

The 15-Minute Vocal Warm-up

Carolyn Wing Greenlee

The 15-Minute Vocal Warm-up CD & Booklet

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The Vocal Cords

You have two pairs of vocal cords. The lower membranous cords or folds in the larynx (called the true vocal cords) handle your usual speaking voice and the lower tones and a thicker, upper pair (false vocal cords) handles the higher ones. Sound is produced by air from the lungs passing over the cords, causing them to vibrate. Pitch is controlled by varying the tension on the cords. Volume is controlled by regulating the amount of air that's passing through the larynx. When you warm up your voice, you're causing your vocal folds to vibrate in a controlled, orderly manner. As runners stretch and get the blood flowing in their legs before a race, singers need to prepare their voices before they sing. These exercises will condition your vocal cords, help you control them, increase your range, and help prevent injury.

The false and true vocal cords make sounds with very different character and qualities. The lower range, also called Chest Register, is where the power, resonance, and richness lie. It can also sound harsh, hard, and inflexible. The upper range, also called Head Register and falsetto, is lyrical and flexible. It can also sound insubstantial and thin. The exercises on this CD are designed to stretch your range on both ends so you will be able to sing lower and higher than before. It will also stretch the qualities of your lower range, drawing the rich, strong, resonance into your upper range, and it will stretch the lyrical, flexible qualities of your upper range into your

upper range

Mixture

lower range

lower range. Where they overlap, you will be able to mix their characteristics any way you want, thus giving yourself a more expressive voice.

The Dreaded Break

They call it the Break because that's what your voice does. There comes a point where your true vocal cords cannot vibrate fast enough to make higher notes. You may feel your voice flip, skip, or get weak. Eventually your brain will have to figure out how to make a smooth transition between ranges, coordinating the vibrations of each set of vocal cords, but smoothing the Break is not the most important thing to do at first. In fact, with this method of stretching both ends of the registers in both directions, your Break may even get wider for a while. Don't worry. It isn't an irreparable problem; it's a phase in your development.

The Good, the Bad, the Ugly

As with any new skill, you will probably not execute these exercises perfectly. You may make some ugly noises. Your voice may crack, split, or suddenly not be there, especially near your Break. Don't worry; that's part of the process.

I think there's too much emphasis on beauty these days. In singing sometimes you need to sound alarmed or angry. If you want to have a full palate of colors with which to paint the message of your music, you may need some ochres and chartreuse. The human voice is so amazing in its ability to convey emotional subtleties and extremes. Don't be afraid to use all that expression in your singing, even if it means you don't sound pretty.

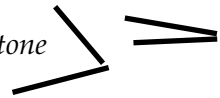
When I made this recording I had just returned from a hard trip. I was tired and hadn't been working my voice, but I decided not to wait until I could sing well. Rather than try to be the example of how you're supposed sound, I decided to leave all the imperfections

so you could hear the evidence of weakness and lack of coordination so that you might understand such things in your own voice. Be assured, however, that when you do your exercises regularly, your voice will grow strong and flexible, coordinated enough to know how to get from one end of your range to another totally, comfortably under your control.

The Optimum Position

The optimum configuration for singing is the Throw-Up Position. Your jaw is open wide, tongue is down flat, your diaphragm is strong and supportive—perfect for propelling something out from the body. In singing, that something should be air. The minute you close your jaw down, your body reads it as Time to Eat. The diaphragm relaxes so food will not be accidentally expelled. It absolutely cannot give you the support which would come automatically if you kept your jaw open.

Open jaw = open tone; Closed jaw = squashed tone



Exercises

(See Glossary for definitions of musical terms)

1. Thirds

This exercise begins in your lower range, crosses over your Break, and ends in your higher range. Try to keep the tone even and the vowel pure Ah. Don't let it deflate into Uh. That usually means you've let your jaw close down.

When you cross the Break, your brain will be trying to figure out how to do it smoothly. That bit of coordination will come in time with practice. Don't worry about it now. The point of this exercise is not how to go smoothly over your Break; it's to train you in breath control, accuracy of pitch, and vowel purity. It makes you use your voice in ranges you might not usually go. If an ugly noise

comes out of your mouth, don't stop. These are vocal push-ups. Their purpose is to strengthen you. Who cares if they sound unpleasant?

Sometimes I sing off key in this exercise—not on purpose, but out of weakness, insufficient air, or lack of concentration. Plan ahead so you have enough breath to last you to the end of each set of thirds. Remember that every note deserves your full attention. Eighty percent of singing is mental. You have to stay in the moment, not regretting past mistakes or worrying about what is coming up next. Give each note its due.

2. Snowplow

I call it the Snowplow because you're pushing the warmth and strength of your lower register up as far as you can into your higher register. Glissando slowly up an octave on Ah, concentrating on keeping your voice in its Chest Register as long as possible. Then glissando back down an octave. Remember that it takes more strength to hang onto the tone on the way down. Set it down in a nice arc. Don't cheat and suddenly be at the end note. Glissando in a graceful arc. My first passes show what not to do, particularly the fifth octave. The curve sounds flattened where I go suddenly to the last note. There's no diaphragm support giving it traction. If you go slowly, it will be easier to control the arc.

As you get towards the higher notes of the Chest Register, they will sound more harsh. This is a good sound if you're singing a song that has to express urgency or emotional stress. It's like shouting, screaming, or crying. But don't hurt yourself. You never want to push your voice to where it's strained. Stretch, but not to the point of pain. The minute it starts to feel strained, go on into your falsetto. If it gets too high, drop back down and sing the octave lower. The Snowplow really works your voice. You might feel tired. Tired is good. Strained is not.

To keep stretching your lower range through your

Break, start off in Chest Register, go into falsetto, and return to Chest Register. In the middle of this exercise you can hear my vocal cords trying to adjust. When I pass into the place where falsetto is the only physical possibility, my voice evens out. Yours will do the same. Eventually you will solve the problems of how to get from one range to the other and you'll have the strength to do it with aplomb.

3. Curving down in falsetto

Keeping your voice in falsetto is easier if you are singing softly. See how low you can get without letting it drop into Chest Register. Keep the vowel pure and the curve graceful. Go slowly and set it down carefully.

4. Pitch matching with all vowels

Pure vowels are the source of good tone. Staying on pitch while changing vowels is an exercise in coordination. Inside your mouth, the soft tissues will be making small adjustments to create the different vowels. Keep the air flowing evenly, supporting every vowel equally. Change vowels smoothly and legato. Don't separate them with hard edges. Let each one flow from the one before. Beware: I do go off key sometimes. Don't copy me; match the pitch of the piano.

One of the secrets of staying on pitch while changing vowels is keeping your jaw cocked wide open and as still as possible. If you have trouble keeping your jaw open, try this: Put two fingers together, then turn your wrist so one is on top of the other. Open your jaw and place your fingers between your upper and lower teeth. Now change vowels. Yes, you really can do that, and you'll be surprised how open your vowels sound because of it. If your tongue tries to pull back (it's trying to help out), keep the tip of it lightly touching the inside of your bottom front teeth. This will help keep it flat.

5. Octave jump with staccato

Glissando up an octave, do seven staccato notes with a hard edge (as in “oc-to-pus”). Your diaphragm should provide a popping support, explosively expelling short bursts of air. Don’t stop the notes with your throat. Then hold the last note and let the vibrato flow before heading back down in thirds. Hold the last note. It should have a nice vibrato, evidence that your voice is relaxed. Keep the vowel a pure Ah. Don’t let it go Uh.

6. Pitch matching with vowel changes

(Follow Vowel Changing Chart on next page)

Singing words is a matter of changing vowels. You add consonants to give definition to the words, but you *sing* on the vowels. Changing vowels helps your brain and mouth figure out how to go from one syllable to another without going off key. If you’re having trouble with a line in a song, sing it without the consonants (ah eh ih eh: Amazing Grace). Solve all the pitch, breath, and phrasing problems while singing just vowels. When you can sing the line easily, add the consonants back in, but don’t be surprised if you suddenly have problems again. The minute you’re singing words instead of sounds, your left brain takes over—impatient with the fine details of expression, nuance, and staying on pitch. Just keep at it.

7. Octave arpeggio with staccato vowels

Aim for precision. Keep the vowels pure. Regulate your breath so you have enough for the trip back down. Support with your diaphragm. Don’t let your jaw close down. If you have trouble with the higher pitches, jut your lower jaw forward just a tad. It helps!

Glossary

Falsetto

Called “false voice” because it is placed in a much higher register than is used for normal speaking.

Glissando

A smooth slide of adjacent notes

Legato

Notes tied together in a smooth, even style with no noticeable interruption between the notes

Staccato

Distinctive breaks between successive tones

Vibrato

A pulsating effect produced by rapid alternation of a given tone as by the slight oscillation of the tone in. When the voice is seated properly and relaxed, vibrato happens.

Vowel Changing Chart

Ah-oh-Ah

Oh-oo-Oh

Ah-eh-Ah

Eh-ee-Eh

EE-ah-EE

Oo-oh-Oo

Oh-eh-Oh

Ah-oo-Ah

EE-oo-EE

Eh-oh-Eh

Oo-ah-Oo

Ah-ee-Ah

Oo-eh-Oo

Oh-ah-Oh

Music is a precious gift. Your voice is a precious instrument. Together, they may bless the world with your song. I hope this exercise program will help you express your heart to the glory of God, who made music, voices, and you.

—Carolyn Wing Greenlee



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