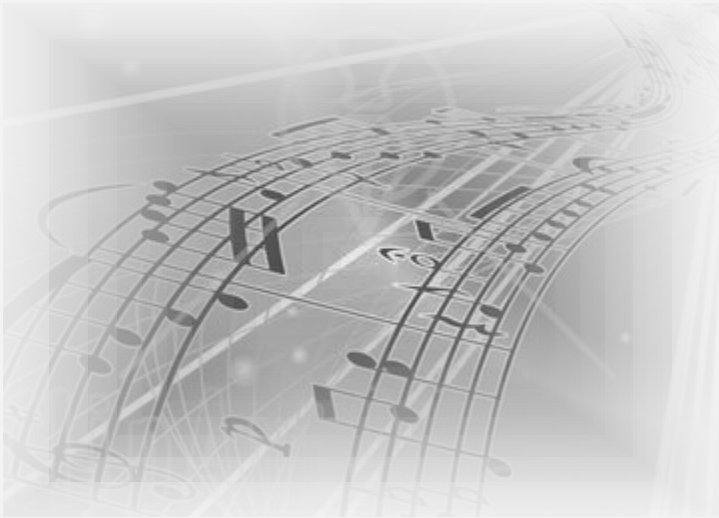


LIFTING THE VOICE THROUGH JOY

Seven Steps to a Bel Canto Choir

by Matthew McFarland



“And David spake to the chief of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers with instruments of music, psalteries and harps and cymbals, sounding, by lifting up the voice with joy.”

I Chronicles 15:16

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INTRODUCTION

To begin with, this publication is not intended to transition everyone who picks it up into a Metropolitan Opera House prima donna (although the techniques discussed are indeed used). What this IS intended for is to assist common, everyday people in improving their singing abilities to the Glory of God and use in His service. Truly, the highest calling in the field of music is one of nothing but complete dedication of the voice to God and a willingness to let pride be replaced by humility. Nobody desiring to be a “minister of righteousness” can succeed while being concerned about their self image or reputation. Only a frank, open and simple willingness to give what God has already given you back to Him.

That being said, humility should by no means be confused with timidity or hesitancy. When singing, humility will set you free while timidity will keep you from ever praising God with your whole heart. We are commanded in I Corinthians 14: 12 – “Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.” Our goal is not a personal one of accomplishment or advancement, but of ministering to fellow believers in the church of God. This is our high calling and this is the objective of this publication.

Step 1: PHYSIOLOGY

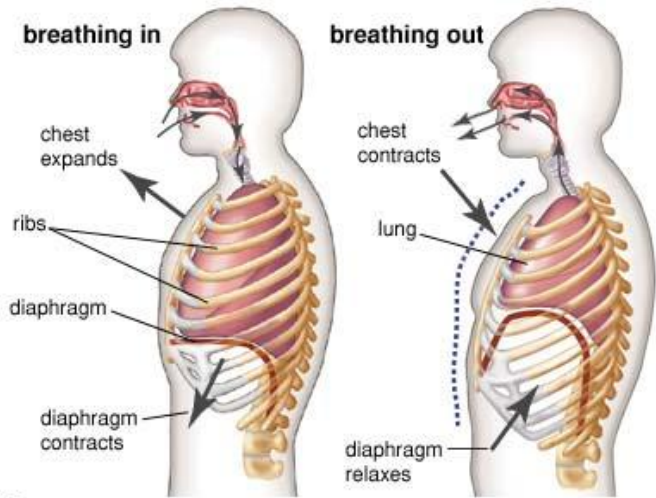
Someone once said, “If you want to help a man, you ought to know something about him.” This was never more true than in the study of voice. Therefore, let’s begin by taking a look at how the voice works and, incidentally, how it doesn’t work. Some of this may seem somewhat rhetorical, but it plays an important role in understanding many of the principles to follow.

There are two basic reasons why we breathe: 1) to stay alive and 2) to punctuate. Let us liken the process of breathing to a rocket being launched from its pad. In this example, the diaphragm is the rocket engine or booster. The diaphragm is what enables you to breath and is also the power behind a song. Obviously, it would be a bad idea to crumple up a rocket engine, shove it into the bottom of the rocket and still expect it to perform properly. Unfortunately, however, this is precisely the situation most people put their diaphragm in. They stand (or sit) with their abdomen relaxing in whatever position it felt like at the moment. This is perhaps the biggest hindrance toward proper singing. In the diagram on the following page we can see what

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physically transpires when we inhale and exhale. When you inhale the diaphragm contracts, pulling air into the lungs; the increase in air quantity forces the chest cavity to expand. A

proper
inhalation
with bring air
in through
the nose as
well as the
mouth,
thereby
maximizing
the amount



of air taken in and minimizing the amount of time taken to achieve this. With some practice, you should be able to fully inhale in no longer than a fifth of a second. This may seem ludicrous at first, but if you ran out of breath while swimming under water, I assure you your first breath once you broke the surface would be remarkably quick. A proper exhalation is generally characterized by a contraction of the chest as the diaphragm relaxes back up into the chest cavity. This collapsing of

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the chest is precisely what a vocalist does NOT wish to have happen as it greatly diminishes the amount of time until he is required to take another breath and destroys any chance of having a controlled tone. This randomness must be eliminated and is discussed in depth further on under PUFFING.

The first checkpoint, so to speak, that air will encounter on its way out of the body is the throat. Oddly enough, the throat (and the included larynx) is importantly UN-important in this whole process. The very part of the body most people rely most heavily on in order to sign should be consciously NOT used. The throat is nothing but a tube the air must pass through. The voice box will naturally perform the job it was created to do unless you attempt to force it into a role it was never intended to play. This is actually dangerous and can lead to damaged vocal chords. When the throat is stiff or manipulated in an attempt to produce a certain sound, the chords will rub together. Eventually, swelling (or even small blisters) will form resulting in a soar or hoarse throat. If this practice is continued over many years they can develop calluses, irreparably damaging the voice. It is therefore important that the throat be unimportant.

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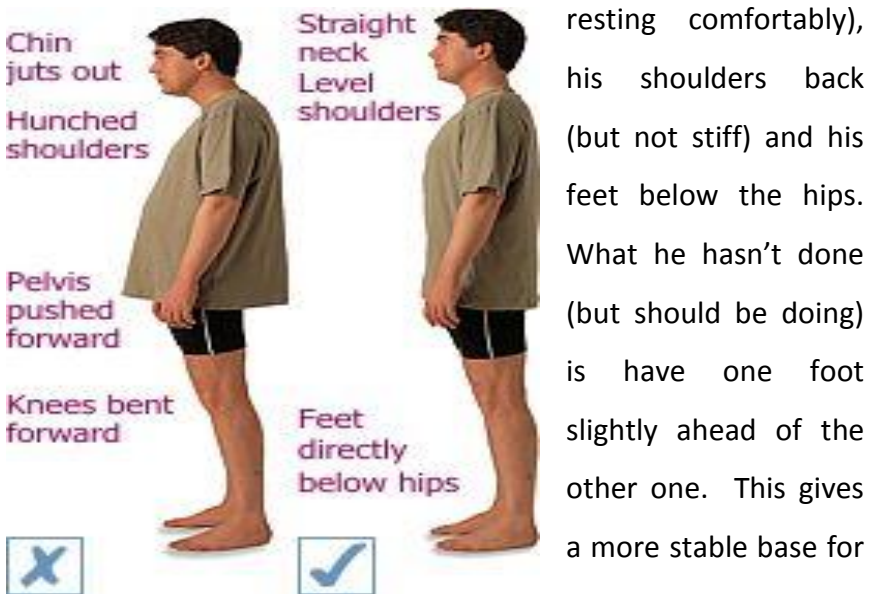
The next checkpoint reached is the tongue. The tongue is important since it is the tool used to form the words to be communicated. HOW these words are formed is vastly important since an improperly formed word will get in the way of the air and tone attempting to escape the mouth. While this is dealt with in greater depth later on under PRONOUNCING, for the moment realize that the tongue should rest comfortably in the bottom of the mouth with the tip of the tongue just touching the back of the bottom teeth. This puts it such a position as to be out of the way and yet readily available.

As we move forward to exit the mouth, the jaw should be relaxed (not stiff or tight, as this will automatically result in a tightened neck). The lips should be slightly narrowed from their natural position, but not constricted. For a good approximation, say the word “TOOK.” With a little exaggeration, the shape of the mouth on the “oo” is very close to the desirable shape. This will allow the words to be formed on the tip of the tongue, rather than back in the mouth, resulting in guttural tones.

Step 2: POSITIONING

In order to accomplish the level of type of breathing just discussed, one needs to have the proper body positioning (or posture). In the example on the following page, the individual on the left has made four of the most common errors made when someone is standing to sing – chin stuck out, shoulders hunched, pelvis (hips) pushed forward and knees slightly bent.

The individual on the right has corrected these errors and has his neck straight (but not stiff), his head slightly lifted (but



the upper body while allowing the abdominal cavity a greater freedom to breathe. This is the correct position to be in whenever singing. While singing is possible sitting down, it will never accomplish what is desired and should only be done when absolutely necessary.

Step 3: PUFFING

“Puffing” is a word that I’ve chosen to use to describe the actual breathing processed used while singing. As we’ve already learned, the abdomen (stomach area) is what provides the power for a good tone. To get a fairly accurate sample of how to breathe, take a big breath and blow out as though you were attempting to blow out the candles on a cake. You’ll notice that your stomach muscles tighten up and press in, forcing the air out with far greater power than if you tried to use your throat to pull it out. The challenge, here, is to use those same muscles, but only let a LITTLE air out or let it out very slowly. Try it a few times, trying to make the air come out slower each time and yet retain the same tightness in your stomach muscles as when you blew

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out hard. Make sure you don't try to regulate the air flow by making your lips smaller and therefore allow less air out. That's cheating! Also, try to keep your throat from tightening up as much as you can. It's not as easy as you might think, is it? This is a great exercise to go through to try to learn how to breathe. Breathing properly is absolutely essential to creating a mellow tone as well as maintaining your voice for your entire life.

If you recall, I mentioned in the first section that the two reasons to breathe are "to stay alive" and "to punctuate." Punctuating a song is something that may seem highly subjective at first, but can really make or break the message you are conveying to your audience. For example, in the song Amazing Grace, imagine if you were to breath at the asterisks:

A-Ma * Zing grace how sweet * the sound

While this may look slightly ludicrous when you read over it, it is a very real and frequent problem in singing – many times a result of laziness on the part of the singer more than anything else. I assure you that you are in no danger of dying as a result of your song, regardless of how much gusto you put into it; therefore, we can safely assume that punctuation should be the

key player in when a singer takes a breath. When determining when to breathe in the song, think about what is being said at the moment and how you would say it if it were not put to music. Would you breathe there? Or would you be seriously trying to speak to someone concerning something that is near and dear to you? Does the train of thought pause? If not, why should you? Adding dynamics to a song can be highly rewarding to both the audience and singer, but it required discipline and concentration to achieve. When dealing with group music the music director should lay out for the group when to pause for a breath, and, most importantly, when NOT to pause. Disjointed breathing within a group practically screams “amateurs” to the audience.

Step 4: PLACING

The topic of placement is one that is often difficult for a learner to grasp for it encompasses an abstract idea often difficult to convey. The basic premise behind it is that you place the tone (created via the methods previously mentioned) out front. This means that you don't let the tone originate in the back of your

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throat. I know what you're thinking! Your thinking, "Um....but the tone DOES come from the back of the throat." I realize that, but we need to get that idea out of your head for it is absolutely fatal for a song to originate there. A tone that is back in the throat will be muffled, harsh and controlled. The idea of singing is to present a song to the audience, not grab them by the neck and drown them in it. While it is covered in greater depth in a later section, pronunciation is a big player in placement. Does your tongue rest on the bottom of the mouth? Does the end flip up to pop off the consonants and then go back down? Is your neck and jaw stiff, or are then relaxed and comfortable? When you don't place the tone out front, your neck will become stiff, your jaw will get rigid in an attempt to maintain the tone that is coming out and the song will sound strained and become ineffective.

For a moment, liken singing to water being poured from a bucket. The water is the tone and the bucket is your mouth. While the water technically does originate from the bottom of the bucket, it doesn't break up and become a stream until after it passes the lip of the bucket (symbolic of your own lips). It is the tip of the tongue where the song is truly born and it's up to you to

not kill it by forcing the water back into the bucket rather than letting it come out. This concept is one that often requires illustration on the part of the teacher for the student to understand; but, if a teacher is unavailable, just practice a little and you'll get it eventually.

This one aspect alone is perhaps the most important one to grasp in your quest to obtain a clear and professional tone and presentation.

Step 5: PROJECTING

Projecting (or projection, as it's often referred to) is the ability to reach to all members to the audience without apparent strain or effort. To achieve this, one must speak to some that are somewhat distant as though you were having a normal conversation with them. To achieve this, one must drop the jaw (while still keeping it relaxed and comfortable) and utilize the methods of placement previously described. Lift the chin slightly and, without straining or forcing the voice, simply reach out and sing to those in the back of the room. When done properly, this

can be accomplished without straining the voice or increasing the volume. Remember, we're after helping the voice be what it was designed to be, not force it into a mold.

Step 6: PRONOUNCING

The subject of pronunciation ties in very closely with placement. Let's begin by setting some basic facts and then proceed to explain how these translate into technique.

First of all, let's establish that you cannot sing a consonant. I challenge you to try to sing a "b" sound. While you may have moderate success with "m" or "n," consonants are there to create words out of the vowels, for it is the vowels where a tone is effective and used. Since this is the case, one must learn to effectively use vowels to create the mood and message of the song. The tongue should always be resting comfortably on the bottom of the mouth with the tip just touching the back of the bottom incisors. Whenever a consonant is needed, the tip should curve up and flip the consonant out on the top teeth – quickly

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returning to its initial position and out of the way for the next vowel.

Secondly, some consonants are downright awkward when found together in a song. For example, in *Amazing Grace*, “how sweet the sound,” the “t” at the end of “sweet” and the “th” at the beginning of “the” are really most cumbersome to deal with when you try to pronounce both of them in quick succession. To address this, simply pronounce it as you normally would when talking (and let the “t” on the end of “sweet” become rather dull and unobtrusive). Aside from instances such as this, most consonants should definitely be present and accounted for, but not accentuated. If a singer or choir attempts to pronounce both sounds, they end up with an unavoidable “Uh” sound between them. (“how sweet..uh..the sound”). This should be avoided at all costs for it is unprofessional and unpleasant to listen to – especially when occurring multiple times in a single song.

Thirdly, any singer or group of singers should be careful to not put an “hhh” sound when changing notes on a vowel. If I may use a different part of the same song we have been using... “I wo.....honce wa...has lost, but no...how am found” and so on. Like

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the obnoxious extra vowel plugged between two consonants that are over pronounced, this sound is a dead giveaway that the singer or group has not had much training or practice.

Since vowels are SO important, we really should look into how each vowel should be pronounced. Drawing somewhat on the Italian pronunciation (for singing is largely of Italian root), keep most vowels open, but definite in design. What I mean by that is that an “o”, for example, should generally be pronounced the same as it is in the word “bomb” or “song.” An open and relaxed sound is very desirable. Now, anyone who knows anything about the English language knows that this is not always possible. So, when you must make the “o” long, bear in mind that it is still to be relaxed and natural and don’t permit the jaw or neck to try to take over and become tight. The better your tone is placed and the most it is pronounced in the front of the mouth the easier this will be to maintain. The same principles apply to the other letters. One thing to note is that it is often advantageous to cheat. What I mean by that is that you can often use the wrong letter to create a long sound. For example, you can often use a variation of the open “I” sound to substitute for the

long “e.” This is especially true on higher notes. Just remember to treat the “e” like it is an “iy” diphthong and tack the “y” sound on just before you put the consonant in with the tip of your tongue.

Step 7: PORTRAYING

The concept of portraying is basically and simply put: meaning what you’re singing. Another word for it is “emoting.” You show emotion through your eyes, not through your mouth. As we have previously discussed, trying to emote or show feeling through your mouth will completely disrupt the flow of air and relaxation so important in this whole process. Since the eyes speak louder than the mouth does, let’s concentrate almost exclusively on them.

You can often tell someone’s true feeling through their eyes. Someone can be smiling on the outside by not on the inside and the eyes generally tell the truth. Because of this they have been called the “windows to the soul.” When singing in a church ministry, your eyes speak wonders. The congregation with be

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able to associate with what you're saying far more if you're eyes are involved in the message than if they are blank and dead. This is what gives the song life and completes the transition from performance to ministry.

SUMMARY

We have gone over pretty much all the basics of bel canto singing: physiology, positioning, puffing, placing, projecting, pronouncing and portraying. All of these are important and an effective artist will seek to master all seven of them. Remember, the main objective here is to take the voice the Lord created you with, and set it free to seek the ultimate in returning glory back to the God who created it. And, through it all, never forget that singing can be a very enjoyable and fulfilling ministry when done for the honor and glory of God.