Vocalizing Vocalises

Bonnie Pomfret

Most voice teachers begin the singing portion of a lesson with vocalizing: scales, arpeggios, humming, sighs, sirens, lip trills, and the like. Indeed, we all have favorite vocalises, or vocal exercises, often those that we found most helpful or useful during our own training. This article will propose a methodic approach to vocalizing, with the purposes as follows:

1. The warm-up: what it means physically to “warm up” and what exercises help accomplish this task.
2. Voice building: the vocalises that every singer should know—for example, the typical types of figures and tasks one finds in standard repertoire.
3. Specialized training: vocalises for special repertoire or voice types.

I will conclude with some tips to help students vocalize more efficiently, and offer a few sources of vocalises.

THE WARM UP

One can think about warming up from a sports point of view. The Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science and Medicine defines warm-up as follows:

A procedure, used prior to competition or hard training, by which an athlete attains the optimal body core temperature and specific muscle temperature for performance, and prepares physically and mentally for the activity.¹

In singing, what muscles do we need to prepare by warming up?

Muscles of Posture and Breathing

In singing, we hold ourselves upright in a rather particular type of posture, and we use abdominal and thoracic muscles to control breathing in a particular way. Usually at the beginning of a lesson, I ask students if they have already had physical exercise for the day. If they have not, I urge them to exercise regularly and have them do a few movements such as the following:

- From a standing position, lean forward from the hips, allowing the upper body to fall. Leave the neck loose.
- From a standing position, raise the arms overhead (this expands the rib cage) and stretch them gently out to the side.
- From a standing position, rotate the upper body gently to the right and left to loosen the abdominal obliques.
- From a standing or sitting position, nod the head up and down and then allow each ear in turn to fall towards the shoulder on the same side. (This loosens the neck muscles.)
Muscles of the Vocal Mechanism and of Articulation

Gentle sirens or sighs are popular and generally beneficial; these exercises, in sliding from one note to another in the range, emphasize gradual movement. Like all vocalises, when performed at the beginning of a warm-up, they should not be taken to the extremes of range or dynamics for the first few minutes. Lip or tongue trills are favorites; these require the singer to use breath pressure more precisely than usually required for singing, because the lips or tongue cease to vibrate when breath pressure changes. Thus, they activate the muscles of breathing and coordination of breath with the tone, especially important for the underenergized or undeveloped singer. They also require a certain level of relaxation of the tongue and lips for those areas to move freely. At the beginning of a warm-up, these and all vocalises should be used in exercises consisting of short phrases. With younger singers, or those who have tension, sometimes only a single note lip trill is possible.

In addition to the exercises mentioned above, light five-note scales or triads on a variety of vowels are useful. Medium dynamics and range are most appropriate in the first few minutes of singing. Light staccatos in figures of small range (1-3-5-3-1) are also beneficial in bringing the muscles of support and those in the throat to work together precisely.

A good warm-up should take five to ten minutes. According to leading voice specialists, long warm-up time is a potential indicator of vocal problems.

VOICE BUILDING

Now that the body is physically warmed up, in the next exercises the purpose is to increase the singer’s skill in some area such as tone quality, purity of vowel, length of phrase, agility, usable range, etc. Many of the traditional vocalises, such as scales and arpeggi, are helpful for almost any student.

While singers want to create beautiful, resonant tones, and our vocalises should contribute to this, singers also need to perform many vocal tasks that will occur in repertoire. Therefore, the teacher should consider the repertoire that likely will be assigned to the student and cover the types of tasks contained within them. Scales and arpeggi are so often used because they are the building blocks of Western classical music. Over a year or two of study, most of the common musical figures and vowels should be introduced.

Modern voice teachers do not always take as methodic an approach as instrumental teachers, or as did our predecessors in the so-called “golden age” of bel canto. We will leave a debate as to why that is so for another time. If we look at collections of vocalises from the great teachers of bel canto in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Lamperti or Marchesi, for example, we see a methodic approach to all the musical tasks required by the music of the period, that is, singing as a skill set. A good exercise for teachers is to make a checklist of vocal skills you think your students should possess.

Here is a sample:

- Articulation
  - legato, staccato, marcato, accented notes
- Dynamics
  - loud and soft singing
  - crescendo-decrescendo (messa di voce)
- Tone and Resonance
  - pure vowels (Italian)
  - consistency of tone throughout range
  - consonants—clear and resonant
- Phrasing
  - sustained notes, long phrases
  - rapid notes
  - stepwise motion and leaps in typical figures and rhythms
  - catch breath

If a teacher covers all these skills in vocalises, students are likely to do very well. For such a task, the number of vocalises is not great. Arpeggi, five- and nine-note scales, and single notes all can be used to develop the skill set above.

This list, however, does not deal with some purely musical issues that challenge many students who have not had instrumental background prior to singing. For example, a number of my students over the years have had difficulty singing in tune in pieces that are in minor keys or other modes. This is not really such a musically advanced task; if we look at basic repertoire, such as simple folk tunes, Broadway tunes, or the early Italian repertoire, we find many pieces, in fact a significant percentage, in minor keys or modes. In my own training, none of my several teachers ever assigned a minor scale
or arpeggio. But I have found that this is much less of a problem in the repertoire, when we cover the minor triads, minor arpeggi, and minor scales, as vocalises (Example 1).

Now let us think about vowels in a similar fashion. Like most voice students, I was assigned vocalises on the pure Italian vowels. Until I went to Germany to study, the vowels that occur in other languages than Italian were never introduced to me in a vocalise. At that point, I had, however, already sung in Italian, Latin, French, German, and English for some time. (After a month of only humming, I was made to practice the “closed oe” vowel [ø] exclusively on every exercise for about a month until it was deemed acceptable!)

It seems to be sound pedagogy first to introduce new sounds in an exercise, before they are demanded within the confines of a repertoire piece. For example, let us say that a student has taken French in high school and is ready for a foreign language song other than Italian, which seems to be the first foreign language most teachers choose for students to sing. It is a good idea to introduce the French vowels in vocalises with this student at about the same time he or she begins studying a French song or aria. After dealing with forming an unfamiliar vowel within a familiar exercise, the student is much more comfortable creating the sound when it comes in a musical phrase. For mixed vowels it is sometimes helpful to sing each of the component vowels separately and then the mixed vowel, before moving up a half step (Example 2). For nasal vowels, it is helpful to sing the same vowel with and without nasality.

Even for those students who are not singing foreign language repertoire, many of our own English vowels (some of them are actually diphthongs) can be a challenge. Think of the a in “hat” [æ], for example. Because it is not a lovely vowel to sing, many of us avoid it in vocalizing; but it is almost impossible to find a song in American English without it. Many times my students have had trouble singing the words “world” or “girl.” It would also be helpful to practice these sounds within the weekly vocalises. The more thorough we are with our choice of a variety of vocalises for such purposes, the less we have to do repair, correction, and relearning in the repertoire.

In addition to standard vocalises, it can be very useful to create individual vocalises for students based upon difficulties they may have with a piece they are currently studying, or have recently attempted. There might be difficulty, for example, with a jump to a fairly high note within a phrase. There are several ways this can be a challenge: singing a large interval, singing a jump into a particular part of the voice, singing on that particular vowel, or singing with those particular consonants. Rather than the student fearing such a spot each time it occurs in the piece, I would create a vocalise with the same interval or contour, and have the student practice it throughout the range on a single vowel, then using the vowel or consonant-vowel combination as demanded in the actual musical phrase, and with the actual words of the song. It is important at each phase to sing this figure in the most comfortable middle range, then work upwards or downwards as needed, going past the actual pitch by a major second or minor third if possible. It will soon become very clear as to whether the problem was musical or vocal-technical; some adjustments can be made if needed, and the student will gain confidence.
when the phrase occurs in the piece, usually within a week or two.

ADVANCED VOCALISES FOR SPECIAL TASKS

Advanced vocalises include trills, chromatic scales, florid figures with sixteenths and triplets, exercises with a very wide range or long phrases, etc. Virginia Zeani, emerita professor at Indiana University, maintains that each voice has a natural affinity for either lyric or coloratura phrases, and this will be the basis for the choice of most of his or her repertoire. But Zeani believes that each voice must also practice the type of singing that does not come easily in order to balance the voice from becoming too extreme: either rigid and unwieldy, in the case of a large lyric or dramatic voice, or not well connected to the tone, in the case of a light or coloratura voice. Therefore, she always assigns to each singer some vocalises and a piece that require those skills that do not come most easily. To make a sports comparison, this would be like cross-training; for instance, a runner lifts weights on days off from running.

Those who wish to sing the fast moving lines of Handel, Rossini, Bellini, or Donizetti need to vocalize with many rapid figures of all types. Fioritura that “folds back” upon itself is very challenging for some (Example 3). Music of those composers—and earlier—also requires of all voice classifications the ability to trill, a facility that can be systematically taught (Example 4).

How to Optimize Your Students’ Vocalizing

Set goals. Talk about your students’ strengths and areas that need work. Sometimes the student already has a very clear idea, but more often, he or she has only general dissatisfaction with some aspect of his or her own singing. Together, set some technical goals that are appropriate for the student’s level and depth of dedication. The student may want to reach a particular note for a piece he or she wants to sing, but a better goal is to improve high (or low) range. Sometimes the goal may be just to vocalize daily! If a student is not improving, perhaps a practice log is in order. This will help the student to be accountable, and help you to see what it is the student is really doing with his or her practice time. Be sure to let your student know what you expect; clear assignments are crucial.

Once a college level student was very frustrated that she could not properly sing the runs in one of the pieces from the old Italian repertoire. I asked her if she had practiced it, and she said yes, emphatically. I asked how many times she had worked on it, and she said three. I thought three practice sessions in a week was not much time, but when I continued to ask her about it, it turned out that she had attempted the piece only three times.
during the entire week! She had no real concept for the value of drill and repetition.

Find the best warm-ups for each student. Identify a few vocalises that are good for each student to use as a regular warm-up. Often this sets up the conditions for a good practice session, as opposed to a mediocre one, and a warm-up that fits well does the job in a few minutes. I like to use staccatos, slides, and tongue or lip trills at the beginning of a warm-up, but certain students do much better with only one of these and not another.

Feedback. Many beginning students do not see the value of vocalises in voice building. Provide feedback, especially when a vocalise is going well. For instance, if the student suddenly sings higher during a vocalise, make it known: "Wow! You just sang a C!" My goal is to get students to spend half their practice time vocalizing, even if the practice session is only twenty minutes in its entirety.

Variety vs. repetition. Each student has a different level of concentration and tolerance for repetition, and we must train them to pay close attention through a number of repetitions. Finding this balance with each student can be a challenge. In recent years, this has become more and more of an issue in the studio, as students are accustomed to being bombarded with digital music and information at ever increasing speeds. Also, I find I use more visual cues while the student is singing, to avoid too many interruptions, especially if the vocalise is going well. Then at the end, we articulate verbally what those cues meant (e.g., "What happened when I made this gesture? How was it different?"). Variety in vocalises is also beneficial; it is terribly boring to repeat the same vocalises, and after a certain point it also ceases to be productive. After a certain number of repetitions, the concentration is reduced and we tend to get sloppy. Even within a single vocalise at a lesson, I often change the vowel or consonant/vowel combination midway through, or several times if the student seems unfocused.

It is never a bad idea to explain why a certain exercise is assigned or changed.

Be specific. Tell students which vocalises to practice. Tell them how high or low you want them to go. Give them a minimum and maximum range of practice length.

Inexperienced students may go home and practice a vocalise differently (or even a different vocalise!) than covered in the lesson, if left to their own devices. Faulty memory, vague understanding of the purpose of the exercise, lack of rudimentary keyboard skills, or lack of understanding about voice building can contribute to this phenomenon. Sometimes students may practice the vocalise correctly but only in the most comfortable part of their range. This is one of the best reasons to record the lesson! A recording will allow students to reproduce the vocalise exactly, using the recording from the lesson to sing along. Additionally, they benefit at home from the repetition of the teacher’s cues during the lesson.

Because I believe that singing off the page is an important goal at every level of study, I provide printed vocalises created on Finale software. I include the first iteration in the key of C (though with different voices I may not start in that key), and then in the space above and below I write in specific comments about the purpose or focus of a vocalise, recommended vowel or vowel-consonant combination, or specific cues to the singer, and I note the date of the lesson in which we started it (Example 5). This helps me to remember what has been covered with a particular student. I replace these sheets every six months or so, in order to have clean copies. The students usually keep the old copies, seeing the value of having a record. It is possible to write out some of your favorite vocalises on manuscript paper and make copies. Allow a blank line between each exercise for comments. This is very helpful to the student.

Vocalizing can be a fascinating part of vocal study or tedious drudgery; with a little creativity, most of us can
make it interesting and valuable for our students. With well chosen and executed vocalises, a few minutes of practice a day can really make a difference over time.

For inspiration, there are many resources where vocalises can be found. Here are a few favorites. Lamperti’s *Studies in Bravura* and Marchesi’s *Bel Canto: A Theoretical and Practical Vocal Method* all offer vocalises at all but the simplest levels. Concone, Lütgen, Vaccai, and others wrote vocalises with accompaniments. Richard Miller included vocalises for particular purposes in his book *The Structure of Singing*, a textbook that can be very useful to the teacher. Happy vocalizing!

**NOTE**


Bonnie Pomfret, soprano, has sung music from the twelfth to twenty-first centuries in seven languages in the US, Europe, and Asia. Her CD of songs by American women, including *De Toda la Eternidad*, a cycle composed for her by Libby Larsen, was received to critical acclaim. Pomfret holds a DM in voice from Indiana University, where she studied with Virginia Zeani; an MM in Voice from Boston Conservatory, where she studied with David Blair McClosky; and the State Music Certificate (SMP) in Voice and Piano from the Musikhochschule in Freiburg, Germany. She was a Rotary Ambassadorial Fellow and NEH Fellow.

Pomfret has served on the faculties of Illinois State University and Emory University. She is a Certified McClosky Voice Technician and served for ten years as a singing voice specialist at Peoria (IL) ENT Group and Emory Voice Center (Atlanta, GA). In 2007, she relocated to her native Massachusetts, and for several years taught students ranging in age from ten to sixty at community music schools and privately. In 2010, she joined the faculty of Boston University.

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