# GEORGE SHIRLEY

Opera singer George Shirley was born on April 18, 1934 in Indianapolis, Indiana, to Irving and Daisy Shirley. By age four, he had begun performing, joining his mother and father as a musical trio within the Indianapolis church community. His musical acumen earned him a scholarship to Wayne State University, where he performed in his first musical drama, *Oedipus Rex*, with the Men's Glee Club in 1955. He graduated that same year, receiving his B.S. in Music Education.

In 1955, Shirley became the first African American high school music teacher in the city of Detroit. A year later, after being drafted into the Army, he became the first African American to sing with the U.S. Army Chorus, where, influenced by fellow choir members, he decided to pursue a career in opera. In 1961, he won first prize in the Metropolitan Opera Auditions, thus becoming the first African American tenor to be awarded a contract with that company, where he performed from 1961 through 1973. He performed major roles in more than twenty operas, often singing with fellow African American opera pioneers Leontyne Price, Martina Arroyo, Reri Grist, and Grace Bumbry. During and after his stint with the Metropolitan Opera, Shirley was a sought around the

globe, appearing in productions in London, Italy, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Chicago, Boston and a host of other cities. Shirley also won a Grammy Award for a recording of his performance in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.

In 1980, Shirley joined the faculty of the University of Maryland as a professor of voice. In 1985, the University honored him with a Distinguished Scholar-Teacher Award. In 1987, he returned to the Detroit area as a professor of voice at the University of Michigan, and five years later, he was named the Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished University Professor of Voice. In 2007, Shirley was named the Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished University Emeritus Professor of Voice upon his retirement.

On April 29, 2014 Mr. Shirley was honored during the 53rd NATS National Conference with the organization's Lifetime Achievement Award.

## The Interview

RR: *You spoke about a support/pressure relationship during the lessons. Would you explain more about that?*

GS: The image that I think best describes the phenomenon of support is a mechanism of pneumatic and hydraulic pressure. I imagine that I have an elevator shaft from the center of my body to my throat. As I sing up the scale, I imagine that the pressure rises with pitch. It's like a rising elevator that pushes air pressure upward starting around the sternum.

RR: *Do you feel it close to the solar plexus?*

GS: I feel it around the solar plexus, because that's where the nerve endings come together. When I'm really emotionally involved in my singing, I can feel all those muscles across my back become firmer. That's where I feel the emotion. It makes my ribcage feel larger without pushing or pulling or squeezing anything to make that happen.

RR: *Which muscles do you feel contracting?*

GS: Put your hands on me. If I sing up the scale [RR comment: as he sang, I felt his abdominals become very taut], I don't do anything consciously to apply pressure anywhere in the support system. It's all mind over matter. It's like a piston pushing pressure up in the center of my body, which I assume is applying the subglottal air pressure that I need. I can feel this sort of tuck itself in a bit [the hypogastric region].

RR: *I felt those muscles come up just a little bit, but this stayed wide here.*

GS: Right. But I didn't do it consciously. It was a result of my thinking about the pressure rising in the shaft I imagine in middle of my body. If I'm getting the physical and vocal response I want in response to this image, then that's what it's about. I call it *pneudraulic* pressure, which is actually a word that describes an instrument that combines both hydraulic and pneumatic principles. When I get kids to imagine and respond to that, it simplifies the process. One school says you need to push down and out. Another school says you need to pull up and in. We get involved in

ways that interfere with what will naturally happen in our bodies if we trigger it with our minds.

RR. *Does imagery lead to more natural body function?*

GS: I try to use imagination, which is what I think they did in the old days before they talked about the diaphragm and starting writing treatises on voice. When I went to Glyndebourne in 1966, I went up to London to study with E. Herbert-Caesari, who wrote that whole series of books, including *The Voice of the Mind*. He was trained in the old Italian school, which taught students to work through imagination and mental intention. Nowadays, we try to activate physically what should be activated mentally. We try to activate physically by pushing and pulling, which just interferes with the process. When we sing, we imagine. We imagine the pitches, words, and how to communicate. If we apply that same imaginary power to breath support, it starts to make all the sense in the world.

Herbert-Caesari would begin lessons with rapid scales. He never slowed down, even when we both knew darn well I wasn't hitting all of those notes. What was he after? He was making me think faster, because you can't sing anything any faster than you can think it. He knew that the more successfully I thought, the more technique would catch up with my thoughts and make everything looser, lighter, and easier.

RR: *How long would you work on the scales during the lesson?*

GS: About seven minutes. Then we'd go on to other things. That's the strongest impression that I have of those lessons. His books are amazing. The forward that Gigli wrote really describes the way I was trained. That's what I do and the way I think. Everything we read about the old Italian School singers talks about the phenomenal control they had over their voices. It makes sense that they spent years mastering that way of thinking.

The old teachers knew something. If you sit in front of a monitor during laryngoscopy and think a five-tone scale, what would you see? You'd see your vocal folds making little responses to your thoughts. These old guys knew that the mind controls those little muscles in the larynx even before endoscopy was invented. It's not all physical.

RR: *I also like very much how much you concentrate your work on the ascent into the passaggio. It is very similar to what I read in [Paola] Novikova's writings. Can you tell me more about your approach?*

GS: I simply try to inculcate an understanding of what happens when those registers come together and try to shake hands. It's the weakest part of every human voice. You have to understand how to affect the joining of registers using the support. When the support works properly, then spaces open up. Things happen when you are connected to your pneudraulic support.

The vowel needs to change through the middle voice. That trick is Berton Coffin's, not mine. The rule is that the pitch [GS thumps his cheek while forming the vowel shapes so the pitch changes] governs the space, not the vowel. The vowel has to fit into the space corresponding to that pitch. If I find the pitch and say /a/, only

one /a/ is going to come out of that space. Don't change the space to get /a/. That's the vowel for that pitch. Not for a lower pitch [sings a lower pitch]. If I change the pitch the vowel distorts.

RR: *When you demonstrate that principle, I notice that the front of your mouth is not quite as wide open as when you imitate what students usually do.*

GS: Yes, it is in a rounder shape. What is helpful is to think of a small vowel.

RR: *Is it helpful for both males and females?*

GS: I think so. One must take into account the physical attributes of the singer. That's the problem of trying to learn by observing an individual. There are differences in physiology that change the way the concept appears externally. If your concept of the small vowel is right as you ascend, it will come out the right way.

I was invited to a little after-party in a New York City club on the east side where I sat between Giovanni Martinelli and Tito Schipa and listened to these guys trade stories. I used to be five-foot-nine, but they were both shorter. But they had heads, necks, and chests about twice as big as mine, if not more. Schipa's voice was very lyrical and Martinelli's was like a vibrant roar, but they were built the same way. They didn't have to think about diaphragms with that build. They just did it. In this science-based century, there's been so much focus on the muscles involved and what happens when you sing, which is great, but we've gotten away from what these old singers….

RR: *Intrinsically knew?*

GS: Yes. I've taught in Cape Town, South Africa a few times. The quality of voice I heard in the young black singers who came from the townships was the same kind of bright, ringing sound in those Italian singers. Perhaps because they both came from rural areas where they called out over the fields. If you close your eyes and listen to the students at the South African College of Music in Cape Town you can hear it. It is hair-raising.

Pretty Yende came from the South African College of Music. She won first place in the Belvedere Competition in every category several years ago. She became a young artist at La Scala and made her Met debut to great acclaim. She is one of the most phenomenal young singers I've heard in my life. That Italianate [makes a roaring sound] in the voice is there. Many American singers from the south have it too. Then they take a lesson and get so involved in the diaphragm, pushing, pulling, grabbing, and squeezing. There must be a way to teach these students so that they can stand on stage and sing from the soul with a sound that grabs people.

RR: *When you hear a singer for the first time in an audition or a performance, what are you looking for? What must a singer have to be successful in this career?*

GS: Intonation is essential. If you sing out of tune, nobody's going to hire you, even if you have the greatest voice in the world. Sometimes people can sing out of tune because of technical problems, so it's my job to identify whether it can be corrected or not. That can be particularly difficult with young singers. With younger singers, you have to listen for a singing sense, good intonation, and something in the sound

that says it's worth developing. If a kid comes in and sings with no imagination or musicality, that's a problem.

RR: *So size, timbre, range?*

GS: Size is less important than the timbre. Range can be developed. If there are six or seven notes in the voice that say, "Wow!" and are in tune, then that's somebody I'd like to spend some time working with to see what's possible.

There was a young lady with a very light, lyric soprano voice who graduated from here over a decade ago. Her voice did not show much operatic potential, but she was very sweet, very musical, and a pleasure to work with. She went to Germany and began to focus on early music. Since then, she has made an impressive career for herself in early music, which fits her voice, her personality, and her intelligence. The voice is not exceptional in the operatic sense. So, it's really hard to sit back and say no from the beginning.

RR: *You talked a lot to students about intonation during the vocalises, especially the half-steps. I remember you said, "Half-steps are a kick in the pants."*

GS: They will kill you. If you don't anticipate them before they happen, the pitch will drop, and then everything else is flat.

RR: *So, when a singer comes to you, what do you think you bring to his or her voice?*

GS: When I hear a voice develop more core, range, or another extension from what the singer initially had, then I know that some of the things I'm trying to get across are taking root. It's the student who does the work. I have to put the ideas out there and see what a student does with them. When it doesn't reach a student, I try to recast that information in a different way. I've had my failures and, thank God, some successes. My way of trying to explain things doesn't always impact the person I'm working with. Sometimes I'll see growth when they go to someone else. Fine. All we want is to see this person advance, because I don't have all of the keys for every individual who comes to me for assistance. I try to learn from every lesson, from every individual with whom I've worked, to expand my storehouse of information and my repertoire of self-expression.

RR: *You have a strong sense of curiosity and creativity that you bring to your teaching.*

GS: Well, thank you. I like the students to enjoy learning. I like to enjoy teaching. I believe that if they feel less threatened by me in this process, they're liable to learn more. It's my job to create what's called a heuristic atmosphere in which they can learn from themselves. In the final analysis, their understanding of something may be different than mine. I say, "Look, you sang those tones so beautifully and effortlessly. If you were to tell me that during that moment you pictured yourself standing in the middle of the room on your head with your head in a bucket of water, I say, 'Cool. Do that! Think that!'" Whatever triggers the right kind of response. It's not monolithic. I'm not going tell you to stop if it's working.

I think the most important teacher I had was Cornelius Reid. Cornelius was the one man who really got me to the point of realizing what was going on inside of the instrument itself. That was of great value to me. He was controversial, no doubt about it. He didn't believe in support, like those Italians I was talking about who

said, "I don't really think about it. I just open up and sing." I think this is true for those people for whom the voice works properly. For those of us who have difficulties or who need to have that understanding of the physical processes when we sing, we should be made aware of what's missing until it becomes second nature. Then we no longer need to think about it. Out of all of the teachers I worked with in New York over the years, Cornelius was the one I stayed with the longest.

RR: *He worked a lot with registration, as I recall.*

GS: Yes, that was his whole thing. He would start with isolating the registers, which is anathema to a lot a people. But basically, he just isolated falsetto and chest register and joined them together. I think some singers got into a little trouble because they tried hooting [demonstrates] and didn't allow the subglottal air pressure to work with the instrument. But the "hooty" sound certainly wakes up the top of the voice [demonstrates]. And then it naturally connects the higher you go. Then you come down singing in full voice. But he really didn't talk about support because he didn't really believe in it. I think he found the whole idea of support confusing when he studied voice. It never worked for him, so he just worked on trying to strengthen the mechanism itself without getting to subglottal activity.

RR: *Do you have a system for choosing operatic repertoire for students?*

GS: I don't have a particular system. With art songs, I encourage the students to choose their own material. If they come in with something that's unwise, I'll say no. I want it to be something they choose because they love to sing it.

I have this young tenor with a connected falsetto extension. He can sing a high-F$^{6}$ that will blow your socks off. It's easy for him. It's a beautiful sound. He's beginning to link it up now. He comes in with operatic arias like "Nessun dorma." He can sing it, but I told him to bring art songs instead.

He's beginning to link this up in the manner that [Carlo] Bergonzi linked up his top range. Carlo made his operatic debut in 1951 as a baritone. He came back a year later as a tenor, and I asked him once between acts in *Lucia*—I was covering him that night—about whom he had studied with. He said, "*Nessuno. Non c'é maestri per tenore*" [there aren't any teachers for tenors]. "*Io fatto tutto me stesso*" [I did everything myself]. I asked him how he did it. He answered, "The narrow vowels through the *passaggio* and the breath."

I sang with him a lot. I sang Malcom to his Macduff and I had the opportunity to stand close to him and hear him negotiate the break. He didn't have the chest power of Tucker and Corelli and those guys. It was this fully connected and basically falsetto mix. You aren't aware of it when you hear the recordings. You weren't aware of it when you were in the hall. It always traveled to the back. It was a mailed fist in a velvet glove. I could hear him make the change, and it worked beautifully with no break. He would get this plangent, full, warm, but ringing sound. He was a true *tenore di grazia*. He sang in the way tenors sang in Rossini's time before Duprez belted it from the chest. It was flexible. He could do anything he wanted to.

RR: *And Bergonzi did this all on his own?*

GS: That's what he told me. He was a very intelligent guy. That's what this young tenor has. It is exciting as all get out now that he's beginning to join it up. I tell him, "You don't have to over-sing it, just go up there and let it sing. It's going to be loud enough. It's beautiful. It's vibrant. It's bright." He's a *tenore di grazia*.

People don't understand the power of the falsetto. It's part of the voice and it has a function. For those people who can start from a whisper and crescendo into full voice like Gedda and others, that's what they're starting with. It's a sigh. I've never had that kind of facility, and my voice could just never sigh into things. Whenever I'd try to do something at the top that was at all like that, coaches would say, "Oh, no, that's falsetto."

I was put into the cast of *Simon Boccanegra* back in 1964. There's one place at the end during Boccanegra's death scene that Gabriele Adorno sings a big $A^4$ and decrescendos to a pianissimo. I tried that in a coaching session. I didn't want to sing it forte and I felt it was inappropriate. So, I went to the performance with Colzani and Tebaldi and decided to sing it that way. I felt good about it. Harriet Johnson said I could do anything with my voice the next day in her review. I have an underground recording of that taken off the radio. It's clean as a whistle. I realized that this is what people were trying to keep me away from all those years, but it was there. If I had more faith in that, I could have developed it even more.

I covered Corelli in *Romeo and Juliet* in 1967, during a time when the Met wanted to institute a policy to give the cover cast an orchestra rehearsal. Apparently, it killed the orchestral players, so the policy did not last long. So, for that first orchestra rehearsal, Corelli and Freni were in costume but not made-up. And Jeannette Pilou and I were not in costume. We sang the first act directly after they did. When I came to the aria, I thought, "Hell, I'm going to sing the final B-flat$^4$ piano, because that's what it is." And I surprised myself. It came out clean and clear and I thought, "Gee." Corelli heard it in his dressing room with the monitors. The next day in the dress rehearsal he sang it forte and then did a diminuendo to nothing. I thought, "That magnificent S.O.B! And he did it that way every time. He had that *voce chiaro* in it. It was an amazing voice.

## Parting Thoughts

I was honored to be in the presence of one of the true living legends of our art. George Shirley broke racial barriers and had an impressive fifty-four-year international career, sharing the stage with many of the greatest singers in the world. As a teacher, he has distinguished himself in academic and professional circles. He has a youthful energy and quest for knowledge. Despite having achieved such eminence in our art, he is disarmingly humble and gracious.

His concept of breathing was fascinating to me. I'll be the first to admit that the term *pneudraulic* was new to me. I pondered it greatly on my drive back home and looked up the term as soon as I arrived.

From Dictionary.com:
*pneudraulic* (adjective)
1. of or relating to a mechanism involving both pneumatic and hydraulic action.
pneu(matic) + (hy)draulic

*pneumatic* (adjective)
1. of or relating to air, gases, or wind.
2. of or relating to pneumatics.
3. operated by air or by the pressure or exhaustion of air:
4. Zoology. containing air or air cavities.

*hydraulic* (adjective)
1. operated by, moved by, or employing water or other liquids in motion.
2. operated by the pressure created by forcing water, oil, or another liquid through a comparatively narrow pipe or orifice.
3. of or relating to water or other liquids in motion.

When I specifically asked him about this concept, he had me place my hands on his torso and feel what he was doing as he sang. He does exactly what he says he does; his lower abdominals move in a little, while his solar plexus muscles move up and in. His body is solid, and his singing is still enviable. He draws this map of breathing in his own body very clearly and works on these ideas with each student. However, as he said earlier, he is quite flexible if something else works better for the student. The technique doesn't drive him, his ears do. This is a quandary we face from time to time; we must let go of our technical approaches if something out of the norm works better for a student. When working with unusual or exceptional voices like many great singers likely had in their youth, we have to be willing to follow different paths. George diligently seeks the right answers for each student he works with.

Each student begins the lesson with a light vocalise. The influence of Cornelius Reid can be seen in the way he works with registration. Male and female students work the very top falsetto/whistle register early in the lesson. After that is established, he blends the registers through other exercises. His goal is to have the student's top voice feel like the bottom, and the bottom voice feel like the top. George is patient with students, but is clear and precise about his direction to them. He also allows students to rest between vocalises and during repertoire work through detailed score analysis and fine-tuning diction. He makes every singer speak the texts and understand the correct syllabic stress of every word.

As we discussed, George spends a good deal of time helping the students use their imaginations purposefully. The body can only do what the mind tells it to do. As I say in Carol Vaness' chapter, poor decisions lead to poor mechanics, which leads to poor results. If the brain gives the body clear, positive direction, singers are much more apt to negotiate their lines successfully. George talks about using breath intake and mind preparation to inspire the body to work optimally. I often joke with my students in the

style of the book of Proverbs that, "As ye take the breath, so shall ye use it." The body must be prepared by the inhalation of the breath in a manifest way that is proportionately measured for the approaching vocal line.

## Lesson Highlights

### Breath Support/Control

*Intention and Imagination in Breath Function*

We tend to forget the motivational part of the breath intake. We want to do so much muscularly that we leave out the boss. The boss is that mass of gray matter that exists between our ears in our cranium that gets everything else to function the way you want it to function. If you imagine that internal pneudraulic pressure inside, it will make everything feel bigger without you trying to make your ribcage bigger in the wrong ways. If you imagine the pressure, you'll feel it. All of those muscles will respond, but they'll do so naturally, without your trying to isolate, pull, or push something. The power of imagination and the connection between the mind and your emotional center is in your solar plexus, where all your nerve endings come together. Your connection to that place is what allows you to express yourself. Breathe in what it is you want to say and what you want to feel. Breathe in what it is you want to accomplish. Chances are you're going to accomplish it.

### Phonation

*Vocal Onset*

Errant onsets are a way of your voice telling you that the pneudraulic pressure and vowel are not right. Make sure you have the right vowel for the pitch. Give yourself enough time to breathe in and relax. Let that action ground you. Take a second after the intake to let your instrument get ready and then speak. Always have the way you want it to feel in your mind before you begin.

### Resonance

*Vowel Migration*

The trick is to never sing the vowel at the bottom of your range that you should sing at the top, and vice versa. You have to allow things to migrate and change so that the lower starting vowel ends up as something else on top.

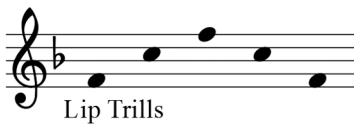
**Articulation**

*Diction and Legato*

Legato is always necessary, even if you are using good pronunciation. Don't sacrifice the line for clean consonants. Use the consonants to tie the legato together. Taste the words and always let the pronunciation communicate a sense of meaning.

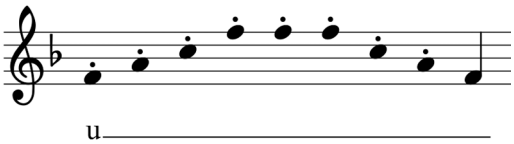
## Exercises

**Exercise 1:** (used with a tenor)



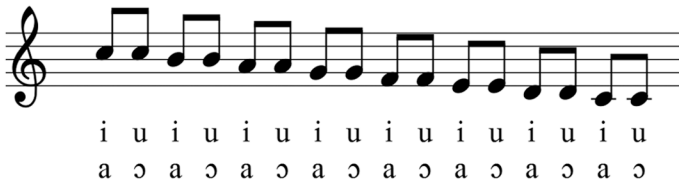

Instructions: Use just enough energy to make it work. Start in an anchored position. Switch into falsetto when you need to. Breathe in with the intention of what you want to do. Anticipate what you need to accomplish.

**Exercise 2:** (used with a soprano and a tenor)



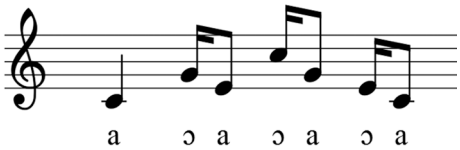

Instructions: Short and crisp falsetto arpeggios ascending in half steps. Let the top note get a little rounder in your mind. Use this through the middle register all of the way up into whistle or falsetto register. When you release a little more, there will be more space in the back.

**Exercise 3:** (used with a soprano, a tenor, and a baritone)



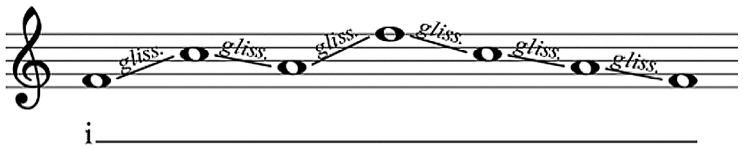

Instructions: This is an exercise for the middle voice. Be careful to sing the half steps accurately. Think upward as you descend. Get the back-space open before you sing, but don't sing the vowels back there. Make sure that these vowels exist in the front half of your mouth. Use good pneudraulic support

**Exercise 4:** (used with a soprano, tenor, and baritone)



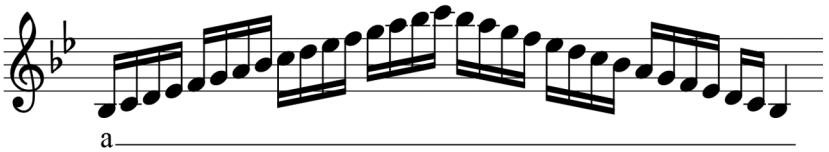

Instructions: Sing with a legato line and let everything rise and ride on that pressurized breath. It's not pulling or pushing; it's mind over matter. To get the speed, sing every pitch in your mind a split second before it comes out of your mouth.

**Exercise 5:** (used with a soprano and tenor)



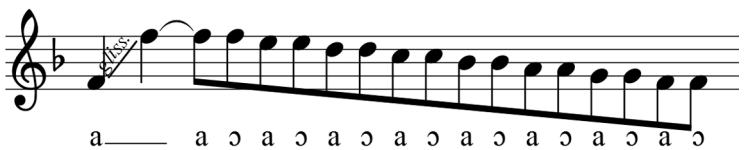

Instructions: *Molto legatissimo*. This exercise is slower in tempo and with deliberate glissandi connecting the notes. Begin lightly in the lower middle voice and continue into the top voice. Feel the internal pressure.

**Exercise 6:** (used with a soprano and tenor)



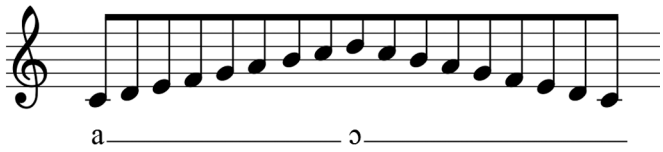

Instructions: These two-octave exercises begin on the lowest pitch the student is able to sing without pressing. Each scale pattern rises by half-steps and is performed in one breath.

**Exercise 7:** (used with a baritone)

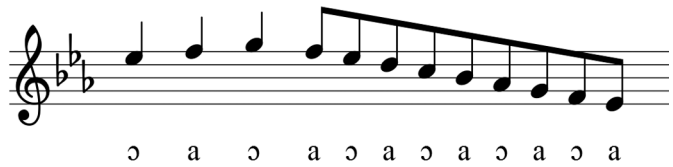



Instructions: Make sure the vowel doesn't go back when you do the slide upward. Keep the sense that the vowel stays in front. Make sure the bottom is substantial, not loud, but authoritative.

**Exercise 8:** (used with a baritone and tenor)

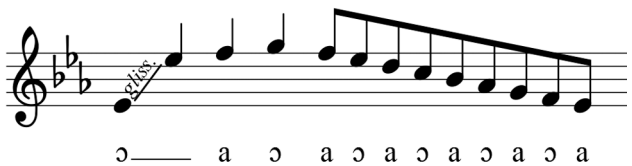



**Exercise 9:** (used with a baritone and a tenor)



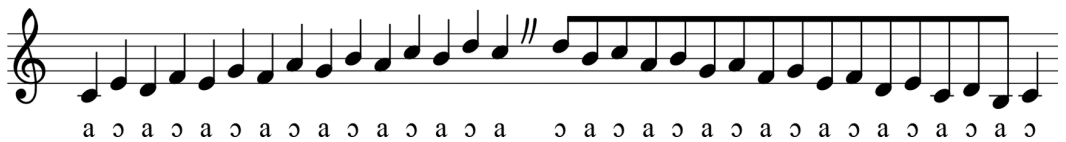

Instructions: Support, make the vowels small and frontal, and go right over the bridge. The airflow should speed up, but it is also imperative that the pneudraulic pressure rises.

**Exercise 10:** (used with a baritone)




Instructions: Make sure the bottom note is stable.

**Exercise 11:** (used with a tenor)




Instructions: Keep your toes on the ground.