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VOCALS
STARTER PACK

A Beginners Guide to Singing

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A BEGINNERS GUIDE TO SINGING

Welcome, one and all, to the Rockschool Beginners Guide to Singing. The brand new Rockschool Vocals syllabus for 2021 is here, and we want to make sure you can all get involved. Whether you're an experienced pro or new to the world of singing, this syllabus has something for you to get your teeth into.

But for today, beginners, we're looking at you! If you've ever wanted to take your vocals to the next level, take this as your sign to start. This pack has got everything you'll need to get to grips with being a vocalist, from prioritising the health of your vocal cords, to all the breathing exercises and warm up routines that you could ever need, to some repertoire which will leave you feeling invigorated and inspired.

So, without further ado, here's our Beginners Guide to Singing.

Good luck!





VOCAL HEALTH

It can be extremely easy to forget that, just like our guitars, violins, snare drums and trumpets, your vocal cords are also your instrument.

For a singer, maintaining vocal health is as important as maintaining an instrument for a musician. When our guitar strings snap we can buy a fresh set, a hole in the drum skin is no disaster (unless mid gig of course!), and the majority of our flutes, saxophones, trumpets and trombones can be restored like new. The vocal chords, however, are an instrument that cannot be replaced so easily.

As singers especially, if we want our voices to last a lifetime, we've got to take exceptional care. So, without further ado, here are our top tips for maintaining your vocal health!

Maintaining vocal health? Warm up!

This one may seem glaringly obvious – and is probably something that most of us would be aware of – but there are many things we can do to improve the humble warm up.

As well as the voice, we need to start off with the face; massage those cheeks, stick out your tongue as far as it can go, sigh like you mean it! This part can make you feel pretty silly, but make it fun! Be loud, be noisy and embrace the ridiculousness of it all! Enjoy the ooo's and ahhh's, the humming and the trilling, for at least 10 minutes.

More on this later!





VOCAL HEALTH CONTD.

Hydration, hydration!

Water is without doubt your voice's best friend. We spoke to vocal expert, Rebecca Woods, who told us that water is essential, and lots of it. She said,

"Your vocal cords are one of the last places to benefit from water intake, so drinking plenty and often is key!"

It's quite important that this water is room temperature too. Anything that's really cold or really hot can be a bit too harsh for your vocal cords, and our main priority is being gentle!

Herbal tea (obviously not when it's boiling hot!) is also great when you're bored of that H2O! You can find herbal teas designed especially for singers that contain smaller amounts of caffeine, too much of which can be dehydrating (hey, we never said this would be easy!). Whilst the flavour doesn't really matter, teas like peppermint and liquorice root are fantastic at getting through unwanted mucus (the glamour), so there's less need for you to be coughing or clearing the throat which can be pretty damaging.

On that note – dairy is not your friend the night before a gig! Chocolate and cheese are likely to clog your throat which is not what we want. Also, eating light meals before a performance is really important! We certainly need a full belly pressing down on the diaphragm!

Steaming / humidifying!

This is an interesting one, which you can think of almost like moisturising your vocal cords, like you might any other part of your body. There's nothing worse than dry air that makes our voices hoarse and coarse, so, regularly steaming your vocal cords, or keeping a humidifier in your living space, is what will keep those cords moist! Plus, your houseplants will LOVE it!

Stop singing!

Say what? Yep that's right, give it a rest sometimes!

Sometimes there is nothing better than simply giving your voice a day off, and research shows that we should do this regularly. Taking a bit of time off from singing (and speaking!) is really essential for rest and recovery - just like we'd need to rest our legs after climbing a mountain! This is called taking a "vocal nap", which, quite honestly, sounds lovely.





BREATHING EXERCISES

We all know how important breathing is (for obvious reasons!), but breath control is vital when singing. Good breathing technique is essential for singers as it aids tone, volume and stamina. Whilst there's an abundance of breathing exercises out there, we thought we'd compile some simple exercises to get you going so you can start thinking about improving your vocal quality and maintaining optimum vocal health.

First things first: Posture!

In its simplest form, great posture that optimises singing quality is to keep the chest high, which allows the diaphragm to expand, permitting comfortable breathing.

Here's some simple pointers to maximise your posture by putting your body at ease:

- Stand straight with body relaxed and your feet shoulder-width apart
- Tilt your weight forward slightly
- Relax your shoulders (they shouldn't be tensed and raised!)
- Make sure your chin is parallel to the floor and that your chest is elevated
- Keep your overall flexibility and make sure you can roll your head and bend your knees



Diaphragm, Diaphragm, Diaphragm!

It's the muscle that covers the bottom of your rib cage and, as a singer, it is your BEST. FRIEND. Unless instructed otherwise, we don't want to be breathing from the chest or the head, as breathing from the diaphragm allows for better breath control and supports the singing voice.

To make sure you've got a proper grip on breathing from your diaphragm, here's a little exercise to complete:

Stand up and place a hand on your stomach, around the point of your bellybutton. As you inhale, you should feel your belly rise, and as you exhale it will lower. As you do this, make sure your chest and shoulders stay relaxed and low.

Ok, now we've got our posture in order, let's get on with learning some breathing exercises.





Hissing

Prepare to release your inhibitions (hey, Natasha Bedingfield!) for this exercise, as at first, you're likely to feel a little bit silly. The idea with this is not to just sound like a hissing snake, but to train your body to last through long phrases of music. Let's have a go...

Breathe in for 6... Breathe out, while hissing, for 10.

Breathe in for 4... Breathe out, while hissing, for 16.

Breathe in for 2... Breathe out, while hissing, for 20.

Make sure your hissing sound is consistent and steady, and try not to release too much air in the first couple of counts, leaving yourself with nothing for the rest! Also, make sure the hissing sound stays at a consistent volume.

Snatching a Breath!

During a performance, we might not always have time to take a full, deep breath before the next line or phrase. We might have to snatch a bit of air that will get us through the next section before we can take a fuller breath later on. This is an important skill to master, and we'll show you how to practise it!

Count to 4, and on each count take in a fraction more air, like this:

Count 1: 25% full

Count 2: 50% full

Count 3: 75% full

Count 4: 100% full

Breathe out slowly for 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

Practising filling up your lungs slowly like this will help build your capacity and improve your technique!

Slow Breaths

Practising breathing slowly is an essential aspect of all breathing exercises, but in this exercise in particular will help you master it. Assuming your correct posture as we mentioned earlier, use a finger to close one of your nostrils and begin to breathe in. You'll notice that by having one nostril closed, your body can't take in as much air as quickly, causing your inhale to be slower. You'll also find that your diaphragm muscle is much more engaged with one nostril closed. Now, exhale through the other nostril and keep this cycle going.

Another way we can practise breathing slowly is by using the "straw" technique - this is exactly as it says on the tin! Just hold your mouth as though you are sucking through a straw, and breathe out like this too. The smaller gap for air will force you to take slower breaths.

BREATHING TIP FOR MANAGING PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

We want every musician to be in the most positive frame of mind when it comes to performing, especially during their Graded Music Exams.

We caught up with life coach and psychotherapist, James Banfield, from The Liberated Mind to provide teachers and students with the tools to understand, spot and overcome performance anxiety.

7:11 Breathing - When you feel nervous or anxious, breath in through your nose for 7 and out through your mouth for 11. The counting engages the logical part of your brain, and deep breathing increases oxygen and signals the body to calm down.

Read the full article with James [here](#).





WARM UPS

So, we've learnt how to take care of our voices, and how best to support it whilst we sing! But now it's time to make some NOISE. You might get some interesting stares from a passer-by at this stage, but this part is absolutely vital!

Humming

That's right! We've had hissing but now we're onto humming (we told you to release your inhibitions!). Humming is such a fantastic warm up because it's quite soft on your vocal chords, so it's a good idea to get some humming in at the beginning of your practice session!

Lip Buzz

As well as warming up the vocal chords, we also want to warm up the lips and the muscles around the mouth. A fantastic way of doing this is with a lip buzz – simply, taking in a breath and releasing the air whilst making your lips vibrate. Try throwing some pitch slides in there too!

Two-Octave Pitch Glide

This warm up is nice and easy. Simply pick your sound – any form of “eee” or “oooh” is perfect! – and enjoy gliding up and down a two-octave range. The two octaves are important as this will take you right through from your chest voice to your head voice and back again.

Unique New York, Unique New York!

I saw a kitten eating chicken in the kitchen. My cutlery cuts keenly and cleanly. No need to light a nightlight on a light night like tonight... Don't panic – we haven't gone completely mad (yet), we're just highlighting some of the classic tongue twisters which you should aim to slip into your warm up routine. Getting your mouth around some of these tricky sentences is really important for mastering pronunciation and diction.

Yawning

Believe it or not, yawning makes for an excellent vocal warm up. Yawning naturally drops your jaw, relaxes the throat muscles, relaxes the vocal chords and regulates oxygen. All of this in turn will improve your tone and improve your range. That's right, the humble yawn is more valuable than you'd ever thought!

Top tip: make it FUN! Warming up can sometimes feel like a chore, but we simply cannot miss it out. Make it as fun and exciting as possible and you'll never miss a warm up in your life!

Finding Your Range

Now that you're warmed up, it might be a good time to find out what your range is! First, find your upper limit by singing higher and higher until you cannot sing without straining your voice. The highest note you can sing comfortably is your upper limit. The same goes for your lower limit too.

Remember that the more you practise and exercise your vocal cords, your range may extend!





THE FUN WAY TO LEARN INTERVALS

We're going to dip into a teeny bit of music theory now – don't worry, we won't be surprising you with an exam just yet, but we'll be giving you some helpful pointers when it comes to the world of singing intervals.

In its most basic form, an interval is the difference in pitch between two notes, which in western music is based on the notes of a diatonic scale.

Let's see an example: if we take the note of C, followed by the E above it, we have ourselves an interval of a third.



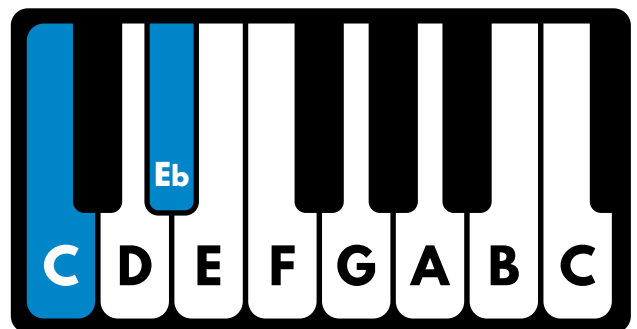
Once we've established the number, we also have to find out the quality. This tells us whether the interval is perfect, major, minor, augmented or diminished (but don't worry about that too much at this stage!).

For now, we'll go back to our example of a third to illustrate this.

The note C and the E above are a third apart, but if that E was an Eb, we'd call this a minor third, based on the fact that the C minor scale contains an Eb.



Major Third



Minor Third

A huge skill involved in being a good vocalist is being able to read and sing these intervals with confidence. Us vocalists don't have the luxury of being able to press a key or pluck a string to create the sound – it must come from within!

We've outlined some songs here which perfectly show different types of intervals. Using this will help you in the beginning to find those intervals quickly, with the aim that eventually you won't need to use them at all! We've stuck to the basic ones for now.





Major Second

To identify a major second, we always go straight to the universal tune that is “Happy Birthday”. Sadly, not the Stevie Wonder version, just your good old classic celebration song. The first two notes of the tune, on the words “happy birthday”, gives you a major second.

For something a bit more interesting, you could think of “Yesterday” by the Beatles. It’s the first two notes again, on the word “yesterday”, but this time the interval is back to front (higher note first).

Minor Third

We’ve got a fun suggestion to illustrate the minor third. It’s a little tune called “Hey Jude”, by the Beatles (you may have heard of it?). The first two notes, on the words “hey Jude”, with the higher note coming first.

Major Third

Onto the major third now! The easiest tune that comes to mind with a major third is “Oh When the Saints”. It’s a song we all know, of which the first two notes of the melody make a major third interval.

Alternatively, we’re referencing back to the Beatles again with “Can’t Buy Me Love”. On the words “can’t buy”, you’ve got your interval!

Perfect Fourth

A classic example of a perfect fourth is in “Amazing Grace”. Those first two notes of the melody, on “amazing”, are just what we’re looking for.

For the film-buffs amongst us, there are a lot of big soundtrack moments featuring the perfect fourth! From Harry Potter’s “Hedwig’s Theme”, to Snow White’s “Someday My Prince Will Come”, to Star Wars’ “The Force Theme” – they’re everywhere! Have a listen to those tunes and see if you can identify the perfect fourth.

Perfect Fifth

The perfect fifth that always springs to our minds is the interval between “twinkle twinkle”, from “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”, of course! But for something more exciting, you could think about “Yeah” by Usher – the two first synth notes in the introduction are a perfect fifth apart! And for the jazz fans amongst us, “It Don’t Mean A Thing” has a backwards perfect fifth on the words “it don’t”.

Octave

Finally, we’ve got the octave! We love to use “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” as our reference here, and the first two notes of the melody in “Singin’ in the Rain” too!

Get familiar with these intervals and we promise you’ll have them memorized in no time. Or, work out the intervals in some of your favourite tunes – whatever will spring to mind the quickest!

Of course, music theory goes far beyond learning intervals. There’s plenty more you’ll need to get your teeth into, and the **Rockschool Popular Music Theory** books and exams will take you through it all, step by step.





UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

It's time to get into the details of the Rockscool syllabus, and see if we can put into practice everything we've learnt so far. We're going to take you through a piece from the Grade 1 and Grade 2 books, looking out for little techniques and challenges as we go along. First up, it's the international sensation that is Billie Eilish.

Billie Eilish – "I Love You"

From her debut studio album, *When We Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*, this beautiful pop ballad catches us every time with the effortless, atmospheric breathiness that is so symbiotic with Billie's style. But how about singing it for yourself?

This piece requires some real breath control. If you've attempted the hissing exercises from earlier, you might understand how this will come into play here. Let's look at an example, shall we?

Mm... hmmm... mm... hmmm...

May - be, won't... you take... it back... say you... were try - ing to make... me laugh... and noth...

ing has... to change... to - day: you did - n't mean... to say... "I love

At only 69 beats per minute, this is a relatively slow piece. You'll see that from the third beat of bar 20, we don't have an opportunity to breathe until that quaver rest in bar 23! It might not look too scary, but without good breath control this passage could be a struggle.

Thankfully, we've got four beats before we come in to take a really slow, deep breath before setting off. If you can think about doing a really slow exhale, like your slow hiss, you'll reach that quaver - no problem!

Equally, when you do reach the quaver rest, you'll have to snatch a breath quickly before continuing on. If you listen to Billie's original track, you'll actually hear her catching a breath in the same spot. Time to put into practice what we learnt in the breathing exercises earlier!

This piece is also packed with opportunity to practise your diction. It's true Billie Eilish style that she never lets us miss a single syllable of a phrase, and each consonant is a gentle but firm reminder of that.

Take the first couple of phrases as an example. The "T" on "true", the "C" on "crying", the "K" in "like" - each are so clear and precise which really adds to the overall character of the piece too.

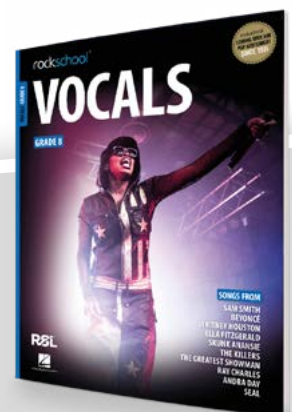
It's not true. Tell me I've been

led to. Cry - ing is - n't

like you. Ooh...

Top Tip for Practicing Diction:

Get comfortable with your tongue twisters! Think "she sells seashells by the seashore", "which wristwatches are Swiss wristwatches?", and "I saw Susie sitting in a shoeshine shop".





UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS CONTD.

Childish Gambino – “Summertime Magic”

Next up, we’ve chosen a piece from the Grade 2 Rockscool Vocals syllabus called “Summertime Magic” by Childish Gambino, a vibey pop song released in 2018 as part of his *Summer Pack* EP.

A clean and crisp intonation is essential for mastering this tune, and you could also experiment with a confident falsetto or head voice. If you listen to the original recording by Childish Gambino, you’ll hear an incredible example of this!

We’ve got some really interesting rhythms at the start of this piece. The off-beat introduction requires a keen listening ear to avoid coming in too early or too late! Practice this slowly to gain the secure rhythmic phrasing that we’re looking for.

Musical notation for the first part of the song, including piano accompaniment and vocal line. The piano part features chords: Dm7, Fmaj7, Em7, Em, G6, and Em/G. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "You feel like summer time, you took this".

As well as interacting with complex rhythms, this piece also requires interaction with the backing vocals. Stay focused and don’t let them throw you off! We still want to hear a beautiful, expressive vocal line which stands out from, but works with, the backing vocals.

Musical notation for the backing vocals, including piano accompaniment and vocal line. The piano part features chords: Em. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Do love me, do love me, do) one else".



SO, YOU’RE A SINGER NOW?

Now that you’ve learnt the basics, you’re ready to crack on with learning some repertoire – but where to start?!

Well, the good news is that the new Rockscool Vocals syllabus is out, and it’s packed full of tunes to get you started.

From John Lennon to Camila Cabello to Bob Marley to Post Malone, the beginner grades have everything you need to improve your tone and intonation, secure your rhythmic phrasing to the backing track, practise your articulation of the lyrics and breath support too!

In this refreshed edition of the Rockscool Vocals syllabus, there is no longer a separate set of books for male and female. Instead, candidates can transpose any of the pieces to fit into their range. Also, for the first time, we’re allowing accompanists into the exam room should you wish to use one!

[Click here](#) to pick up your first book today. We can’t wait to see these songs sung so beautifully in the exam room.

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VOCALS

DEBUT—GRADE 8

ROCKSCHOOL VOCALS IS BACK WITH AN UPDATED, REFRESHED AND EXPANDED SYLLABUS!

From Debut through to Grade 8, Rockschool Vocals equips students with the skills needed to succeed in any performance environment. Containing everything required for a graded music exam, the new grade books include the most diverse and well represented collections of repertoire, with 10 new arrangements of iconic rock, pop, and contemporary pieces from the greatest artists past and present.

No longer split into male and female syllabuses, Rockschool Vocals allows students to experience a broader range of hit tunes and technical exercises, and throughout the grades encourages students to demonstrate vocal excellence. There's also new piano arrangements to back each piece, making Rockschool Vocals the perfect audition and recital tool!



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