

A Singer's Survival Guide (Part 1)

Cameron Burns

This is an abridged item from the blog of young and upcoming British conductor, Cameron Burns, on the fundamental components of good singing. Cameron has a wealth of experience with singers, having started his career in the theatre as a repetiteur and vocal coach.

Connecting to the voice

Support

This is the most fundamental element of singing. A car cannot run without petrol and a good voice cannot sound without a constant connection to breath.

Sensation versus sound

As musicians, we are constantly told to listen. However, I believe singers should rely more on the physical sensation of singing. What *you* hear is not an accurate representation of what *we* hear on the outside of your body. That sound will also differ greatly, depending on the acoustics of the venue. One concert hall is not the same as the next and yet the sensation of the voice and its mechanism will remain relatively constant in each. Getting used to sensation will help to avoid pushing in dry acoustics or with a loud orchestra.

Prepare ye the way

Above the *passaggio*, a little extra space is always needed for sound to resonate. Modifying the vowels will inevitably achieve this. However, the process sometimes needs to start earlier on the approach to the high notes, so the transition is as smooth and easy as possible.

Consequently, always look at the vowels *on the way up* to the high notes. Imagining a yawn will also help to create the right sort of space and prevents any tightness from creeping in.

Vowel maintenance

Pavarotti is rumoured to have said “pick your best vowel and sing on it”. What I believe he meant by this was to keep the internal distance between vowels as short and efficient as possible. Always be on your guard when switching between open and closed vowels because you may not have to change the position quite as much as you think. This is especially true when descending on open vowels. Experiment with how slim you can make the internal position, starting with the closed vowel and opening slowly to see how far you have to open it to get to the open vowel. The result will be greater efficiency of movement and an avoidance of singing flat.

The three states of consonants

Consonants come in three forms: solid (e.g. G, B, D), liquid (e.g. L, M, N, Z) and gas (e.g. C, F, S), although these differ depending on the language. Learn to love consonants and learn to connect them with your support. They help to maintain a legato line, not detract from it. Not only will your support stay consistently connected, you'll also put the text into HD (High Definition) for

your audience. Consonants often benefit from coming slightly before the value of the printed note, so the vowel speaks on the note itself, rather than the consonant. This is especially true in German with sometimes as many as four or five consonants before you get to the vowel.

Don't masticate!

When watching the very best singers, I am always struck by how little they open their mouths; only when they need extra space for the high notes does the jaw drop. Vowels are formed internally, not by the external shape of the mouth. In golf, once you've hit the ball, you can no longer determine where it will land. In singing, once the air has passed through the teeth, no amount of facial contortion will give you that bright 'ah' vowel you desire – it has to happen internally.

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