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## Management of Tongue Tension in Singers: Strategies and Techniques

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### Possible technical issues related to extraneous tongue tension

1. Vibrato issues, such as bleat, wobble, straight-tone
2. Nasality
3. Vowel distortion
4. Generally poor articulation
5. Strident or tight vocal production
6. Woolly, or pharyngeal tone
7. Tension of areas connected to the tongue, such as: larynx, jaw, soft palate, and neck

### General relaxation of the tongue

1. Use one or more of the following descriptors of a relaxed tongue: weightless, as if it is floating upward in the mouth, full and present in the mouth, thick, in the way, perhaps even „gaggy,” especially for students who have been pressing the tongue flat in the mouth. A relaxed tongue position will seem wrong.
2. Sing through an entire average-length song with a very loose tongue razz (raspberry, motor boat sound). Immediately sing the same piece with words; the student will feel a much more relaxed sensation. As soon as the tension returns, revert to the razz before continuing with text.
3. Think of relaxing the tongue to a wide position that serves as a cap over the bottom teeth.
4. Wiggle base of tongue by quickly moving the whole tongue very slightly forward and back (at about the pace of a trill). This is helpful for a held, tense tongue.
5. Do not over-extend the jaw. The vowel [ɛ] most naturally seems to result in a relaxed jaw position. Practice with a small mouth opening to minimize tension, to more easily notice tongue depression, and to notice the fullness of the tongue in the mouth.
6. Rest the back of the neck in hands and allow the head to tilt backward. Relax the tongue and allow it to feel as if it is falling down the throat.
7. Place the thumbs under the tongue as far back as they can go. Pinch the tongue with the thumbs and forefingers just on either side of the midline of the tongue, and the forefingers on top of the tongue, directly above the thumbs. While pinching, slide thumbs/forefingers forward to the front of the tongue.

### Directive for encouraging the tongue to arch properly

8. Use illustrations of tongue positions for various vowels. See: <http://www.uiowa.edu/-acadtech/phonetics/>
9. Produce an ach-laut [x] or hocking sound and move directly to any sung back vowel. Use uvular R if the sound is too far back. Use an ich-laut [ç], uvular R, or cat hiss for front vowels.
10. Tongue Stretch: lodge the tip of the tongue behind the teeth, and arch the middle of the tongue forward out of the mouth, keeping the tongue wide. Continue rolling the middle of the tongue outward to Stretch the root of the tongue. Suggestion: bite down on tongue and vocalize on a 1 - 5 - 1 slide. (Be

sure to use sufficient airflow.) Either of these can be combined with a slight yawn to keep the larynx down.

11. Place a straw, chopstick, or similarly shaped item under the tongue, allowing tip of tongue to rest at teeth. Practice vowel formations in this position. This discourages retraction of both the tip and the root
12. Flatten the whole body of the tongue (tip remains down) against the hard palate and hum. Think of leaving the tongue in place and lifting the palate off the tongue while opening to a vowel.
13. Think of lifting the tongue toward the nose to create the proper arch while encouraging nasal resonance.
14. Thrust the tongue upward by simulating a pre-vomit position.
15. Feel the sides of the tongue touching the upper molars while singing on various vowels. For some this will benefit the front vowels, for others, the back vowels.
16. Practice scratching the sides of the tongue against the molars.
17. For tongue position of [a] sing [NG] then simply lift palate off of the tongue, leaving the tongue where it was.
18. To prevent a backward pull on the tongue, think of pronouncing a front vowel while producing a back vowel (works especially well to keep larynx low without pushing down on the tongue as pitch ascends).
19. Practice tongue „push-ups“.
20. Imagine a wall that extends across the back of the molars, behind which the tongue is not allowed to go.
21. To maintain consistent placement and vowel formation throughout the duration of a pitch, think of “shooting vowels at it” or imagine the repetition that occurs when holding down the key on a typewriter.
22. When the tongue is stubbornly pressing down for back vowels, mix some American R] f tip of tongue down, not dental) with the vowels. Tongue position for [u] and [U] is especially likely to be depressed, and the tongue cannot press down while doing this properly.

### **Creating independence of tongue movement**

23. Allow the jaw to hang loosely, and practice vowel migration exercises without moving the jaw. Move the tongue smoothly and slowly. Look at a vowel chart to think of singing the vowels that lie in between the vowel you are singing and the vowel you are moving to. Imagine the arch of the tongue rotating through the mouth like a pool ball.
24. If difficulty persists in producing smooth, incremental movement of the tongue during vowel migration, think of the tongue not moving at all for vowel changes.
25. Check for jaw tension by pressing fingers on muscles around jaw line or sliding fingers down muscles on side of face; or, think of the jaw melting into the neck. Relaxing the jaw relaxes the tongue.
26. If the sound is pinched or if it is overly dark, think of widening the tongue in the back. This action both helps to keep tongue from bunching in the mouth, and prevents the root of the tongue from pulling downward. A good visual this: picture wings on the back of the tongue that angle out and up.
27. Focus on the movement on the middle of the tongue to form the vowels. Keep the tip and the back uninvolved.
28. To avoid pressing down on the tongue while opening the throat, think of yawning in the nose instead of in the back of the throat.
29. Be sure the lips are not tense (pouty, not wrinkly) when forming rounded vowels. Tongue tension is more likely when lip tension is present.
30. Inhale with the tongue in the relaxed position of the vowel that is about to be sung, then begin the tone without any adjustment of the tongue. Practice in front of a mirror.
31. High notes arch tongue forward to prevent pressing that can create tension in the pharynx and extrinsic laryngeal muscles, both of which can impair production of high notes. This can be done either with intentional muscular action (necessary when extreme tension is present) or through the thought of [I] or [Ĕ].

32. Practice inserting a portamento between every pitch to maintain a loose tongue and throat loose while changing pitches. This prevents the tongue from locking the larynx and also encourages continuous airflow.

### **Avoiding Tongue Retraction**

33. Place the forefinger vertically against the chin, with the tip rising just above the bottom lip. While singing, allow the tip of the tongue to rest against the finger for all vowels and all consonants that do not require movement of the tip of the tongue.
34. Slide the tip of the tongue over the bottom teeth, allowing it to rest between the inside of the lip and the gum line. While phonating, allow the tip of the tongue to „sneak“ back up to the top of the bottom teeth.
35. While phonating, “polish” the top edge of the bottom teeth with the underside of the tongue.