Sing like an Italian
Caruso and Pavarotti’s big advantage?
They spoke Italian—a language that, unlike North American English, can serve as the foundation for excellent vocal habits.

You’ll sing brighter and with more ease as you apply these essential Bel Canto methods—and your intonation issues may vanish, too!

If you think Swedish singers are making waves, wait until Italy discovers barbershop harmony. Most North American singers must unlearn a lot of poor vocal habits before we can sing well. Italians, simply because they speak Italian, can have an edge in the habits that contribute to excellent vocal technique. Fortunately, we English speakers can learn to sing like Italians, and without adopting a Mediterranean accent.

I believe many of our vocal challenges are directly related to the pitfalls of our spoken language. It can be especially difficult for native English speakers to naturally create a well-placed, open, clear tone that stays in tune. Our infamous diphthongs (double-sounded vowels), combined with our propensity to inflect down at the end of our sentences, can inadvertently create vocal problems. Add in dialect regionalisms, inconsistent support and jaw and/or tongue tension, and you have a recipe for throat constriction and ineffective singing. These pitfalls tend to manifest as poor pitch and dull sound, along with fatigue, breath control weakness and loosening of the vibrato at ends of phrases.

Beautiful singing, no accent required
The good news is that the superior results of pure Italian diction can be applied in any language. Every minute you invest to overcome your unconscious language-related issues will pay huge dividends—many vocal issues you were never able to fix before may simply vanish!

Native Italian speakers are noted for using forward, pure vowels (no diphthongs), combined with wonderful, rounded resonance attained by a sustained optimal muscular position. Together these form the essence of the Bel Canto school of singing.

Bel Canto (Italian for “beautiful singing”) methods were formalized between 1800 to 1840 to handle the rigors of early 19th Century opera. While new compositions have pushed some opera styles toward wider vibrato and more dramatic vocal color, the ageless Bel Canto methods are still widely taught throughout the world as the classical vocal foundation. These
methods are also perfect for barbershoppers due to their unsurpassed ability to generate:
• impeccably smooth and energetically connected singing
• vocal agility
• well-focused timbre
• clean attacks
• graceful phrasing
• full mastery of breath control
• avoidance of loose vibrato
• seamless transitions between the chest, middle, head and falsetto voices

When incorporated into barbershop harmony, Bel Canto methods greatly improve a singer's vocal tone and agility, while generating clear, accent-free diction in both ballads and patter songs. It can take patience and focus to integrate all the techniques, so this article focuses on principles that can produce immediate results.

Breathe with perfect ease
You will not sing your best until you learn to breathe in a manner that removes pressure from your throat, preventing it from taking responsibility to make the sound. Getting air “into the tank” is not enough. Your rib cage must work in concert with your abdominal muscles so that your entire torso works as a breath-support mechanism.

Engage the ribs. Stand in front of a mirror in good posture while clasping both hands in front of the sternum. While you inhale, pull the hands in opposition, as shown in the photo on page 1 of this issue. This maneuver, an old iconic image for pretentious-looking opera divas, is actually an exercise to strengthen and energize the ribs in an open, expanded position. You should feel this engagement in the lower rib muscles of the back. (Some find it helpful to create a mental picture of only the bottom of the ribs expanding to take in the breath, with the air coming in through two small, imaginary holes in your back, just below the rib cage.)

Focusing the inhalation via the lower ribs eliminates tension in the upper chest and neck, while engaging muscles that have always been involuntarily directed by the lungs. Strengthening these back muscles takes some focused practice, but as you learn to stabilize the ribs in the expanded position while singing a difficult phrase, you will begin to notice that the pressure is taken off your throat to sustain sound and straight tone.

The author demonstrates the musculature for the “inner smile,” which expands the singer’s “acoustical amphitheater.”

Italian vowels dramatically improve tuning and vocal brilliance
You can actually be singing on the correct tone but, no thanks to the varied English vowel placement and speech patterns among quartet or chorus members, still sound out of tune to the audience. Vowel blending issues affect more than the audience’s perception of pitch—English vowels help individuals (and the group) literally lose pitch. Just thinking about the end of many English words can cause a singer's mind to start deteriorating the tone. This problem can potentially repeat itself on every new note or syllable.

You'll change this only when you change your vowel habits, when you stop inflicting down or drop at the end of sentences, and change the way you produce diphthongs. Pure Italian vowels offer a pathway to better overall intonation and complete vocal ease, for groups and individual singers.

Italians naturally produce forward, ringing vowel sounds while North Americans do not. Prove it to yourself. Say ‘A,’ ‘E,’ ‘I,’ ‘O,’ ‘U’ very slowly while over-enunciating and breathing between each vowel. Notice these English vowels actually consist of two sounds, and that you drop pitch on the second half of each vowel, whether or not that vowel is officially a diphthong. Now, maintain your inner smile, with teeth showing, while quickly articulating the same vowel sounds. Immediately you will notice a brighter quality to the sound. This is essentially how an Italian feels while saying each of his vowels, as he naturally resonates each in the front of his face.

There are five pure vowels in Italian: ‘A,’ ‘E,’ ‘I,’ ‘O,’ ‘U’ are respectively pronounced “Ah” “Eh” “Ee” “Oh” “Oo.” When sustained, Italian vowels feel “unfinished” to the English speaker’s ear, as if the vowel has been cut off after the first half. Italian vowels are “pure” because there is no second sound to the vowel sound and therefore no diphthong. The sound you make at the start of the vowel is the only sound you make, so the attack and release of each vowel is naturally precise.

When Italians sing mixed vowels within a single word, you’ll generally hear each vowel separately and independently. An “Ah” yields to the “Ee” without blending the two, similar to how barbershoppers try for an open sound until the turn of the diphthong. With a little practice, singers can blend these five Italian vowel sounds to form any English vowel sound in a way that sounds completely natural to the North American ear.

That said, don’t worry about how to make Italian vowels sound good in English until you’ve had time to internalize the dramatic difference you can hear and feel when you stick exclusively to these five pure vowels. You’ll find that words are automatically and instantly tuned, the sound is brighter and more natural, and chords ring for longer. If your “forward lift” muscles are maintained (discussed in part 2), it is almost impossible to recommit your problem sounds (also discussed in part 2) at all; your vowels will come forward almost automatically. Only after these Italian vowels are an engrained habit should you refine your ability to blend them into natural-sounding English. It won’t be difficult, and you’ll never want to return to your North American vowels!

As you learn to use your rib cage in the breath-support mechanism, you’ll find you can make a very big sound while very little air passes over your vocal chords. A trained Bel Canto singer requires such a small stream of air that, were he to sing with a candle an inch or two from his mouth, the flame would barely flicker. The key is to maintain a constant, natural air pressure.

Find your inner smile
The internal musculature of your mouth is your acoustical “amphitheater.” Open it up properly and you’ll greatly improve your tone, diction, and ability to maintain pitch—even on descending musical lines.

When you yawn, you can feel your cheeks and the soft
How an operatic soprano became a barbershop vocal coach

A “barbershop brat” as a child, Debra Lynn’s earliest musical heroes included Suntunes legends Harlan Wilson and Gene Colaroff, who directed her father, George Mount, in the Goostmen in the early 1960s. Following a long career as a prominent professional singer and vocal coach in Hawaii, Debra found her way back to the mainland and the barbershop world only last year.

“In early 2009, Sweet Adeline Lindi Bortney (current director of Maiden Vermont) had read a Bel Canto article just before she went on vacation in Maui, where I was living at the time,” Debra recalls. “She accompanied one of her leads to a private voice lesson in my studio. As she listened and watched the rapid transformation of this girl’s voice with Bel Canto principles, Lindi looked at me and said, ‘I wish you could work with my chorus of women in Vermont.’

“That one conversation started a collaborative relationship that began a year ago, dovetailing two seemingly unrelated musical realms in a serendipitous and potently unprecedented way,” she continued. “My move to Connecticut led to my vocal production work with Silk City Chorus—a group my dad also sang with in the 1970s—and with SAI’s Millennium Magic and several competing BHS and SAI quartets, including Men in Black.”

Debra Lynn has a bachelor’s degree in voice performance and received four years of post-graduate training in Bel Canto methods in San Francisco, Austria and Germany. Since 1993, she has maintained a private vocal studio, sung as principle soprano with the Maui Symphony and Pops Orchestras, and worked as a professional singer in the Hawaiian convention industry. She was founder of Maui Civic Light Opera and her original CD “Heaven in Your Heart” was a Na Hoku Hanohano Award finalist for Inspirational Album of the Year in 2009. Once Maui’s best known voice coach, she developed the ability to distill the essential Bel Canto methods to their essence, helping singers of all abilities enjoy rapid and dramatic improvement.

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Palate at the back of your throat rise up. Now raise your cheeks and soft palate without yawning while keeping your lower jaw in its relaxed natural position, the teeth slightly apart and your tongue gently touching the back of your bottom-front teeth. (The lower jaw, neck and tongue remain relaxed.) This energized upper jaw and palate orientation, combined with the engaged ribs noted above, is your new default singing position.

To quickly pull this muscular understanding together, use what I call a “breath prep,” which helps engage the frontal lift, inner smile and energized rib cage in one thoughtful movement. Each time you breathe through your mouth, think “ah” as you fully stretch the muscles back in your throat and lift the soft palate into high position. This creates what I call the internal ear-to-ear “Cheshire Cat grin.”

Inhale each time with this smile, which is easier to maintain than the yawn, in the back of your mouth throughout each phrase. If you do this properly, you’ll naturally direct resonant vowels right under your nose. You’ll then direct the vowels forward, rather than farther back in your throat (where intonation becomes problematic) while using lips and tip of the tongue for quicker articulation.

“Smile” instead of “tank up.”

Barbershop songs feature many long phrases and quick breaths. “Tank ing up,” or quickly sucking in air between phrases, can constrict the neck and back of the throat, reducing vocal quality. Once you get used to Bel Canto breath support and inner smile methods, consciously work on not thinking about how you inhale. If you normally breathe either by opening your throat, lifting your chest or by extending your abdomen, stop those habits. Instead, simply lift the “inner smile” muscles into place on each inhalation and allow the breath to effortlessly fill your lungs quickly and quietly. You’ll discover that without any conscious effort to inhale, your lungs still have more than enough air—and with time, some of your vocal fatigue issues may vanish as well.

Part 2 will discuss:
- How “forward lift” generates greater ringing and vocal freedom in every phrase
- How to fix the most problematic English vowels and consonants, virtually eliminating all of your group’s prior intonation challenges
- Why the singing advantages of youth enjoyed by Westminster Chorus are overstated—and why older men actually have the upper hand in certain areas

Continued next issue.

Less than a month after the author started coaching Connecticut’s Silk City Chorus together and in individual break-out sessions, members reported a dramatic increase in group singing cohesion and a sharp decrease in individual vocal issues. 