



## Singing Consonants – 9 useful Principles

Many singers find it easier to sing a tune on a single vowel sound, rather than singing actual song words. Adding consonants to a vocal line can be a real problem – the musical line suffers, singers find themselves running out of breath much more quickly, their throats get tired, and some intervals and passages feel much more awkward to sing. Sometimes singers try to overcome this problem by singing (or saying) fast and tricky consonant combinations, or tongue twisters, near the start of a practise session. I don't think using tongue twisters to 'warm up' the voice helps solve the problem. In fact, it can make it worse. Read this article, and you will find out why.

Over many years of singing, teaching, reading and experimenting, I have come up with these 9 Principles to make singing consonants easier. They put the singer back in charge of their voice, the musical line, and the interpretation of the song. Each of the Principles has a clear rationale, based on mechanical efficiency, vocal health, good musical line, intelligibility for the listener, and enabling the singer to be a flexible song interpreter. Embedding each Principle deeply as a physical habit will bring its own teaching. Study these Principles deeply. Try them with single notes, pairs of notes, single words, a short phrase. Make sure that you are using them all to support each other. Live with them, and see how you might use them. As a system, they have worked for many singers. If your singing is working, then don't worry about these Principles. But if something in a song seems tricky, then working these 9 Principles may help get you out of trouble.

Each Principle inevitably refers to other aspects of vocal technique not covered in this article. If you want deeper explanations for each of these 9 Principles, get in touch, and we can book a session to talk them through. In the meantime, here they are:

### 1. **“The pitched vowel stream reigns supreme.”**

It is the vowels that fundamentally carry the note, and therefore the tune. The vowel stream should be even (without pulsing stronger or weaker with each new syllable or pitch). Practise speaking – resonantly, theatrically, and smoothly, the sequence of vowel sounds at the heart of the sequence of syllables. Then sing the same smooth vowel sequence to the pitch sequence of the melody. This pitched vowel stream is at the heart of all good singing - i.e. singing that is healthy for the voice, resonant, musically expressive, audible, and intelligible for the listener. Many challenges with consonants are diminished by re-establishing the feel of this pitched vowel stream at the heart of each phrase, and maintaining that feel when the consonants are re-introduced.

### 2. **When introducing consonants to the vowel stream, make them as short as possible, unless there is a good artistic reason to do otherwise.**

Dwelling on the consonants can do several things. Sometimes it can lead to tension in the jaw, tongue, lips, or laryngeal muscles, impairing phonation at the level of the vocal folds, impairing clean resonance and tone, interfering with good breath management, and tiring the throat. Sometimes, it can aid the singer's comfort in the throat (e.g. m, n, l, v etc.). Either way, prolonging consonants, especially continuants (those consonants that sustain a

pitch), may feel lovely and *legato* from the singer's perspective, but the musical line, with the vowel stream noticeably interrupted, will not sound *legato* to the listener. Principle 2 supports Principle 1.

### 3. **Minimise jaw activity.**

It's ok to move the jaw when singing – in fact it is absolutely necessary sometimes, to establish good resonance and vocal safety depending on the vowel-pitch relationship (see other blog entries). However, if you have to move your jaw when singing low or middle pitches, you are probably over-using it. Even if you have had to significantly drop the back of the jaw for a particular vowel-pitch relationship, you will only have to close a little to form the consonants. Take any string of words, and sing them on a middle pitch; it is possible to sing them all, cleanly and even vigorously, while maintaining a gentle bite on the tip of your little finger. This is good practice. It helps us learn how to activate the tongue and lips properly for healthy voice-use and clear-sounding consonants, instead of relying on jaw movement. Principle 3 supports Principle 2 and Principle 1.

### 4. **“All singers’ consonants originate in the belly.”**

Yes, really! Healthy vocal sound depends on good breath management which, in turn, depends on delivering air mostly with a subtle and sustained squeeze from the *transversus abdominis* muscle low in the belly. The air flow begins a fraction before the vocal folds vibrate enough to be heard at the chosen pitch. Given that this is how healthy and resonant vocal sound is begun and sustained, any activity to deliver consonants must support this principle. Thinking of the consonants as primarily activity of mouth parts would therefore be counter-productive, and make the singer work harder and harder with the mouth to deliver sufficient acoustic energy; this can happen when singers introduce tongue twisters to their practise routine. It would also mean perpetually trying to switch the foundation of the vocal sound production backwards and forwards between the mouth and the belly. Experiment with delivering single consonants beginning with a pulse from the belly, just as one does with a vowel. Continue on to a vowel, and notice how much more secure and resonant the vowel is, and the throat is more comfortable. Principle 4 supports Principle 1; it also makes Principle 2 and Principle 3 more possible.

These first four are the most important principles. They will help a singer deliver a comfortable, *molto legato* line as in the best *bel canto* tradition. These, and the next four principles may need to be modified under certain circumstances, but wait until Principle 9 to find out more about that ... These next four principles develop the lessons learned from the first four:

### 5. **Treat every syllable as if it begins with its vowel.**

Of course, many syllables begin with a consonant. But, the problem is that, when singers think like that, they often over-exert their jaw or throat muscles – and almost certainly try to begin the sound with their mouth – and throat (argh!), rather than their belly and breath flow (remember Principle 4). Aim to prepare the note, with its vowel, first; finding the right resonant shape for that vowel-pitch relationship. Sing it, then re-sing it the same way,

tucking the consonant in front. The likelihood is that the syllable will feel much more comfortable to make, and sound fuller. Principle 5 is a natural development from Principles 1-4.

**6. Don't let the consonant change your plan for the pitched vowel that precedes or follows it.**

In other words, we must not hear in the preceding vowel that there is a consonant about to happen, or, in the following vowel, that a consonant has just happened. Inefficient consonant delivery is apparent when the preceding vowel loses its tone or intensity as it approaches the consonant. Equally, a consonant has compromised the following vowel if that vowel begins weakly or with unfocussed tone and only eventually finds its centre. Words delivered in this way can make the line sound 'lumpy' and what I call 'notey'; the larger musical shape of the phrases can get lost (but see Principle 9). The plan for the pitched vowel stream can be established by Principle 1 and Principle 5.

**7. When voiced consonants begin a word, join them to the vowel that follows, whether that vowel is sung cleanly, or *portamento*.**

This applies to consonant clusters (e.g. 'br' in 'bright') as well single consonants (e.g. 'b' in 'bite'). If the word is partway through a phrase, it is possible and vocally safe to join the consonant to the preceding vowel, but I find that the line sounds musically 'cleaner' when observing Principle 7. On wider intervals (e.g. a fifth or more), Principle 7 also feels mechanically easier than joining the consonant to the preceding vowel. I suspect this is because ignoring Principle 7 seems to undermine Principles 2, 3, 5 and 6.

**8. Voiced consonants in the middle or at the end of a word can be joined to the preceding or following pitch.**

Depending on the word or phrase, try both ways, to find a) which feels most mechanically fluent and comfortable (with good technique, either should be possible), and b) which best serves your interpretation of the song. Principle 8 works best when Principles 1, 2, 3 and 4 are firmly established.

**9. Be willing to bend all of these Principles in the service of interpretation, but not at the expense of your vocal health.**

These Principles are designed to build superb discipline and mastery of one's vocal instrument, produce immaculate *legato* typical of *bel canto*, and maximum versatility for interpretation. However, the lines may become so 'clean' that they sound unnatural, so that the listener is taken over by the musical line and beauty of tone, and doesn't necessarily notice the words, story or character. Depending on the musical genre, the singer may want to bend the Principles significantly. But there is merit in having the discipline, control, and choice so that one can return to these Principles when necessary.

## **Beware tongue twisters as warmups**

I said at the start that I think tongue twisters are not a good tool for warming up. My basic reason is that, unless a singer is already well warmed up, and using all of these 9 Principles, s/he will be practising and reinforcing dysfunctional muscular patterns by doing the tongue twisters too soon.

Sometimes a singer has to sing rapid syllables, whether in a patter song, fast comic song, comic (*buffo*) aria, or in recitative. To learn these passages and songs, remember the cardinal rule: “Fast singing is slow singing speeded up.” To sing rapid syllables, with a recognisably musical line, preserving the throat, and achieving intelligibility for the listener, learn the passages by singing them very slowly, using all 9 Principles. Then gradually add pace until you can eventually sing the passage at full speed. Never start your practise at full speed, even when you know the piece well, and have created a fast version in previous practice time; start with a slower version, and then add pace.

It can make sense to use a tongue twister as a diagnostic tool, to discover which vocal principles need to be fine-tuned and improved. Once you’ve identified the problem, use a combination of slow practice and the 9 Principles to master the sequence of sounds.

## **Working the 9 Principles**

Focusing on any one of the first 8 principles will immediately improve vocal comfort, clean resonance and a balanced tone, and musical line. It will quickly lead to being able to use more of the Principles. Conversely, if a singer neglects any one of the 8, then s/he is likely to neglect others as well, and soon get into mechanical difficulty, or feel limited in what s/he can do interpretatively.

These 9 Principles for Consonants, like most of my work as a singing teacher, are work in progress. They have helped me and my students sing better. At the same time, I find myself constantly testing my teaching ideas, to see if something else will work better. So, don’t take my word for it. Try these ideas out, and see what works for you.