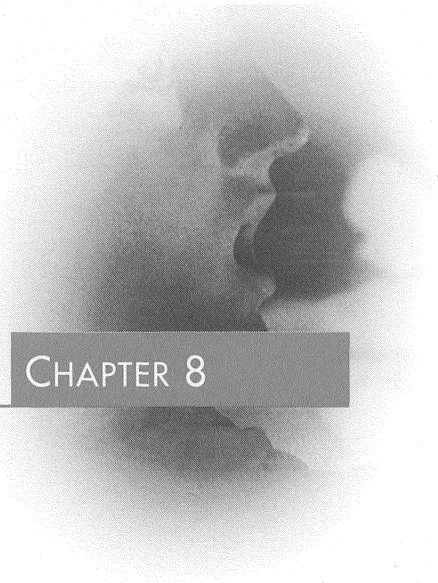
EXCELLENCE IN SINGING

multilevel learning and multilevel teaching

VOLUME 2: Mastering the fundamentals

CELUMBRA
Redmond, WA



Teaching and Learning Flexible Breath

Chapter 8

Breath powers every vocal sound. It powers the sensuousness of a Debussy phrase, the broad soar of a Strauss melody, the delicate inflections of a Wolf song. Breath powers the excitement that can fill Lincoln Center. It powers every sung phrase in the life's work of a singer. Just as it does for life, breath sustains our art.

To laugh, to cry, to giggle, to call, to invite, to command, to moan, to sing—each impulse to utter a vocal sound prepares a breath before the sound. In the nursery, for example, an infant coos at her mother, and her impulse to coo prepares her little diaphragm, intercostal and abdominal muscles, viscera, posture, and vocal folds for just the right breath for cooing—not the breath for crying, not the breath for laughing, but the perfect breath for cooing.

Breath is as varied as these natural impulses to express. The breath for a dramatic fortissimo is different from the breath for a melancholy pianissimo. Breath for long, sustained notes is different from breath for short ones. Breathing for singing is never just lowering the diaphragm and keeping the ribs open; it is always more alive than "technique." It is dynamic, connected to the whole vocal system, to the whole person—to a changing mix of emotions, ideas, and spirit.

As you teach breathing, you can run the risk of becoming too mechanical and too disconnected from the human urge to sing. Some teachers avoid teaching breath because simply directing

attention to it can make it lifeless. To teach or to learn successful breathing for singing, it is always necessary to connect the technical principles to the deeper urges and emotions that prompt dynamic breathing.

Natural Breath and Technique

When your student first walks into your studio, she is already capable of putting most breathing techniques into action—but she might not know it. From the powerful breath under a scream to the gentle breath under a whisper, she can already coordinate her ribs, diaphragm, and abdominal muscles in amazing ways. However, she will need to develop sophisticated skills to produce these complex and unconscious responses on cue and to adapt them to the demands of her voice and the music.

As you teach your student the mechanical elements of breathing technique, you can keep her breath vibrant by tapping into familiar experiences. Many of the exercises in this chapter draw upon such experiences: laughing, barking, moaning like a ghost, and other lighthearted, playful actions that will help her breathe deeply. She'll realize that she already knows a great deal about breathing, and that an urge to express can be as much a basis of breathing in singing as technique.

Following are some of the basic mechanics she'll need to become conscious of:

- Lowering her diaphragm easily and completely, which allows her inhalation to flow deep into her body
- Opening her ribs and keeping them open, yet flexible, throughout a phrase

- Keeping the shape of her vocal tract independent of her breathing
- Ensuring that her outgoing air pressure is continuous and smooth, even as it increases and decreases

You also need to point out the four phases of the cycle of breathing and help your student learn to manage them:

- Inhalation. During the *inhalation* phase, your student relaxes her exhalation muscles while maintaining good posture, thus letting the air "fall" into her body.
- Suspension. During the *suspension* phase, she crosses over from her inhalation to her exhalation. She stops the processes of inhalation and begins the processes of exhalation.

  This phase is important because many students do not make a smooth transition from inhaling to exhaling. Instead, they introduce tension into various parts of their bodies and start the exhalation and phonation with an off-balance body. It is a phase in which a student can have many bad habits.

  Your student can artificially suspend this phase, extend it so that she is neither inhaling nor exhaling—hence the term "suspension phase." While her breath is suspended, your student can become aware of how she uses her body during the crossover, learn many ways to make the crossover, relax any undue tension, and properly set up for the upcoming exhalation and phonation.
- Exhalation. During the *exhalation* phase, her abdominal muscles tighten against her contracted intercostals, keeping her rib cage open as she begins the exhalation. As she reaches the end of the exhalation, her body gradually relaxes.

- Recovery. The *recovery* phase is like the suspension phase, but it occurs between the exhalation and the inhalation.

Once your student learns to breathe successfully, she'll carry out these technical basics at the same time that she engages her body in an urge to express an emotion. As a result, she'll breathe dynamically, driving many emotions and vocal inflections, and always with a full, continuous breath.

What Is the Best Breath for Singing?

Before you can complete a clear picture of the best kind of breath for singing, it is necessary to see how breath connects to the other parts of the vocal system. As the vocal folds and resonator change, the breath must dynamically respond to keep the system in balance. For example, when a singer increases the tension in her vocal folds to raise the pitch, she must increase her breath pressure. If she tunes her resonator to different formants or to narrower frequency bands, her breath pressure may need to adjust a degree or two. If the musical phrase must move from mezzoforte to forte, her breath pressure must increase. (See "Optimizing the Body for Excellence in Singing," in v. 1, ch. 4, and the heading "Source-Filter Theory," in v. 1, ch. 6.)

This all means that the best breath for singing is one that provides a steady pressure of air that can easily flow from very light to very strong in order to balance the whole vocal system. Like pressing the gas pedal on a Jaguar XKR coupe, your student should be able to "rev up" her vocal system with plenty of power and precision, in finely tuned degrees of flow—and ease it back down just as smoothly.

It also means that her breathing will progress as she learns to manage the other parts of her voice. When your student is able to manage her resonance better, she will help her vocal folds vibrate more easily. Doing this will change the amount of breath pressure she needs to balance the system.

The best breath for singing balances the entire vocal system. Because the entire vocal system dynamically changes (in pitch, timbre, and dynamic level), the best breath must also be dynamic. In perfect balance, your student's tone quality will seem to move effortlessly from pitch to pitch, from timbre to timbre, and from dynamic level to dynamic level. When the whole system is in balance, your student may feel as though she isn't using any breath at all.

Multiple Levels of Teaching Breath

On a fundamental level, your student needs to develop steady breath pressure. A beginning singer sings with intermittent pressure, like a garden hose sputtering water. By lowering her diaphragm, opening her ribs, and keeping her chest high throughout each phrase, your student can learn to use her abdominal muscles and intercostal muscles against each other to produce continuous pressure. (See the heading "Muscle antagonism," in v. 1, ch. 4.) This chapter includes several exercises that can help your student activate these muscle combinations. (For example, see "To Blow a Feather," on page 74.)

At another level, a student might have trouble changing the degree of breath pressure in response to the other parts of the vocal system. As she sings higher in pitch, for example, she might not increase her breath pressure enough, causing her to tighten her vocal folds to maintain pitch. Or she might increase the pressure

too much, overpowering her vocal folds and pushing the pitch higher. Such a student might have learned to supply continuous pressure but not how to adjust it to balance the rest of the voice. Exercises such as "To Discover a Balanced Onset," on page 142, and "To Sustain the Tone," on page 148, can help a student with this kind of breath coordination. (See also "To Explore Three Ways to Begin the Tone," on page 132 to refine these sensations.)

At yet another level, a student might not prepare to sing with a proper inhalation. She might suck in the air, causing her laryngeal muscles to become too wrought up to phonate well on the exhalation. Like a choreographer, your student needs to plan her inhalations throughout a song or an aria, being sure she sets up her phonation properly. (See "To Plan Breath For Musical Phrases," on page 94, and "To Combine Breathing Techniques with Other Aspects of Singing," on page 103.)

In addition, poor posture and unnecessary tension can crimp the air spaces in a singer's throat and chest, affecting the airflow. Remember that air pressure is closely related to the sizes of the spaces it travels through. So, in general, any body part that affects the diameters along the airway also affects breath pressure and airflow. (See ch. 5, "The air inside the body," in v. 1.) Poor posture and unnecessary tension can also block a singer's diaphragm and ribs, stifling her breath. (See the exercises "To Evaluate Posture," on page 29, "To Find the Center of Balance," on page 30, "To Balance the Head," on page 31, and "To Lengthen and Widen the Body," on page 33.)

As she becomes more advanced, your student must learn to adjust her breath pressure by tiny degrees. Beginners may only be able to adjust their breath pressure in gross amounts, and any singer can spend a lifetime refining the range between delicate and powerful breathing. To control small changes in breath pressure, your

student must coordinate many muscles, something that she can usually accomplish only indirectly, through a rich imagination and an impulse to express emotions. (See the exercise "To Inhale an Emotion," on page 71.)

Breath Terminology

Teachers and singers use many different terms to describe breath for singing: "breath support," "breath management," "breath pressure," "breath control," "breath coordination," "appoggio," and "natural breathing." Each of these terms suggests a valid or useful part of breath for singing, but each can also suggest unintended meanings.

For example, "breath support" describes how breath holds up the system, but it can suggest stiff and static breathing, like girders that support a building; it can also suggest great effort, which can lead to tension. Similarly, although "breath pressure" accurately describes a property of breath, it can imply tension and effort, like water pressure in a garden hose. And while "breath management" and "breath control" are essential goals of technique, these terms can make a student overly conscious of processes that need to become natural.

All of these terms are useful for some aspect of breathing for singing. But like the rest of singing, breathing is more than words can describe. No simple definitions can describe an operation as full of nuances as breathing for singing—which is no doubt the reason why there are so many terms.

Words can suggest experiences, but your student will hear the words in her own way. Teachers need to be sensitive to the meanings of words. As Socrates pointed out, using word meanings precisely is essential. Teachers also need to be sensitive to the