you would practice like this - on the in-breath AH (unvoiced) - on the out-breath B-AH-IH.

This sounds odd but try it, it does work.

 Carols "Come all ye faithful"

Hard short K consonant followed by a short vowel sound. Use the tips above to a) soften or shorten the consonant and b) lengthen the vowel sound. You might think of it as - UH (unvoiced) K-AH-M

"A little child on the earth has been born"

That word "little" was going flat. Why? Because the vowel sound is dark. To brighten it and make it tuneful, sing like an Italian! Aim for a sound of L-IH-TLE with a long 'IH' vowel sound (as in "lean"). Feel and hear the difference - there is much more air in this vowel sound. Secondly, a hard or explosive T sound will interrupt airflow, so practice a softer T (closer to a D) - see the exercise on voicing B above.

 Stabat Mater

With the phrase "Virgo Virginum" first speak the words as you would normally. Next use long vowels to produce

V-IH-RG-OH V-IH-RJ-IH-NUHM

Finally, be aware of the hard G in Virgo interrupting your airflow; try to soften the consonant using the technique provided above. Now sing the phrase, using the modified vowels and consonants.

Eia Mater - think of this as AI (as in 'air') AI-AH MM-AH-TAIR, with a soft M and T

7. Be more Italian

 Try this out - say the words "O sole mio" in your normal accent. Repeat with an Italian accent. Repeat a second time with an exaggerated Italian accent. Repeat and exaggerate further. Listen carefully each time and you should hear a much more musical sound emerge with each iteration.

8. ... Eyes up!

Keep watching the conductor! You know, the one right at the front, signalling with both hands ...