

Help! My Guys Sound Terrible!

Quick fixes to common problems

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FOUR MAIN AREAS OF STRUGGLE

Vocal Range and Octave Displacement
Teaching Head Tone/*Falsetto*
Singing through the *Passagio*
Modeling Tone

STRATEGIES

Voice Range and Octave Displacement

Singing the wrong octave?

- Sing the desired note an octave higher in chest voice.
 - Ex. When a woman sings middle C, it sounds relatively low in her range, which is why the men sing the low C. When you sing the in your chest voice, it sounds high in the voice and the men more naturally replicate it.
- Slide up to the pitch or ascend by a scale.
- Have the men singing the correct pitch model for the others.

To fix a stray pitch

- Stand facing a partner with hands on each others shoulders.
- Slide up or down to the note.
- For an individual: find the note they are singing, then vocalize from that point.

Accessing the Head Voice - Head Tone and Falsetto

- Head voice can have a number of timbres. Focus on Two Timbres:
 - Falsetto: “A treble range produced by most adult male singers through a technique whereby the the vocal folds vibrate in a length shorter than usual [and] along the very edges of the vocal folds.” – New Grove Dictionary
 - Head tone: Fuller, less breathy tone. Approximately one-third more closer (adduction) of the vocal folds than in falsetto.

To access *falsetto*:

- Throwing an imaginary Frisbee. Regular size, then a tiny one using the sound [wi] (*wee*).
- Imitate someone with a high pitched voice like Mickey Mouse.
- Try saying, “Sing like a 1st grade boy” rather than “Sing like a girl.”

To access Head Tone:

- Yawn slightly (the onset of a yawn). The larynx will tilt down and forward slightly. This naturally lengthens and creates greater closure of the vocal folds and prevents excess air from escaping.
- Hooting like an owl
- Speaking like Julia Child or Mrs. Doubtfire

Singing Through the *Passagio*

Use the term *Passagio* (Passageway) rather than “Break.” The Break implies that something is broken, when in actuality it is the passage-way from one voice register to another and implies that singers must learn to navigate through it.

Transition notes from Chest to Head Voice:

- Basses: D4
- Tenors: F#4

Novice singers need encouragement!

- Short anatomy lesson.
- Show of hands how is having trouble? We are not alone.
- Check daily progress. Show of hands who could sing more notes than yesterday. Which is easier: Ascending or descending through passagio?
- Crack is cool! Just the voice releasing to more comfortable range.

Exercises for singing through the *passagio*:

- Quick descending and ascending slides between head voice to chest voice on a forward sound like [ŋ] (*sing*), [i] (*ee*), or [he] (*hay*).
- Two octave ascending and descending scales on [u] (*oo*). Encourage the men to continue singing, if their voice cuts out, and come back in when they can. Eventually, they will find that they can sing the entire exercise.

The image shows a musical score for a two-octave exercise on the vowel [u]. The score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The exercise is divided into four measures. In the first measure, the bass staff has an ascending eighth-note scale from G2 to G3, and the treble staff has a whole rest. In the second measure, both staves have an ascending eighth-note scale from G3 to G4. In the third measure, both staves have a descending eighth-note scale from G4 to G3. In the fourth measure, the bass staff has a descending eighth-note scale from G3 to G2, and the treble staff has a whole rest. Below the bass staff, there is a horizontal line with the letter 'u' underneath it, indicating the vowel sound for the exercise.

- By Rosalin Hall at BYU Provo: Descending 3rds alternating [i-u] (*ee-oo*). Start on C above middle C and descend each time by half step.

[i u i u i u i u i]

- Anthony Frisell, author of *The Baritone Voice*, offers the following exercises to train the voice to sing at different dynamic levels on tones in the *passagio* and improve tone.
 - Begin on F above C4. Sing a descending three note figure of your choice (ex. whole steps, half steps, etc.) on [u], [i], or [a] and *messa di voce* (crescendo and decrescendo) from *piano* to *forte*, then back to *piano* over the full three notes.

[u _____]
[i _____]
[a _____]

- Starting on G-flat above C4, sing a descending scale on a vowel of your choice (Ex. [u], [i], [a]) holding each note for four beats. During the four beats, *messa di voce* (crescendo and diminuendo) from *piano* to *forte*, then back to *piano*. The desired result is to increase the fullness of tone on those notes.

[u _____]
[i _____]
[a _____]

Modeling Tone

Tone is a personal taste for each director and for each genre of music. Some music requires a soft, warm bass sound. Others a resonant, brash sound.

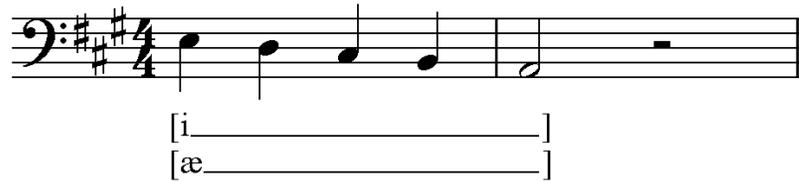
Common occurrences:

- Breathy voice
- Lack of resonance or vibrancy of tone
- Too much tension in neck or throat

For Basses –

- For a vibrant, resonant tone in low range – Use “Vocal Fry” or “Pulse Register”
 - Used to reduce breathiness (air escaping through vocal folds).
 - Vocal folds approximate (come together) up to 90%

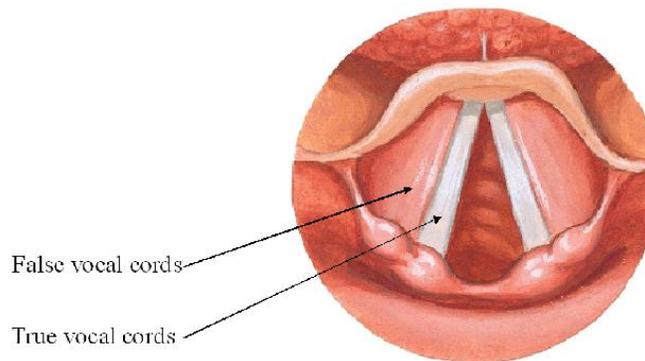
- To perform a vocal fry, expel a small amount of air on an [a] (*ah*) and sustain the sound before the voice fully engages. It will have a popping sound. Next, choose a low note (Ex. C below middle C). Have the men start with the vocal fry and then sing into the note. If done correctly, the singer should sound a bit like a leaf blower. Then descend by half step.
- Another exercise to keep resonance in the lower range is to vocalize on forward vowels such as [i] (*ee*) or [æ] (*cat*).



- For breath support Kathryn Rundus, author of *Cantabile: A Manual about Beautiful Singing for Singers, Teachers of Singing and Choral Conductors*, offers the following exercises.



- For a big “gruff” “burley” sound
 - Big dog bark (HOWF!), then immediately speak text or sing
- If the basses have a gravelly, rough sound, it might be caused by tension in the false vocal folds (vestibular folds), which causes them to constrict over the true folds and hamper their vibration. Functions to protect true folds when exerting effort.
 - A way to retract the false vocal folds is by thinking of a funny situation that makes you want to smile and chuckle. Hold the smile inside and notice the sensation in your throat. Your vocal folds should now be free to vibrate and should produce a warm melodious quality. (Example “Ah”)

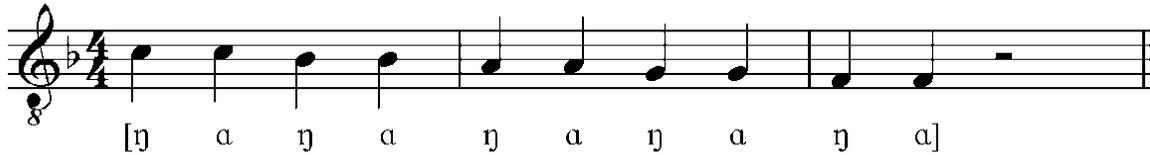


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For Tenors -

- We have an advantage of similar range in their high voice. Can model.
- In order to maintain resonance and vibrancy in their upper range, use vocal exercises with bright and forward phonemes such as [ŋ] (*sing*), [i] (*ee*), and [æ] (*cat*).

- Exercises that transition from bright to dark sounds will also help maintain resonance in the darker vowels.



- Mixed voice – Blend of chest & head voice
 - Exercise “Dad! I’ve gotta have the car!”
 - Speak in chest voice, head voice, then light, exacerbated mixed voice
 - Good for transitioning through passagio
- *Coperatura* is a technique from the *bel canto* school that helps balance resonance and vocal timbre throughout the scale by using vowel modification.
 - When ascending, you want to modify a vowel to its nearest neighbor, for example [i] (*ee*) to [ɪ] (*him*). As you modify the vowel, open the mouth slightly, but make sure to keep the basic resonator tract shape the same. Meaning the tongue, lips, and cheek muscles. This will avoid heavy mechanical changes in larynx and allow the voice to retain optimal resonance.



Additional Modeling – Use Male Vocal Models

- Use an advanced ensemble member.
- Bring in a local voice teacher.
- Listen to excellent recordings.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Rehearsal Pacing

- Keep it fast! Small chunks, short sectionals, everyone sing the bass line..

Feeling comfortable

- Like any situation, the more you know the music, the better you can serve the singers. If you come in with a clear vision and plan of attack, they will respond positively. Any hesitation or unsureness, they will lose focus energy. Teach FAST. Build their egos.

Repertoire

- Varied, fast & slow. Text that is relevant to them. Good mix of unison, two part, and expanded divisi. 24 Italian Art Songs! Schuman or Schubert solo art song. Man Choralography! Audiences LOVE IT

Group Morale

- Generally, men can be pushed more like a coach would. They enjoy being challenged. Weekly goal – did we reach it? Section verses section. Silly physical activities, moving around. You can push them harder than a women’s chorus. NOT always the case. You must know your ensemble.

Building a brotherhood

- It’s okay for you to be the music director and they have the brotherhood. You don’t have to be one of the guys. Build a sustainable culture: officers, section leaders, social committee, social media, merchandise, retreat,

Suggested Resources

*Full Papers by Jaclyn Johnson

“Females Teaching High School Male Singers: Overcoming Vocal Differences”

<http://gradworks.umi.com/1504484.pdf>

“Bel Canto Singing in the High School Choral Classroom”

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Biography

Often described as an “energetic little firecracker” on stage, Dr. Jaclyn Johnson has made it her life goal to share her passion for music with ensembles and audiences around the world. Johnson is the current Interim



Associate Director of Choral Activities at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Before completing her doctoral degree in Choral Conducting at the University of Michigan, she had a thriving career as a high school choral educator for eight years. Ensembles under her direction received numerous honors and awards, including performances at the American Choral Directors Association National Conference (2011), Western Division Conference (2010), and Central Division Conference (2014). Her choirs have toured domestically and internationally to such destinations as San Francisco, New York, New Orleans, Canada, and Italy. Other conducting experiences include: Assistant Conductor for the Long Beach Camerata Singers, Co-Director of the Arrowbear Summer Music Choral Camp, and collegiate choral and orchestral ensembles including the University of Michigan Women's Glee Club, Orpheus Singers, Arts Chorale, and Michigan Pops orchestra.

In 2014, Dr. Johnson represented the United States as an International Exchange Conductor to China. Her own vocal performance career has taken her to Russia, Czech Republic, Austria, Bratislava, Canada, China, Hawaii, Chicago, New York, New Zealand, and Australia. Johnson has been a Music Minister for the United Methodist Church since 2002 and is currently the Director of Choral Ministries at First United Methodist Church, Oak Ridge. Johnson earned a Master of Music degree in Conducting at the Bob Cole Conservatory of Music in Long Beach, California, and a Master of Art in Teaching, Bachelor of Music in Conducting, and Bachelor of Music Education degree from Chapman University. She currently resides in Knoxville, TN with her beloved husband, Ron.

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