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Reduced-Vibrato Singing in Choir

Syracuse University | PDG 519 | 2025

why does this matter?

choirs have been singing with reduced vibrato for centuries

harmful habits can be built if this is done incorrectly

there is still plenty of debate about the use of “straight tone”

many vocalists (even well-trained ones) are unsure of the proper techniques surrounding reduced-vibrato

it is an important aspect of choral tradition and modern practices

terminology

vibrato =

- a natural oscillation in pitch, when breath and pressure (subglottal/adduction) are balanced
- rate + extent
- rate = ~5-7 cycles per second
- extent = ~ semitone above and below fundamental

reduced vibrato =

- vibration rate/extent is no longer perceptible to the ear
- phonation is always vibration
- “straight tone” misleading
- other terms to use:
  - stabilized vibrato
  - simple tone
  - minimized vibrato

vibrato basics

what ***is*** vibrato?

- alignment of respiratory + laryngeal mechanisms
- intrinsic laryngeal muscles (CT, TA) oscillate
- neurological impulses
  - vagal activation
  - ambiguity around this topic

vibrato is still a mysterious subject!

recent research

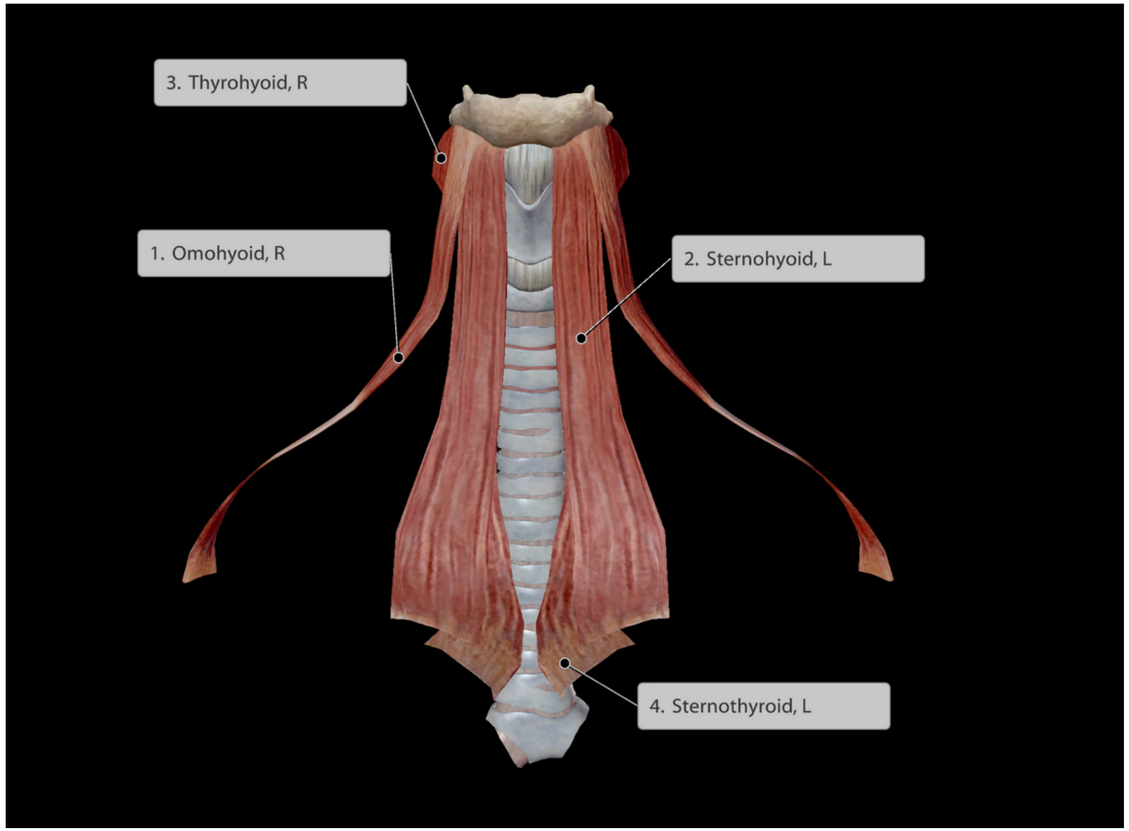
researchers Junseo Cha and Seong Hee Choi monitored activity in the extrinsic laryngeal muscles during singing **with** and **without** vibrato.

activity in both muscle groups was:

- **Significantly higher when pitch rose**
- Markedly higher when singers produced vibrato overall

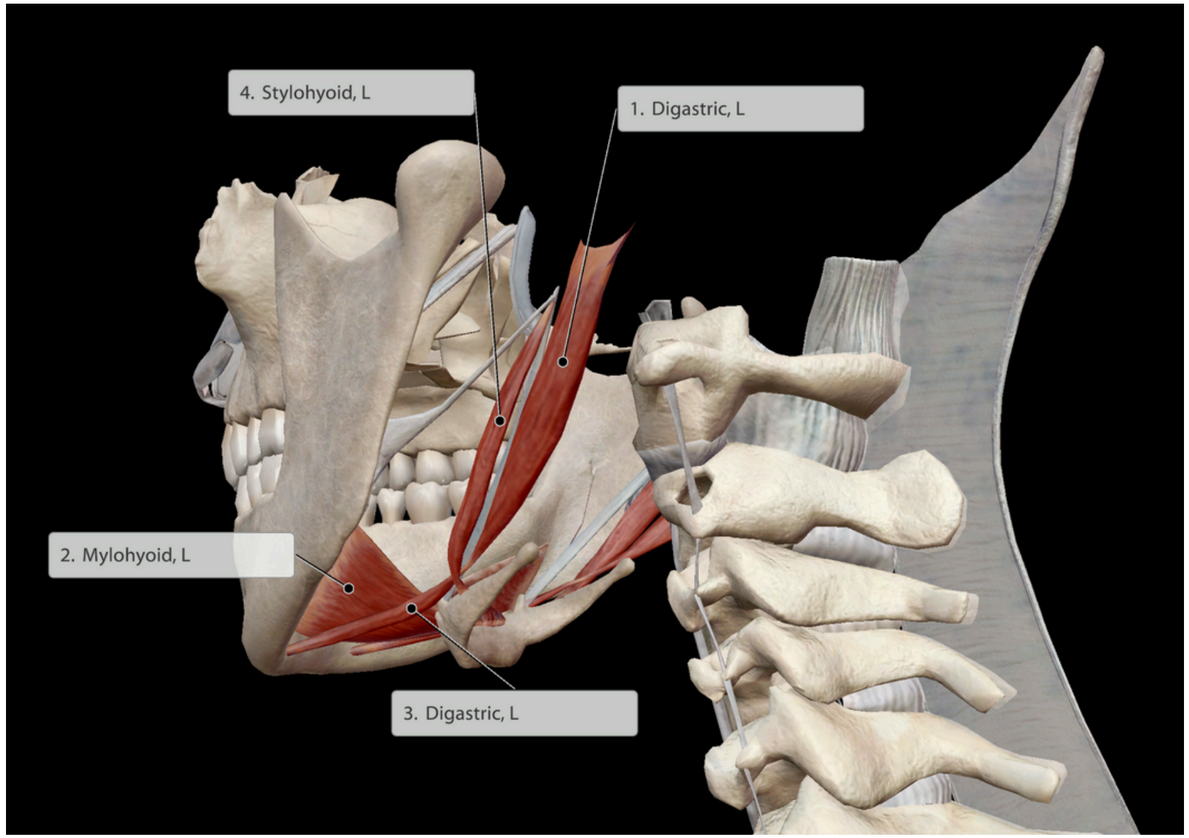
conclusion: vibrato involves more muscular activity overall

extrinsic muscles



infrahyoid (IH) muscles
help lower & stabilize the larynx

suprahyoid (SH) muscles
help lift/shift the larynx (for high notes)



reduced-vibrato singing

DIFFERENCE 1

less airflow
→
lower subglottal pressure

(if done correctly)

DIFFERENCE 2

more constant muscle engagement

vibrato = "work-rest"

RISK FACTORS

pressed phonation (over-adduction)

breathy phonation (under-adduction)

fatigue (especially high/loud singing)

key findings

- vibrato correlates with flow phonation + efficient production
- reduced-vibrato requires LESS air, not more work
- intensity/volume can be just as present in reduced-vibrato
    - careful on long/high notes, especially treble voices
- reduced-vibrato singing is like all other singing: too much is tiring

historically informed performance (H.I.P.)

the movement that has recently resurged to perform early music with the same techniques and colors musicians used in the Baroque/Renaissance eras

reduced-vibrato technique is appropriate

strings do non-vibrato for Baroque
tuning is better with less vibrato during polyphony
music is light and dance-like (ex. Handel, Bach)

modern considerations for H.I.P.

hard YES

balance historical ideas with the voices that are in the room

prioritize singers' health and vocal stamina

hard NO

ask adult sopranos to sound just like young boy sopranos

(adult sopranos sing with more vibrato, naturally!)

inclusion and vocal integrity matter just as much as authenticity.

how to sing with minimized vibrato: crash course

01 “fog the window” → [u], [o]

02 [wo]-[u] glissandos

03 add [h] if needed for onset

04 avoid extremes

let's try it!

stretches:

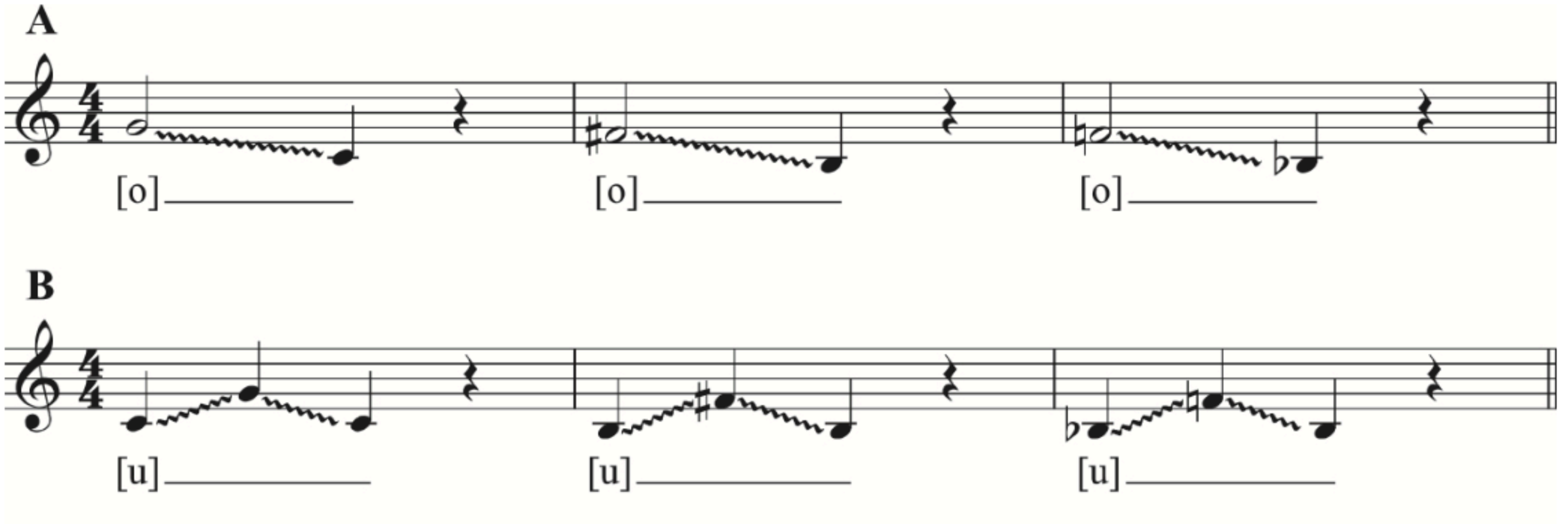
- lift arms up over your head
- bring them down without collapsing ribcage

"fog the window" → [u], [o]
you should actually *feel* the air flowing as you sing

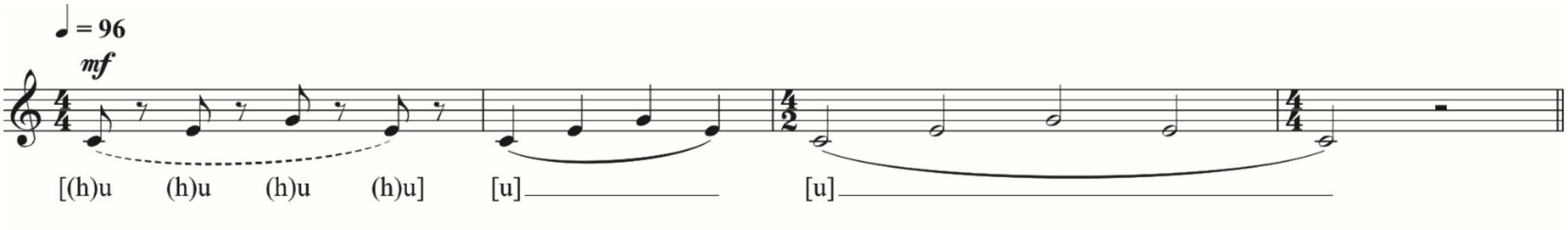
reduced airflow → less adduction

this is OKAY! as long as the air and adduction are balanced.

slide exercises (beginner)

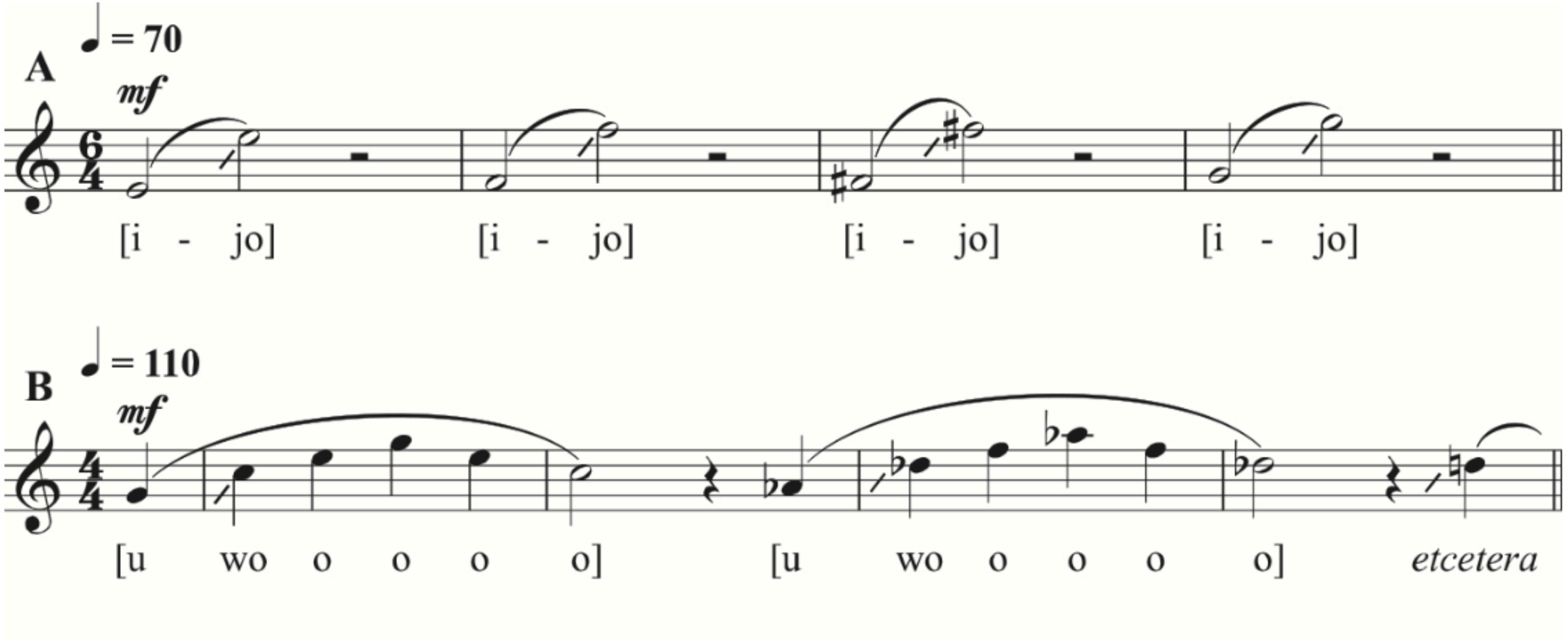


arpeggio exercise (intermediate)



exercises are from Danya Katok's article "HEALTHY MINIMIZATION OF VIBRATO" from The Choral Journal in 2021, published by American Choral Directors Association.

upper range exercise (advanced)



applications

vocabulary matters

avoid “straight tone” and
even “nonvibrato”

instead, ask for
“reduced vibrato”
“stabilized vibrato”
“minimized vibrato”
“Baroque tone”

choral placement

strong vibrato voices on the
inside, + vice versa

autonomy + awareness,
not uniformity at any cost

**comfortable singers =
healthy singers**

make friends

voice teachers and choral directors must collaborate, not argue!

I would love to come lead warm-ups and see what y'all are up to in class

I would love to ask you about vocal technique and teaching method ideas

reframing the debate

the issue isn't "vibrato vs. straight tone," it's really...

airflow
adduction
muscular balance
individual vocal awareness

reduced-vibrato singing isn't the enemy, bad technique is!

conclusion

reduced vibrato can be:

- healthy
- expressive & artistically fulfilling
- stylistically appropriate

if approached with:

- flow phonation
- balanced breath-to-muscular engagement
- self-awareness and freedom

questions

thank you!

bibliography