

PART II—THE BASICS OF SINGING

Breathing

Strangely enough, one of the least understood and commonly overcomplicated parts of singing is the act of breathing. It would seem that we should all be experts at this, having been required to practice it for the majority of our lives. Unfortunately, it is not quite so simple.

Proper breathing is extremely important in singing, because the breath being exhaled works with the vocal cords to create the tone. Correct breathing utilizes the muscles in the lower abdominal region and allows the voice to gain its strength, agility and finesse from this area, taking the pressure off the throat muscles. This allows your true, clear, natural voice to be produced. Since the abdominal muscles are proportionately larger and stronger than the delicate throat muscles, it makes a lot of sense to allow them to do the heavy work.

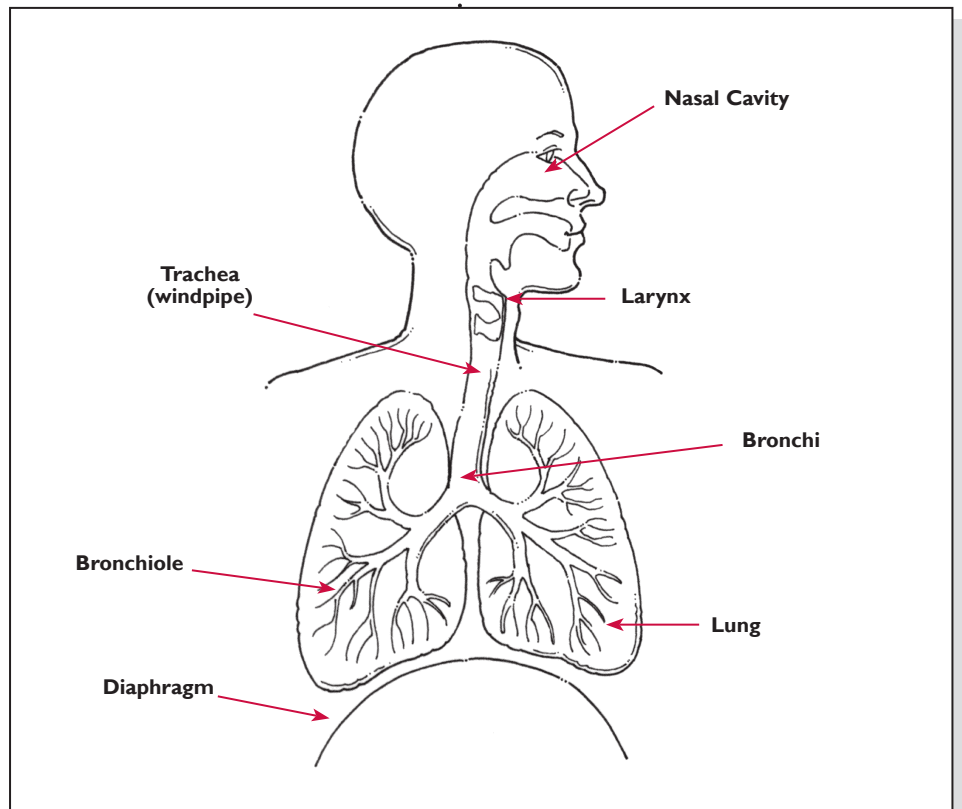
All of this makes up a natural approach to breathing for singing. Your body already knows how to do it. All you have to do is relax and cooperate. The deep, relaxed intake of air before a sigh is the feeling that you want to have when you take in your breath. The intake of air should activate muscles all the way to the lower abdominal region.

The normal breathing process begins when the brain sends a message to the respiratory system that oxygen is required. The *diaphragm*, a large, dome-shaped layer of muscle which separates the abdominal cavity from the chest cavity, is positioned just under the lungs and aids them in the breathing process. Upon inhalation, the diaphragm lowers, and the rib muscles lift the rib cage. This enlarges the chest cavity, creating a vacuum in the lungs, which expand as they fill with air. Then on exhalation, the diaphragm repositions itself, and the rib muscles relax, aiding the lungs in pushing out the air. Thankfully, the diaphragm is an involuntary muscle or we'd have to spend all of our time trying to remember to breathe!

When air is taken in through the mouth or nose, it travels down the windpipe or *trachea*. The trachea divides at the lungs into two *bronchi*, one for each lung (see diagram), which branch out again 15 or 20 times forming thousands of tiny *bronchioles*.

The lungs are made up of spongy tissue. Their main purpose is to provide the blood with oxygen upon

▼ *Respiratory system.*



inhalation and relieve it of carbon dioxide at the time of exhalation.

It is very important that the throat be a relaxed, open channel through which the air can flow unencumbered. If one has a tight throat, the air will not be able to function freely and can cause vocal distress.

A very calming exercise is for the singer to quietly become aware of his or her breathing. Take a few moments and focus on the breathing process and your body. Take a deep, medium-sized breath and do not allow your shoulders to rise as you draw the breath. Shoulders should stay in a relaxed position, down and back,

resting into the body, thus opening up the chest area. It is necessary for the chest to remain comfortably high and open for optimal lung expansion. When singing, this posture should be maintained throughout the inhalation and exhalation process so that the air is not pushed out of the lungs prematurely and the amount of air sent to the vocal cords may be regulated.

Trying to control the breathing muscles is counterproductive. The extra tension exerted in the body will affect the vocal cords, causing them to tense and strain. Conscious manipulation of the breathing process is truly unnecessary, because the abdominal muscles and diaphragm will naturally work together to regulate airflow. To achieve this, stand tall with good posture. Do not allow the chest to collapse, keep it comfortable, but high. When done properly, these breathing elements will do their job *for* you.

A huge gulp of air does not help you to sing better; conversely, it



Exercises

All exercises in this book should be sung starting with the notes shown and then progressively raising the notes in the exercise by a half step on each repetition. For example, an exercise which

begins on the note C will progress to start on the note C#, then in the next repetition, D, D#, and so on. Continue to sing as high a pitch as is comfortable. Do exercise the upper ranges of your voice and encourage it to grow, but do not attempt to sing the exercises when you are experiencing vocal strain. The number of each exercise refers to the number of the musical example below.

1. Keeping the same gentle, no-pressure feeling used for the Speech-Chant, sing “Hah-Mm,” sustaining it on the given pitch. Keep feeding the breath into the tone, maintaining a smooth exhalation.
2. The very tiny distance between the notes in this exercise has a massage-like effect on the vocal cords, making it an excellent way to start the warm-up process. Whisper the vowels, be very sensitive and note the minute movements inside the mouth. Begin slowly, then do the exercise several times, varying the *tempo* (or speed). Start with “Ah” the first time you sing the exercise, then “O.” Finally combine the sound as “Ah-O.”
3. This exercise uses the humming sound “Mm.” The lips are together, but the back molars should be slightly apart. Keep the space open in the throat. The tone should be placed in the mouth; try aiming the sound at the lips. Be careful not to allow it to become too nasal. Keep a consistent energy level.
4. Whisper the vowel first, then sing the exercise. Try to match the vowel on each note to the vowel preceding it.
5. No singing, please! Just speak this one on pitch, saying the numbers.

Track 2

1.

Track 3

2.

Track 4

3.

Track 5

4.

Track 6

5.

The Jaw

From the neck up a singer's muscles should be fairly loose and relaxed. This includes the jaw. A tight jaw will limit your ability to sing freely. The jaw is needed for articulation purposes in singing, but even then must be utilized in a relaxed manner.

As one sings higher, the jaw naturally lowers. The idea is to lower the jaw in a way that will result in increased space for the tone, and actually help the singer.

If the jaw is lowered at the point of the chin, the only extra space gained

is at the front of the mouth. Opening the mouth in this way may also result in tension in the jaw area. The most beneficial method of opening the mouth for singing is to lower the jaw from the back, at the hinge, around the molar area. This opens up the proper areas that provide the singer with the extra room that they can use. It also places much less strain on the jaw.

To loosen up the jaw area, open the mouth and allow the jaw to hang loosely from the hinge. This is sometimes referred to as a "dumb" jaw. Remember, you are getting

used to a new, relaxed feeling and during the exercises in this section, relaxation is far more important than a precise articulation of the words. While singing, try for as little movement of the jaw area as possible. Allow the tongue and lips to do their jobs in pronouncing the vowels and consonants. Check your progress by observing yourself in a mirror and placing your index finger lightly on the chin.

A relaxed jaw is essential for good singing.



Exercises

1. Experience a feeling of letting go in the jaw and cheeks while you sing this exercise.

2. Sing this exercise with a relaxed jaw, letting it go and

allowing your tongue to do all the work. The jaw absolutely does not need to move in order to sing these exercises—make sure there is no chewing of the jaw as you sing! Remember to sustain the tone between the notes and keep singing a pure vowel throughout the exercise.

3. Let go of the jaw and sing the exercise.

4. Use very little movement of the jaw in this exercise. Be very aware of singing a good "Ah." Don't allow this vowel to become "Uh."

5. Allow the tongue to work independently from the jaw in this exercise.

Track 14

1.

Track 15

2.

Track 16

3.

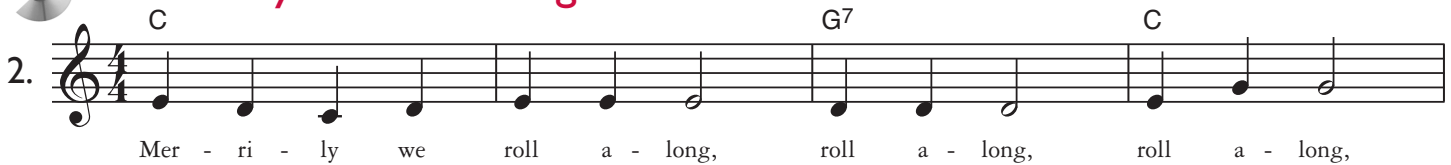
Track 17


4.


Track 18

5.

Track 28 Merrily We Roll Along

2. 



3. 

Track 29 

4. 


5. 

Play the notes or listen to the recording of each of the following songs. Then when you are sure you know each tune, sing them. Imagine that each note is a bull's-eye, and hit the mark directly in the center of the pitch every time from the first instant you sing the tone. It is easy to get into a habit of always singing the notes in a "scooping" manner—sliding up or down to the pitch. Too much of this effect is annoying to the listener and can be a difficult habit to break.

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

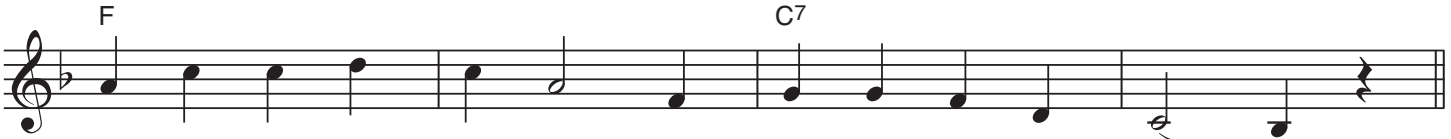


Spiritual




2. He made me a watch - man up - on the cit - y wall. And

3. In the time of Da - vid, some said he was a king. And




if I serve Him tru - ly, I am the least of all. _____

if a child is true born, the Lord will hear him sing. _____



Go, tell it on the moun - tain that Je - sus Christ - is born.



More Breathing Strategies

We have already discussed the basics of breathing for singing. Now we come to the singer's eternal concerns: What is the proper amount of air to inhale in preparation for singing any given phrase of music? How much do we really need? Of course, the correct response to these questions is, "Enough." How do we know what "enough" is? Well, the answer is that we don't. The good news is that our body does know and we need to learn to trust its judgment.

Notice your breathing right now. The body is taking care of everything. We don't have to think "Okay, breathe now, out, in, out, in." We couldn't

handle it! The body regulates the amount of air it needs. It's the expert, so let it do its job. Our singing isn't helped when we draw in too much air and hold it, then press it out of our lungs. Overinflating like this can cause physical problems, vocal strain and pitch problems. Even when encountering the longest phrases, try taking just a small amount of air before you sing. The best singing results from simply breathing in order to stay alive and allowing the body to do the rest. The real issue isn't how much air is taken, but how naturally it is received and what happens after the breath is inhaled. The intake is very easy. You really use very little breath when you sing. When it

is time to make a tone, all that is required is the thought and the body will see to it that there is an adequate amount of air to sing through the music. The singer takes the breath, opens up the channel for the air and then allows the body to take over. There is cooperation. It's like riding a roller coaster and instead of fighting the ups and downs, settling in and going with it as a friend. There is a partnership of the mind and body, not a power struggle.

The mind and body work together to provide the right amount of air for singing



Exercises

1 and 2. Take in your breath as if you were able to draw in the air through every pore in your face. Sing the "Ah" as in the word "father." Relax the jaw, provide the open space in

the mouth and drop into the "Ah," as if you are dunking a tea bag. It is a feeling of resting into the body, not a forced, upward motion.

3, 4 and 5. First speak the words to these exercises. Try different inflections in your voice: happy, sad, questioning, authoritative. Now sing the exercises, starting from speech. Keep it simple—speak them on pitch.

1. **Gently**

a. Ah _____
b. O _____

2.

Ah _____

Track 45

3.

Here _____ is the rose. _____

4.

Oh _____ No _____ Oh No _____

Track 46

5.

a. What can I say a - bout this land? It _____ is _____ grand. _____
b. So, tell _____ me a - bout these trees. They _____ are _____ green. _____

INTERPRETATION

PART IV—INTERPRETING VOCAL MUSIC

Learning the notes and the rhythms is really the easy part to performing a song. The more difficult task for many performers lies in the interpretation of it, portraying the drama and soul of a song to an audience.

Telling a story

The point of singing is to use words in conjunction with the music to tell the story of a song. Songs in all styles of music have a story line, and your interpretation can enhance the drama inherent in the song. As with learning the notes and rhythms, the drama in a song is extremely important or the song just won't come across to an audience. After studying the words and determining the meaning of the song, there are several artistic decisions you can now make.

What is the song about?

In five words or less, identify the essential gist of the song. (Examples would be love, unrequited love, joy, sorrow, frustration and so on.) This basic question will help you find the heart of the song and establish it in your mind. Your answer to this question may change or evolve during your association with a song.

What is the mood?

The general mood of a song must be created by the singer. This question is closely tied to, "What is the song about?" The answer to that question will be helpful in determining the overall mood that you wish to convey. The tempo and rhythm of the music will also provide some clues as to the mood. A song with a quick, lively tempo should leave a very different

impression on the audience than a slower moving piece. Similarly, examining rhythmic patterns in the song should give you some ideas about how to sing it.

Who is the narrator of the piece?

Develop a personal history of the person. This may be more important in some styles of singing than others, but it can't hurt to know the character. Are they male or female? What is their approximate age? Where are they from? Lastly, in correlation with the mood of the song, what is the narrator's attitude?

Location: Where are they when they are singing?

You will want to consider this question carefully, because whether your narrator is in jail or at a dance will tend to affect your interpretation.

Are they singing to someone or something?

What is their relationship with the person to whom they are singing? How do they feel about this other person (or cat, horse, truck)? These answers will give you some feelings to work with. If the narrator is in love with the person they are singing to, he or she will probably show more tenderness, for example, than they would toward someone or something they dislike. Or, there may be layers of feelings. If the singer is singing about unrequited love, there is probably love toward the object of their affection beneath their hurt and resentment.

Is there humor present?

Humor may be present in an explicit manner in a comedy song, or may only be implied in others. Seeking out the humor in your piece is a positive move for your interpretation and will help you build rapport with the audience.

Not necessarily all of these items will pertain to every song, but careful consideration of them will help you to develop an interpretation. Try out several choices for each question, ranging from the obvious to the surprising. Experiment until you find an interpretation that is interesting and will work for you.

Based on your answers, experiment with the way you should stand, using a full-length mirror to gauge the effect. Try out some gestures, remembering that too many can be distracting. Words that are repeated are usually repeated for a reason. Figure out the reason and find a new way to sing them each time, perhaps through the use of dynamics (loud or soft) or other vocal expression.

Determine your focus. If you are speaking to someone in the song, where is that person—on your right or left, or perhaps directly in front of you? Visualize the events of the song, make up a story for it and see it vividly in your mind, creating a movie in your mind for yourself. Use this to fuel your performance and engage the audience in seeing and feeling the song as strongly as you do.