

Daily Vocal Exercises

C. Parcels

1. 2. ppp
 EPA i-e-e-a-a-o-u

3. 2 ff spp rit.

5. 6. mp
 2 2 2 2 2
 e e e e e
 i i i i i
 a a a a a
 u u u u u

7. (p) or one breath

8. 9. ff spp f

10. 11. prest
 e e e e a a a

12. 13. Grand Scale

14. 14. Queen of Scales

Daily Vocal Exercises

Elizabeth: The point of the daily exercises is to develop a routine which you carry out daily and learn how to exercise your voice properly. To learn them takes regular lessons, preferably weekly. Depending on the aptitude of the student these exercises take months to learn and years to master.

There are 14 scales on this page. These are the exercises I relied on as a student and during my career. Each voice type should begin the exercises from a middle note of the voice, in the center of their range.

Each exercise has an arrow at the end, meaning you repeat the exercise a half step up or down. The exercises begin with a double line and end with a double line. Exercise #2 goes for 4 measures for instance. The exercises work each aspect of the voice and technique in an even fashion.

Exercise #1 is a *Messa di voce*, which means crescendo-decrescendo on one breath, on one note singing through all of the vowels.

The vowels are written in the symbols used in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). I believe singers should be familiar on those symbols. They resemble letters of the alphabet but represent specific vowels and specific sounds.

The exercises are arranged on the page in a good order for performing them. The first several exercises can be a good warm-up. Never strain in range or dynamic. Keep the voice in a comfortable range.

The first athletic exercise is #5. This is a key exercise because of its switch from staccato to legato. It works through your range up and down on each vowel. This exercise can take up to 20 minutes to complete because of the repetitions on each of the 5 vowels and working up and down the range. It should be sung athletically but never with strain.

#6 is a relaxing downward exercise. It is good to alternate between exercises that go with energy upward and the next to be relaxed on a downward scale. These patterns help balance the voice.

It's important to work all the notes evenly with enough variety to avoid overworking any aspect of the voice.

From exercise #7 and onward the purpose is to work on flexibility. Triplets are difficult to coordinate so they get lots of practice. Many singers do quad 16th's more easily than the triplets. When triplets come up in the music you want to be well grounded in them so they are even and accurate. Triplets are revealing about technique.

Exercise #9 is a registration exercise. Sing in the lower range of your voice, kind of chesty on the un-ga. Then sing the downward scale in a lighter registration, crescendo toward the bottom back to the lower registration.

These exercises should be guided by a good teacher who can demonstrate them.

The grand scale #13 is a more advanced exercise that helps practice and demonstrates the unity of your registration and voicing. You should be able to sing the octave scales up and down without a lot of audible breaks in the voice.

Lilly Lehman called #14 the “queen of scales.” It is two octaves over your entire range sung in one breath on “ah.” This is an advanced exercise. When you can perform this scale well you will be well along towards the goals of belle canto singing. The “ah” vowel should stay the mostly the same throughout the range.

So go through these exercises as they are, transposed for your voice. They can be varied some or adapted to the music you are studying. A warm up should reflect what you are scheduled to sing that day. On a performance day you might just warm up some. On a lesson day, you might warm up longer if the teacher wants you prepared for something. Be ready to adapt the exercises to suit your needs.

This page of exercises is more a guide than a dogma. Keep your exercises balanced so that your voice trains evenly throughout the range. Spend more time with exercises than with repertoire each day.

Charlie: What was the first exercise you got at your first voice lesson?

Elizabeth: We sang 5-note scales, sometimes slow, until I could reach the notes accurately. A major, 5-note scale, in a major key, is more difficult to sing than one might think. The first thing you have to do is learn your scales so that the intervals come out in tune.

Charlie: Is there a particular scale on your list for that?

Elizabeth: The closest would be the 5-note scale #5. You begin with a staccato repeat of the first note, one, two, three, four. Then sing the 5-note scale legato. The legato part of the exercise is the beginner part. The staccato adds an athletic aspect that works the breathing muscles and coordinates the attack with the breath. #5 is really a breath exercise with vowels. It provides you with the muscle conditioning in the staccato. The quick change to the legato is difficult for some singers.

Charlie: What exercises were in the first homework assignment from your first voice lesson?

Elizabeth: Five note scales and an octave scale.

Charlie: How much time did the teacher want you to spend on those?

Elizabeth: 20 minutes to an hour. At the time, I was 16. She didn't want me over singing so she felt my practice time should be about an hour and that's what I did. My first two teachers were in two sessions at Interlochen summer camp. There was Willis Patterson, professor emeritus from U of M today, a wonderful bass. The other was Elizabeth Manion, a fabulous contralto, who was at U of M at the time but later moved to Bloomington Indiana. It's good to find someone who has a good performance record and is perhaps even still performing.

Charlie: Are your very earliest exercises on this list?

Elizabeth: These are the exercises that followed me throughout my career. When I was on a daily routine I tended to do these exercises in this order. These exercises kept my voice fit and maintained.

Charlie: What other voice teachers did you have?

Elizabeth: I spent my senior year of high school at Interlochen Arts Academy. My teacher then was Janice Harshane, she described herself as a spinto soprano. I was at New England Conservatory for 7 years and Mark Pearson, a bass baritone, was my voice teacher for that entire period. After that, I felt confident enough as a singer that I never had another voice teacher. I consider him my teacher. I also participated in lots of master classes where I learned important things. I worked with coaches and conductors who taught me a lot.

By the time you are working with coaches and conductors you need to be in good command of your singing and able to deliver the music the way they ask.

Charlie: I've heard you say some of the books you've read with exercises needed to have more explanation of what the exercise does for the singer. I'd like you to go through the exercises and explain why each is on the list.

Elizabeth: #1 makes you take a good singer's breath, to attack the tones cleanly on a soft dynamic, on an e, which is a high vowel, to crescendo using breath support from e to ah and to decrescendo with good breath support, from ah to "ou." This is a good warm up, the Mesa di voce which is Italian for crescendo-decrescendo on one breath. This exercise combines voice placement with the vowels but principally good management of the breath. You are using a tone on a breath exercise. In the beginning, it might be a short duration. As you get better at it, you can make the exercise quite long, as your breathing improves.

#2 begins on a pianissimo on a central note. Begin with a major 3rd. It's all sung on ah. This gives the voice a short stretch. Then increase the interval to a perfect 4th. Then in the 3rd breath the interval increases to a perfect 5th and then two a 6th. Following that repeat a quick octave followed by a slow octave. This is a stretching exercise so the voice can move up and down without strain.

#3 The quick octave is on a forte. The second octave is subito piano which is sudden softer, retard, and sing a slow octave down making sure that every note is centered and in good intonation and placement. This is an upward working exercise.

#4 is the opposite of #3. You start up and work down and up again, a mirror image of number 3. On this one you are practicing a portamento first, which is a carrying the voice down. It's different from the glissando. So, portamento down, a quick octave up, and then a glissando coming down. The voice is in its natural state is more of a glissando instrument than melodic or intervolic instrument. The glissando, or slide, is a healthy and relaxing way to warm up the voice. So you are practicing a portamento scale then a glissando to relax and worked from the top down.

#5 is the athletic one. This is a fitness exercise. It should be sung with its aerobic nature in mind. It's an up and down. You work it from the center of your voice upward to a point that is high but not strained and then work it back down again, change vowels to the next one on the list the do the same repetition up and then down. Continue until you've done all 5 vowels. If you do the staccato with good energy and can change to the legato on each one it should put your breathing muscles and attack muscles through

their paces. You might feel muscle fatigue but should not push until there is vocal fatigue. You might find your solar plexus and abdominal muscles get tired. That's the whole point. To sing it all could take 20 minutes and it should feel like you've had a good workout.

#6 is downward triplets, meant to be sung easily, not strained, with a mezzo piano. You aren't in a hurry on this one. It's a compensation for all the work of #5.

If you only sang the exercises through #6 you would have had an effective warmup for any singing assignment you are about to take on. Next come the flexibility exercises.

#7 is triplets upward sung presto then down. The breath in the middle is in parentheses because you will need that breath in the beginning. Eventually you will be singing it in one breath. This exercise works upward.

#8 is a 5-note scale plus a 9-note scale. It is variable in that you can change the shape and scope of those scales if you'd like. It's for flexibility. Every voice should be trained to sing quicker scales. Every voice has a use for the coloratura technique of flexibility on their melissmas. A melisma is a series of notes sung in quick succession on one breath.

#9 is a registration exercise to find the lower resonance in the chest and unify it with the higher resonances of the head. So on those first note in the chest you sing "un ga," take a breath and do a subito piano in head voice on the octave above then crescendo slowly down. During that downward scale you should be working to sing through and over the registrations so that you arrive back in the chest voice, from head voice, through your mixed voice and find your way through the registrations one note at a time. The notes should progress smoothly with a lot attention to what registration you are singing in on that particular note.

#10 is one I hear lots of singers do. This one is the opposite of #5 because it starts with a legato arpeggio and ends with staccato notes up and down and arpeggiated. I include some vowel work by starting on an e, moving to an eh, and then to an ah. Most of the time vocal exercises are best sung on a pure "ah" because that centers the voice well. It's a difficult vowel to sing. The "ah," without modification, is the best one to use.

#11 is another arpeggiated exercise using two different velocities on the same arpeggio to work it slow and fast. Again, this one is for flexibility and accuracy.

#12 is another relaxer after the more strenuous exercise. This one is just an octave "ya" glide starting at a comfortably somewhat high note, not strained, to relax the voice between strenuous exercises.

#13 the grand scale going up two octaves and back down again. The goal here is to have the two octaves unified in their voicing and registration, because in two octaves you'll travel through chest, mixed, and head and back down again, not emphasizing the difference in sound of any of the registers but trying to make them sound the same. It's somewhat the same as voicing a piano. The goal is for the entire range to sound like one instrument.

#14 takes things to a new level, the same two octaves up and down but twice on one breath. That takes mastery of breathing, registration, flexibility, legato, everything you've got, to sing that double scale twice on one breath. Doing this one masterfully demonstrates everything we've talked about.

I used these core exercises throughout my career for warm-ups, training, and maintenance. We are trying to keep the voice even, so that it is a unified instrument.

Exercises are a bore to some people but they shouldn't be. They should be fascinating. The exercises are what makes us singers. If you are bored with the exercises you might be in the wrong business.