

## Sing Out! 1 Day Course Notes

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### 1. The Basics

- 1.1 **Posture:** standing up straight, feet hip's width apart, knees relaxed not locked, weight evenly distributed over feet, shoulders rolled back and down, and head upright with imaginary string drawing up from crown of head – and all VERY RELAXED. If sitting, same applies except that you need to be sitting upright on your sitting bones.
- 1.2 **Breathing:** primary driver of your breathing is your diaphragm, secondary drivers for breathing are your intercostal muscles, which live between your ribs. Try breathing whilst placing hands on abdomen and on ribs to observe which bits move as you breathe in.
- 1.3 **Projection:** speaking/singing further rather than louder. Partly about body language and enunciation, partly clarity at whatever volume, linked to air pressure rather than capacity. It is not about how much air you exhale - singing really quietly often uses more breath than singing loudly.

### 2. Tuning

When people say 'in tune' they can mean a variety of things – usually to do with accuracy of either matching another voice or instrument, or in hitting the 'correct' pitch or the 'correct' interval between two notes. In order to sing in tune we use voices, ears *and* brain. We have a feedback loop – produce a sound, hear it, analyses whether it is 'in tune' or not, make any necessary adjustment, hear it, analyse it, etc. Improving our ability to sing in tune relies on consciously using this feedback loop and getting better at all the different parts.

- 2.1 **Ear training:** *Play two notes and identify whether the second is higher or lower than the first.*
- 2.2 **Note matching:** *Hum then aah same note as somebody else (or an instrument) a few different places in range and, if that is too easy, sing a note an octave higher or lower than the one that is being played.*
- 2.3 **Feedback:** Ear & pitch training is difficult done in isolation – because how do we know whether our perception of whether something is in tune is accurate or not? External feedback mechanisms:
  - sing with a trusted friend (or small group),
  - singing lessons,
  - record and listen back,
  - use an electronic tuner,
  - use an ear and/or voice training package on the computer or phone app - go to [www.eartraining-online.com](http://www.eartraining-online.com) or google for yourself.
- 2.4 **Scales:** The conventional western scale is a sequence of notes with a fixed pattern of intervals between them. To be in tune means to hit each note bang on at the exact frequency the rules say it should be. So, if you can train your muscles to always jump an interval of a certain size between notes, you're helping yourself to learn to be in tune.

major			minor	
i	Doh	8(1)	Doh	8(1)
xii	Ti	7	Ti?	7?
xi			Ti?	7?
x	La	6	La?	6?
ix			La?	6?
viii	Sol	5	Sol	5
vii				
vi	Fa	4	Fa	4
v	Mi	3		
iv			Mi	3
iii	Re	2	Re	2
ii				
i	Doh	1	Doh	1

Note that a classical major scale only has one option for where the notes are, whereas minor scales have different variants with different combinations of sharp or flat positions for the 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> note of the scale – the thing that makes it distinctively minor is the position of the 3<sup>rd</sup> note. *As an exercise, practice singing major and minor scales, arpeggios (1358) or just specific intervals.*

## 2.5 General Tuning tips

- Sing “down” to high notes and “up” to low notes.
- Work out what interval you’re trying to jump and just practice a tiny segment that spans the jump.
- For any problem areas, sing really slowly and “hang” the note while you work out if you are sharp or flat and correct yourself.
- Use an instrument to check against.
- Finger in/near ear.
- Sing to a drone.
- Do repetitive phrase exercises on a regular (daily?) basis, e.g. in shower or car.
- Use of the feedback tools while doing the exercises.
- Work out the numbers for the whole song or just for problem areas. Note that not all songs start on a 1! How can we work out where the 1 is? Often (but not always) tunes resolve to the 1 (the “tonic”) at the end of a line, at the end of a verse, or at the end of a chorus – especially if the tune at that point *feels* like it has satisfactorily concluded.

### 3. Tone & Register

#### 3.1 Physiology

Some people talk about upper register, middle register and lower register, others talk about head voice and chest voice. When people say 'chest voice' they usually mean a tone that is warm and rich, and lower in pitch, where you can feel a lot of sympathetic vibration in your chest. When people say head voice they usually mean a tone that is bright and pure and higher in pitch.

Modern speech experts may instead talk about 4 different registers: vocal fry/modal voice/falsetto/whistle; with most people's singing voices using modal voice and some falsetto. The differences are to do with which parts of the vocal folds are involved in the vibrations.

Other aspects of tone are to do with other aspects of the sound: e.g. full bodied, clear, thin, weedy, croaky, squeaky, shrill, throaty, nasal, breathy, brassy, mellow, shouty, sweet, soft....Some of these are obviously positive or negative, and others are just descriptive.

Most differences are to do with resonance in the different cavities within your head. Muscle tension around them can drastically affect the resonance and therefore the tone. There isn't a 'right' or 'wrong' tone, except in the case of anything that causes physical damage, but personal taste and fashion do affect our feelings.

#### 3.2 Exercises for exploring tone variation & control

##### **"Lift" exercise**

*On the syllable "HEEE" start on a comfortable low note in your range and slide continuously to a comfortable high note in our range (from the bottom floor to the top floor of a building).*

- 1. Think about the comfortable low pitch - hear it in your head before you start.*
- 2. As you initiate the pitch, create a mind picture of an old fashioned lift compartment beginning in your chest.*
- 3. Begin to slide on the syllable "HEEE", pitch to pitch, up to the comfortable high note. Picture the lift on a steady, smooth and effortless rise to the top.*
- 4. You will need to gradually increase your airflow with each pitch.*
- 5. Know your top pitch. Hear the top note you wish to hit in your head. You are the lift operator - make a definite yet easy stop once the destination is reached.*

*The transition between pitches (and registers) often produces a vocal tone that breaks and cracks, or experiences a great change in quality. The first goal is to sing the "HEEE" syllable strongly over each note; even through a break or tone change should one occur. Repeating this exercise over time will help you gain the necessary strength and coordination to negotiate pitch changes without cracks or breaks.*

*Repeat with the lift going down instead of up. Try with different vowel sounds.*

##### **Transition and observation**

*Observe that in some songs there may be a point at which your tone goes over a "break" – if not try shifting the pitch of the song until it does do this just for the highest note. Observe what is happening in the throat around this point. Work to support from the diaphragm, use projection skills etc. and work to vary the tone of that "top" note so that it matches the tone for the lower part of the song as far as possible.*

## 4. Remembering the words

Here are a few of the things that I do when I want to remember words:

- Sing it over and over again from the words and music or with recording.
- Sing it over and over again with just the words.
- Write the words out by hand.
- Type the words out.
- What is the structure of the song? Which bits repeat?
- Does the song have a story? (Or could it have one?) Tell the story out loud in own (spoken) words. Identify which key part of the story happens in each verse.
- What is the first word of each verse? What letter does each start with? Are there any patterns?
- Play the hide & repeat memory game – have words to hand but hidden, sing from the beginning, if get stuck check on the words but then restart from beginning of song. Keep repeating til you get to the end. You can also do this with writing out the words from memory, folding over the page when stuck, checking and then starting again from beginning.
- Problem areas – are there interchangeable words or lists that are tricky? Are there any rules or patterns that can be applied to help work out what the order is 'on the hoof' as it were? (alphabetical or reverse alphabetical order? A little mini-story to go with the elements in a list? Visualising pictures for things sometimes helps.)

## 5. Harmony

### 5.1 Drones

The simplest form of harmony is to drone on one note. This may not be terribly exciting but allows you to start feeling what it is like singing something against the tune. While you're doing it, observe the places where it feels nice and satisfying, and the places where it feels crunchy and unsatisfying. Try using different notes from the song and observe the differences – in particular try the note that the song resolves to.

### 5.2 Triads

A triad is your basic 3 note chord. If you consider the notes of the scale labelled 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 then the triad is note 1, 3 and 5 sung/played together.

### 5.3 Pick a note and wibble

There are times when a single drone doesn't work – not only can it get a bit boring but there may be too many lengthy sections where it feels clashy/crunchy and therefore not very comfortable or satisfying. One alternative to a single drone is what I call my 'pick a note and wibble' technique – start off singing a drone, when it feels like it has stopped working, wibble sideways onto the next note of the scale (up or down) and then wibble back again when the second note also stops working. You can usually do the whole song with just those two notes – a simple, 2 note harmony. *Which note to pick as your starting point?* Your best bet is to identify what the 'key' note of the song is (the '1' of the scale) which is usually the note that the song resolves to, and to pick either that note (the 1) or count up/down to the 5.

*Where to wibble to?* ONLY go one step up or down the scale – so if you start off on a 1, only wibble to the 2 and back to the 1, or the 7 and back to the 1. If you start on a 5, only wibble to the 4 or 6 and back.

### 5.4 Why do we need to wibble?

You might already be familiar with the idea that a tune can have a set of chords that goes with it – especially if you are used to songs being accompanied by a guitar or piano. Most songs have places where if you just stick on the notes from the original chord (i.e. the 1 3 5 triad of the key that the song is in), it doesn't feel right. That is because at those points, the notes of the melody belong with a different chord (triad) from the one we started off on. So if you are used to improvising purely by 'feel' then instinctively you probably already have a sense of which points in any give tune need a different chord from the starting one, and may also have a feel for which notes or chords you want to move to, even if you're not really analysing which notes you're using or where they fit into which chord. But if you're not used to doing this based on instinct, or feel stuck, then having some rules that can guide you as to *where to move to* when you move note can be helpful.

### 5.5 Three Chord Trick – theory

One of these rules is the 'Three Chord Trick' which is a rule that chord players such as guitarists can sometimes use to know which chords they could try to fit with a particular song. (NB so long as the song is in a major key!)

Think about our scale 1-8. Each of the notes in our scale has a chord (triad) associated with it.

The Three Chord Trick uses chords I, IV and V.

So, chord I is notes 1, 3 and 5 of the scale

Chord IV is notes 4, 6 and 8 (which is in fact the 1) of the scale.

Chord V is notes 5, 7 and 9 (which is in fact 2) of the scale.

If you were a guitarist, what that might mean is, if you were accompanying a tune in the key of G, you'd know that the three chords I(G), IV(C) and V(D) are good chords to use and most tunes in G can be accompanied just using a sequence of those three chords. Which chord to use at any given point depends on which notes the tune is using at the time. The same can be applied to harmonising – where the note that you are choosing to sing is part of the triad of one of those three chords.

Now, knowing that a particular note fits at a particular point doesn't necessarily give you enough information to know which chord you're being part of.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I	1		3		5				
IV	1			4		6		(8)	
V		2			5		7		(9)

This chart shows that some chords have notes in common with some other chords.

It also demonstrates why the 'pick a note and wibble' method tends to work, especially if you start on the 1 or 5. For example, if you sing a drone on the 1, then that will work against the tune in all the places that the I and IV chords fit – the only places you need to wibble will be where the V chord fits. And since in the pick a note and wibble method you only wibble one note up or down the scale, that means you'll be moving to a 2 or a 7, both of which are part of the V chord.

Alternatively if you sing a drone on the 5 that will work against the tune in all the places that the I and V chords fit, and wobbling one note up or down the scale takes you to a 4 or 6 both of which are part of the IV chord.

## 5.6 What about the Minor?

The major three chord trick doesn't work quite the same in the minor key. As we've already said, the 6 and 7 notes of the scale tend to vary in minor keys and so there is not such a hard and fast set of rules with minors as with majors.

Instead of the I - IV - V chords, in lots of minor key tunes you can actually get away with using just two chords: I and VII, and if you want to add a third chord it would often be the IV or VI.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I	1		3		5				
VII		2		4			7		(9)
IV	1			4		6		(8)	
VI	1		3			6		(8)	

*When you're singing the triads for these chords, should they be minor or major triads?* The answer actually depends on which minor scale the tune uses – i.e. which combination of sharp or flat 6 and 7 notes it uses. All the minor scales tend to have a flattened third, which means that the I chord is always a minor triad. But depending on the position of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> notes of the scale, the VII, IV and VI chords could each either be minor or major triads.

## 5.7 Instinctive rather than constructed harmony

Personally I think harmony is most fun when it is instinctive and just goes where 'feels' right. But a tool like the 3 chord trick can give you a useful starting point and can suggest some note options for any point where you feel a bit stuck and don't know what note to sing.

My suggested steps to be when harmonising to a song would be

1 – listen and try to identify 'key' note (i.e. note 1 of scale). Think about whether it is minor or major. Listen for clues – is there a note the tune keeps coming back to? Ends of lines, ends of verses and ends of choruses – do they also come back to one of these notes? If you hum a scale (major or minor) starting on that note, does that feel like it gives you the same collection of notes that the tune is using?

2 – when you have your key note, if it is major, hum the root notes for the I, IV and V chords. If it is minor, hum the I and IIV.

3 – then hum the triad for each of the chords.

4 – then just start singing – using whichever of the techniques we've already tried such as drones, pick a note and wibble, or three chord trick, plus just a healthy dose of trusting your instinct and giving it a go without over thinking too much – doesn't matter if occasionally you end up on the tune but if you get stuck with it try to go somewhere different.

5 – think about the 'shape' of the harmony you are constructing relative to the 'shape' of the tune. As the tune rises and falls, do you want your harmony to rise & fall in a parallel way, or contrast by descending as the tune ascends, or do you want your harmony to stay still while the tune moves? There is no right or wrong here!

6 – apply all of the other singing techniques as you go along – projection, breathing, tuning and tone control. Your harmony will sound better when it is sung with confidence and you will get a better feel for whether it works or not.