

## **Better Singing by Christmas!**

Six 15-minute lessons to jump-start your rehearsals

by Carole Brewer

Christmas is almost here and singing will play a central role in your church's celebration. Starting now, why not incorporate these challenging but fun, 15-minute warm-up lessons into your weekly rehearsals?

With the suggestion of improving singing techniques, also comes the consideration of putting too much pressure on your faithful volunteers. After all, isn't choir supposed to be fun; a mid-week break from work and family pressures; an outlet? Absolutely! All of those reasons apply but the foremost purpose for being in a church choir or worship team is to serve our Lord and effectively minister the gospel. Each "minister" can be blessed and be a blessing when he or she grows spiritually and in musical expertise.

Taking your singers to the next level requires that they re-think how they sing. The following lesson plans will help your singers to take a look at their vocal habits, improve their overall tone quality, and sing lyrics that are understood by the congregation.

### **Week One: Breathing**

Filling up the lungs is comparable to filling up your car's gas tank. The more air, the farther you go.

**Practice 1:** (Need an open floor space or carpeted area for this practice.) Lie down, relax, close eyes, and feel your abdomen rise and fall while breathing. Stand up and try to duplicate that feeling. If time, repeat the exercise and assign as "homework".

**Practice 2:** Stand with a straight spine, ears positioned directly above the shoulders, and chin parallel to the floor. Place hands on each side of the rib cage and feel the lungs expand when taking in a deep breath of air. Re-position one hand in front of the mouth and blow a small steady stream of air onto the index finger for as long as possible.

### **Week Two: Relaxing the Jaw**

Singing with tension comes naturally because of our tension-laden language, English. It's natural to want to "bite down" on lyrics as they come out of the mouth. We do that when we ar-ti-cu-late speech. The difference is that in singing, biting down on words usually ruins a beautiful tone. The objective for this week is to introduce singers to the concept of relaxing the tongue, teeth, and jaw.

Try to keep this exercise fun and light-hearted. When a singer tries too hard or intensely concentrates to get it right, the outcome is often counterproductive. The concept of relaxing the mouth and having the tongue seemingly float when singing offers a drastic change to most untrained singers. Asking singers to embrace this concept can create for them a mental brick

wall that blocks their ability to get to the next level of proficiency. Make this important practice count but keep it light and non-threatening!

**Practice 1:** Place hands along the sides of the face, relax the jaw, and say “Ah”. Let the weight of the hands help to relax the jaw muscles, keep the jaw dropped, and the mouth open. Say a no tension, sighing “Ah” several times.

**Practice 2:** Speak the following words, “Hello \_\_\_\_\_”

(Make it personal, use a multi-syllable name in from someone in your group, a name with hard consonants in the middle, i.e. Harold)

1. Say it with normal speech, “Hello Harold”

Now, say it with a flabby tongue and a Novocain mouth, “Heh-woh Haa-wold.”

The purpose of this practice is to establish that **SINGING IS NOT LIKE SPEAKING OR YELLING!**

### **Week Three: Producing Resonance**

In the front of our faces, we have sinus cavities. Though very irritating when infected, these spaces under the skin serve the fantastic purpose of giving the unique bell-like quality to the human voice. Acoustical guitars have sound boxes and we have sinus (resonating) cavities. When the singer understands their presence and function, he or she can intentionally focus the tone in the front of the face and produce brilliant sounds. Doing so will also help keep the singer from: 1. producing dull and flat tones in the back of the throat and 2. becoming hoarse. Those who already speak with resonance will find this easy while others will be challenged.

Again, keep these exercises light and keep the humor going!

**Practice 1:** Say a sharp “Quack!” When speaking this word, focus the tone into the bridge of the nose rather than low in the mouth. Feel the slight tension on each side of the nose as you practice this. Repeat. Have someone listen to you to confirm that you’re “quacking” into the front of the face.

**Practice 2:** Sing on single, comfortable tone: mmee, mmeh, mmah, mmo, mmoo When singing, focus the tone into the “quack” position. Change the pitch and repeat.

If the position is correct, the tone will sound slightly thin and distant to the singer. The listener will hear a brighter, more pleasant sound with better pitch.

### **Week Four: Coordinating/Reinforcing New & Better Vocal Habits**

**Practice 1:** Stand tall with a straight spine. For better balance, knees are slightly flexed and feet are not perfectly parallel.

Each time a breath is taken in, the singer must consciously do the following, simultaneously, until the coordinated actions become second nature: Practice filling the lungs with air, pushing down on the diaphragm, and relaxing the tongue, teeth, and jaw all at once. Instantly

afterwards, focus the tone in the front of the face and sing. Practice singing a descending five-tone scale on *mah* while focusing the tone in the front of the face. Repeat several times at different pitches to reinforce the coordination of these components.

**Practice 2:** Singer's vowels: Discuss singer's vowels (ah, eh, o, oo, ee) vs. the vowels we speak in the English language ( a, e, i, o, u) Ask the singers to say each and to feel the difference between the tight vowels used in speech vs. the relaxed-jaw vowels used in singing.

## **Week Five: Coordinating/Reinforcing New & Better Vocal Habits**

**Practice 1:** Stand with best posture for appearance and lung capacity. Each time a breath is taken in, the singer must consciously do the following, simultaneously, until the coordinated actions become second nature: Practice filling the lungs with air, pushing down on the diaphragm, and relaxing the tongue, teeth, and jaw all at once. Instantly afterwards, focus the tone in the front of the face and sing. Practice singing an ascending-descending five-tone scale on *mah* while focusing the tone in the front of the face. Repeat several times with several starting pitches to reinforce the coordination of these components.

### **Practice 2: Introducing diphthongs**

Diphthongs are single syllable words containing two to three actual sounds. The amount of time taken to sing words is generally longer than the time it takes to speak them. When the singer stretches all of the sounds of a word over the length of the musical tone(s) being sung, the words are more controlled, sound better, and are easier to understand.

Practice saying and singing the combination of sounds embedded in the following words.

I – sung “ah-ee”

you (also u) – sung “ee-oo”

your – sung “ee-or”

we – sung “oo-ee”

what – sung “oo-uht

where – sung “oo-air”

when – sung “oo-ehn”

why – sung “oo-ah-ee”

way – sung “oo-eh-ee”

how – sung “hah-oo”

yes -- sung “i-ehs”

### **Practice 3: Singing diphthongs found in your Christmas selections**

You'll find these common words in the actual songs you're rehearsing. Ask your vocalists to practice one or two of the phrases paying particular attention to the new way in which these words are sung.

## **Week Six: Using Diphthongs - Practices for Eliding Words**

### **Practice 1: Reinforce the presence of diphthongs in your lyrics and practice singing them**

Find additional phrases from your Christmas repertoire to practice.

### **Practice 2: Elide because...**

**"THE ENDS OF THE WORDS ARE JUST AS IMPORTANT AS THE BEGINNINGS!"**

**Eliding** is the art of attaching words together in each phrase for well-articulated singing. When words are elided, every vowel and every consonant, from beginning to end, can be understood by the listener. A consonant at the end of the first word slides onto the beginning of the next and so on throughout the phrase...kind of like a cheesy combination pizza with everything melted together! Though it seems strange and complicated at first, developing this skill makes

singing easier and more enjoyable. The audience reaps the benefits because they can understand the song!

Phrases to practice eliding:

**1. Say: And His Kingdom will have no end. Amen.**

Now, elide this phrase by sliding the first sound into the second, the second sound into the third, and so on.

Sing on a single tone: **An-diz-kee-ngduh-mwi-la-vno eh-n-d. Ah-meh-nn.**

**2. Say: Shout joyfully unto God**

Sing: **Shah-oo-t-jo-ee-fuh-lee-ah-ntoo-Gah-d**

**3. Say: My Savior and Lord**

Sing: **Mah-ee Seh-vee-o-ra-nd-Lo-rd**

**4. Say: Away in a Manger**

Sing: **Uh-oo-eh-ee i-na Meh-njuh-r**

**5. Say: I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day**

Sing: **Ah-ee hur-dthuh behl-zahn Chri-smahs Deh-ee**

Though eliding takes a lot of careful thinking before it becomes second-nature, finding a few key phrases to practice can be a great help in the overall sound of your Christmas presentation.

Preparing for better singing by Christmas does require some re-thinking and new ways for rehearsing. Take the lead or ask your experienced volunteers to present these weekly fifteen-minute "warm ups". Your singers will feel more confident with the new skills they'll be acquiring.

Most importantly, may your Christmas celebration reflect the glory of the Lord and the power of His word. God bless you as you plan and prepare!

*"David told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brothers as singers to sing joyful songs, accompanied by musical instruments..." 1 Chronicles 15:16 NIV*

**Rejoice and sing His praises!**

## Carole Brewer Bio

**Carole Brewer** exchanged her goal to sing on the Broadway stage for using her giftedness to proclaim the truth of God's word. Her unique presentations are a seamlessly interwoven blend of dynamic heartfelt messages and Carole's beautiful songs of worship. For audio and video samples of Carole's music, speaking topics for women, and information about her innovative voice training methods for church volunteers, visit [www.CaroleBrewer.com](http://www.CaroleBrewer.com)

Carole also serves as West Coast Regional Director for Women in Christian Media. Learn how you can be a part of a network of media professionals who serve God both in vision and purpose at [www.WomeninChristianMedia.org](http://www.WomeninChristianMedia.org)

***Cookin' Up a Song*** voice workshops by Carole Brewer are presented at the Association of Christian School's International, the Bay Area Church Workers (BASS) Convention, adult education classes, and women's retreats. Carole has a BA in Music, an MA in Education, and teaching credentials in music, adult education, and special education.