

A brief outline of

## The Five Fundamentals of Singing

### Q. What are or what is, The Five Fundamentals of Singing (TFF)?

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As an aspiring singer, you may find yourself often wondering: “why do some people just seem to ‘have it’, while no matter how much I practice, I just can’t seem to get the voice I want”?

The thing is, it’s not that you’ve missed the memo on the right scales, technique, or voice “education” – instead, there are fundamental physical and mental traits that “natural” singers have that those of us who struggle with singing have either lost or unintentionally neglected.

But for whatever reasons, the majority of the singing teaching world has poorly identified what it takes to make an average voice good. Thus the struggling singer gets bogged down in technical remedies by a teacher who inadvertently addresses symptoms, not the causes of their vocal woes.

The common skills that all aspiring singers wish to develop, such as better pitch, richer tone, bigger range, less constriction, or being able to “belt” for example, naturally start to emerge as they develop these Five Fundamentals. It may come as a surprise that, by establishing a solid framework of fundamentals, the above skills don’t require a great deal of specific training of their own.

The approach to singing training introduced in this outline is all about how to build the physical traits and train the mental traits that enable you to develop the best possible vocal instrument you can develop. *What we do is address the causes, not the symptoms of your vocal troubles.*

The overarching idea here is that, if you want your fabled 10,000 hours of practice to count for anything, you need these five fundamentals in place.

***The Five Fundamentals of Singing (TFF) training system guides you through the development of the Five Fundamentals in your own voice. It is designed to give you an intuitive knowledge and *feel* for what makes a voice really tick, without needing to know intricate vocal science, and with the aim of enabling you to take the reins and train yourself.***

***As you’ll understand by the end of this outline, the TFF training approach does not have you standing in front of a piano doing scales week-on-week. There are much more effective, straight forward ways to train a voice that directly target what is lacking and what is holding you back from singing your best.***

***Once upon a time, singing used to be a complete mystery to me but now I “see” it as clearly as my fingers working a guitar, and I can train it with the same amount of certainty and order. Through TFF, my wish is to pass that same clarity and certainty onto you.***

*In this PDF I can only introduce you to the basic components of **TFF** and outline the **TFF** approach to vocal training. Thus, any controversial ideas are explored further on the [blog](#) and in [lessons](#).*

## The Five Fundamentals at a glance

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We'll go into the five fundamentals in more detail in a moment but for now, let me just give you a brief look at what they are in a couple of sentences, with the growth and changes that each one is meant to produce:

### Fundamental 1:

#### The strength and structure of a singer's body

- It's becoming increasingly obvious now that singers ought to hit the gym and strength train for a better voice (don't worry... this doesn't require becoming a bodybuilder). There's a reason why so many aspiring singers spend years frustratingly messing around with breathing technique: it's because their bodies simply lack the basic strength and structure necessary for good singing. Your body knows how to power and drive your voice but it can't do this properly if you don't have adequate strength to do so;

### Fundamental 2:

#### The Prominent Jaw

- Like your body, your vocal tract works best when the major parts that house it are operating in a naturally optimal, strong manner. A robust, assertively hinging jaw, coupled with robust and engaged facial musculature is essential for enabling vocal freedom, optimal expression of tone and resonance, and the accuracy of pitch.

### Fundamental 3:

#### Single-point singing

- There is no such thing as high notes – and I don't mean that metaphorically. Thinking of notes as *up* or *down* creates negative physical reactions (think constriction). When you rid yourself of this habit you free your voice up immensely;

### Fundamental 4:

#### The "self-focussed" voice

- You mimic far more than you realize. If you want a better tone and to sound the way you're actually supposed to sound, then you need to remove the habit of *subconscious karaoke*. When you allow your own "vocal fingerprint" to materialize, throat constriction and tension are also significantly reduced;

### Fundamental 5:

#### The Primary Functions of the human voice

- In order to realize and exploit the full extent of your vocal potential, it is necessary to understand how to utilize and transition between the four baseline "functions" of the human voice. The old classifications of "chest voice" and "head voice" give singers a shaky foundation and misguided assumptions about how to effectively utilize their voice.

## Q. How and why was TFF developed?

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*Feel free to skip ahead to page 5 to get straight to the fundamentals.*

I spent thousands of dollars and nearly a decade trying other people's methods to learn how to sing. While I never struggled with instruments, singing always seemed like a riddle I couldn't wrap my head around (let alone solve). Unlike the guitar, singing didn't come easily to me.

For years I kept trying to improve my voice but it was like I was banging my head against a brick wall and just burning money.

I'm sure I tried every method out there and none of it seemed to help. Some progress seemed to occur but it was haphazard and painstakingly slow. Somehow though, I knew that **it shouldn't be this difficult** and I refused to believe that I couldn't learn to sing the way I wanted to sing. My gut told me that there had to be something missing –that there had to be something critical that just wasn't being taught by all the methods I'd tried.

So one day I just said, "*screw it, I'll figure it out myself*". I had no idea how I'd do it but I wasn't getting anywhere with the standard approaches anyway, so why not?

Thankfully, my little adventure into the unknown paid off. I managed to discover a few things that absolutely transformed my singing ability. I realized that these weren't just some handy little tricks or voice hacks; they were the real *fundamental* things that were missing from my voice all along.

I knew I was onto something because for the first time ever, progress came thick and fast and importantly, if I did the work, the progress just kept on coming. Whereas before, progress wasn't a sure thing, no matter how much I practiced.

Finally, there was no more banging my head against a brick wall and just hoping the singing gods would grant me a better voice. Instead, now I had ways I knew were guaranteed to not only improve my singing ability but would always be something I could rely on to provide a remedy for when I was having an off day.

This framework does not include banal guidelines such as *get plenty of sleep* or *drink lots of water* because these things should be common sense. Likewise, "sing in tune" or "express emotion" are not a part of this framework because they are blinding statements of the obvious and they *don't actually tell you anything* about *how to make your voice better*. All the technical stuff I'd been taught counted for little because I had essentially been practicing with a broken instrument – so TFF is in part about fixing broken vocal instruments.

Ultimately, the ideas in the **TFF** framework come from three places: my interpretations of voice science and conventional wisdom (where it still applies); the influence of other areas of expertise (such as fitness science, psychology, and others); but most significantly, my own discoveries and successes in attempting to improve my singing through sheer trial and error.

This approach of bringing in new, innovative ideas without throwing away good conventional wisdom has resulted in what I truly believe to be a superior approach to building a great singing voice.

## The TFF approach and philosophy

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The biology behind the singing process is incredibly complex but the good news is it's far less deliberately controlled than we are commonly led to believe. What this means is that your body knows how to do what it needs to do to produce a sound, without you needing to consciously conduct every little action.

The trouble is, we impede the natural vocalization process because our instrument has been left in disrepair (largely due to contemporary lifestyle factors), and this is where most "less-than-desirable" sounds originate in aspiring singers. To get back to our vocal potential requires rebuilding our vocal instrument in order to give ourselves the best set-up to practice and perform with.

So the fundamentals are largely about optimizing you physically and mentally to allow you to freely practice singing the way you want to sing. Aspiring singers usually have the necessary underlying musical capacity stuck in their head - they just need a bit of assistance in accessing it. Therefore, with TFF it's more about ***rebuilding and enabling the voice*** than it is about ***practicing technique***.

### *An analogy with running might help to explain the TFF approach:*

Learning how to use your legs correctly as a child is an almost exclusively instinctive process - yet most people grow up to run with terrible form. *But why?* Because the natural developmental process of our bodies is sent askew by the negative impacts of hours spent in chairs and cushioned footwear (to give just two reasons). This has resulted in the compromising of our natural physical development and thus our ability to operate in the way nature intended. Aches, pains, injuries, and accelerated physical deterioration result.

So if you've ever tried to get fit by going for a run but ended up considering it a fruitless exercise, it's probably not because *you're just not a good runner, or you weren't taught the right techniques* - I would say something like: *you lost your innate potential to move effectively and efficiently* because your body wasn't able to develop in the way it was meant to. The goal then becomes to rebuild your body and relearn natural physical form, which will allow your innate fitness potential to be pursued.

While I don't think that learning to sing in any given modern genre is as innate as learning to run, there's good evidence to suggest that singing itself is. And much like the chair, there are aspects of our modern environment that lead to atrophy and poor form in our singing muscles. The solution is therefore to reacquaint ourselves with the natural functioning of the voice and gain sufficient strength in the right muscles in order to enable our natural, human, potential to sing.

Developing the voice to excellence *is* the same as any other pursuit in the sense that it takes deliberate practice<sup>1</sup> and time but what we've been lacking up until this point is a coherent set of physical and mental explanations for why some people find this pursuit drastically easier than others. I had never truly had a sense of being in control of the growth of the singing process until I discovered these fundamentals. **TFF** can give you that sense of *visceral* understanding and control.

So if you want your 10,000 hours to count for anything, you need your fundamental framework in place.

## Overview of the fundamentals

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These five fundamentals are both the *physical* conditions necessary for having a great vocal instrument as well as the *psychological* conditions necessary for using it well. Fundamentals One and Two are physical; Three and Four are psychological; and Five is a bit of both (or *physiological* it could be said). A great voice is both *well-built* (the physical) and *well-oiled* (the psychological).

When developing the Fundamentals, the physical should be worked on first, but not exclusively. Meaning: as important as the concept of Single-Point-Singing (**F3**) is, you will have a much harder time developing it with poor strength and structure (**F1**) and poor jaw development (**F2**) but, you don't need to wait until **F1** and **F2** are *perfect* before working on **F3**.

Overall, if you only take away one thing from this outline, let it be this:

**You can do all the scales and all the practice you want but if you're significantly lacking development in these five fundamentals, you'll never be able to create the voice you desire, no matter how much time you commit to it.**

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### Fundamental one:

#### The Strength and Structure of a Singer

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- **People are usually taught overly technical breathing and support methods when actually what they are lacking is not technique but the solid baseline of core strength necessary for good singing**

The biggest breakthrough I had in improving my voice, after years of frustrating conventional practice, was to hit the gym and lift weights. Turns out all the technical breathing and support exercises I had practiced for hours on end weren't helping me sing better because my vocal support mechanism was simply *too weak for singing*.

*Too weak for singing...* how's that even possible? I wasn't a weakling in general but it turns out it takes a lot better core strength than you'd realize to sing the way we all want to sing. 99% of the time, famously great singers have exercised these muscles from a very young age. For the rest of us, well, we need to do some repair work - and the solution that makes the most sense for this is:

#### Strength training for singers

I advocate a specially designed strength training program for singers to replace breathing and support exercises and the various convoluted approaches to "breathing technique".

**The first purpose** of this is to counteract the effects of living a sedentary lifestyle. These days we grow up sitting down. Our body and its muscles are compromised and weakened because of it – and the core muscles that power and control singing don't magically escape this fate.

**The second purpose** is to take the place of the overly technical approach to breath-management and support. This works in three ways:

- 1) **Traditional breathing exercises are the slow (and often never ending) road to a strong support mechanism. Strength training does the same job, except quicker and ultimately much more effectively;**
- 2) **Strength training provides a much more permanent and subconscious type of support strength – allowing you to “set and forget”;**
- 3) **Most teachers will tell you to give a big note “more support” (essentially, more physical effort in the body) but as with anything to do with muscles, getting stronger lessens the effort required to execute a given physical task.**

Our voices depend upon a strong body to operate effectively. The closer we can get to a natural human design and optimum functional strength, the greater the chance we have to develop to our vocal potential.

I don't believe that vocal “support” and breath management are *skills*, as is commonly taught. When our body is structured and operating in the way nature intended, support and good breathing “technique” naturally emerge.

The strength training approach replaces support and breath management with the lung power that comes with natural *strength and structural integrity*.

**Notice any similarities between great singers and humans not living sedentary lives?**

**They have huge ribcages, great posture, and although you can't directly see it, the kind of core strength that enables and maintains this structure that you *can* see.**



**How to posture:** I remember trying to sing while standing stiff as a board, trying to hold my posture right, while trying to do scales. It just felt awkward, and there was too much to concentrate on. Unfortunately, good posture isn't something you can just switch on (or even merely habituate).

Due to our sedentary culture, most of us grow up looking like someone was cutting corners when constructing us. Our natural structural potential has been compromised by the humble but not-so-harmless chair, among other things. Good posture is not a set-up you can just adopt - it's the end result of a naturally strong musculature brought on by the adequate use of certain muscle groups.

**Babies don't need to be taught how to breathe:** There is no need for complex breathing “techniques” when the body is structured well. Babies can scream for hours and not lose their voice because their bodies haven't yet been compromised by a life of living sedentarily.

## Fundamental two:

### The Prominent Jaw

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- In order to improve tone, resonance, and vocal freedom our lower jaw must be robust, well-aligned, and hinging correctly. With the upper jaw, robust facial muscles create lift and sturdiness in the hard palate (yes, the *hard* palate, not the soft). This is what enables great tone and resonance and assists in the accuracy of pitch.

The conventional wisdom in voice training is to relax the jaw. This is bad advice. In the same sense, when improving our voice, the focus should be on the *hard* palate not the soft. These are the two main considerations in more detail:

1. **The lower jaw:** the traditional prescription for the lower jaw when singing is, “*collected down and back*” from a perceived “neutral” position. Neutral (according to conventional wisdom) has our lower teeth starting from *behind* our upper teeth and then hinging further backward as the mouth opens wider. I argue that neutral should instead mean that our upper and lower teeth start from and be, for most of the movement of the mouth, *in line* with each other. Putting the lower jaw into a much more “prominent” posture.

So starting with your teeth edge-to-edge, your mouth should move straight down for about 80% of its range of motion – only hinging noticeably backwards for the highest few notes. In practice, this alignment will accommodate 99% of the notes you’ll sing.



This is an illustration of what is traditionally and still widely taught as correct jaw alignment and action for singing but most well-known master singers (and speakers) can be seen completely contradicting this rule (e.g. the next image).

(Illustration: Complete Vocal Institute)



This is Pavarotti as a case in point for what I call the “prominent jaw” alignment. I argue that his voice would never have been as big and resonant as it was if he didn’t have this jaw position going on. Notice the positioning of the teeth/lower jaw compared to the image above.



**2. The upper jaw:** There should be a sense of “lift” in the upper jaw/hard palate – this is achieved through robust facial musculature, and thus exercising these muscles plays an important role in creating and maintaining great tone and resonance. Work on the upper jaw is arguably more critical to singing in tune and creating adequate freedom and resonance than the lower jaw. But both are important and I believe that a well aligned and robust *lower* jaw separates the good singers from the greats.

**Caveat:** classical/operatic techniques are unique in the realm of the human singing voice. Roughly speaking, the classical approach is to enlarge the vocal tract *vertically* to create resonating space, whereas with everything else, it’s about optimizing the more **natural** *horizontal* resonating space. So of course we can see classically trained singers mastering the voice with the “collected down and back” rule but I argue that this is more of an **artificial** and invented (albeit successful) approach to creating resonating space. The good news is: if classical singing is your thing, you can train both horizontal and vertical space and gain superior resonance from doing so (à la Pavarotti).

[Here are a couple more examples of a “prominent” jaw on display:](#)



Bruno Mars usually displays great jaw alignment but the argument could be made that he does push it out a little far sometimes - so be wary of jutting your lower jaw excessively. There is ‘wiggle-room’ of course but you’ll want to stick to edge-to-edge as much as possible.

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You can produce a huge range of sounds by becoming skilled in the manipulation of the *moving* parts of the vocal tract, that much is true - but the health and strength of the *solid* parts of the vocal tract is what matters most. Conventional teaching tends to focus on what to do with things like your tongue or larynx but I suggest this is *not a solution* to the problems the vast majority of aspiring singers face. Instead: improving the strength, and alignment and action of your jaw is the thing that will gain you the crucial improvements in tone, resonance, pitch accuracy, and vocal freedom.

*Try observing great singers and speakers (such as news anchors and actors) – you’ll start seeing the prominent jaw in the vast majority of instances. A robust upper jaw is difficult to directly observe but prominent cheek bones are one tell-tale sign.*



## Fundamental three:

### Single-Point-Singing (SPS)

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- This fundamental is important for improving pitch and vocal freedom, and removing constrictions and doubt from the voice

Here is something that may come as a bit of a shock to you: ***there is no such thing as high and low notes.*** Changes in pitch are caused by changes in *frequency*, which is caused by the vocal folds vibrating *faster or slower*. There is no up or down in this equation.

#### A little bit of throat science:

The larynx isn't equipped with the type of nerves that allow us to feel what's going on down there, so even though the larynx does (and *should*) move up and down during singing, we cannot directly feel it. If you do feel something, it essentially means you're doing something wrong (so use it as a warning sign!)

So when we are singing, **there should be no feeling of upwards or downwards movement.** There are a number of practice strategies that we can implement in order to cultivate this lack-of-sensation. In itself, simply becoming aware that there is no such thing as high notes can have the effect of removing a lot of tension, constriction, and bad habits associated with reaching and stretching for notes.

"Higher" and "lower" is simply mental imagery that we developed some time ago and haven't moved on from since. Because mental imagery has a physical effect (if you think a note is high, you'll reach up for it), we need to remove the idea that 'high C' is *higher* than 'middle C'. This doesn't mean that a 'high C' isn't challenging but if we remove the mental baggage from it, we make it a lot more achievable. Developing **F1** and **F2** will get you much closer to hitting a 'high C' with confidence, but if you retain that fear of how "high" it is, you'll sabotage your efforts.

#### Single-point-singing also means:

- Remember to sing forward and out – don't hold back or second guess yourself during singing because this only interferes with the natural workings of your voice
- If you have enough core strength (see **F1**) then your body subconsciously knows how much support to give a note – don't interfere with this process by doubting, second guessing yourself, or approaching a big note too timidly

#### **Caveat:**

- If you don't have enough core strength for a given note, then your doubts are justified because the note won't come out as intended due to your body not being able to call upon enough strength to cater for it – the trick is to not continue to carry these doubts with you as you develop greater core strength.

## Fundamental four:

### The self-focussed voice

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- People talk vaguely about ‘finding your own voice’ – the thing is, your voice isn’t lost or waiting to be found, it’s just being *interrupted* by what I call “subconscious karaoke”

When you sing, it must be all you – and I don’t mean this in a spiritual sense. Just as we all have a unique fingerprint, we all have our own uniquely contoured vocal tract which creates our own “vocal-print”. Unfortunately, most of us try to imitate someone else’s vocal fingerprint.

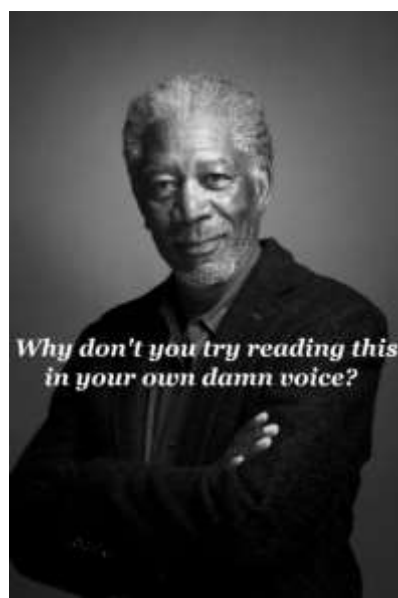
As aspiring singers, ninety-nine per cent of us spend most of our time singing and practicing with the famous songs we enjoy. The vast majority of us thus also subconsciously imitate the artist’s voice we are singing with at the time.

Think of your favourite song and you can hear the song and the singer in your head. Chances are, when you go to actually sing the song out loud, you’ll still somewhat have the singer’s voice in your head.

*Mr Freeman here demonstrates the point well.*

Adopting aspects of a singer’s style or tone is fine but you must always be vigilant about having *their* voice in *your* head when singing.

When we sing, this subconscious “hearing” of another singer’s voice has a whole host of negative effects on our ability to sing well because it interrupts the normal functioning of our own voices.



- In order to sing a well-known song well, it’s essential (fundamental even!) that we remove the original song from our head as we go to sing it and put ourselves in a light state of what is called *flow*\*
- In order to “find your voice” for originals, you’ll likely need to rework your voice to eliminate the bad habits you’ve picked up from singing along to other artists
- If you sing the songs of many different artists, then chances are you’re altering your voice with each different song you sing
- If you’ve only ever focussed on originals and practiced with scales, then you’re probably fine in regards to this fundamental (such a person is a rarity though, so it pays to take nothing for granted)

## Fundamental five:

### The Primary Vocal Functions

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- **Ways of understanding and utilizing your voice such as the *register* system (head/chest voice) or the *modes* system are either outdated science or are too clinical – here I propose something more practical and intuitive.**

The traditional way to categorize the voice and teach aspiring singers how to use it is through the register system. It's still believed by most people that in order to have a unified tone throughout the whole voice, a singer needs to "mix" head and chest voice, and "bridge" between the two main registers to avoid vocal breaks (the *passagio*).

I believe these categories are misleading and an inaccurate representation of how our voices actually operate. Yes, if you want to unify your tone, transitions will need to be made at certain points in your range but this does not mean that these transitions are absolute physical necessities – they are stylistic choices. The belief that there is a break in your voice that you *must* learn to navigate causes more anxiety than it relieves. "*I'm approaching my break*" is probably the most anxiety inducing technicality a singer has to think about. The good news is you don't really need to!

Research by the [Complete Vocal Institute](#) in Denmark led to a new system of "mapping" the human voice and the way we use it. They replaced head and chest voice with a [system of modes](#). While their research contributed to changing the way I understand the voice, I have found that the resulting system they've created has its limitations. Therefore I rely on an alternative "map" that differs in some key aspects. Among other things, I believe the system I use to be more intuitive and user-friendly than either the CVI system or the traditional register system.

The system I use categorizes the voice based upon the purpose that it evolved to serve:

### Communication

Without the need to communicate something (danger, safety, or desire for example), there would be no reason for animals to evolve the ability to make sound. All the complexity of language that we know today was built upon very simple foundations that emerged in our ancestors a long time ago to meet the basic needs of survival for a social animal.

For singing, we make things infinitely easier for ourselves if we learn to tap into these baseline functions of communication:

- **The *Intimate* function**
- **The *Muse* function**
- **The *Affect* function**
- **The *Assert* function**

Some of this stuff will no doubt stir up debate but I'll save the wider discussions for [the blog](#).

Below, we'll look at the functions in a little more detail. I have presented them in order of their relative volume to each other – low to high – which also coincides with the ***intensity*** of their tone.

Although you can produce quite loud sounds in the “high” parts of the voice with a low intensity function, it will still be quieter than that same note produced in a higher intensity function.

The amount of strength, energy, or core support required for each function differs and isn’t linear. What I mean by this is: for example, singing with a low-medium volume in the mid to high parts of the voice requires greater core support than going full volume in those same parts.

Put another way, it’s much more difficult to sing with nuance, than it is to just go full volume (or to sing very quietly) in certain parts of the voice - this is a big part of the reason why people’s voices tend to break or flip when they try to sing with nuance in the upper-middle part of their range.

## The Functions:

### Intimate

#### **Salient characteristics:**

Very soft; can be aspirated (air added); intimate; comforting; very personal; close proximity

- Low relative volume (but in the very high parts of the voice this function will be medium-loud)

#### **Songs where examples can be found:**

*Boyfriend* by Justin Bieber (The spoken verses)

*Lay Me Down* by Sam Smith (Most words in the first verse)

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### Muse

#### **Salient characteristics:**

Contemplative; a distant or wishful idea; dreamy; gentle affection or friendliness;

- Low to medium relative volume

#### **Example songs:**

*Somewhere Over the Rainbow*

*I Will Always Love You* by Whitney Houston (first verse and first chorus)

*Happy* by Pharrell Williams

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### Affect

#### **Salient characteristics:**

Palpable or affective; dramatic; passionate; often about desire, frustration, or sadness in regards to love

- Medium to high relative volume

**Example songs:**

*Nessun Dorma* (With some *muse*)

*The Power of Love* by Celine Dion (chorus)

*Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen (Think “Mama...”)

*Diamonds* by Rihanna (chorus, pre-chorus, plus some parts of the verses)

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### Assert

**Salient characteristics:**

Commanding tone - like an order given by a general; someone making a confident statement; generally limited to the lower end of your vocal range; can be taken higher but requires a very solid grasp of fundamentals 1 – 4.

- Loud to very loud relative volume

**Example songs:**

*Sad but True* by Metallica (verses)

*Roar* by Katy Perry (“You’re gonna hear me roar”)

*We Will Rock You* by Queen (much of the song)

**NB: The assert function isn’t used a great deal in popular music; it appears more on individual words than complete sentences. Even heavy metal tends to use the affect function (with distortion) more than the assert function. The most common functions used by far are *muse* and *affect*.**

One important thing to remember is that, when singing, these functions don’t have to be applied in a rigid fashion – I imagine these categories above to be somewhat like primary colors with a number of shades. Some phrases that are lyrically contemplative (***muse***) can and will contain tones that fit more into the ***affect*** function. Some singers can alter certain functions with concentrated manipulation of the vocal tract. A good example of this would be the Bee Gees – they use a low intensity function but make it sound more impactful by having a very narrow vocal tract setting (and various studio production techniques of course!).

### Vowels and modifying your voice for hitting “high” notes

Vowel modification is not considered a fundamental in **TFF** but it is acknowledged that vowels do play an important role in the singing process (hence the mention here). **TFF** teaches that learning about vowels mainly has its benefits *stylistically*.

Vowels do play a role in managing the variables of volume, tone, pitch, and vocal function but the extent to which you can manipulate these variables is mostly determined by your level of core strength, the state of your jaw, and to a lesser extent, the strength of your 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> fundamentals. Essentially, this means: the stronger your fundamentals, the less of a slave you are to volume, tone,

pitch, and function, and thus to vowel modification. Likewise, the stronger your fundamentals, the more you can play with vowels and adjust them to suit your needs.

Where traditional methods teach extensive vowel modification in order to access the trickier parts of your voice (often leaving singers dissatisfied with the resulting tone), **TFF** demonstrates that vowel modification is a case of treating the symptoms, not the actual cause of the problem. Developing your fundamentals is what will get you hitting those tricky notes with the vowel you actually want to use.

***Yes, the laws of physics do place constraints on the voice*** - I acknowledge that. This does require us to work within/around these parameters but simply put: I bet that the challenges you're facing as an aspiring singer right now are not because of the laws of physics but merely because of your current physical state – and we can change that!

### ***But what about this thing they call the “vocal break/bridge/passagio”?***

When entering the more “difficult” parts of the voice, amateur singers tend to shout for notes or flip into a very light “falsetto” type of voice. This is traditionally understood as hitting your vocal “break/bridge/passagio” – the transition between the traditional categories of chest voice and head voice. The prescription for this breaking or flipping is typically that the aspiring singer needs to “blend” their chest and head voices, with the use of vowel modification, thus accessing their “mixed voice”.

I believe this to be misguided. The **TFF** explanation for this phenomenon is that the further you move away from the comfortable middle of your voice, the more core strength you need and the better your jaw needs to be. This is, roughly speaking, because:

1. in order to produce “higher” pitches, the increasing air pressures present at the level of the vocal folds demands greater management of airflow in order to achieve and sustain them;
2. in order to achieve a desired tone, the space requirements in the mouth are demanding of, and must sync with, the output from the lungs

Furthermore, certain functions of the voice require better first and second fundamentals in order to utilize them as we wish. **Muse** and **affect** are more difficult (for the majority of people) than **assert** and **intimate**. So in an aspiring singer with inadequate 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> fundamentals, the combination of moving away from their comfortable middle and then being unable to sufficiently access **muse** or **affect** leaves them shouting or flipping into falsetto.

Ultimately, the voice of course has its physical limitations and there does become a point in every singer's upper range where everything blurs (or narrows) towards the same kind of sound, and where the more intense functions become increasingly difficult to utilize. This does result in a limiting of what sounds are possible but I've found these changes to be largely naturally occurring and intuitive – not something that requires extensive technical guidance from a teacher.

The crucial point is though, as I mentioned at the start of this section, the vocal break and the changing and mixing of registers is not something that *must happen* at a specific point in the ‘upper-



middle' part of a singer's range. The idea of "mixing" head and chest voice is a misleading term for what could be better called either the **muse** or **affect** function (depending on intensity) – which are better accessed through stronger first and second fundamentals.

The idea of *having to* make these register changes ("bridging") at historically specific parts of the voice is just not true and I believe that the *Primary Functions* approach is not only more scientific but importantly, also a more *practical* way of understanding and tackling the common problems aspiring singers face when it comes to the more challenging parts of the voice.

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## Q. How are the five fundamentals taught?

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There is an unfortunate trend in the singing world today of teachers thinking that teaching people *how the voice works* counts as teaching them *how to sing*. It doesn't.

It's interesting to know how the diaphragm or how the larynx operates but that doesn't teach us *how to sing*. An analogy for this would be: you don't need to be a mechanic (or even know how an engine works) in order to drive a car. Learning *how to sing* is like learning to drive – learning *how the voice works* is like learning how to be a mechanic. Mechanics are incredibly necessary in society but we don't all need to be mechanics in order to drive well.

At the other end of the spectrum, some vocal training methods merely focus on "letting go" and releasing tension through positive-thinking and relaxation exercises without doing anything of substance at all. In the vast majority of cases this is not enough for the aspiring singer because, as we've discussed, having a well-built instrument is of critical importance.

So, in general, many vocal training methods are either on one extreme or the other: either overcomplicating singing or neglecting certain elements of the voice. With that in mind, **TFF**:

- Is comprehensive in its scope, yet aims to keep the singing process as simple as possible
- +
- Doesn't confuse teaching *how to sing* with *how the voice works*
- +
- It replaces rigid technique training with *purposeful practice*<sup>2</sup> as well as physical and mental development where it impacts the voice
- +
- Seeks to simplify and improve the teaching of certain traditional singing knowledge where it is still relevant

**TFF** does not teach you to sing by way of arbitrary scales, quirky exercises, or obscure imagery. Nor does it try to bog you down in needless anatomy lessons (i.e. *how the voice works*).

Just understanding the five fundamentals alone will allow you to teach yourself to a certain extent, but the **TFF** system helps you through a number of means:

- Strength training through weight lifting and bodyweight exercises
- Jaw training exercises
- Targeted “stripped back” vocal exercises with an emphasis on teaching you *how you do them* (meaning: no scale or exercise will fix your voice on your behalf – you must consciously create the necessary changes)
- Break down into manageable parts and then build back up the songs you want to sing

This is what **TFF** doesn’t do:

- Teach you complicated breathing and support techniques
- Rely on subjective technique descriptors like *placement* or *sing from the diaphragm*
- Use obscure imagery for instruction (such as, “imagine placing an egg in at the back of your throat” or “imagine your voice going up like an elevator”)
- Use scales as the primary mode of voice development

**TFF** takes advantage of the fact that many of the elements that contribute to a well-functioning voice are intimately tied to your overall physical and mental state. What this means is that you can do a lot of the training and development of your voice outside the allotted time you might put aside to directly practice singing. For example:

- You develop the strength of your diaphragm and torso at the gym - and you can stretch and develop good posture anytime, anywhere.  
+
- You can develop your jaw throughout the day, through good speaking, eating, resting, and breathing habits  
+
- You can develop your SPS ability and work on getting rid of *subconscious karaoke* without worrying about disturbing the household (or neighbours) because these things don’t necessarily need to be worked on at full volume.  
+
- In regards to something like improving your stage performance ability, you can engage in *comfort challenges*<sup>3</sup> at any point of the day to increase confidence and calm in stressful situations.

This approach is a great advantage to our speed of development.

## Practice tips

### + Presence and Performance

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*Within the **TFF** system I include peripheral strategies for better practice and vocal performance.*

#### Practice

Although researchers such as Anders Eriksson and Daniel Coyle for example, have pretty well established the best methods for efficient and effective practice, I'm always searching for the latest science on 'how to practice better' to help you get the voice you want in the shortest possible time.

My two most important beliefs with practice:

- **Allow ourselves to *play and make mistakes*:** This can often be the hardest thing to do because making mistakes can make us feel vulnerable and embarrassed. But without taking chances and risking "failure", there is no progress.
- **Practicing and progressing has a rhythm:** Tension and release. Stretches of intense focus on improvement are necessary, but these periods must always be followed by a period of *letting go* – where you get out of your own way and let the work you've done show through.

#### Pitch

The thing about pitch accuracy is, for most people it falls into place with little extra effort when the fundamentals are well developed and if you are immersed in music. Absolutely, pitch requires the skill of *listening* but this is not a difficult or complicated skill to develop and there are tonnes of great technological tools available to us today to help with that.

For people who already music lovers, as the fundamentals improve in a person's voice, pitch does also. It may need some additional fine tuning on top of fundamental development but focussing on trying to sing in tune with weak fundamentals is a fool's errand.

#### Presence

Presence is simply the art of being yourself, in the moment, without thinking about what others are thinking about you.

*I love the analogy of being watched typing:*

Have you ever been asked by a boss or a teacher to type something while they looked over your shoulder? Do you remember how all of a sudden you went from a nimble commander of the keys to something more like a seal slapping at the letters with its flippers?

You think to yourself, *what the hell just happened?*

Someone standing over our shoulder and us forgetting how to type is a perfect example of *losing presence*. We've gone from focussing on the task at hand, to focussing on the judgement of the person behind us.

There's a skill to remaining present and *staying in the game* – a skill that we can develop, which has huge benefits for our ability to perform.

### Performance

When I teach about performance, it's more about how to get into *flow state*\* and the psychology of performing well under pressure rather than the commonly covered subjects of stage personality and song delivery.

Basically: Peak performers don't *think* - they just *do*. There is a subtle art to getting out of your head and letting your body do what it now knows what to do.

## Q. What is the end goal of TFF training?

### **A weightless, effortless, vibrant voice**

If you're wondering what you need to aim for, let those three things be your guide.

One of the biggest confusions for me on my journey of learning to sing was that I didn't know how it was supposed to feel when I was doing it right (or moving in the right direction).

If the way you are singing doesn't feel like those three things, or when you are practicing it doesn't feel like you're getting closer to those three things, then your weaknesses need to be assessed.

You'll only be embedding bad habits if you try to push through and *force* your way to good singing.

The act of singing itself should not be a battle; it should not be a struggle. This does not mean that it doesn't require energy to put on a good performance - but if singing for you is more like a fight, then you're doing something wrong.

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In developing the five fundamentals and applying good practice strategies, a good singing voice is the inevitable outcome. I truly believe that a good singing voice is the result of all the innate human singing-parts working with strength and freedom, where the learner can *play and experiment* to achieve the sound they desire.

It's not about applying music to the voice through an academically developed technique, it's about having a healthy, optimally operating instrument and using it to channel an innate, human, musical potential – because music is in us, we just need the right way to get it out.

<sup>1</sup> We shouldn't confuse the natural capacity to sing with the necessary skills needed to sing in a specific style – such as the operatic genre. There are certainly skills in some styles and genres that go beyond the “normal” usage of the voice but in the end these skills are still bound to the fundamentals. If a singer has a strong grasp of the fundamentals, playful imitation will get them most of the way towards adopting the hallmarks of a specific genre most of the time. Overly cerebral corrective measures should be used as a last resort in all cases.

<sup>2</sup> *Comfort challenge* is a term popularized by Tim Ferris

<sup>3</sup> *Purposeful practice* is a term coined by Anders Eriksson

\* In performance science and psychology the term *Flow* is attributed to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

- Steven Kotler talks about various “depths” of flow and is a great source for the most current understandings of peak performance

# An interesting jaw alignment theory: <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/how-forks-gave-us-overbites-and-pots-saved-the-toothless/267252/>