

ENERGETIC PLACEMENT

Vocal Sigh This exercise is for finding a complete, connected, and relaxed vocal exhalation. This takes consistent practice outside of the rehearsal. Is the voice connected to the breath, or riding on top? Is the exhalation smooth and complete, or has it got bumps in it, as if 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. The health benefits are innumerable.

Larynx Awareness Have your singers 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 larynxes will never normalize. We want the larynx to be halfway between the two extremes of too closed or too open. Most of us will have at least a few singers whose larynxes have become frozen in an abnormally high position. Too much breath (pressure) forced through the vocal folds will contribute to this phenomenon.

Neanderthal 'Huh' The point here is to train the exhalation to arise from lower abdominal and back muscle energy, not from 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" below the ribs? Where in the body in the 'aw' focussed - high or low? This 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. Ask them to experience what a steady, focussed, small stream of air feels like. Have them notice how long they can sing on a tiny bit of air, and that "heaving" a massive inhalation actually hinders a long phrase, and a legato line. Then, when singing words, the trick is to maintain constant and invariable breath pressure while managing both vowels and consonants.

Slack Jaw "Blah" or "Plah" vocal exercises will help achieve the healthy, relaxed slack-jaw effect of a correctly positioned jaw.

Head Resonance Puppy whine, open-mouthed hum, 'oo', or tiny siren. Descending vocalizes are usually best. However, these exercises will simply turn into improperly produced sinus-tone if the singer's energy is not first centered in the abdominal region.

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 winning the battle of dynamic contrast but losing the war of a fully expressive, well-blended choral tone.

CONFIDENCE: CONNECTING BREATH, IMAGINATION AND BODY

Valkyrie Entrance This expressive and powerful movement is 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, and 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 - in short, our total selves. Slowing down and sensing my inner world has certainly assisted me in experiencing both life and music on a more intimate and profoundly personal 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.*

Inayat Khan

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