

Vocal Education Series

Part 2 - Breath Control and Better Singing

By René Torres

[In Part 1 the author dealt with warming up the voice and related matters. The exercises he recommends here can be done separately or in conjunction with a warm-up session. Though some of the exercises for breath control should be done daily, so should vocal warm-ups, but that isn't always feasible for the amateur singer].

You do it thousands of times a day. You do it 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You don't even think about it. But if you can't breathe—even for a few seconds—your body certainly lets you know fast!

It's a natural process.

Breathing is natural, normal, easy, unconscious, and effortless. There is no reason why breathing while singing should be any different. Yet it's amazing to observe the contortions and gyrations that some singers go through to make singing a reality. We are going to discuss how you can achieve a natural, easy breath while singing and, therefore, a natural, easy singing voice.

Vocal exercise is the key.

There are two objectives to doing breathing exercises. One is to be able to have a longer singing phrase, and the other is to have a smoother use of the air column as you deplete the supply. The former objective requires exercises to increase your vital lung capacity. All things being equal, the more air you can store, the longer the phrase you can sing. The latter objective is met by exercising the muscles that control the inflow and outflow of air so that they function smoothly. This is generally accomplished by good physical conditioning and muscle toning.

- **Maximizing lung capacity.**

It is important for the singer to maximize vital lung capacity because this makes the biggest difference in the quality and beauty of singing to be achieved. By having a greater capacity for air, your phrases can be sung without tension and with emphasis on nuances.

To be a good singer, you have to know how to breathe properly. An intake of breath, preferably fast and smooth, involves the relaxation of muscles, whereas an outflow of breath in singing involves the controlled contraction of muscles.

- **Maximizing airflow.**

There is an expression known as “drop like a pear” when taking a breath. This means: Open the mouth wide enough to get all the air you can in the shortest possible time, relax the diaphragm muscle down and out without pushing, and let physics take its course by drawing in the breath and filling the lungs “from the bottom up.” Not doing this is one of the biggest mistakes in beginning singers, and one of the main reasons for having insufficient singing breath. If you raise your shoulders to breathe in, or if you forcibly expand your chest, you will get air into the lungs all right, but the air will fill the upper part of the lungs, and make filling the lower part more difficult, if not impossible. Not only that, feeling a full chest of air may trick you into thinking you have your lungs full, and this is not necessarily so. The trick is to let the diaphragm relax and, therefore, draw in the air from the bottom.

Practice doing this a few times a day. Begin by exhaling all the air you possibly can. Then, standing erect, but not rigid, simply open your mouth and at the same time relax your diaphragm, letting the air rush in of its own accord before you expand the upper chest. If you have a “spare tire” around your waist, it will be pushed out as if you were exaggerating it. This is normal, and to be expected. It may not look pretty, but it works! As you get used to dropping like this, you will begin to see that relaxing in all directions around your stomach tends to allow in even more air. Be especially conscious of the relaxation of the muscles at stomach level on each side of the spinal column, and finally the rising of the chest as the last of the air is taken in.

Getting through the three stages of singing.

You will get through the three stages of singing once you have gotten the hang of “dropping like a pear.” In the first stage, every time you sing, you will be consciously aware of how you are breathing, and it will mean no end of distraction to your voice. Your timing will be off, you will feel very self-conscious as you sing, and everything will seem to be coming unglued. However, this is normal. Keep it up, and you will progress to stage two.

At this point, you will be less conscious of your breathing as you start to develop “muscle memory” and experiment with the breath and its use in singing. In the last stage, when everything is integrated, you are singing better than before, and you are glad you went through all the hassle.

Learning to use air efficiently.

There are two useful exercises to train the muscles for smooth operation. The first one should be done while relaxed and comfortable. The second can be done anywhere and any time, even while driving on the freeway!

- **Reading.**

Find a long article in a newspaper or magazine, one that would take several minutes to read at a normal pace. Cut out and save the article as you will be using it many times. Take a full breath and start reading the article aloud in a normal tone of voice. Do not pause for punctuation and do not take a breath. Actually, the article is just a convenient string of words for you to utter. Keep going until you have no breath left. Mark the point at which you stopped. Then do it again with the express purpose in mind to go further than the previous time, even if it is just one word more. Do it a third time, again marking where you stopped. The total time of this exercise will be four or five minutes. If you do it every day, you will be amazed how much more you can read as time passes. More importantly, as you read, you will find yourself coming in contact with feelings and sensations in your body that tell you how much breath is left. This process will allow you to consciously change the pace of the reading in order to “beat” your previous record. Then, when you sing, these same emotions will tell you how to properly complete each phrase.

- **Recitation.**

The other exercise involves reciting numbers out loud until you cannot go any further. You remember the number at which you stopped and, in a subsequent exercise, try to go further. This exercise can be done anywhere.

The well-produced voice always seems to have more breath “in reserve” at the end of a phrase, no matter how difficult or complex its nuances. The poorly trained singer always seems to be gasping and in distress.

A few more pointers.

Remember to fully exhale any unused air before you “tank up” again. Remember also, that having good breath control alone is not enough to make you a good singer. Vocal pitch and tone color require a certain amount of energy and muscle balance. You need more than good breath to achieve a precise attack on a note. The instantaneous melding of vowel, pitch, and intensity is possible only when you have a balance and smooth maintenance of breathing tension. Don’t think of breath control as saving the breath for later notes. If you do that, the energy necessary for an efficient tone is lost. These factors are considered part of vocal technique, the subject of the next article.