

Riffing In The Contemporary Voice Studio

Cierra Lee #2242371

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Project Proposal

Context of Work

As a professional contemporary vocal coach working with singers worldwide, my mission is to help vocalists develop healthy, sustainable techniques across a wide range of styles, empowering them to reach their full artistic potential and achieve long-term career success. One topic that frequently arises in both private instruction and broader pedagogical discourse is vocal riffing—also known as a *run*—which is defined as “a stylistic, melodic pattern of descending or ascending notes, typically performed on a single syllable at a rapid pace” (Alida, 2024). While riffing plays a prominent role in many contemporary genres, there remains a notable gap in empirical research and pedagogical frameworks addressing how riffing is executed anatomically and how best to teach it. This study aims to explore the physiological mechanisms underlying riffing and to identify evidence-based strategies for its effective instruction.

Justification

While numerous voice teachers have contributed diverse methodologies for teaching vocal riffing across pedagogical literature and media, there remains a significant gap in empirical research clarifying which instructional practices are truly effective, particularly from an anatomical and physiological perspective. Various contemporary vocal coaches have offered their interpretations: for example, Alida from Alida Vocal Studio emphasizes the importance of flexible, fast-paced singing usually on a singular vowel (Alida, 2024), while Matt Ramsey of Ramsey Voice Studio also underscores vocal agility but advocates specifically for the use of pentatonic scales and the development of a strong mixed voice (Ramsey, 2022). Vocal pedagogue John Henny highlights the importance of pacing and speed (Henny, 2022), and Natalie Weiss suggests that successful riffing is largely a matter of syncing the brain and body through repetition and coordination (Henny, 2019). Despite the abundance of expert opinion, there is still a need for a clearer consensus supported by scientific inquiry—one that identifies not only the anatomical mechanisms behind riffing but also the pedagogical approaches that best equip singers for consistent, healthy execution of this stylistic technique.

Intended Impact

This research will initially focus on identifying common pedagogical approaches employed by voice teachers in the studio setting, with the goal of uncovering shared techniques and principles used to teach vocal riffing. Building on these insights, the next phase will involve investigating the anatomical and physiological processes that enable singers to execute riffs effectively. The ultimate objective is to translate this knowledge into evidence-based, practical exercises that support healthy, consistent riffing. As riffing becomes increasingly relevant across genres—including musical theatre, where pop-style songs are now frequently required in auditions—these findings have the potential to influence not only contemporary vocal pedagogy but also inform classical voice instruction. Classical singers navigating melismatic passages or expanding into crossover repertoire may also benefit from a more structured and anatomically grounded approach to developing vocal agility.

Outline Intention

For this module, I will engage 5–10 adult contemporary voice teachers using a mixed methods research design, incorporating both qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey. The interviews will be

conducted virtually and will aim to explore how these educators approach the teaching of vocal riffing in their studios, as well as which techniques they have found to be most effective for themselves and their students. In parallel, a structured survey will be distributed to collect quantitative data regarding teachers' perceptions of the anatomical and physiological processes involved in riffing. All communication and data collection will occur virtually. Following initial data analysis, I may refine interview questions or survey items and conduct follow-up interviews as needed to ensure clarity, depth, and confidence in the findings.

Expected Learning Outcomes

This project aims to:

- Identify and compile effective, tangible exercises that enhance the ability of students working on vocal riffing.
- Deepen understanding of vocal riffing by formulating informed hypotheses regarding the underlying muscular behavior involved, particularly in relation to exercises that yield consistent results.
- Develop proficiency in conducting research using a mixed methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.
- Analyze, organize, and interpret the collected data effectively to draw meaningful, evidence-based conclusions.

Ethics and Insider Research Consideration

All adult participants will provide informed consent through secure virtual e-signatures. The consent forms will clearly outline the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, procedures for data collection, and participants' rights—including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Initial interviews will be recorded, with participants' permission, and securely stored on a password-protected device to maintain confidentiality. Survey data will likewise be anonymized and stored in accordance with data protection protocols. This study does not involve sensitive or high-risk topics; rather, it is designed to foster a respectful, exploratory environment focused on pedagogical practices. As an insider-researcher operating within the same professional community, I will remain aware of potential biases and power dynamics, ensuring transparency, reflexivity, and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

Introduction

Over the past decade, I have specialized in the development of contemporary singers at all levels, offering both in-person and online instruction, primarily within the United States. My pedagogical focus has been on equipping vocalists with the tools necessary to access a broad spectrum of contemporary genres in a healthy, efficient, and sustainable manner. Among the most frequently requested areas of training is vocal riffing—a stylistic device described as a rapid series of ascending or descending notes performed on a single syllable (Alida, 2024). A deeper understanding of riffing will not only enhance my own teaching practice but also contribute valuable insights to the broader contemporary voice community.

In the Western classical tradition, an analogous vocal device is melisma, defined as “passages where a single syllable is sustained across more than one note” (*Music and Lyrics Interactions and their Influence on Recognition of Sung Words*). While some educators in the contemporary voice world distinguish between riffs and runs based on musical context and phrasing, others use the terms interchangeably

(Ramsey, 2020). For the purpose of this study—grounded in the context of contemporary commercial music (CCM)—the term *riffing* is used inclusively to refer to both riffs and runs, irrespective of length or musical placement. To reflect current perspectives, this research incorporates interview responses that touch on the evolving understanding of melisma and the nuanced terminology used by voice teachers.

Despite a growing number of resources shared via websites, YouTube videos, podcasts, and pedagogical forums, many instructional materials lack specificity. Few provide clearly articulated, evidence-based strategies that explain the aim of a given exercise, the physical sensations singers should expect, or the muscular activity involved. As a result, singers are often left searching for practical, anatomically-informed answers. Existing research tends to treat vocal agility and pitch control as isolated skills, and while these topics are certainly related to riffing, there remains a distinct gap in literature addressing riffing as a unique and integrative vocal skill. Bridging this gap has the potential to improve pedagogical outcomes by enabling more focused, efficient training that supports long-term vocal health and stylistic fluency.

The present study seeks to serve both CCM artists and contemporary voice educators by providing clearer insight into the practice and pedagogy of riffing. More specifically, it aims to lay the groundwork for future physiological research into the mechanisms that make riffing possible and effective. As a preliminary step, this research examines common vocal exercises currently used by teachers that yield consistent and positive results, with the goal of identifying and recommending those that can be reliably implemented in the voice studio.

To that end, a mixed methods approach was employed. Five experienced voice teachers—each based in the United States and representing a range of student demographics and training backgrounds—were selected for participation. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed to assess participants' knowledge and teaching confidence related to riffing. This was followed by 45-minute virtual interviews with each teacher, which explored topics including pedagogical strategies, the subjective experience of riffing, exercises perceived to be effective, and hypothesized anatomical processes involved in riff production.

On a personal level, this project has been an opportunity to deepen my understanding of mixed methods research, refine my skills in questionnaire design and qualitative interviewing, and gain clarity on the pedagogical frameworks surrounding riffing. My hope is that this study not only supports contemporary voice teachers and singers with practical tools but also initiates further inquiry into the anatomy and physiology of riffing. Ultimately, I aim to contribute meaningfully to the evolving field of contemporary vocal pedagogy and advocate for research-informed, artistically empowering approaches to voice training.

Literature Review

Understanding Vocal Riffing

Vocal riffing refers to the rapid articulation of a series of notes, often on a single syllable, requiring advanced levels of vocal agility and pitch accuracy (Baron, 2024, p. 45). While contemporary genres refer to this technique as *riffing* or *running*, its historical foundation lies in what Classical and world music traditions label as *melisma* or *coloratura*. These vocal embellishments originated in Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian musical practices, where they held spiritual and expressive functions (Nettl,

1986). Over time, melismatic singing entered Western liturgical music through Gregorian chant and flourished in the operatic coloratura passages of the Baroque and Classical eras (Stark, 2008). The transatlantic movement of these techniques led to their integration into African American musical traditions, especially spirituals, gospel, blues, and eventually R&B and soul. In these contexts, melisma evolved into the emotive and improvisational styles recognized today as vocal riffs and runs. This practice was later popularized in mainstream pop by vocalists such as Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, Beyoncé, Tori Kelly, and Ariana Grande—artists who embody the technical prowess and emotional nuance of this skill.

Riffs vs. Runs: A Distinction in Practice

Although often used interchangeably, the terms *riff* and *run* can hold distinct meanings depending on context. Contemporary vocal pedagogues and performers often distinguish between the two. According to Natalie Weiss, creator of the YouTube series *Breaking Down the Riffs*, a riff is generally a shorter, rhythmic melodic phrase that is repeatable or loopable, while a run is a more extended, fluid sequence of notes—often less predictable and more improvisational in nature. Despite terminological variation, the consensus across pedagogical literature is that both forms demand precise pitch control and high levels of vocal flexibility.

Developing Vocal Agility and Pitch Accuracy

Vocal agility—the ability to move quickly and fluidly between pitches—is essential to executing riffs and runs. Historically, it was believed by pedagogues such as Giovanni Battista Mancini that agility was innate and could not be taught (Baron, 2024). However, more recent perspectives, including those of Kirkpatrick (2008), suggest that while some singers may be naturally more agile due to vocal fold mass and voice type, agility is a skill that can be developed through targeted training.

Baron and Nix (2024), in their study *Vocal Agility: Six Pedagogues' Recommendations*, outline practical strategies for cultivating agility. Key recommendations include practicing slowly before accelerating, beginning with brief two- to three-note sequences, and gradually increasing complexity. They emphasize the importance of maintaining airflow consistency—even during staccato passages—and note a slight increase in breath velocity during ascending patterns. These insights serve as a useful pedagogical framework for developing agility in singers of all voice types.

Notably, the authors also highlight the significance of muscular freedom. Optimal agility requires that the larynx move without tension, allowing for unimpeded pitch transitions. Over-manipulation or engagement of constrictive consonants can hinder speed and clarity. Doscher (2008) supports this approach by recommending the use of the voiceless “th” [θ] to encourage airflow and reduce tongue root tension, thus enhancing space and freedom in the pharyngeal cavity. Additionally, Baron and Nix emphasize the importance of an engaged but buoyant rib cage to support breath efficiency during fast vocal passages.

One particularly innovative approach is Smith and Chipman's (2008) technique called “The Wobble.” This exercise, contrary to the term's negative connotation in classical pedagogy, promotes a sense of physical surrender. The technique encourages the singer to allow airflow to be active while phonation remains passive, facilitating a release of control that enhances vocal mobility and expressive vulnerability.

Pitch Accuracy and Ear Training

In tandem with agility, pitch accuracy—also referred to as intonation—is critical in executing riffs and runs successfully. This skill encompasses pitch discrimination, pitch matching, and auditory-motor coordination. Geringer et al. (2014) identify pitch perception and intonation as foundational elements of musicianship. Similarly, McPherson and Parncutt (2002) underscore the role of ear training in developing pitch control, noting that pitch accuracy is not fixed but developable over time.

Research also suggests that physiological and developmental factors, such as age and vocal fold mass, may influence pitch precision. As the voice matures, physical changes can affect both agility and pitch production, highlighting the need for age-appropriate vocal training strategies.

Identifying Gaps in the Literature

While current literature offers valuable insights into pedagogical approaches, agility development, and pitch control, there remains a notable gap in empirical research on the physiological mechanisms involved in riffing and running. Specifically, little is known about the precise muscular and anatomical behaviors that support high-speed vocal embellishment. A deeper understanding of the laryngeal, respiratory, and articulatory coordination during riffing could enhance evidence-based voice instruction and move pedagogy beyond anecdotal methods.

This gap presents an opportunity for future research focused on anatomical analysis, including laryngeal imaging, electromyography (EMG), and airflow studies. Such investigations could provide concrete data to inform technique development, helping teachers and singers understand not only *what* works but *why* it works from a functional perspective.

Methodology & Methods

This study is grounded in a constructionist ontological perspective, acknowledging the existence of a singular Creator—God—as the source and sustainer of all life and knowledge. From this worldview, I understand knowledge not as something newly created, but rather as something eternal and pre-existing that we uncover through inquiry and discovery (Keengwe, 2018), suggesting that understanding is co-constructed between researcher and participant (Crotty, 1998). While the mechanisms behind a phenomenon such as vocal riffing may be newly revealed through research, their function has always existed—awaiting deeper understanding.

The central research question guiding this study is: *What does riffing feel like to the adult singer? How are voice teachers currently approaching the teaching of riffing in the studio? And how might this knowledge influence and inform singers globally?*

My methodological approach is further shaped by a pragmatic epistemology, which allows for both flexibility and open-ended inquiry. Pragmatism supports the blending of subjective and objective elements, making it well-suited for a mixed methods study that allows the researcher to use multiple data collection strategies to address complexities from multiple angles (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). As someone who works closely with singers who frequently engage in riffing, I bring an insider's perspective to this research. While my long-term goal is to understand *how* riffing occurs physiologically within the body, this initial phase of research focuses more subjectively on perception, language, and practical

approaches, setting the foundation for more anatomically grounded inquiry in future stages—particularly in Module 6.

Chosen Methods & Justification

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select five experienced contemporary voice teachers from across the United States. Each participant was chosen based on a minimum of one year of consistent professional observation through digital platforms, such as instructional videos, webinars, or social media content. The participants vary in age, academic background, geographic location, student demographics, and musical genre specialization. However, they share key qualifications: all actively teach contemporary commercial music (CCM) styles, possess current training in voice science, and demonstrate pedagogical engagement with vocal riffing in both their own performance and in their teaching practices.

Although the primary sampling method was purposive, there is a secondary element of quota sampling, as participants were intentionally selected to represent a range of perspectives within the contemporary voice teaching community. A convenience sample, such as only selecting local teachers or individuals from my own studio, would not have provided the diversity or expertise necessary to address the research questions comprehensively. Similarly, **snowball sampling** was considered inappropriate, as the aim was not to build a network of referrals, but rather to target specific, pre-vetted professionals based on demonstrated expertise.

Mixed Methods Design

A mixed methods approach was employed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data, offering a holistic understanding of how voice teachers perceive and approach riffing in the studio. This design is particularly appropriate for complex, real-world pedagogical topics where both subjective experiences and measurable trends are relevant (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The pragmatic and abductive foundations of this methodology allowed for flexibility and openness in interpreting the data while maintaining a structured process for identifying emerging themes and patterns (Morgan, 2007; Slade, 1991).

Quantitative Component: Questionnaire

The quantitative phase of the study involved a brief structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms (see Appendix). The survey began with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, anticipated time commitment, risks, participant protections, and withdrawal rights. Informed consent was obtained via an e-signature prior to participation. The questionnaire included:

- Demographic and background information (e.g., years of teaching, vocal training)
- A self-efficacy scale measuring the participant's comfort level in teaching riffing
- Preview of the upcoming interview questions for transparency and reflection

This instrument was designed to collect quantifiable data that could be used to contextualize qualitative responses and assess the baseline confidence and knowledge level of the participants. All participants completed the questionnaire within 15 days of receiving the form, and survey results were automatically processed through Google Forms, providing accessible statistical summaries.

In future studies, an expanded questionnaire may be developed for broader distribution, possibly incorporating snowball sampling to increase sample size and generalizability across the wider voice teaching community.

Qualitative Component: Semi-Structured Interviews

Following the questionnaire, each participant took part in a 45-minute semi-structured interview, conducted virtually via Google Meet. Prior to the start of each session, participants were reminded of their anonymity, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions exploring topics such as:

- Definitions and distinctions between riffing and runs
- The role of scales, pitch accuracy, and agility in riffing
- The crossover between riffing and melismatic passages in classical singing
- Sensory experiences and embodied feedback during riffing
- Tangible exercises and strategies that yield results in their teaching
- Hypotheses on the anatomical and physiological mechanisms at play during riffing

The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up and clarification questions, encouraging deeper insights while maintaining consistency across interviews. All sessions were recorded in both audio and video formats, securely stored on a password-protected device, and transcribed to ensure accuracy and facilitate analysis.

Data Management and Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews, all transcribed data were systematically organized in a Google spreadsheet, with participant identifiers listed across the horizontal axis and corresponding interview questions along the vertical axis. This structure enabled clear comparison and contrast of responses, supporting thematic analysis and pattern recognition.

The data were analyzed using abductive reasoning, which combines elements of both inductive and deductive approaches (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This allowed for the development of plausible explanations based on observed themes while remaining open to alternative interpretations and future discoveries. As Slade (1991) suggests, abductive logic offers a framework for “best-fit” conclusions drawn from incomplete, yet meaningful, data—recognizing that further physiological or experimental research may deepen or refine these early findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the University of Wales Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Excellence, as well as applicable ethical guidelines within the United States.

Informed Consent

All participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study’s purpose, scope, and timeline. Written informed consent was obtained prior to granting access to the questionnaire and interview materials, ensuring voluntary and informed participation.

Confidentiality

To protect participant anonymity, all personally identifiable information was removed or anonymized in the presentation of findings. Participants were assigned identification numbers selected by the researcher. Both written and verbal assurances of confidentiality were communicated to all participants. Data were securely stored in password-protected locations to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the research.

Voluntary Participation

Participants were reminded, through the information sheet, consent form, and at the outset of each interview, of their right to decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequence.

Risk Mitigation

Given the non-invasive nature of the study, no sensitive or potentially distressing topics were included. Participants were encouraged to respond only to questions with which they felt comfortable and were allowed adequate time for thoughtful reflection. This study did not involve any vulnerable populations.

Insider Research Considerations

As a researcher with a strong personal interest in the topic, I recognized the potential for bias. Efforts were made to maintain objectivity by prioritizing participant perspectives and data-driven conclusions over personal hypotheses, thereby ensuring the integrity and credibility of the findings.

Project Timeline and Implementation

This project was planned as a three-week process and, despite minor scheduling delays with participants, all data collection objectives were successfully met.

Preparation

To ensure a streamlined process, I carefully developed the interview protocol, crafting targeted semi-structured questions aligned with the research aims. Additionally, I designed a comprehensive Google Form incorporating essential study information, informed consent documentation, and the quantitative questionnaire. Consolidating these elements into a single accessible link simplified participation and enhanced the overall user experience.

Recruitment

Participant recruitment was conducted primarily through Instagram direct messaging. Given the substantial followings and busy schedules of the selected voice teachers, some delays in communication were encountered. Nonetheless, I successfully coordinated interview times with all participants and provided them the Google Form to complete at their convenience.

Execution

Interviews were carried out over a period of approximately ten days. While the initial project proposal allocated 90 minutes per interview, actual sessions lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, reflecting a more efficient and respectful approach to the time constraints of these professional educators.

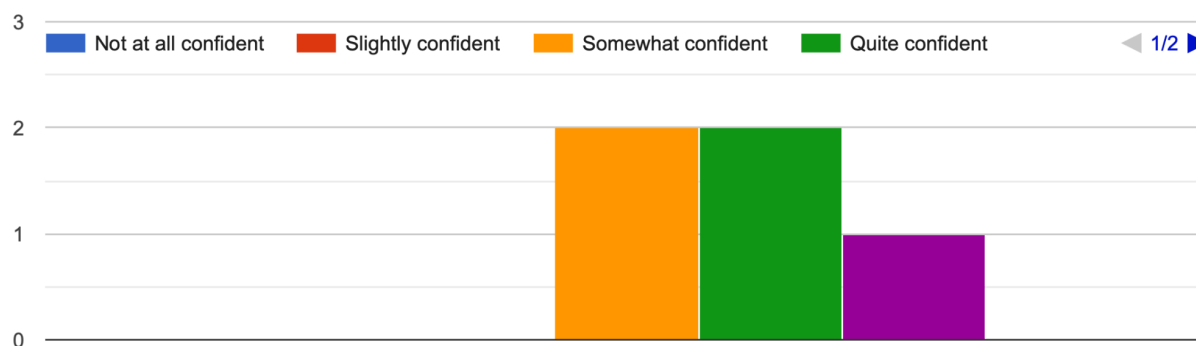
Findings

This study sought to consolidate current knowledge regarding vocal riffing, examine instructional approaches employed by voice teachers across the United States, and develop informed hypotheses concerning the anatomical mechanisms involved, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent research.

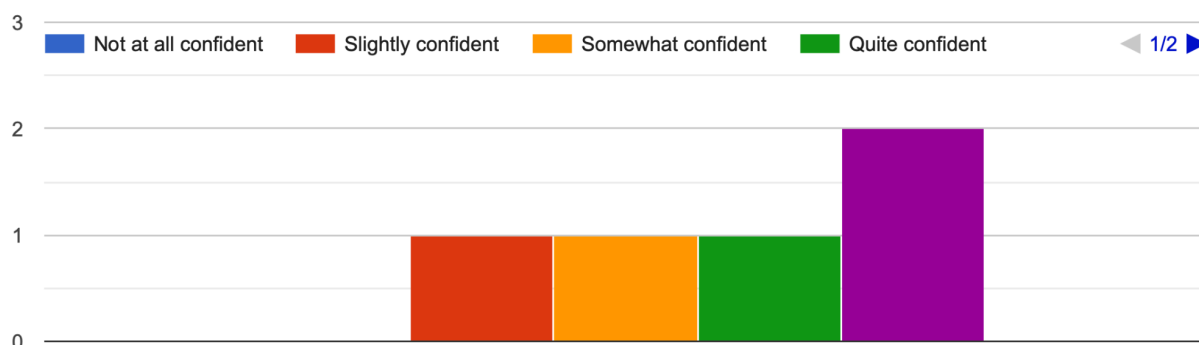
Quantitative Findings

The five participating voice teachers possess an average of 16 years of teaching experience, with a specialized focus on instructing vocal riffing for approximately 12 years. Each participant holds at least a bachelor's degree, with qualifications ranging up to the doctoral level. Additionally, all have received advanced training under esteemed pedagogues, including Dr. Kari Ragan and Kerri Obert. Quantitative results are presented below, with the purple rating indicating "Extremely Confident."

How comfortable are you with teaching the topic of riffing?

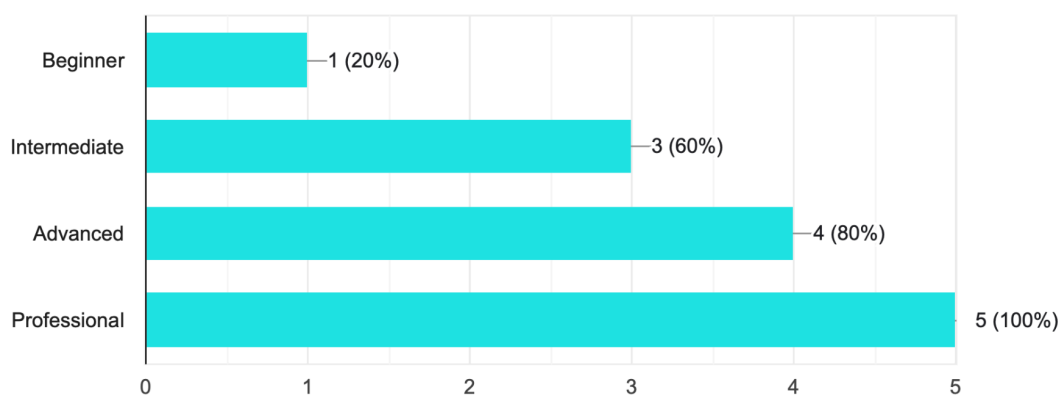


How comfortable are you riffing in your own singing?



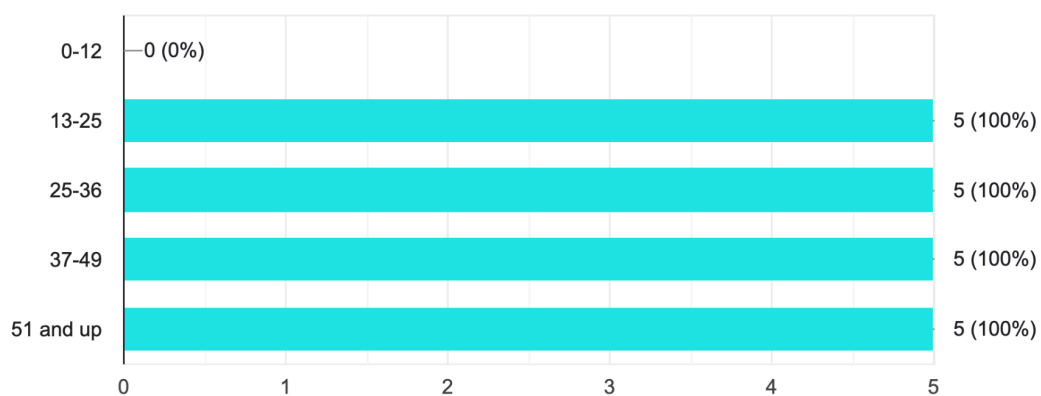
What is the singing level of the students you teach? Check all that apply.

5 responses



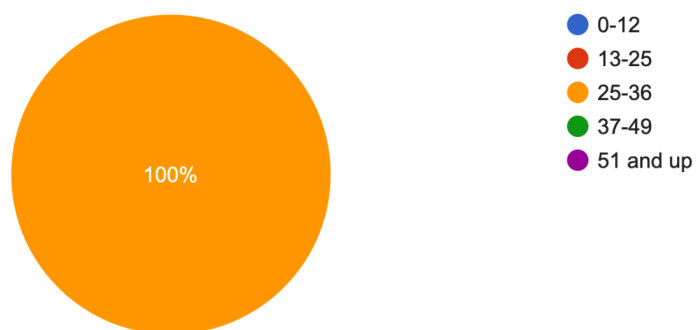
What is the age range of the students you teach? Check all that apply.

5 responses



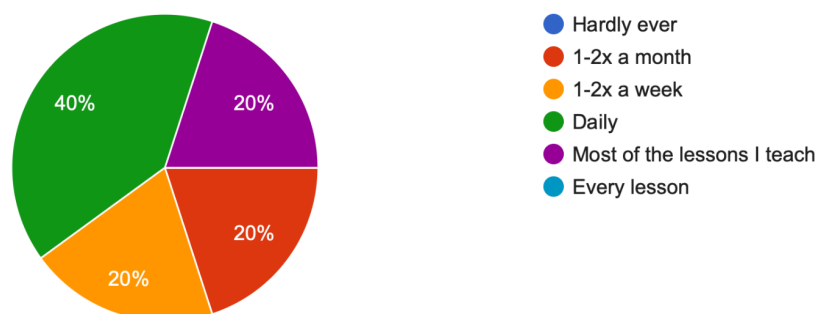
Which age range is working on riffing the most in your studio? Select one.

5 responses



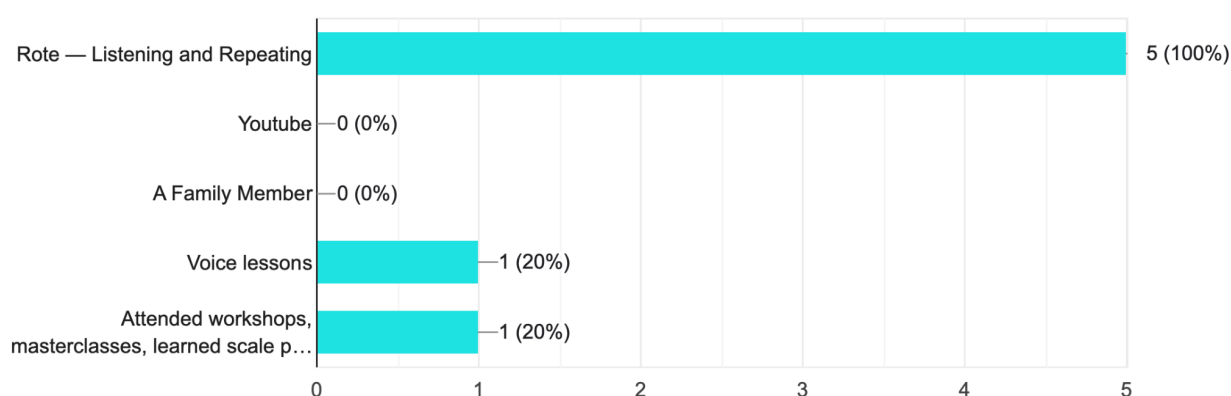
How often does riffing show up in your studio? Select one.

5 responses



How did you personally learn to riff? Check all that apply.

5 responses



Qualitative Findings: A Thematic Analysis of Contemporary Vocal Riffing Pedagogy and Practice

This section presents a detailed thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from five experienced voice teachers specializing in contemporary riffing techniques. The analysis synthesizes participant perspectives to elucidate shared understandings, divergent viewpoints, pedagogical strategies, and speculative anatomical insights related to vocal riffing. The aim is to provide a comprehensive and nuanced account of how riffing is conceptualized, taught, and physically enacted in contemporary vocal pedagogy, contributing to a deeper scholarly understanding of this complex vocal phenomenon.

Theme 1: Variability and Nuance in the Definitions of “Riff” and “Run”

One of the most striking findings from the interviews is the lack of consensus among participants regarding the precise definitions of “riff” and “run.” This ambiguity echoes the broader landscape of vocal pedagogy and musicology, where these terms are often fluid and context-dependent.

Several participants observed that, in everyday use, “riff” and “run” are often treated synonymously, yet their nuanced personal definitions reveal subtle differences in conceptualization. Teacher A framed a riff as “a short, recurring melodic theme,” distinguishing it from a run, which they defined as “an improvisation.” This framing highlights the role of repetition and thematic identity in a riff versus the spontaneous, extemporaneous nature of runs.

Teacher B offered a contrasting perspective centered on musical structure rather than length or repetition. They defined runs primarily as scalar patterns, likening them to a rapid succession of notes following a scale, while riffs were described as “general embellishments” including arpeggios or intervallic leaps. This perspective suggests a distinction based on melodic content and interval relationships rather than temporal qualities.

Teacher D introduced a further dimension by emphasizing the improvisational aspect as integral to riffing, suggesting that for a sequence of notes to qualify as a riff, it must be spontaneous and unrehearsed. This contrasts with fixed melodic motifs or rehearsed runs, which may lack the creative immediacy implied by improvisation.

Teacher E and Teacher C echoed aspects of these views but also highlighted that in teaching contexts, the interchangeable use of terms often leads to confusion among students. This variability suggests that vocal instructors must navigate and clarify these definitions continually, tailoring explanations to individual learner needs.

The divergence in definitions indicates that “riffing” is a multidimensional concept involving repetition, improvisation, melodic structure, and stylistic context. This definitional fluidity reflects the oral and aural transmission of contemporary vocal styles, which resist rigid codification. Consequently, the study pragmatically adopts an inclusive definition of riffing as the rapid articulation of notes within contemporary vocal styles, irrespective of length, repetition, or improvisation status, to maintain analytical coherence.

Implications for Pedagogy

This variability in definitions has practical pedagogical implications. Teachers must recognize that students may enter instruction with differing conceptual frameworks and may require explicit guidance to develop a functional understanding of riffing. Moreover, the emphasis on improvisation by several participants aligns with pedagogical trends valuing ear training and creative vocal exploration over rote memorization. It underscores the importance of fostering musical intuition alongside technical skill.

Theme 2: Foundational Skills and Prerequisites for Successful Riffing

Participants unanimously identified several foundational technical skills as essential prerequisites for proficient riffing. Among these, vocal agility and precise intonation were consistently emphasized, underscoring the interplay between neuromuscular coordination and auditory discrimination.

All teachers highlighted the central role of scalar exercises, particularly those involving the pentatonic scale, as scaffolding tools for developing riffing proficiency. Teacher C’s assertion, “If you don’t know how to do your scales, you won’t be able to successfully riff,” reflects a shared understanding that scales constitute the fundamental building blocks from which riffs are often constructed. The pentatonic scale, with its relative simplicity and prevalence in popular music genres, was identified as a particularly relevant framework.

Teacher A elaborated on this point by emphasizing that scales cultivate vocal agility, defined as the capacity to move the voice quickly and accurately through pitches. This aligns with broader vocal pedagogy literature that associates agility with flexibility and precision in vocal fold adjustments.

Intonation, or the ability to sing accurately in pitch, was highlighted with equal importance. Teacher C offered a candid perspective, emphasizing that riffing demands solid pitch control, humorously stating, “I

don't think you should be riffing if you can't sing in tune in the first place." This reinforces the idea that technical proficiency is a prerequisite for artistic expression in riffing, as inaccurate pitch undermines musical coherence and listener perception.

Collectively, these observations suggest that successful riffing rests on a foundation of disciplined technical work. This foundation supports the vocal flexibility, muscular control, and auditory skills necessary to execute rapid note sequences with clarity and musicality.

Broader Context and Pedagogical Strategies

This consensus on foundational skills aligns with established vocal training paradigms that emphasize progressive skill acquisition. It suggests that contemporary riffing pedagogy should integrate scale work, intonation exercises, and agility drills early in instruction to prepare students adequately.

Moreover, participants' focus on the pentatonic scale reflects the cultural and stylistic origins of riffing within genres such as gospel, R&B, and soul, where this scale predominates. Teachers must therefore balance technical rigor with stylistic authenticity, ensuring that students develop technical skills within relevant musical contexts.

Theme 3: The Sensory Experience and Kinesthetic Awareness of Riffing

In addition to technical and conceptual dimensions, participants provided rich descriptions of the physical and sensory experience of riffing. A recurring theme was the sensation of laryngeal freedom or buoyancy, suggesting an interplay between active muscular control and relaxation.

Teacher A described riffing as "fluid," evoking imagery of seamless vocal transitions facilitated by dynamic muscular engagement and release. Teacher C used the term "sigh" to capture a similar sensation, indicating a feeling of effortless, natural movement rather than tension or strain.

These qualitative descriptions suggest that riffing involves a finely tuned balance: sufficient muscular engagement to articulate rapid notes clearly, paired with relaxation in surrounding muscles to avoid tension that could impede vocal flexibility. The concept of "laryngeal freedom" emerged as a core experiential marker for efficient riffing.

This aligns with contemporary vocal pedagogical models emphasizing kinesthetic awareness and somatic feedback. Teaching strategies that cultivate bodily awareness and encourage sensations of ease may facilitate better control over rapid vocal sequences.

Theme 4: Distinguishing Riffing from Melisma: Stylistic and Physiological Considerations

Although the study's focus is on contemporary riffing, participants frequently referenced melisma, a related vocal technique prominent in Western classical traditions. Melisma involves the articulation of multiple notes on a single sustained vowel, often in highly ornamented passages.

Participants generally agreed that riffing and melisma share fundamental physiological mechanisms—specifically, the coordinated adjustment of vocal fold tension and breath support necessary for rapid note articulation. However, they identified clear stylistic differences, particularly in timbre, length, and melodic patterning.

Riffing was characterized by a more speech-like, rhythmically varied, and stylistically flexible approach, often integrated into improvisational contexts within popular music genres. Melisma, by contrast, was described as more sustained, smoother, and aligned with classical vocal aesthetics.

This distinction reinforces the necessity of context-sensitive pedagogy that addresses not only technical execution but also stylistic authenticity. Understanding the similarities and differences between these techniques enriches pedagogical dialogue and enhances students' stylistic versatility.

Theme 5: Directionality in Riffing: Ascending vs. Descending Patterns

Participants offered varied perspectives on whether ascending or descending riffs are more challenging to execute. The lack of consensus reflects the complexity of vocal physiology and individual variability.

Teacher A suggested that descending riffs may be harder for the “average” singer, possibly due to the laryngeal adjustments required for lowering pitch while maintaining agility. Teacher B countered that ascending riffs demand more cognitive effort and intentionality, as raising pitch rapidly can be “counter-intuitive.”

Teacher D introduced an important physiological consideration, noting that a singer's natural vocal dominance influences difficulty: singers with relaxed vocal folds may find descending riffs easier because pitch lowering involves vocal fold shortening, which can be less effortful. Conversely, ascending riffs require vocal fold lengthening and increased tension, posing a greater challenge.

These insights highlight the necessity of individualized assessment in riffing instruction, where a teacher's awareness of a student's unique vocal physiology informs tailored strategies for direction-specific agility training.

Theme 6: Vowel Selection and Its Impact on Riffing Clarity and Ease

Participants unanimously emphasized the significance of vowel choice in effective riffing. Preferred vowels included /æ/ (as in “cat”), /i/ (as in “see”), and /u/ (as in “you”), whereas vowels such as /e/, /ɔ/, and /ʌ/ were generally discouraged for riffing exercises.

Teacher A preferred /i/, citing its forward placement and bright resonance that facilitates agility. Teacher B noted that in head voice (modal register 2), /u/ was favored, whereas chest voice preferred /i/ or /æ/, indicating register-dependent vowel strategies.

The selection of vowels impacts vocal fold configuration, resonance characteristics, and muscular engagement, thereby influencing the ease and clarity of rapid note articulation. For example, /u/ tends to thin the vocal folds, potentially aiding in faster transitions, although this effect requires further empirical investigation.

These vowel preferences underscore the importance of targeted vowel modification in riffing pedagogy, allowing teachers to optimize resonance and minimize strain during rapid passages.

Theme 7: The Influence of Age and Physical Condition on Riffing Ability

All participants acknowledged that age-related changes in muscle mass, pliability, and neuromuscular control can affect the capacity for vocal agility and riffing. Teacher A remarked, “Agility gets more difficult throughout the body as we get older, and vocally there is no difference.”

However, consistent with principles of neuroplasticity and muscular training, participants emphasized that ongoing practice and conditioning can mitigate age-related decline, maintaining vocal flexibility and agility. This perspective encourages a lifespan approach to vocal training, emphasizing maintenance and adaptation.

Age-related considerations also inform pedagogical adjustments, such as modifying exercise intensity and emphasizing technique to prevent injury while sustaining skill development.

Pedagogical Exercises

Drawing on these findings, a tiered series of exercises was developed to support riffing proficiency across skill levels—beginner, intermediate, and advanced (see Appendix A, B, and C). Exercises incorporate scale work, arpeggios, vowel variation, and ear training, with emphasis on gradual tempo increases and resonance optimization. Physical motions such as finger pointing, gentle head circles, and torso swings were recommended to reduce bodily tension and promote vocal freedom.

Common Challenges in Teaching Riffing

Participants identified three primary barriers encountered by students: fear of attempting riffs, technical limitations affecting vocal balance and agility, and entrenchment in habitual patterns that inhibit improvisation. Teacher B noted that fear accounts for approximately 90% of hesitancy among students, while technical and habitual issues comprise the remainder. Teacher C emphasized the paradox of control, asserting that relinquishing control often enables greater vocal flexibility. Recognizing these common obstacles may facilitate more effective instructional strategies.

Speculative Anatomical Insights

Although this study did not include direct physiological measurement or instrumentation (e.g., laryngoscopy, EMG, or airflow analysis), participants were invited to hypothesize about the potential anatomical and muscular behaviors involved in the execution of vocal riffing. Their responses, while speculative, offer valuable insights into commonly held pedagogical beliefs and experiential observations that may guide future empirical research.

Intrinsic Muscle Engagement: CT, TA, and Arytenoid Involvement

Across all five participants, there was clear consensus that the intrinsic laryngeal muscles—particularly the cricothyroid (CT) and thyroarytenoid (TA)—are centrally involved in executing riffing due to their critical role in pitch modulation and fine motor control. These muscles, which regulate vocal fold length, tension, and thickness, are presumed to be engaged dynamically and with high precision during rapid pitch transitions. Several participants also acknowledged the likely involvement of the interarytenoid and lateral cricoarytenoid muscles, which facilitate medial compression and vocal fold adduction. Their engagement supports phonatory stability, particularly when executing rapid melodic runs where consistent glottal closure is necessary for clarity and tone continuity. However, despite agreement on the involvement of the CT and TA, participants acknowledged the limitations of perceptual inference in determining the exact muscular behavior without visualization. This underscores a broader challenge within voice pedagogy: the gap between somatic sensation and actual physiological activity.

Extrinsic Musculature: Divergent Views on Jaw and Tongue Engagement

Where participants' perspectives began to diverge was in the domain of extrinsic musculature, particularly the jaw and tongue, which play key roles in articulation, vowel shaping, and overall vocal tract configuration.

Jaw Dynamics

Most participants agreed that moderate jaw engagement is helpful for riffing insofar as it assists in the articulation of target vowels and facilitates resonance alignment. However, there was a strong cautionary note against excessive jaw tension, which can impede vocal freedom and introduce unnecessary muscular resistance. Teacher D offered a representative viewpoint: *"You want the jaw to be engaged to the extent that it helps you facilitate the vowel that you're trying to articulate. But when it's too tight, that tends to not be helpful."* This emphasis on functional engagement over rigidity reflects a pedagogical priority on efficiency and coordination over brute force.

Tongue Behavior

Discussion of tongue involvement yielded more nuanced and variable responses. Participants were asked to consider the behavior of the four anatomical parts of the tongue—tip, blade, dorsum, and root—in relation to riff execution.

While all teachers suggested that the tongue is not entirely passive, the degree and nature of its engagement were less clearly defined. Several participants, including Teachers B and C, hypothesized that disengagement or release of the tongue root may be crucial for vocal tract freedom, helping to avoid constriction that could interfere with agility. Teacher D, however, noted that *"a little bit of engagement in the back of the tongue can be really helpful, but again, not too much in my experience,"* suggesting that a certain level of tonus may actually support vocal precision.

Regarding tongue shaping, there was a subtle consensus around a relatively high dorsum position, paired with a relaxed blade and tip resting behind the lower teeth. This positioning was thought to promote acoustic tuning that supports clarity and agility in rapid note transitions. Such shaping is consistent with contemporary pedagogical approaches to modern commercial music (MCM) singing, where vowel modification and vocal tract shaping are optimized for stylistic resonance and efficiency.

Laryngeal Posture: Neutrality as a Desired Baseline

Another area of agreement among participants concerned laryngeal position. All five teachers emphasized a neutral, flexible laryngeal posture as optimal for riffing. A stable laryngeal position, capable of adapting to pitch changes without excess elevation or depression, was seen as supportive of both tone quality and technical efficiency. Teacher A stated, *"Neutral is what I always hope for,"* while Teacher D added that *"too much manipulation of the larynx is going to get in the way of riffing, in my experience."* These views are consistent with current voice science literature suggesting that laryngeal hyperfunction, or over-manipulation of laryngeal height, can lead to reduced efficiency and vocal fatigue. The inference here is that a reactive, rather than directive, larynx—one that responds to pitch and intensity demands without being forced into fixed positions—creates the most favorable conditions for the rapid, fluid transitions characteristic of riffing.

Abdominal Engagement: Stability Without Rigidity

In discussing abdominal support, all participants reported that riffing does not appear to demand more or less engagement than regular singing. The consensus was that stable, balanced engagement of the abdominal and intercostal muscles is essential, but that over-recruitment or rigidity can disrupt the flexibility required for fast, nuanced passages. Teacher B described the abdomen as “stable, but not locked,” emphasizing that riffing should ride on a flexible breath management system that avoids over-pressurization of the subglottic space. This aligns with contemporary breath pedagogy that distinguishes between support (muscular coordination) and control (regulation of airflow and pressure). Participants further noted that breath management during riffing involves more refinement than force, and that abdominal engagement must remain responsive to musical phrasing and pitch trajectory, rather than uniform or static.

Velum Position: Aesthetic Choice vs. Functional Necessity

Discussion around the velopharyngeal port—the mechanism governing whether sound exits through the nose or mouth—elicited varied and somewhat inconclusive responses. Most participants reported that the position of the velum (i.e., raised for oral resonance or lowered to allow nasal resonance) is largely aesthetic and genre-dependent, rather than physiologically essential for riff execution. Some teachers noted that a raised velum, typical of classical or “belt” singing, may help achieve the clarity required for agile riffs. Others suggested that slight nasality—resulting from a more relaxed or lowered velum—can be stylistically appropriate in certain R&B or gospel contexts. What remained unclear was whether the velum actively contributes to the mechanics of riffing or simply adjusts to suit the desired tonal output. This uncertainty points to an area in need of targeted empirical study, especially considering the potential interplay between velar movement and subglottal pressure regulation, particularly during descending runs that require quick vocal fold shortening and controlled airflow.

Breath Management: The Elusive Element

Perhaps the most speculative domain involved breath flow dynamics, including airflow velocity and breath quantity during riffing. Teachers were asked to consider whether riffing required an increase or decrease in airflow, and whether this might vary by melodic direction (i.e., ascending vs. descending). Teacher B hypothesized that ascending riffs may require increased velocity to accommodate rising pitch and heightened vocal fold tension, whereas descending riffs could be supported by a more gradual or decelerated airflow, which aligns with the natural relaxation and shortening of the vocal folds. While this model appears plausible, other participants expressed uncertainty or admitted that they had not previously considered airflow adjustments at this level of specificity. No teacher reported a significant change in breath quantity between regular singing and riffing. This suggests that airflow volume remains relatively constant, with pressure and velocity being the more variable factors. However, given the complex interdependence of subglottal pressure, airflow rate, and laryngeal configuration, more detailed physiological research is needed to clarify these relationships.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The speculative anatomical insights offered by participants illuminate several emerging patterns in vocal pedagogy and point to promising areas for further scientific exploration. Notably, there was strong alignment around the importance of intrinsic laryngeal engagement, stable support, and flexible laryngeal

posture. However, areas such as extrinsic muscle coordination, velum positioning, and breath flow regulation remain more ambiguous and subject to individual interpretation. These inconsistencies reflect a broader lack of consensus within pedagogical communities regarding the biomechanical requirements of complex vocal ornamentation such as riffing and runs.

These findings underscore the critical need for rigorous, empirical voice science research focused specifically on contemporary techniques like riffing. The use of laryngeal imaging (e.g., videostroboscopy, high-speed video), acoustic analysis, surface electromyography (sEMG), and aerodynamic measurement could help confirm or refute current pedagogical hypotheses and ultimately enhance instructional precision. A multidisciplinary approach incorporating voice science, motor learning theory, and artistic feedback would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the vocal mechanism in high-speed melodic ornamentation.

Understanding the physiological underpinnings of riffing will not only benefit voice teachers in crafting evidence-based techniques but will also empower singers to achieve expressive agility with greater efficiency and vocal health. Until such data becomes available, teachers must rely on a combination of informed intuition, experiential learning, and somatic feedback, maintaining flexibility in methodology while prioritizing the singer's individual response and comfort. The evolving dialogue between scientific inquiry and artistic practice remains essential as we seek to deepen our understanding of vocal riffing in the context of 21st-century performance.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore how riffing is currently being taught in the vocal studio, what the technique feels like to experienced teachers, and what anatomical mechanisms might be involved during its execution. Through a qualitative, interview-based methodology, paired with targeted quantitative data, this study successfully initiated a deeper conversation around a vocal skill that is frequently used in contemporary music but often underdefined and inconsistently taught.

By engaging skilled, knowledgeable, and diverse voice teachers from across the United States, this project gathered a range of perspectives that shed light on both pedagogical approaches and speculative physiological insights. The themes that emerged—from foundational prerequisites and vowel strategies to physical sensations and common technical hurdles—offer voice teachers practical tools and pedagogical considerations they can experiment with in the studio. These findings provide a valuable contribution to the evolving conversation around riffing, offering clarity in an area that often relies on intuition or imitation.

While more empirical research is needed to fully understand the biomechanical and acoustic underpinnings of riffing, the insights collected here represent an important step toward standardizing language, technique, and teaching methodology for this advanced vocal skill. Ultimately, this study encourages continued inquiry and experimentation, positioning riffing not just as an expressive tool, but as a teachable, accessible, and trainable component of contemporary vocal artistry.

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Appendix

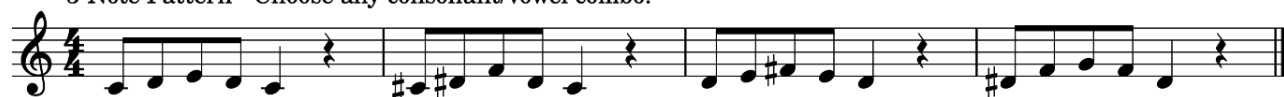
Beginner Riffing

Appendix A

Cierra Lee

Figure 1

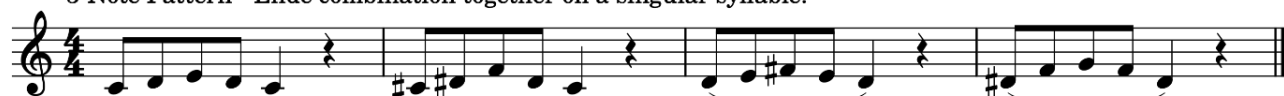
3-Note Pattern - Choose any consonant/vowel combo.



Step 1: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 2

3-Note Pattern - Elide combination together on a singular syllable.



Step 2: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 3

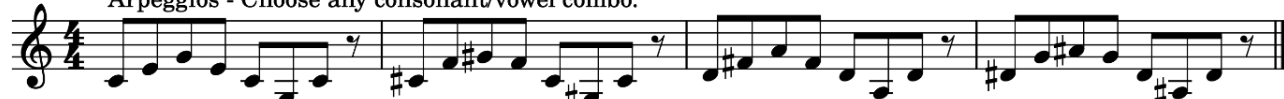
3-Note Pattern - Elided singular syllable on various vowels. Match resonance.



Step 3: Mi Me Ma Mo Mu walk up chromatically
*Gradually increase speed

Figure 4

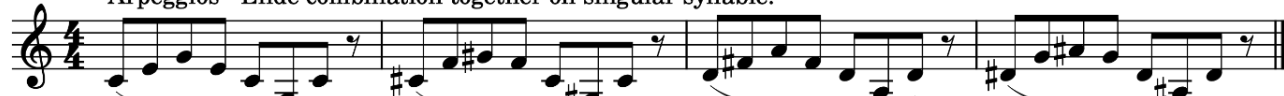
Arpeggios - Choose any consonant/vowel combo.



Step 1: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 5

Arpeggios - Elide combination together on singular syllable.



Step 2: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 6

Arpeggios - Elided singular syllable on various vowels to match resonance.



Step 3: Mi Me Ma Mo Mo walk up chromatically
*Gradually increase speed

Intermediate Riffing

Appendix B

Cierra Lee

Figure 1

Pentatonic Scales - Choose any consonant/vowel combo.



Figure 2

Pentatonic Scales - Elide combination together on a singular syllable.

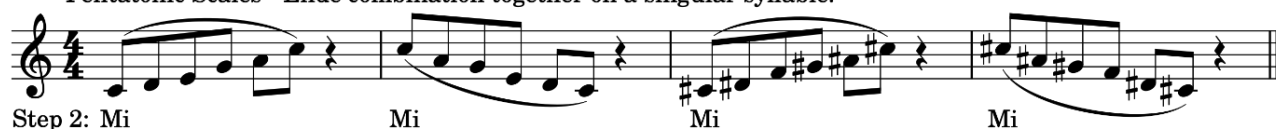


Figure 3

Pentatonic Ascending Scales - Elided singular syllable on various vowels. Match resonance.

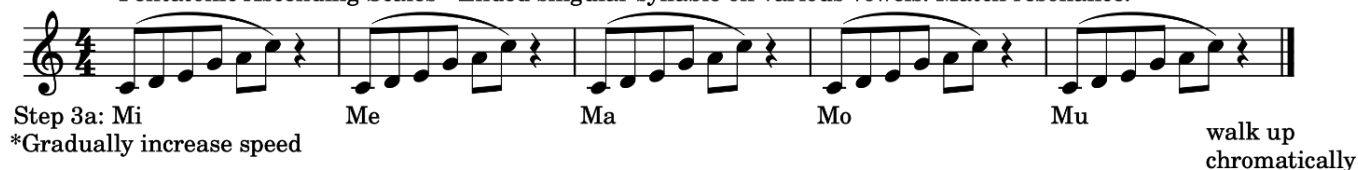


Figure 4

Pentatonic Descending Scales - Elided singular syllable on various vowels. Match resonance.

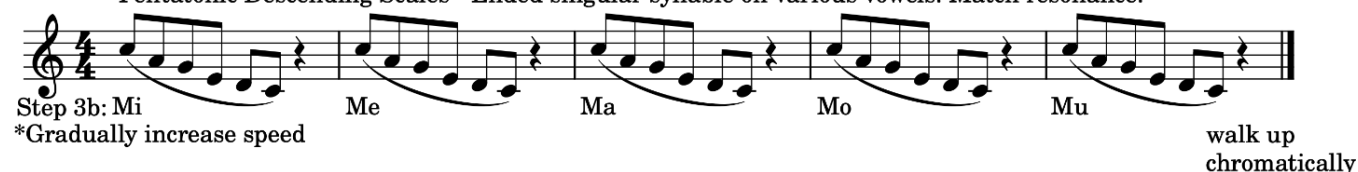


Figure 5

Chromatic Scales - Choose any consonant/vowel combo.



Advanced Riffing

Appendix C

Cierra Lee

Figure 1

Extended Pentatonic Scales - Choose any consonant/vowel combo.



Step 1: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 2

Extended Pentatonic Scales - Elide combination together on a singular syllable.



Step 2: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 3

Pentatonic Intervals - Choose any consonant/vowel combo.



Step 1: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 4

Pentatonic Intervals - Elide combination together on a singular syllable.



Step 2: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 5

Practice - Choose any consonant/vowel combo.



Step 1: Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi Mi and so on...

Figure 6

Practice



Step 2: Mi e i e u Mi e i e u and so on...

Figure 7

Belt/Belx Riff - Do not flip to head voice/thin folds.



Mi ye Mi ye and so on...

2

Figure 8

Plane-Shifting Riff - Flip into head voice/thin folds where you see "+".

The musical notation is written on a single staff in 4/4 time. It consists of two measures, each followed by a whole rest. The first measure contains a quarter note (G4), an eighth note (A4), a quarter note (B4), and a quarter note (C5). The second measure contains a quarter note (D5), an eighth note (E5), a quarter note (F5), and a quarter note (G5). Both measures are marked with a "+" above the first note. The notes are connected by a slur. The word "Me" is written below the first measure, and "and so on..." is written below the second measure.

Me

Me

and so on...