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Sensation Associated with Melismatic Movement

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Question: *What should be the sensation in the abdominal wall region when I am singing a lot of fast notes in a melismatic passage? I'm wondering what the abdominal muscles do and what they feel like when they do it. Do they accentuate every note by small movements or is some of that action done in the throat? (I hope some is done with throat because I have trouble making my abdominal muscles move that fast.)*

Comment: As is the case for all voiced phonation, vocal fold adduction/abduction (closure/opening) that turns breath into tone must never be consciously controlled by the throat. However, in the execution of agility passages, if each individual note of a *gruppetto* commences with an aspirated [h] articulation, the singer may get the impression that the throat has participated. In answering the question posed, both aspirated and nonaspirated articulation will be considered.

Vocal phrases often include turns, shakes, and longer groups of running notes. A short pattern (usually three, four, or six notes) is termed a *gruppetto*.

Melismas, *Rouladen*, and runs are generally composed of series of *gruppetti*.

Quickly occurring articulated passages can be accomplished in both staccato or legato mode. In either instance abdominal wall movement, not conscious throat action, should be the motivating source. It is generally helpful to establish awareness of this action by executing a rapid “**Hm-hm-hm-Hm!**” sequence on a sixteenth-note pattern followed by a quarter note on any single pitch in comfortable speaking range, as though engaging in quiet laughter. This achieves an articulated *gruppetto*, with a slight aspiration before each note. Continue with a “**Ha-ha-ha-Ha!**” pattern, as in gentle laughter. Then raise the figure to somewhat higher pitch and dynamic levels. The next step is to apply the “**Ha-ha-ha-ha-Ha**” laughter to a descending 5-4-3-2-1 scale figure. In all of these maneuvers, the abdominal wall, epigastric, and umbilical regions engage in slight articulatory movement. (When constantly relied on for achieving agility in performance, this kind of aspirated melismatic treatment is sometimes referred to as “the **Ha-haha-ha-Ha** school of articulation.”)

The next maneuver is to execute the same patterns without the assistance of

[h], as in “**Ah**-ah-ah-ah-**Ah**!” The glottis is now automatically closed in advance of each onset note. This should be normal procedure for executing both articulated legato and staccato passages.

Abdominal-wall articulation should take place while the singer remains *appoggiato* (that is, while retaining the basic inspiratory position that occurs initially during the breath cycle in the *appoggio* technique of breath management). There is a gentle, almost imperceptible epigastric bouncing action, but no inward pulling or outward pushing on the abdominal wall during articulatory maneuvers. Of course, as with all phrases of long duration, the lower abdominal wall eventually must move inward at phrase endings, because breath capacity has been depleted. However, this motion is not necessary in short phrases or in brief agility exercises. The important factor is that the slight articulatory movements associated with agility not be impeded by an inward pulling on the abdomen.

Similar flexible abdominal-wall action occurs in stifled laughter. (Recall the elementary school child rocking with silent laughter behind the teacher’s back, hand over mouth so that no sound can escape.) Epigastric/abdominal wall bouncing in suppressed laughter can be felt and seen. The same kind of movement occurs in audible panting. Place the hands on the anterior/lateral abdominal wall during several seconds of panting and note the action that takes place in the epigastric/umbilical area and at the sides of the torso. Then replace rapid noisy panting with rapid silent panting.

Initially using an aspirated agility pattern alerts the singer to abdominal-wall action. But as soon as this energy source for agility has been discovered, articu-

lated legato (no [h] insertion) should become the aim. The small articulatory movements that occur in singing staccato are retained in legato mode.

Next, brief agility patterns built on scale passages (e.g., 1-2-3, 1-2-34, 1-2-3-4-5) should be introduced in comfortable lower-middle range. They are first performed staccato, then in legato mode. In both cases, the nonaspirated onset (“ah” as opposed to “ha” should be used). The alternation of quick staccato and legato modes then follows.

In all of these procedures, whether staccato or legato, abdominal wall movement is the articulatory generator. Radiologic observation indicates that the diaphragm responds to these small articulatory movements of the abdominal wall by providing proper impetus for the apportionment of exiting breath. The vocal folds react (they are not the initiators) by turning the minute bursts of air into tone. One has the feeling that there is an immediate and precise correspondence between minimal air flow and vocalfold approximation.

After short patterns have been mastered, longer passages should be introduced, as with the ascending/ descending 9-note scale. Traditional triadic and arpeggiated patterns should be subjected to alternating staccato and legato modes. Whether staccato or legato, the same articulatory motions take place in the anterior/lateral abdominal wall.

Excerpted passages from familiar literature sources serve as splendid routining vocalises for agility. For soprano: Handel’s *Rejoice Greatly* and *O Had I Jubal’s Lyre*; for mezzo-soprano: Handel’s *Iris*, *Hence Away!* and Rossini’s *Cruda sorte*; for tenor: Handel’s *Evr’y Valley* and Mozart’s *Il mio tesoro*; for low male voice: Handel’s *For He Is Like a Refiner’s Fire* and Mozart’s *Hai già vinta la causa*.

From melismatic portions of each of these arias (and from many others), short vocalises of several bars may be constructed. Transposed sequentially, they serve as excellent drills for the establishment of articulatory movement.

Some passages in the literatures for all voices require light articulation, while others require firmer accentuation. The required degree of articulatory action will determine the extent of discernible epigastric movement. To be avoided at all costs is artificial impulsing (shaking) of the abdominal wall as a means for generating either articulatory movement or vibrato.

Because bel canto is based on the ability both to sustain and to move the voice (note the cavatina/cabaletta juxtapositions of numerous arias), the agility factor should be introduced early in systematic voice training. Indeed, if freedom induced by velocity facility is lacking, *sostenuto* singing will never be totally free.

As explained, melismatic passages can be accomplished through the aspiration of each note, a favorite device among some choral conductors who lack understanding as to how to attain clean melismas

without the constantly inserted [h]. Such melismatic technique is exceedingly inefficient because of constant loss of breath, and it has no place in the performance of solo literature.

It is true that consecutive velocity patterns are sometimes so rapid (as in many Rossini arias) that it is temporarily helpful to introduce the first note of each *gruppetto* with slight aspiration. However, to hear bel canto pyrotechnical arias sung with constant “**Ha**-ha-ha-ha-**Ha**” usage is neither stylistically correct nor aesthetically pleasing.

For all singers, agility patterns should be included as part of the daily technical routine. Because of their freedom-inducing nature, they should be among the first exercises used in warm-up sessions. They are intended not solely for voices where the literature calls for frequent coloratura and *fioritura* passages, but for the voices of every *Fach*. 

