

Most voice teachers prefer a sound that is neither too bright nor too dark and definitely not too nasal. The best sound is one that has enough throat resonance to be rich, full, and mellow, enough mouth resonance to be brilliant, clear, and ringing, and nasal resonance only on the three nasal consonants (m, n, and ng). The beginning-of-a-yawn position, combined with relaxed lips, tongue, and jaw, will help you to get the desired balance of your resonators. There are few thoughts that will help the singer as much as the simple one of starting a yawn, so you should make it a permanent part of your approach to making beautiful sounds. Remember that beautiful sounds start in the mind and imagination of a singer.



Lesson 5

TO COMMUNICATE OR NOT TO COMMUNICATE— THAT IS THE QUESTION

God's gift to singers—The stuff that tone is made of—Living with consonants—Once more with feeling

raised to their highest level of use, and it becomes especially important that the singer be able to communicate the text in such a way that the meaning of the words will be understood by those who listen.

God's Gift to Singers

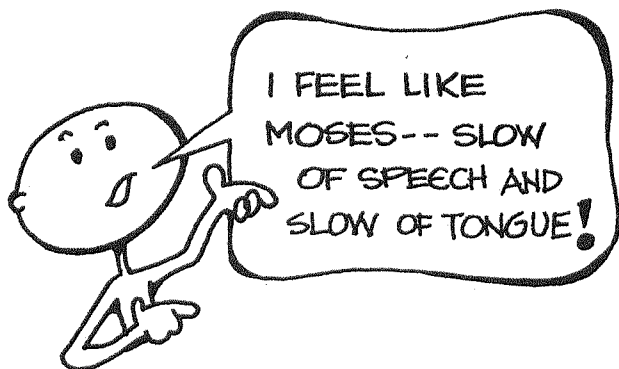
Human beings are the most wonderfully blessed of all the creatures in God's creation! Why? Because they were created in God's own image and were given the power to think and to communicate the meaning of their thoughts through speech and through song. All musicians can communicate in meaningful ways through the music they perform, but only singers have the special gift to communicate specific meaning through the words of the songs they sing. When these words convey the message of the "good news" about the Way, the Truth, and the Life—Jesus Christ—both music and speech are



There are two processes by which the meaning of the words of a song may be made clear: (1) one is articulation, the process by which the speech organs shape your vocal sound into recognizable speech sounds; (2) the other is interpretation, the process by which you convey the spirit or meaning of a song through the way you perform it.

The starting point for the communication of meaning is the process of articulation. If a listener is expected to hear the words of a song, it is the job of the singer to articulate so well that the hearer has little difficulty in doing so. If you cannot make your words clearly understood, you might as well leave them out and pretend that you are a trumpet, a violin, or any other instrument that cannot communicate through words.

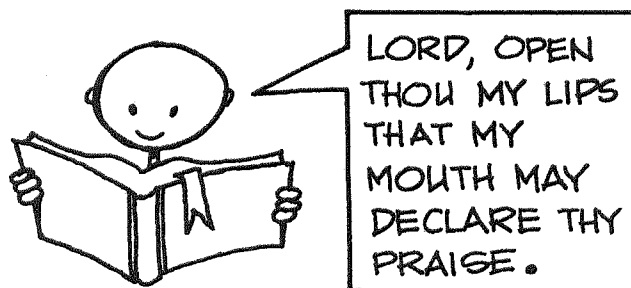
The speech organs that are moved and adjusted to form speech sounds are called articulators. The three main ones are the lips, jaw, and tongue. In order to articulate well, it is necessary to think the right thoughts. First of all, think that all movements of the lips, tongue, and jaw must be quick and positive. In fact, it is a good idea to exaggerate these movements until you are certain that all your speech sounds are easily understood by other people. Do not be afraid of overdoing it! Very few singers really articulate well. The main reason for this is that they do not realize that in singing, the movements of the lips, tongue, and jaw need to be much stronger and more positive than they are in everyday speech. It will help if you will imagine that you are singing to a person in the back row of a large auditorium. It will also help if you will take every opportunity to practice in an auditorium or some other large group.



Another good thought that may help to make your speech distinct is to imagine that all the movements of articulation are taking place just in front of your mouth, with everything moving very quickly and precisely, but without undue tension anywhere.

Remember, movements of the lips, tongue, and jaw must be quick and positive, somewhat exaggerated, and must be made with the feeling that they are taking place just in front of the mouth. Thinking the right thoughts will help you articulate well and can also guide the actions of the individual articulators.

The Lips. If the lips are to work well as articulators, they must be free from tension and ready to move as needed. Imagine that your lips are made of rubber and that they bounce freely apart when making sounds such as "b" and "p." The position of the lips should be such that it helps your face have a pleasant, vital expression. It is very important that you learn to communicate with your face, as well as with your voice. Avoid pulling the corners of your lips back in a forced smile; just the beginning of a smile is sufficient. Also avoid pulling your lips down over your teeth or protruding them while you sing. Either position will affect your tone quality.



The Jaw. If the jaw is to work well as an articulator, it must be free from tension and ready to move as needed. The easiest way to get this feeling is through the beginning of a yawn. (Where have you heard this before?) When you begin to yawn, the jaw drops down freely and can be opened wider easily as you sing higher. Many of the muscles used in chewing are attached to the jaw. It is very important that you relax these muscles while you are singing. If they are tight, your throat will tend to tighten and your voice will sound tight. Clench your teeth together and start to swallow; notice how much tension there is in your throat and mouth. Obviously this is not the right position for singing. Now begin a yawn and feel the tension disappear.

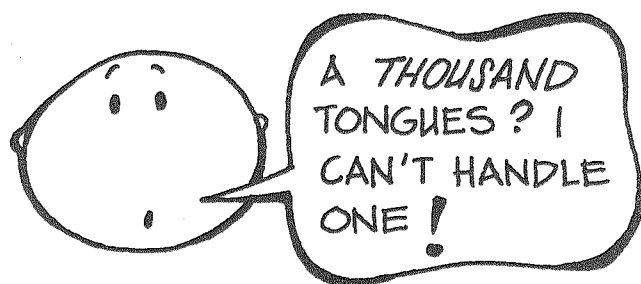
The reason that the jaw must be free to move at all times is that the amount of mouth opening must be changed as you sing higher or lower. The mouth should open wider as you sing higher and should decrease as you sing lower. When the mouth is opened wider, the jaw should drop down and then swing back. It should not be pushed forward, pulled back, or locked in one position, but should drop freely open and then swing back.

The Tongue. If the tongue is to work well as an articulator, it must be free of unnecessary tension and ready to move at all times, just like the lips and the jaw. All its movements must be quick, firm, and precise. The tongue is the most important articulator; it helps form all the vowel sounds and many of the consonants. If its movements are not accurate, some of these sounds will not be clear and distinct.

Because the tongue has to move for so many sounds, it is important for it to have a resting place

to return to—a point of reference. For most singers the best resting place seems to be on the gum ridge just below your lower teeth. The tip of the tongue should rest lightly on this ridge when you are singing all vowel sounds. The tongue will have to move to make certain consonants, but its tip should always return to the gum ridge for the next vowel.

Be careful not to pull your tongue back into your throat or to stiffen it in any way. Nothing can ruin good diction as much as a stiff, sluggish, or lazy tongue. Remember tongue movements must be quick, firm, and precise. If they are not, you should do some tongue exercises to gain agility.



The Stuff That Tone Is Made Of

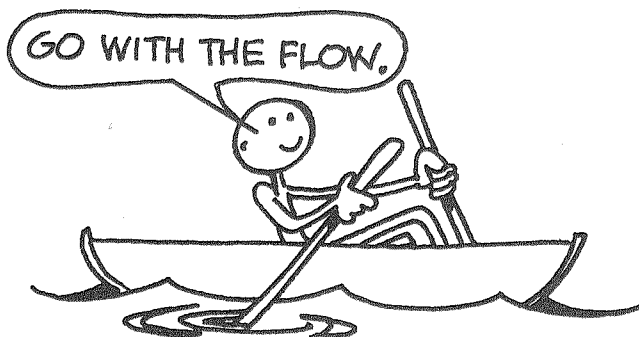
There are two basic kinds of speech sounds: vowels and consonants. Generally speaking, vowels are what you actually sing on—the stuff that tone is made of. Your tone flows along from one vowel to the next one in a connected line of sound. The consonants interrupt this flow of tone and break it up into recognizable units or syllables which the listener groups together into words. In other words, you do most of your singing on vowels and you communicate most of your meaning with consonants.

To illustrate the difference between vowels and consonants, sing any familiar song or hymn (such as "America" or "Amazing Grace") and leave out all the consonants; sing only the sounds represented by the letters, a, e, i, o, u. If you have never tried this before, it may seem hard; it will grow easier quickly. Do you think anyone could understand what you are singing? Obviously not. Now try to sing and leave out all the vowels; the vocal tone is almost totally destroyed as the consonants get in the way of the sound. Without consonants the voice would be just another instrument—beautiful perhaps, but with no ability to communicate words. Without vowels the voice would change from a musical instrument to some kind of noisemaker—the beauty would be lost.

Since vowels are what you sing on—the stuff that tone is made of—it is important to train your voice to move smoothly from vowel to vowel without any breaks between successive tones. After you have learned to "go with the flow," you must learn to put in the consonants without upsetting that flow. This is what is called *legato*, which means smooth and connected. Many voice teachers believe that a truly

legato flow of tone is at the heart of all beautiful singing and that the secret of *legato* singing lies in the smooth connection of successive vowels in the words of the song.

Legato Exercise. Pick some tune that you know well and sing it on the vowel "ah." (AMERICA would be a good choice.) Do not use any consonants whatsoever and sing as smoothly as you can. Let your voice flow from note to note without any interruption or hesitation; do not leave any "daylight" between any two notes. Keep repeating the tune until you feel certain your voice really is flowing from note to note. Then, sing the same tune but add an "l" in front of each note, so that you are singing "lah, lah, lah" all the way through the song and still as smoothly as possible. Do not let anything stop the flow of tone; make it completely continuous. Notice that you can add the "l's" without interfering with the flow of tone. Now sing the tune again, but this time use the words. Try to sing just as *legato* a sound as when you were using only "ah" or "lah." If you make the consonants quickly and cleanly enough, they will not upset the flow of tone.



Try this same approach on other songs that you know well. First work to establish the flow of tone on one vowel; try other vowels besides "ah." Then add in a consonant like "l," "m," "n," "y," or "w" which do not upset the flow of tone. Finally, sing the song with its words, making certain that you do not lose the flow of tone.

Vowels may be defined as unrestricted speech sounds which can be sustained or prolonged. Because of these characteristics, vowels should be the basis of most vocal exercises for beginning students. You should practice vowel sounds until your voice is flowing freely in the most comfortable part of your range, and then use more vowel exercises to try to extend your range. One goal of good singing is to learn to sing to the natural limits of your voice without any obvious change of tone quality. Remember, vowels are "the stuff that tone is made of."

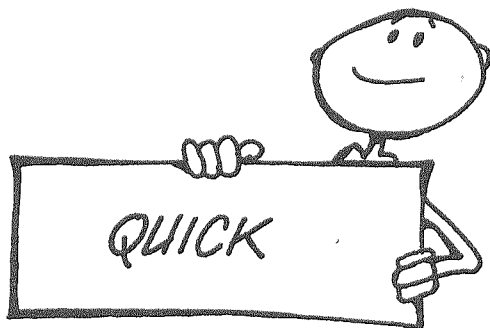
Living with Consonants

To the singer consonants are necessary evils. The vowel carries the tone; the consonant gets in its way. The vowel is an unrestricted speech sound; singers love to make beautiful sounds on them. The con-

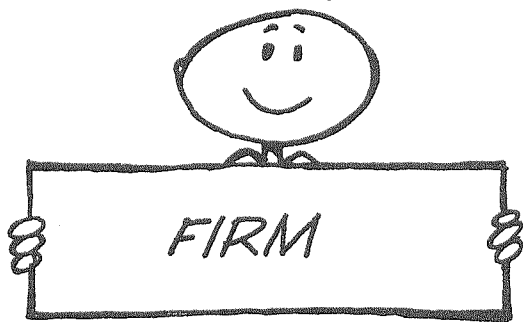
sonant is a restricted speech sound; some of them (such as, "s," "t," "h," and "p") are nothing but noise. The vowel lets the voice flow along; some consonants (such as "b," "p," "g," and "k") stop it up completely.

All consonants are not made the same way, but they do have one thing in common—to some extent they place a restriction or obstruction in the path of the tone. This is the problem that a singer has to learn to live with. If you leave the consonants out or slight them, your words will not be understood. If you put them on strongly enough for them to be understood, they tend to get in the way of the tone. What a dilemma! All is not lost, however. There are three basic principles which can help you to be happier when you must live with those terrible consonants.

Rule 1. Consonants must be put on quickly. Since all consonants tend to get in the way of the tone, the quicker they can be made, the less time and space they occupy, the less chance there is that the tone will be interfered with. The longer it takes you to make one of the consonants that really block the tone (such as, "g," "b," "d," "t," "p," and "k"), the more chance there is that it will hurt the quality of your tone or even block it completely. Train your articulators to reach maximum speed. Imagine that you have the tongue of a lizard or snake. You have seen how fast they can move in zapping an unsuspecting bug. Train your tongue to zap consonants!



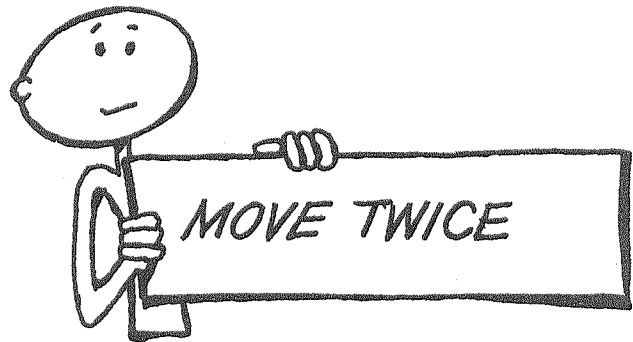
Rule 2. Consonants must be put on firmly. Consonants must be put on firmly for at least two reasons: (1) they usually do not carry as well as vowels, especially in a large room or auditorium; (2) they can help the singer to establish and maintain good solid tone production on the vowels which follow them. Firm consonants help to supply the energy needed for good vibrations of the vocal cords. Remember that all articulatory movements need to



be somewhat exaggerated, especially as the size of the room increases. Many singers just cannot believe how much articulatory energy it actually takes to be understood in an auditorium!

Rule 3. Many consonants require two distinct movements of an articulator if they are to be heard at any distance. For example, in consonants such as "d," "t," or "l," the tongue tip must rise from its resting place on the lower gum ridge until it touches the upper gum ridge and then return quickly to its resting place. This return movement must be vigorous, as if the tongue is rebounding from the gum ridge. If the tongue returns slowly or is allowed to remain high in the mouth, it may interfere with the following vowel. Consonants such as "b," "p," and "m" are made by bringing the lips firmly together and then letting them bounce apart. "F" and "v" are made by bringing the lower lip firmly against the upper teeth and then letting them bounce apart. This vigorous return movement is the key factor in making consonants audible at a distance.

Special care needs to be taken with consonants which begin or end words. (These are called initials and finals.) Once again the vigorous return movement is very important. In beginning consonants it clears the way for the following vowel sound; in final consonants it avoids the habit of slighting them or leaving them off altogether. To avoid starting below a pitch and scooping up to it, put an initial consonant on the same pitch as the vowel that follows it and give it enough breath support to guarantee a firm vowel sound. A final consonant should be put on the same pitch as the vowel in front of it, and your breath support should be continued until the end of the release.

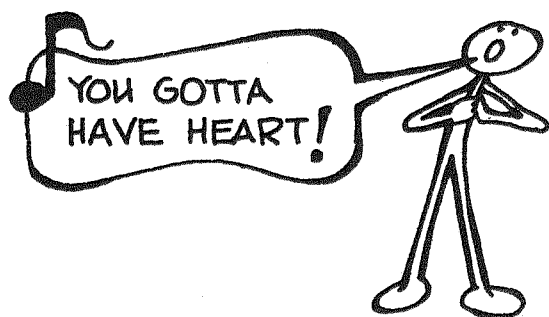


Remember that consonants are sound stoppers; they get in the way of the sound if they are not put on properly. They must be formed quickly, firmly, and, where possible, with two distinct movements. Consonants are absolutely essential to good diction; you must learn to live with them!

Once More, with Feeling

You can sing a song and observe all the rules of good posture, breathing, breath support, making beautiful sounds, and using the articulators and still be sadly lacking as a singer. Communication is more than making the words understandable and display-

ing good vocal technique. If you communicate well, you draw forth a response from your listeners, because you not only make the words understandable, but because you also make the *meaning* of the words and the musical expression of them clear to those who listen through your interpretation of the song. After you have learned to sing a song and to observe all the rules, sing it once more, *with feeling!*



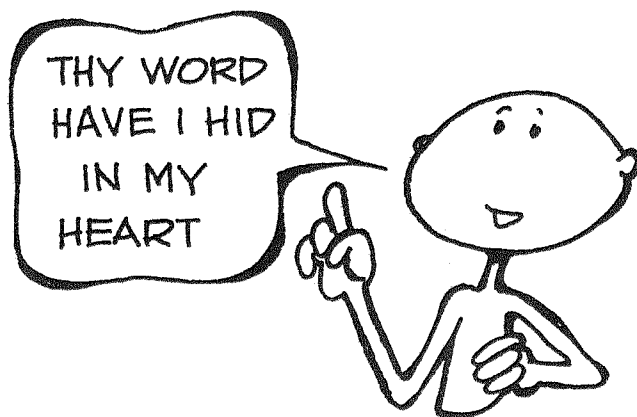
There are few things as dull or uninspiring as a song presented with no emotional involvement, a poem read in a singsong manner, or a speech delivered in a monotone. Music and speech require contrast—contrast of excitement and relaxation, of louds and softs, of bright sounds and dark sounds, of highs and lows, of fast movement and slow movement. The singer or speaker must become personally involved in the meaning of the text. When properly done, words gain new depths of meaning by the way you say or sing them. Some words are more important than others because of where they fall in the sentence and because of their meaning. Words such as love, hate, sorrow, joy, sleep, hasten, death, life, cold, and warm should suggest different colors of your voice, different dynamics, different degrees of emotional involvement, different facial expressions, and even different body stances.

Read or recite the following lines from Psalm 23 making each syllable of every word exactly equal—same length, same loudness, same pitch, same expression. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." What could be worse than this mechanical presentation of such a beautiful text?



Now read the text again, trying to bring out the important words and to express the meaning of the text by the way your voice rises and falls; by making some words of syllables louder than others; by lingering on words like Lord, shepherd, lie down, green pastures, still waters; by being more forceful on words like maketh and leadeth. Let your imagination suggest different ways of interpreting the text. Read it as if you are reading it to someone who has never heard it before, or to someone who is hard of hearing. Try to let your inner emotion show through your voice, your face, and your stance. Many people have been taught to conceal their emotions or to avoid any public display of them. Singers must learn to let their emotions speak freely through the music. Pretend that you are singing a song to a tiny baby; the baby cannot understand your words, but it can know exactly what mood you are in—happy, sad, or angry—by the tone color of your voice. If you are like most people, you can emote easily to a baby or a small child, but are reluctant to do so with adults. Learn to let yourself go! A singer must be willing to take risks emotionally.

One good way to bring out the meaning of a song text is to memorize it before you learn the music that goes with it. Study the text until you feel that you are completely aware of what it is trying to express; then recite it aloud, using all the expressive means at your disposal (pitch, tone color, volume, inflection, rhythm, and tempo) to bring out that meaning. Do this *before* you try to figure out what the music has to say. Scripture states, "In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1, KJV). This, of course, is referring to God, himself, and not to a song text; however, there is a practical application for a singer, for the words of a song usually are in existence before the music is written. Because of this fact, you should study the words of the song before you study the music.



One important part of the interpretation of a song is faithfulness to the intentions of the composer. In learning a song you should try to learn the exact rhythms, pitches, tempos, and mood markings given by the composer. Try to figure out what he is trying

to say through his music, and sing it exactly as he wrote it. If, after sincere and diligent study of a song, you find that you have trouble expressing the song as it is written, it may be acceptable to make some minor changes in the tempo, rhythm, or dynamics to help you express it better, but only after you have tried it the composer's way several times.

To communicate or not to communicate—that is the question. The best communicator is one who uses the vowels to carry the tone, consonants to make the words intelligible, and all of his expressive powers to portray the meaning of the text and the beauty of the music. This is the ultimate goal of the singer: to communicate *well*. Go thou and do likewise!

LET THE WORDS OF MY
MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION
OF MY HEART BE ACCEPTABLE
IN THY SIGHT, O LORD,
MY ROCK AND MY
REDEEMER.

