



~ *It's All in Your Head* ~

Tips for Singing in Tune

article by Michael Smolens ©2020

For some people, singing right in tune never presents a problem, they do it quite naturally. But for many more people singing in tune presents a real challenge that can take months or even years to master. If you're reading this article, chances are good that this skill has been a challenge, or that you're a vocal teacher who is looking for new techniques to offer their students.

There's a whole range of issues that contributes to singing on pitch: posture, breathing, alignment, holding unconscious tension in the neck, face, or shoulders, etc. I'm going to put my attention on four techniques that, when put together, will make a difference for you. You should focus on just one area in isolation at first because of how much concentration it takes to make any change in your sound. Gradually, you can combine two areas to focus on, and then move your awareness between different combinations of areas. You can't speed through this process — only by going slowly will your body begin to register each physical area of focus. This is why recording yourself doing simple exercises always yields Big Results!

Here are four tips for getting your sound more in tune that deal with your face and head:

1) Mask Resonance — the part of the face that has the most muscle is the area surrounding the eyes, from the forehead down to the bottom of the nose. A simple traditional masquerade ball (or Venetian) mask is the easiest way to imagine this part of your face. When the mask is really in focus, your sound will be:

- a) clearer, because the resonance and overtones will be brighter,
- b) easier to discern re: diction, and
- c) more dynamic and will project more easily.

By literally “smiling with your eyes”, you create a sense of tautness in the top half of your face. You can practice getting in touch with this sensation by extending your arm out in front of you and at eye level, raising just your first finger. Practice looking at your finger neutrally for a while, then look at it as if the finger is going to put you to sleep, and then like you're trying to visually burn a hole in your finger. The object is to go back and forth between these different stages of focus and notice how each affects your mask. You should feel a noticeable difference. The trick is to NOT raise or engage your eyebrows — that will distort your face and send a disconcerting message to your audience. You'll also begin to feel how your abdominal muscles mirror the amount of focus you bring to your mask area.

It's All in Your Head - page 2

2) Back of the Throat — on each exhale, your abdominal muscles are sending air from your lungs, up through your throat, and out of your mouth. That all-important right angle turn (the very back of your mouth) is where your soft palate allows only *some* or *all* of the air to flow out of your mouth. The more you can visualize that part of your mouth being free and tall, the more likely you'll be able to create a truly free sound. Remember — your awareness of the back of your throat should begin even before you inhale and all the way through the end of your exhale!

3) Fully Open Mouth — most people are not encouraged to have their mouth wide open. In fact, in some cultures that is considered quite rude . . . but in singing, it's essential that you have a dependable sense of what your mouth feels like to be fully open. It should *not* be open to the point where your jaw is hyper-extended. Consider that later you'll be learning how to modulate the amount of openness depending on the vowels involved in a given phrase. But when you're just warming up, try to keep your awareness on how having an open mouth can create a fuller and more in-tune sound.

4) Imagine Top Half of the Pitch — humans as a species are highly impressionable, and many tried and true vocal techniques take full advantage of our capacity to think metaphorically. So, visualize that the pitch you are wanting to sing is a large sphere (instrumentalists also use this image to help create a fuller tone). If you find yourself singing under pitch (or flat), then focus singing toward the upper half of this sphere; conversely, if you're singing too high (or sharp) then try to focus your singing toward the lower half of the sphere. This simple image can be very effective in helping your intonation.

These four techniques can assist with either singing too high or too low. My experience is that if there is a consistent issue with intonation, more often than not, it's because students tend to sing flat. This can be remedied by the above techniques along with working on your breathing and posture/alignment. If there's a tendency to sing sharp, usually it means that there is a fear or concern about singing in general, and so different solutions are called for in that situation.

When you become acquainted with how each technique affects your sound, you can zero in more readily on which combination of techniques will bring about the result you want most quickly. As you progress, you will be able to access more areas of focus that cover a wider range of your body. Eventually, these points of awareness will be internalized so that you can gradually put more and more of your attention on the interpretive and improvisational aspects of your singing.