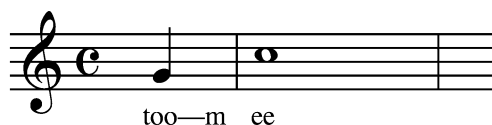


**Singlish: Word Sounds, Not Words**  
**Jim Henry, IES 2008**

Every word we sing is actually a collection of individual sounds. The word *love*, for example is made up of three discreet sounds: the *l* sound, the *uh* sound, and the *v* sound. Great choral singers must be experts at identifying word sounds and performing each one properly. There are specific techniques for singing different kinds of consonants, various vowel sounds, diphthongs, etc. and the singers in a choir must do them the same way at the same time. If they don't the choir will suffer in terms of synchronization, vitality of tone, and intelligibility of the text. If you unthinkingly just sing the words like you would talk or read a book, you will undoubtedly neglect the subtleties needed to properly form all the word sounds. Thus, you should sing not from word to word, but from word *sound* to word *sound*. If you see the word *love* on the page, don't blithely sing *love*. Sing *l-uh-v*. The audience will perceive it as *love* but only because you've performed a perfect *l* followed by a perfect *uh* followed by a perfect *v*. We never sing words; we sing word *sounds*. It's not English; it's *SINGLISH!*

**Target Vowels**

The beginning of good Singlish is learning the vowel sounds. Usually we sustain notes on a vowel sound, so everyone must match that vowel if the choir is to blend and tune. I call the vowels we sustain "Target Vowels" because you have to hit a bull's eye every time you sing them. The vowel must be the exact sound the choir has agreed on and it must be sung at exactly the right moment. That moment is always the very point at which the note is to occur (the "point" of the note). So if the target vowel is preceded by a consonant, the consonant must precede the point of the note by a slight bit. If, for example, the word *Me* is to be sung on the downbeat, the initial *m* would sound just *before* the downbeat so that the target vowel *ee* will sound *on* the downbeat. If the word occurs on a note change, the *m* would sound on the previous pitch and the *ee* would start the new note. The phrase, "to me," for example, would be sung like this:



Singlish vowels are sung with a lifting of the soft palate, with the sound forward-focused toward the teeth, with lips tucked slightly at the corners and lifted off the front teeth, and with the tip of the tongue placed gently on the gum line of your lower teeth. The vowel should sound neither "spread" nor "hooty."

A target vowel should be sustained in its pure form, never allowing an upcoming diphthong or consonant to be shaded into it. Syllables that end in *l* or *r*, for example, are especially problematic in this regard. Sustain the word *well* on a single pitch. Unless you're specifically thinking about it, you will likely notice the *l* sound start to creep in on the EH target. Now sing the word *wet*. It is easy to hold on to the target because the *t* doesn't turn like the *l* did. Sing the word *wet* again, but at the last minute sing a frontal *l* instead of a *t*. This is the proper way to approach such a word.

We use 12 target vowel sounds, categorized as either Round or Square according to the shape of your lips when you sing them. Note that the chart below includes the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) spellings (set off in brackets).

**Target Vowel Sounds:**

Round (small to tall):	Square (small to tall):
OŌ [u] (soon, food, you)	EE [i] (feel, see, weep)
OO [ʊ] (full, stood, book, could)	IH [ɪ] (sit, bill, win)
schwa [ə] (unstressed syllables: trumpet, angel)	EH [ɛ] (let, send, when)
ER [ɜ] (word, her, bird)	Ä [æ] (hand, man, sat)
OH [o] (go, foal, boat)	UH [ʌ] (sun, hush, love)
AW [ɔ] (gone, fall, soft)	AH [ɑ] (father, hot, light, brown)

In the book *Up Front! Becoming the Complete Choral Conductor*, editor (and outstanding choral man) Guy Webb offers a chart of vowel hand signals, which is included Appendix A of this handout.<sup>i</sup> This system effectively helps us clarify the target vowel in real time without saying a word.

### *Target Vowel Modification*

As you get higher in your range it is usually necessary to open and round out the vowel. Lower notes, on the other hand, require a brighter, more forward placement in order for them to carry. Remember this mantra: “The higher I sing the rounder I sing.” Also, generally speaking, a softer volume will accompany higher notes, while lower notes should increase in volume. The irony of these techniques is that although you are changing your vowel and dynamic level, the listener will perceive that you are singing very consistently throughout your pitch and dynamic ranges—much more so than if you hadn’t changed anything.

### *Diphthongs & Glides*

The word *diphthong* literally means “with two sounds” and refers to “double vowels, sounded together as a single unit with a primary emphasis on the first of the two vowels.”<sup>ii</sup> This emphasized first vowel would be the target vowel. Here are some examples of diphthongs:

My = **ɔ**\_i (AH-ee)      Boy = **o**\_i (OH-ee)      Same = **ɛ**\_i (EH-ee)

How = **ɔ**\_u (AH-oo)      Lone = **o**\_u (Oh-oo)      Sure = **u**\_ɜ (OO-er)

As you close from the taller vowel to the shorter one, a volume loss will naturally occur. You should negate this by increasing the intensity of your shorter vowel as you turn to it. This takes some practice, but it is worth the effort to maintain a constant “wall” of sound throughout the phrase.

Sometimes you will find a double vowel combination in which the shorter vowel comes before the target vowel. This is called a *glide*. You will find glides in almost every word that begins with the letters *y* or *w*, as well as a few other instances:

Yet = **i**\_ɛ (ee-EH)      We = **u**\_i (oo-EE)      Muse = **i**\_u (ee-OO)

In these cases, you should perform the shorter vowel as if it were a beginning consonant. You sound it with intensity and emotion, yes, but you also must get off of it quickly in order to get to the target by the point of the note.

### *Consonants*

Sing the following lyric from the song “Just the Way You Look Tonight” on a single note (or use the melody if you know it):

Someday when I’m awfully low,  
When the world is cold,  
I will feel a glow just thinking of you  
Just the way you look tonight.

Now sing it without any consonant sounds. Pretty unsatisfying, isn’t it? Without consonants no one would be able to understand a word we are singing.

Sing it again with loud consonants. You can understand the words now, but there’s still something missing.

This time sing with *emotional* consonants. Sing the *f* in *awfully* with the feeling of sadness that the lyric conveys. Communicate the cold loneliness on the *c* in the word *cold*. Ah, but things are about to get better—bring love to the *f* in *feel* and warmth to the *gl* in *glow*. This is the real value of consonants—they convey the emotion of the lyric. This is how you create art. There is nothing emptier than a choir with perfectly articulated and soulless consonants. Any group of robots can do that. It is the emotion that we pour into the consonants that communicates the message in a human and heartfelt way. Our consonants will be perfectly articulated, but meaningful.

Consonants can be categorized as either *voiced* or *unvoiced*. As their designation implies, voiced consonants require activation of the vocal folds in order to be pronounced. For example, *b, g, d, v, j, and zh* are all voiced consonants. In

order to pronounce them, you have to vibrate your vocal folds. *P, k, t, f, ch,* and *sh,* on the other hand, are unvoiced consonants. You pronounce them using only air, not your vocal folds. The two sets of consonants that I listed have an interesting relationship. Each consonant in the first set is a voiced version of its counterpart in the second set. If you put a voice behind a *p,* for example, it becomes a *b.* If you put a voice behind a *k* it becomes a *g.* These pairs of voiced and unvoiced consonants are called cognates. The table below shows all the cognates:

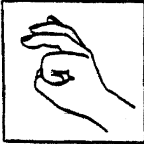


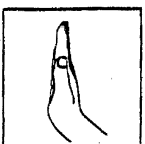
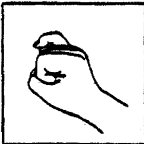
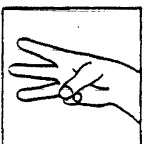

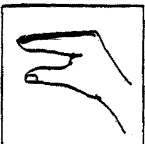
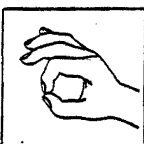
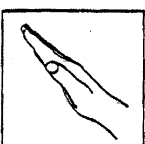


<u>UNVOICED</u>		<u>VOICED</u>
<i>p</i>	→	<i>b</i>
<i>k</i>	→	<i>g</i>
<i>t</i>	→	<i>d</i>
<i>f</i>	→	<i>v</i>
<i>ch</i>	→	<i>j</i>
<i>sh</i>	→	<i>zh</i>

Some consonant sounds, like *v, zh, l, m, n, ng,* and *sh* can be sustained. I call these singable consonants. This can be extremely helpful in bringing emotion to the text, because some of them, particularly the *m, n,* and *ng* can be quite beautiful and evocative when given a little length. Sing the lyric again, and pour emotion into the *m* in *someday,* and the *n* in *when the world* and the *ng* in *thinking.* Such depth and intensity of meaning can be found in emotional consonants!

#### **A few rules about consonants:**

- *Always sing emotional consonants.*
- *Consonants that precede a target vowel must always be sounded a split second before the point of the note so that the target vowel sounds at that point.*
- *Always sing a starting consonant on the correct note. Imagine doing this even with unvoiced consonants. This will help you to avoid scooping into the note.*
- *Like the secondary vowel of a diphthong, the singable consonants l, m, n, and ng should be given increased intensity in order to match the volume of the target vowels.*
- *Always keep your consonants up in front. Avoid swallowing them.*

**Appendix A: Chart of Vowel Hand Signals (See Guy Webb. Used by permission.)**

	= $\bar{oo}$ (soon)		= ee (see)
	= $\overset{\hook}{oo}$ (stood)		= ih (sit)
	= ə (suspend)		= eh (send)
	= er (sir)		= æ (sat)
	= oh (soul)		= uh (sun)
	= aw (soft)		= ah (stop)

<sup>i</sup> See Guy B. Webb, ed. *Up Front! Becoming the Complete Choral Conductor*. Boston: E. C. Schirmer Music Company, Inc., 1993.

<sup>ii</sup> See Clifton Ware. *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy: The Foundations and Process of Singing* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1997) 166.