

# Vocal Production II

## Vowels, Diphthongs and Consonants

In ensemble barbershop singing, we give emphasis and clarity to the lyrics of the songs NOT by exclusively singing the words, but by singing the WORD SOUNDS. To do this properly, it is extremely important that we sing the CORE vowel sounds in exactly the same way (exceptions to be determined by the music director), all of the time, with due consideration being given to diphthongs and consonants.

For example, people from different parts of the United States or from foreign lands will naturally say and sing vowels differently; for "angel" it could be ang(eh)l or ang(uh)l. In an ensemble, just ONE man singing a vowel incorrectly will cause the incorrect vowel to stick out, and we will NOT be able to create the overtones that are so essential to the barbershop style of singing and to excellence in our musical performances.

Proper "tall" chorus vowels dictate that the lip corners should be tucked in and "in line", not spread horizontally wide. Tall vowels dictate that there is space in the mouth and in the sound with the soft palate raised while keeping the jaw relaxed. You should try practicing in the mirror to get the feel of the correct way to tuck the corners of the mouth. If you look in the mirror and feel like your lips resemble a fish's, you may be closer than you think!

To achieve proper vowel production, the lips should always be lifted away from the teeth and the tip of the tongue always touching the lower gum ridge. *(Please refer to the Vowel Target pages at end of this chapter for the correct vowel shapes for the mouth.)*

### Vowels

Here are twelve core vowel sounds. There are some variations to these sounds (again, to be determined by the music director), but the twelve are the primary ones with which you must become thoroughly familiar. A couple words are used for each vowel sound as examples. The "brightest" sounding vowel is shown first, and the "darkest," last. ("Brightest" and "darkest" are simply terms used to differentiate sound placement.)

EE	we, feel, neat	
IH	sit, bit, mitt	
AYE	pay, late, break	diphthong is required ending with "EE"
EH	bet, set, send	
AE	have, land, black	
AH	pop, heart, cod	used as a primary vowel in diphthongs
AW	song, dawn, long	used as a primary vowel in diphthongs
OH	boat, grow, go	diphthong is required ending with "OO"
U	good, book, full	
OO	moon, tune, blue	
UR	learn, word, urge	
UH	sun, love, gum	

Remember, there are variations to these vowel sounds that the music director may choose to use to enhance the musicality of a word sound, and such variations may vary by part.

## **Diphthongs**

Diphthongs (not dip thongs) are "gliding" vowel sounds that are connected to the ends of some core vowel sounds to complete them. Not all vowel sounds will have diphthongs, but when they do, they must be executed to complete the word sounds to which they belong. Examples are shown below.

The term "turning the diphthong" is one that's generally applied when a diphthong is needed. The first or primary vowel sound of a diphthong is sung longer than the secondary vowel. However they should both be sung with the same level of intensity.

- Complete the pure "AYE" vowel sound by turning it to a pure "EE" vowel. The word sounds in "pay" would sound like "pay-ee" with the diphthong.
- The pure "OH" vowel sound requires an "oo" to complete it, i.e. "boat".... "bOH-OO-t."
- The "AH" and "AW" vowel sounds are used frequently as the primary vowel in a diphthong ending in "EE" or "OO" For example "kite".... "kAH-EE-t" or "sound" .... "sAW-OO-nd"

## **Consonants**

If it's not a vowel sound, it's a consonant. Some consonants are "singable" consonants (l, m, n, ng, and v). Attention should be given to energize the singing of these consonants. The consonant "r" is often sung as the vowel sound "UR", being sure to keeping the tip of the tongue touching the lower gum ridge. (i.e.: learn, urge)

Other consonants do not carry a pitch or tone. They are the aspirated or articulated links with the vowel sounds that create the word sounds. Picture a long freight train as if it were a song's lyrics. The cars (what you primarily see) are the vowel sounds (what you really hear), and the couplings are the consonants (what you can hardly see). Now, let's speak in just the musical terms of the "train." Usually, a listener barely hears the consonants, but they have to be there for the lyrics to be understood, as they help to tie all of the vowel sounds together. They should be softened and not be "popped" or overstressed (unless directed to do so by the director), as that will tend to cause choppy singing and get in the way of the forward movement or flow of the "wall of sound" we want to create. A consonant at the end of a word within a phrase should be "attached" to the beginning of the following word.

## **Terminology**

### **Placement**

Individuals have certain areas in their vocal apparatus where they tend to generate the unique sounds of their voice while singing. These areas can be "back" in the mouth or throat (sometimes referred to as more "covered sound") or more frontal (sometimes referred to as "more focus in the sound".) It's important for a singer to become adept at using all parts of his vocal apparatus to allow for more flexibility of tone and choice of vocal color. These will vary and usually be dictated by the director. This is referred to as "placement". The relativity of these terms will be on a scale of 1 to 5 - "1" being "bright" like how Jerry Lewis speaks in his characterization, and "5" having a "dark" quality that has a deeper, broader throat and chest resonance (that is sometimes referred to as "hooty"). The majority of our songs will be placed in the "2.5 to 3" area of the placement scale. It should be stated that the extremes of a "1" and "5" would be rarely if ever used and only for short duration for a specific musical effect.

The “bright” and “edgy” sound can be perceived as louder and carries the pitch well, and the “covered” or “darker” quality has resonance and fullness. It is not an either/or situation. The Masters of Harmony strive for a clear and forward tone that resonates in the mask (head resonance) to enable maximum ring in the sound, but also contains chest resonance for a full warm, rich sound.

Barbershop can be described metaphorically as a diamond sitting on black velvet. The diamond is the focus in the tone, pitch, clarity and brilliance; and the velvet is the warmth, depth and color in the sound. Each enhances the other; one without the other will not create the excellent quality of sound for which we are striving.

### **Pitch**

There are three general areas of the pitch that are referred to: on top of the pitch, on pitch, and under the pitch.

We “live” on top side of the pitch of the song and all of its chords. If we sing the A above middle C on a piano, that’s the A with 440 Hertz (Hz). If you sing it at 442 or higher frequency, you are on top of the pitch; singing it at 440 Hz is on pitch and 439 or lower Hz is under pitch. Singing under pitch is not what we want, and is unacceptable. Better pitch accuracy can be obtained by singing “taller,” by better interval singing and by even better breath support, to name those things that most commonly create pitch inaccuracies.

### **Smooth vs. Choppy Singing**

In our style of music, we want to sing the lyrics as smoothly as possible, unless told to do otherwise. This smoothness of singing is called *legato*. It’s the smooth delivery of the sound of the chorus that will enable us to sing a “wall of sound” to the listener. The faster we sing, the more smoothly the lyrics must be sung. To do otherwise is to sing choppy or vertical sounds, and the delivery of a wall of sound is not possible. Picture in your mind as if your singing was like walking along the street with your hand being drawn along a smooth wall. Barbershop employs techniques such as softening consonants to make them singable, so they don’t “pop” and disrupt the flow of sound. Now, picture the same song being sung while you were drawing your hand along a picket fence. Get the idea? Remember that the vowels are the roads we travel on; the consonants are just the signposts.

### **Consistent Tone Quality**

In essence, this means that, as you move sounds from lows to highs or highs to lows or anywhere in between, that the tone of your voice, once established with quality, does NOT change. Do not change the tone quality to accommodate the extremes of your range. Keep all sound in a vertical position, both the interior of your mouth and your lips, and do not let the sound spread to a wide-mouthed sound.

### **Clear, Warm Tones**

To create a clear tone in singing is to create a sound that contains no “junk” in it (no edginess, raspiness, throatiness, etc.). The singer must add height and space in the mouth as well as a good flow of supported warm air. “Warmth” is not just a metaphor in this case. Place your hand in front of your mouth and try singing with warm air and then with cold air. Warm air will allow the tones to be active and vibrant as opposed to tones that are dead or flat (not only in pitch) which will sound dull and dreary.

### **A Faltering Voice**

As individuals, when we sing we sometimes come close to hitting the wall as we try to give that last ounce of energy, that last gasp of air, that last push of a crescendo, even when we hear that our voice isn't making it or isn't going to make it. We hear our voices starting to do weird things, yet we are determined that we won't be quitters! When any of these things are going on in your voice, that's the time you DO stop singing, until you can get your voice regrouped, so to speak, so that you can again make a contributing sound rather than a detracting one. However, try to not let anyone see you sweat during any part of your performance process! You might reasonably believe that you can hide within the large chorus. Not so! Let's say you are looking at a marquee of lights, but one is not in sync with all the others. Which one gets noticed?

### **Connective Singing**

Connective singing is the smooth flow of vowel sounds from one word to the next, without the disruptive, excessive use of consonants. To help with connective singing, it is common to link consonants to vowels or vice versa, but the vowel sound is always predominant, as we sell the lyric of a song through its word sounds. Unless directed to do so by the director, always sing with smoothness vs. choppiness to create connective sounds. Such smoothness may be called *horizontal singing*. (This applies to the music line and NOT to the shape of the mouth. See "Consistent Tone Quality" above.)

### **Thin and Heavy Sounds**

Thin sounds are generally caused by lack of breath support to sustain the sound, or in softly sung phrasing, by simply going into a "little" voice thinking it represents a soft sound. Heavy sounds can be caused by, among other things, singing too far back in the throat, by pushing too hard on notes (ascending or descending) or simply putting in false sounds, or allowing them to happen. (No *edginess* or *ratles*, please.)

### **Dynamics (1-10)**

This is relativity of soft to loud, "1" being the softest and "10" being the loudest you can sing *with quality*. Shouting or yelling is not musical and detracts from the performance. A "1" should not be softer than you can sing and maintain intensity and support. Singing too far on either end of the spectrum should not enter the "suck level".

### **Catch Breathing**

Sometimes the music dictates that the phrase may be longer than each singer can sustain. Unless there is an identified rest, catch breathing means that the singer should find an unobtrusive place to breathe and go out and come back in the sound unobtrusively. If everyone takes a catch breath at an obvious place (such as after a sentence that should be carried over to the next line), there will be a noticeable dip in the volume of the overall sound. Don't do it. Always try to take a breath during a held word, or drop a word and breathe there. Breathe through the vowel shape that is being sung, or which will next be sung when you sing again.

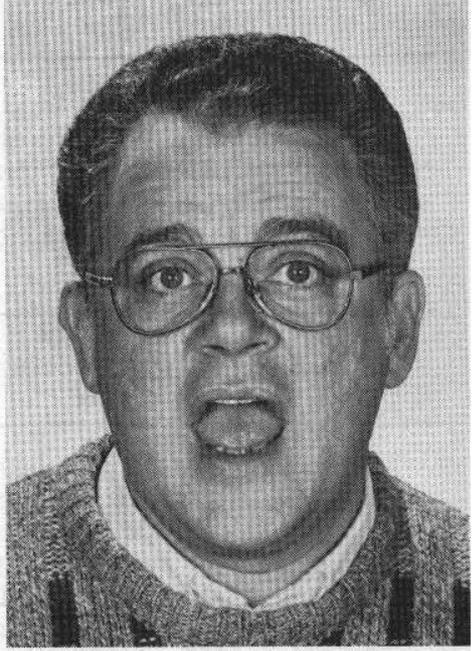
TARGET VOWELS



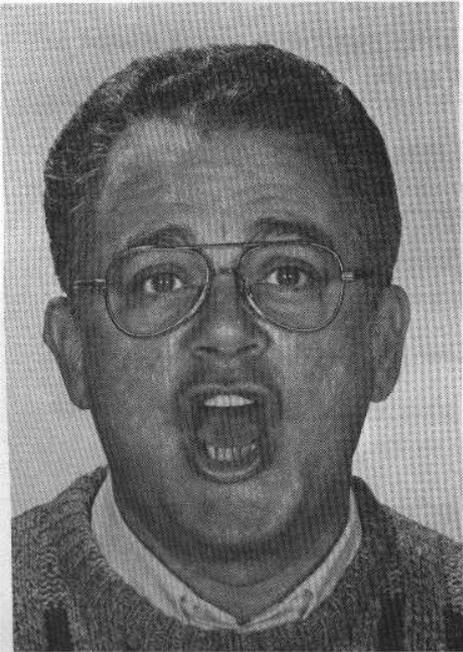
**EE**  
WE, FEEL



**IH**  
BIT, SIT



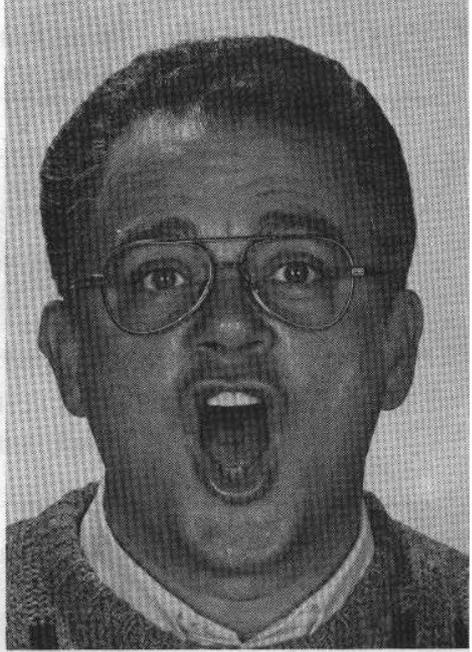
**AYE**  
PAY, LATE



**EH**  
BET, SET

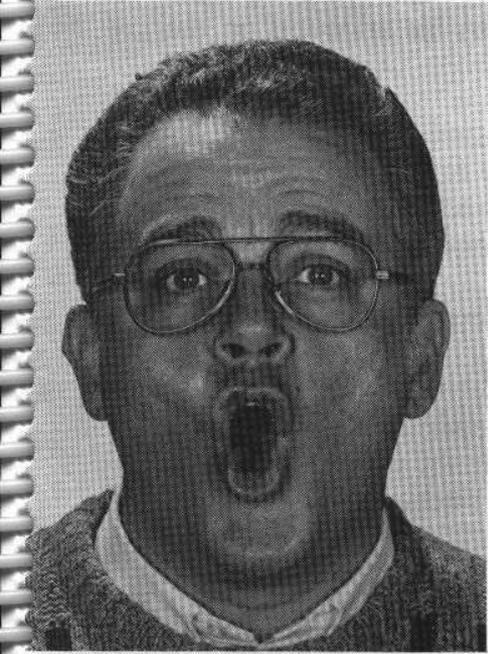


**AE**  
HAVE, LAND



**AH**  
POP, HEART

TARGET VOWELS



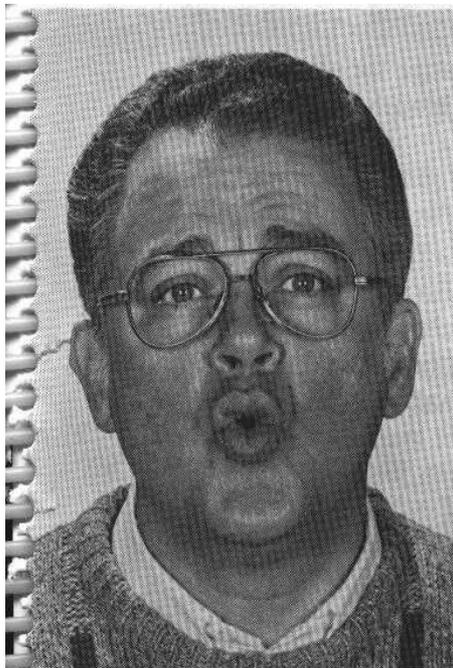
**AW**  
SONG, DAWN



**OH**  
BOAT, GROW



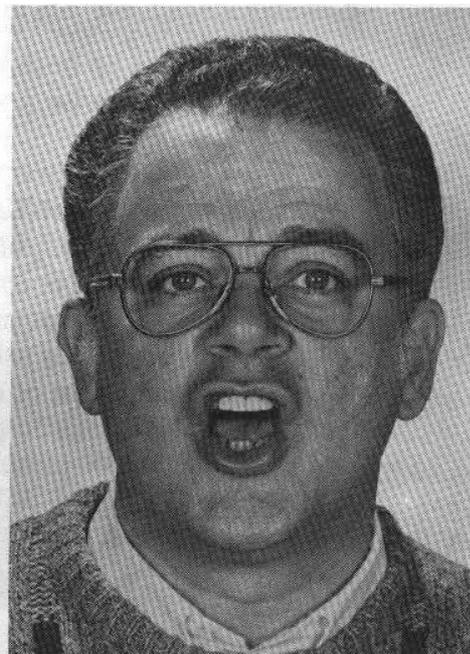
**U**  
GOOD, BOOK



**OO**  
MOON, TUNE



**UR**  
LEARN, WORD



**UH**  
SUN, LOVE