VOICE LESSON #7

Articulation: The Essentials of Singer's Diction

I) Singing Words that Communicate (Words that Pray)

Singers are distinguished from other musicians in that their range of artistic expression includes the beauty of language. Specifically in the case of a cantor, that language is the language of prayer.

Singing words, rather than speaking them, presents special challenges. Vowels are given specific pitch and sustained according to the rhythmic requirements of the music. Although we strive to sing emotionally in the same way we speak, musical expression extends far beyond its spoken or written sounds and meaning.

Everyday speech, particularly among Americans, tends to be quite imprecise, and varies with regional differences, accents, and dialects. When speech habits are carried into chant, flaws are magnified. Impure vowel sounds and unclear consonants become evident, often making it difficult to understand the words.

Often, when we have become sufficiently familiar with the notes of a chant and begin to think more about the words, we concentrate on articulation and our delivery tends to become choppy rather than smooth and connected. Instead of forming consonants quickly and clearly, we overemphasize them. In order to avoid this choppy delivery, we must keep the rich, round, resonant sound described in the previous lessons.

To form words that will be understood, and at the same time communicate a musical message, we must remember the principles of resonance that you learned in Lesson 3:

- an open, relaxed throat
- a rich tone
- pure matched vowels

II) Achieving an Open Relaxed Jaw and Throat during Articulation

One of the best ways to understand how to achieve an open, relaxed jaw and throat during articulation is to sing an entire selection 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.

After practicing in this manner, try to keep the same open, relaxed feeling as you add the words, 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.

While vowels are the carriers of vocal tone, consonants are the interrupters of it. The sense of the words cannot be communicated and the time and rhythm of the chant cannot be accurately conveyed if the consonants are not well articulated.

Because cantors in our tradition sing without accompaniment, there is nothing to sustain the momentum of the sound and the message of the chant when a break occurs. In fact, when unaccompanied singers over-articulate, the consonants stop the tone flow completely and there are "white spaces."

Since consonants shape the tone, the better the quality, intensity and continuity of the tone, the more precisely it can be articulated by accurate consonants. Quick, clear consonants do not "chop up" a singing line, but give it shape and energy.

As much time value as possible should always be given to the vowel, particularly in *legato* (smooth and connected) singing. Consonants should receive as little time value as possible, but sufficient strength and energy to project well.

Some rules of articulation:

- Consonants must be thought on the same pitch as the vowel they precede, to prevent the tonal onset 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.

III) Voiced and Unvoiced Consonants

Voiced	Unvoiced Counterpart	Other Voiced Consonants	Other Unvoiced Consonants
v vine	f fine	l love	h hello
g got	k keep	m mine	wh when
b bit	p pit	n not	th thing
z zip	s sip	r raise	
d dip	t tip	y you	
j jeep	ch cheap		
zh azure	sh rush		
dz leads	ts pizza		
gz eggs	x excite		

The Letter "R" – A Special Case

When the letter "R" is at the beginning of a word, articulate it quickly and move on to the following vowel sound. When it is in the middle or at the end as in the words *Lord* and *ever,* replace the R with a W or UH sound: Lord= Lawd and ever=evuh. This is necessary to avoid closing off the throat and producing the "pirate roar" (AAARR!). The modified R's allow the throat to stay open which creates a more pleasing tone. One exception is the word *Spirit* - if possible, it is best to flick the middle R with the tongue in the British manner. Do not worry - these modifications, if done properly, will not be noticed by your listeners.

IV) Fundamentals of Vowels and Diphthongs

Ten Basic Vowel Sounds:

Vowel	Sample Word	Type of Vowel	
ee	need	Tongue	*Lips don't change*
ih	did	Tongue	
eh	red	Tongue	
a	cat	Tongue	
ah	pot	Tongue	
uh	mud	Tongue	
OO	soot	Lip	*Tongue doesn't change*
aw	lawn	Lip	
oh	moan	Lip	
OO	moon	Lip	

It is essential that singers sing the words with long, pure vowels and short, clean consonants. This is the basis for excellent diction.

Diphthongs:

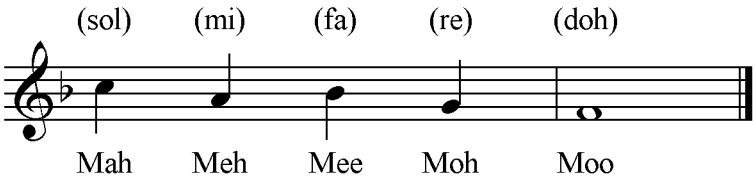
Diphthongs are a combination of two vowels sounded within a single syllable, with the greatest stress on the first one.

- The first vowel is the important vowel of the diphthong. (80%) The second "vanishing" vowel should be executed quickly and deliberately. (20%)
- Diphthongs are "turned" when going from the first vowel to the second vowel.
- Both vowels must be heard. The first or primary vowel is sustained like a normal vowel. The secondary one is treated like a clear consonant.
- If the diphthong is not "turned," the word changes, i.e. "night" sounds like "not."

- Proper turning of diphthongs is CRITICAL in good singer's diction.

- Below is a simple warm-up that is good for turning diphthongs. Think of a tall open sound and use the concept of singing "through" each vowel smoothly from one to the next.

Exercise 7.0



REPLACE THE VOWELS WITH THE FOLLOWING WORDS: (or make up your own!)

I am glad I'm here.	**AH-ee ….AH-eem….HEE-r**
I sing very well.	**AH-ee**
I sing with my friends	**AH-ee……MAH-ee**
Resonance is mine	**MAH-een**
We can sing our vowels	**AH-oor…. VAH-ools**
We know how to dance	**KNOOH-oo….HAH-oo**
I use space and air	**AH-ee….SPEH-eece**

The Most Common Diphthongs:

1st (sustained) Vowel	2nd (vanishing)Vowel	Example Words
AH	oo	cow, round, sound
AH	ee	pie, wise, sky, mine, night
OH	ee	boy, joy, toy
EH	ee	day, away, play
OH	oo	blow, go, though
EH	r (uh)*	hair, there, fair
UH	r (uh)*	ever, world, girl

** See the discussion of the letter R above.*

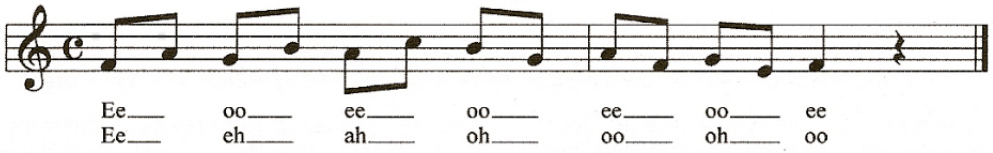
V) Exercises for Achieving Proper Articulation

Exercise 7.1
Tongue Twisters: Sing any of the following sentences on a repeating single note. Repeat until you can sing each very quickly and accurately.

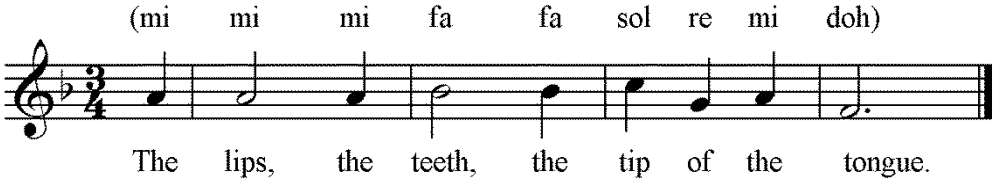
- Sneeze, snort, sniff, sniffle, snuff, snuffle, sneer and snicker.
- Ninety-nine nuns in an Indiana nunnery.
- Millions of monks in a Minnesota monastery.
- Lemon liniment, lemon liniment.
- Clunk, junk, skunk, flunk.

Exercise 7.2
Sing an entire song on one open "Ohh" vowel sound, rather than voicing the words. 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.

Exercise 7.3
Smile and get the feeling of singing the vowels with the jaw relaxed, the molars apart, the ribs and the sternum high and wide. Memorize that feeling. Two groups of vowels are suggested but you can try some of your own.



Exercise 7.4
This exercise reminds you where to place your consonants. Repeat up and down the scale.



Exercise 7.5
A silly exercise good for practicing diphthongs. Sing often as a warm-up and transpose to other keys.

