ICSV13 - Vienna
The Thirteenth International Congress on Sound and Vibration
Vienna, Austria, July 2-6, 2006

THE TUNING OF VOCAL TRACT RESONANCES IN SINGING AND IN PLAYING THE DIDJERIDU

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Abstract

The different vowel sounds in normal speech are produced by adjusting the position of tongue, lips and teeth so that the vocal tract resonates at certain specific frequencies. In voiced speech, these resonances interact with the harmonics of the signal from the vibrating vocal folds to produce associated peaks, or formants, in the output spectral envelope. For singers, the use of these resonances is sometimes constrained more by musical than linguistic context. For sopranos, the vibration frequency of their vocal folds may be much higher than the normal values for the lowest resonance, and consequently a reduced interaction would cause a loss of power. Direct measurements of the resonance frequencies of the vocal tract of classically-trained sopranos during singing show that they consistently increase them to match the frequency of their singing. This significantly increases the loudness and the uniformity of tone, at the expense of comprehensibility. The fundamental frequency of other singers is usually less than the value of the lowest resonance so they gain less by tuning this resonance. However the power may be increased by tuning the resonance frequency to a harmonic of the fundamental frequency. Our measurements indeed show that some altos, tenors and baritones use this strategy when appropriate. The role of the vocal tract resonances is quite different when playing the didjeridu or yidaki. The sound is then primarily generated by the vibrating lips, although the vibrating vocal folds are also sometimes used for various effects. The frequency of vibration is then primarily determined by one of the strong resonances of the wind instrument itself. Our measurements show how varying the resonances of the vocal tract can change the harmonic structure or timbre of the produced sound. The described research has involved several members and associates of our Acoustics Laboratory.

Eds.: J. Eberhardsteiner, H.A. Mang, H. Waubke

INTRODUCTION

Although its original function simply involved the ingestion of food, the vocal tract in humans has evolved into a system that played a crucial role in the development of modern society. In this paper we discuss how techniques developed in our laboratory for measuring acoustic impedance rapidly and precisely have enabled us to investigate the resonant behaviour of the vocal tract during speech, singing and whilst playing the didjeridu.

THE VOCAL TRACT

In normal speech and singing, the vibrating vocal folds are approximately a flow-driven relaxation oscillator located at the larynx. They generate a harmonically rich signal with pitch frequency f_0, which is transmitted via the vocal tract into the surrounding air [6] – see Figure 1. The fundamental frequency, f_0, is controlled by varying their tension and/or mass distribution. In normal speech f_0 is typically 110 Hz for men, 220 Hz for women and around 300 Hz for children.

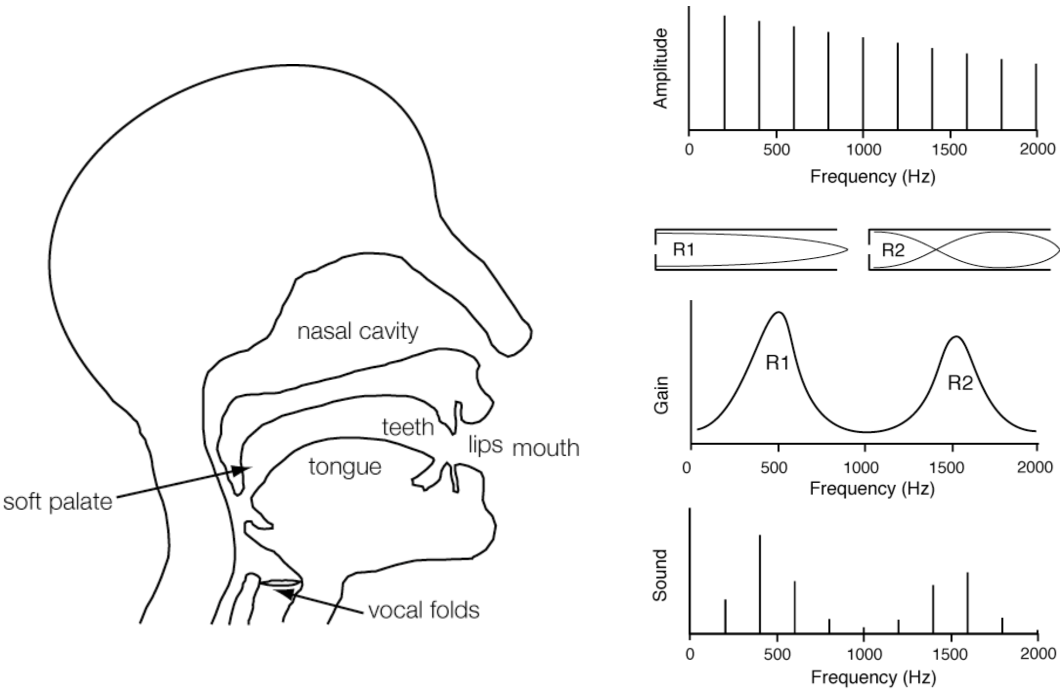

Figure 1 – A simple schematic of the vocal tract is shown on the left and the source-filter model for voiced speech is shown on the right. The harmonic-rich signal from the vibrating vocal folds (top right) is transmitted to the radiation field (bottom right) via the resonating tract. The second sketch represents the tract as a uniform cylinder (a suitable approximation for a neutral vowel) and shows the pressure amplitudes [3].

The vocal tract most effectively matches the relatively high acoustic impedance of the lower tract near the vocal folds to the low impedance of the radiation field outside the mouth, near its resonances. They are controlled independently of f_0 by varying its shape using the position of the tongue, jaw and lips. These resonances produce broad peaks called formants in the spectral envelope of speech - see Figure 1.

MEASUREMENT OF VOCAL TRACT RESONANCES

The acoustic current source: Transfer functions are measured using a technique described in detail elsewhere [4, 5, 11, 19]. A computer synthesises the broad band signal $s(f)$ over the frequency range of interest from a set of harmonic components that have been chosen for the best compromise between frequency resolution and signal to noise ratio. The relative phases of these components are adjusted to improve the signal to noise ratio [10]. The electrical broad band signal produced via an analogue/digital interface (National Instruments NB-A2100) is amplified and used to drive an enclosed loudspeaker, which is matched by an exponential horn to an acoustic attenuator with a high value acoustic impedance – see Figure 2. This serves as the output impedance Z_O of the acoustic current source. The impedance of this attenuator is a compromise; if it is too large, the acoustic current $u(f)$ will not produce an adequate pressure signal when applied to 'loads' with a small acoustic impedance, whereas if it is too small there is the possibility that the acoustic current might vary slightly when applied to different 'loads'. A small microphone (6.5 to 8 mm external diameter) is used to record the pressure $p(f)$.

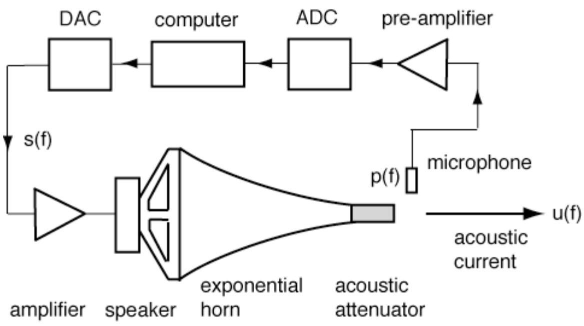

Figure 2 – The acoustic current source.

Measurement of acoustic resonances: All the measurements presented herein involve the ratios of two pressure measurements in which the same acoustic current source is connected to two different acoustic 'loads'. Because the characteristics of the amplifier, loudspeaker, horn, and acoustic attenuator each depend upon frequency, the spectrum of the acoustic current $u(f)$ can be quite different from the spectrum of the electrical signal $s(f)$ produced by the computer. In the measurements reported here, the spectrum of the pressure $p_{cal}(f)$ as measured by the microphone in the initial 'calibration' procedure is adjusted to be independent of frequency – this helps improve the signal to noise ratio across the measured spectrum. This is accomplished by adjusting the relative amplitude of the harmonic components in the synthesized electrical signal *s(f)*. This procedure does not remove any frequency dependence in the response of the microphone itself, but any such dependence will cancel when the ratio $\gamma = p_{meas}/p_{cal}$ of the pressure measurements is considered.

The ‘calibration’ used for measurements of the vocal tract in speech and singing involves a measurement made at the same position, with the mouth closed. This choice minimises the geometrical effects of the face: the ratio shows the effect of putting the open vocal tract in parallel with the radiation impedance, measured at the lips, with the face as a baffle.

Measurement of acoustic impedance: Measurement of acoustic impedance, rather than just the frequencies of resonance, requires calibration using a known reference impedance. The reference impedances used are long cylindrical pipes that are straight for at least the first 40 m. These pipes are effectively infinite for the frequencies in this study, and their impedances are purely resistive, and determined from the cross section.

VOCAL TRACT RESONANCES IN SPEECH

Figure 3 shows an example of the pressure measured just outside the mouth when the broad band acoustic current was injected just outside the mouth.

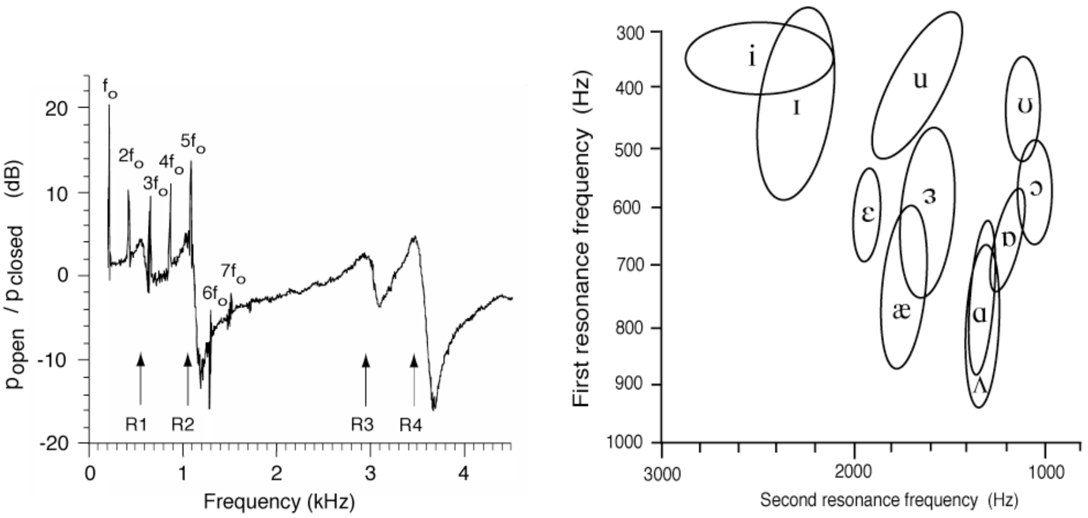

Figure 3 – The left hand figure shows the ratio of the spectra measured with the mouth open to that with it closed (p_{open}/ p_{closed}) for the vowel in “hot”. Several harmonics of the voice signal with fundamental frequency f_O = 215 Hz can be seen. The maxima in the broad band signal corresponding to the resonances R1, R2, R3 and R4 are indicated by arrows. The right hand figure shows the distribution of (R2,R1) measured in this way for young female speakers of Australian English [3].

It is thus possible to see how our technique can measure the resonances with higher precision than is possible using the voice signal alone. This is because the injected acoustic current has a frequency resolution of 5 Hz, whereas the voice has harmonics spaced at f_0 (at least 80 Hz). Especially for high pitched voices, the speech or singing signal can only give imprecise information about the frequencies of the formants or resonances.

VOCAL TRACT RESONANCES IN SINGING

In singing, the vibration frequency f_0 of the vocal folds is now determined by the desired pitch, so a new set of problems and possibilities emerges.

If the pitch frequency is not too different from that of normal speech, the singing voice will continue to gain support from the impedance transforming effect of the normal resonances *R1* and *R2*. However, once the pitch becomes sufficiently high, the resonances need not coincide with a harmonic of the pitch. Consequently, when the harmonics (nf_0, n an integer) are widely spaced, fixed resonance frequencies and varying f_0 lead to some pitch-vowel combinations being weaker than others, depending on whether the nf_0 fall near to or far from a resonance. If few of the nf_0 are aided by the impedance transforming effect of a strong resonance, the voice is weak and may have trouble competing with the accompaniment, especially in opera.

The musical range for sopranos is from C4 to C6 (approx. 250 to 1000 Hz), although some coloratura parts can go as high as G6 (~1500 Hz). The ear is more sensitive in the higher part of this frequency range so a soprano could significantly increase her sound output and timbral homogeneity by adjusting *R1* from its normal value to match f_0 [13,14]. Our studies show that this is indeed the case [8,9] – see Figure 4. Furthermore the vowels are shown to converge so that their non-dimensional separation in (*R1*,R*2*) space and their overlap are comparable with the characteristic separation required to distinguish vowels [4] with a consequent decrease in intelligibility [2].

The fundamental pitch of singers other than sopranos lies below the normal values of *R1* for most vowel/pitch combinations. However, tuning their resonances close to harmonics of the pitch could still be advantageous. Further, at high sound levels, the vibratory behaviour of the vocal folds could also be influenced by the acoustic load presented by the vocal tract [18]. Singers thus might be able to avoid damage to their vocal folds by appropriate resonance tuning.

Some singers (usually tenors and altos) produce a singer's formant or vocal 'ring': a band of increased radiated power in the frequency range 3-4 kHz, a range where human ears are sensitive but where orchestral output power is reduced [13, 15].

In singing, the control oscillator is the vocal folds and the strong resonances in the vocal tract downstream from there produce the strong difference in timbre that we recognise as different phonemes. We now proceed to a case in which similarly great changes in timbre are produced by analogous resonances in the tract, but in which the control oscillator is at the other end of the tract.

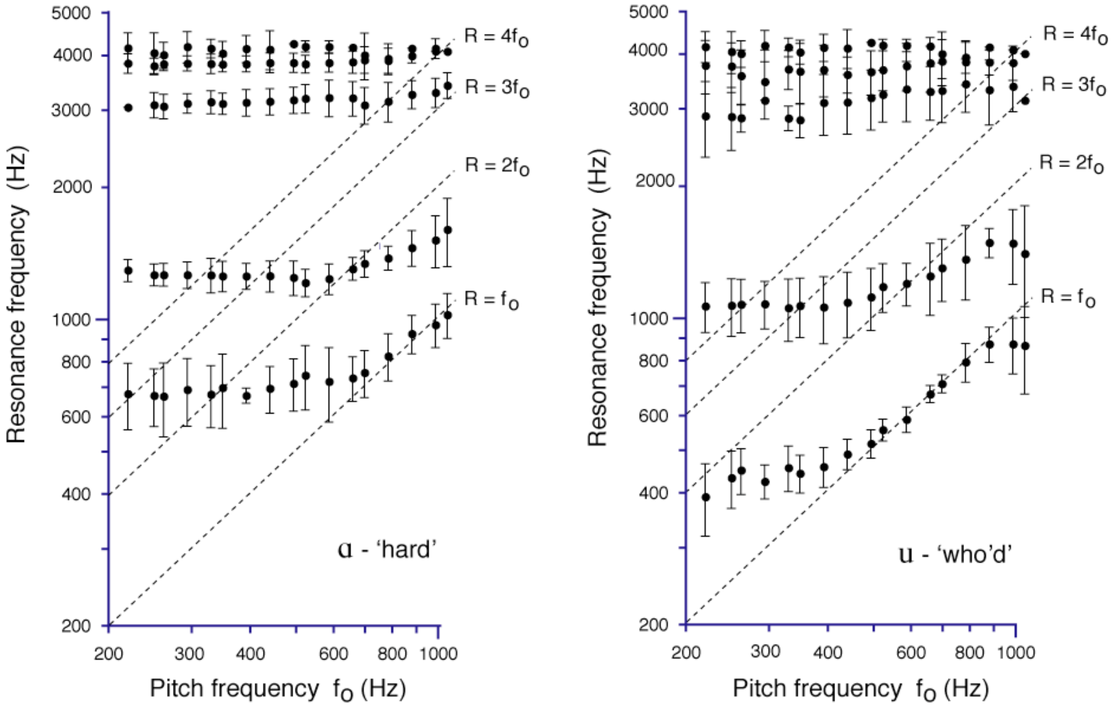

Figure 4 – The first five average resonance frequencies of the vocal tract as a function of the fundamental frequency f_0 for the sustained vowels in two words /hard/ and /who'd/ sung softly by nine sopranos. The vertical bars indicate the standard errors. The dashed lines $R = n f_0$ indicate the exact tuning of a resonance to a harmonic of the pitch frequency f_0. The tuning of R1 to the fundamental can be clearly seen once f_0 exceeds the value of R1 at low pitch. The loss of resonance tuning for 'who'd' at the highest pitches is probably due to the physical impossibility of further tuning with the rounded lips used for these vowels.

THE DIDJERIDU AND THE VOCAL TRACT

The didjeridu is an onomatopæic Western name for an instrument known as the yidaki in the Yolngu language of Northern Australia. It is traditionally made from the trunk of a small tree, hollowed out by termites. It is unusual in that it usually only plays one note, with occasional overtones in some styles. Its musical interest comes however from the spectacular changes in timbre, which far exceed those in orchestral wind instruments.

In a standard model [1] for lip valve instruments (trombone, tuba etc), the acoustic impedances of the bore and of the performer's vocal tract act in series on the lips and on the air flow through them. In orchestral lip valve instruments, the narrow bore and a tight constriction at the mouthpiece together produce resonances whose acoustic impedance has values considerably exceeding those of the vocal tract, even at resonance. Consequently, the tract impedance has only a modest effect on the series combination. In the didjeridu, by contrast, the effect is of primary importance. For example, Figure 5 shows the difference between the spectra of sounds produced with the tongue close to the hard palate and with the tongue low in the mouth. On the same graphs are shown the acoustic impedance of the player's vocal tract, measured just inside the lips, during performance [16].

The mechanism whereby this occurs is perhaps counter-intuitive [7]. At resonance, the vocal tract presents a high impedance at the lips: in other words, a pressure antinode and flow node. If the impedance is sufficiently high (comparable with or greater than that of the instrument), then acoustic flow into the instrument is inhibited at that frequency. As a result, we see in Fig 5 the minima in the spectral envelope of the sound produced by resonances at 1.5 and 2.0 kHz, and the consequent formation of a clear formant between these two frequencies. The peak frequency depends strongly on the mouth geometry and can be varied by the player. In contrast, the low tongue configuration shown in Figure 5 has no comparably strong resonances in this range and so produces no comparable formant. In orchestral lip valve instruments, the effect of the vocal tract geometry on register, pitch and timbre is not so spectacular [20], but it can still be musically important. Current and future research will, we hope, further our understanding of its role in music performance and pedagogy.

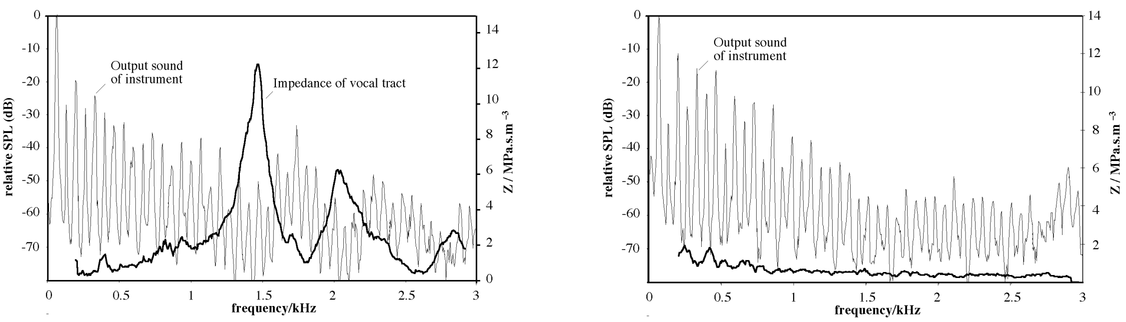

Figure 5 - Spectrum of radiated sound and magnitude of vocal tract impedance measured just inside the player's lips during performance. In the figure on the left, the player performs the 'high drone', with the tongue close to the hard palate, that produces a characteristic, strong formant at 1.8 kHz. The strong peak in the impedance associated with each minimum in the spectral envelope of the output sound is clearly evident. In the figure on the right the player performs with the tongue in the low position, a configuration that does not produce strong formants. [16, 17]

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CONCLUSIONS

In studies of the acoustics of speech, the importance of the speech signal as both an object of study and as a non-perturbing probe of the vocal tract is obvious. Nevertheless, our capacity to measure the frequency response of the vocal tract, while in use, with a resolution of ~ 10 Hz, has improved our understanding of some techniques in singing and music performance. It has also produced techniques with potential for practical application in speech training and therapy, and may do likewise for singing and instrumental music in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The described research has involved several members and associates of our Acoustics Laboratory including Tina Donaldson, Annette Dowd, Julien Epps, Neville Fletcher, Nathalie Henrich, Lloyd Hollenberg, Elodie Joliveau, Benjamin Lange, Alex Tarnopolsky, and Diana Wang. We thank our volunteer subjects, UNSW and the Australian Research Council.

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