EXCELLENCE IN SINGING

multilevel learning and multilevel teaching

VOLUME 2: Mastering the fundamentals

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Orienting to this high-level idea, your student learns to use her body with minimum effort. You teach her to respond to the air with the strategy of a martial artist—guide the energy in the motion around her rather than expend her own energy. This simplified concept can help you lead your student away from labored singing and toward singing with efficiency, freedom, poise, and maximum expressiveness—all qualities of advanced singing.

Flexibility in the Parts of the Vocal Tract

Every vocal sound is created with a corresponding vocal tract shape, which is formed with the jaw, tongue, cheeks, lips, larynx, soft palate, throat, and head position. Because these parts line the vocal tract, moving any one of them changes the shape of the vocal tract.

These parts can move in a wide range of combinations: the front of the tongue can rise as the jaw drops, the soft palate can lift as the head tilts, the lips can spread as the cheeks lift. The parts can move all at once or one at a time, subtly or dramatically. The combinations are limitless.

But your students arrive in your studio with varying abilities to move these parts. A beginning student, for example, might not be aware of how she uses her tongue; most of your students will not be conscious of their soft palates or head tilts. Their speech habits feel and sound normal to them, even when the corresponding vocal tract shapes pose vocal problems. Students need to learn to discriminate between sounds they think they're singing and sounds they're really singing—and to monitor the underlying movements of the parts of their vocal tracts.

For the first level of teaching resonance, you need to help your student develop flexibility in the parts of the vocal tract so that the

parts are free enough to create the vocal tract shapes that produce the sounds she wants. You need to help her move past her familiar habits and use the parts of her vocal tract in many new, precise combinations, which will no doubt feel unfamiliar. The more flexibility your student has within each part's range of movement, the more chance she has to move from one tuned shape—that is, one quality of sound—to another.

While studying singing, your student needs to learn to move each part of the vocal tract as independently of the others as possible—free from unnecessary tension, across the full range of motion, and with finer and finer precision. The exercises in this chapter begin with this fundamental level of teaching resonance: developing flexibility of the jaw, tongue, lips, cheeks, head position, soft palate, throat, and height of the larynx.

The jaw

The jaw can move in many directions: up and down, side to side, forward and back. Because each movement changes the size and shape of the vocal tract, the jaw exerts a major influence on resonance. (For details on the physiology of the jaw, see heading "The Major Body Parts that Control Resonance," in v. 1, ch. 4.)

Your first step in training vocal resonance is to help your student relax her jaw. Because many students tighten their jaw muscles in response to stress—even the stress of learning to sing—you might need to help your student keep her jaw relaxed as she works with the other parts of her vocal tract.

The tongue

The tongue is tremendously mobile. It makes thousands of small and large movements, as a unit or in segments, and any one movement creates new contours along the bottom of the vocal

tract, changing its shape. The tongue, like all muscles, can be trained to become more flexible and responsive.

Many students have problems with their tongues. They pull the tongue back, thrust it forward, bunch it up, tighten it, or let it shake or dip as they are singing. These problems stem from habits developed through poor speech; childhood behaviors (such as thumb sucking); unusual dental structures; or physical limitations such as a lisp or a short frenum (the attachment under the tongue), which can prevent the full movement of the tongue tip.

You can correct many tongue problems by helping your student become aware of the problem and leading her through patient practice to change a habit.

The lips and cheeks

Aside from managing the opening of the mouth, the lips and cheeks lengthen and shorten the vocal tract as they stretch forward and relax, profoundly affecting resonance.

Most people are unaware of their lips and cheeks, though they move them over a wide range. People are especially unaware of where or when their lips and cheeks become tense. Many people—particularly Americans—have sluggish lips and cheeks. Other people habitually tighten or spread their lips or tense their cheeks unnecessarily. Awareness and flexibility exercises can help your student free these important parts of the vocal tract.

Head position

Your student can tilt her head anywhere in a circle—toward the front, the sides, or the back—or she can turn it from side to side. Moving her head in any of these directions changes the vocal tract by moving the spine and neck muscles closer and farther apart.

The head position not only changes the resonance spaces in the vocal tract, but it also affects the functions of the other muscles. The head can lean into a position that jams the muscles together, keeping them from functioning freely. Or it can sit poised at the top of the spine, balanced and free, helping the muscles adjust easily, particularly the muscles that move the larynx.

The soft palate

By lowering her soft palate, your student opens the passageway into her nose, profoundly affecting the shape of her vocal tract and creating a nasal sound. Instead of a single tube from the lips to the larynx, she suddenly adds the entire nasal cavity to the overall vocal tract's shape. By raising her soft palate, she suddenly lops off the entire nasal cavity, reverting the vocal tract back to a single tube.

The soft palate can be lowered by degrees. Slightly lowered creates a nasal sound, which is twangy or whiny. Lowered too much creates a muted and honky sound, like the sound of a person with a cleft palate. If the soft palate is raised tightly, sealing off the nasal cavity, when it should be lowered for nasal language, it causes *denasality,* a cold-in-the-nose sound. In addition, the soft palate can be stretched or relaxed by degrees, which also affects the shape of the vocal tract.

A singer lowers and raises her soft palate all the time—both to turn nasal language sounds on and off, such as [m], [n], or [ŋ] (ng), and to help sing throughout her range. But when your student can't tell whether or not her soft palate is lowered (when she can't tell whether she is singing with nasality) or when she's unable to raise it (when she is unable to stop nasality), she has a problem you need to help her with. One student lets her soft palate hang down for all pitches, another student does so on par-

ticular pitches, yet another on particular vowels. Where and when your student allows her soft palate to drag open indiscriminately depends on her habits. Some students have a problem called "assimilation nasality," in which they allow their soft palate to hang open during a vowel that is next to a nasal consonant (as in the words "since" or "men"), which produces nasal vowels.

Building awareness of her soft palate helps your student manage nasality appropriately for singing and for language.

The throat

The walls of the throat can be relaxed, constricted, or stretched to change the shape of the vocal tract. Many beginning singing techniques focus on relaxing and gently opening the throat, especially through inhalation exercises. (See the exercises under "Inhaling," on page 61.) A relaxed throat tends to add warmth and ring to the tone of the voice.

This chapter describes several exercises for relaxing and gently opening the throat, especially while searching for a tall, spacious kinesthetic sensation. (Also see the exercises under "Relaxing the Throat," on page 126.)

The larynx

The larynx can be moved up or down, which shortens or lengthens the vocal tract, dramatically changing the resonance. A shorter vocal tract sounds brighter, just as a piccolo sounds brighter than a flute. A longer vocal tract sounds warmer.

In normal speech, the larynx tends to move up and down with pitch and with vowels; beginning singers often carry over this tendency to their singing. The larynx tends to move downward as a speaker says close vowels (particularly the back vowel [u]) and to move upward as a speaker opens toward [a]. On higher pitches,

singers tend to raise the larynx. We sometimes call a young tenor who strains for the high notes a "necktie tenor" because of his squeezed throat and high larynx. In contrast, other students push the larynx down too low.

Your student can learn to keep her larynx in a more-consistently low position on all vowels; this will help her produce warmer, less-effortful tones. You want to help her to lower her larynx and keep it comfortably low, suspended somewhere in the middle, where her larynx is flexible enough to freely adjust up and down.

Flexibility with Vowels and Consonants

All singing occurs within language. Sometimes a singer must sing clicks and hisses and other nonlanguage sounds from twentieth-century art music or ethnic music, but most of the time she sings a stream of vowels and consonants.

- The tongue, lips, jaw, soft palate, and larynx are called "articulators" because they are used to articulate a vowel or a consonant. We include the cheeks, the position of the head, the height of the larynx, and the walls of the throat as additional parts of the vocal tract that you need to monitor because they help your student make refined resonance adjustments for singing.

Vowels and consonants might seem to belong only to the study of language pronunciation, but because each vowel and consonant has a unique corresponding vocal tract shape, vowels and consonants offer us a stable set of reference vocal tract shapes—a "vocal