

Bel Canto Basics

The objective of Bel Canto singing is to create a vocal sound that is rich in harmonic overtones and is uniform in color from your lowest note to your highest note as well as uniform in color across the vowel sounds necessary to distinguish words in the English language. The advantages of using this vocal style is that it: sounds quite nice, extends your high range by a few notes, eliminates muscular stress in your larynx so that you can sing much longer and louder as well as sing high notes without effort.

Here are the basics:

Body Preparation

Body Position - Your body must be aligned from below your rib cage to the top of your head.

Breathing - Inhale by lowering your diaphragm and expanding your lower ribs without lifting your shoulders. You do this naturally when you are out of breath after running.

Relax the jaw (and larynx) - Let your jaw drop so there is about one finger width space between your teeth. You can force your jaw to relax by "breaking the jaw" (pushing your chin in about 1/4 " with your hand). After some practice you can do the same thing with some voluntary muscles. If you are doing this successfully and look in a mirror you will see the "dumb founded" look on your face.

Making a sound

The Ring, Squillo, the Buzz - These terms describe what happens when you direct a vibrating column of air into the forward part of your face ("in the mask"). Because of the irregularities in the bone structure of your skull and the many irregular air chambers, the vibrating air will begin to resonate in some chamber. This amplifies the sound naturally and introduces harmonics. The harmonics enrich the sound and are the primary objective of Bel Canto singing.

The best exercise to develop the ring is to hum as if you are trying to sing the "ng" sound. If you start to sing the word sing, close to the "ng" and continue singing that sound. If your jaw is relaxed and you are supporting the air column from your diaphragm (push) you will feel a ring or buzz somewhere in your head. This feeling happens because the sound is resonating someplace in your head. This is fairly easy to do and should happen within the first try or within the first few minutes. The easiest pitch to start on is C for men and F for women. If you can't feel this resonance, ask someone at rehearsal or take a voice lesson.

Once you can make the ng sound resonate, let your tongue fall to the bottom of your mouth so that it touches the inside of most of your lower teeth. Then slide the pitch (portamento) you are singing up a third (do re me) and back down. What you are focusing on is keeping the buzz the same up and down the pitch change. Unless you have been doing this for several years, your throat and larynx muscles will try to engage on some pitches and destroy the buzz. After you are successful sliding up and down that third, raise the pitch a half step and slide up and down the new third. As the pitch rises it takes more push from the diaphragm to sustain the buzz. Try to push just the amount required to sustain the buzz and no more. If you do this daily for a year it becomes automatic. You can get some idea of where this is all heading if after a few minutes of singing ng portamento thirds you start on the ng and then open to the word "knee". If you like that sound, read on. If you don't, take a voice lesson.

Singing the vowels - Vowels "in the pocket"

There are only 7 vowel sounds that you can sing with resonance. They are:

| | | | | | | |
|------|-----|------|-------|------|------|------|
| EE | EH | UH | AW | oo | IH | OO |
| Peek | elk | what | ought | book | sing | moon |

The easiest vowel sound to sing with resonance is EE. The exercise is to morph from the ng hum to the EE, then to the EH, etc. while keeping the resonance and same color at each pitch in your range.

Diphthongs: dominant vowel - 85%

Long A = cane = EH + EE

Long I = pine = UH + EE

Long O = bone = AW + OO (moon)

Long U = UH + OO (moon)

Round = UH + OO (moon)

Other Vowels:

Has, And = EH

"W" = OO (moon)

With = OO (moon)

"The" before a consonant = oo (book)

"The" before a vowel = EE

Mercy, First = oo (book)

Are = UH

Lord, God = AW

you = EE + oo (book) + OO (moon)