


# CHORAL PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS AND VOCAL EXERCISES

## A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO TEACHING HANDEL'S *MESSIAH*

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When from your most open  
to your most closed tone you  
control all the shadings of your  
voice, you are a great artist...  
It is a long road. But it pays...  
Talent, though necessary, is not  
a substitute for knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

In the centuries since Giovanni Lamperti's (1839-1910) teachings, dramatic developments in voice science and methodologies have reshaped the field of vocal pedagogy. Although much has changed, a fundamental thread connecting the past to the present has remained the same: the consistent instruction of vocal technique is the foundation for artistic singing. Choral directors and music educators undertake an essential role as voice pedagogues with their ensembles. Echoing Lamperti, Richard Miller argues in his *The Structure of Singing*: "Artistry in singing is acquired by practice (habit) just as is technique... part of the daily routine."<sup>2</sup> Through technically reinforced vocal instruction, choral singers can establish healthy vocal habits resulting in vibrant, resonant, and dimensional choral tone.

These habits of technique are based on proprioceptive memory, otherwise known as "muscle memory."<sup>3</sup> Performance consistency and accuracy are linked to muscle memory through guided technical practice. Depending on the repertoire, choirs of non-professional singers require vocal instruction and stylistic instruction informed by historical performance practice. Often, the challenge of preparing technically and stylistically intricate repertoire is compounded by inadequate rehearsal time. When there is little time to learn difficult skills, choirs and their directors need to resort to practical and efficient rehearsal methods.

# Choral Pedagogical Tools and Vocal Exercises

Within the choral canon, Handel's *Messiah* is one of the most frequently performed works by non-professional choral ensembles. While preparing *Messiah*, choral singers are offered ample opportunities to build and refine singing technique while engaging in historically informed performance practice. Nuanced performances are harder—but not impossible—to foster with limited rehearsal time. Given careful rehearsal planning, non-professional choral ensembles can perform with historically informed artistry and singing technique grounded in voice science.

Below, practical solutions will be offered for teaching singers who are unaccustomed or inexperienced in navigating the stylistic nuances of historically informed performances. These solutions will offer examples of pedagogical tools and their practical applications to help expedite the rehearsal process of *Messiah*. In addition, this article offers sequential vocalises to teach agility and artistry in melismatic vocal lines that are typical in Handel's choral works. The content offered is adapt-

able and variable to suit the general technical needs of most amateur and student singers.

## Practical Tools to Convey Teachable Skills

Conductors can use the following study guides as an example of how to clearly highlight individual lines of counterpoint when instructing less-experienced singers at any level. *Study Guide A* (Figure 1) provides an example of introducing motivic material for the movement, "And the Glory of the Lord." In this guide, each motive is written out individually outside of the choral score texture. Core musical material of the movement is shown through iterations of motives "a," "b," "c," and "d." Within this study guide, other musical concepts, such as articulation, metric accentuation, and rhythmic alterations (which were assumed practices in Handel's time but informed performance practice today), can be demonstrated explicitly and efficiently.

Motive A  
And the Glo - ry, the Glo - ry of the Lord. [d]

[slightly swing dotted rhythm]  
inégalité  
Motive B  
Shall be re - veal - - - ed. [rd]

macro phrase  
[slightly swing]  
micro inégalité micro micro  
Motive C  
And all flesh shall see if to - geth - er. [ʒ]

Motive D  
For the mouth of the Lord hath spo - ken if. [t]

elide [o] elide [d]

Articulation Key:  
- = stress  
∪ = unstressed  
∩ = short with length  
→ = direct phrasing  
| = clean onset of vowel

Figure 1. Study Guide A, Handel's *Messiah*, "And the Glory of the Lord."

At the bottom of the guide, an articulation key is provided for singers. The rhythmic alterations from the original notation are demonstrated in measure 3 of motive “a,” as well as in measures 2 and 3 of motive “b.” To simplify important concepts that occur throughout a full score, the study guide extracts motivic lines and enables the choir to sing each individual line as an ensemble. With the study guide as the instructional example, muscle memory can be ingrained quickly as singers achieve stylistic accuracy across all variations of similar motives. In the following sections, metric accentuation, phrasing, rhythmic alteration, diction, and dynamics are discussed.

## *Metric Accentuation*

Dr. Dennis Schrock describes metric accentuation as “the practice of stressing or emphasizing certain notes and de-emphasizing others as determined by the placement of notes in regular metric schemes...”<sup>4</sup> Musical articulation is based on these concepts of strong versus weak and emphasized versus de-emphasized. Various Baroque treatises offer modern musicians insight into the role of metric accentuation upon musical articulation. In his treatise on clavecin, Saint-Lambert states:

Just as a piece of rhetoric is a whole unit which is most often made up of several parts...so the melody of a piece of music is a whole unit which is always composed of several sections. Each section is composed of cadences which have a complete meaning and are the sentences of the melody<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Saint-Lambert equates the use of musical articulation in the same manner as one uses grammatical structure. This concept is the starting point for teaching musical expression and specific articulation. An example articulation key is provided in *Study Guide A* (Figure 1) for directors as they create their own content to assist their singers during the rehearsal process.

The first two symbols are borrowed from poetic syllabic stress. The third mark is used to indicate more substantial length to a note performed staccato. With reference to Schrock’s use of poetic marks, “In the following rhythmic patterns, therefore, notes marked with

the poetic sign – would be emphasized...and notes marked with  $\smile$  would be completely de-emphasized.”<sup>6</sup> This marking suggestion is applied to motive “d” of Figure 1. Above the notes, the poetic stresses are indicated, and musical articulation is shown below the notes. The use of agogic marks aids singers to sing with proper syllabic stress and stylistically appropriate phrasing.

## *Articulation in macro- and micro-phrasing*

The final articulation mark  $\curvearrowright$  in Figure 1 is a symbol that indicates specific phrasing. This mark is simply an arrow attached to the end of a phrase symbol. The direction mark can be adapted on a macro-phrase level or a micro-phrase level.

In Judy Tarling’s book *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners*, she refers to two Baroque treatises that discuss micro/macro phrasing and articulatory decisions: “Both Quantz and Tartini give us an instruction that says conjunct notes (i.e., adjacent in pitch, or scale-like patterns) should be played smoothly, and notes which leap or are separated by larger intervals should be played detached from each other.”<sup>7</sup> The use of micro/macro phrasing marks are shown in motive “c” of Figure 1.

On the micro-level, the two quarter notes in measure 1 of motive “c” behave as an anacrusis figure, or “pick-up notes.” The micro-level phrase mark creates momentum to the downbeat of measure 2. The same mark is used for all motion from the third beat of each measure to the subsequent downbeat. The macro-level phrase mark is used to indicate the overall direction of the phrase from beginning to end.

Based on Baroque period treatises, the marks in the study guide are used to communicate points of emphasis and de-emphasis and articulation. As seen in motive “a” of Figure 1, beats 2 and 3 are de-emphasized due to the metric stress in triple meter.

In alignment with Tarling’s interpretation of the Quantz and Tartini treatises, the two beats in measure 1 and the anacrusis of measure 1 into measure 2 of motive “a” would be detached since they are not stepwise. Whereas the first two pitches of measure 2 would be performed with more connection as they are “conjunct notes.”<sup>8</sup> The provided example demonstrates the gen-

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eral rules for the application of detached versus connected articulation and emphasis versus de-emphasis of the sung text.

## Rhythmic Alterations and Notes *Inégales*

By the time Handel composed *Messiah*, the cross pollination of national musical styles on the continent had established common stylistic practices. The French style of *inégalité* developed in the court of Louis XIV. The performance custom of *inégalité* assumed that performers would rhythmically alter notes of equal divisions (straight eighth notes), to long/short or strong/weak patterns (dotted eighth and sixteenth notes).

Over time, this practice was internationally adapted: “As the styles of France and Italy overlapped, a new mixed style became popular. German composers in particular took elements from both styles to create new forms.”<sup>9</sup> Handel spent his early developmental years as a composer in Hamburg and then Venice. In these cities, he was exposed to the new “mixed style”<sup>10</sup> of in-

corporating French rhythmic alterations to the Italian style. In accordance with period practice of the time, there is no one way that *inégalité* is approached. Tarling argues that “[u]nwritten conventions abound in the performance of Baroque music... The amount of rhythmic alteration in the performances of any era is a matter of degree governed by the performer’s taste.”<sup>11</sup>

In motive “a,” the guide indicates a change in rhythmic duration on the first beat of measure 3. This rhythmic alteration aligns with the syllabic stress of the text, “Glory of.” Shrock states: “Strong notes would then receive their full durational value as printed and weak notes would receive less.”<sup>12</sup> For inexperienced singers, a clear written alteration of rhythmic notation can help clarify the concept of *inégalité* and provide an example for similar alterations within a given movement. In a rehearsal, each individual vocal line can practice the same motive and then apply it to their respective lines. In addition, a choral score can always be marked with alterations. See an example in Figure 2.

★ - Rhythmic alteration of original score

Figure 2. Example of Pre-marked Choral Score, Bärenreiter Urtext Score

Georg Friedrich Handel, *Messiah HWV 56: Oratorio in Three Parts*, Edited by John Tobin (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, Second Edition, 2022), 12.

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To provide more guidance on how even eighth notes are altered, Tarling refers to Corrette's 1738 violin treatise: "3/4 Quavers equal, semiquavers unequal..."<sup>13</sup> The quarter notes (quavers), are notated equally, and the eighth notes (semiquavers), are notated as unequal long/short patterns. The original score of motive "b" is notated with even eighth notes as seen in Figure 3. The alteration of straight eighth notes to *notes inégales* are demonstrated in Figure 4.

Rhythmic alteration is also indicated for motive "c," as each group of even eighth notes are altered to the

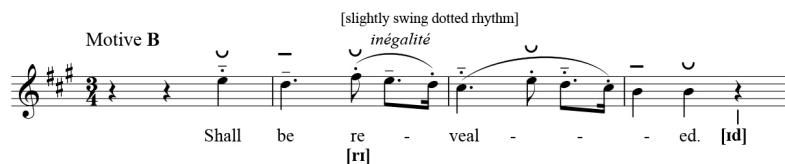
long/short pattern. The original rhythmic notation of "And all flesh shall see it together" is shown in Figure 5 with its rhythmic alteration demonstrated in Figure 6.

## Consonant Placement and Rhythmic Alteration

In his text *The Voices I Hear*, Dr. Will Kesling argues: "Good diction is dependent upon the correctness and purity of the main vowel sound...[and] internal and final consonants."<sup>14</sup> In *Study Guide B* (Figure 7 on the next page), consonant placements and the resulting rhythmic alterations are demonstrated in measure 1 of



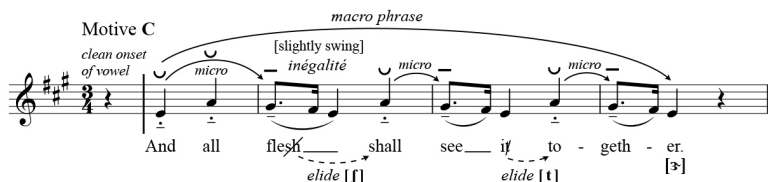
**Figure 3.** Study Guide A, Motivic Material "B" and Articulation of Handel's *Messiah*, "And the Glory of the Lord" Original Tenor Line Notation



**Figure 4.** Study Guide A, Motivic Material "B" and Articulation of Handel's *Messiah*, "And the Glory of the Lord," Rhythmically Altered Motivic Line



**Figure 5.** Study Guide A, Motivic Material "C" and Articulation of Handel's *Messiah*, "And the Glory of the Lord," Original Alto Line Notation



**Figure 6.** Study Guide A, Motivic Material "C" and Articulation of Handel's *Messiah*, "And the Glory of the Lord," Rhythmically Altered Motivic Line

motive “c.”

For an appropriate stylistic performance of measure 1, some separation between pitches must be used for consonant clarity and clean onset of the following sixteenth notes. The study guide indicates shortening the eighth note in beat 3 to a sixteenth note followed by a sixteenth rest. This rest clarifies elocution by providing a placement for the [l] of “will.” Initial consonant placement and International Phonetic Alphabet symbols are included with symbols shown above the text line vowels as illustrated in motive “a” from Figure 7.

## Dynamic Markings

Although some dynamic markings are indicated in the original score, very few dynamics are included. In his treatise on violin playing, Leopold Mozart explains, “Yea, one must know how to change from piano to forte without directions and of one’s own accord, each at the right time.”<sup>15</sup> Due to the absence of notated dynamic marks in original scores, conductors can use study guides as an efficient rehearsal tool to communicate specific expressive details. For example, in a *mesa di voce* in measures 3 and 4 of Study Guide B (Figure 7) has been added to show the beginning of the crescendo, peak, and the onset of the diminuendo. The

cadence in these measures becomes an appropriate location for a *mesa di voce*. This expressive decision is supported in Tarling’s book: “Dynamic nuances should be sought at every rhythmic level... On long notes the art of swelling and diminishing the sound imperceptibly on a single note—the *mesa di voce*.”<sup>16</sup> Although there is a comparable “lack of” notated dynamics in Baroque period works to musical scores from the Classical and Romantic periods, this does not equate to an absence of dynamics in performance!

## Communicating Rhetorical Gestures in Study Guides

In his treatise, Leopold Mozart states: “It would be an error if every note were played with the tremolo... The tremolo must only be used at places where nature herself would produce it.”<sup>17</sup> Mozart’s use of *tremolo* equates to our modern term vibrato. By advocating for the thoughtful use of *tremolo/vibrato*, he views vibrato as a form of ornamentation. Motive “b” of Figure 7 includes the directive to singers: *non vibrato*.

When making stylistic decisions, not only should rhythmic notation inform the use of vibrato, but more importantly, vibrato should be used to heighten and dramatize the text. The informed performance practice decision to forgo vibrato is based on rhetoric. The

Figure 7. Study Guide B, Handel’s *Messiah*, “Glory to God.”

# A Practical Guide to Teaching Handel's *Messiah*

Baroque period adopted a more humanist approach when it applied rhetorical guidelines based on the interpretation of Ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric. These rhetorical guidelines equated musical expression as akin to speech and art of oratory.

*Decoratio* (ornamentation to evoke affect) and *Pronunciato* (manner in performance to evoke affect), are two broad concepts of Baroque rhetoric used to invoke the affections. Under the broad umbrella of *Decoratio* and *Pronunciato* rhetorical intents, composers would use specific rhetorical “gestures” or compositional techniques to incite the affections.

In *Musica Poetica* by Dr. Dietrich Bartel, the rhetorical gesture *assimilatio/homoisis* is detailed: “The rhetorical *assimilatio* (*homoisis*, *similitude*)...is more than mere word painting... The figure...through its musical qualities, becomes the very source of the affection which it is called to depict.”<sup>18</sup> Handel’s use of *assimilatio* creates a “source” of peace through the sustained unison tenor and bass voices. Handel further evokes a peaceful affect through his orchestration—only the *tasto solo* in the basso continuo doubles the voices—immediately creating a lighter, more sparse musical texture. This intentional rhetorical device evokes a sense of stillness and musical serenity. Thus, conductors can use study guides as instructional tools to communicate rhetorical

gestures and ornamentation (including the use of vibrato). These expressive decisions fulfill Handel’s compositional intentions and evoke the appropriate affect.

## *Study Guide Applications of Melismatic Music*

Amateur and student singers encounter technical and stylistic execution challenges when singing melismatic vocal lines in Baroque music. These complications occur at a basic mechanical level as well as on an artistic level. These technical and artistic concepts can be addressed through skill-focused, sequential vocalises.

In *Study Guide C* (Figure 8), the soprano part of “For Unto Us A Child Is Born” is one of many difficult choral melismatic lines in *Messiah*. The example study guide includes markings for articulation; metric accentuation; dynamics; consonant cut-offs; macro-level phrasing for the long melismatic section as well as the internal micro-level phrasing.

## Sequential Technical Exercises for Vocal Agility and Accuracy in Florid Music

Educational theory advocates for the use of sequential teaching methods for skill acquisition. In their study on pedagogical sequencing, Patten, Chao, and Reigeluth write:

For un-to us a Child is born, un-to us, [s] a Son is giv-en, un-to us, [s] a Son is giv-en, for un-to us a Child is bo-m.

Figure 8. Study Guide C, Handel's *Messiah*, “For unto us a child is born.”



When designing any piece of instruction... break the subject matter into small pieces, order the pieces, teach them one at a time, and then pull them together based on their inter-relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Instruction for melismatic vocal lines must build technical skills in “small pieces”<sup>20</sup> to make the singing of difficult passages more manageable. This learned technique can be replicated in other iterations. Over time, these skills become ingrained as muscle memory. The manageable sections offered as examples in this article are based upon standard contour patterns found in rhetorical gestures of Baroque music.

### *Applying Rhetorical Gestures in Sequenced Skill Building*

The four sixteenth-note patterns, as seen in “For Unto Us a Child is Born,” exist as rhetorical gestures. Handel, like other composers of the period, used these rhetorical gestures as “building blocks” to create motives within melismatic lines. While not all melismatic lines used this compositional technique, most melismatic music used these rhetorical gestures as structural components. In “For unto us a Child is born,” Handel introduces the contrapuntal line in the soprano. Through analysis, a harmonic progression is shown in the circled notes of Figure 8, measures 8-10.

The “head note” from the group of eight notes is the first note of a combination of rhetorical gesture building blocks. In this example, these rhetorical gestures follow a predictable pattern for the entirety of the melisma (excluding the melisma’s final four notes). As seen in Figure 9, the melisma begins with a rhetorical gesture called *gropo*, “a four-note motif with a common first and third note.”<sup>21</sup>

The *gropo* in the melismatic line becomes the first gestural building block for each of the “head note” groupings. The second group of four notes is a *mes-*

*sanza*, “a series of four notes of short duration, moving either by step or by leap.”<sup>22</sup> The *messanza* is seen in two iterations. The first iteration shown in Figure 10 ascends by step, descends by an interval of a third, ascends again by step, and descends to the “head note” by a third. The second iteration of the *messanza* in Figure 11 follows a different contour. It ascends by an interval of a third, descends to a lower neighbor note, and ascends twice by step to the “head note.”

When both rhetorical gestures are grouped together, the melisma follows a predictable macro-structure. As a result, singers are provided with a reliable pattern when learning the melisma. This reliable pattern becomes the foundation for the following sequential exercises (seen in the Melisma Exercises on pages 34-35). For clarity, the figure of eight notes (*gropo* and *messanza* 1) are labeled as “Motive 1”; the combination of the *gropo* and second iteration of the *messanza* is labeled “Motive 2” (Figure 12).



**Figure 9.** Study Guide C  
*Gropo* example



**Figure 10.** Study Guide C  
*Messanza* first iteration



**Figure 11.** Study Guide C  
*Messanza* second iteration



**Figure 12.** Motives 1 and 2

## *Vowel Choices in Melismatic Exercises*

The *Melisma Exercises* (see pages 34-35) are designed to sequentially build the appropriate muscle memory to offset the technical challenges of florid vocal lines. While teaching vocalises, conductors need to continuously gauge the progress of their singers and offer specific technical feedback. These corrections should assess breath control; release of potential tongue and/or jaw tension; resonant vowel placement; appropriate vowel modifications throughout shifts in singing register.

The sequence begins with lip trills as a form of semi-occluded vocal tract exercises or SOVTE. These SOVTE efficiently reinforce balanced phonation while ingraining pitch accuracy. For singers that struggle with lip trill production, conductors can modify the semi-occluded vocal tract location with closure through tongue trills or lip closure through singing on a sustained [v] or [m] consonant.

The exercises progress to scalar vocalise patterns on eighth notes using the syllable: [vi]. The voiced labiodental fricative [v], enables singers to sing pitch during the production of the consonant and place the sound forward into the “singer’s mask.” The [i] vowel is essential to building resonance when singing, as stated by Miller:

The acoustic nature of the vowel [i]...plays a significant role in vocalises devoted to vowel differentiation and to resonance adjustment... the vowel [i] is useful in developing the full timbre of the voice.<sup>23</sup>

The [i] vowel efficiently develops vocal resonance and must be sung with a rounded release of the lips. As singers ascend in range, the [i] vowel should be appropriately modified in the oral cavity. The sequence of exercises begins with notes of larger rhythmic value to notes of shorter rhythmic value: essentially moving from slower to faster. Skill acquisition that moves from slow to fast enables singers to not only build muscle memory and pitch memory but gives them time to self-correct during the process.

The vocalises further include the syllable [vo] and eventually [bo]. These consonant/vowel combinations

are informed by the text of the original melisma: “born.” Transitioning from a voiced labiodental fricative [v] to a voiced bilabial plosive [b] is an easier motor movement for singers. Exercises intended to build vocal agility need to involve the alteration between front and back vowels: for example [i] and [o]. Miller states:

Subsequent alteration between front and back vowels is then drilled using changing vowel combinations...with the aim of maintaining the same vocal resonance... There should be no attempt to hold one position of lips, jaw, tongue, or mouth... No attempt should be made to differentiate the vowels by excessively mouthing or shaping them...<sup>24</sup>

These expectations should be applied to the example sequence of vocalises when moving between the [i] and [o] vowels. The adjustments should be made without over-expanding the oral space; this unfortunately happens with the general directive to “drop the jaw.” The lips and tongue should move accordingly to produce the correct vowel shapes. The alteration should remain natural and flexible per ensemble member. Conductors can remind their singers of this flexibility by reiterating a natural release of the tongue and jaw interspersed between melismatic exercises. The exercises included are written in C major. This key is selected as a general example key, and conductors should transpose vocalise keys appropriately per voice section. As a general note, the use of the [i] vowel is excellent in building resonance in the mid-register. The inherent acoustical properties of the [i] vowel formants are less accommodating for high voices above C5. Instead, the formants for [o] make it a desirable vowel choice for sopranos and altos vocalizing in the upper register.

## *Reinforcing Stylistic Skills in Agility Exercises*

To further expedite the pedagogical process, technical exercises can be combined with informed performance practice skill sets. Pitch practice can be paired with exercises utilizing *notes inégales* patterns and their rhythmic inverse as shown in Figure 13 on the next page.

The use of strong-weak beats and the inverse of

weak-strong beats helps reinforce pitch memory when moving between the stepwise and skip patterns of the *grosso* and *messa* groups. These exercise alterations also offer a novel way to practice technical skills while bolstering period performance techniques. As a caveat, the *inégalité* modifications are intended as an iteration of a vocalise sequence and should not inform the final performance of the melismas. Any combination exercises should be practiced in moderation: enough to learn pitches and stylistic applications, but not enough to inhibit the performance of the melisma as it appears in the score.

## *Building Muscle Memory and Vocal Flexibility Due to Balanced Phonation in Melismatic Vocalises*

The end goals of agility exercises include pitch accuracy, air speed flexibility, vowel modification through the registers, and balanced phonation. These goals are relevant today as they were during Handel's time. In their book, *Handel's MESSIAH: Warm-Ups for Successful Performance*, Dr. Ryan Kelly and Dr. Jason Paulk state: "Many Baroque-era writers described ideal vocal timbre as sweet, clear, refined, harmonious, and tasteful and they often cautioned singers to avoid singing forcefully and with excessive resonance."<sup>25</sup> The perceivable clarity of a "sweet" released tone is based on technique using balanced phonation. The resulting performance of melismatic singing should involve connected phrasing (not necessarily legato), with light articulation of the individual pitches. In the following section, information will be provided explaining balanced phonation and how to achieve balanced phonation in singing melismatic music.

Although there are many motor movements involved in the phonatory process, two important factors impact melismatic singing: subglottal pressure and glottal ad-

duction. The term "subglottal pressure" relates to the air pressure that fluctuates below the vocal folds prior, during, and following phonation. Glottal adduction is defined by the contraction of the lateral cricoarytenoid (LCA) muscles and the interarytenoid (IA) muscles, leading to the closure of vocal folds for vibration.<sup>26</sup> When there is a "high subglottic pressure with a strong adduction force," the perceived vocal tone is "pressed."<sup>27</sup> In contrast, "while flow phonation has a lower subglottic pressure and a lower degree of adduction force," the sound is "breathy."<sup>28</sup>

Neither pressed nor breathy phonation is technically efficient in singing. To properly navigate the long melismatic lines with a perceivable healthy vocal tone, singers need to work toward balanced phonation during vocalises. A balanced phonation is dependent upon breath control (rate at which air passes through the vocal folds), muscle memory of the melisma pitches and contour, and full glottal closure while singing the long lines.

Two unfortunate "solutions" are usually used by amateur and student singers to achieve articulated pitch clarity within melismas: the first being a glottal stop and the second an aspirated [h] before each successive note. These applications are usually provided as a quick remedy to most amateur and student singers to offset unclear melismatic singing. Centuries ago, even Handel's contemporaries debated these methods. In his treatise on singing, Pier Francesco Tosi lamented:

What would he [the good teacher] say about those who have invented the astounding trick of singing like crickets? Who could ever have dreamed that it would become fashionable to take ten or twelve consecutive eighth notes and break them up by a certain shaking of the voice?<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 13.** *Inégalité* application to melismas

From a current viewpoint informed by voice science research, singing melismatic music with an aspirate [h] is inefficient: “The vocal fold vibrations must completely stop in order to make it. Therefore, it is not possible to sing a completely legato melisma with inserted [h] aspirations.”<sup>30</sup> When singers insert an [h] before every pitch in a melisma, the rate of airflow increases because the folds not only stop vibrating to produce the consonant but remain partially open to enable the sounding of the voiceless fricative. This partial opening between the vocal folds releases a higher volume of airflow; this increased airflow can inadvertently impede a singer’s ability to sing long melismatic phrases. In *The Science of the Singing Voice*, Dr. Johan Sundberg describes this inefficient use of air with the term “glottal leakage.”<sup>31</sup> This is essentially air escaping during phonation. Because the vocal folds are not fully closed/adducted for vibration, a drop in air pressure below the vocal folds (low subglottal pressure) also impacts the singing tone: the voice sounds breathy. Not only is the ensuing sound breathy but it can lack resonant vibrancy and impact pitch clarity.

At the other end of the spectrum, the “remedy” involving constant glottal onsets is another potentially inefficient technique used in melismatic singing. Continuous glottal onsets require sudden bursts of air that escape due to a build-up of subglottal pressure when the vocal folds are closed. These bursts of air are a form of “pressed” phonation. During “pressed” phonation, the subglottal pressure is increased, and in turn, increases glottal resistance as the vocal folds alternate between rapidly opening and fully closing.<sup>32</sup> This form of pressed phonation prohibits the flexibility needed to seamlessly modify subglottal pressure during melismas. With less flexibility and agility, melismatic singing has little potential to be sung healthily and artistically.

Successful melismatic singing carefully balances airflow, air pressure, and vocal fold closure. During the learning process, singers should be instructed to avoid using the general “quick fixes” stated above. Although sequential practice takes time to learn at the onset, once a skill is learned properly, it saves rehearsal time when it is transferrable to differing melismatic passages in a musical work. The vocalises included below are intended to be used as teaching tools to help offset the

use of “quick fixes.” Singers can navigate the offered exercises by establishing muscle memory slowly and incrementally increasing speed as they learn to regulate their phonation, glottal closure, and breath control.

## Conclusion


Choral directors and music educators are charged with a fundamental responsibility: the fostering of vocal technique to support healthy, vibrant, and beautiful singing within their ensemble. The singing technique that is established on an individual level accumulates to choral excellence. By providing supplemental study guides and tailored technical exercises, a choral director can establish and reinforce healthy and efficient vocal technique. Directors can predict potential technical issues that will result in inefficient uses of rehearsal time. Targeted study guides and vocalises, like the ones offered in this article, can clearly provide crucial stylistic information to singers to offset projected challenges. Interpretive and technical skills are teachable and applicable in historically informed performances, regardless of a singer’s prior experience. There is no substitute for sequential learning: the cost of time and effort is eclipsed by an engaged, informed, and artistic performance. Barbara Doscher’s reflection on singing artistry tenders this wisdom:

Emotional expressivity is difficult, if not impossible, unless what is called the “technique” of making sound is perfected enough to provide a foundation. The foundation consists of knowledge and control of the basic material of an art form, what Herbert Witherspoon, the famous American singer and singing teacher, called the “medium.”

“The object of art is expression.

The essence of expression is imagination.

The control of imagination is form.

The ‘medium’ for all three is technique.”<sup>33</sup> 

## Melisma Exercises

All exercises ascend by half step through the appropriate pitch range, then descend by half step.  
 Modify vowels as needed.

Exercise 1

*Lip trill*

Exercise 2

*Lip trill*

Exercise 3

*Lip trill*

Exercise 4

[vi] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vo] [vo] [vo] [vo] [vi]

Exercise 5

[vi] [vi] [vo] [vo] [vi]

Exercise 6

[vi] [vi] [vo] [vo] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vo] [vo] [vo] [vo] [vi]

Exercise 7

[vi] [vo] [vi] [vi] [vo] [vo] [vi]

Exercise 8

[vi] [vi] [vi] [vi]  
 [vo] [vo] [vo] [vo]

Exercise 9

[vi] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vi]  
 [vo] [vo] [vo] [vo] [vo] [vo]

Exercise 10

[vi] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vo] [vo] [vi]  
 [vi] [vo] [vo] [vi]

Exercise 11

[vi] [vi] [vo] [vi]  
 [vo] [vo] [vi] [vi]

# A Practical Guide to Teaching Handel's *Messiah*

**Exercise 12**

[vi] [vo] [vi] [vo] [vi]

**Exercise 13**

[vo] [vi] [vo] [vi] [vo]

**Exercise 14**

[vi] [vi] [vi]  
[vi] [vo] [vi]

**Exercise 15**

[vo] [vo] [vo]  
[vo] [vi] [vo]

**Exercise 16**

[vo] [vo] [vi] [vi] [vi]

**Exercise 17**

[vo] [vi] [vi]

**Exercise 18**

[vo] [vo] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vo] [vo] [vi]  
[vo] [vi] [vi] [vo] [vo] [vi]

**Exercise 19**

[vo] [vi] [vi] [vi] [vo] [vi]  
[vo] [vo] [vi] [vo] [vi]

**Motive 1 Contour**

**Motive 2 Contour**

**Motive 1 Contour Exercise 1**

[bo] [bo] [bo] [bo]  
[bo]

**Motive 1 Contour Exercise 2**

[bo] [bo] [bo] [bo]  
[bo]

**Motive 2 Contour Exercise 1**

[bo] [bo] [bo] [bo]  
[bo]

**Motive 2 Contour Exercise 2**

[bo] [bo] [bo] [bo]  
[bo] [bo]

**Motive 1 Contour Exercise 3**      **Motive 2**

[bo] [bo] [bo] [bo] [bo] [bo] [bo] [bo]  
[bo] - - - [bo] [bo] [bo] [bo]

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *Vocal Wisdom: Maxims of Giovanni Battista Lamperti*, trans. William Earl Brown (Marlboro: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1931), 83-84.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique* (Boston: Schirmer, Cengage Learning, 1996), 197.
- <sup>3</sup> Johan Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987), 62.
- <sup>4</sup> Dennis Shrock, *Performance Practices in the Classical Era: as related by primary resources and as illustrated in the music of W. A. Mozart and Joseph Haydn* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc. 2011), 201.
- <sup>5</sup> Michel de Saint-Lambert, *Les Principes du Clavacin*, trans. and ed. R. Harris-Warrick (Paris: 1702, Cambridge, 1984), 32-33.
- <sup>6</sup> Shrock, *Performance Practices in the Classical Era*, 203.
- <sup>7</sup> Judy Tarling, *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners*, 2nd ed. (Hertfordshire: Corda Music Publications, 2001), 14.
- <sup>8</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners*, 14.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.
- <sup>12</sup> Shrock, *Performance Practices in the Classical Era*, 221.
- <sup>13</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners*, 163.
- <sup>14</sup> Willard Kesling, *The Voices I Hear: A Philosophical and Practical Approach to the Choral Art* (Chicago, GIA Press, 2022), 28.
- <sup>15</sup> Leopold Mozart, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, trans. E. Knocker (Augsberg, 1756; London, 1948), 218.
- <sup>16</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners*, 21.
- <sup>17</sup> Mozart, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, 203.
- <sup>18</sup> Dietrich Bartel, *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 207-208.
- <sup>19</sup> James Van Patten, Chun-I Chao, and Charles M. Reigeluth, "A Review of Strategies for Sequencing and Synthesizing Instruction," *Review of Educational Research* 56, no. 4 (1986), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1170341> (accessed November 10, 2022).
- <sup>20</sup> Patten, Chao, Reigeluth, "A Review of Strategies for Sequencing and Synthesizing Instruction," 437-438.
- <sup>21</sup> Bartel, *Musica Poetica*, 290-291.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 318-319.
- <sup>23</sup> Miller, *The Structure of Singing*, 71-72.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.
- <sup>25</sup> Jason Paulk and Ryan Kelly, *Handel's MESSIAH: Warm-Ups for Successful Performance* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2016), 7.
- <sup>26</sup> Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*, 63.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> Jeffery Kite-Powell, *A Performer's Guide to Seventeenth-Century Music, Second Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ufl/detail.action?docID=670323> (accessed November 10, 2022).
- <sup>30</sup> Melissa Malde, MaryJean Allen, and Kurt Alexander Zeller, *What Every Singer Needs To Know About The Body* (San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing, 2017), 213.
- <sup>31</sup> Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*, 38.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.
- <sup>33</sup> Barbara Doscher, *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice*, ed. 2 (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994), xii.