

Everyday Tools for Musical Technique

If you are a serious student of singing, you likely begin your practice sessions by warming up your voice with exercises that your teacher has assigned. Like an athlete training for an event, these exercises are crucial for properly preparing your voice, body, and mind to work on your assigned repertoire. Some teachers also assign books of vocalises, such as *The Technics of Bel Canto* by Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *Practical Method of Italian Singing* by Nicola Vaccai, or *Bel Canto: A Theoretical and Practical Vocal Method* by Mathilde Marchesi. These volumes, among a great many others, are important to consider for your daily practice. But there's more you can do on your own!

I have identified five exercises for daily practice that are incredibly useful and can be applied to all repertoire (not just classical).

Before beginning, I ask you to close your eyes and touch your nose, and then touch your ears. I'm sure you were successful. How in the world did that happen when your eyes were closed? Well, you've been touching them your whole life. When you were fifteen months old, the adults in your life were thrilled if you got anywhere near your face when doing this, but now it is routine. The musical notes you must produce with your throat, body, and brain can become equally routine. These exercises will help you get there.

Pianists start practicing scales very early in their studies. Beginning with one hand, they gradually progress through playing two hands, extending the scales from one to two, or four octaves, in contrary motion, parallel thirds and sixths, and with varied rhythms and complexity. And then there is work to be done on arpeggios and various exercises by Czerny, Hanon, and multiple others. As skills develop, the pianist might move on to the incredibly difficult Chopin *Études*, highlighting very different skillsets in each of the 12 *Études* of Opus 10, the 12 *Études* of Opus 25 and three additional *Études* he wrote in 1839 (*étude* means study, a learning, practice, or preparation). Singers usually don't get this sort of progressive, systematic musical technique for their voice. Indeed, singers are different from pianists and other musicians; not only must they learn vocal technique, but they also are required to build their own instrument. Imagine if all instrumentalists had to spend the first few years in college building their violin, flute, or piano? Not so easy. Yet generation after generation of singers has risen to the occasion. I have the greatest respect for singers and everything they are required to do.

Process

Each day you identify your *pitch of the day* and your *vowel of the day*. Over the course of a year, you will have cycled through each pitch you sing in your range as well as all vowel sounds found in lyric singing (English, Italian, French, and German, at a minimum). For the following examples, we'll begin with C₄ (middle-C on the piano) and the vowel /i/. You can choose a metronome marking, if you like, as a reference for a consistent tempo; ♩ = 60 is a good starting point. Except for exercise five, I would not sing *with* the metronome. In these exercises, you need to find the center of the sound immediately so that you learn

by doing, feeling exactly where the pitches are within you. It only takes five to ten minutes each day.

Tips

- Audio record your musical exercises frequently so that you can hear your work as immediate feedback to your actions.
- It might be helpful for you to create a chart for yourself of every pitch in your range and all the vowel sounds. Each day you can mark off the pitch and vowel you choose.

1. Half step whole step

- Begin on C and move upward a half step to C# on one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes and one of half note and half rest.
- Begin on C and move upward a whole step to D on one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes and one of half note and half rest.
- Begin on C and move downward a half step to B on one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes and one of half note and half rest.
- Begin on C and move downward a whole step to B \flat on one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes and one of half note and half rest.

Figure 1: Half step, whole step exercises (vary the octave and starting pitch to fit your voice)

(♩ = 60)

Ex. 1 **Half step up**

Ex. 2 **Whole step up**

Ex. 3 **Half step down**

Ex. 4 **Whole step down**

2. Scales

- Begin on C and sing a five-note **major** scale up and down, paying particular attention to singing in the center of the pitch
- If you are able, begin on C and sing a nine-note **major** scale up and down (to D), again paying particular attention to singing in the center of the pitch
- Once you have sung the five or nine note **major** scale, begin moving along the scale in an improvisatory manner. No skips are allowed. Tempo variations are encouraged once you know where the center of the sound is.

- d. Begin on C and sing a five-note **minor** scale up and down, paying particular attention to singing in the center of the pitch. You can choose melodic or harmonic minor.
- e. If you are able, begin on C and sing a nine-note **minor** scale up and down (to D), again paying particular attention to singing in the center of the pitch. Again, you can choose melodic or harmonic minor.
- f. Once you have sung the five- or nine-note **minor** scale, begin moving along the scale in an improvisatory manner. No skips are allowed. Tempo variations are encouraged once you know where the center of the sound is.

Figure 2: Scales (practice from a variety of starting pitches)

Figure 2 displays four musical examples (Ex. 1 to Ex. 4) illustrating scales and improvisation in C major and C minor, presented in 4/4 time signature.

- Ex. 1:** C Major (5 Note) and C Major (9 Note). The first staff shows a five-note C major scale (C4-D4-E4-F4-G4) and a nine-note C major scale (C4-D4-E4-F4-G4-A4-B4-C5).
- Ex. 2:** C Major Improvisation. The second staff shows an improvisatory line in C major, featuring various intervals and rhythms.
- Ex. 3:** C Minor (5 Note) and C Natural Minor (9 Note) + Melodic Minor Down. The third staff shows a five-note C minor scale (C4-D4-E4-F4-G4) and a nine-note C natural minor scale (C4-D4-E4-F4-G4-A4-B4-C5) followed by a melodic minor scale descending (C5-B4-A4-G4-F4-E4-D4).
- Ex. 4:** C (Harmonic) Minor Improvisation. The fourth staff shows an improvisatory line in C harmonic minor, featuring the characteristic augmented second interval between F4 and G4.

3. Arpeggio

- a. Begin on C and move forward on notes of equal value to E, G, C, G, E₄, C. (C-major arpeggio)
- b. Improvise on C, E, G throughout your range with skips of thirds, fifths, octaves, and even a fourth down from C₄. Be gutsy on your arpeggios.
- c. Begin on C and move forward on notes of equal value to E_b, G, C, G, E_b, C. (C-minor arpeggio)
- d. Improvise on C, E_b, G throughout your range with skips of thirds, fifths, octaves, even a fourth down from C. Be gutsy on your arpeggios.
- e. After several months, add the seventh (raised and lowered on separate occasions)

Figure 3: Arpeggios and improvisation

Ex. 1 Major (♩ = 60) Major Improvisation

Ex. 2 Minor Minor Improvisation

4. Trill

- a. The rhythm here is key: one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes, one of triplets, one of sixteenth notes, and trill. Be sure to STOP when you flat line (when the trill stops working) otherwise you will train your trill to always flat line at the end! You may breathe as needed except between the measures of sixteenth notes and trill.
- b. C to C#
- c. C to D
- d. C to B
- e. C to B \flat

Figure 4: Trills

Ex. 1 (♩ = 60)

Ex. 2

Ex. 3 tr down half step

Ex. 4 tr down whole step