

Vocal Techniques

by Tim Marriner

A singer can sing a song with note to note perfection but if they lack emotional expression the overall performance will suffer. Every song should have a purpose that links to the heart. Without this connection the meaning of the song will get lost in translation. There are many vocal techniques that can be used to assist with conveying and even enhancing the message within the lyrics. Several techniques overlap but there can be subtle differences. The following collection of vocal terms describes techniques that can be used to produce unique vocal effects for versatility and stylistic differences.

A Cappella: Singing without any form of instrumental accompaniment.

Accent: Giving a particular note, syllable, word, or phrase more stress than the ones before or after. Italics do it in print, accents do it in singing.

Articulation: The over enunciation of words achieved by opening the mouth wide to exaggerate the movement of the lips, cheeks, teeth, and jaw assuring the sounds are full and complete. (See also *diction*.)

Attack: Describes the process of a singer first hitting a note, as in "his attack on that high C was too harsh," or "her attack at the beginning of the song was very gentle."

Body Language: It is a non verbal message that your body conveys to others. It is a visual expression of things such as if you are relaxed, uptight, nervous, cavalier, or that you really need to use the bathroom. When your body language is in tune to the musical theme it validates the authenticity of the performer. Exaggerated body language opposite of the musical theme can add humor to a performance.

Back Phrasing: A stylistic technique where the singer is either ahead or behind the beat, on purpose. Jazz singers typically use this technique, as do some pop singers.

Base Voice: Using a head register the singer focuses the placement of sound near the molars or jaw creating a tone with a lower bass quality tone. (See also *treble voice*.)

Beatboxing: A form of vocal percussion that mimics drum beats and other musical sounds using one's mouth, lips, tongue, and voice.

Bel Canto Technique: A traditional vocal technique that literally translates to "beautiful singing." This classical singing approach creates a pure vocal sound by sustaining syllables and vowels within each word in a uniformed reverent manner.

Belting: A common word to describe a loud over driving sound that is produced by pushing the natural chest register beyond its normal limits. Over the years this term has taken on different meanings. It also describes a sound that is curbed and a twanged neutral sound. (See also *edge*.)

Blend: In solo singing, the smooth transition between the head and chest voice. Or, when more than one individual is singing, the sound combination between singers, which preferably makes it difficult to pick out one singer's voice amid the group.

Breath Support: Efficient use of the singer's stream of breath, controlled primarily by the diaphragm. A lack of support produces vocals that can be flat or off pitch, straining to reach the end of a musical phrase and usually has the singer gasping for breath. This could be used as a theatrical affect by mimicking the loss of breath while singing a long phrase with lots of words, only to prove later that you can really do so without trouble.

Catch Breath: A quick, short, unobtrusive breath.

Chase Vocals: A technique used by two or more singers where the lead vocal is being followed off phrase by other singers, usually consisting of the same words without interfering with the leads, almost like an echo.

Chest Voice: Also known as the chest register, usually the lower notes of a singer's range; in the same general range as the speaking voice. When singing in the chest voice, the vocal cords become naturally thick, and the resulting sound is generally associated with deep, warm tones resonating from the chest and lower part of the vocal masque.

Consonance: A combination of notes that sound pleasant when played or sung together; very helpful when harmonizing with lead vocals. (See also *dissonance*)

Counter Melody: An additional melody that provides contrast to enhance the main melody.

Cracking: This is a vocal problem where the singer projects the voice forward with a head register then flips the sound back to a falsetto due to a lack of control. Usually it occurs if a singer fails to warm up before performing or is over stressing their vocal abilities.

Crescendo: Equitable to a big finish, this term refers to building the level of vocal energy of a given phrase or section of a song to full voice without belting.

Dialect: A stylistic form of singing with a particular accent related to the song or musical theme providing authenticity.

Diaphragmatic Breathing: Many singers perform using shallow breathing patterns - identical to "gasping for air." Trained singers, on the other hand, use primarily diaphragmatic breath support. During the inhalation process, the muscles of the lower back and abdomen are utilized as the diaphragm is lowered. When singing, the breath stream (exhalation process) is employed, the diaphragm ascends (the abdominal muscles contract), allowing for decreased tension in the larynx. It is important that singers develop a very fine balance in utilizing the air stream to create the proper dynamics and quality within their vocal sound. "Pushing the air stream" can result in an undesirable vocal quality.

Diction: The clear pronunciation of words. This requires attention to both consonants and vowels. Good diction can usually be achieved by opening the mouth wider while singing or speaking. Different types of music may require more or less diction; for example, in our activity it's essential that the dancers understand the calls, but in jazz or blues, the singer may occasionally slur words on purpose in order to achieve a desired effect. (See also *articulation*.)

Diphthongs: Syllables within words or vowels that, when enunciated slowly, contain more than one vowel. It is preferred to accentuate the first vowel of a diphthong as long as possible before pronouncing another word or syllable to obtain a pure sound.

Descriptive Words: A vocal technique that places emphasis on words or phrases to convey a degree of emotion or level of excitement usually by singing louder with higher stages of excitement or softer with lower stages of excitement.

Dissonance: A combination of notes that sound harsh when played together. It is a technique that can be used to build tension musically, frequently used in jazz music. (See also *consonance*.)

Dynamics: The art of changing the volume level while singing to add texture. (See also *vocal shading*.)

Edge: This is the new term that better defines the old term "belting." It exclusively describes loud singing with a full-metallic sound. (See also *belting*.)

Emotional Expression: The art of telling a story with dramatic vocals that must be truthful to feel authentic with the singer using imagery or reflection of a real event to match the mood or theme of the song.

Fade: A stylistic vocal technique that gradually changes the volume of sound leading in or out of a word or phrase.

Facial Expression: Our face exhibits many emotions. A singer can move the muscular structure of the face relative to the song theme to communicate feelings such as joy, sadness, and surprise. Expressions help authenticate the mood and affect tonality.

Falsetto: A type of vocal production, similar to head voice that allows you to sing in the higher part of your range without strain. Unlike head voice, falsetto cannot blend or connect with your chest voice because when produced the cords do not actually connect.

Flip: A stylistic singing effect that occurs when a singer creates a dramatic shift between vocal registers to enhance a word with two very different notes, usually up in scale. (See also *yodel*.)

Harmony: The sound of two or more notes played simultaneously or the progression of chords in a song. Some music theorists have referred to harmony as being everything that isn't the melody. When two or more callers work together it is important for each to understand what part they are to sing to avoid conflicts. One of the most common ways of harmonizing involves singing notes that are either a third or a fifth above the melody. The fifth will always parallel the same notes as the melody but the third can be either a major or minor key. Octaves are the exact same notes as the melody either eight notes above or below. They can be used to enhance endings or special phrases within a song. Harmonies should blend using a balanced tone with neutral vowel sounds and vibrato that match the melody singer without standing out. (See also *suspension*.)

Head Voice: Also known as the head register, a singer uses the upper portion of their vocal masque to sing higher pitches with sounds resonating from the face.

Improvisation: The creation of music on the spot. Sometimes a vocalist will use this if they forget the words or wish to create musical runs.

Inflections: A change of pitch in the voice by sliding up and down the scale while expressing various shades of thoughts and feelings. An upward slide usually expresses a question or an incomplete thought. A downward slide usually marks a completion of thought. A voice without inflections is thought of as monotone. A voice that holds your attention conveys emotion and interest by changing pitch or inflection, a quality needed when calling patter. (See also *vocal shading*.)

Legato: A method of playing or singing the melody smoothly, with no break between the notes (opposite of *staccato*.)

Melody: A sequence of single notes played to form a meaningful pattern; jazz songs generally have one melody that serves as the songs theme. (See also counter melody)

Modulation: A music technique that changes tonic pitches within or between musical phrases. A singer must be aware of these modulations in order to shift their vocal tones to accommodate.

Onomatopoeia: A word that imitates the source of the sound that it describes. For example a singer could emphasize the word “Pop” by making a hard “P” sound at either end of the word. Some animal sounds fall into this technique for example Frogs “croak”, pigs “oink”, and ducks “quack.” Some birds have names that imitate their calls such as a Bobwhite.

Pitch: When a singer matches or harmonizes with the music they are said to be on pitch. If the singer is off pitch they are either flat (slightly below the pitch) or sharp (slightly above the pitch.)

Projection: For a singer, it is the ability to thrust vocals outward in order to be heard by using proper diaphragmatic breath support and vocal techniques. A lack of projection can be used as a vocal technique to convey a lack of confidence.

Rapping: A vocal technique that uses spoken words in a rhythmic chant. The content, flow, and delivery, are performed in time to a beat.

Raunchy: A vocal technique where a singer uses a tone that sounds guttural or screams to convey a message of sexiness or excitement.

Resonance: The amplification of sound in our body cavities, usually of the mouth and head. Everyone is unique and so is their resonance. Typically resonance can be amplified through the following cavities of the body: sinus, nasal, throat, mouth, chest, and head cavities.

Retard: A point where the musical phrase or lyric is slowed down.

Runs: A string of notes or passage in song that are sung rapidly. (See also *trill*.)

Scat: A method of singing using nonsense words to try to sound like a musical instrument.

Shake: A stylistic vocal interpretation that varies the volume of a particular note or phrase by contracting and relaxing the diaphragmatic muscles to create a difference in the vocal threshold. It is another approach used to accent a particular word or phrase.

Sibilance: A manner of articulating consonants by directing a stream of air with the tongue towards the teeth which are held closely together. Most singers avoid sounding sibilant, but it can be used effectively with some cases as humorous showmanship; for example, the song “All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth.”

Silence: Yes, this seems like an odd vocal technique, but it is very effective. At times you should just let the music speak for itself, hear the crowd sing, or listen to feet shuffle, all the while not saying a thing.

Sigh: A vocal technique that allows air to be released while singing a word or phrase on a downward slide until it is no longer audible.

Slide: A stylistic singing from note to note, without any break in tone. Slides are most common in blues and country music.

Staccato: A method of singing with short or clipped individual notes. (Opposite of *legato*.)

Straight Line Sound: A vocal technique where a singer projects sound up and away from the center of the face directly forward without adding any texture or fullness. Straight line sound usually does not vary in volume or change resonance.

Suspensions: A harmonizing technique that combines the relationship of the third and fifth as a component of the chord associated with the melody. As the melody changes the sixth is sung, as an inverse of the third, then resolves back to the fifth to provide a chord harmonic. Octaves can also be used with suspensions to form a wider chord by hitting a ninth then resolving back to the octave. In order for this effect to be heard, a harmonizing suspension can be slightly louder than the melody singer but soften as they resolve.

Syncopation: Stressing the wrong beat or a beat at the wrong time, used to produce a feeling of satisfaction in the listener when the regular rhythm pattern resumes. Sometimes it is referenced as singing with the accent on the up beats.

Style: A personalized approach or manner of singing. As a vocal technique, a singer might mimic a well know vocalist to provide showmanship.

Talking: A vocal technique used to create a dramatic contrast to singing.

Theme: It is the overall purpose of a body of work. Music communicates this main expression of emotion both lyrically and musically. A performer must be in tune to the theme in order to properly convey the true meaning. When this connection is made by the performer and they authentically deliver the message, the audience will relate and feel the same raw emotion.

Timbre: A term that refers to person's individual resonating tone quality. (See also *tone quality*.)

Tone Quality: A vocal resonance or "ring" that can be achieved through a "bel canto" technique that enhances overall vocal quality. Tone is sustained with equal pitch that is caused by regular and constant vibrations of air. Tone is set in motion by similar vibrations in the body producing the tone, while noise is caused by irregular and unequal vibrations.

Treble Voice: Using a head register the singer focuses the placement of sound near the cheek bones creating a tone with a higher treble quality. (See also *base voice*.)

Tremolo: A rapid repetition of a single tone similar to vibrato, but subtle, more quivering. (See also *vibrato*.)

Trill: The rapid and repeated alternation of two notes, in the style of many birdsongs. (See also *runs*.)

Unison: A term that means multiple singers are singing the same notes together.

Vibrato: A natural oscillation or pitch variant that is the result of the dynamic balancing of airflow and vocal fold approximation. Vibrato is a natural occurrence that may be learned or controlled. This is caused by the natural, normal relaxation and contraction of the vocal muscles. Vibrato gives energy or life to a tone. (See also *tremolo*.)

Vocal Delay: A technique that delays singing a particular word or phrase. It leaves the listener eagerly waiting for the lyric to be delivered. It adds an element of suspense.

Vocal Drop: An abrupt decrease in pitch and volume at the end of a word or phrase.

Vocal Effects: A stylistic vocal noise that mimics sounds to enhance the musical theme.

Vocal Fry: A guttural noise that singers use mainly for vocal warm ups, as it is a very unpleasing sound.

Vocal Masque: A singer's vocal masque is literally their facial features and good singers achieve stellar vocal sound when the sound is resonating from behind the eyes, and within the nasal passages. With proper diaphragmatic support, correct positioning of hard and soft palates of the tongue, relaxed muscles around the mouth, jaw, and cheek bone, open throat and eyes, vocal sounds can fully resonate within these cavities. Therefore, a person's facial features, combined with the genetic structure of the vocal cords, give the singer his or her unique vocal sound.

Vocal Register: A grouping of adjacent notes made with the same vocal coordination. Different registers include: chest, head, falsetto, and mixed.

Vocal Shading: This is a term similar to inflection. It is the combination of changing tones to match the emotion of each word or phrase with varied degrees of volume. It provides depth to a performance. (See also *dynamics*.)

Whisper: A vocal technique that drops the vocal volume below the musical threshold. It will usually draw attention as everyone tries to listen to what is being sung or said. Sometimes it is used to create a romantic mood or feeling.

Whistle: There are a few songs where this effect could be used to enhance excitement or to mimic the original song. “What a Day for a Daydream” is a great whistling tune, as is the end of “Dock of the Bay.”

Wobble: An effect that occurs when a singer loses stability of their outer muscles when they are trying to control tone, usually not intentionally done.

Yodel: A vocal effect that occurs when a singer shifts from a head register to a falsetto and back repeatedly often at a rapid rate.