Body, Breath & Voice for Choral Singers

Breathing is a pre-requisite to singing. It will come as no surprise to readers of Quires that the way we breathe can affect the success of our singing. The following list of choral challenges can be ameliorated through improved breathing:

Poor posture: tension in upper back, neck, chest, jaw, tongue, and throat
Running out of breath during a phrase
Lack of ability to sing true legato
Lack of flexibility during runs
Incorrect or muddy vowels
Poorly articulated consonants / late cutoffs
Vocal placement too far back
Using air and throat to change pitch
Pitch and tuning issues
Poor sight-reading
Inability to sing musically
Inability to concentrate

The singing breath should be energized and effortless. Our daily lives often encourage the opposite; the body is dragged down by gravity, inhalations are too fast, too soon, and too shallow, while exhalations are truncated and hesitant. Days, weeks, or years practicing unhealthy respiratory patterns and poor posture will eventually create habitual tension in the torso, chest, middle/upper back, neck and throat, making it difficult to sing to full potential. If we can efficiently create a state of "readiness to sing" in the body and the breath, we can save ourselves much time and energy during the rehearsal process.

While concepts of breathing are best communicated with physical demonstration, it is hoped that the following written descriptions will be useful. Try viewing diagrams of the anatomy described by googling "respiratory muscles" (such as the one at http://www.colorado.edu/intphys/Class/IPHY3430-200/image/17-1.jpg)

When singing effectively we call on our Primary Respiratory Muscles (PRMs). They are the Internal Obliques, External Intercostals and Diaphragm. A stressful day can cause our bodies to recruit Secondary Respiratory Muscles (SRMs) such as the Scalenes, Sternocleidomastoid, Trapezius, and Pectoralis Minor to sustain the "I'm under attack" pace. These SRMs are activated by the Sympathetic Nervous System, and exist to assist the PRMs during stressful, "flight or fight" situations that only last a few minutes. They are not designed to be used on a constant basis, and yet this is how many people breathe most of the time. Consistent over-use of the SRMs can lead to injury and weakness, especially in the lower back. Shallow, clavicular breathing, along with tightness in the solar plexus (clenching the Rectus Abdominus, which should be phasic and relaxed) leads to obstruction of the diaphragm's natural descent into the abdominal cavity, hindering our inhalation. This creates a lack of connection to our "font of strength" in the lower belly and hips, decreasing the volume of air, and therefore efficacy, joy and self-confidence. As we gulp shallow inhalations and truncate our exhalations, we begin to feel as if we "can't get a full breath," and singing becomes a chore.

Decreasing physical tension while increasing awareness and strength restores the inherent calm of the mind, increasing the singer's focus and concentration skills. The singing will be spacious, strong and centered. Strong hips and a stable lower back allow increased airflow and an open throat. The singer will be in a much better position to sing to full potential.

The following exercises are designed to lengthen and strengthen the PRM and Postural Support muscles, while relaxing and softening the SRMs. This series also frees the breath and grounds the body, thereby energizing the voice. This takes around 15-20 minutes.

STEP 1: Breath

Harmonizing the breath. A choir that breathes together sings together.

1. **Natural Breathing.** Inhale through the nose, using only the PRMs. The inhalation should occur easily and naturally, not as a heave or a gasp. Exhale through the mouth, releasing the air, like a sigh, then "drift" (without clenching any throat or belly muscles) lengthening the end of each exhalation. Just sigh. Do this 10 times, increasing the drift each time. The emphasis here is soft strength, fullness of inhalation, surrender and release of the exhalation. Then add voice to the sigh, encouraging the singers to safely release voice and breath at the same time.
2. **Full Body Breath.** 1- Breathe into belly. 2- Breath into solar plexus. 3- Breath into upper chest. 4- Breath into lower back. 5- Breath into middle back. 6- Breath into upper back, 7-Full body breath: all six spots from the bottom up. Then ask, where can you breathe, and where can't you?
3. **Birthday Cake.** Imagine a birthday cake 50 feet away; blow out the candles as hard as you can. Repeat x4. One of the major difficulties for amateur singers is that they hold their breath when they sing. The Birthday Cake encourages the release of air while vocalizing.

STEP 2: Breath & Body

Understanding the connection between breath and body

1. **Massage Chain.** Choir turns to one side, massages the back and neck of the person in front of them. Reverse. Each chorister then massages her own face, throat, and jaw. Encourages ensemble, and releases muscular tension.
2. **Chair Twist.** Sit with your body and legs facing to the left, flush with the back of the chair. Take hold of the two sides of the back of the chair. Twist the torso to the right (away from the legs), while exhaling – 5 breaths. Turn to other side and repeat. Assures spacious Intercostal muscles for increased lung capacity.
3. **Shoulder Roll.** Clasp hands behind back, gently and slowly roll the shoulders up while inhaling, and down, forward while exhaling. Opens the upper and middle back.

4. **Necking.** Lengthen and lift the back of neck. Slowly and carefully tilt head to side; once there, pull down on the opposite shoulder for 5 breaths. Reverse. Singers, in a misguided attempt to conserve air and/or "sing loudly", will clench a plethora of neck muscles that need to be soft to encourage a relaxed vocal mechanism. Together with releasing these neck muscles (Trapezius, Sternocleidomastoid, Omohyoid, Thyrohyoid, Mylohyoid, Stylohyoid, Levator scapulae, Scalenus anterior, Sternothyroid and Arytenoids), this is an instant calmer of rambunctious choirs. It activates the phrenic nerve (the only motor supply to the diaphragm), which floods the body with relaxation hormones.
5. **Samson.** Sitting or standing. Arms out to sides (palms facing down), shoulders relaxed down; try to get the hands/fingers completely vertical, then gently attempt to roll the shoulders. This will open the upper back (this is also optimal for relieving the symptoms associated with Carpal Tunnel Syndrome).
6. **PalmTree 1.** Place left hand on hip, right arm straight up in air, and inhale. Exhale, bend from hip to the left, reaching diagonally to the left with right hand. Keep hips and legs grounded. Inhale back to center. Reverse.
   PalmTree 2. Same, but slide hand down leg during the stretch.
   PalmTree 3. Same, both arms up, left hand holds right wrist, exhale, bend to the left. Reverse. For Intercostals, Latissimus dorsi and Scalenes; singers will notice a massive improvement in their "singing carriage".

STEP 3: Breath & Body & Voice

Movement as metaphor for the forward momentum and strength required for singing.

1. **Resonance and Relaxation.** Closed-lip *hmmm*, on Soh-fa-mi-re-do. Ask: Is it placed forward or back? Is the air like a laser through the nose, or is it swirling around in the back of the throat? If it is the latter, the breathing is being hindered by a tight jaw and lifted tongue. When the *hmmm* tickles the lips or the front of the face, they have it right. Then, work with *zzz*, tongue trill (*rrr*) and lip trill (*brrr*), also on Soh-fa-mi-re-do. These sounds are safe starters, as they use only a portion of the chords, encouraging airflow and discouraging tension.
2. **Sumo Wrestler.** Make a Neanderthal-like relaxed-throat *HUH* while simultaneously bending the knees. Find chest resonance as low as possible; is the throat relaxed? Does the impetus and momentum of the breath feel connected to the "font of strength" in the belly? Once the chest voice is set, have the ladies repeat in head voice; does it feel as connected and supported? Repeat back and forth between chest and head until it does. Then vowels that emphasize free breath, such as "ha-ha ha-ha ha-ha ha-ha- haaa. (pairs on soh-fa-mi-re-do) with the knee-bend on the soh. This movement facilitates the release of all neck, back and chest muscles that interfere with the exhalation, therefore encouraging throat and chest resonance.
3. **Valkyrie**. Vowel is *ooo* or *oh*, first on Do-mi-soh-mi-do. On soh, take a big, confident step forward with one foot, pumping the arms forward as well. Feel the heel press into the floor; the high note should feel easier, and the choir should be able to reach higher pitches with greater ease. Inhale and pull back to standing between each repetition.

Repeat with Do-mi-soh-upper do. This encourages the release of high notes, eradicating the fear and effort associated with them.

4. **I'm Ready to Sing.** Imagine the energetic excitement of the moment on stage just before something happens. Stand with feet under hip bones. Bend knees slightly. Tuck tailbone down slightly. Tuck front ribs toward spine while lifting the chest. Roll shoulders forward, up, back, down, and let them settle. Lengthen back of neck up. Repeat numbers 2 and 3, in this energized posture, while *feeling* as if you are moving. Inhale with excitement, exhale with release. Ask the singers, "does your support feel the same as when you are moving?" If it doesn't, repeat the Sumo Wrestler and Valkyrie until it does.
5. Revisit the **Full Body Breath** from Step 1. If it feels different, success!

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