

Sing like an Italian

Caruso and Pavarotti's big advantage? They spoke Italian—a language that, unlike North American English, can serve as the foundation for excellent vocal habits

You'll sing brighter and with more ease as you apply these essential Bel Canto methods— and your intonation issues may vanish, too!

Part 1 of 2

The great Enrico Caruso, circa 1908

If you think Swedish singers are making waves, wait until Italy discovers barbershop harmony. Most North American singers must unlearn a lot of poor vocal habits before we can sing well. Italians, simply because they speak Italian, can have an edge in the habits that contribute to excellent vocal technique. Fortunately, we English speakers can learn to sing like Italians, and without adopting a Mediterranean accent!

I believe many of our vocal challenges are directly related to the pitfalls of our spoken language. It can be especially difficult for native English speakers to naturally create a well-placed, open, clear tone that stays in tune. Our infamous diphthongs (double-sounded vowels), combined with our propensity to inflect down at the end of our sentences, can inadvertently create vocal problems. Add in dialect regionalisms, inconsistent support and jaw and/or tongue tension, and you have a recipe for throat constriction and ineffective singing. These pitfalls tend to manifest as poor pitch and dull sound, along with fatigue, breath control weakness and

loosening of the vibrato at ends of phrases.

Beautiful singing, no accent required

The good news is that the superior results of pure Italian diction can be applied in any language. Every minute you invest to overcome your unconscious language-related issues will pay huge dividends—many vocal issues you were never able to fix before may simply vanish!

Native Italian speakers are noted for using forward, pure vowels (no diphthongs), combined with wonderful, rounded resonance attained by a sustained optimal muscular position. Together these form the essence of the *Bel Canto* school of singing.

Bel Canto (Italian for “beautiful singing”) methods were formalized between 1800 to 1840 to handle the rigors of early 19th Century opera. While new compositions have pushed some opera styles toward wider vibrato and more dramatic vocal color, the ageless Bel Canto methods are still widely taught throughout the world as *the* classical vocal foundation. These

methods are also perfect for barbershoppers due to their unsurpassed ability to generate:

- impeccably smooth and energetically connected singing
- vocal agility
- well-focused timbre
- clean attacks
- graceful phrasing
- full mastery of breath control
- avoidance of loose vibrato
- seamless transitions between the chest, middle, head and falsetto voices

When incorporated into barbershop harmony, Bel Canto methods greatly improve a singer's vocal tone and agility, while generating clear, accent-free diction in both ballads and patter songs. It can take patience and focus to integrate all the techniques, so this article focuses on principles that can produce immediate results.

Breathe with perfect ease

You will not sing your best until you learn to breathe in a manner that removes pressure from your throat, *preventing it from taking responsibility to make the sound*. Getting air "into the tank" is not enough. Your rib cage must work in concert with your abdominal muscles so that your entire torso works as a breath-support mechanism.

Engage the ribs. Stand in front of a mirror in good posture while clasping both hands in front of the sternum. While you inhale, pull the hands in opposition, as shown in the photo on page 1 of this issue. This maneuver, an old iconic image for pretentious-looking opera divas, is actually an exercise to strengthen and energize the ribs in an open, expanded position. You should feel this engagement in the lower rib muscles of the back. (Some find it helpful to create a mental picture of only the bottom of the ribs expanding to take in the breath, with the air coming in through two small, imaginary holes in your back, just below the rib cage.)

Focusing the inhalation via the lower ribs eliminates tension in the upper chest and neck, while engaging muscles that have always been involuntarily directed by the lungs. Strengthening these back muscles takes some focused practice, but as you learn to stabilize the ribs in the expanded position while singing a difficult phrase, you will begin to notice that *the pressure is taken off your throat to sustain sound and straight tone*.

The author demonstrates the musculature for the "inner smile," which expands the singer's "acoustical amphitheater."



Italian vowels dramatically improve tuning and vocal brilliance

You can actually be singing on the correct tone but, no thanks to the varied English vowel placement and speech patterns among quartet or chorus members, still *sound* out of tune to the audience. Vowel blending issues affect more than the audience's perception of pitch—English vowels help individuals (and then the group) *literally* lose pitch. Just thinking about the end of many English words can cause a singer's mind to start deteriorating the tone. This problem can potentially repeat itself on every new note or syllable.

You'll change this only when you change your vowel habits, when you stop inflecting down or drop at the end of sentences, and change the way you produce diphthongs. Pure Italian vowels offer a pathway to better overall intonation and complete vocal ease, for groups and individual singers.

Italians naturally produce forward, ringing vowel sounds while North Americans do not. Prove it to yourself. Say "A," "E," "I," "O," "U" very slowly while over-enunciating and breathing between each vowel. Notice these English vowels actually consist of two sounds, and that you drop pitch on the second half of each vowel, whether or not that vowel is officially a diphthong. Now, maintain your inner smile, *with teeth showing*, while quickly articulating the same vowel sounds. Immediately you will notice a brighter quality to the sound. This is essentially how an Italian feels while saying each of his vowels, as he naturally resonates each in the front of his face.

There are five pure vowels in Italian: "A, E, I, O, U" are respectively pronounced "Ah" "Eh" "Ee" "Oh" "Oo." When sustained, Italian vowels feel "unfinished" to the English speaker's ear, as if the vowel has been cut off after the first half. Italian vowels are "pure" because there is no second part to the vowel sound and therefore no diphthong. The sound you make at the start of the vowel is the only sound you make, so the attack and release of each vowel is naturally precise.

When Italians sing mixed vowels within a single word, you'll generally hear each vowel separately and independently. An "Ah" yields to the "Ee" without blending the two, similar to how barbershoppers try for an open sound until the turn of the diphthong. With a little practice, singers can blend these five Italian vowel sounds to form any English vowel sound in a way that sounds completely natural to the North American ear.

That said, don't worry about how to make Italian vowels sound good in English until you've had time to internalize the dramatic difference you can hear and feel when you stick exclusively to these five pure vowels. You'll find that words are automatically and instantly tuned, the sound is brighter and more natural, and chords ring far better. If your "forward lift" muscles are maintained (discussed in part 2), it is almost impossible to recreate your problem sounds (also discussed in part 2); all your vowels will come forward almost automatically.

Only after these Italian vowels are an engrained habit should you refine your ability to blend them into natural-sounding English. It won't be difficult, and you'll never want to return to your North American vowels!

As you learn to use your rib cage in the breath-support mechanism, you'll find you can make a very big sound while very little air passes over your vocal chords. A trained Bel Canto singer requires such a small stream of air that, were he to sing with a candle an inch or two from his mouth, the flame would barely flicker. The key is to maintain a constant, natural air pressure.

Find your inner smile

The internal musculature of your mouth is your acoustical "amphitheater." Open it up properly and you'll greatly improve your tone, diction, and ability to maintain pitch—even on descending musical lines.

When you yawn, you can feel your cheeks and the soft



How an operatic soprano became a barbershop vocal coach

A “barbershop brat” as a child, Debra Lynn’s earliest musical heroes included **Suntones** legends Harlan Wilson and Gene Cokeroff, who directed her father, George Mount, in the **Coastmen** in the early 1960s. Following a long career as a prominent professional singer and vocal coach in Hawaii, Debra found her way back to the mainland and the barbershop world only last year.



“In early 2009, Sweet Adeline Lindi Bartney (current director of **Maiden Vermont**) had read a *Bel Canto* article just before she went on vacation in Maui, where I was living at the time,” Debra recalls. “She accompanied one of her leads to a private voice lesson in my studio. As she listened and watched the rapid transformation of this gal’s voice with *Bel Canto* principles, Lindi looked at me and said, ‘I wish you could work with my chorus of women in Vermont.’”

“That one conversation started a collaborative relationship that began a year ago, dovetailing two seemingly unrelated musical realms in a serendipitous and potentially unprecedented way,” she continued. “My move to Connecticut led to my vocal production work with **Silk City Chorus**—a group my dad also sang with in the 1970s—and with **SAI’s Millennium Magic** and several competing **BHS** and **SAI** quartets, including **Men in Black**.”

Debra Lynn has a bachelor’s degree in voice performance and received four years of post-graduate training in *Bel Canto* methods in San Francisco, Austria and Germany. Since 1993, she has maintained a private vocal studio, sung as principle soprano with the Maui Symphony and Pops Orchestras, and worked as a professional singer in the Hawaiian convention industry. She was founder of Maui Civic Light Opera and her original CD “Heaven in Your Heart” was a Na

Hoku Hanohano Award finalist for Inspirational Album of the Year in 2009. Once Maui’s best known voice coach, she developed the ability to distill the essential *Bel Canto* methods to their essence, helping singers of all abilities enjoy rapid and dramatic improvement.

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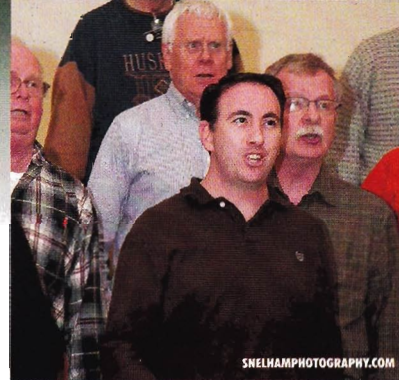
palate at the back of your throat rise up. Now raise your cheeks and soft palate without yawning while keeping your lower jaw in its relaxed natural position, the teeth slightly apart and your tongue gently touching the back of your bottom-front teeth. (The lower jaw, neck and tongue remain relaxed.) This energized upper jaw and palate orientation, combined with the engaged ribs noted above, is your new default singing position.

To quickly pull this muscular understanding together, use what I call a “breath prep,” which helps engage the frontal lift, inner smile and energized rib cage in one thoughtful movement. Each time you breathe through your mouth, think “ah” as you fully stretch the muscles back in your throat and lift the soft palate into high position. This creates what I call the internal ear-to-ear “Cheshire Cat grin.”

Inhale each time with this smile, which is easier to maintain than the yawn, in the back of your mouth throughout each phrase. If you do this properly, you’ll naturally direct resonant vowels right under your nose. You’ll then direct the vowels forward, rather than farther back in your throat (where intonation becomes problematic) while using lips and tip of the tongue for quicker articulation.

“Smile” instead of “tanking up.”

Barbershop songs feature many long phrases and quick breaths. “Tanking up,” or quickly sucking in air between phrases, can constrict the neck and back of the throat, reducing vocal quality. Once you get used to *Bel Canto* breath support and inner smile methods, consciously work on *not* thinking about how you inhale. If you normally



Less than a month after the author started coaching Connecticut’s Silk City Chorus together and in individual break-out sessions, members reported a dramatic increase in group singing cohesion and a sharp decrease in individual vocal issues.

breathe either by opening your throat, lifting your chest or by extending your abdomen, stop those habits. Instead, simply lift the “inner smile” muscles into place on each inhalation and allow the breath to effortlessly fill your lungs quickly and quietly. You’ll discover that without any conscious effort to inhale, your lungs still have more than enough air—and with time, some of your vocal fatigue issues may vanish as well!

Inhale your coming vowel. When attacking a phrase that begins with a vowel sound, some vocal coaches encourage adding a near-silent “H” ahead of the vowel so that you don’t begin the phrase with a glottal attack at the back of the throat. Avoiding glottal attacks is a worthy goal, but that extra air for the “H” can destabilize the sound for a few notes. In *Bel Canto*, you instead simply *think* of the coming

pure vowel while you inhale, which naturally readies your vocal musculature in the proper position. Then the vowel is attacked with a gentle, crisp action that may be felt slightly at the top upper back portion of the

throat, where the pharynx is located. If your group consciously breathes together like they sing together, group articulation becomes much cleaner and more accurate. ■

Continued next issue.

Part 2 will discuss:

- How “forward lift” generates greater ringing and vocal freedom in every phrase
- How to fix the most problematic English vowels and consonants, virtually eliminating all of your group’s prior intonation challenges
- Why the singing advantages of youth enjoyed by **Westminster Chorus** are overstated—and why older men actually have the upper hand in certain areas

Sing like an Italian

The last issue showed how to hold your mouth and how to breathe. Now learn how to avoid the problematic North American vowels that lower pitch and harm individual and group resonance

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Part 2 of 2

The great Enrico Caruso

Have you been practicing your inner smile, and inhaling your pure, Italian vowels? Great! Now learn how to ring vowels better and avoid the most problematic vowel sounds of the English language.

Create forward lift

Find the space between the gum line and your cheek bones and then lift the cheek muscles up off the gums. Maintain this muscular engagement and (combined with the energized support of the rib cage and torso) you'll find yourself singing every vowel with forward ringing, and you'll sing every phrase with greater freedom and resonance.

To see someone incorporate this musculature on a regular basis, watch a video clip of **Ringmasters** bass Martin Wahlgren. The muscles right beside his nose are almost constantly engaged in what looks kind of like a

mischievous smile. When the cheeks are lifted in this way, you'll feel each vowel vibrating at the front of your face ("the mask"), just like Italians do naturally. Keeping this muscular position high also helps you better descend down to the chest voice. This forward lift will therefore almost assuredly add additional low notes to your range.

Staying lifted feels "fake" to most of us at first, so integration requires focused effort. The cheek muscles might also need exercise. Integrate this forward engagement with your inner smile and relaxed lower jaw and you'll create a rounded tall space in your "amphitheater" and a balanced sound that is not too wide.

Improve pitch by fixing these sounds

There are several problematic sounds in the Americanized-English language. The "Aaagh" (as in "at") and non-vowel *schwa* (as in "love") particularly cause the

tone to quickly go south. With these two sounds making up so many connective words in English, it is no wonder that intonation is the biggest issue for most barbershop singers, and English-speaking singers in general.

Fix the “Aaagh.” Go to a mirror and sing a phrase that uses the words “that,” “at” or “as.” Notice how your mouth opens wider and your jaw drops to produce this sound. You can somewhat solve the issues associated with this sound if you simply become aware of that jaw movement and choose not to open your mouth so far. In a group setting, if everyone simply thinks “Eh” while making the “Aaagh” sounds, you may notice the legato line stays stable, the tuning accurate and controlled, and the diction more understandable to the audience.

Fix the schwa. Pay attention when you sing the English *schwa* sound in “the,” “of” or “love” and you’ll feel the production being articulated downward in your throat. *In Bel Canto, nothing is ever felt in the throat.* To maintain a good forward tone and to keep the throat from constricting, especially concentrate on the “forward lift” techniques, described earlier, when singing this sound.

Fix the “R.” A North American “R” sound at the end of a word will close down the voice and cause a complete disconnection of the legato line, plus it can help you drop pitch and lose control of the phrase. Every “R” needs to be softened and unstressed. Use the soft British “R,” which can be achieved without closing your mouth on the sound. This will take practice in a group setting before it will sound natural, but is well worth the effort.

Fix the “L.” The “L” causes the tongue to almost swallow itself, particularly at the end of a word or in a combined sound like “ld” in “world.” Learn to keep the intrinsic “Eh” in the sound “L” until the last possible moment, then produce the “L” with a quick and light stroke that uses only the tip of the tongue.

Conclusion

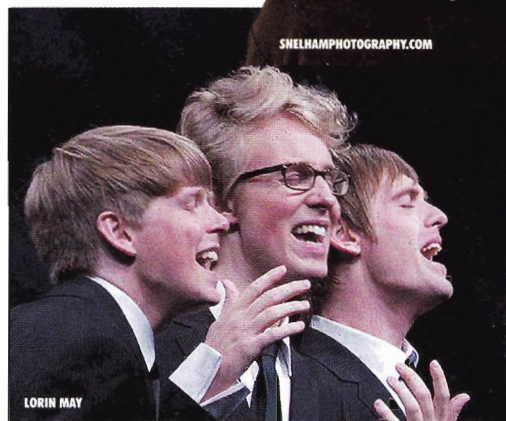
The Bel Canto orientation will transform a chorus or

quartet. You’ll find it makes you a well-tuned and cohesive unit, capable of instantly ringing every chord rather than waiting for multiple voices to stabilize the vowels in each syllable. This approach also brings the high harmonics into balance with the male voice’s natural low resonance. Some of the process may seem counter-intuitive at first, but you will start to feel your voice resonate with more ease, effectiveness and less fatigue as you practice consistent conscious muscular and breath preparation.

An added benefit of these methods: They help naturally blend your chest, middle, head and falsetto vocal registers into one voice, neutralizing the “passaggios” (transitions) and making ascending and descending lines far easier to maneuver. You’ll need less weight or power to maneuver through difficult vocal areas, allowing more freedom of sound with no constriction.

Incorporate these Bel Canto methods into your singing, and the effortless, greatly improved voice you’ve always wanted will come faster than you ever dreamed! ■

Don’t know how an Italian produces forward lift? Watch a Swede. Martin Wahlgren (center), bass of Ringmasters, is particularly good at showing off the “mischievous smile” (also at right) that places the cheeks—and the sound—in the perfect place.



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Hope for the more mature singer: The advantages of youth are overstated

In Philadelphia, I heard many barbershoppers say of **Westminster Chorus**, “Oh, they achieve that wonderful sound because they are all young.” It’s not that simple! While there is a modicum of truth to the advantages of youth, the fact is that more mature male singers have just as much ability as younger men to get a wonderful, balanced resonance—and older men enjoy added resonance advantages that rarely show up before age 35 or 40.

During the convention, I sat in on the **Ambassadors**



of Harmony and Crossroads master classes, where I was pleased to hear Dr. Jim Henry talk about balanced vocal sound created by forward vowel placement and open, resonant musculature. He is teaching the very essence

of Bel Canto training, and you can hear the results whenever the mostly “older” Ambassadors sing.

As we get older, our bodies do require us to work harder if we wish to continue to make great sound. With effective support and energized lift, the youthful sound that is somewhat natural to the under-30 set becomes refreshed and accessible to more

mature singers. I have seen and heard amazing results from men well past 70 once these principles are reintroduced and reintegrated.