

Quiet Breathing as a Basis for a “Free” Voice: a Brief Introduction to Singing in the Ancient Belcanto Style

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INTRODUCTION

Isn't it wonderful to listen to a singer who is able to enchant us with glorious sounds and take us into the dream world of an opera? Or to be carried away by the voice of an actor who is a master of recitation? What is necessary to produce beautiful sounds like this?

Well, first of all you need a good instrument: healthy vocal cords and the vocal mechanism fitted nicely into the rest of the instrument, into the neck, the whole spine, into the entire torso.¹ And if you are lucky, you are also endowed with a wide bony skull structure. Secondly, you have to learn how to master the instrument. For this training, you must find a teacher who is right for you. One who is willing to help you, one who sees in you your entire character and, most important, one who knows the singing technique very well. Thirdly, you must really want to be a singer. You need a strong desire to want to be on stage.² Fourthly, you need lots of patience and power of endurance; perseverance and hard work must be companions on your journey. And finally, talent is of major importance in the recipe for success.

In this article I am going to describe how to free the voice. In the title, I mention calm or quiet breathing as the foundation or the basis for the voice to be free. This aspect will be looked at in the first half.

Let me tell you how I came to be here talking about training voices. Some of you might know that I did not train initially to be a singer, at least not in the normal way, studying at a conservatoire of music. I started out playing the violin as a child and took up professional training when I was 18. During all these years, I was suffering with rheumatoid arthritis and the chances of becoming a full-time violinist were very slim.

Around this time, I discovered the Alexander Technique and enrolled immediately for a teacher training programme in London. There I learnt to take

responsibility for how I am. I experienced that how I carried and nourished myself had a direct effect on my well-being. This was crucial in helping me to recover and to get out of the cycle of illness. I had improved to such an extent that I could return to my studies at the University of Music, Detmold, Germany. Funnily enough, I also auditioned as a singing student, but – now I say fortunately! – was not accepted for singing. During the four years of study, I continued giving as many Alexander lessons as I could manage. This enabled me to earn a living in this “Alexander desert”. (I was the first and only teacher in Germany on the STAT list at that time!)

After qualifying as a violinist, I moved to Munich and started to take singing lessons regularly with no specific reasons in mind. I obviously must have enjoyed using my voice and I applied the Alexander Technique principles to the activity of singing. Around that time, while attending a seminar on “Archetypes of the Soul”, I learned that my destiny was to heal people through the art of sound. More and more, I regarded the human body as a resonating instrument, which needed to be freed in order to sound better. Then as the training of Alexander students progressed, I was busy for the following 14 years with my lovely students.

It was not until I met my teacher and dear friend Johannes Romuald from Vienna in 1995, that I became hooked on singing more seriously. Johannes taught me the very old and classical art of singing which came from Italy and is called the old or “traditional Belcanto”. He himself had studied with an Icelandic female singer who had sung at La Scala in Milan in the 1930s.

The striking thing to me right from the beginning was that Belcanto is based on the principles of undoing and letting things move and unfold naturally, as is the case in the Alexander Technique. There are no tricks, for example how to sing high notes or how to produce certain effects – it is a steady and continuous way of experiencing and training the voice.

QUIET BREATHING

There are three major points that I believe define a calm quality of breathing:

1. a constant and steady flow of air while exhaling,
2. breathing internally,
3. quick replacement of the amount of air used immediately after the sound ends.

1. Exhaling

In the practice of whispered 'ah' we find that smooth flow of air which is needed in singing. The vocal cords act like a valve, only letting a very small amount of air pass at a time. The air causes the cords to vibrate and enables the production of sound for speaking as well as singing. The sound produced in this way should be of fine quality and should not change in volume or in pitch. In opposition to the described act we find a forcing of air against the cords which puts pressure on them and curves them upwards. If the amount of pressure is still stronger, the entire larynx is moved upwards in the direction the air is pushing.

2. Breathing internally

Looking at the anatomy of the respiratory mechanism it is obvious that there is more movement possible in the lower half of the ribcage than in the upper part. Ribs 7–10 attach only indirectly to the sternum, while ribs 11 and 12 do not attach at all and are therefore called the floating ribs. The diaphragm moves down and up, taking the lungs and all other organs in the abdomen with it. This movement depends on the ribcage hanging from the vertebrae (in contrast to a held up ribcage) where all ribs can move freely at their joints on either end. The diaphragm attaches from the sternum all along the lowest ribs round to the spine, reaching down with its back part as far as the upper half of the lumbar spine. To get free movement in this lumbar part of the diaphragm, which is in my experience the coordinating part for the diaphragm to function as a whole, with the intestines following it with ease, a flexible lumbar spine is the presupposition. All participating muscles have to be in coordination for this: the legs connecting to the spine with the iliacus, psoas minor and major, and quadratus lumborum muscles, and at the back the back muscles (dorsi).

A little exercise I found most helpful for this is the idea of swinging a hula-hoop circle very gently round the middle of the torso while sitting.

Now I come to the point of what I mean by internal breathing. The only duty of the diaphragm is to bring air into the lungs (inhalation) by contracting its fibres to initiate a movement downwards. The diaphragm does not facilitate breathing the air out as well. It is pushed up via the intestines by the abdominal muscles. (I am describing the action in this way, because I find confusion over and over in singers as well as Alexander teachers.)

The most active role in exhaling is played by the rectus abdominis muscle – a white fibre muscle for movement – which we will see later delivers a connecting impulse to the vocal mechanism. The abdominal wall consists of another three layers of muscles, which are mainly muscles for posture (red and mixed fibre muscles), whose first job is to hold the intestines in the abdominal cavity. This is true whether breath is being taken in or exhaled. It does this best when it is under a nice stretch. Asking the whole body to lengthen will provide the right amount of tonus in the abdomen to secure enough stability in the lower part of the trunk.

The interaction between the diaphragm and the abdominal wall that causes the journey of the inner organs down and up can be demonstrated with a pair of hands pushing against each other. If hand one dominates by moving down onto the other, hand two has to give way; then as hand two, which wants to stop being pushed down, comes up against hand one, it moves it up. Neither of these systems loses contact with its partner and both remain in an active lively condition. Through this simplified explanation I would like to point out the necessity of keeping an active abdominal wall in the movement of breathing, thus allowing the pressure on the inner organs to be equally distributed. A common way in which singers and wind players breathe is to let go of the abdominal muscles with the intention of gaining speed when inhaling. This letting go is a dropping of one part in a complex system that causes a falling forward of the organs, creating a one-direction movement followed by a shortening in stature.

Coming back to the good example of breathing, you see almost no or very little movement on the outside. The entire torso which is the breathing instrument distributes the expansion equally in all directions. The inhaling process is initiated deep inside in the diaphragm and then moves from this central point outward to the periphery.

For instruction I use the following helpful picture. You all know the Chinese symbol of yin and yang, the two halves that are interdependent. The yang stands for activity, the yin for passivity; yang is movement, while yin is stillness. Yang dissolves structures, yin creates or preserves them. The human body is our house we live in (yin), the movement of breathing is the party taking place in the house (yang). The party must not be so vigorous as to destroy the house. Therefore it is our main focus to care for the yin (i.e. to keep our directions going) so that we stay in good order for the breathing to happen naturally. The yang will take care of itself. This means we do not have to focus on the act of breathing, but we have to enable it through creating the correct conditions.

3. Inhaling

The most important and most difficult parameter of quiet breathing is the springy return of the air at the end of a tune. In many singers the musculature for this action is untrained and therefore sluggish and slow. It is the coordinated interplay between the rectus abdominis muscle and the diaphragm as described under point 2 above. If both muscles are awake, you will find that after blowing out a candle the used air is replaced automatically without any stop. This can be practised with a series of quick blows of air on a consonant (for example fff). Each sound will be followed by the reverse action of the air intake. Finally add sound using the vocal cords, but with the lips closed, so that the air has to leave through the nasal passage. Do five sounds in a row, then pause on beat six, changing pitch if you like. You will probably find that the speed of the intake is different, slower before the rest. It should of course be the same in tempo following the sound, without any waiting before the breath returns. Even harder is the in-breath reflex when the sung phrases are longer, as in most classical pieces (for example four bars). You have a long steady out-breath followed immediately by a very short and fast in-breath.

To try to explain this action in words, I would say that the amount of effort applied by all participating muscles during the out-breath must entail an equal quality of air flow (see point 1 above) and the right amount of pressure needed while the quantity of air is diminishing. The common fault I find in my students is releasing with the continuation of the musical phrase.

TRAINING THE VOICE

In the old Belcanto style of teaching only a handful of the exercises that were passed on are necessary to help the voice to become free. Later on more and more exercises were invented, maybe to make it less boring for the students or the teachers.

The **first exercise** is close to what I described in quiet breathing under point 3. With an open throat (like when saying 'ah') but with closed lips you do a scale of 7 half tones going up to a minor third and then down to the note you started from. Beat 8 is a rest. The next series is half a tone up, the following up again, and so on as high as your student is capable of singing. The cords are asked to close into the air stream and to stretch in order to change pitch.

The aims of this exercise are to connect the breath impulse given by the rectus abdominis muscle with the larynx, to speed up the beginning of the sound, to train the **return reflex of the breath**, to teach the larynx to stay calm and not moving while changing pitch and to release the vocal mechanism after every sound. There are other benefits, but it is too difficult to describe them without being able to hear and feel the effects.

Exercise two teaches **change of pitch**. It develops the flexibility of the vocal cords and the entire larynx is trained. It is done in reverse mode, with a closed throat and open lips. On the consonant 'ng' (as in the word English) you sing a glissando slide up and down one octave, very, very slow to begin with, not missing out any quartertones. Then it is done fast, like yodelling, repeating the up-and-down three times, finishing with the down.

In **exercise three** you practise the effortless forming of the **vowels** a-e-i-o-u. They must be produced with the tongue and not with the jaw. A traditional tool to help avoid movement and tightening in the jaw is the placing of a wine cork between the front teeth. This helps the student detect false tension and teaches the separation of the tongue from the jaw. You sing the vowels on the same pitch as well as an arpeggio 1-3-5-3-1.

All the exercises described must be practised in a steady rhythm to incorporate the intake of air after each sequence. It is important not to consider the sequence of five tones to be the exercise, but to see that the entire chain of sequences over approximately two octaves has to be practised as a whole. The exercises usually start at the bottom and go up. Occasionally you change direction, going down to repeat a certain area. The reason for this is to build up stretch and to increase tension in the musculature without tightening.

The tradition is that this is all you need as teacher to help people free their voices. Of course the exercises as such are not magic tools. When transmitted by an expert teacher or vocal coach, who is in the position to detect the subtlest differences in sound and leads the way, they develop into a most useful aid for the singing student.

In the process of coaching a voice, an untrained system will get tired very quickly. Because of this, a unit of training the technique lasts only 20 to 30 minutes. I use other exercises to vary the demand made upon the voice and with a greater variety of exercises I manage to delay the tiring effect.

An important part of singing the Italian repertoire is the virtuosity. **Coloratura** has to be trained extensively using runs of scales up and down to make the cords move precisely and quickly. They are practised with different articulations such as legato, non-legato and staccato. This means the pitches are tied together, slightly separated and more separated by shortening the notes. There are countless ways of arranging musical figures together, and I invent my own depending upon the situation.

In the next step you have to coordinate the sound with the **text**. This is one of the hardest and longest parts of the training. The complexity of different things happening at the same time often turns out to be a struggle. A series of sentences using all sorts of combinations of vowels and consonants are sung to the same tune going up step by step. A characteristic of good Italian singing is that the words begin with an energetic attack to reach the vowels as quickly as possible. The sung words always begin head-on, whereas in contrast you hear a hold-up in developing the sound (what I call pushing the sound). The rapidly spoken consonants and the pure vowels supply clarity of pronunciation that helps the meaning of an aria to be understood on stage.

When the stage is reached that the larynx remains calm then exercises of expression can be included, such as messa di voce, trills, vibrazione, sotto voce, etc. A good singer has many voices at his or her disposal, one for Lieder, for Mozart, for Verdi and for Puccini.

RESUME

What one wishes to achieve is to express oneself through the voice. True expression must be heard in the sound and not be seen in the facial muscles or somewhere else in the body. Therefore the major work is to train the vocal cords and their base the larynx. This appears evident and logical. In a voice not perfectly free you will find a lot of accompanying tensions and support from unwanted areas, which disturb the ease of an effortless production of sound.

Let me give you one example. When changing pitch, singing from a low note to a higher one, it is common that not only do the vocal cords increase their tension but also you will find the larynx doing the same, moving upwards. It is a physiological phenomenon that a "going up" in pitch automatically stimulates the related "going along" in other areas. To get rid of this automatic response a great

deal of work is required until the singer is able to leave the larynx alone or quiet, staying audible at the same level while tones are changing. I would remind you of the first parameter of quiet breathing. For the voice box to stay at the same level, no interference must arise from changing the amount of air pressure. Some of you might ask how the singing of high tones can be achieved without an increase in pressure. You are absolutely right with this thought. There must be a different and increased quality of air to enable the cords to vibrate under much more tension. But it is the quality and not the quantity that has to be "more".

At this point I would like to draw a parallel to Alexander's work. I should not tell my students what to do in order to sing high notes. It is the other way round. I must coach the singer in such a way that they can find it by themselves. The voice must have free access to all parts of the body to take at any chosen moment what is needed in muscular activity to produce a particular sort of sound. Putting it in other words: there is no getting ready in advance in order to do something, instead there is allowing the wish to organise the required coordination for the intended action.

I would like to end with some thoughts about what is important to me in training singers. Three things seem to be of priority in my role as teacher.

1. I encourage my students as much as I can with all means available. On the journey of unfolding the voice and his or her personality, the young human being is often insecure and full of doubts whether it will turn out a success or not. I cannot guarantee or even less foresee the outcome, but what is important for the singer is that they have given it a chance and have done it. And I am there to support them in this adventure, making clear to them that I am on their side, no matter the result.
2. I help them to start trusting their bodies and their voices. You would not believe how many singers are scared and suspicious about their voices, about whether the voice will produce a reliable result. They have experienced it as accidental. Once the foundation of a secure technique is solidly built, the fear of pure chance will disappear.
3. In combination with the point above, I make sure that the student understands his or her role. Their job is to sing; and my job is to hear what they are doing, to give constructive criticism, to choose the right repertoire for their stage of development. Most students have the habit of being their own teachers. This is not possible for the following reason. For such a difficult activity as singing you need to keep your complete attention on what you are doing. If you criticise your performance you are splitting your

attention and engaging some part of your mind for judgement. A pure and focused state of mind is the most valuable ingredient for successful learning.

NOTES

1. In the past, experienced voice teachers in Italy would not take on students who had a pushed forward jaw or a badly aligned instrument. They knew it would take too long to get rid of the tightening. If they did teach such a student, the master would have an assistant do the hard work.
2. I ask students who want to train with me what their desire is. Do they want to become a member of a professional choir or be a soloist performing on stage either as a concert singer or in opera? Is their dream the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House or that of La Scala, or is it the local opera house where they wish to perform? It is essential to know what their personal wishes are in order to know what direction the training should take.

Daniel Süsstrunk was born in 1959 and studied as a violinist at the College of Music in Basel, Switzerland and in Detmold, Germany. A serious illness affecting his joints brought him in contact with the Alexander Technique and he began a teacher training course in London from 1979–1982. He has lived and worked in Munich since 1986. From 1992, for a period of 14 years, he directed his own Alexander Technique teacher training school. Also, during this time he became increasingly involved in his study of singing and met a master of the traditional Belcanto technique, an art which he has continued to perfect over many years. He coaches professional singers and singing students with vocal difficulties and assists them in mastering the professional demands of performing on stage. In 1999, as a member of a team of directors, he organised the first Alexander Technique Congress in Germany. Other interests include Qi Gong, Zapchen Somatics and Tibetan Buddhism in which he has also acquired teacher training qualifications.