VOCAL LESSON #1, PAGE 1 POSTURE: THE BASIS FOR ALL GOOD SINGING

POSTURE is the basis of all good singing. When you study a musical instrument, you are first taught to hold it correctly so that you have the ability to play it properly. The human voice is the most versatile and flexible of musical instruments. Since we sing with our whole body, it is important and the basis of all good singing, to learn how to hold the body properly.

The ultimate goal in singing is a freely-produced, rich, open and resonated sound. The vocal apparatus must be relaxed. The way the body is held, "its posture," has a major impact on whether the vocal mechanism can remain relaxed and free.

Proper singing posture, from the toes up:

- One foot slightly in front of the other, feet comfortably apart for good balance
- Weight forward on the balls of the feet, heels on floor
- Knees, relaxed and flexible
- Buttocks tucked under
- Chest (sternum) lifted high and spread wide
- A feeling of the ribs being lifted up out of the waistline
- Shoulders relaxed, as if hanging on a coat hanger
- Neck relaxed, head able to move freely
- Head remains level
- Chin parallel to the floor, neither lifted nor lowered

Exercise & Posture Drill

Stand up as straight as possible with spine stretched tall and crown of head trying to touch the ceiling. Raise arms horizontal to floor with palms down. One foot should be slightly ahead of the other, with weight balanced forward on the balls of both feet. Unlock the knees and keep them flexible. Tuck the pelvis under and slightly forward. Now turn the arms over so that the palms are facing toward the ceiling. Notice the extra stretch that occurs in the ribs. The chest is now very wide, separated and high. There is a lot of space between the bottom of the ribs and the waistline. Keep everything aligned and lower the arms to a normal position. The back of the neck is pulled back against an imaginary wall. Now put a smile on your face and walk around the room. Restate this good posture often.

Common posture problems:

- 1. Locking the knees: When the knees are locked, the body is off balance. This causes body tension, which creates a tense singer. Be sure to put the weight forward on the balls of the feet and keep the tail bone tucked under to help avoid inadvertent locking of the knees.
- 2. Swayback: Sometimes a singer tries to attain a lifted chest by pulling the shoulders back (and consequently tensing them) instead of using the muscles around the rib cage to lift the ribs out of the waistline. The intercostal muscles surrounding the rib cage are the muscles that should be used to lift the ribs and the sternum. When the shoulders are pulled back instead of the sternum being lifted high, and the buttocks are not tucked under but are thrust backward, sway back posture is the result. In this tense, unbalanced position, good vocal production is not possible.
- 3. Chest droop: As a musical phrase is sung and air is exhaled, it is easy to allow the chest to cave in and the rib cage to drop back into the waistline. At the end of the phrase, if this occurs, the singer has lost the height of the sternum. As you sing a phrase, consciously retain the height of the sternum and resist the collapse of the rib cage.

VOCAL LESSON #1, PAGE 2

BREATH: THE FUEL FOR SINGING

BREATH is the fuel for singing. The tone we produce when we sing rests on a cushion of air; thus, the breath is the fuel for the sounds we produce. We see, then, how important it is to supply the fuel properly.

The muscles involved in breathing are the intercostal muscles, including the epigastrium; and the abdominal muscles, including the diaphragm. (If you are not familiar with the epigastrium, place your right hand just below your breast bone, where you can feel the inverted V of your rib cage. Make a fist with your left hand, put it to your mouth and blow gently onto the fist without allowing any air out. Your right hand will feel the epigastrium pop firmly outward.)

The lungs are where the fuel is stored, but the lungs are organs, not muscles; they are elastic, but not capable of independent movement unless the movement is initiated elsewhere. The lungs are attached to the rib cage and to the diaphragm. When the rib cage is expanded, it pulls the lungs upward and outward; when the diaphragm is lowered, it pulls the lungs downward. When the lungs are stretched in this manner, through expansion of the rib cage and lowering of the diaphragm, a partial vacuum is created and air rushes into the lungs. If the muscles are working properly, the singer does not have to help the air into the lungs, but simply ensure that the passageway is open. It is the movement of the intercostal muscles and diaphragm that causes inhalation to occur.

BREATHING FOR SINGING: THE DISTINCTION

What makes breathing for singing different from normal or other specialized breathing is the action of the rib cage. In normal breathing, the rib cage expands to bring in oxygen, then collapses or lowers as the breath is used. In singing, we want to create a feeling of firm support for the lungs in the intercostal and epigastrial muscles, so that as we use the air the rib cage does not collapse. It is a feeling of nonviolent resistance keeping the rib cage high and wide and not allowing the ribs to drop into the waistline.

Practicing intercostal and epigastrial breathing helps the singer because successful resistance to collapse of the rib cage gives us control of the breath, allowing us to feed the cushion of air into the tone in a steady stream (like the control provided by the adjustable nozzle of a garden hose). Breath control provides constant support and a sense of projection of the tone being produced. We achieve that by successfully resisting collapse of the rib cage as we sing the phrase.

ABDOMINAL MUSCLE AND BREATH SUPPORT

At the same time as we are using the intercostals to keep the rib cage high and wide, we use the abdominal muscles for support. The abdominals need to be relaxed during inhalation, so the diaphragm can be lowered completely, without resistance from below. As we sing, the diaphragm gradually lifts, pushing air up and out of the lungs as the tone is produced. Because the rib cage is kept high and wide, the diaphragm will lift gradually and we have better control of the breath.

The nonviolent resistance that keeps the rib cage from collapsing also keeps the breath from rushing out too fast. It can be compared to isometric exercises, in that we have external and internal intercostal muscles, creating a push pull situation. We strive for balance, so we don't collapse and push air out too fast or tense up and produce a strangled tone. With support from the abdominal muscles and resistance to collapse from the intercostals, we achieve relaxed control.

VOCAL LESSON #1, PAGE 3

TO RECAP, THEN, BREATH IS THE FUEL FOR SINGING.

- Assuming that the upper chest is wide and the shoulders are level, neither the shoulders nor the upper chest should rise as air comes into the lungs.
- Expansion ultimately will be felt in the lower rib cage and the back. The abdominal area visibly expands during inhalation.
- There should not be any audible sound upon breath intake.
- During exhalation or singing, the lower abdominal muscles lift upward and inward, lifting the abdominal bulk up against the diaphragm.
- While singing, the singer must resist the urge to let the rib cage contract and go down. The conscious maintenance of an expanded rib cage will aid the singer in developing a supported tone.

BREATHING EXERCISES

- 1. Sit down. Place forearms across knees and relax head. Inhale deeply. Feel back expand and stomach relax into your lap. Exhale and pull tummy away from thighs. Keep back wide.
- 2. Begin with singer's posture. Inhale by expanding lower rib cage as far as possible. "Hiss" out breath between teeth to count of twenty. Do not let lower rib cage collapse downward until absolutely necessary. Keep upper chest as wide as possible during entire exercise. Never let the sternum bone collapse downward. Repeat five times.
- 3. Same exercise as above, but instead of "hissing," count aloud to twenty. Work up to forty counts over a period of time.
- 4. Take a breath and expand rib cage. Hold breath and use intercostal muscles to move rib cage in and out 15 times. Repeat.
- 5. Standing in singer's posture, inhale quickly by allowing lower abdominal muscles to relax and drop down. Lift lower abdomen in eight quick motions, shushing the breath out in eight quick motions. Do not allow the chest to fall during exercise.
- 6. While standing, place weight on the forward part of the feet. Lift the heels off the ground, and slide down an imaginary wall with the back as straight as possible. Do not lean over. Now lift your arms to shoulder height in front of you and make a circle with them. Maintaining this position, sing.
- 7. Full breath standing. Lift both arms up above head with arms close to ears as you rise up on your toes. At the same time, inhale through the nose. After a full breath has been taken, place palms together, stretching as high as possible and hold breath to count of six. Repeat five times.

VOCAL LESSON #1, PAGE 4

TERMS DEFINED

- Column of air: The idea is of a solid, constant source of air coming from the bottom of your lungs through the top of your head. Imagine a blow dryer pointing up from your diaphragm. A continuous column of air allows notes to be sung with the same excellent quality no matter where they fall in the singer's range.
- Massage your vocal cords: Tense muscles make tight, forced sound. Visualize the air coming from the bottom of your lungs massaging your vocal cords and the sound will be smooth and relaxed.
- Energized breath: A quick, deep breath that adds energy to the vocal line.
- Forward motion: The feeling/sense that the vocal line is moving toward something in anticipation, making the song interesting to listen to and keeping the tune from dragging. Proper breathing is critical to the success of forward motion.

SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Singers are vocal athletes and must learn to be expert breathers. The chorus only sings as well as it breathes.
- A musical phrase is like a spoken sentence.
- The singer should mark breathing places on the music and memorize the breathing plan along with the words and notes. Occasionally changes can occur from the original plan at the director's discretion.
- Not enough planned breaths can cause the music to lose its energy and to sound strained.
- Too many breaths make the music sound choppy and difficult for the listener to follow the musical story.
- Rhythm (or lack thereof) is strongly affected by breaths. Taking too much time to get a breath can cause lost beats and poor synchronization.
- Proper breathing is critical to the success of forward motion the feeling/sense that the vocal line is moving toward something in anticipation, making the song interesting to listen to and keeping the tune from dragging.

Rest assured that breath support and management are topics that are discussed, reviewed and refined continuously. You are as close to breathing properly as your very next breath!