

Mask up and sing out!  
Singing with Masks  
A seminar for the BCCF  
October 1, 2021

First, I'd like to thank Brigid and the BCCF for inviting me to talk to you about singing and masks.

The first thing you need to do, of course, is to find a mask that works for you. You already know there are now many people and places who make them, and it's also become quite an industry, so there are many different kinds of disposable ones that are quite acceptable, plus all sorts of accessories for your mask :)

Over the last few months I've acquired quite a collection, including different kinds of plastic or silicone inserts and frames to keep the mask away from your face and give you more space. This of course is quite important for breathing, especially if you're a singer.

[show / compare masks and inserts]

Although singing with a mask could cause you to develop unhealthy compensatory habits, there is also the potential of becoming more mindful of vocal technique and developing or strengthening healthy singing habits that will improve your voice production, with or without the mask.

Now, of course you have noticed a few things when you sing with your mask:

1. It feels like your voice is contained in the mask, and doesn't project.
2. There is very little acoustical response from the space around you.
3. It's more difficult to open your mouth without the mask shifting.
4. Reduced decibel levels, or in layman's terms, your **sound feels much softer**
5. **Attenuated Frequencies.** In other words, there are some frequencies which don't project as easily - These are in the range from 2000-7000 Hz. The UNVOICED consonants fall in this range -in order of frequency these are - **ch, sh, then p, h, g, followed by k, and then f, th, s.** The higher the frequency, the harder it is to hear them. It's why most people seem to be mumbling when speaking through the mask. You need to increase attention to the initial and final positions of these sounds. Vowels and voiced consonants will always be perceived stronger and understood better than unvoiced consonants, and this is also true without the mask.
6. **Diminished word boundaries.** In this case we need to compensate by being mindful of articulating the beginning and final sounds of each word. However, you need to also be watchful of habits that can hurt your voice, such as harsh or abrasive vocal onset or glottal stops, and trying to sing too loudly, and pushing your sound. More about this later

**7. Blocked facial cues.** We'll want to use our eyes more expressively and lift cheeks, or smile with the cheeks, which will also help with giving us an intent to the forward focus.

**Here are some things to watch for**

**1. Breath. The breath is most important, because that is the fuel for singing. Without the breath as energy, none of the points can be address in a healthy way, with energy and commitment.**

If the way you breathed was always important for singing, it is especially true, and doubly so, when using a mask. I have to say that I'm getting about 25% less air every time I breath, when I'm singing.

I don't feel this so much in regular wearing of the mask or regular speech, because I'm much more relaxed, so I'm not fighting the mask or the breath. When you are breathing to sing, with a mask, you must not panic and try to suck the air from the throat. This response is the opposite of what you're looking for - it basically closes the throat, in effect defeating the purpose of a more energetic breath.

It is CRUCIAL that you learn to use your costal breathing. That is, the impulse for the breath must be borne IN THE RIBS. What you need to do is MAKE SPACE for the breath, for the lungs to expand. My go-to trick has always been the sense of surprise, or the feeling of having to sneeze. Both these physiological responses **open the eyes, expand the sinuses**

**and the throat, lift the soft palate, drop the larynx, drop the diaphragm, and expand the back.**

These are ALL conditions for a proper, relaxed, deep, full breath. What they are not is NOISY, CONTRACTIVE, GASPY, RASPY, or PANICKY

**2. Louder is not better,** especially if you are using more air to get louder. For starters, louder never comes from pushing more voice, it's all about the resonance. So instead of volume, focus your attention on your resonance and articulatory precision. We will do some exercises in a few minutes.

**3. Clear vocal quality.** Work on improving the quality of your voice and your phonation. Phonation is the moment of inception of the sound, when the cords are drawn together and vibrate. Of course, this depends on a number of synchronized systems working together, but the best short cut I have found is to notice how you speak, easily and clearly, with a set intention. "Oh! Hello! Come here! I don't know...." You can try a million phrases, you can read a book, a newspaper, an invoice out loud, and notice how clearly and easily your cords phonate.

Get in touch with the sensations, and then sing that way. Too many of us change the way we produce our sound when singing, thinking that the 'singing' voice is different from the 'speaking' voice, and nothing is further from the truth.

Along with a clear voice quality, is the efficiency and clarity of the speech articulation. Too many times, when we ask singers

to articulate well, we get this kind of response. .... Efficient diction and articulation is not in the exaggeration of the vowel shapes, its in the crispness and efficiency of the consonants. What we need to, is learn to make our consonants strong, crisp, clear and with the most efficient use of air, and that implies a certain level of relaxed tension.

This involves learning, intimately, how consonants are made in the mouth, and with what surfaces. Consonants involve TWO SURFACES, always. That's why we describe them as dento-labial, or bi-labial, or alveolar (which includes the tongue). It doesn't matter what they're called. It only matters that you know how you make them. Sometimes, various consonants are made in the same place in the mouth, what changes is the amount of pressure, or voiced/unvoiced.

For example.

B (P) (M) (W)

TH (TH)

C (G) (KH)

D (T) (L) (N)

F (V)

S (Z)

SH / R / CH / ZH ... Not exactly the same place, but different tension, and the tongue changes slightly

Phrases like

DOUBLE BUBBLE GUM BUBBLES DOUBLE

BIPPITI BOPPITI BIPITI BOO

## A BIG BLACK BUG BIT A BIG BLACK BEAR

Are much easier to sing/speak when the consonants aren't breathy, wasteful, and have the correct amount and quality of tension

Vowels are also more contained than we think them

Notice that you can go from A > E > I without the need to spread your mouth. The tongue needs to do this work. It rises and, widens and moves slightly forward in the mouth.

And you can go from A > O > U without moving your tongue, just by rounding the lips and gathering in front.

So really, there is very little movement required for good diction. It's more about awareness of position, shape and degree of tension.

**4. Attention to Unvoiced consonants.** As I mentioned earlier, you need to pay more attention to these. And if you become intimately acquainted with the consonants and the qualities as I outlined before, this would become second nature.

**5. Vocal hygiene.** Stay hydrated, don't scream or raise your voice for a prolonged period, voice alcohol and too much coffee. And before you sing, probably stay away from sugar, milk, and lemon too, will cause phlegm in your throat.

## CULTIVATE YOUR ATTENTION TO PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

**1. Resonance.** Sing by feel, not by ear. Concentrate on the sensations of resonance and vibration

2. Use the mask to help you focus your intention in the front - the mask :) It's this focus that projects your sound, not the volume you push for
3. Stay aware of the **energy and intention in your abdominal area**, as well as your **ribs and back**. **For me, this is infinitely more important, as maintaining your back open will somatically engage your abdominal wall, but the reverse is NOT true.** Your abdomen should feel toned, but not tight. The sensation that you get in your abdominal area when you have a surprised reaction or when you are ready sneeze should remain consistent while you sing.
4. Learn to look for and enjoy **looseness in your tongue and jaw**. Feel the space you create when you inhale through the surprise or sneeze, and then maintain that space while you sing. When you work at becoming intimately familiar with the consonants, then your tongue and jaw can stay loose while articulating them, just like any activity that you do a lot and nurture, and which becomes second nature.

### **EXERCISES (from the Susan Butterfoss article)**

1. Hum on /m/ and slide your voice up and down slowly focusing on the vibrations and resonance. Don't think about MOVING THE PITCH, think about MOVING THE RESONANCE.
2. Use phonemes with voiced consonants, such as MA, NA, VA, ZA, ZHA or any other vowel. Feel the resonance of the

consonant and strive to maintain it as you transition to the vowel.

3. Find simple phrases that use these consonants and maintain the resonance throughout (*my mother makes marvellous muffins... maybe my mommy may go to Miami and maybe my mommy may not...*)

## RESPIRATORY EXERCISES

1. Stand or sit upright. As you breathe feel SHOULDERS and CHEST loosen and rise off the lungs. Try to feel the grounded in feet and pelvic floor.
2. Make little gentle barking sounds (OW, OW, OW) or ha! Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! Ho! And feel the supportive tension in your upper/lower abdominal wall
3. Practice voiced/unvoiced single repetitive sounds (f, f, f, f, or v, v, v, or z, z, z, zh zh zh , s, s, s,) if voiced, transition to triads, arpeggios or musical phrases. Feel the dynamic tension throughout.

## PHONATION

1. Using speech level, Choose a closed vowel and make a soft sound. Oh! Ah! Feel the mechanism of the phonation, both in the throat, in the belly, in the resonators, and even the breath prior. Try all vowels. When you have a sense that you know how it happens, then begin hearing a pitch in the exclamation. DON'T CHANGE the way you make the sound. DON'T TRY to HELP the mechanism. Just speak!



**2.** Perform a vocal Tongue trill (rrrrrr) on a comfortable pitch , loose and semi-closed mouth. Slide up and down. Then try moving from the trill to an open sustained vowel. If you can't roll your tongue, you can do this with a lip trill (raspberry).

## LARYNGEAL RELAXATION

Yawn and phonate on the exhale, like so. Slowly slide down the pitch, keeping the jaw, tongue and larynx relaxed.

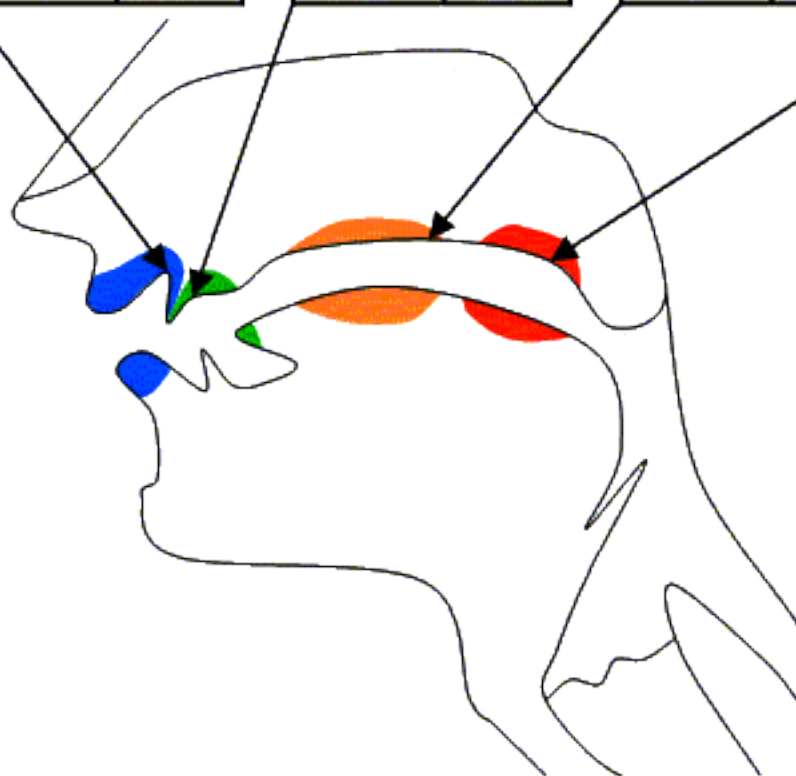
**labial****dental****palatal****velar**

D \ V	-	+
·	*p*	*b*
-	*f*	*v*
~	*m*	

D \ V	-	+
·	*t*	*d*
-	*θ*	*ð*
~	*n*	

D \ V	-	+
·	*k*	*g*
-	*ç*	*j*
~	*ŋ*	

D \ V	-	+
·	*k*	*g*
-	*x*	*ɣ*
~	*ŋɣ*	

**D** duration

· stop

- continuant

**V** voicing

- voiceless

+ voiced

~ nasal

