

# LEGATO

I am often asked if legato and portamento are the same thing: they are not.

**LEGATO** is a musical term meaning "smoothly bound together without breaks between the notes."

**PORTAMENTO** is the tool a singer uses to achieve this.

A lot of confusion stems from the fact that legato is achieved in different ways on different instruments. The pianist for example has 10 fingers and a right foot to achieve it. Simply put, a pianist can depress key B before releasing key A to achieve finger legato. He can also use the sustaining pedal to "bind notes together" if the fingers cannot reach. Well, singers cannot sing two notes at the same time and have no pedal!

The string player can put down a second finger on the fingerboard before picking up the first one. BUT he has an option the pianist does not have: he can play a slide! One finger on one string: to make two notes legato the finger can slide and it results in a portamento if the bow stays connected to the string. We know string players played with more portamento because they were taught to do it in their own exercise books and the survival of written-in fingerings show how often in performance they favored the less obvious choice in order to achieve truly "smoothly bound together notes."

If we change the length of our vocal cords while keeping our breath engaged, we hear what the Italians call "portamento." It is just how the instrument works. While portamento is not the goal (legato is), it is what results when the singer truly maintains breath flow between the pitches.

All the old treatises follow onset and messa di voce exercises with portamento. Change pitches without stopping your air. I know it seems pretty basic, but do you do it? In all your small intervals? Can you commit to singing all your tones and semitones legato? There are a lot of them in your repertoire! Your improved legato line starts right here: when you realize just how many small intervals you sing without care - without true legato.