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THE ABC OF VOCAL TECHNIQUES - L6

A is for Amygdala

The amygdala comprises a cluster of nerve cells and is part of the emotional response centre within the brain, otherwise known as the limbic system. In The Chimp Paradox, Professor Steve Peters explains how “the amygdala is a fast-acting defence mechanism that does not think but responds quickly”. This may explain why immediate feelings of anger or upset are triggered when a client challenges a recent price change or is late for a session. The amygdala can also defuse other areas of the brain, including those associated with logical thinking, to ensure that an emotionally charged response isn’t interrupted. (Watch out for our book review of The Chimp Paradox coming soon to our podcast.)

B is for Bilabials

‘Bi’ relates to both or two, and ‘labial’ refers to the lips. Thus, bilabials are sounds articulated by both lips coming together. P, B and M are bilabial consonants and are highly efficient for finding a more ‘forward placement’. Bilabials are also useful because they resist airflow and, as a result of the occlusion created by the lips, generate helpful backpressure. Many singing teachers love the ‘puffy cheek’ - a bilabial semi-occluded vocal tract exercise (SOVT).

C is for Chew

A chewing motion busies the jaw muscles, giving them something to do other than grip during vocalising. ‘Chewing’ can help decouple the jaw from the larynx and tongue; the latter helped by fixing the tongue to the top of the mouth (as if about to say an L, N, or raising the tongue at the back as in an NG sound).

D is for Dorsum

The dorsum is an area at the back of the tongue associated with articulating consonants such as K and G. It can move into a higher position (like when articulating an EE vowel) that, in turn, allows the larynx to rise (helpful for those high notes). It can also be manipulated into a lower position (like when articulating an ‘a’ vowel as in the word ‘father’) which encourages a darker tone.

E is for Epithelium

The epithelium is the top layer of the vocal folds.

F is for Fricatives

Fricatives are consonants made by two articulators coming together (i.e the top teeth and bottom lip for FF and VV). When this happens, it creates a blockage and thus causes

air turbulence or a ‘friction’ as the air escapes through small gaps around the occlusion.

G is for Glottal

A type of onset to a sound that “is created by the vocal folds coming together before the air passes through”. An example of this would be saying a warning ‘uh-uh’ to the person threatening to change the TV channel. Glottal onsets are a helpful tool when training vocal fold closure to reduce breathlessness.

H is for Heart Rate

Our heart rate increases during inhalation and decreases when we exhale. Therefore, controlled exhaling is beneficial for singers who experience performance anxiety as it helps reduce the symptom of a racing heart. As singing is performed on the exhale, it’s an activity encouraged to help reduce anxiety and increase a sense of calm.

I is for Inferior

When considering anatomical directions, ‘inferior’ means towards the lower part of the body or structure. For example, the chin is inferior to the nose as it is closer to the lower part of the body.

J is for Jaw Stop

We can stop the jaw from moving by placing an object (like a finger, cork or bone prop) between the top and bottom teeth. Singing teachers often use this exercise when training the articulators to work independently, allowing the tongue freedom of mobility without being influenced by the jaw.

K is for Kinaesthetic Learners

‘Kinaesthetic learners’ are people who learn more effectively through physical engagement in an activity (compared to viewing visual aids or listening to audio, for example). A VARK questionnaire can help us determine the most effective learning method for our clients and tailor our teaching approach accordingly.

L is for Lips

The position of the lips influences the shape of the vocal tract. For example, the ‘Instagram pout’ tends to lengthen the tract and darken the tone, whereas ‘smile lips’ shortens the tract and brightens the tone.

M is for MOV T

A ‘manually occluded vocal tract’ or MOV T is where a singer covers their mouth with their hand to create an air-resisted blockage. The sound escapes through the nose and, when the hand is partially released, through gaps around the edges of the occlusion; a useful SOVT as the articulation of text is still possible.

N is for Nasality

Air that is sent up into the nasal cavity and escapes through the nostrils will create a nasal sound. A depressed soft palate and the tongue can also be a cause of nasality. Sometimes we need a bit of it, though, for example, when we’re articulating nasal consonants such as N and M.

O is for Open Questions

Unlike closed questions (which usually elicit one-word answers), open questions

“encourage someone’s participation and involvement, which helps us to explore their thoughts and ideas”. Therefore, the vocal coach will find it more effective to ask more open questions than closed when working with clients.

P is for Posterior

Meaning towards the back of the body or structure.

Q is for Quack

A silly, playful sound that, due to its ‘twangy’ quality, can boost resonance.

R is for Resonance

Resonance is like a lunchtime meal deal - you get more for less. Resonance is a boost of a sound’s upper frequencies, which makes it seem louder but with no extra effort from the singer. Bargain! In vocal training, resonant sounds are beneficial for helping ‘yelly’ singers find a full sound without the added labour.

S is for Semi-Supine

This is a position (often used in the Alexander Technique) where the singer lies on their back, knees pointing to the ceiling and soles of the feet flat on the floor. Semi-supine is an efficient position for helping to release tension. Used regularly this position in cases of vocal strain as it immediately relieves stress from the neck muscles.

T is for Tryptophan

Tryptophan is an amino acid and ‘a precursor to serotonin and melatonin’. As serotonin stabilises our mood and melatonin helps control our sleep cycle, including tryptophan in our diet makes sense. (After all, our overall health impacts our vocal health.) Tryptophan is in cheese, eggs, and pumpkin seeds.

U is for Unvoiced

Sounds that have no vocal fold vibration, such as in F and S (both of which are also fricatives).

V is for Vocal Fry

That crackling, popping sound found below our lowest pitched note is vocal fry. It is a vocal register of its own, and is efficient for reducing breathlessness, finding efficient vocal fold adduction, training chest voice and cooling down.

W is for Whine

We’re talking about the ‘moaning child on a long car journey’ type, not pinot grigio, I’m afraid. A ‘whiney’ sound is beneficial for developing the upper range as it activates the Cricothyroid (CT) muscle and encourages more cartilaginous adduction (closure at the back of the glottis).

X is for Cross-Training

Okay, I cheated there! Cross-training generally relates to training the voice for versatility across many different styles.

Y is for YAH-YAH

An efficient sound for the singer to use in order to sense the bouncing movement of the back of the tongue (or dorsum; see above). Combined with a fixed or hanging jaw, the

YAH-YAH can be applied when training tongue mobility and articulation decoupling.

Z is for Zygomatic Bone
AKA 'the cheekbone'.