

Yoga and Breath

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.

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(Part two of this article, outlining specific poses and exercises for the facilitation the concepts expressed above, will appear in the Fall issue of 2002)