
Some Thoughts on Singing in Tune

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In a previous article for *Resound*, I reflected on learning from my Finnish friends the benefits of using piano very sparingly in rehearsals. Doing so helps singers develop an inner sense of pitch by not relying on an outside source. Here I want to share some related thoughts about singing in tune.

There are many causes for poor and for good intonation, and it would be beyond the scope of this article to go into much detail; however, I want to share some observations I've made over the years. I've noted a number of quick fixes employed by colleagues, some of which worked at times, and some that did not. My experience suggests that the issues associated with faulty intonation can be complicated and multi-faceted. At the risk of over simplification, the following are some of the approaches that have worked for me.

First, the causes: singing in the wrong register, singing too loudly (or too softly), singing with too much vibrato (a technical issue here, not a stylistic consideration), and simply not thinking about pitch. Women's voices seem to be a bit more susceptible to register issues than men's voices. We all know there is that danger zone where women can sing pitches in either head or chest voice. Problems can arise. Those accustomed to belting will often choose to sing notes in that range too often in chest voice, resulting often in singing flat. My solution begins in the warm-up exercises where we always begin in the upper middle part of the voice—on E₅ in a descending pattern of some kind.

The strategies here are to begin in a range of the voice in which it is rather obvious to most women that if she is singing in head voice and dropping by half steps in whatever warm-up sequence is chosen, she must make sure to maintain singing in head voice as long as possible before easing into a light chest voice.

When rehearsing a work, if the pitch problem is possibly due to a register issue, I create an exercise, possibly a melodic fragment from that particular part, transposing it up into a

range where singing in head voice is inevitable and easier. Then we move it down by steps to the actual written pitches. This often means that the singers cannot sing those notes as loudly in head voice as they would in chest voice. That can be frustrating for some women. However, it's really worth the effort, and eventually many figure this out on their own.

Most high school and college students know what in-tune singing is and what it is not. They struggle at times with knowing how to do it, but they know. I remember Robert Shaw saying something to the effect that vibrato is a good thing as long as it does not "confuse the pitch."

I have a hand gesture that looks very much like the Curwen hand sign for "mi" that means no vibrato. I don't employ this in a concert (well, rarely), but I do so in a rehearsal. The singers know to sing without vibrato for that passage. Sometimes I'll ask them to sing without vibrato on certain chords. We hold a chord without any vibrato then slowly add vibrato back in to achieve the warmth, stylistic effect, etc., but we try to maintain good intonation.

A common phrase I use is the following: "Keep the brain engaged all the way to the end of the phrase; be intentional about singing in tune all the way." It is easy for singers to get lazy regarding breath support, vowel unity, and all of the things we know which take a lot of effort to sing well. The simple act of reminding them about the need to be intentional about maintaining pitch can work wonders.

Another exercise for your consideration is to have the singers slide up from a pitch to the pitch one half-step higher over about eight seconds. Most singers, in my experience, wait until about count seven to move. When the singers get accustomed to moving just slightly almost immediately, they develop an awareness of how much space there really is between the "cracks between the piano keys."

When rehearsing, I may ask the singers to be prepared to stop on a given note or chord, and with a slowly rotating thumbs-up gesture from me, to raise the pitch just slightly as in the above exercise. They are also encouraged to take a breath to sustain the pitch. Then they move the pitch up and down until it is accurate. I ask that they keep the breath engaged and moving but not change the dynamic level, the vowel, the focus, their eyebrows, etc. Singers must change only the pitch. Focusing intently on the pitch and realizing that one can move the pitch at will gives the singers a powerful tool for singing better in tune. I hope you give some of these ideas a try and that you experience success with your singers.
