

ARTICULATION

Articulation is the phase of diction dealing principally with the action of the speech organs in forming consonants.

As singers, we may have heard the idea expressed that consonants are the “bones” of speech and vowels are the “flesh,” and also that “consonants are the intellectual and ugly elements while vowels are the beautiful and emotional elements” (from *Foundations of Singing* by Van A. Christy, William C. Brown Company Publishers, Dubuque, Iowa, 1979). The American Academy of Teachers of Singing adds, “The function of a consonant is to interrupt the vowel without doing violence to the tone.”

These are good images. But beautiful articulation is more than organs, bones and interruptions. It is the act of creating words that communicate the message of the song. In order to form words that will be understood, and at the same time communicate a message and its emotions, we must remember the principals of resonance: keeping an open, relaxed throat and a rich tone.

Often, when we have become sufficiently familiar with the notes of a song and begin to think more about the words, we concentrate on articulation and our delivery becomes choppy rather than smooth and connected. Instead of forming consonants that just barely interrupt the tone, we overemphasize them. In order to avoid this choppy delivery, we must keep the rich, round, resonant sound. This is especially true for a capella singers.

In accompanied vocal music there needs to be greater emphasis on consonants so the words are understandable to the audience over the instrumental background. But because a capella singers perform without accompaniment, there is nothing to sustain the momentum of the sound and the message of the song when a major break occurs. In fact, when a capella singers over-articulate, the consonants stop the tone flow completely and there are “white spaces.”

Many Sweet Adelines have encountered the phrase “wall of sound” used by contest judges. In our realm of music it is synonymous with the aggregate tone flow produced by a quartet or chorus. When we over-articulate, we become tense, our singing mechanisms become tight, we overemphasize consonants and create a “picket fence” rather than a wall of sound. Remembering that the tone rests on a cushion of air and on vowel sounds, we must keep the tone flow open and relaxed.

There are two primary factors in achieving a wall of sound and still articulating well; the first is using as little jaw action as possible and second, using the tongue to swiftly and with no tension produce both consonants and vowels.

Relaxation is a tremendously important factor in both the jaw and the tongue. In addition to a loose, relaxed jaw, we must attempt to disconnect the jaw from the tongue and lips. The entire mouth should be loose and relaxed so as to avoid over-articulation. As Van Christy says, "Let the jaw relax so loosely that there is a feeling the singing is done without the jaw."

One of the best ways to understand how to achieve an open, relaxed jaw and throat during articulation is to sing an entire song on one open vowel sound, rather than voicing the words. "Oh" is a wonderful vowel sound to use, while thinking of the operatic, cultured production of that vowel and the concept of singing "through" the vowel. You might imagine you are singing "through" and "Oh" tunnel. That tunnel is high in the mask of your face and doesn't flatten or spread to accommodate the individual vowels we sing.

After practicing in this manner, try to keep the same open, relaxed feeling as you add the words of the song, thinking "oh," but singing the words through the open "oh feeling. Ideally, the vocal line will be an almost continuous tone, as it was when you sang the vowel sound only. This exercise will help to produce the wall of sound to which we aspire.

To achieve the second aspect of good articulation you must develop the coordination of your tongue. A tense tongue can pull up and/or back in your mouth and actually choke off a resonant tone. There is slight changes in the tongue in moving from an "Ah" to an "Ee" but even more slight in moving from an "Aye" to an "Ee". Yet, if these changes are not done by an independent tongue (without the assistance of the jaw) the vowel sound is "chewed" and does not stay open and resonant. It would be good for the singer to practice in an exercise the change from one vowel sound to another without a consonant to mask the subtle changes required by the tongue.

The "independent tongue" is also important in the articulation of consonants. Consonants like "L", "K" "T" "D" "G" should be achieved without the need to close down the jaw therefore closing off the space inside the mouth (soft palate). The singer can easily check oneself by looking in the mirror while singing "La" up an octave. Does the jaw move?

As you practice proper articulation, it will be helpful to know a little more about the specific sounds associated with consonants. For instance, most consonants cannot be produced on a pitch (you cannot sing a sustained “B” sound) but there are a few that can, such as M, N, L and V. These are called voiced or singable consonants. It is important in articulation to sing through the voiced consonants. These singable consonants also affect pitch; the vowel that follows will always be flat if the preceding singable consonant is under pitch. You may also find that there are times that you might want to elongate a singable consonant for effect or word color. One might hold the “ng” in “long” for a phrase “I long to know you understand”. It is important when singing singable consonants that the space inside the mouth stays open and the tone remains supported with a column of air.

Mr. Christy summarizes several rules of articulation:

- Consonants must be thought on the same pitch as the vowel they precede, to prevent the tonal attack from being scooped or flat.
- Consonants should be articulated distinctly, freely and flexibly, rapidly, and as naturally and plainly as in dramatic speech.
- Articulate the proper sound of each consonant; do not substitute one for another.
- Make vowels long, consonants short. Do not shorten the complete rhythmic length of the vowel by anticipating the ending consonant.

Over-articulation is more common in singing than in speaking, because the mouth needs to be so much more open in singing. The tongue and lips must move farther and we must work harder to move them greater distances. This is even more difficult in the high ranges; thus our tenors have a harder job of articulating without tensing or tightening the vocal mechanisms.

Words tell the story of a song; they make it fun and exciting and allow us to understand. So articulation is particularly important. The primary goal for a capella singers is to achieve beautiful articulation while creating as little interruption of the tone flow as possible. The exercises described below will help you visualize and practice proper articulation.

We are limited as singers only by how good we think we can be. Approach singing with enthusiasm and joy. Each time you sing, try to improve and experience continued growth as a singer.

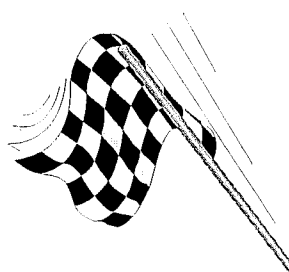
EXERCISES FOR ACHIEVING PROPER ARTICULATION

Exercise 1

- As a warmup, practice any tongue twisters you know. Peter Piper, for instance.
(Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.
A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked.
If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,
How many pickled peppers did Peter Piper pick?)

Exercise 2

- Trill the tongue.
(Imitate a motorcycle revving up.)



Exercise 3

- In order to help keep a relaxed, constant tone flow, review and practice the five exercises below for resonance. Loosening the tongue and jaw will assist in a resonant tone flow as well as the delicate production of consonants required in a capella singing.
 1. Using your fingertips, gently massage the temples, then down the sides of the face and at the jaw hinge. Relax and “let go”. You may feel the urge to yawn. Massage underneath the chin, gently loosening the tongue muscles. With your face down, gently roll your head from side to side, keeping the shoulders relaxed and the sternum high. Feel a stretch up the back of the neck. You should begin to feel more relaxed. Pretend that you have fallen asleep in a comfortable easy chair, let your jaw hang loose, totally relaxed. Be on the verge of drooling!
 2. Make these sounds, which will help activate the breathing and support muscles:
 - hissing sound

- “Whee” sound
- S, f, ch sounds

Sing the following exercise slowly:

3. With arms raised, knuckles placed between the molars of the upper and lower jaws, elbows high, and using the inside smile, sing the following exercise. Let the jaw hang and use just the tongue. This exercise also loosens the front tongue muscle.
4. To continue to reinforce a relaxed jaw and an open, relaxed throat, and to loosen the back tongue muscles, sing the following vocaleze. The tip of the tongue should be touching the lower gum ridge and the jaw should stay relaxed. The arm position and inside smile are the same as in exercise 3.
5. Use the same arm position, inside smile and good posture. Keep the tip of the tongue touching the lower gum ridge. Allow the tongue to move freely and keep it relaxed so that movement from one vowel to

the next is smooth and clear. Get the feeling of singing the vowels with the jaw relaxed, the molars apart, the inside smile and the sternum high and wide. Memorize that feeling.

Exercise 4

- Practice the exercise described previously in this article, singing an entire familiar song on an open "oh" vowel sound. Try to keep the open, relaxed feeling when you add the words.