

Pitch Accuracy Teaching Method by Ellie Hallett
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Please ask me questions if you have any queries.

Also send me feedback on how you go.

I thought up this method in the middle of the night a year or so ago for a piano student who was desperately unable to sing in tune for an upcoming piano exam where singing was a part of the test. It worked so well that I started a 'tone deaf' choir for adults, and after about ten minutes they were singing a note in unison. It went on from there. After eight weeks of fun and lots of graded repertoire, they were able to join my regular choir. The result? They sang Mozart's Ave Verum in parts with my more experienced choir, accompanied by a chamber orchestra in a performance for the state governor and an invited audience. Result? A life-changing experience.

Below is my Learn to Sing in Tune method. Adapt it to suit your needs, and use your own words to explain what to do. I have used first person to help you visualise the whole procedure.

Let's Start at the Very Beginning Be a fire engine and let your voice go up and down from middle to high, down to low and back to high smoothly. Take a breath when you need to. Now walk around the room and move your arms up and down to match the up and down pitch of your voice to feel the freedom it gives you. Let your voice ring out unrestricted. Be confident.

The Big Yawn Exercise Come closer to me and stand in a loose group i.e. not too close together to allow room for your arms to move without bumping into anyone. This silent yawn exercise is where you open your mouth and turn it into the longest, multi-breathed yawn you have ever made. Stretch out your arms to expand your chest while you do this. Imagine your mouth as a huge cave. Let

your tongue relax on the floor of your cave but open your throat so your breath can go down slowly into your lungs and back out again gently over and over a few times as you keep yawning in and out for the same yawn. Stop yawning when you see my signal. (Wide-opened arms come down slowly, curved fingers, thumb and pointers touch, and then hold still near your shoulders – or devise your own signal. Watch choral conductors on YouTube to learn some starting and stopping techniques. Try them out at home in front of a mirror.)

Breath Control Hold straight fingers close to your mouth and exhale evenly for my eight counts. Feel the light flow air on your fingers, checking that it doesn't fade during the eight beats. Realise that you don't need a huge intake of breath to do this, but rather, you can control the airflow by calculating the distance to comfortably get to eight without expiring/falling on the floor. *(Start at a lower number if eight is too many.)*

Feeling the Beat Count out loud for six even beats using a firm speaking voice while breathing out. Watch my hand going up because it will tell you when to inhale before you begin. This also ensures we all start together. My hand will continue to give you the beat while we count together to sound like one voice rather than lots of individual voices. Also read my facial expressions as my eyes will communicate messages to you. My hand and facial expressions will tell you when to stop. *(Do several of these. The conducting helps students feel the beat - a new experience for many.)*

Bovine Bliss Say in a sing-song voice *(to develop vocal pitch awareness)* the words **How now brown cow** to my hand beat. Do this several times, watching my hand to give you the tempo or speed of what I want. *(Demonstrate first.)* These words are good because apart from *n* in brown, each one ends with a vowel. Float your voice and breath on the vowels. Stretch them or shrink them for a slower or faster tempo.

Devine Bovines! This time when you say **How now brown cow**, stop on the word where my hand indicates this to you, but keep the sound going on that syllable. By sustaining a spoken pitch, sung pitch will be discovered. Do this several times to lock this physical sensation into each person's mindset. For a student unable to stay on a note, redo the breathing, sing with him/her/them to do this 'cross over' from a spoken to a sung pitch. Play a note (e.g. D) on the piano and sing a firm, strong, even D using the mouth open cave technique explained above. Keep singing this sustained vowel to match my voice and the piano. Nod you head with smiling eyes to indicate that they are finding and singing this D in tune.

Your Inbuilt Microphone or Kangaroo Ears. Have students cup their hands behind their ears to better hear their own voice. *(This can bring about a miraculous understanding of pitch.)* Do this until singing becomes a more instant 'I've found the note'. *(Keep playing the note over and over and singing it so that the sound isn't lost, or better still, use an organ or violin sound on a digital keyboard because it will sustain the pitch better than a piano.)* Next, sing with and without the piano to begin the important auditory part of singing in tune – learning how to really listen.

Sing made-up silly words, words from a poem or nursery rhyme etc just on the note D above Middle C. Students can look at a partner while singing to intensify these listening skills. Encourage them to use their Kangaroo Ears Microphone. For variety, do these with a wide distance of physical space between you and students e.g. you at the front and students spread out at the back of the room to develop more accurate listening skills, then coming together then moving apart again. This helps your singers to hear other voices and sing with them to get used to blending with others. Partners (duets). trios, quartets, quintets are good fun as movement activities. Walk around with them as well, so everyone is singing.

When they are confident, add the note E, and then alternate D and E. (*Only add a new note when you can hear that students are ready. Do lots of repetition in different ways. In the first lesson you may only do one note and for ten minutes as the total lesson.*)

Am I right or wrong? Have everyone sitting to have a rest from standing. You play a note on the piano/violin/organ while everyone listens. You then sing a glissando note (a slight fire engine sound gliding slowly up and down) and then stop and hold a note either in tune, widely out of tune, or slightly sharp or flat with the note is repeatedly played. (Also have students play the piano note, even if they have never touched a keyboard before.)

Students do a thumbs up for yes or thumbs down for no to let you know if they think your sung note and the instrumental note are in tune with each other. Observe those who are correct and incorrect, and build on the results by doing more of the same but start by being widely out of tune, and gradually come in closer to being spot on in tune. Work on this one note until everyone or most students are correct and then make up some words for everyone to sing on this note repeated, such as ‘How are you today?’ ‘I am feeling well/hungry/musical’ and similar. Be creative. Individual singers may like to lead the group for echo singing or questions and responses.

Singing posture and other matters Stand as if you have a string pulling you up straight. Draw a stick person with a string going from the top of their head straight up to a drawn ceiling. Keep an open throat and relaxed tongue. Stretch vowels and enunciate consonants clearly – especially those at the ends of words. Never force your voice to sing loudly or high without knowing how to do this correctly. Make up and find a collection of simple two or three note songs. Examples: *Merrily We Roll Along, Hot Cross Buns, Frere Jacques/Come to Dinner, Nursery Rhymes* - but take care with *Twinkle twinkle as it has a wide*

interval for the second Twinkle twinkle. However, this can be a very good listening and singing activity. Sing Solomon Grundy from the Let's Sing Book on my website. Discount price if you send me an email request. Teaching Book and/or Children's Songbook/Reader. See my website for Look inside each book.

Gradually extend the group's repertoire. Do lots of echo singing where you sing a short improvised phrase on one or two for students to echo. Keep everything cheerful and unstressed.

Add lots of encouragement, enjoyment and praise because they are an essential part of this teaching method.

Moving on: Write the first two words, (doh and ray) of the solfa scale vertically on a white board or large piece of cardboard. Using these solfa words, sing improvised melodies of two notes only on D and E

e.g. *doh doh ray ray doh ray doh.* The group echoes your melody while you point to the solfa words. Gradually add to the scale from low to high until you have the entire solfa scale to work with.

doh

te

la

soh

far

me

ray

doh

Do more complicated echo phrases where you sing solo while indicating your solfa notes with your hand, after which the students sing the same phrase while following your hand only.

Next big step: Do some solfa-pointing silently where students then sing what you have pointed to. This will help develop their aural skills and inner ear.

Build a song repertoire. Nursery Rhymes for every age group are perfect for continuing the musical journey in learning how to sing in tune. Repetition and familiarity help lock in pitch accuracy.

(A collection of songs will be added to www.musicworks.net.au by Saturday 24th November, 2023.)

Comments or questions:

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