

Singing Bel Canto



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Art & Science

*An introduction to the art of beautiful singing
based on the Bel Canto traditions*

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To past and future pupils

Preface

The aim of this book is to give an explanation of the Bel Canto technique and how it has developed over time, an accurate description of the anatomical structures used when singing in this technique combined with a way of visualising these structures, and a practical method for the production of the singing voice. The intention is to give an insight into the basic understanding of this method and the realisation that it is for *all* singers, not just classical.

The exact meaning of words and phrases changes over the years and what one generation means or signifies by any term or phrase changes and means something subtly or completely different to the next generation. For this reason the present day meaning of the main terms used in this description of Bel Canto singing are defined. When learning to sing, a whole philosophy of historical interpretation and beliefs are also implicitly transferred between teacher and pupil. It is hoped this text presents a clear view of the process and technique of singing and makes all the information presented explicit.



Chapter 3

Singing sounds

Production of vowels

Vowels are the parts of words that carry the breath when singing. Bel Canto singing technique was developed in Italy in the 17th century and uses the pure, open, and clear vowel sounds termed here the Italian vowels.

When talking about speech five vowel sounds are considered; however, spoken English includes many local dialects with the pronunciation of these vowel sounds varying in different parts of the country. Some written vowels are pronounced as if they change from one vowel sound to another when spoken. Thus although the word *bit* clearly has only one vowel sound *i*, the word *bite* has two joined vowel sounds, which could be *eye* and *ee* before the *t*, or perhaps *a* and *ee*, or even *uy* and *ii* before the *t*, depending on where you come from. In these cases, where two vowels are sounded on one syllable, it is called a diphthong. Often, when singing in English, the ending vowel sound of a diphthong pulls the fauces inwards and downwards and produces a dull and closed sound which makes the voice sound old and dark. The sung Italian language uses pure vowel sounds without diphthongs. Singing these vowels keeps the soft palate lifted, the fauces stretched widely, and the pharynx open, producing a pure, open sound with a natural lightness, that keeps the voice sounding young and bright.

Twenty different vowel sounds have been identified in spoken language and each is represented by a specific symbol in the International Phonetic Alphabet. Words are often spelt out in phonetics in dictionaries to show readers how to pronounce them. The specific vowel sounds used in the singing exercises in this book are shown in the table as Italian vowels. They have been supplemented for singing songs in

English as well as Italian; the *i* sound as in *thin* is part of English pronunciation rather than Italian, and the vowel *A* in both languages can be sung with the fauces and tongue very widely stretched as in *AA*, or with the tongue even flatter and a feeling of greater vertical space in the pharynx as in *AH*. The phonetic sounds and example pronunciations of the vowels used in the exercises are given in Table 1. It is worth looking up these phonetic sounds on the internet to hear the sound of the vowel exactly: at the time of writing we can recommend the websites www.multimedia-english.com/phonetics/british-vowels and www.yorku.ca/earmstra/ipa/vowels.html.

<i>English vowel</i>	<i>Italian vowel</i>	<i>Phonetic sound</i>	<i>Sound in word underlined</i>
A	AA	æ	bat
	AH	ɑ:	arm
E	EH	e	met
		ɪ	thin
I	EE	i:	see
O	OH	ɒ	hot
U	OO	u:	food

Table 1: English and Italian vowels and their phonetic sounds.

Visualization

Begin with visualization of the soft palate, uvula, and fauces. Visualize the vowel *AA*, lifting the soft palate and pushing the fauces outwards, with tongue flat and forwards in the mouth. When singing vowels, mentally stretch your fauces outwards to keep the vowel pure and the pharynx open.

Vowel exercise

AA, EH, EE, OH, OO

1. Take a deep breath in, taking the air and the vowel to the soft palate. Sound out AA on one tone (normal speech level) as a supported breath exhalation, feel the air passing over the soft palate. Repeat this for each of the vowel sounds: EH, EE, OH, OO. The OO sound passes over the soft and hard palate and you can feel it in your top teeth and upper lip. You might be able to feel your lips and teeth vibrating. You must keep the breath supported and moving fast. The sound may be louder than you expect, but make sure you do not force the sound.
2. Take a deep breath in, move the air to the soft palate. Sound out AA moving the tone from a low tone to a higher tone and back down again. As the sound goes higher you may be able to feel it in your nasal cavity. Repeat this for each of the vowel sounds: EH, EE, OH, OO. The EE sound is very likely to be felt over your top teeth. As the tone becomes higher it may be felt in your head (Figure 16).

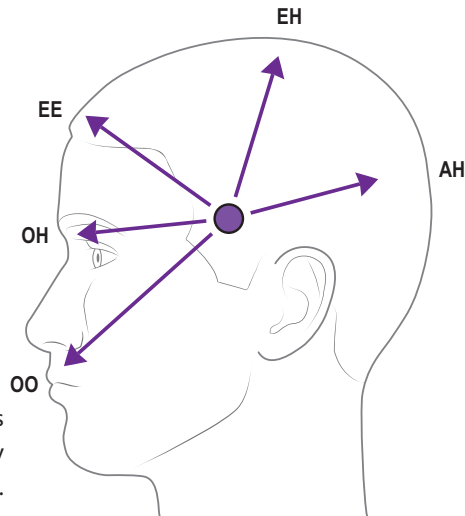


Figure 16: Resonant areas where the placed vowels may be felt, depending on the pitch..

Singing vowels

To achieve pure Italian vowel sounds when you sing needs a bit more thought than you might expect. When sung vowel sounds travel through the air to the ears of the listeners, its clarity may not be received as intended and the listener may not recognize the words. Because of this, when singing in Bel Canto technique, the vowel sound is adjusted at the outset, so if you read the lyrics of a song in Bel Canto in spoken voice they may sound rather strange, yet when they are sung the listener perceives the correct pronunciation. It is always worth saying a song aloud, using the Italian vowels, while smiling, lifting the soft palate, and stretching the fauces in preparation for singing. Remember, no Italian vowel has two sounds (a diphthong) within one vowel.

To ensure the words sung are always clear to the audience, the pronunciation of the Italian vowels is adjusted from the C above middle C and higher. At these pitches it is much harder to produce the OH and OO vowels clearly and the EE vowel can become squeaky. Therefore the AA and AH vowels are used for the very highest notes so the sound produced is clear and pure. The audience will still hear the words sung, even if the sung vowel is different on these top notes.

Production of consonants

Although the aim of singing is to maintain the vowel sounds for as long as possible, the clear articulation of consonants, especially at the beginning and end of words, is very important. Without their clear and quick articulation we would not understand the words. If too much time is spent on them the vowel will be shortened, also making the word unclear.

Each consonant must be clear but articulated quickly when singing so as not to take any sound away from the vowel. The first consonant of a word must be clear and distinct. Words starting with 'm', 'n', and 'l',

Lip	Sides of the tongue
M [B, P, W]	Y [J]
Tip of tongue	Back of tongue and soft palate
L, N [D, R, S, T, Z]	G [C, K, Q]
Lip and teeth	Back of tongue, soft palate, and imposto
V [F]	NG
Breath consonant	
H	

Table 2: Consonants and where they are formed.

help to get the air into the imposto, as does ‘v’ which is used on the breath focused in the bridge of the nose; they can be used as described in the warm up exercises. The consonants ‘t’, ‘d’, and ‘b’ are approached differently at the beginning of a word than at the end. It is useful to begin with a short hum when articulating ‘d’ and ‘b’ at the beginning of a word.

The consonants at the end of words are invariably carried on to the beginning of the next word, so the vowel sound is clear for the duration of the note. Ending consonants followed by a breath use a different technique. Those such as ‘t’ and ‘d’ are very important and can be sounded rapidly and clearly with a flick of the tip of the tongue behind the front, upper teeth. Consonants like ‘ch’ and ‘g’ (give), and ‘j’ (just, large) are formed further forward in the mouth than in speech. Ending on ‘m’ or ‘n’ needs a stress on the sound without stopping the breath.

Exercises to help you feel the vowels and consonants

MAH, MEH, MEE, MOH, MOO

The lip consonant M is helpful to find the placing at the imposto. Begin with a m (hm) against lightly closed lips and add it to the vowel. Sound the vowel in speech tone three times. Take a deep breath making sure the air fills the imposto.

Sing a descending scale from the C above middle C, using the sounds MEE – MAH on each note. Feel the muscles around the pharynx and fauces stretching higher and wider each time the vowel is sounded. Repeat this exercise moving up one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable, and down one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable.

To utilize all the vowels, take a deep breath making sure the air fills the imposto and sing a descending scale from the C above middle C, sounding MAH, MEH, MEE, MOH, MOO on each note. Again, repeat this exercise moving up one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable, and down one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable. The transition from one sound to the next is rapid, ensuring the air and vowels constantly flow through the imposto.

Tip of the tongue consonants

Take a deep breath making sure the air fills the imposto, put the tip of the tongue against the back of the top teeth and primary palate, hum the air through the bridge of the nose. This will encourage the resonance in the imposto.

Take another deep breath in, move the air to the soft palate. Sound out NNN, moving the tone from a low tone to a higher tone and back down again.

You should be able to feel this in your nasal cavity throughout. Whereas the M sound allows the air to come more forward into the mouth as well as the other resonant areas, the N sound takes the air higher and into the nasal cavity and frontal sinuses.

LAA, LEH, LEE, LOH, LOO

The N sound is helpful for finding the next tip of the tongue consonant, the L sound. Begin with a *n* sound, tongue against the back of the top teeth and primary palate, take a deep breath making sure the air fills the imposto, sing a descending scale from the C above middle C, using the sounds LEE – LAA on each note. Concentrate on the flexibility of the tip of the tongue and the resonance in the imposto. Ensure the pharynx and fauces are stretched higher and wider each time the vowel is sounded. Repeat this exercise moving up one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable and down one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable.

To utilize all the vowels, take a deep breath making sure the air fills the imposto and sing a descending scale from the C above middle C, sounding LAA, LEH, LEE, LOH, LOO on each note. Again repeat this exercise moving up one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable, and down one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable. The transition from one sound to the next is rapid, ensuring the air and vowels constantly flow through the imposto.

Back and side of tongue consonants

NGAA NGAA NGAA NGAA NGAA

The sound NGAA is produced both in the imposto with the *n* sound and by the middle of the back of the tongue brought forward to meet the central portion of the back of the hard palate. The middle of the tongue is forward in the mouth, with the soft palate lifted and the fauces stretched. The vowel sound is pure and open. This exercise encourages development of the flexibility of the back of the tongue.

In normal speech level repeat NGAA five times. Singing a descending scale from the C above middle C, repeat NGAA five times on each note ensuring each new tone starts with a clear 'n' sound. Repeat this exercise moving up one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable, and down one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable.

GAA GAA GAA GAA GAA

The sound GAA is produced by the middle of the back of the tongue brought forward to meet the central portion of the hard palate. The middle of the tongue is forward in the mouth, with the soft palate lifted and the fauces stretched. The vowel sound is pure and open. This exercise encourages development of the flexibility of the back of the tongue.

In normal speech level repeat GAA five times. Singing a descending scale from the C above middle C, repeat GAA five times on each note. Repeat this exercise moving up one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable and down one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable.

YAA YAA YAA YAA YAA

The sound YAA is produced by the sides of the tongue against the upper molar teeth, with the soft palate lifted and the fauces stretched. The vowel sound is pure and open. This exercise encourages development of the flexibility of the sides of the tongue.

At normal speech level repeat YAA five times. Singing a descending scale from the C above middle C, repeat YAA five times on each note. Repeat this exercise moving up one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable, and down one semitone, as far as it feels comfortable.

The exercises given in the warm up section p. 59 will allow you to feel where each of the sounds are made and placed.

Appoggio

Appoggio means, 'leaning/support' and is an important part of Bel Canto technique. The breath needs to have somewhere to lean so it can resonate; there are several areas where this can be felt.

Five appoggi areas are given in this book; there are others but their study is beyond the scope of this text.

When singing, the air and vowels are mentally *leant* into the appoggio areas (Figure 17).

The main area, which should always be in use and, in fact, must be connected first, is of course the imposto.

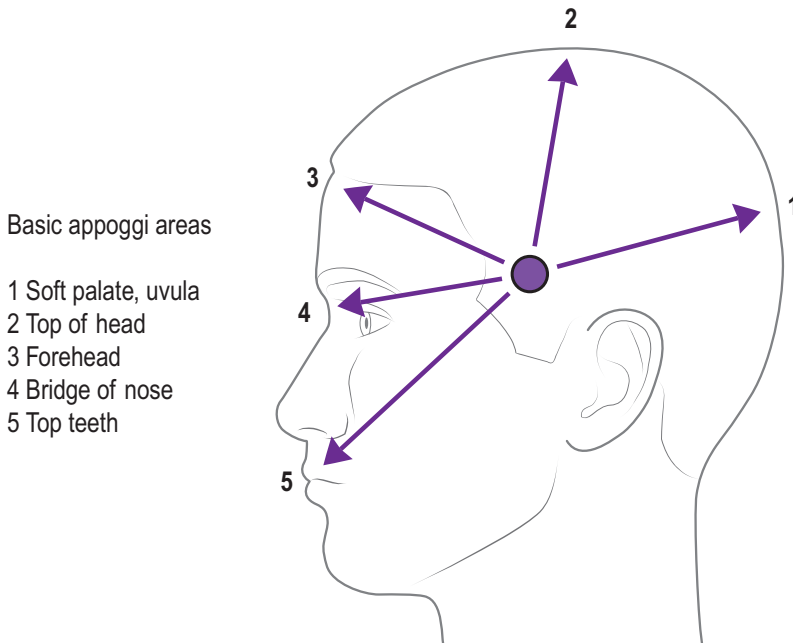


Figure 17: Appoggi areas.

