

BRING IT ON (and off)

Onsets - The beginning of phonation

Lea Baker, Region 25 Summer Music Camp. June 2024

ONSETS are the beginning of phonation (making sound). They are often referred to as an 'attack'. That seems a little harsh don't you think? The end of phonation (where we mostly take a breath) is known as the 'release' or 'offset'.

Singers can choose the way they start making sound, based on their desired style, character and emotion. Listen to your favourite singer. What sort of onsets do they use?

For us as ensemble singers, it's important we are unified in our approach to onsets.

Words start with either a consonant or a vowel. Let's look at vowels first. Take the word "and" or "If".

We can start that sound in one of four ways:

GLOTTAL onset

The vocal folds are closed. Air builds up below them, they are blown apart and slam back together to start vibrating and create the sound. Glottal onsets can range from mild to severe.

BREATHY onset

The vocal folds are slightly apart allowing air through. The air comes through the folds first then they start to vibrate. It sounds "breathy".

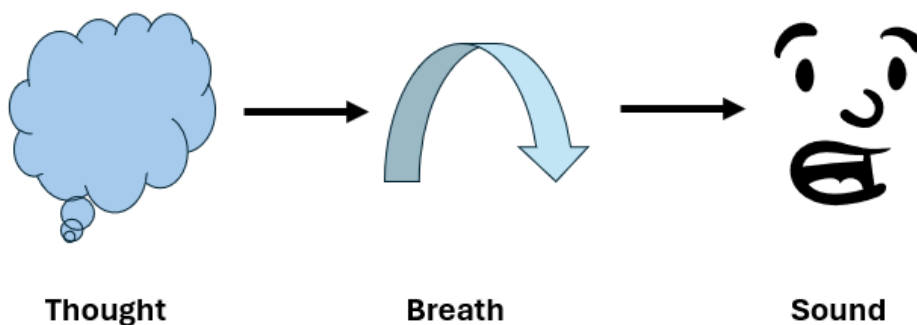
CREAKY onset

The vocal folds are vibrating at the slowest laryngeal register (vocal fry) and then come together to vibrate and produce sound.

BALANCED or CO-ORDINATED onset

Where the air flow and vocal fold closure occurs simultaneously, leading to a 'clean' onset of sound.

Many new singers use glottal onsets until they learn about balanced or co-ordinated onsets.



The impulse to make sound starts with a thought, which triggers the breath and finally the sound.

Sing the melody of 'Auld Lang Syne' and notice how you approach the onset to "And" (with the thought and breath before this word).

Try it with a breathy approach, then a glottal approach and finally a BALANCED approach.

For balanced, you'll need:

- Good breath management. Just the optimal amount of air moving up through the folds.
- The pitch of the note in mind, along with the emotion of the thought
- A tension free instrument. (Tongue, jaw, neck, shoulders)

Have a look at a current chorus repertoire song. Notice how many phrases start with an open vowel like 'Ah' or 'Oh' etc. These will be the ones to keep in mind for possible glottal onsets. Aim for balanced.

Looking at the Region 25 school song, Come On And Sing, absolutely no phrases start with an open vowel. They all start with consonants.

When phrases start with consonants, especially voiced sustainable ones, like "L" "M", "N" "W" these can easily be 'scooped'. And that's our next topic!

SCOOPING

Scooping is:

- When we slide up to a note.
- When we get to the target vowel / pitch LATE
- When we correct the note AFTER we've started singing it
- It's out of tune singing

Scooping is very common in new singers. Check out Kathleen Hansen's YouTube clip on how not to scoop. It's excellent.

Lea Baker – Voice Teacher

<https://www.raiseyourvoice.net.au/>

<https://bettersinging.thinkific.com/>