

VOICE LESSON # 3

I) Breath: The Fuel for Singing

BREATH is the fuel for singing. The tone we produce when we sing rests on a cushion of air; thus, the breath is the fuel for the sounds we produce. The more control you have over the air flow, the more control you will have over your singing tone. One can see, then, how important it is to supply the fuel properly. **The upper airway needs to be open and relaxed.** [See Illustration #1]

Breathing is movement – movement of air, movement of muscles and organs, movement of energy. A healthy voice means **free movement of air and all the muscles** involved in breathing, and free movement of the vocal folds.

Imagine a kite flying high in the air. When the airflow is consistent, the kite will fly smoothly and steadily on top of the air current. When the airflow is inconsistent, the kite will bob and dive with no rhyme or reason. Your singing tone is much like that kite. If you provide a strong steady airflow, your vocal tone will have the opportunity to ride strongly and smoothly to our ears. If your airflow is uncontrolled and inconsistent, your voice will break and waiver.

II) Breathing for Singing: The Distinction

What makes breathing for singing different from other breathing is the **action of the rib cage**. In normal breathing, the rib cage expands to bring in oxygen, then collapses or lowers as the breath is used. In singing, we want to create a feeling of firm support for the lungs so that as we use the air, **the rib cage does not collapse**. It is a feeling of nonviolent resistance keeping the rib cage high and wide and not allowing the ribs to drop into the waistline. The singer must learn to inhale quicker and exhale slower than in normal reflexive breathing.

Exercise 3.1: Here's a simple exercise to discover the muscles and organs involved with breathing as a singer:

- Sit in a chair with your feet flat on the floor.
- Lean over and rest your forearms across your knees, relaxing your head, neck and body.
- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose.
- Feel your back and stomach expand; relax into your lap, while you are expanding your lower abdomen.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth and feel the abdomen lift. But continue to try and drop the belly.
- Let the chest stay relatively still.

Repeat as many times as you like. Recommended: try nine times as a start. Each time you repeat, move a little toward sitting upright, continuing to breathe, expanding your abdomen and ribs.

III) Abdominal Muscle and Breath Support

While keeping the rib cage high and wide (think: *wide to the sides*), we use the abdominal muscles for support. As we sing, the diaphragm gradually lifts, pushing air up and out of the lungs as the tone is produced. Because the rib cage is kept high and wide, the diaphragm will lift gradually and we have better control of the breath. [See Illustration # 2]

Think of your rib cage as an accordion, keeping it expanded, rather than squeezed together.

Exercises to Develop Strength in the Breathing Muscles

As you do these exercises, remember to keep the chest (rib cage) high and wide, with no tension. Notice that the basic breathing and posture principles from Exercise #1 apply to all exercises.

Exercise 3.2

1. Begin with a standing singer's posture, holding the chest high and wide.
2. Inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity.
3. Release any tension in the chest or shoulder area. Now exhale, using a hissing sound like air escaping from a tire, as you count slowly from one to eight.
4. Resist the inclination to allow the rib cage to collapse while exhaling.

Note that the danger in this exercise is tension and overexertion. It is easy to become tense about not allowing the rib cage to collapse. Remain conscious of keeping free of tension, constriction and tightness in the shoulders and chest.

Repeat a few times each day, gradually increasing the amount of time you hold the breath until you can **hold it for a full minute** without tension. You can do this exercise while driving, working, etc.

Exercise 3.3

- Inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity.
- To let the breath out, count aloud extremely slowly from one to six (no faster than one number per second), with much openness and resonance in the voice, constantly feeding the tone a great deal of warm air.
- To keep the chest high and wide, think of expanding the rib cage again as you speak each number.
- Your full breath should be used up when you finish speaking the number six. Now take another full breath and begin again. As your breathe control grows, increase the count to 8, 10, 12, and so forth (remembering to keep the same slow tempo or speed).

Exercise 3.4

- To remind yourself of the proper muscular feeling when keeping the rib cage high and wide (nonviolent support), first place your right hand just below your breastbone, so you feel the inverted V of your rib cage (epigastrium/sternum).
- Make a **fist with your one hand**; place it against your mouth **and blow gently on the fist**, not allowing any air to escape.

- Be aware of your rib expansion and the firmness of your sternum area.
- Repeat this often until the sensations are committed to memory.

Exercise 3.5

- To strengthen the abdominal muscles, hold the chest high and wide, inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity.
- Now sing the following exercise, thinking about the support and control provided by the diaphragm as it slowly rises, while the chest stays high, wide and quiet. Begin on a comfortable note in your range and sing up and then down the scale, making each note staccato and using the following sounds and notes.

Go up by half steps with each repeat.



The musical notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The melody consists of 13 notes: D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, Bb3. The notes are grouped into four measures: the first measure has four notes (D, E, F, G), the second has four notes (A, Bb, A, G), the third has four notes (F, E, D, C), and the fourth has one note (Bb). Below the staff, the syllables are: hip hip hip hip ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. Below that, the solfège syllables are: (doh re mi fa so so so so so fa mi re doh). The syllables are aligned with the notes: 'hip' under D, 'hip' under E, 'hip' under F, 'hip' under G, 'ha' under A, 'ha' under Bb, 'ha' under A, 'ha' under G, 'ha' under F, 'ha' under E, 'ha' under D, 'ha' under C, 'ha' under Bb.

(See Exercise 6.5)

IV) To Recap, Breath is the Fuel for Singing

- Assuming that the upper chest is wide and the shoulders are level, neither the shoulders nor the upper chest should rise as air comes into the lungs.
- Expansion ultimately will be felt in the lower rib cage and the back. The abdominal area visibly expands during inhalation.
- Inhalation should be silent, with no audible sound upon breath intake.
- During exhalation or singing, the lower abdominal muscles want to lift upward and inward, lifting the abdominal bulk up against the diaphragm. But keep thinking of downward expansion to control the air flow.
- While singing, the singer must resist the urge to let the rib cage contract and go down. The conscious maintenance of an expanded rib cage will aid the singer in developing a supported tone.
- The more you exercise your breathing, the more control you will have over your voice. With a little time and practice you will be a master of breathing control. Breathing correctly needs to be a habit, meaning you need to do it without thinking about it. So in the beginning you really want to concentrate on the proper technique.

V) Some Typical Language Used when Speaking of Breathing for Singing

- **Column of air:** A consistent source of air coming from the bottom of your lungs through the top of your head. Imagine a blow dryer pointing up from your diaphragm. A continuous column of air allows notes to be sung with the same excellent quality no matter where they fall in the singer's range.

- **Lifted phrase ending:** To have enough air at the end of the phrase to keep the tone fully supported and energized so as to not let the phrase just die out. To sing all phrases as if they were a question. In other words, we must be able to breathe through the last note.
- **Massage your vocal cords:** Visualize the air coming from the bottom of your lungs massaging your vocal cords and the sound will be smooth and relaxed. Tense muscles make tight, forced sound.
- **Energized breath:** A quick, deep breath that adds energy to the vocal line. Often called a “catch breath.”
- **Forward motion:** The feeling/sense that the vocal line is moving toward something in anticipation, making it interesting to listen to and keeping the tune from dragging. Proper breathing is critical to the success of forward motion.
- **3-D Breath:** Inhaling into the space all around you, in front, to the sides, in back. Establish the singing space inside your mouth and throat as you inhale.
- **Suspension:** The brief moment of pause after taking a breath and beginning the sound (phonation).

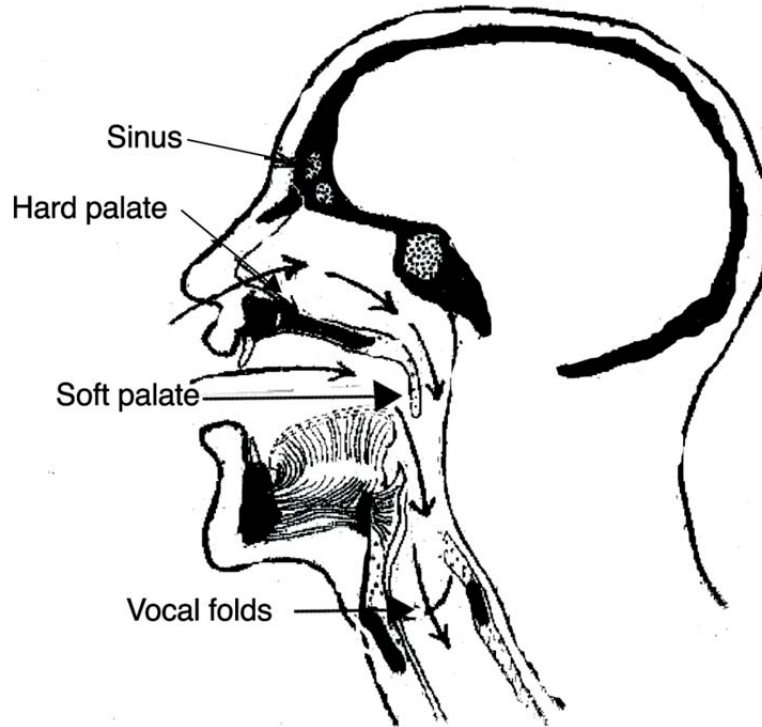
VI) Some General Considerations

- Singers are vocal athletes and must learn to be expert breathers. One only sings as well as one breathes.
- A musical phrase is like a spoken sentence.
- The singer should mark breathing places on the music and memorize the breathing plan along with the words and notes. This includes the initial or preparatory breath at the start of the piece.
- Too few planned breaths can cause the music to lose its energy and to sound strained. It can also make it difficult for the congregation to sing along.
- Too many breaths make the music sound choppy and difficult for the listener to follow.

Breath support and breath management are topics that are discussed, reviewed and refined continuously in most voice lessons. You are as close to breathing properly as your very next breath!

Voice Lesson 3, Illustration #1: The Upper Airway

Arrows indicate flow of air through nose and mouth



Voice Lesson 3, Illustration #2: Ribs - Lungs - Diaphragm

a) At Rest

b) Positioned for Inhalation and Control

