

Why does everyone always go on about breath support?

As members of the singing category we thought it might be useful to include some articles in voicebox which focus on specific singing skills and give some ideas and techniques to improve how we sing. We hope you will find these helpful.

If you have any comments or questions on this article, the category generally or advice on coaching please do not hesitate to contact any of us. Our details are all on the LABBS website (under Education, singing category) .

For our first topic we thought we would cover that old favourite – breath support. It's such a common theme when singing (your director wants you to sing to the end of that phrase where you struggle every time....the judges mention it to (nearly everybody) every year). Why is everyone always going on about it ?!

As we all know, breath support is the foundation of good singing. It really is...Breath is the fuel for the voice and the nature of the tone we produce depends on that fuel. As Lesley Garratt said to a contestant on Celebrity Fame Academy recently – if you want to improve the quality of your tone work on your breath support.

With good breath control you can minimise or eliminate:-

- Tone flattening
- Breathy tone
- Excessive vibrato
- Inability to project the voice
- The effects of nerves

Breathing and breath control take constant concentration. The moment you lose that the voice will lose its quality and projection not to say a loss of forward motion due to fading at the ends of phrases.

Posture

Firstly, then a word about posture. You can't start to sing properly or breathe properly without starting with the correct posture. Posture has a major impact on how you breathe and how much air you can take into your lungs. Every time before you sing *and throughout the song* make sure you have the right posture:

- One foot slightly in front of the other, feet comfortably apart for good balance
- Weight forward on the balls of the feet, heels on the floor
- Knees relaxed
- buttocks tucked under
- chested lifted high and spread wide
- shoulders relaxed
- neck relaxed
- head level

- chin parallel to the floor neither lifted nor lowered

You can do it as a chant for a warm up

toes pressed, knees flexed, pelvis tilted, ribcage lifted, shoulders relaxed (rpt...)

Sandra Landey used to say to the White Rosettes before they started a song (possibly every song) 'imagine (like a puppet) you have a string out the top of your head, lift your body as if the string is being pulled'.

And so to breathing.....

The science bit...

The lungs are where the fuel is stored but the lungs are organs not muscles. The lungs are attached to the rib cage and to the diaphragm. If you expand the rib cage and lower the diaphragm then the lungs are automatically expanded and the air rushes into them without the need for any extra help on the singers part. In order to avoid making ourselves look too fat (!) we sometimes develop bad habits of shallow breathing from the chest. Your chest should already be 'high and wide' when you take in the breath and so you should really feel the breath expanding the ribs and diaphragm

If you're a man and you would like the technical terms the muscles used to keep the rib cage 'high and wide' are the intercostal muscles and those in the diaphragm are the epigastric. The skills we want to develop are intercostal and epigastric breathing.

Breathing for singing is different to breathing for talking. When we talk we take a breath then talk until the air runs out allowing the ribs to collapse as it does so. We then take another breath. When we sing we need a continuous cushion of air to support the voice throughout the phrase so we need to keep the lungs stretched and full of air throughout the phrase. Accordingly you need to develop muscles which you don't use when talking to keep the ribs expanded and the diaphragm lowered (and the lungs stretched) for as long as possible. Some suggested exercises are set out below.

Exercise 1 – lifting the ribcage

Put your hands on either side of your body and feel your ribs. Keep the chest high and wide. Breathe in through your nose and feel the ribs lift. You will also feel the muscles on your back working. Keep shoulders relaxed.

Hold your breath for 10 to 15 seconds. Hiss out the air but don't let the ribs collapse. Repeat daily until you can increase the amount of time you hold the breath without tension. You should be able to get to a minute.

You might visualise it by imagining you have a belt around your ribs when they are lifted and expanded. Don't let the belt fall as you sing a phrase.

Exercise 2 - locating the diaphragm muscles

If you're not sure how to breathe properly from the diaphragm try these exercises to locate and use your diaphragmatic muscles (or, if you prefer, to practice your epigastric breathing...)

Lay on your back and make a heavy object (not too heavy...) rise and fall on your abdomen

Stand near a wall. Place a water bottle with one end on the wall and the other on your abdomen (above the belly button) lean weight gently against it and as you breathe in you should move away from the wall.

You might think of it as getting 'fat' as you breath in and 'staying fat' as you sing a phrase.

Exercise 3 – warm up for keeping ribcage high and wide

Keep chest high and wide. Inhale through nose and feel the ribs lift. Hiss the air out as you count one to eight. Keep the ribcage high and wide. Perform again increasing the number of counts as you hiss out the air. You might do it as a chorus walking round the room and see who can get to the highest number of counts.

Exercise 4 – warm up for strengthening abdominals

Breathe in through nose and keep chest high and wide and make the abdomen go fat. Make the following sounds. Group the sounds into twos, fours etc and breathe between each group. As you make the sounds feel your abdomen muscles working

- sh sh [breathe] sh sh sh sh
- f f [breathe] f f f f
- s s [breathe] s s s s

Sit ups are also good for strengthening your abdominals !

Finally

So just some final practical tips on breathing in a song as it isn't just about breathing technique but also how you put the breath points into a song:

- **Agree breath points** - agree all the breath points for the song (if even a few people breathe (or forget to breathe) you can hear it and it disturbs the unity). It sounds simple but I have seen one coach stop a (medal winning) chorus approximately 10 times because one person sang through a phrase where there is a breath point. You can hear it.
- **Sensible breath points** - try to make the breath points as sensible as possible. It isn't an endurance test ! It should be the type of phrase a reasonably good quartet could get through (i.e. you don't have to sing longer phrases because you're a chorus)
- **Staggered breathing** - if you need to (in a chorus) use staggered breathing. This means that individuals may 'sneak' a breath in the middle of the phrase to enable them to give it some welly, for example, at the end of a tag. Rules of staggered breathing are – don't breathe at the end of a word (because you can hear the breathe) take a word or part of a word out and come in a smoothly as possibly – make sure you are not taking a breath at the same time as anyone around you. You can reach an 'agreement' as to who breathes when !
- **Energise ends of phrases** - the final point is to try and push the volume and energise the end of EACH PHRASE. Us wretched judges love mentioning 'support'. If you trail in energy at the end of phrases it's much easier to pick up on. Push the energy and the volume slightly at the end of every phrase and keep the forward motion of the song.

As I say please contact us if you have any questions or comments at any time

Nancy Kelsall on behalf of the Singing Category