

# **Simon McEnery**

## **A selection of singing exercises**

### **Exercise 1:** Basic warm up.

1 a: Sirening - open mouth, 'ng' hum, sliding easily, steadily and quietly from low to high and back in the voice, describing a large figure of eight, keeping journeys between registers as smooth as possible. NB Engage support muscles; keep jaw relaxed.

1 b: Rolled lips - the same slide, though it can go a little quicker, through 'rolled lips' (ie a fast 'b-b-b-b', or a horse blowing) and with your soft palate lifted; use two fingers either side of your mouth if necessary.

1 c: Rolled 'r's – same again.

1 d: Raspberry - same again, though with your tongue blowing a raspberry instead of your lips.

### **Exercise 2:** Engaging the lower abdominal muscles.

Place one hand on your lower abdomen, the other on your breastbone. Firmly vocalise each of the following once, then twice, then three times: vv, zz, zh and vwoo. You should feel the muscles pull in and lift (and your breastbone react) with the vocalisation, and each vocalisation should be followed by a release of those muscles, allowing your diaphragm to drop and the air to rush in.

### **Exercise 3:** Isolating onsets.

Do this if you can't conjure each onset easily. Practise a series of spoken or lower register vowels with a glottal onset. Practise a series of vowels a little higher with an aspirate onset going to a breathy sound. Practise a series of quiet sung vowels, each beginning with a 'y'.

### **Exercise 4:** Engaging the 'twang' space above the false vocal folds (the aryepiglottic sphincter or AES).

Practise a playground 'nyah nya nya nyah nyah' in a low and then middle register; or practise your best impersonation of a wicked witch or a country singer.

Start the following exercise low in your voice, in a 'speaking' place, and find a 'duck call' tone. The n/ng will help. Ensure your tongue is high (in touch with your upper molars), your jaw is free and not too open or closed (use a bone-prop to be sure; lose it as you get into your top register), and your support well-engaged.



**Exercise 5:** The ‘shocked French woman’.

Starting high in the upper register with a smooth onset, imitate a shocked French woman on an open ‘o’ vowel. Slide down into your lower register (smoothly) and back up, ending with a dramatic flourish. The sound should be operatic – check that your soft palate is high, your larynx tilted, the sides of the back of your tongue are in touch with your upper molars, your AES is narrow (which will give you lots of ‘ping’ or buzz behind your nose), your body and neck anchoring are engaged, your lips are free, rounded and possibly slightly protruding, your jaw is free and your false vocal folds are retracted.

**Exercise 6:** Engaging the support/anchoring muscles.

To increase access to the core support muscles, try ‘sitting’ on a phantom chair, leaning against a wall, feet under your knees, shoulders back and down. Alternatively, try pushing over an imaginary brick wall or gearing up for a rugby scrum. Try to be aware of which muscle groups you are using – work your lower back, your muscles connected to your ribs and your thigh and calf muscles while trying not to fix your lower abdomen or your shoulders.

To increase access to the neck anchoring muscles, try pulling a rather small imaginary bathing cap onto your head; pushing your head back or forward into your hands; or leaning board-straight against a wall with your neck bent and only the back of your head against the wall. (Do this carefully and gradually, stepping away from and then back into the wall). Stay put for a minute or so.

**Exercise 7:** ‘Opening the throat’: retracting the false vocal folds.

Use the Estill hand signal if you know it. Breathe out an unvoiced ‘ee’. Constrict your false vocal folds, then return to neutral, before retracting the false folds and making the outbreath silent.

Triggers for this sensation: The ‘inner smile’; listen to something a long way away; open the freezer door and breathe in the cold air; laugh silently.

**Exercise 8:** The ‘sweet shout’ (useful for MT in particular, but also for accessing freedom at the top of the voice) and the belt.

In the middle register, shout ‘way’ with a high tongue, an untilted larynx, a tilted cricoid (try tipping your head back a little) and lots of support/anchoring in the neck

and body. Then shout ‘way-ay-ay’ in an ascending pitch, fluidly and solidly, staying firmly on the voice, keeping the false vocal folds fully retracted, keeping the support.

To find a true - and safe - belt, practise shouting ‘Eh, Francesco!’ from a high, clavicular, breath, with a high larynx, tilted cricoid, narrow AES, high tongue, retracted false vocal folds (be happy to see him!) and a high level of neck and body anchoring. Then try it with a sustained ‘eh’ vowel in ‘Francesco’. Also try pitching a cry of ‘Get off my horse’, ensuring all the above ‘recipe’ is in place. Do **not** do these exercises without having been shown how to do them by a teacher.

**Exercise 9:** Tongue placement for vowels.

Keeping your tongue near or against your upper molars and your jaw free (use the bone-prop), speak-sing in a high-ish register through ‘ee, ee eh, ee ah, ee o, ee oo’, then ‘ee-eh-ee-ah-ee-o-ee-oo’. The lips should move easily and freely from a wide-ish smile to very forward and rounded, while the tongue should do very little.

**Exercise 10:** The Caruso.

Keep your tongue in the middle of your mouth, working as little as possible, in a similar way to ex. 5. This exercise could also be done with the bone-prop as far as the bottom of the upper register. With this and all the following exercises it’s important to pitch the start of the exercise in the right place for your voice. Mezzos and baritones should start on a low A-C, sopranos and tenors on a D-F.

Remember when practising sequences of scales and arpeggios always to release the lower abdominal muscles at the end of each phrase to allow an efficient in-breath.

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff is in C major (one sharp) and contains a sequence of notes with lyrics underneath: Ee\_ eh\_ ah\_ o\_ oo\_ o\_ ah\_ eh\_ ee. The second staff is in C minor (three flats) and contains a sequence of notes with lyrics underneath: Ec\_ ch\_ ah\_ o\_ oo\_ o\_ ah\_ ch\_ cc, followed by 'etc'.

**Exercise 11:** Vowel arpeggios.

The purpose of all these examples, regardless of their difficulty, is to gain an even tone quality throughout the voice. You should also be aiming for a really legato sound. Don’t sing too loud, but do try to find a full tone, with retracted false vocal folds, a raised soft palate, a free tongue root, a relaxed jaw, good breath control from a solid core within a good posture, resting on, and thoroughly connected to, excellent low abdominal support. Vowels can of course be changed to suit any individual needs you may have. You can also exercise with a simple arpeggio (eg CEGCGEC) on any vowel, or on ‘wee’, ‘weh’ ‘wah’, ‘yah’ etc.

On all these kinds of exercises, you should try to make a smooth journey between registers from ‘head’/falsetto or ‘head’/thin vocal folds to ‘chest’/thin vocal folds or ‘chest’/thick vocal folds. This will be different for women/men or for classical/pop/MT. Try to be clear about what vocal quality you are trying to achieve and why. Remember that taking a low quality (say speech quality) too high will prevent you from moving to a higher register.

11 a:

ah eh ah eh ah eh ah eh ah eh ah eh

*etc*

11 b:

ee eh ah ee

*etc*

11 c:

ee eh ah o oo ee eh ah o oo

*etc*

11 d:

ah eh ah eh ah eh ah eh ah eh ah eh ah eh ah eh

*etc*

### Exercise 12: Text arpeggios.

Any arpeggios with any consonants you find helpful (or tricky) are fine, but here are a couple of favourite not-quite arpeggios. (It’s ‘knivy’ as in a cockney ‘navy’!)

There are many versions of these not-quite arpeggios. Try to vary the diet as much as possible as well as latching on to ones that effectively work for you.

12 a:

Two staves of music in a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The first staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B-flat4, C5, B-flat4, A4, G4, F4, E-flat4, D4, C4. Below the notes is the text "moo ma moo ma moo ma moo ma moo ma moo ma moo ma". The second staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: G3, A3, B-flat3, C4, B-flat3, A3, G3, F3, E-flat3, D3, C3. Below the notes is the text "etc".

12 b:

Two staves of music in a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The first staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B-flat4, C5, B-flat4, A4, G4, F4, E-flat4, D4, C4. Below the notes is the text "Kni - vy kni-vy kni - vy kni - vy kni - vy kni - vy kni - vy kni - vy". The second staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: G3, A3, B-flat3, C4, B-flat3, A3, G3, F3, E-flat3, D3, C3. Below the notes is the text "etc".

**Exercise 13:** Text driven exercises.

These are more to do with working the consonants you find tricky (make up your own words) and exercising the tongue and lips to move freely in spite of tongue-twisters. Try 'pewter tutor', 'yellow leather' and 'blowsy party'. And vary the scale if you're easily bored.

Three staves of music in a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The first staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B-flat4, C5, B-flat4, A4, G4, F4, E-flat4, D4, C4. Below the notes is the text "Moo - min - mam - ma Moo - min - mam - ma Moo - min - mam - ma Moo - min - mam - ma". The second staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B-flat4, C5, B-flat4, A4, G4, F4, E-flat4, D4, C4. Below the notes is the text "Moo-min-mam-ma etc". The third staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: G3, A3, B-flat3, C4, B-flat3, A3, G3, F3, E-flat3, D3, C3. Below the notes is the text "Moo-min-mam-ma etc etc".

**Exercise 14:** Coloratura exercises.

These are all about getting the voice mobile. Relax the jaw, loosen the tongue, make some space, work the support and risk going really fast. Keep it legato.

Remember that this kind of exercise is not so much about warming-up (for which you need go no further than exercise 1) as exercising specific aspects of your technique that you want to develop, keep in trim or use for specific repertoire.

14 a: (With and without 'n's.)

cc ch  
nee nee nee etc neh neh neh etc

ah  
nah nah nah etc

ee etc  
nee etc

etc

14 b: Use any vowel, or one after the other.

14 c: A variation on a theme. Make this very staccato, very well-supported, with a constant flow of air and a very rounded tone.

ee ee ee ee ee ee ee eh eh eh eh eh eh eh ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah

ee ee ee ee etc

etc

### Exercise 15: Octaves.

Lastly, an exercise for really stretching the boundaries. Don't start uncomfortably low, but do try to open up the sound at the bottom of the voice - free jaw, open throat - without digging. You're looking to make effective journeys from, for example, speech quality or thick vocal folds to thin vocal folds, or to falsetto, or to twang. This is particularly good if you're trying to improve an operatic or classical range. Work from thick or thin vocal folds to falsetto (sopranos/mezzos/tenors), or thick to thin folds (tenors/baritones). (These approximate to ideas of 'chest' to mid-range or 'chest' to 'head'). Then ascend without straying too far above your comfort zone, again, keeping the throat open and the jaw free. Make sure the top notes are really well-

placed, the octaves really are octaves, and that your posture and support remain strongly intact. Try to complete a journey covering two octaves with two breaths (beginning and middle). Use any vowel you like, but 'ee' and 'ah' are good.

15 a:



15 b:



## **Appendix**

These exercises are not designed as a singing tutor. The exercises should be used in conjunction with lessons from a qualified singing teacher.

You will find all these exercises much easier if you master playing chords or triads in each key on a keyboard. Start with C (C, E, G), then D flat (D flat, F, A flat) and work from there.

You will also be much more aware of your jaw being released if you use a bone-prop and, most importantly, what the rest of your body is up to if you work using a mirror.

Try to warm-up whenever you're going to sing unless you sing very regularly (ie. over an hour every day), in which case you will probably find your need to warm-up diminishes.

Try to exercise your singing voice every day - better five minutes each morning than two hours on a Saturday.

Practice in the car is seldom practice and often damage. (Memorising is another matter.)

Use specific exercises to achieve specific goals. Try constantly to analyse what needs working on and exercise appropriately.

Drink lots of water.

Don't sing when you're tired.

Do sing (carefully) with a cold; don't sing with a sore throat or a cough.

## **Acknowledgements**

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