

Lloyd, Thomas Alternative Images for Helping Singers Connect to Their Breath Support in Warmups: "Drawing-in the Tone" and "Breathless Breaths"
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One of the more important functions of vocal warm-ups, especially for student and community choirs, is trying to establish the often elusive connection between breath support and vocal resonance. Since this connection primarily involves coordination of activity we can only view externally, creative verbal images are often helpful in giving singers some useful guidelines over the course of regular rehearsals.

It is common to begin warm-ups with fairly vigorous breathing exercises to help singers locate the muscles needed for diaphragmatic breathing that have gone unused all day. Various forms of rapid thrusts of air beginning with explosive consonants, or long steady releases of air on an audible hiss manage to accomplish not only this, but also to energize the body in general in preparation for the very physical act of singing. In this way, we start with getting the air going before adding the tone.

However, it can also be effective to seek this connection from the other way around, starting by finding the resonance, or placement of the tone, as a first step in finding the most efficient form of breath support. After using some sort of stretching or moving exercise to loosen up the neck and shoulders, I ask singers to stand tall and become aware of maintaining a free and open position of the rib cage, using the image of a birdcage hanging from the ceiling. The shoulders are not hunched forward, the chest is not pushed out, the neck and head are free--just a comfortable, open position (albeit usually not the posture we walk around with all day!). Then the only thing to say about breathing is that their job in the exercises is to prevent that wonderfully open rib cage from collapsing. They should not feel like they are "holding" the rib cage open, but just maintaining its resting, non-collapsed position.

Then ask the singers to "find their resonance" beginning in a small but not constricted place in the front of the head, on a single note in the middle range, either with a sustained hum, an [i] (IPA) vowel, or an [u], sometimes changing back and forth on cue. At first they sustain without a particular duration, breathing when they need to. The focus is on finding a free, spinning resonance in a relatively small forward space. For the hum, this means with a closed but not clenched mouth, not a "buzzy" hum, just a neutral one.

Finding a resonant place for the [i] vowel is especially important. Rather than a tight sounding [i] with the teeth clenched or the lips drawn horizontally across the face in a smiling position, something closer to the lip position for [u] is used, still making a "real"

[i] vowel, but with a vertical, or circular orientation, spinning, suspended in place on a reservoir of air.

Then we move to singing patterned sequences in time, starting first with alternating [i] and [u] on the same note,

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and then increasing the intervals to seconds, thirds, and finally scale or chord patterns of a fifth or more. As the exercises increase in length and range, they continue to begin and end with [i] or [u], opening to [o] and then [a] at the top of the phrase.

For the pure [o] vowel, the lips are in the optimal position for vertical resonance (focused center, with space both above and below). This vertical, oval position is the basic embouchure to which the mouth positions for the other vowels should be related (avoiding any rigidity or tension). The [a] vowel can be sung as a true [a] by opening the space in the back of the mouth (i.e., the soft palette) while keeping the lips in a somewhat more relaxed [o] position.

These vocalises begin with a voiced consonant such as [v] or [z], or with a "y" (IPA [j]). These particular consonants make it easier to experience the tone as starting from the front of the face and then resonating backward into the "mask" (the sinus cavities behind the cheekbones and around the eyes). During these exercises the singers are guided to keep the rib cage in its open position (as described above) and to try to maintain the same area of resonance regardless of how the vowels or pitches change.

As the phrases increase gradually in length with each exercise, the singers are asked to avoid taking an audible breath with their mouth, but instead to use up the air already in their lungs without allowing the rib cage to collapse. (Unless we have a collapsed lung, or are otherwise completely out of breath, there is always a certain amount of air available to us in our lungs.) They should be encouraged to imagine the empty spaces of the mask area as being open, but not as packed with inhaled air.

By taking this kind of "no-breath breath," singers should soon feel the muscles surrounding the diaphragm being drawn up from below as they reach the end of the phrase. The breath is then taken, not with a gasp, but by simply releasing the abdominal muscles without letting the rib cage collapse. This release of the abdominal muscles is far more important to sustaining long phrases, making effective catch breaths along the way than the attempt to take in or hold in as much air as possible.

As the vowels open from [i] to [o] to [a], the singers can be encouraged to imagine drawing-in the tone, letting it spin around in the resonant areas of the face and then straight down into the support area, and ultimately into the floor. This serves both to

bring in the mouth resonance necessary for a warm tone, but only after the resonance is initiated out front in the mask. This way of imagining the connection between tone and breath is also a reversal of the up and out direction we more commonly think of.

Rather than imagining taking in breath by smelling the roses, we can imagine drawing in the tone in much the same way. This imagined downward flow of energy can in turn evoke a feeling that the body is firmly anchored into the floor, with only as much air as needed escaping the reservoir of support.

I use the word "imagined" so often here because the idea of directing air and tone in and down is obviously the opposite of what is actually physically happening. Since our bodies are so good at playing tricks on our valiant attempts to master all kinds of physical coordination, for many people counter-intuitive thinking can offer a positive way to overcome kinetic obstacles. The goal is a warm, expressive tone that spins through a musical line from beginning to end without a loss of resonance.

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