

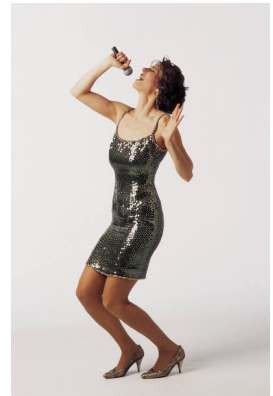
Personal Vocal Development

Foreword

The Vocal Skills section of the Judging Category Description Book outlines 5 areas of development for vocal skills. As these skills build upon each other, I have graphically shown them as a pyramid ([below](#)).



Although rather technically phrased in places, the JCDB well describes the vocal qualities required for good singing. It also mentions the most common faults in each area although the question of how to overcome these faults is not addressed (not surprisingly, as individual voices have individual needs and "keys" to unlock them).



If you are truly interested in understanding the voice better, I highly recommend starting and ending your journey with this section of the JCDB. You may not understand it all the first time, but each subsequent reading will bring new illumination as you progress in your vocal journey.

It is my intention here to provide a practical approach to improving your voice. It is imperative that you understand that a skilled and objective assistant is required if you want to progress quickly and without too much frustration. Whether that assistant is a professional vocal teacher, or a friend taking the journey with you, you need an outside ear that you can trust. Because you cannot always trust what you hear from the inside!

Developing vocal skills is a cycle of learning. A lot of the journey is overcoming preconceptions, letting go of the "hard road" and most importantly, learning to step outside your comfort zone. If you are not prepared to be uncomfortable - not vocally but mentally - you are NOT prepared to CHANGE and will never really progress.

Pyramid of Vocal Skills - A Synopsis

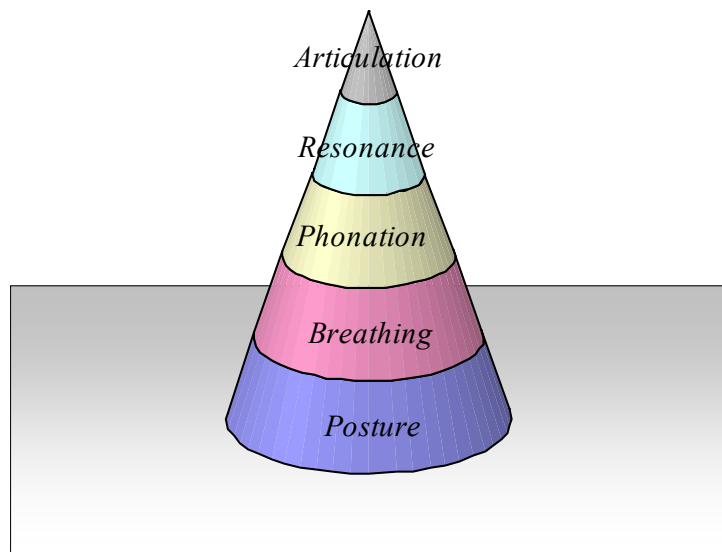
At the bottom of the pyramid is **Posture**. It is (naturally) the foundation upon which your voice is built. You're not going to get very far playing a flute that has been bent out of shape, and the same goes for YOUR wind instrument.

Once the body is free of tension and poised for singing, **Breathing** takes the stage. Sound is vibrating air, so how we move our air - in and out - is vitally important to our ability to sing!

Having sufficient mastery of our air to provide a steady column of air with which to create sound, **Phonation** must be next on the list. Simply put, phonation is the process of turning air into sound. Well phonated singing is that for which almost all the air is translated into sound - no breathy sounds or fuzziness indicating air is escaping the vocal chords and being wasted.

Nine tenths of a violin or guitar is sound board and resonating chamber. The strings create the sound, but giving it a place to reverberate gives the instrument its tone and carrying power. The same is true of the voice, thus **Resonance** works hand in hand with Phonation to deliver our pure sound. Voices that sound shallow, "girly" or strident are often simply missing out on resonance opportunities. The more of you that you can get to vibrate when you sing, the more powerful you are as a "speaker" as the more vibrations you are sending out on the air towards your audience - like a living sub-woofer!

The tip of the pyramid is **Articulation**. As I have said in my [Articulation & Tone Flow](#) class, don't confuse articulation with pronunciation! Articulation is how you shape the sound to make words. Most particularly, it is how we shape and produce the different vowel sounds which needs to be studied here.



Jo's Cycle of Vocal Development

There are 4 general goals in developing vocal skills:

- quality
- consistency
- power
- freedom.

These goals are all achievable by every vocalist to some degree - the degree is the difference between a good vocalist and a great one! I strongly believe that you cannot achieve your potential as a vocalist without working on ALL of these aspects.

You may notice that the four points outlined above could convincingly be used to pursue excellence in any physically involved art or sport. That's because these are the elements common to all that transform the merely amateur into a thing of beauty, be it pole vaulting, ballet or singing.

Quality relates to the skill of the artist - for a singer, this is the sound they produce and the rapport they set up with the audience. Here the nitty-gritty of vocal production "basics", physical and mental training and technique are put together to form the core of the performance. Quality is HOW WELL we present our art.

Consistency is fairly self-explanatory. Any performance which is uneven in it's demonstration of skill (Quality) severely hampers any "magic" on stage. It degrades the confidence of the performer, because he or she is still worrying over the flaws in the performance. Unfortunately, the more consistent we are as performers, the more those increasingly tiny flaws seem to leap out of the seams. The good news is, the more we insist on a specific level of skill in one area, the more quickly we build muscle memory and find that singing it any other way is impossible!

If you find that you have not achieved a goal (although you know how to do it in small brilliant bursts!), it is most likely that you have not applied the consistency rule - REPETITION without error. As Dr Phil says, you can't "white-knuckle" a change in your [singing] behaviour. Instead, you need to replace one behaviour with another. To achieve consistent use of a new skill, you must insist on using that skill on every breath, note, phrase and song - every time you prepare to sing. The more inconsistently you repeat the skill correctly, the less likely you are to achieve mastery over it in the short, medium or long term. This is where having an aural assistant or teacher can help you to ensure you practice the skill consistently correctly.

Singers who, without trying, have a clear, "ruby" tone, are often those who find it most difficult to improve. These "naturals" don't know how they produce the good tone they have, and thus (being out of touch with their vocal instrument) find it difficult to work out how to change things to improve them further. They also tend to have greater difficulty moving outside their comfort zones, as they are used to

receiving praise for singing in a certain way, so changing that creates a dramatic fear of failure.

Getting in touch with your instrument is something which every vocalist must do or fight with the frustration of slow or no progress. REPEATABILITY is the key here - if you know how it feels to make the change, and you know what you did to achieve that feeling, you will be able to repeat it until it becomes muscle memory, part of your skill set.

It's also VERY difficult to improve dramatically in all areas at once. Usually, a singer will practice a new technique or vocalise to improve in one or possibly 2 areas at a time - an exercise to practice placement for example, doubling as a breathing exercise (practically all vocalises are breathing exercises really - after all, you must breathe to sing!). Where you get into trouble is going to a rehearsal and trying to suddenly do everything right at once! You end up doing nothing right consistently, and therefore everything wrong a lot of the time. It's better to concentrate on one area at a time and gain CONSISTENCY at your new level for that skill before concentrating on the next thing.

It is also important to spread your effort evenly into all aspects of your singing. Everything is interconnected and it is a false economy to concentrate on one thing - say "power" - when the path to powerful singing is in getting everything else right.

Sometimes, vocal problems actually stem from the vocalist trying to achieve growth in one area without a balancing growth in the other skill areas. Take "power" again as an example. Naturally, singers often yearn for a more powerful sound. In an attempt to achieve a louder sound (which is NOT power) the singer ends up singing with "chest voice", which involves the wrong muscle set, and a louder, but more blared sound is the result.

The correct way to achieve **Power** is to:

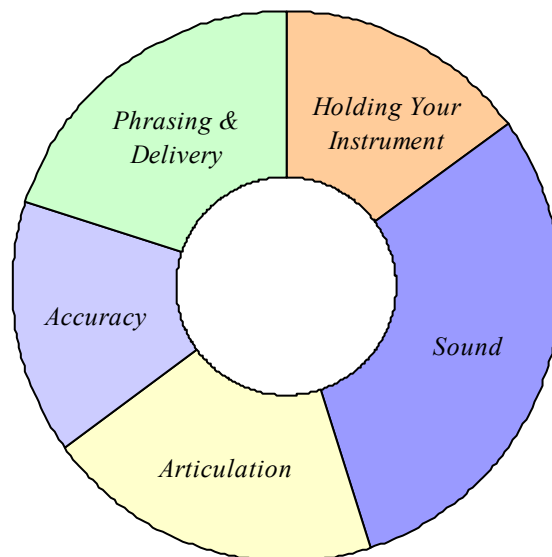
- (a) produce the voice correctly
- (b) have a physical approach to singing which supports phonation and resonance and
- (c) learn to sing with an unweighted, free sound.

Power is then possible, as is delicacy, because they are being attempted in a stable and flexible vocal environment.

A powerful voice is not only one which projects well and is pleasant to listen to. It is also a measure of the connection between the performer and the audience: the power of the voice is the power of persuasion it has over the hearts and minds of its auditors. This has a great deal to do with on-stage magic, as it allows the performer to suspend the audience's disbelief and help them live within the performance.

Which runs faster: the horse who runs for sheer joy of it, or the one which is whipped every step of the way? The free voice has twice the power of the forced voice, and does you no harm in the process.

Often it is difficult for a vocalist to know how to tackle the climb to these ideals. For the purpose of providing a logical and flowing path for the individual, I have devised a cycle of progression. The singer makes her way around the circle constantly, all their singing life. As their instrument grows in strength and flexibility, the performance fills in, until the full circle - no hole - is achieved.



Some of these sections overlap the specifics of the Pyramid of Skills - and so they should, as those skills are vital for vocal improvement. The sections I have added are those which the individual must work on to become a better performer. I have not addressed ensemble skills here - they are fully explored in the Group Vocal Development section.

I would advise you to start at Holding Your Instrument and move clockwise around the circle, measuring and achieving an improvement in each category before moving on. You can use this [Personal Development Chart](#) to monitor your progress.

Holding Your Instrument

Good posture is characterised by a high degree of alignment and lengthening along the spine and an alert, relaxed body. No, that's not a contradiction! Relaxed simply means a complete lack of TENSION in the muscles. You can USE muscles and not be TENSE. It does NOT mean a collapsed state. It should feel like you're about to run a race with a friend, being warmed and limbered up, ready to go.

Characteristics of good singing posture include:

- a "poised" sensation - feeling light on your feet
- good alignment of the spine, through the hips and up the neck

- ribcage lifted - if you lift from the bottom of the ribs, this will correct the position of the shoulders. If you "put your shoulders back", the tendency is to pull them too far, closing off the back of the ribcage
- feeling balanced at all times - this is a subconscious awareness of your centre of balance, which should sit low in your torso, and give you a sense of being "grounded".

Sound

The characteristics of sound which we admire and aspire towards are discussed in [The Visual Voice](#). These include the following definition of good sound qualities:

- **Clarity** - sometimes called "focus", this is efficient phonation
- **Depth** - the tone needs dimension, created through resonance
- **Sonority** - good support is needed to carry the tone through a phrase
- **Lift** - this upward pull gives life to the sound and helps to ensure the sound doesn't become "squashed"
- **Consistency** - we are rewarded for how much of the time we display our skills. This is not just a stamina issue – lasting the whole song – but also a character of our voices. How consistent are the above 4 elements throughout your range? Do you have as much clarity at the top of your range as at the bottom? "Chest Voice" and your "break" are fallacies – if you sing with clarity, depth, sonority and lift, you will never have problems with a break, or sink to singing in "Chest Voice".

Articulation

Of primary importance to an a cappella singer when articulating words is the ability to instantly and accurately move from vowel to vowel, enunciating the consonants clearly but without letting them interfere with tone flow.

Think of the situation where you are at a very loud party or concert and someone is trying to tell you something. Do you hear the consonants or the vowels the most? What then gives the greatest clue to the message? That's right - the sequence of vowels. That's also what makes foreign accents difficult to understand. Usually the speaker will put the consonants in the right place, but by pronouncing the vowels with an accent (i.e. differently to you) your brain has to do a quick translation-by-closest-guess. The classic example that springs to mind is in The Pink Panther... "I've come to fix your phern!"

The vowels we choose for barbershop are a sort of "classic" American, and we choose them for the following reasons:

- the majority of the music we sing in barbershop is part of the American musical tradition, and it is therefore appropriate that we sing it in that style and with American vowels
- American vowels are shorter than Italian or English ones. For example in the word "dance", we have "a" from cat vs. "ah" from car. This shortness causes

the vowel to be sung in a more forward and lifted placement, producing more overtones and overall a brighter, more major sound, characteristic of barbershop.

The real trick to vowel articulation then is to keep the vowel still for as much of the note as possible in order for chords to lock, and to keep each vowel "clean" by defining the vowels for each word specifically in order for all parts to match.

Things to remember when working on consonant articulation and how it affects tone flow include:

- eliminating "scooping" by singing the pitched consonant that starts the word on the same pitch as the vowel
- keeping unvoiced and explosive consonants as short as possible to minimise white space
- choose the pitched / voiced version of consonants where you would normally do so in speech - in the word "eyes" you would actually pronounce it "eyez", using the pitched consonant Z rather than the unvoiced consonant S. This doesn't mean eliminate all explosive consonants! Just identify where the pitched version would be acceptable and then sing it on purpose
- ensure consonant clusters are identified and practiced for speedy resolution to the following vowel sound. A consonant cluster is where multiple consonants appear together. The worst kind are those involving a ch or sh.
- ensure fully voiced consonants are sung with as much sound as open vowels - M, N and NG
- ensure the R is turned and treated exactly as a diphthong
- ensure doubled consonants are not double articulated as they are in classical music, even if they are in separate words - for example "first tree" would be sung "firstree" (also a good example of a consonant cluster!)
- make exceptions to these rules ON PURPOSE for artistic effect - emphasising the SH in hush etc.

Accuracy

Some exercises for practicing pitch accuracy include:

- blow/play pitch, then sing (need an assistant with an excellent ear to help you with this, making sure you are in tune perfectly each time)
- blow pitch, then sing on an "ah" for as long as possible (similar to the 45 second exercise for breath management), then blow the pitch to see if you have kept pitch
- blow pitch, then sing on an "ah" (check pitch after each one):
 - 1-8-1
 - 1-3-5-8-5-3-1
 - 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1
 - 1-2-1-7_{low}-1

- blow pitch, then sing on an "ah", 1-2-3-2-1, think up a semitone, repeat until you have completed 5 repetitions. Check new pitch. You can start this smaller by completing 2 reps before checking, then 3 etc.
- blow pitch, sing the 5 of the scale, check note.

Accuracy of pitch is not simply down to training the ear. There are a number of factors which can cause a note/chord to be "muddy" or out of tune. If you can identify these traps and practice NOT falling into them, you will retain clear chording and pitch through much more of your songs.

- Choice of vowel, or change of vowel. If the vowel we are using for that pitch is one which has a tendency to be sung "under the tongue" or with a lowered soft pallet rather than near the roof of the mouth, towards the teeth (where it has most ring and clarity), the resultant note will tend to be flat. Also, if you've just COME from one of those vowels (which you possibly also sang incorrectly) and are moving to a vowel requiring a totally different mouth shape (say "ah" to "oo"), it is likely that the second vowel sound will be mangled by the change and result in a mismatched vowel, and a badly placed vowel, also tending towards flatness.
- Pressed sound. If there is a decided lack of vocal freedom in the sound, caused by pressure on the tone or tension in the instrument, it is likely the pitch will flatten also in response to that pressure. The lift required in our sound allows us to pitch upward intervals correctly as well as encouraging overtones.
- Breath support. When we are running out of air we tend to let the vocal mechanism droop and with it goes the pitch. We need to run out of air in an upwards direction!

Phrasing & Delivery

In Barbershop we strive for a continuous wall of sound, as we don't have instruments to fill in the gaps in our vocal line. This means we approach our pronunciation slightly differently from other musical forms. We articulate (and separate) our diphthongs and we don't double articulate consonants. In fact we connect all syllables in a phrase together for a smooth, connected vocal line.

While working on our vowel-to-vowel singing as a technical skill, how we choose and deliver each phrase also requires attention in order to round out our barbershop musicianship. Although as a chorus member the phrasing of our songs may be decided by the director, it is up to us to understand the phrase plan and ensure their most effective delivery to the audience.

The most common flaw in delivery is caused by a lack of connection to the message encapsulated in the words. The message of a song is presented not only in the words but in the musical structure and the interpretive plan we choose. Once we lose connection to the words, remembering dynamics and other interpretive elements becomes difficult, and even when remembered, the plan loses meaning. It is difficult to pinpoint the nuance of change that is caused by the

singer considering the words as he/she sings rather than pronouncing random syllables to melody, but the result is dramatically different. Some of the more obvious unconscious corrections include:

- a more connected vocal line
- a musical, lyrical delivery rather than mechanical
- a more consistent vocal placement resulting in a more consistent tonal quality
- greater accuracy
- a more emotional delivery of the message.

Practicing this mental connection in order to achieve these benefits in delivery of phrases is essential to your overall consistency and musicality as a singer.

Start All Over Again

Having now completed one cycle of vocal improvement you will find your overall understanding of your personal vocal mechanism as well as your knowledge of technique will have increased, measurably! It's time to make some sort of recording on which you benchmark your progress - perhaps with a particularly difficult song that you have been using as an exercise to practice new technique.

Before you start on the next round of goal-setting and practice, there are a few other things which may also need adjustment to your new level of skill.

Internal Dialogue

In any sport or performance art the reviews we give ourselves on a day to day basis are critical to our success or failure. Often, having an outside person give you objective feedback on your progress can be a lot more positive and effective than listening to the self-critical voice we too-often use when comparing our singing ability with others. When you achieve a new skill/level make sure you remind yourself of it frequently and positively so that your belief in your abilities also grows.

Believing that you can change and improve is half the battle.

Design a personal mantra and pin it up in your car or on your bathroom mirror. Say it aloud each time you see it: "I am improving every day. Soon I will be able to ___ for an entire song!" The key to a good mantra is to make the statements positive - if you've used the word "don't" or "not", turn it around to say what you "will" and "can" do.

Goal-setting

Tie everything back to quality, consistency, power and freedom. Having completed the circle once, the next level is to achieve a measurably higher level/more consistent demonstration of each skill area.

It may take you a year to complete the circle. If one area of skill is proving too elusive (you're not seeing any progress after 3 weeks of consistent effort) move on to the next sector - you may not be ready for that particular goal yet.

Alternatively, ask your assistant/teacher if they think there's something else in that sector that needs more urgent attention and change to that. Your helper will be invaluable to you in goal setting for each sector as often it's easier to spot problems from the outside.

Letting Go

Vocal freedom is an ultimate goal in this process. Learning to "let go" and relax into your skills as you sing is something that you need to be aware of or it may not happen. Singing with freedom is a physical & emotional release via sound, and sometimes we need to consciously relinquish control. Practicing that during public performance may seem impossible from where you now stand, but as your confidence grows (along with your skills) there will come a time when you will be able to do it!

Good Luck & Bon Voyage!

