

Yoga and Breath for Musicians 1

Time is Breath

G.I Gurdjieff

Breath, Body, Mind and Life

The use of effective breathing to improve mental and physical health goes back many thousands of years. Natural, full-body breathing powered by the lower belly is essentially our birthright. As infants our bones, muscles, organs and entire spinal column would undulate with the pulse of our breath. In *The Breathing Book*, Donna Farhi states:

Breathing affects your respiratory, cardiovascular, neurological, gastrointestinal, muscular, and psychic systems, and also has a general affect on your sleep, memory, ability to concentrate, and your energy levels.

As we are challenged by the rigors of life, we begin to tense our body and breath in order to “hold firm”, just as we would hold onto a tree during a strong wind. Dealing with increased levels of psychological stress increases the tempo of our internal metronomes, and our chemical, cellular and neurological paces quicken. In an effort to sustain this hurried rate, our muscles often learn to remain tense, expending valuable energy. Eventually, we begin to constrict our primary respiratory muscles (the abdominals, intercostals and diaphragm), flooding the body with adrenaline in order to cope with the situation. The body then relies on the secondary respiratory muscles (scalenes, sternocleidomastoid, trapezius, and pectoralis minor) to sustain the pace. However, the secondary system exists only to assist with stressful situations; it is not designed to power our cardiovascular system on a constant basis. Furthermore, the continual tensing of these muscles weakens their strength, inducing other muscles to overwork in order to pick up the slack; this often leads to injury. Society’s ideal of the “flat, rock-hard stomach” also encourages shallow breathing, as we obstruct the diaphragm’s natural descent into the abdominal cavity. This creates a lack of connection to our “font of strength” in our lower belly, decreasing our efficacy 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”. These harmful events eventually lead to the pH balance of the body shifting, favouring acids over alkaloids, which in turn creates more stress, and further weakens the immune system. Naturopaths, Breath therapists and Homeopaths have identified this vicious cycle with Asthma, Sinusitis, Bronchitis, Ulcers, High Blood Pressure, Depression, Anxiety, Indigestion, Hyperventilation, PMS, Headaches, and Chronic Fatigue. There is an alternative to ingesting sugar, caffeine, or other stimulants to artificially increase our energy levels. Consciously returning to natural, unhindered breathing allows us to release physical tension and re-vitalize our body and mind.

Breathing is effortless, but after many years of ingraining unhealthy habits of tension, the breath becomes effortful; conscious relaxation techniques become necessary. We should not be forcing the body to breathe, but instead, learning how to get out of the way, allowing the body to breathe naturally. This restores the inherent calm of the mind, enabling us to better cope with the frenzied activity of daily life.

Breath, Body, Mind and Rehearsal

Western society encourages individual expression, yet the practice of assertion often lacks positive reinforcement. As a result, many people are not speaking (much less singing) with their true voice. Amateur singers may have spent days, weeks, or even years breathing shallow, and nervously speaking from their throat; “using the voice” equals stress. It is unrealistic to expect the amateur singer to magically change these ingrained habits exclusively for weekly rehearsals. Kenny Werner, in his book *Effortless Mastery* writes:

A person might give up music for reasons of insufficient talent, when upon closer inspection it becomes clear that... many people are crippled by an inability to focus and by a sense of being overwhelmed. These problems are often mistaken for laziness or lethargy.

The already overwhelmed singer, with her concentration levels pushed to the maximum, and worried about letting down her conductor or fellow choristers, works hard to achieve the correct pitches, rhythms and text. On some level, singing and music has been equated with fear. If this continues, the singer will exhibit ungrounded behavior. Flighty giggling, lack of concentration, anger, an overly rigid or slouched sitting posture may all be attempts by the singer to deal with anxiety. The sound will be inflexible, as many singers (especially men) will clench their abdominal muscles inward, take too much breath too high in the chest, and push from their larynx in order to “lead the section” and create a “full sound”. Legato singing will be impossible. As the secondary respiratory muscles strain, the singer will begin to feel chronic tension in his upper back and neck. The impetus of the breath will leave its proper “font of strength” position, rise higher in the chest, create improper airflow, and lead to over-singing. As breathing becomes impaired, the singer will feel they have less sustaining power. Incorrectly assuming they need more air, they will inhale with great effort, move the abdomen strongly upwards, thrust the chest forward, and lift the shoulders. Proper support and breath management has now been abandoned. According to Master Great Nothing of Sung-Shan in the famous *Taoist Canon on Breathing*:

As for the proper inner breath, it is called the Embryonic breath.
Since it is naturally inside you, you do not have to seek outside for it.

Standing rigidly during warm-ups will not help release these difficulties, as they are already tight from the inside-out. Releasing this tension will facilitate a smoother rehearsal. A method to combat this rigidity is to have the singers move and stretch before and during vocalizations. Throw the arms in the air on high notes, stomp the foot to encourage uninhibited entrances, vocalize with sirens and laughter: anything to activate their energy, release their physical and mental tension, and bring them back into a calm, joyful, grounded sense of themselves. The improved tranquility, happiness and confidence of the singers will allow the focus, concentration and togetherness of the ensemble to escalate accordingly.

What is Yoga?

Yoga is many things to many people. For our purposes it is a system of stretching and breathing for increased flexibility and strength. While each pose has specific physical, mental and vocal health benefits (too numerous to discuss here), what makes Yoga different from standard exercises is patience. Our muscles have a natural inclination to remain in their given state; this is known as the “recoil response.” In Yoga one remains gently in a stretch, attempting to relax more each moment, until the “recoil response” subsides and the tension eases, thereby lengthening and strengthening the muscles. This can be a good example for how we can adjust to difficult situations in our daily lives. One puts oneself in an unusual pose (*asana* in Sanskrit) that at first seems tight, tense and difficult, but with patience begins to soften. Once you have found repose, the body has learned to turn a stressful situation into a relaxing one. The implications are innumerable. As the renowned yogi B.K.S. Iyengar writes in *Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health*:

The practice of *asanas* have a beneficial impact on the whole body. *Asanas* not only tone the muscles, tissues, ligaments, joints and nerves, but also maintain the smooth functioning and health of all the body’s systems. They relax the body and mind, allowing both to recover from fatigue or weakness and the stress of daily life. *Asanas* also boost metabolism, lymphatic circulation and hormonal secretions, and bring about a chemical balance in the body.

When one is relaxed, time expands. Every moment spent on relaxing the singers will save you double or triple the time during the music practice, as the time wasted with repetition due to unfocused singers will diminish. So many musical “problems” disappear when we sing in a healthy and joyful manner. You will be tuning the bodies, minds and ears of the singers, just as instrumentalists tune their instruments.

Breath Management for Singers

Inhalation

- Inhale deeply through the nose (when possible). This grounds the diaphragm, fostering confidence (Anxiety causes pitch to sharpen). This insures the breath pressure will be in the belly, alleviating air pressure in the throat, allowing for a lower larynx, more open throat, and therefore rounder sound. Avoid the quick upper-chest “snatch breath” which causes flat pitch.
- Inhale less air. Breath into your lower back and pelvis only. Many singers take more breath than is required, and create shoulder or abdominal tension in the process. The “pushing of the voice” or “blowing out the cords” is caused by the stacking up of tension-filled breath pressure (which also causes flat pitch), while the “unsupported voice” is that which has too much loose, unfocused air moving through the larynx.
- The inhalation (especially between phrases, where this is most difficult) should occur naturally of its own accord, and not be forced as a gasp through the use of external muscles.

Exhalation / Singing

- Release dead air between phrases. In rehearsal this can be achieved with the sigh, the Neanderthal “HUH”, the “cough-off”, or laughter. The ‘HUH’ is not about singing low, but speaking/singing with connection, with undertones, and with confidence (it works with high voices as well – the more connected they are to their low, center-of-gravity

singing energy, the higher they will be able to sing). Once they are using their “font of strength” of support, the task of tone placement will be more successful.

- Conserve air. Learn to manage the breath; do not blow it through the cords at the beginning of the phrase.
- Sustaining Power. Fear impairs proper breathing. Practice releasing the sound gently when your breath is done. Do not push past the natural end of your air, tightening the abdominals and shoulders in order to sing to the end of the line. Releasing the exhale without tension will improve your ability to sing longer phrases, because it takes away the fear. You have more air than you think you do.

Proper Support for Singers

- Support is the lengthening and expansion of the Neanderthal, or vocal sigh.
- The ribcage is lifted and solid (not rigid) and expanded side to side, like an accordion. Resist the inclination to drop the lift and side-to-side expansion as you sing.
- Inhale a tablespoon of air into your lower back.
- Breath, diaphragm, larynx, tailbone and feet are all grounded down.
- The head is centered over the spine.
- The lower back (lumbar muscles) is expanded.
- The throat, jaw, tongue and abdominal muscles are relaxed.
- Music doesn't sell, heart sells. The more the singer is aroused by musical inspiration, the more effective the support will be. Focussing exclusively on technical detail is discouraging and therefore harmful to the vocal mechanism.

This is who we are

I do not suggest that one can effect a permanent psychological change in all your choristers in a few rehearsals. This takes time, and is facilitated primarily by the carriage and attitude of the conductor, who will only help himself by reducing those things that block music-making, such as physical tension, and mental anxiety. Is our fear of imperfection obstructing our joy of making music? Is our aim of excellence based on avoiding “mistakes”? It is sometimes too easy to forget about the humanity in front of us; you never know what a person can bring to the table. Above all, we must remember that music is not simply about music; music is about humanity.

Bio

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Yoga and Breath for Musicians 2

by David Wilson

If one can focus one's heart on music,
it is just like warming something which has been frozen.
The music's beauty of rhythm regulates the beating of the heart,
which helps restore health of body, mind and soul, and bring them to their proper tuning.
The joy of life depends upon the perfect tuning of mind and body.
Inayat Khan

(drawing of "Primary and Secondary Respiratory Muscle here, with this paragraph.)
The muscle responsible for most of our natural respiratory effort is the diaphragm (in combination with the intercostal muscles between the ribs, and the four layers of abdominals). When unhealthy, stressed, fearful or confused, our body transfers the bulk of the work to the secondary (supporting) respiratory muscles, in readiness for our fight, flight, freeze or faint responses. However, we often use these upper muscles unnecessarily, our muscle memory fooling our brains into believing we are in jeopardy. As our respiration quickens, so does our heart rate, making reposeful performing difficult. Clavicular breathing will eventually cause these four muscles to ache, as they are being asked to do a job for which they were not intended.

The following postures are selected for ease of use during a normal rehearsal. The exhalation is the impetus for all movement in and out of poses; this connects the relaxation response to the poses, convincing the body that the goals are easy and enjoyable. (Holding the breath convinces the body that the exercise is "hard; the health benefits then diminish accordingly). We are often unaware of our breath patterns. When you get out of your car, or when you pick up a heavy object, are you holding your breath? If the answer is yes, you may be heading toward injury. Instead, try exhaling to propel your body through the "effort". You will find you get out of your car with more ease, and that the heavy object is lighter. This concept of consciously altering our breath patterns is exactly the same when dealing stressful mental/emotional circumstances such as performance anxiety.

A final note: There is a difference between "A Good Stretch" (a broad, lengthening sensation in the middle of muscle, that focussed breathing alleviates) and "Pain" (a sharp twinge around tendons or ligaments that breathing will not soften). All of these postures should be done slowly, with great thought and breath awareness; rushing causes injury. The ideas below are only guidelines, any pose can (and should) be modified for those who require a gentler stretch. These are also not intended as replacements for other time-honoured activities, only as alternative methods for reaching the goal for which we all strive: Beautiful Music.

Physical Warm-ups: Standing

Massage Chain Turn to one side, massage the back and neck of whoever is in front of you. This also encourages a close and more connected ensemble. After, each person massages their own face, throat, and jaw.

Table Stretch Hands (shoulder width and height) flat on wall, table, or back of a stable chair. Position feet under pelvis. Lengthen spine, exhale chest toward floor, stretch into shoulders, upper back and armpit area. Heels grounded.

Palmtree 1 For intercostal and abdominal awareness and expansion. Place left hand on hip, right arm straight up in air. Inhale do nothing, exhale, bend from hip to the left, reaching diagonally up and out with right hand. Keep sighing through the sensation for five breaths. Exhale back to center. Keep outer hip and leg grounded. Reverse.

Palmtree 2 Same, but slide hand down from hip as bending to the side. Reverse.

Palmtree 3 Same, both arms up, left hand holds right wrist, exhale, bend to the left. Reverse.

Warrior 1 Left leg two to four feet in front of the right, feet stable and grounded. Bend front knee. In final position, knee is over heel, so adjust accordingly. Arms in “fieldgoal position”, belly button facing straight ahead through feet. Exhale, back of the body drops, front of the body lifts. Come out on exhale, reverse.

Warrior 2 Same feet position, front leg bent, but torso now faces to the right. Arms and hands are parallel to floor, head facing out over left arm. Come out on exhale, reverse.

The Warriors are about holding music folders properly. Improper breathing and stance leads to heavy and stiff arms, inducing hunched shoulders, tight leg muscles, and bracing the neck, hip and knee joints. The jaws and tongues then tighten and our singing soon deteriorates. Relaxed breathing in these poses increases our leg and torso stability, training our arms to be light and strong.

Cyclone or Washing Machine This energizer opens the breathing mechanism. Feet a few inches apart, so the leg bones are straight under the outer edges of the pelvis. Hips steady; pelvis always faces forward, or the torque of this pose goes into the knees. Arms at right angles. Turn back and forth from your waist, raising the arms a few inches every 5-10 breaths, then come back down slowly. The whole exercise should take about a minute. Again, hips do not move. (Careful with anyone with lower back problems. These twists are excellent for lower back-aches, but they are done lying down, with less movement).

Hippy Shake Many of you know this fun activity. This is a tension breaker, laughter creator, and energizer; it also aids body awareness. In order, shake each body part, counting out loud to 8: left hand, right hand, left forearm, right forearm, left entire arm, right entire arm, left foot, right foot, left calf, right calf, left entire leg, right entire leg, whole body. Then count to 4, do the same thing, then to 2!

Physical Warm-ups: Seated

Neck Stretch Calms mind, relaxes jaw, neck and tongue. Tilt neck gently to the left shoulder, lifting *both* sides of the face, as if bending around an imaginary grapefruit lodged between shoulder and neck. Reach diagonally up and out with the head, while stretching down with the right deltoid (shoulder muscle). Hold, sigh through the stretch

for five breaths minimum. Come back to center on an exhale. Reverse. Secondly, turn to either side, chin parallel to the floor, pulling back on the opposite shoulder. Watch for clavicular breathing and for “Chicken Neck” (esp. in high school males), as both inhibit healthy, free singing.

Fieldgoal Arms reaching straight up past ears, shoulders relaxed. Hold for 5-10 breaths, set the ribcage, then bring arms down on the exhalation, keeping the ribcage lifted and expanded. This helps to discourage the “heave and collapse” ribcage breathing.

Shoulder Rotation Hands clasped behind back, palms facing forward, lift as high as comfortable, gently roll shoulders. Breathe. Repeat with palms facing back.

Double Helix Arms straight out to sides, bring forward, cross elbows, bend at elbows and see if you can get palms to touch. If comfortable, gently roll shoulders.

Samson Arms straight out to sides, attempt to point fingers toward ceiling, pushing through the heels of the hands. This is not as easy as it sounds. This loosens up the muscles that become constricted due to holding music. Also excellent for pianists.

Chair Twist For ribcage awareness and expansion. Sit in a chair sideways. Place right thigh firmly against the back of the chair, feet and knees together. Exhale, put hands on either side of the back of the chair. Each exhale, you turn and twist farther around to right. Breathe into ribcage. Neck, jaw, shoulders are relaxed, only forearms work. Reverse.

Breath Developers

Breath Comparison Ask your choir to purposefully breathe high in the chest, then change to low in the belly, and ask for comments. Do they feel more “in their head”, or connected to their “gut feelings”? Which method makes them feel more grounded, which makes them anxious or flighty?

Font of Strength Breath 1 Sit on a chair, eyes closed for inward concentration, with hand just below belly button. Breathe into this area for 10 breaths, quiet and focused. Check that the impetus of the breath begins low, then expands outward.

Font of Strength Breath 2 Same, but inhale with hands on side ribs (like an accordion), then move hands to belly, exhale by gently drawing the belly toward the spine. Repeat a minimum of 10 times. Over time, this will help train healthy breathing habits.

Folding Exhale Encourages a full exhale from the abdomen. Seated, bend over slowly from hips as you exhale. Allow inhale to occur naturally as you sit up. Repeat for no more than 5 breaths. (This is excellent for asthmatics, but only under controlled circumstances – avoid if asthma is acute. Those with migraines or eye troubles do not do this exercise).

Lower Back Expansion Good to do right after massage. Alone or in partners, depending on the comfort level of your singers. Seated, hands on lower back around the kidneys.

Breathe, expanding this area. Partners can check for improper raising of shoulders on the inhalation, and that they fully, vocally sigh on the exhalation.

Energetic Placement

Vocal Sigh A full, connected, relaxed vocal exhalation. This sometimes takes time. Is the voice connected to the breath, or riding on top? Is the exhalation smooth and complete, or has it got bumps in it, like it is falling down stairs? If so, this is stress held in the cardiovascular system. Sigh until smooth, noticing where the exhalation is centered in the body, high or low. Adding voice will speed up the process. The singers should feel more peaceful, relaxed and centered almost immediately.

Larynx Awareness Yawn - Do they feel the throat open? Place hand on throat. Do they feel something drop? Hold the jaw open for a few breaths with the forefinger. Is there immediate pain? These people need to relax their jaws, or their larynx with never normalize. We want the larynx to be halfway between the two extremes of too closed or too open. Some larynxes have been virtually squeezed shut for years.

Neanderthal ‘Huh’ Driven by lower abdominal and back muscle energy, not by the throat. Listen – where is it centered? Is the belly activated, making the sound full of undertones and breath energy and body connection? Do it with each chorister – they will learn from each other. Is the sound coming from the “font of strength”? Where in the body in the ‘aw’ focussed – high or low? Works especially well with teenage boys, but also helps females connect their head-voice to their support.

Vocal Placement

Sirens Play in the upper register with freedom; move, walk around, stretch, whatever it takes to free their minds and bodies, reaching the high notes joyfully and freely. Allow the singers to be creative.

Breath Management Take a thimbleful of air in the lower back, and then vocalize on ‘ng’, ‘vv’, ‘ss’ or tongue trills. Listen for evenness of tone. Experience what a steady, focussed stream of air feels like. Have them notice how long they can sing on a tiny bit of air, and that heaving a huge inhalation actually hinders a long phrase.

Slack Jaw “Blah” or “Plah” vocal exercises will help achieve the healthy, slack-jaw effect.

Head Resonance Puppy whine, open-mouthed hum, ‘oo’, or tiny siren. Descending vocalizes are usually best. However, these exercises will simply turn into sinus-tone if their energy is not first centered low in their core.

Free first, Soft later Encourage full, confident, nourishing vocalizing before asking them to sing “*piano*”. They will want to please you at soft passages, often sacrificing proper technique. Otherwise we run the risk of unhealthy, unsupported and throaty “half-

singing”, thereby barely winning the battle (dynamic contrast!?) but certainly losing the war. Voice is the expression of our living spirit – attend it mindfully.

Confidence: Connecting breath, imagination and body

Valkyrie Entrance Especially good for timid teenage singers who yell and scream in the playground, but clam up upon entering rehearsal. They are almost always breathing at around 25% of capacity. I’ve found it is best to have all the singers take part; the beginners will learn from the more confident. Ask them, one by one, to take a substantial, full-footed step forward, throw their arms wide and sing a vowel. Sometimes asking for “playground voice” works. (This assumes an environment where the singers feel safe, free from criticism or judgement). Let them laugh, not at each other, but via the joy of breaking through inhibitions. This will take some time, but will pay huge dividends, as they develop into a confident team of joyful singers.

Phrasal Arm Sweep As the singers sing a long phrase have them draw their arm from across their chests to open position, (i.e. right arm starts pointing left and comes across to the right) feeling the music in their arm. The idea here is to feel a phrase as a kinesthetic reality. Then sing same phrase, take the arm away, ask them, did it feel the same? What changed? They will respond by moving away from the short, choppy phrases, feeling the larger musical structure more intuitively.

This two-part article has been about repose. In our age, nervous activity has increased to the extent that we rarely sit and listen to our selves. Listening is not only at the core of true music-making, but is also at the foundation of our harmony (or disharmony) with each other. Our lives today often lack equilibrium and poise. These “full of repose” techniques offer an opportunity to deepen one’s connection with one’s own breath, voice, and body. Slowing down and sensing the inner world has certainly assisted me in experiencing both life and music on a more intimate and profound level.

What makes us feel drawn to music is that our whole being is music;
our mind and our body, the nature in which we live, the nature which has made us,
all that is beneath and around us, it is all music; and we are close to all this music,
and we live and move and have our being in music.

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