

“Secrets of Great Singing”

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ELISABETH HOWARD’S VOCAL POWER METHOD

I once asked a new student, "What kind of music do you listen to?" He said, "Oh, the classics". I was very impressed. I said, "Like who?" He said, "Yeah, like THE WHO, LED ZEPPELIN, THE ROLLING STONES, AERO SMITH."

BLUES SCALE

Probably the greatest musical influence on all popular singing is the Blues. In pop music we have vocal embellishments on the melodies called "licks," which are typically derived from the blues and pentatonic scales.

So in the Vocal Power method, we give our students exercises not only on the major scale, but also on the *blues* and *pentatonic* scales. Singing these scales helps to develop improvisational skills and personal style. Let's first focus on the Blues scale.

The Blues scale is built on the steps of the natural minor scale. 1-3-4-#4-5-7-8. On the way down the sharp 4 becomes a flat 5. I tell my students to be careful with the half steps on the way down.

I like to start this exercise low in the chest voice and then take it as high as possible, through the mix and then head voice on the highest notes. Descending, I like stopping on the flat five, the tritone, which really gives it a bluesy sound.

One of the earliest and best examples of a Blues singer who had a tremendous influence on today's pop sound is Howlin' Wolf. He was a Mississippi Delta Blues singer, who began his career in the late twenties. In this song, listen to how he starts out with a double tone bending the flat five in the first ten seconds of the song.

Listen to the Major 9th in the hum of the voice against the Major 7th in the guitar at the beginning of the song. Listen to the flirtation between the major and the minor third on the word "somebody".

Listen to the downward slide over the 321 from the *blues* scale on the word "Door".

The entire melody uses notes from the Blues scale and is based on one single e minor chord. This is Howlin' Wolf "Moanin' at Midnight" recorded in 1951.

Now let's listen to the Blues scale influence in one of the best rock singers, writers and guitarists and a 13-time Grammy winner whose heart is in the Blues. Here is Eric Clapton in his song, "Before You Accuse Me", from his 1992 Grammy winning album, "Unplugged." Here's Eric Clapton.

Now listen to the Blues scale influence in the melody of the song, "Take Me Or Leave Me." from the Broadway musical, "Rent" recorded in 1996.

Here is a simple two-bar phrase you can use to accompany yourself or your students for improvisation using the Blues scale. We play a game of "musical tag". I improvise a phrase using the Blues scale and have the student take my last note and improvise. Then I take their last note and continue. Let's try it. Can we have a volunteer?

BREATHING AND SUPPORT

For breathing and support, three areas expand on the intake of breath: the rib cage, lower abdomen and the lower back. As we sing, the ribs resist collapse and the lower back remains firm.

For breathing and support, I like to use a very effective breathing and support exercise: Let me do it first. We sit on the edge of our chairs and drop down slowly, exhaling our air. We slowly come up, inhaling and imagining the air filling low into our back and rib cage.

POWER AND PROJECTION

Let's talk about Power and Projection. Power and Projection is not how *loud* one sings, but it is in the *intensity* of the tone.

The vocal folds are muscles and need to be strong to be able to project a clear and powerful sound. In order to create a clear tone, the breath pressure must be *balanced* with the *firmness* of the vocal folds.

We want a laser beam sound, whether it's soft or loud, not a breathy diffused tone that doesn't project, except when the *breathiness* is *intentional* for emotional expression.

As we age, our muscles get flabby, and the vocal cords are no exception. Weak and flabby vocal cords affect the clarity of the tone as well as the vibrato control. This exercise will keep the vocal cords *firm* and *youthful*.

Here is an exercise for the chest register that will strengthen the vocal cords will put a "ring" in your tone, allowing you to project that tone with ease and intensity.

We use the sound *Ow!* because it *isolates* and *strengthens* the vocal cords and brings the tone *forward* in the *mask*. A strong *chest* register is also very important for the *classical* and *musical theater soprano*. For example, in the song from "West Side Story", the soprano sings, "I feel pretty". If the soprano knows how to use her chest register to match her head register, it would sound like this: "I feel pretty, oh so pretty. I feel pretty and witty and bright" which sounds much better than: "I feel pretty, oh so pretty, I feel pretty and witty and bright".

If you find that your *ee* (i) is more resonant than other vowels, this is usually because the tongue for *ee* is *arched* and against the upper molars on both sides not *pressing* down in the back of the throat. To achieve similar resonance, in the other vowels, I like to think of the tongue *toward* the *ee* (i) position, but not all the way as arched as in the *ee* (i) vowel.

VIBRATO

Let's talk about vibrato. Although I believe we were all "Born to Sing", no one is *born on the operating table* with a vibrato. Just think, if we were born on an island, would we have a *natural* vibrato? Many singers say they have a *natural* vibrato, but it still is learned, whether by *imitation* of other singers or by the guidance of a voice teacher. And what one calls *natural* is not *necessarily* pleasing to all ears, because vibrato is a *tool of expression* and must be suited to the *musical* style. Vibrato control is *crucial* in the recording studio where you might need a straight tone, or a straight tone into vibrato, or a vibrato that speeds up, or a faster vibrato, or a slower vibrato, or a vibrato with crescendo or decrescendo, or you might need to *synchronize* your vibrato with other singers.

I have defined four types of vibrato: “Vocal cord flutter vibrato”, “Throat vibrato”, “Shimmer vibrato” and “Diaphragmatic vibrato on the breath.”

The *vocal cord flutter vibrato* is done with *puffs* of air, directly by the vocal cords.

An example of the “vocal cord flutter vibrato” is heard in the cabaret singing of French legend Edith Piaf “La vie en rose”.

A *vocal cord flutter vibrato* is appropriate and beautifully expressive in many musical styles and cultures.

But a vocal cord *flutter vibrato* in Juliettes waltz, “Ah, Je veux vivre,” might not be appropriate.

You hear the “vocal cord flutter vibrato” in the singing of the French Canadian Pop star, Celine Dion in the song, “My Heart Will Go On” from the movie, *Titanic*.

The “throat vibrato” is done by pulsating the larynx which feels like an up and down motion in the rhythm of the vibrato pulses. Singers like Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley often use this type of vibrato “Fly me to the moon,” and it fits their styles.

Here is Elvis Presley singing with a *throat vibrato* and a little vocal cord flutter in the song, “ But Love Me”

The “Shimmer Vibrato” is used in faster tempo songs in many styles, and especially in *scatting* in Jazz singing.

It is also used in faster tempo classical singing.

Here is jazz legend, Ella Fitzgerald with an example of the “shimmer vibrato” in a song called, “Oh, Boy, I’m in the Groove” from her album, “In The Groove”.

Here is an example of shimmer vibrato in the classical singing of Renee Fleming in the Mozart aria, “Ah, dal pianto, dal singhiozzo from Zaide.

In the Vocal Power method we teach what I call, “Diaphragmatic Vibrato on the Breath.”

Diaphragmatic vibrato on the breath is done with slight, almost *imperceptible* diaphragmatic pulses and is heard in every vocal style from *Rock* to *Musical Theater* to *Opera*. The vibrato is the fluctuation of volume and pitch. On the pulse the tone is louder between the pulses the tone is softer. On the pulse the pitch is on the desired pitch and between the pulses, slightly lower, but never more than a quarter of a tone difference in width.

For control of the speed of the vibrato, one can achieve great precision with *Diaphragmatic vibrato on the breath*. For a faster vibrato we add *throat vibrato* with diaphragmatic vibrato.

Vibrato on the breath makes it possible to be able to sustain high notes with an even vibrato and to sing *crescendos* and *decrescendos*. *Vibrato on the breath* makes it easier for a singer to sing with more freedom to express. Whether it be in Pop or Opera:

Sustaining a note *effortlessly* with an *even vibrato* shouldn’t be a *hope and a prayer*. It is a *skill* that should be used as a *tool of expression*.

Let’s listen to an example of *vibrato on the breath* in the Bass baritone voice of Ezio Pinza. Here’s “Some Enchanted Evening,” from the Broadway Musical, “South Pacific.”

Here’s Whitney Houston with vibrato on the breath with a faster throat vibrato at the end for increased intensity.

When a word ends with a consonant, such as the word *his*, the final consonant is sounded *after* the final pulse of vibrato.

The vibrato should not “bounce” the tone. The tone should be *smooth* and the pulsations of the vibrato *not obvious*. On the intake of air, make sure that you breathe very low and allow the lower abdomen to *release*, while the lower back and rib cage expand. The inhalation muscles resist the exhalation muscles, creating a *dynamic tension* for support.

So make sure the rib cage *resists* collapse and returns to its original position *gradually*. The vocal cord *adduction* or *firmness* must be *balanced* with the *sub glottic* breath pressure, breath going through the cords, to create an *even* vibrato. If the support is lax, the vibrato will slow down and could develop into a *wobble*. You can practice your *vibrato on the breath* without sound by using a *hiss*, keeping the pulsations smooth using this exercise.

If you are having trouble keeping your vibrato *even*, or if the pitch *flats*, it's usually because of tongue tension. Here is a *tongue release* exercise, which I use for sustaining tones and you can also use it for other scales and arpeggios.

There are three steps:

1. Use a dampened paper towel. Hold the tip of the tongue and stretch out your tongue while doing the vibrato exercise.
2. Hold the tongue out without the paper towel while doing the same vibrato exercise.
3. Sing the vowel “Ah” with the tongue in a normal relaxed position while doing the same vibrato exercise. You will feel freedom in your tone.

THE BELT MIX

To be able to sing powerful *high* notes that match the *chest* register, we use the *belt mix*. Both female and *male* singers can use the *belt mix*.

D minor *Hey* on D cascade down. I call this *safe belting*, not harmful to the voice because we don't bring the chest register too high. We use this technique for pop singing from Blues to Jazz and in Musical Theater.

The *belt mix* must be anchored in the mask. This is our “safety zone”. I also like to call this “the Liz Howard throat by-pass”!

Here's how the vocal cords work from chest register to mix: Starting with a lower note in chest register, as we ascend the scale, we begin with *firm* vocal cords and *gradually decrease* the *firmness* as we move into the upper range.

We maintain *mask* resonance and *firm* support all the way.

For both male *and* female singers, the *belt mix* starts at about A or B flat above middle C and goes as high as two F's above middle C and even higher.

Unsafe belting is when the vocal cords are held firm and are *not released* gradually for the higher notes.

A singer with an already developed *strong* head register will find it easier to develop the *belt mix* than a singer with *little* or *no* head register.

So I make sure that the head register gets a good work out at the beginning of every lesson.

A *belt mix* that has *more* firmness in the vocal cords and that is closer to the *feel* and *sound* of *chest* register, is what I refer to as the *chest mix*.

A *belt mix* that has *less* firmness in the vocal cords and that is closer to the *feel* and *sound* of *head* register is what I refer to as the *head mix*. You can also think of head mix as a *lighter* belt mix.

Head mix is different from *head register*. In *head mix*, there is more *firmness* in the vocal cords and more *mask* resonance than we would use in *head register*.

Let's listen to my student, Paige O'Hara, the voice of "Belle" in the film, "Beauty and the Beast". She studied with me when I had my voice studio in New York.

Here's an example of "belt mix" in the song, "Time Heals Everything" from the Broadway show, "Mack and Mabel."

Listen to how she begins in *chest* register on the first "Time Heals Everything" and moves into *chest mix* on the second "Time Heals Everything" then a soft *head mix* on the words, "but loving" and *head register* on the last word, "you". Also notice the abundance of *mask* resonance, so typical of the Broadway *belt* sound. Here is Paige O'Hara.

Now we hear Elton John using the *head mix* alternating with his chest voice in his song, "Bennie and the Jets"

Let's work on the *belt mix*.

I like to come from the top down, staying forward in the mask. This exercise is for *power* and for matching the tones from *mix* to *chest register*.

In order to *match* the *mix* to the *chest* register, we add chest color to the mix along with mask resonance, using *Mneow (mniau)* on the descending arpeggio.

VOCAL DYNAMICS

To sing with expression, a singer must be able to control *dynamics*. A *louder* tone, a *softer* tone, a *breathy* tone, *crescendo* or *decrescendo*.

Sudden changes in volume are great for passionate singing in any style, pop to classical.

For *forte* singing, we use *more* vocal cord firmness with *more* air pressure.

For *piano* singing, we use *less* vocal cord firmness and *less* air pressure.

For *crescendo*, we begin with a *piano* tone, with *less* firm vocal folds and *less* air pressure, and gradually *increase* the firmness of the vocal folds and the air pressure at the same time.

For *decrescendo*, we begin *forte* with *firm* vocal cords and *more* air pressure, and gradually *decrease* the firmness of the vocal cords and the air pressure at the same time.

Let's alternate *forte* and *piano* using an *even* four pulse vibrato on each word so we can practice *both* vibrato and dynamics together.

VOCAL COLORS

Another wonderful tool of expression we have as singers is the use of our *vocal colors*.

In the Vocal Power Method, we teach *four* basic vocal *colors*:

Chest, mouth, nasal and *head*.

Beginning with our lowest notes, and sliding upwards, we can *feel* and *hear* a natural *resonance track*, going gradually from *chest* color to *mouth* color to *nasal* to *head*.

Let's try out our colors.

Chest - Whoa!

Mouth – Hey!

Nasal – Nyah!

Head - Yoo!

The resonances or *colors* are quite apart from the diction. Pronunciation should be clear and the colors are independent. I like the sound of *bright* vowels with *dark* colors. I call it *chiaro scuro*.

We would apply our colors in a song like this: "Crazy, crazy for feeling so lonely, I'm crazy, crazy for feeling so blue."

Special Effects

I would be remiss if I did not address a couple of *special effects* or *sounds* or we could call them *colors*.

These *special effects* are commonly used in *all* styles: From Blues to Jazz, R&B, and Broadway. One sound is what I call the "Back L" sound "I feel so strong today." This sound must be approached carefully and not over done.

Another sound is the "Creaky door" sound, very common in Pop singing "I don't want to leave you."

Pop/R&B singers like Whitney Houston and Cristina Aguilera use these sounds. You hear it in some Broadway belters as well. Here is an example of the "L" sound in the voice of Cristina Aguilera in the song, "Fighter," from her album, "Stripped".

R&B STYLE

RHYTHM and BLUES was a natural outgrowth of the Blues. In R&B, both female and male singers use *chest* register, *head* register, which is *false* for the male voice and the *belt mix*. A straight tone into vibrato is typical.

A slower and wider vibrato in a ballad is also typical.

Quick changes in *registers* are also characteristic.

There is what is called a "push and pull" in R&B. This refers to rhythm and quick changes in dynamics and colors and is based in emotion.

Quick changes in *dynamics* are characteristic.

Quick changes in *vocal colors* are also characteristic.

At the end of a phrase, there will often be a grace note going up a step or down a third, or a "lick" from the blues or pentatonic scales.

One of the best examples of an R&B male singer singing in falsetto is four-time R&B Grammy winner, Luther Vandross.

Listen to the sudden changes in dynamics and registers. Listen for a "trill" at the end of one of his phrases.

THE PENTATONIC SCALE

In Pop/R&B style, singers use *licks* from the pentatonic scale with a touch of the blues scale. Let's go to the *pentatonic* scale.

If we sing only the black notes of the piano, we will hear the sound of the pentatonic scale.

POP COLORATURA

For fast and clean licks in pop, I use the same technique as for my classical coloratura singing. I call it "Pop coloratura." It's done with the articulation of the vocal cords.

In opera, a vocal flourish at the end of an aria is called a "cadenza".

This next selection could be called a “coloratura cadenza,” pop style.

Let’s hear Pop/R&B singer, Mariah Carey, using the Pentatonic scale in this ending of the song, “Can’t Take That Away” from her “Rainbow” album.

Also listen to her use of the *belt mix* and how she blends her registers. Mariah Carey “Can’t Take That Away”

ROCK STYLE

Teachers, what if your next student comes into your studio and wants to do this?

Guns and Roses - "Welcome to the Jungle"

Classic Rock is powerful with and can also be very sweet. Vibrato is used sparingly and the emphasis is on *attitude*. Rock singers use chest register, chest mix, head mix and falsetto, often with a raspy vocal quality.

A *lot* of rasp is *not* healthy for the voice, although many Rock singers sing that way and eventually develop stamina --- or NODULES on their vocal cords and continue singing that way though their entire careers.

I advise Rock singers to work with *voice strengthening* exercises and *anchor* the voice in the *mask* for *longevity* and a *long lasting* career.

JAZZ STYLE

In Jazz, the voice is used like an instrument and the instruments are used like voices. They can laugh, cry, and moan!

In Jazz, the singer personalizes a song through the creative use of *dynamics*, *phrasing*, *vibrato* and *vocal colors*. *Vocal colors* imitate the timbres of the instruments. Often the voice will have a *colorful* “conversation” with another instrument in the band.

A Jazz singer must be aware of *musical* tools such as *syncopations*, which is accenting the *weak* beat, *back-phrasing*, which is coming in *after* the down beat and *anticipation*, which is coming in *before* the down beat.

It is also important for a singer to be aware of the composer’s deliberate use of *alliteration*, where the words have the same sound in the same phrase.

For example, in the song, “As Time Goes By” the *w’s* and *l’s* in the phrase can be very expressive, “the world will always welcome lovers”. As opposed to very little regard for the expressiveness of the words.

Once the tune is established, a good Jazz singer can *improvise*, on the repeat of the tune, using alternative notes which embellish the melody. A singer can *scat* the tune on the repeat section, by using various *word syllables* in an instrumental style over the chord progression of the accompaniment.

The singer must be familiar with the chord progressions of the song in order to scat over the tune being played.

WORKING ON A JAZZ SONG

Let’s see how some of these techniques work in a song. For example in the song, “When Sunny Gets Blue”, the alliteration in the words, “comes to call” is great for a variety of vocal sounds. Consonants can be very sensual like “sweet, lover, man”. Improvisation on the melody the second time around shows the singer’s artistry and personal style.

MUSICAL THEATER

In today's Musical Theater world, like no other time before, the Musical Theater performer is asked to sing in vocal styles ranging from the operatic style of "Phantom" to the Rock style of "Rent". A good example of a singer with a healthy and phenomenal vocal technique, who has a strong *belt* voice, as well as a strong *head* voice, and who can show off her character voice, her operatic voice and her torch song belt voice in one song, is Kristin Chenoweth who is currently starring on Broadway in a new show, "Wicked." Here she is in the song, "The Girl From 14G"

This means you need to prepare audition material that fits the style of the show. So singers, be prepared with solid vocal technique, because you may be singing "Ah, Je veux vivre" one day, and "Welcome to the Jungle" the next!

I really have enjoyed presenting my program to you today at this marvelous Conference and I hope these techniques and styles will be of assistance to you and your students. And to close I would like to say that to be a really great singer with a long lasting career, you need three things – TECHNIQUE, TECHNIQUE, TECHNIQUE and after that you need EMOTION, EMOTION, and EMOTION!