

SINGING 101 by Nick Page 1/1/20

Singing words is different from speaking words. We get into trouble, as choral singers, when we sing words with the same vowels and consonants as we speak them. They are completely different.

Good singing begins with breath. An insufficient breath will create an insufficient sound. Make breathing a meaningful and conscious event. The more support you create through breath and good posture, the bigger and more beautiful your sound will be.

Singing is 60% listening. Turn off auto-pilot so that you become fully conscious of the sounds coming from your body. Listen to those around you as well, matching pitch and tone.

Your body is the most expressive musical instrument there is. Create tall gorgeous vowels by dropping the jaw and opening your mouth. A trumpet has a bell at the end that helps project the sound. Your mouth can do the same, but you have to be conscious of your instrument. Remember, it's not the same as talking.

Your pencil is your best friend. It keeps you from making the same mistake twice. When the conductor gives an instruction about phrasing, write it down. When the conductor gives instruction about diction, write it down. When the conductor gives instruction about tuning or cut-offs or breathing, write it down. The difference between a good choral singer and a bad choral singer is that a good choral singer marks the scores or word sheets with their pencil, thus not repeating mistakes. The bad choral singer keeps repeating the same mistakes over and over again. Making mistakes the first time is part of the learning process, but repeating mistakes is simply lazy behavior and can be solved by marking your score with a pencil.

Notice the word "conscious." Becoming aware of the beauty we are capable of is a joyful act of discovery. It is a discipline particularly if it is something new. Seasoned singers work very hard at being present and aware of every breath, posture, phrase, tone, rhythm and inflection. Make no mistake. It is hard work, but it need not be a chore. Learning to sing well is an awakening of the heart.

Every sound has a beginning, middle, and end.

The beginning of the sound is called THE ATTACK. It can be a soft attack as in Oo, Ah, or Oh or it can be a percussive attack as in "cat" or "talk." Some consonants need to be anticipated, consonants like H, R, V, W, Y, M or N. These sounds actually begin BEFORE the beat. The word "yellow" begins before the beat with an "Ee" vowel followed by "Ell-Oh."

The middle of a sound is called the SUSTAIN. Sustained vowels must be pure with the jaw dropped. AH AWE EH OH OO and especially EE. A DIPHTHONG IS A SYLLABLE WITH TWO VOWELS IN IT as in the word "MY" (Mah-Ee). Sustain the first vowel, but treat the diphthong as the CUT-OFF. The word SHINE consists of two vowels, AH and EE. The rule is that we sustain the first vowel, then cut off with the second. Sing this: SHA - - - EEN. The diphthong cut-off has to be as short as a consonant like "T."

The CUT-OFF is the end of a sound. There are soft cut-offs as in GO or TOO. There are percussive cut-offs as in CUT OFF. In choral singing, all CUT-OFFS need to be exaggerated, but not sustained. It's easy with words like CUT and HAT, but with words that end with SS or FF, we have to remember not to sustain the cut-off, so repeat this: HATS OFF. All cut-offs need to be sung in unison with everyone cutting off at exactly the same time.

Ending a sound with an RR or an LL is a challenge. Treat the RR and LL as diphthongs so for the number FOUR we sustain the OH and cut-off with a short RR. In a song like SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW, the RR at the end of SOMEWHERE should not be sustained. Sustain the vowel, never the consonant.

I suggest going through your music and marking words. Good choral singing does not come automatically. It takes time and knowledge to learn new habits.

The Nick Page Guide to singing: Love your consonants. Seduce your vowels.

Become Conscious of Pitch. This is called listening, but there's a lot more to it. Hearing is an auto-pilot function of the ear. Listening is a self-pilot function. Listening requires discipline and focus. Listening requires a reaching out to sound, a hunger for sound. Reaching out to sound means listening to those around us, to vowels, phrasing, and pitch. But listening also requires a reaching within. This is called "audiation." Audiation is the ability to listen to sounds within the head without vocalizing them. We need to be able to hear a pitch BEFORE we sing it. The songs we sing are all within a diatonic system, which means they generally comply to the do re mi fa sol la ti do scale. The process of listening internally (audiation) will help to make the singing much more in tune.

If you have trouble hearing the right note, it can help to sit next to a strong singer. If you are right handed, it usually means your right ear is dominant, so sit with a strong singer to your right. If you are struggling with finding the right pitch, simply stop singing and listen. You cannot sing a pitch in tune until you can internally hear the pitch. When you can hear it correctly, then you can sing it correctly. This may take time and a lot of patience. It's worth it.

Most important. Always find the joy.