

SACRED MUSIC INSTITUTE 2014

Vocal Technique Class

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"A Beautiful Sound is a Prayerful Sound"

(Taken from the 12-week Vocal Technique curriculum created by Valerie Yova for the Academy of Orthodox Church Singing, San Diego, California, 2008)

I. The spiritual component of singing – our high calling

The vocal mechanism is quite miraculous. It involves a very refined coordination of many large and small muscles.

The physiological and primary purpose for the vocal cords is to act as a valve.

Regardless of when we first began to use the voice to communicate, it gave us, the created ones, the ability to praise the creator. This is the highest calling or purpose for the human voice.

What is the voice?

Physiologically speaking, it is sound that has as its source an object that vibrates, and is then amplified by the resonating chambers around the vibration.

For those of us who use our voices to praise the creator, to lead others in that praise, to give thanks and to teach, the voice is so much more than this.

St. Basil the Great said:

“ The discipline of piety nourishes the soul with divine thoughts. What then is more blessed than to imitate on earth the sacred chorales of angels’ choirs; to hasten to prayer at daybreak, and to worship the Creator with hymns and spiritual songs; and then, when the sun shines brightly and we turn to our tasks, praying being our companion at all places, to season our work with hymns as food with salt? For the state of the soul in which there is joy and no sorrow is a blessing bestowed by the consolation of hymns.”

Singing is a natural component of worship. The two cannot be separated. For Orthodox believers, singing IS worship and worship IS singing.

II. Why study vocal technique?

To be able to imitate the angels – achieve our most heavenly sound
Freedom to more fully communicate the text

Efficiency of energy
Power & strength ("Dynamis!")
Endurance

III. What makes one sound different or more beautiful than another?

Genetics

Human personality and physiognomy are very diverse. The vocal sound mirrors that diversity.

Balance of resonance

Mystery – something indefinable

Vowel shape/color (a deliberate choice)

Speed of airflow & vibration - "vibrato"

IV. What, then, is to be our model in terms of the vocal sounds that we make? How will we determine what "beautiful" singing is?

The dictionary defines beauty as "the quality that gives pleasure to the senses or pleurably exalts the mind or spirit; loveliness..."

By this definition, any singing that gives pleasure could be called beautiful, but when the term is applied to singing tone, it generally means a more limited group of sounds that have recognizable qualities or openness, clarity, support, balanced resonance, accuracy of pitch, and emotional coloring or intent.

Beauty of tone has an elusive quality. You know it when you hear it, but you may not be able to describe it. We need to begin to build a concept of beautiful tone into our way of thinking about singing. We need words to describe it, and we need models of beautiful sound.

A good reference point is the quality of tone that the vocal machine produces in its most natural, vital, and unstrained position. On this you can build singing habits that do not let strain, poor breath support, or any sort of constriction of muscles interfere with the development of a tone.

Some words to describe a singing tone:

bright	dark
clear	muddy/breathy/muffled
free/open	tight/constricted
light	heavy
warm/mellow/sweet	harsh/unpleasant
full	thin
strong	weak
low	high
slow vibrato	fast vibrato/no vibrato

THE ELEMENTS OF BEAUTIFUL SINGING

- ❖ POSTURE & BODY ALIGNMENT
- ❖ LOW, RELAXED BREATH
- ❖ RESISTANCE TO COLLAPSE
- ❖ RELEASE OF JAW & TONGUE TENSION
- ❖ RELAXED, OPEN THROAT
- ❖ LIFTED SOFT PALETTE
- ❖ GENTLE ONSET OF SOUND
- ❖ BALANCED RESONANCE
- ❖ CLEAR, CONSISTENT VOWELS
- ❖ ENERGIZED, QUICK CONSONANTS
- ❖ A HEART & MIND THAT IS FOCUSED ON
DELIVERING THE MESSAGE

V. Posture - the foundation

Singing requires a "noble" posture. A balanced posture is the first step toward more efficient use of the breath in singing.

Our daily lives present many challenges to maintaining this noble posture.

Stress!!

Too much sitting

Computer chicken neck syndrome

Fatigue

Lack of self-awareness

Carrying children

Others?

In order to be able to manifest a balanced and strong singing posture on Sunday morning, we must be thinking about it all week long and strengthening the muscles that keep the ribcage lifted. We must also be conscious of tension in the muscles that restrict low breathing and "talk them down" all day long.

VI. The spine

The spine consists of 33 individual bones (vertebrae) stacked one on top of another. The vertebrae are held together by strong ligaments, and are padded and protected by spongy disks. The vertebrae, muscles and ligaments all work together to maintain the alignment of the entire spine against tremendous forces of gravity weight-bearing, and the pull of the muscles of the trunk and limbs.

The spine has 4 natural curves in it. The more we are aware of these curves and the more we move keeping the "flow" of the spine in mind, the more healthy our posture and movement will be.

VII. How to find your singing posture

Stand with feet about 12 inches apart.

Soften the knees.

Keep hips tucked under. Think of hipbones as "headlights" shining straight ahead.

Let the shoulders relax down and back.

Feel the mid-back muscles working to keep the ribcage lifted.

Imagine that you are a puppet with a string attached to your sternum (breast bone in middle of ribs) and another string coming out the top of your spine (in the back of your head). Imagine what it would feel like if someone were gently lifting on both of those strings.

Relax/release your arms and hands.

Keep the chin slightly tucked in, not jutting forward.

Release the jaw hinge and keep the top and bottom teeth slightly separated.

VIII. BREATHING TO SING

Breath is life.

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. " (Genesis 2:7)

Air is not simply the fuel that makes the vocal "machine" run. Oxygen is what enlivens every cell in our bodies. It renews us. There is something sacred, mystical and holy about the breath of life. We should never take it for granted.

Breathing to sing -- It's about breath MANAGEMENT!

"Baby's breath"

Have you ever watched a baby breathe, especially when it is crying very hard? why can a baby cry for hours at a time and not lose its voice? Which muscles are involved in this process? Which are not?

Breathing to sing has two purposes:

1. To support the production of continuous, controlled singing tone;
2. To make it possible to sing meaningful, expressive phrases

To accomplish this, our breathing system for singing must work in a more sophisticated, coordinated way than the one we use to speak. When we speak, we rarely sustain single sounds for very long. Singing, on the other hand, is a series of sustained tones on specific pitches. This requires a CONTINUOUS flow of air pressure for phonation and constant, subtle adjustments to the airflow. Adding phrasing and expression intensifies the need for controlled air flow.

When the body is at rest, the normal inspiration-expiration cycle is brief -- about 4 seconds. Because of the aerodynamic aspect of breathing to sing, keep in mind that, unless restricted in some way, air will flow from a region of higher pressure to one of lower pressure.

When we breathe to sing, the diaphragm and the chest and abdominal muscles increase their activity. Phonation modifies the pace of the breath cycle. In singing, this happens phrase after phrase, and the breath cycle is drastically prolonged, particularly in the expiratory phase.

So it's NOT about taking in MORE air, nor is it about SAVING air. It's about how we MANAGE the breath once we take it.

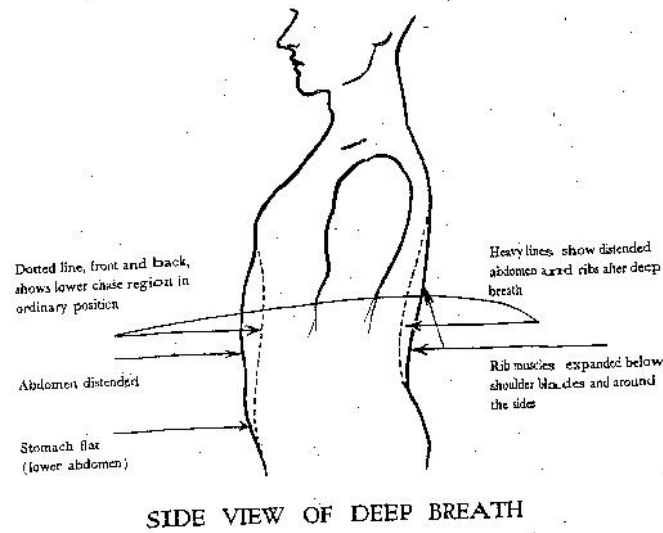
To accomplish skillful control of breath management for singing, special coordination of the phrases of the breath cycle must be learned.

1. Inhalation
2. Onset of sound
3. Phrase duration
4. Release

Skill in singing is largely dependent on the singer's ability to consistently achieve the coordination of airflow and phonation. Richard Miller calls this the "vocal contest." It's the cooperation among the muscles of the larynx and the chest wall, and the contraction of the diaphragm.

So the action of the ribcage, diaphragm and abdominal muscles must be coordinated so that we have **DYNAMIC MUSCLE EQUILIBRIUM** without exaggerated activity in any one of the three areas.

The goal is to maintain for as long as possible the **POSTURE OF INSPIRATION**.
Sing in the posture of breathing. Breathe in the posture of singing.



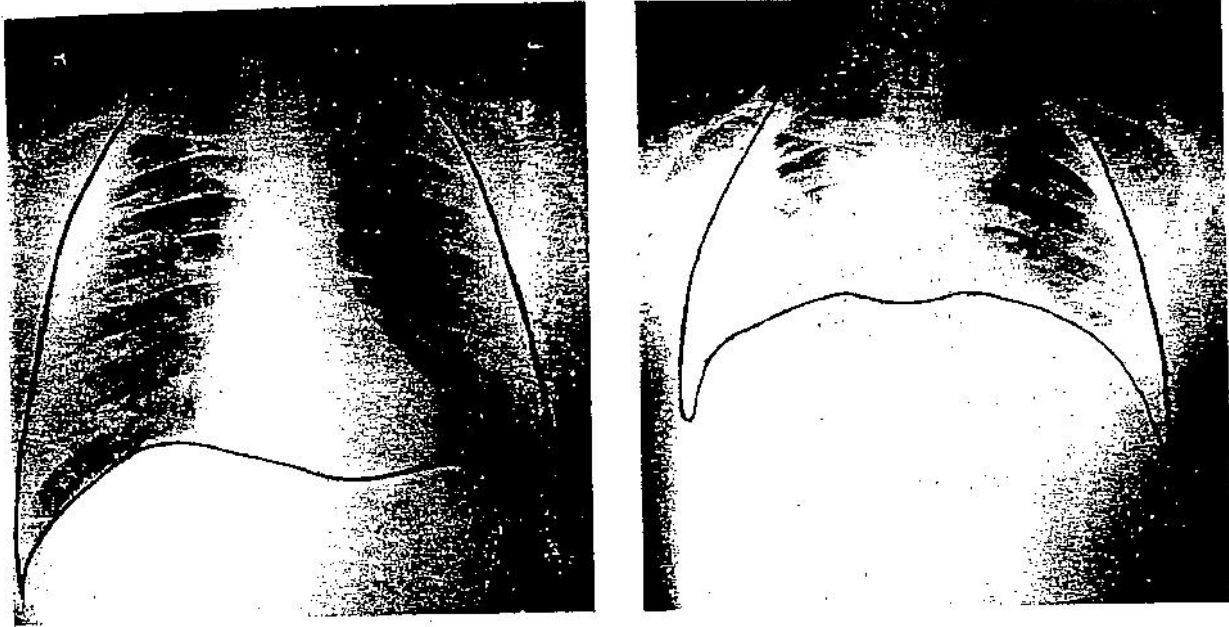


Fig. 12. X-Rays of Thorax in Breathing

Left: Deep inhalation. Right: Deep exhalation.

X-ray study of a prominent operatic singer. From Friedrich S. Brodnitz, *Vocal Rehabilitation*. Similar studies can be found in various places. See James Terry Lawson, *Full-Throated Ease*,

The most important of all inspiratory muscles is the *diaphragm*, which may be considered the floor of the ribcage or the ceiling of the belly. It is described as a large dome-shaped muscle which divides the trunk into two parts, with the lungs and heart above and the rest of the viscera below. Actually it is almost a double dome, with the stomach and spleen under the left dome and the liver under the right. The heart is in the middle above, and the two domes are separated by the backbone (remember that apple-shape? Fig. 10). The upper portion of the diaphragm is the *central tendon*, and running down from it are muscular walls which attach to the lowest ribs, the sternum, and the backbone. Normally it is arched rather high in its relaxed position, and when it tightens it tends to flatten. (You can illustrate this by forming a dome with your hands, fingers interlaced, and showing how flattening the dome creates more space above it.) When the diaphragm exerts itself, the capacity of the air chamber is increased because its floor is dropped. Naturally this flattening of the dome will be coordinated with the expanding of the ribs, to which it is attached at its circumference.

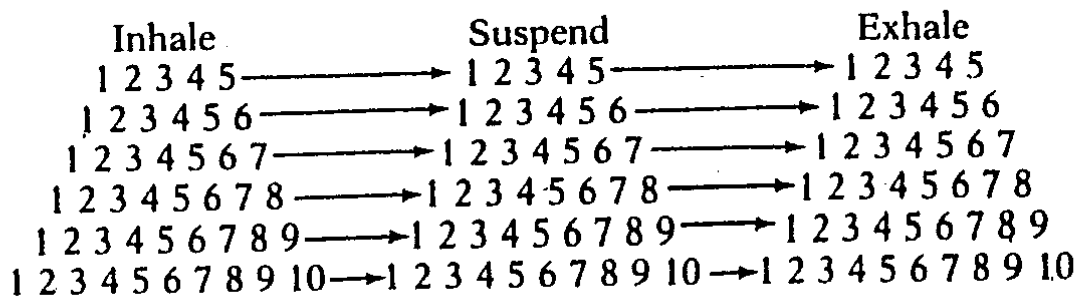
My favorite breathing exercise from Richard Miller ("The Structure of Singing"):

INHALE WHILE MENTALLY COUNTING FROM 1 TO 5 AT A MODERATE TEMPO, MAINTAINING ABSOLUTE SILENCE. KEEP PRECISE RHYTHM BY TAPPING A FINGER OR PENCIL. A METRONOME ALSO MAY BE HELPFUL. LIPS SHOULD BE PARTED THROUGHOUT THE THREE PARTS OF THE EXERCISE. COMPLETE BUT UNFORCED EXPANSION OF THE RIBS AND OF THE MUSCLES OF THE UMBILICAL-EPIGASTRIC AREA AND OF THE LUMBAR AREA SHOULD BE REALIZED.

SUSPEND THE BREATH WITHOUT ANY SENSATION OF HOLDING IT (GLOTTIS REMAINS OPEN, AN ACTION SOMETIMES TERMED "THE VAN DEN BERG MANEUVER" IN THE FIELD OF PHONIATRICS), WITHOUT ANY MUSCULAR TENSION IN EITHER THE VOCAL TRACT OR THE TORSO. THE POSITION OF THE RIB CAGE AND THE ABDOMINAL WALL IS RETAINED WHILE SILENTLY COUNTING FROM 1 TO 5 AT THE ORIGINAL TEMPO.

EXHALE SILENTLY, MAINTAINING AS FAR AS POSSIBLE THE SAME POSTURE OF STERNUM AND RIB CAGE, COUNTING 1 TO 5. THERE SHOULD BE RHYTHMIC CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE THREE PHASES OF THE EXERCISE (INHALATION, SUSPENSION, AND EXHALATION). IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING COMPLETION OF THE THREE-PART BREATH CYCLE OF 1 THROUGH 5, MOVE WITHOUT PAUSE TO A CYCLE OF 1 THROUGH 6, PASSING THROUGH THE THREE SUCCESSIVE PHASES OF THE EXERCISE; IN THIS FASHION, INCREASE THE NUMBERS UNTIL 9, 10, OR PERHAPS 12 COUNTS HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED.

Exercise 2.3 may be graphed in this way:



REFERENCE MATERIALS

English Diction for Singers

- The Singer's Manual of English Diction by Madeleine Marshall (\$20-40 on Amazon.com)
- The Fundamentals of Voice and Articulation by Lyle Mayer. (\$4-\$25 on Amazon.com)
- Diction for Singers by Robert Caldwell (\$10-\$10 on Amazon.com)

Vocal Technique/Vocal Warm-up CDs

- An Introductory Lesson with David Jones (Download for \$44.95 or purchase double CD set for \$54.99 at www.cdbaby.com/cd/david)

An introductory voice lesson, plus 35 tracks each for male and female voices; includes exercises for posture, breath management, vowels, open throat, jaw, register changes, head voice.

David's website is: www.voiceteacher.com

There are lots of materials available on line for pop singers. Be wary of these. I think David Jones' CDs are the best ones out there for the more classical approach to singing. I studied with him for several years in New York and I highly recommend his CDs, especially for conductors who must teach choir singers how to sing more beautifully. David's website has lots of interesting articles and he frequently addresses common questions and challenges (for professional singers) on his Facebook page. Probably a bit too complicated for beginners.

- <http://www.wonderhowto.com/how-to-warm-up-for-classical-vocal-training-230613/> (free online videos - OK but not great)

Vocal Technique - Books

- The Structure of Singing by Richard Miller (\$67 on Amazon.com) A bit technical, but has lots of great exercises.

Finding A Good Voice Teacher- A Checklist

Taken from <http://www.vocalfocus.com/voice-teachers.html>

The following is a guideline that may help you define those qualities and competencies you would look for in a voice teacher. These are not hard and fast rules, of course. Depending on what your individual needs are you may find many of these suggestions helpful.

- The teacher has an excellent ear, and carefully listens to, and gives you accurate feedback about your voice.
- Has an understanding of vocal anatomy, including the respiratory muscles, the larynx and throat structures, and how they affect singing.
- Allows you to tape record lessons or exercises in the lesson for take-home practice. Provides you with written exercises when needed.
- Is professional in conduct yet personable. You should feel comfortable with this person. You should feel free to ask questions.
- While being emotionally supportive, he or she should be able to challenge you to grow as a singer at the same time.
- The teacher should be able to explain to you in depth why you are doing each exercise that he or she gives you.
- If available go to a recital where this teacher's students are performing. If they mostly sound great then this is probably a very good indication of a competent voice teacher.
- Avoid teachers who only take on students who are already professional vocalists. A good teacher can train any voice and would enjoy the challenge of doing so.
- The teacher shows genuine interest in you as a singer.
- The teacher understands vocal health issues including the need to drink water and monitor the speaking voice
- Addresses the need to relax those tensions/muscles that can block good vocal production and vocal freedom.
- Is emotionally stable and does not intimidate or talk down to you.
- Your voice feels easier and more resonant when working together
- Beware of super-expensive teachers. Along the same vein, as David Jones wisely states in his website, "Remember that a large ego does not replace excellent teaching skills. One excellent quote to remember is: "Ego and wisdom are rarely in the same room"."
- I urge you to read [David Jones'](#) article about voice teachers which elaborates on these ideas and more. His attitudes and beliefs about teaching voice are ones that I deeply admire.

Some steps to locating a good voice teacher:

1. Call the local college, university or community college for a list of names.
2. Call local performing organizations, even if they are instrumental groups, for referrals. Musicians know other musicians.
3. Go to the website for the National Association of Teachers of Singing (www.nats.org) and click on "Find a Teacher." NATS has a careful screening process when a teacher applies for membership so this is one of the more reliable sites.
4. Ask local high school vocal teachers who they recommend to their students.

**FIVE TIPS THAT WILL IMPROVE
YOUR VOCAL (AND ENSEMBLE) SOUND IMMEDIATELY**

Valerie Yova

1. For heaven's sake, stand up straight!
What is "singer's posture" and why is it helpful?
2. The highs and lows
High palate, low breath
3. The perfect marriage: active and passive
Which muscles to activate and which ones to release
4. Do you have commitment issues?
Know which vowel(s) you are singing and commit.
5. It's a marathon, not a sprint.
WARM UP!

