

Towards a better understanding

Some supplementary exercises for singers

Keith Booker



This exercise should help singers get used to the idea of allowing sufficient time for the consonants. All the choirmasters and singers to whom I have described it see no point in it. After fifty years I have come to suspect that they have no appreciation of the sister arts and do not realise that a song (psalm, aria, chorus, etc), having a text, is not just a delight to the ear. As every student of literature knows, words have a meaning as well as sound. The songwriter has an idea - perhaps, "I love you" - and writes a text that conveys his feelings better than such bald words; he (or someone who has specialised in composing) then adds the music to give the idea even more emotional power. But the idea - conveyed through words - remains the song's main business, just as it is the main business of a novel or a poem. Thus A SONG IS to be regarded as FIRST AND FOREMOST A PIECE OF LITERATURE. Indeed, if you want to know what a song is all about - its purpose - you must understand the words. All too often you can't. The articulation is too poor. This exercise, along with the following ones, should help the singer to give the listener a chance to understand what the song is all about.

Ex 1 - Sentence fle

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Try reading the sentence as if you were a monotone speaker (not a convincing singer!) How, for instance, would you read the following lines of John Dryden?

"I attempt from love's sickness to fly in vain,
Since I am myself my own sickness and pain?"

Would you read

"I attempt from love's sickness to fly in vain -
Since I am myself my own sickness and pain"

or

"I attempt from love's sickness to fly - in vain -
Since I am myself my own sickness and pain"?

The second version draws attention to the words "in vain", which is the whole point of the song. Compared to this version the first sounds trivial. Yet I have never heard a singer make a break here in Purcell's song.



N.B. It is useful to analyse a sentence to find out how best to express it. ("In vain" is an adverbial phrase.)

Strophic songs need particular care. The composer tends to set the first verse (in the following case the first two lines!) and the singer has to make sense of the other verses by suitable emphasis and commas. Try reading the following hymn text (by J Sparrow-Simpson) first, so as to bring out the meaning before singing it. (Be sincere, not sloppy!)

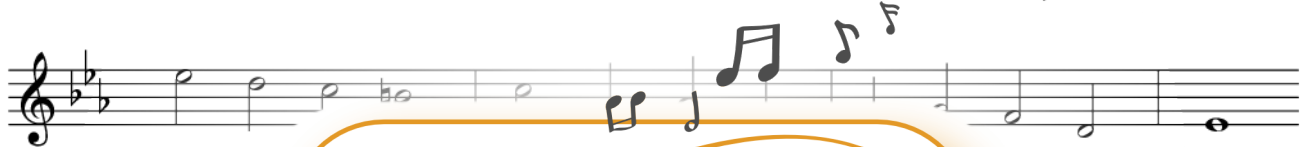
(Music by J. Stainer, from "The Crucifixion, A Meditation")



I a - dore Thee! I a - dore Thee! Glor - ious ere the world be -
 I a - dore Thee! I a - dore Thee! Thank - ful at Thy feet to
 I a - dore Thee! I a - dore Thee! Born of wo - man yet di -



gan; Yet more won - der ful Thou shin - est, Though di -
 be; I have heard Thy ac - cent thrill - ing, Lo! I
 vine: Stained with sins I kneel be - fore Thee, Sweet - est



vine, ye
 come, fi
 Je - su

we for man.
 v - en me.
 on - ly Thine.

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In the first phrase Stainer repeats the phrase a tone higher. The singer makes a break between the two phrases. At the beginning of the second line he repeats the sequences even higher, but out of purely musical considerations. There is no longer a hiatus between the sequences and only in the third verse do the words "stained" and "kneel" have the same degree of emphasis as the "dore" in "adore" - now on the third beat of the bar. (A hiatus after "sins" would be effective.)

In the first verse the commas before and after "though divine" are important. This concessive phrase should be held back. (Stainer is most unhelpful!) "Still" points the contrast and needs emphasis, but "divinest", the superlative of "divine", is the most important word, needing the main emphasis, with no hesitation till the word "love". (Do not emphasise the misplaced epithet "dying".) Similarly there is no hesitation after "willing" in the second verse (though there is an emphasis on the next word, "me",) until "even me", where the comma emphasises the penitent's personal consciousness of undeserved redemption. "Lo!" of course, gets special treatment.

Each syllable needs appropriate emphasis, e.g. p Though di- mf vine, mp yet mf still mp di- sf vin p est. ("v" in "divinest" plosive, "i" short, "ll" long, in "still".) Words of several syllables have usually only one stressed one. Composers expect singers to get these details right. I heard a performance of "The Crucifixion" recently in which this hymn was sung absolutely legato and pianissimo. You can, of course, like Ulysses' Sirens, stupify your listener with sheer beauty if you want, but I prefer to engage his mind as well as his feelings. The work is subtitled "A Meditation", not "A Lullaby"!

Ex 2 Articulation - a) the vowels

If the listener is to understand the text each individual word must be well articulated. Teachers use the following sort of exercise, with all possible combinations of consonants and vowels to develop tone and resonance. But so many singers fail to differentiate between the vowels once they are singing a song; some even substitute purposely the wrong vowels on high notes. (It is perhaps tricky to sing a high ee or oo beautifully, but possible; the throat must be kept open, the adam's apple low.)



Try singing the following song by (Purcell) vowel for vowel first, concentrating on producing the correct vowel; then syllable for syllable; finally connecting it all in a smooth flow; with the vowels clearly differentiated. (In most languages the words run into each other! This leads sometimes to elision, insertion or omission of consonants.) It is not easy, but necessary if the words are to be understood.

The second song should be sung at speed - a challenge for throat and mouth.

e i o a - y or - a i
Re tird from an - y mor - tal's sight

e e - i a - o ay
The pen - sive Da - mon lay

slowly H. Purcell

Re tired from a - ny mor - tal's sight, The pen - sive Da - mon lay...

Now try this, at first syllable for syllable, then quickly well articulated. (Bin-go, not bean-go!)

There me, sir. B I N G O

Bang 'er an' bop 'er an' kick 'er a'n cop 'er an' Bin - go was his name sir!

You'll sing bang 'er and I'll sing bop 'er an' you'll sing kick 'er and I'll sing cop 'er an'

Bang 'er an' bop 'er an' kick 'er an' cop 'er an' Bin - go was his name sir!

Ex. 3 Articulation b) consonants

Exercises *slow, legato*

a) m - aa m - aa m - aa m - aa m - aa m - aa m - aa m - aa m - aa m - aa

b) mb - aa mb - aa mb - aa mb - aa mb - aa mb - aa mb - aa mb - aa mb - aa mb - aa

c) mp - aa mp - aa mp - aa mp - aa mp - aa mp - aa mp - aa mp - aa mp - aa mp - aa

These exercises (also with other vowels) should get you used to allowing sufficient time before the bar line for such consonants.

A long anticipatory consonant can be most effective.

Re m e mber, re m e mber not, L ord our o ff en ces H. Purcell

The anticipatory consonant need not always be so long. It is, however, useful in quiet passages, where it might otherwise not be registered, as in the first "remember" above. It is also useful after short vowels, as in Stainer's Hymn, where it prevents "still" becoming "steal". (C.f. Bin-go and bean-go. Some vowels are short, others long!) The anticipatory L (almost ld) in Lord and ff in offences help to give force to the respective following syllable. The consonant b is a so-called plosive. The lips are closed as for an m and released with more or less force. In the above song Bin-go, it is an example of a loud b. In the next song the bs should be soft. 'tingling, using an unvarying air-flow to assist to get a soft but hearable (m)b.

Meau ty sat math - ing my a spring Th. Hume

(m)Beau-ty sat (m)bath-ing (m)by a spring where fair-est shades did hide her

The consonant p differs from b in that it is not voiced - the vocal cords are not active. It, too, can be forceful or quiet. Practise the exercises b) and c) above with soft bs and ps, then build up the pressure on m to produce loud ps and bs.

You should also practise these exercises, with other nasals etc. and plosives, e.g.:

n-aa nd-aa nt-aa (l-aa l-daa l-taa) as in funny, founder, fountain, honey, hinder, winter ng (= n at the back of the tongue)

ng -aa ngg-aa ngk-aa as in singer, (ng without g) linger, (ng plus g) thinker th-aa (as in this and that) th-aa (as in thick and thin) etc.

(In the Stainer hymn "divine" has a soft v, "divinest" a forceful one.)

And then there are consonant clusters: Fr-aa Kr-aa Bl-aa str-aa

Give yourself time for an unnoticeable minimal vowel between the consonants:

Fer-aa; Ker-aa Bel-aa. (Make something out of "g(e)l-orious Lord" and "S(u)w-eetest(e) Jesu" in Stainer) There are often many consonants where words come together - "in vain", "thy accents thrilling", "stained with", "Fairest shades".

Suww - ee - te - ste J es u, I i - mmpell ore Th-ee

Allow plenty of time for them, especially before emphasised vowels, as above.

N.B. An unnoticeable minimal vowel is sometimes useful at the end of a word too, e.g. "Thy dying love for man(e) ...Make me ever only thin-e" (This vowel would be represented in the phonetic alphabet by an e upsidedown.)

But now read the texts of the following two songs. You will see that the first is the angry protest of the frustrated male. In the second the lover is totally happy with his beloved, hoping that this love will last. Dowland sets the first text to the uneasy rhythms of a galliard, the second reflects the static architectural formality of the verse.

I have heard the first song sung as just a beautiful piece of music. But the words break the boundaries of good taste. (Dowland's equivalent to "I get no satisfaction") The song needs a scornful tone, strong dynamic contrasts and short, effective consonants. (You can emphasise every syllable of "If thou canst not o'ercome her will")

I J. Dowland

Can shee ex - cuse my wrongs with ver - tues cloake:
Are those cleere fiers which van - ish in - to smoake
Shall I call thee un - kind
Must I prove I find.
No no where I stand,
Cold love is like to words writ - ten on sand,
Thou maist be a - bused if thy sight be dim. Wilt thou be thus a -
Or to bub-bles which on the wa - ter swim.
bus - ed still, See-ing that she will right thee nev - er If thou canst not ore -
come her will Thy love will thus be fruit - less ev - er.

II

Spitting out the consonants in the second song would be quite wrong. (It usually is.) All should be smooth and gentle. You can emphasise "never" by anticipating the n. (Take at least a quaver from the previous crotchet.) You can treat "Suww-eet" and "sher-ink" and "ll-ove" in a similar way. Note that "beauty" is pronounced "by-ooty". (Give the l in "faile" a crotchet and use it to glide gently up the octave.) There are other possibilities for this treatment. But don't exaggerate. The effect should be of a quiet, drawn-out rendition. The commas are unusually important. Observe them (except, perhaps, on the octave jump after "faile")!

J. Dowland



Deare, if you change, Ile nev-er chuse a - gain Sweet,

if you shrink, Ile nev-er think of love. Faire, if you

faile, Ile judge, make, moe wits Ile

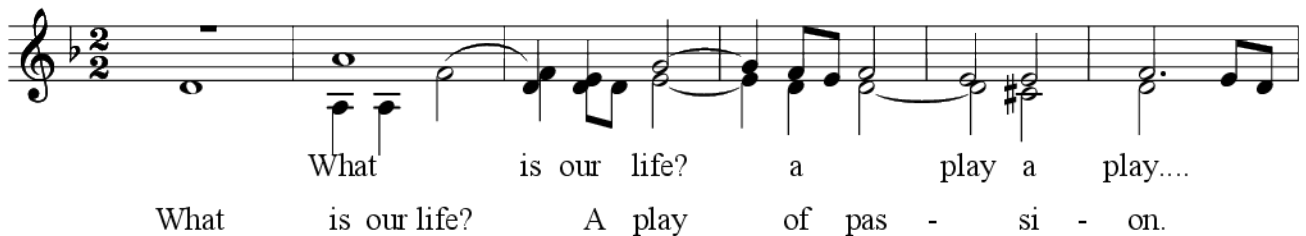
ne-ver prove. Deare, sweet, faire, wise change, shrink, nor be not

weake: And on my faith, my faith shal nev-er breake.

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Choristers should be aware that part songs etc. can have contrasting characters too. Walter Raleigh's embittered text calls for strong emphasis on significant words with forceful consonants. The first of the lines "Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is, Who sits and marks still what is done amiss" can be sung staccato, with strong consonants.

O. Gibbons



In Wilbye's Madrigal all is calm. Instead of spitting out the d of "draw", take enough time before "aw" - up to a crotchet - and then it will be heard:- (Sop.) Der/aw on sweet night, der/aw on sweet night. Where a number of consonants fall on a short note, there is little time for them, but nevertheless the whole should be smooth.

J. Wilbye



Choristers are part of a team and should be aware of what the other singers are doing. (I am sorry to have to state what should be obvious!) The listener should be able to hear when a new voice enters with a theme. This can be achieved not only by the other voices' discreet reduction of volume but also by clear diction.

All these examples look curious but sound quite natural. The singer should be aware that consonants have to be sung, not only vowels, and they need time and intelligent treatment. Once the singer has understood the text himself, he can convey its meaning through correct emphasis and clear articulation and so help the listener towards a better understanding.

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Titel: [Towards a better understanding](#)

Komponist: [Keith Booker](#)

Epoche: 21. Jahrhundert

Thema: Übungen

Reihe/Zyklus: Übungen

Schwierigkeit: Leicht

Instrumentierung Gruppe: Sologesang

Instrumentierung: Solo>X

Instrumentierung: Gesang Solo>X = unbestimmte Stimmlage (J(1)

Gesangsübungen