

PART II—THE BASICS OF SINGING

Breathing

Strangely enough, one of the least understood and commonly overcomplicated parts of singing is the act of breathing. It would seem that we should all be experts at this, having been required to practice it for the majority of our lives. Unfortunately, it is not quite so simple.

Proper breathing is extremely important in singing, because the breath being exhaled works with the vocal cords to create the tone. Correct breathing utilizes the muscles in the lower abdominal region and allows the voice to gain its strength, agility and finesse from this area, taking the pressure off the throat muscles. This allows your true, clear, natural voice to be produced. Since the abdominal muscles are proportionately larger and stronger than the delicate throat muscles, it makes a lot of sense to allow them to do the heavy work.

All of this makes up a natural approach to breathing for singing. Your body already knows how to do it. All you have to do is relax and cooperate. The deep, relaxed intake of air before a sigh is the feeling that you want to have when you take in your breath. The intake of air should activate muscles all the way to the lower abdominal region.

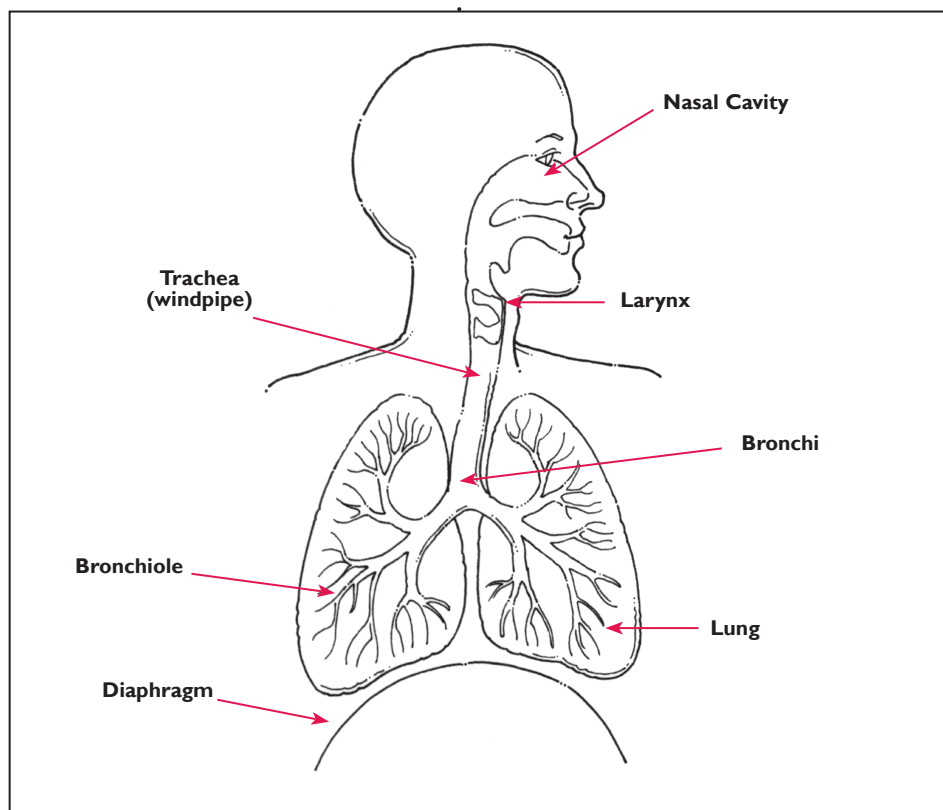
The normal breathing process begins when the brain sends a message to the respiratory system that oxygen is required. The *diaphragm*, a large, dome-shaped layer of muscle which separates the abdominal cavity from the chest cavity, is positioned just under the lungs and aids them in the breathing process. Upon inhalation, the diaphragm lowers, and the rib muscles lift the rib cage. This enlarges the chest cavity, creating a vacuum in the lungs, which expand as they fill with air. Then on exhalation, the diaphragm repositions itself, and the rib muscles relax, aiding the lungs in pushing out the air. Thankfully, the diaphragm is an involuntary muscle or we'd have to spend all of our time trying to remember to breathe!

When air is taken in through the mouth or nose, it travels down the windpipe or *trachea*. The trachea divides at the lungs into two *bronchi*, one for each lung (see diagram), which branch out again 15 or 20 times forming thousands of tiny *bronchioles*.

The lungs are made up of spongy tissue. Their main purpose is to provide the blood with oxygen upon

▼ Respiratory system.

resting into the body, thus opening up the chest area. It is necessary for the chest to remain comfortably high and open for optimal lung expansion. When singing, this posture should be maintained throughout the inhalation and exhalation process so that the air is not pushed out of the lungs prematurely and the amount of air sent to the vocal cords may be regulated.



inhalation and relieve it of carbon dioxide at the time of exhalation.

It is very important that the throat be a relaxed, open channel through which the air can flow unencumbered. If one has a tight throat, the air will not be able to function freely and can cause vocal distress.

A very calming exercise is for the singer to quietly become aware of his or her breathing. Take a few moments and focus on the breathing process and your body. Take a deep, medium-sized breath and do not allow your shoulders to rise as you draw the breath. Shoulders should stay in a relaxed position, down and back,

Trying to control the breathing muscles is counterproductive. The extra tension exerted in the body will affect the vocal cords, causing them to tense and strain. Conscious manipulation of the breathing process is truly unnecessary, because the abdominal muscles and diaphragm will naturally work together to regulate airflow. To achieve this, stand tall with good posture. Do not allow the chest to collapse, keep it comfortable, but high. When done properly, these breathing elements will do their job *for* you.

A huge gulp of air does not help you to sing better; conversely, it

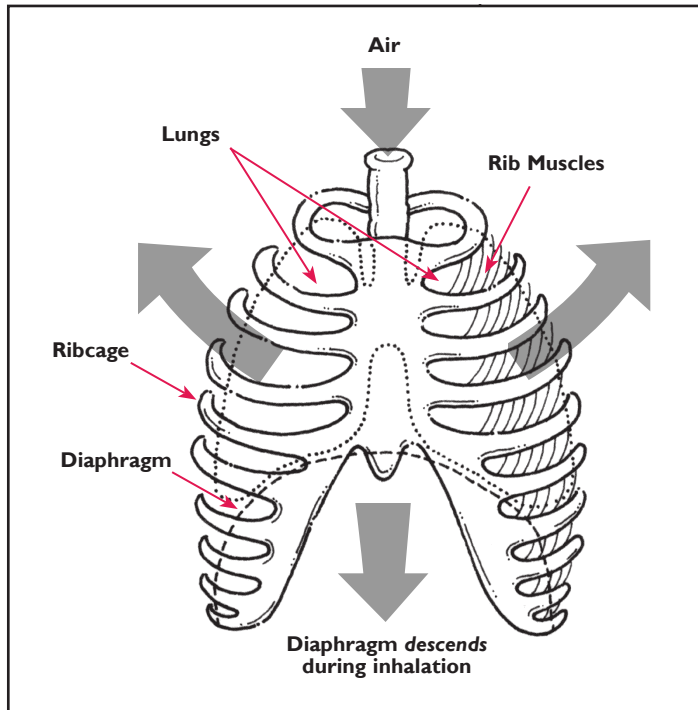
invites tension. Just as anything in excess tends to be detrimental, too much air often causes rigidity and tension in the throat, and in the lower abdominal region. The key is to sip

Physical Exercises

Most people do not need special exercises to strengthen their breathing muscles. The muscles involved are generally in good shape to function

low, quick breaths in rapid succession. The abdominal muscles will move in and out with each breath. Do this for short stints only, or you will hyperventilate.

3. Exhaling little puffs of air through the nose will also engage the diaphragm. Do about 30 puffs, rest and then do 30 more, increasing



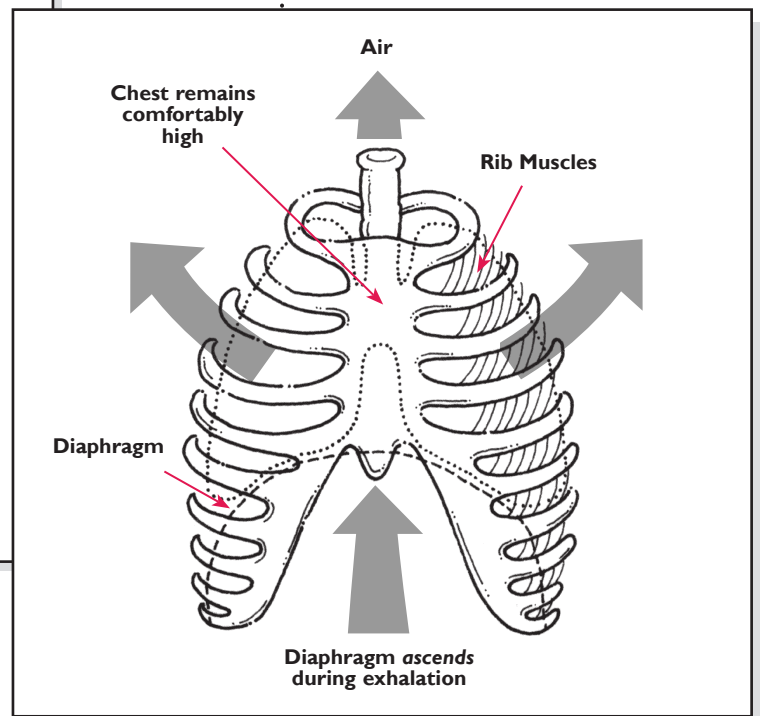
◀ *Inhalation during singing*

the air. You will be surprised how far a small amount will take you. Just try it and you'll see.

Usually the fear of taking an inadequate breath comes from a feeling of mental insecurity, not an actual physical shortfall. In a deep breathing process such as is used in singing, even though we may exhale a large quantity of air, a good amount of residual air remains in the lungs which generally goes unused. Take heart in the knowledge that you really do have enough reserve available. Trust your body to breathe for you.

Strive to allow the body to create a balance between the action of the breathing muscles and the amount of air inhaled for singing

Exhalation during singing ▶



for your singing needs. Often, however, there is a lack of awareness of how the body operates.

1. To experience a natural breathing style, lie flat on your back on the floor and just breathe. The body really does know how to do this by itself. We can learn a lot by observing its technique. When we are on our backs we naturally breathe deeply and the diaphragm gets a full workout. Watch your stomach go up and down, relax and listen to your body. The great thing is that if anyone asks, you can tell them you are practicing. This is serious, strenuous work! Don't rush, give it several minutes, and when you feel you understand it, slowly stand up and see if you can recreate the experience from a standing position.
2. Panting is a good way to experience the action of the diaphragm muscles. Inhale and exhale several

the speed. Staying relaxed will enable you to draw in small amounts of air between puffs.

4. The "Rag Doll" is an excellent exercise for allowing the air to act correctly on the inhalation process. To do this exercise, bend over from the waist and allow the upper half of the body to hang loosely like a rag doll. Allow the muscles to completely relax and take some deep, relaxing breaths. After a minute or two of this, slowly stand up. As you rise, try to imagine that you are stacking each vertebra of the back on top of the previous one in a straight line. The shoulders should fall back into place, and the head should come up last. Take a deep breath. Repeat this exercise, and before beginning to stand up, release all your breath. Don't breathe in again until you are in a fully upright position. Take several breaths while you are standing in this position, getting used to

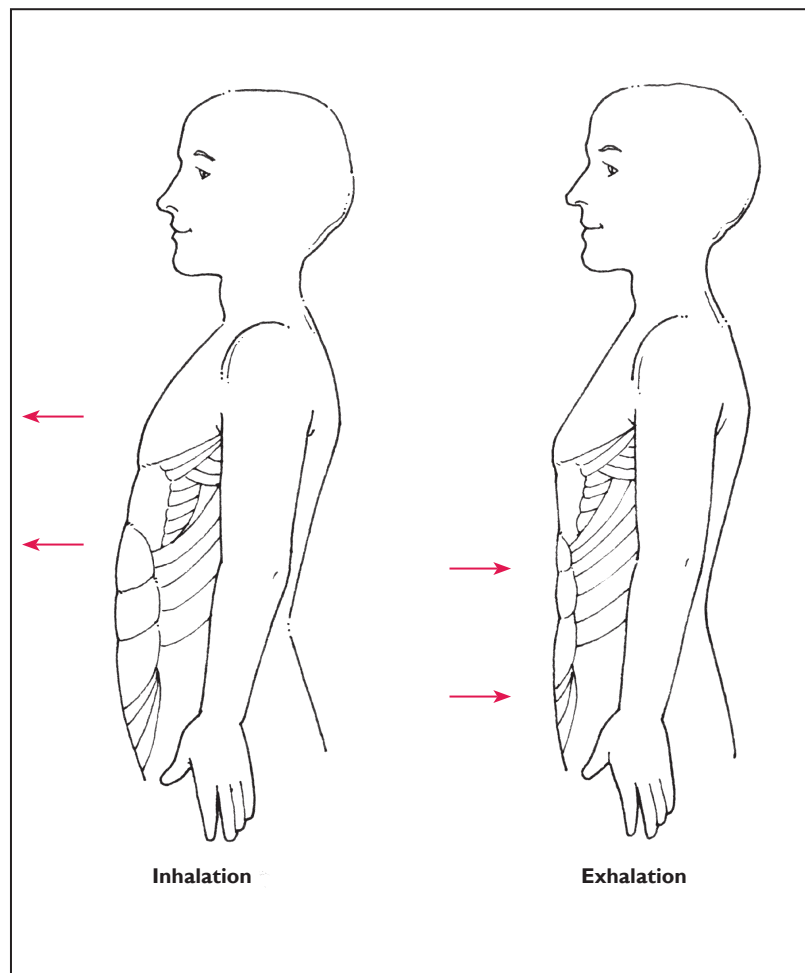
the feeling. The breath should naturally be full, and you will automatically use the muscles in the lower abdomen.

5. From a standing position, remember the feeling of taking in a breath for a sigh, and feel as if the breath is descending to the lowest part of your abdomen. You have to let go of your stomach muscles (there's no room for vanity here) and let them act on their own. You may feel as if your stomach expands out during the inhalation process. This is the diaphragm moving down as you inhale. It is natural and correct.

Upon exhalation, maintain an upright posture and slowly expel the air. You may feel the abdominal muscles moving inward a bit. This is not something that you should help with, the body can take care of it just fine. Place your hands on your abdomen and monitor the movement of the muscles. Repeat 10 times. When you are able to allow the body to take over and move smoothly on its own, an even singing tone is possible.

6. Draw in a gentle, low and full breath to a count of three. Stand about two feet away from a wall, facing it. Exhale the air slowly in a controlled hiss. The throat should be relaxed, acting only as a passageway for the air. Try to maintain an even intensity in the hiss, and imagine that the power of the quiet, steady energy contained in the hiss will slowly push back the wall. Extend the hiss as long as possible, then repeat.
7. Breath control involves developing both agility and flexibility in the muscles used for the breathing process. The action of the diaphragm and lungs can be felt in one's back, so place your hands on your back at the waist level. Imagine that you are a cylinder filling up with air. Breathe deeply and feel your back expand as you fill the area under your hands. Complete, full breathing should include this area of the back.

▼ Muscle action during breathing



Vocalizing

One of the best ways for singers to build better singing technique is through vocalization exercises. Vocalization exercises are designed to help condition the vocal cords and improve the range and flexibility of the vocal mechanism. You might want to think of them as vocal aerobics.

Warming Up the Voice

It is always a good idea to “warm up” before singing. Singers of all musical styles, from rock to opera, employ vocal warm-up exercises to get their voices moving through their entire range, protect themselves from vocal strain and to prepare for the rigors of performing. Vocal exercises warm up the voice just like stretching movements warm up the body before running or other physical exertion. As with other types of exercises for the body, vocally, it is best to begin gently.

Vowels

Because vocalists sing words and want these to be understood, a lot of time is spent perfecting the way they sing vowels. The tongue and mouth form the vowel shape, and the breath flows through the vocal cords into the mouth. This creates the vowel sounds which we recognize as:

Ah	as in "father"
Ay	as in "say"
Ee	as in "beet"
Eh	as in "red"
I	as in "tie"
Oh	as in "so"
Oo	as in "loom"

Vowels which are made up of two sounds, such as "I" (Ah + Ee) and "Ay" (Eh + Ee) are called diphthongs. The second sound in each diphthong, known as the vanish, should never be emphasized. The vanish is only lightly articulated just as the sound fades away.

In the case of a word containing an "Uh" sound, such as love, dove, because, or the "Ow" sound as in

the words round, down, town, the preferred pronunciation for singing is to slightly modify the vowel toward the "Ah" sound, creating a rounder, more open tone.

The best way to examine and practice the shape required for vowels is to whisper each one. To practice using the "Ah" vowel, whisper "Hah." Feel where the tip of the tongue is, what the sides and back of the tongue are doing. The tongue should be relaxed, with the tip touching the back of the bottom teeth as you whisper the word. Memorize the way it feels.

Singing is based on speech, so after we investigate the feeling of the vowels by whispering, the next step is to speak them. With the jaw relaxed, and the upper and lower back molars slightly apart, very gently say "Hah." Everything in the mouth should remain still. Repeat "Hah" several times, experiencing the sensation of stillness.

Whisper "Mm." Still relaxing the jaw, and with space in the mouth, gently say "Mm." On the "Mm" there should be a feeling of vibration in the mouth, but the tongue remains still. This is the beginning of a hum.

Now, try something called the *Speech-Chant*. Combine the two sounds above, saying "Hah-Mm," prolonging the sound, allowing two beats for the "Hah" part and three beats for the

Tony Bennett's clear singing style allows the lyrics to stand out.

▼ (Sony Music/Columbia.)



"Mm" part. Sustaining the sound as if chanting, keep the tone going through the entire five-beat duration of the "Hah-Mm." Make sure that there is space between the back teeth. Repeat "Hah-Mm," not allowing it to die out prematurely. Your desire to communicate prolongs the sound.

Singing is essentially sustained speech



▲ *Natalie Cole is noted for her careful attention to the words of her songs.*
(Photo: Firooz Zahedi. Courtesy of Elektra Entertainment.)



Exercises

All exercises in this book should be sung starting with the notes shown and then progressively raising the notes in the exercise by a half step on each repetition. For example, an exercise which

begins on the note C will progress to start on the note C#, then in the next repetition, D, D#, and so on. Continue to sing as high a pitch as is comfortable. Do exercise the upper ranges of your voice and encourage it to grow, but do not attempt to sing the exercises when you are experiencing vocal strain. The number of each exercise refers to the number of the musical example below.

1. Keeping the same gentle, no-pressure feeling used for the Speech-Chant, sing “Hah-Mm,” sustaining it on the given pitch. Keep feeding the breath into the tone, maintaining a smooth exhalation.
2. The very tiny distance between the notes in this exercise has a massage-like effect on the vocal cords, making it an excellent way to start the warm-up process. Whisper the vowels, be very sensitive and note the minute movements inside the mouth. Begin slowly, then do the exercise several times, varying the *tempo* (or speed). Start with “Ah” the first time you sing the exercise, then “O.” Finally combine the sound as “Ah-O.”
3. This exercise uses the humming sound “Mm.” The lips are together, but the back molars should be slightly apart. Keep the space open in the throat. The tone should be placed in the mouth; try aiming the sound at the lips. Be careful not to allow it to become too nasal. Keep a consistent energy level.
4. Whisper the vowel first, then sing the exercise. Try to match the vowel on each note to the vowel preceding it.
5. No singing, please! Just speak this one on pitch, saying the numbers.

Track 2

1.

Track 3

2.

Track 4

3.

Track 5

4.

Track 6

5.