BREATHING ESSENTIALS by Sheri Gould

Understanding and utilizing proper breath support can make a huge difference in your ability to sing- in many ways. With the proper breath support you can sing the phrases you want to without having to take breaths in inappropriate places. You can also learn to achieve a better tone and volume control. Proper breath support also gives you more control over various aspects of your singing including vibrato. Most importantly, proper breath control can help keep the rest of your vocal mechanism safe from unnecessary stress and strain as you utilize the correct musculature system for singing.

One important muscle to understand during the breathing process is the diaphragm. The diaphragm moves down allowing the lungs to fill, and expand, with air. The diaphragm is the muscle of the hour when it comes to inhalation! This is a relatively simple process, but many of us have it backward in our mind. From the time we were young, we would suck air in and at the same time 'suck in' our stomach muscles. This has inadvertently given many of us the idea that as we fill with air—we suck **in**! We should rather think of a balloon filling with air. As it fills, it expands and this is true also for the lungs.
As the lungs fill with air and expand, so does the rib cage. A secondary effect of the filling of the lungs is the expansion of the abdominal region. Many make the mistake though of thinking that the abdominal muscles are the muscles for inhalation. It's better to think of them as simply 'responding' to the breathing process. The diaphragm is the muscle that does the work. You can not move the diaphragm down and fill the lungs with air by moving the abdominal muscles; however, you do move the abdominal muscles by moving the diaphragm! Thus the command I've heard some voice teachers use to "fill the stomach with air" is really rather erroneous.

From the moment of your first breath your diaphragm and other muscles involved in breathing have been doing a great job all on their own. At this juncture however, what we're going to attempt to do is manually begin to override the process so to speak, so that we can learn to work with it better. When it's time to exhale, the diaphragm becomes essential flaccid as the stomach muscles take over the process of exhalation. These muscles help the lungs to force the air out by pushing the diaphragm upward. Therefore during exhalation, the flow of air is controlled in large part by various stomach muscles.

So how do we gain better control of this and get the results that we want? With practice we can begin to realize how these muscles work together and take over. It's essential to star with good posture. Start by standing in front of a mirror. Most vocal exercises can be better accomplished while checking oneself in front of a mirror. Place your feet slightly apart, directly under each hip. Reach your arms well over your head. Really stretch upward, the kind of stretch that would 'untuck' your shirt! As you do this you'll be placing your ribcage in the proper position; up and off the diaphragm. This will allow your diaphragm to move more freely. Now bring your arms down to your sides keeping your ribcage high but relaxing your shoulders.

Next position your hands, on either side just above your waist, on your ribcage. Keep your thumbs toward your back. Inhale deeply and watch your hands expand with your ribcage. Try this several times until you are confident that you are completely relaxed and yet you are able to feel your ribcage expand and contract as your lungs fill with air. This expansion can be felt all the way around to your back. Try to really focus on feeling the ribs expand and the lungs fill as opposed to your stomach area. Although the stomach area does expand somewhat, don't make that the focus. Feel where the air is actually going—into your lungs.

Now find the bottom of the front of your rib cage with your fingers. Placing the right hand fingers under your right ribcage and your left hand fingers under your left ribcage; follow your ribcage to the center where it meets. Now move your fingers off your ribcage and onto the soft fleshy part of your belly right underneath where the ribcage meets. Take a deep breath and gently cough. You should be able to feel a 'kick' from your diaphragm as you do. Try this several times (using a silent cough so as not to stress your vocal cords).

Now just for contrast. I want you to try this same exercise after you've 'relaxed' your posture. Allow your shoulders to sink and your rib cage as well. Try the same process of taking a breath and gently coughing while you feel for your diaphragm to 'kick' out the air. I want you to notice how much less powerful the kick is! Proper posture is so important for proper breath control!

If you need any help to further identify your breathing process, try this: lie down on your back and place a book on the area just below where the ribs meet in the center. Relax and try to breathe normally. You should see the book rise and fall with each breath. The movement from the diaphragm and surrounding abdominal muscles is making this happen. As you are lying there relaxing and just watching yourself breathe, after you feel confident of your body's natural rhythm, try to begin to control the process by willfully controlling the muscles that were just moving without your voluntary help. Do what you can to make the book move in the same manner only faster or slower and hopefully this will help you get in touch with those muscles.

The better and more adept you become at controlling your diaphragm, the better you will be able to control your breath. What you ultimately want is to be able to control the amount and the force with which your breath comes into and leaves your body during singing. In addition it's important to note that your body was designed such that you would breathe air in primarily through your nostrils. When the air is taken in through the nostrils it is cleaned, warmed and moistened. All of these things help your body to function better. So whenever you possibly can, remember to breathe in through your nose.

Once you've mastered the movement of the diaphragm and the rest of the essential breathing muscles, then you can learn to control the flow of air. It's important to maintain control over the force and the amount of air that leaves your lungs. First let's talk about flow. Let's use a balloon again as an example. Think about the force of air with which a balloon deflates. The rate is related to the amount of air pressure inside the balloon. If the balloon is VERY full of air, the air will rush out more quickly than if there is just a little air inside. In the same way, if you over-inflate your lungs, your tendency will be to use more air than you need. It will all rush out quickly. So try 'topping it off" before you sing. Don't overinflate. If you take in a HUGE breath, its going to tend to flow out too quickly and with less control than you want, so let a little out before you start singing. You'll find that you have more control over what's leftover.

In an effort to help you fully understand how *little air* you really need to sing or speak, try this. Take a deep breath and let it 'all' out. *Without breathing in again*, try talking. You'll find that you can actually go on for a lot longer than you thought—probably 20 seconds or more. You don't need a lot of breath to phonate. What you DO need is the support of that diaphragm. The diaphragm can take even the smallest amount of air and apply it. I use this illustration to help you see that its easy to use too much breath in your singing, and that's likely why you run out of air so quickly when you sing.
In order to begin to get a hold of the power of the diaphragm and other essential breathing muscles now, let's try some exercises that will help you strengthen your control.

Try this in order to slow down the amount of air you let out. Take a deep breath and 'hiss' like a snake. The tongue should be directly behind your teeth and disallowing the air to flow out rapidly. Time yourself. Repeat the exercise and try to extend your time. You should be able to work yourself up to 30 seconds (maybe more!) pretty easily.

As you get to the end of your air, you should really feel the breathing muscles working hard. At this point it is working hard to get the last bit of air out. That feeling is one you want to take note of. You want to 'imitate' that strong pull any time you need more support. You don't have to be running out of air to get it! That force is exactly what you need when you want more power to either sing more loudly OR to sing very quietly yet with a powerful tone. Singing quietly take at least as much power/effort as singing loudly, one is just louder!

It's important to maintain control of exactly how much air you let out and how fast. It's also important to make sure that you are 'aiming' the air exactly where you want it as well. Using too much force of air can do a number of things you don't want. First of all, too much pressure on the vocal cords is stressful. Also too much air will only have one place to go and that's out! However, it will pass through the cords on the way out and leave you with a breathy tone. So making sure you focus your air to vibrate the cords and using just the right amount will help you to utilize your breath better (sing longer phrases) and it will help your tone as well.

Another exercise you can try that may help you gain control over the amount of air you let out is what I call the 'Alphabet Exercise'. Take a nice breath in (through your nose) and let it out slowly while saying the alphabet very quickly. You should be able to work up to saying the alphabet *at least* four times with one breath (approx 20-25 seconds).
Additionally, over breathing is not helpful. It's important to make decisions as to where you want to breathe and not just leave it to chance. Leaving it to chance will result in an overabundance of 'catch breaths' and you'll always have the feeling that you're running out of breath. Making the decision as to the best place to breath not only takes the guess work out of breathing but can also help avoid making the mistake of breathing in an inappropriate place. But more importantly, you'll find that you have much more control by simply controlling *when* you breathe. Many times we'll feel out of breath trying to catch our breath when the verses seem to run into each other quickly. For example:

"I Could Sing of Your Love Forever" by Martin Smith

"Over the mountains and the sea" (breathe)
"Your river runs with love for me," (breathe)
"And I will open up my heart," (breathe?)
"And let the Healer set me free." (breathe)
"I'm happy to be in the truth," (breathe)
"And I will daily life my hands," (breathe)
"For I will always sing of… (breathe?)
"When Your love comes down, yeah" (breathe)

By the time you're done singing this you feel like you've run a marathon!

Ok, remember when you did the 'hissing' exercise? I feel confident that you were able to 'hiss' for at least 20-25 seconds. Furthermore, I believe you were able to work up to doing at least 4 times through the alphabet which should've taken you about 20-25 seconds. This is proof that you can phonate for at least 20 seconds right? Now the song example is around 20 seconds *in its entirety*! That's right, the entire verse shown can be sung in around 20 seconds depending on tempo. So what I want you to do is first try singing the verse as shown with the breaths as marked. Then try singing the phrases as I've remarked them below:

"I Could Sing of Your Love Forever" by Martin Smith

"Over the mountains and the sea Your river runs with love for me," (breathe)
"And I will open up my heart, and let the Healer set me free." (breathe)
"I'm happy to be in the truth, and I will daily life my hands," (breathe)
"For I will always sing of when Your love came down, yeah" (breathe)

Typically, you'll actually feel less winded after having sung the entire verse in one breath!
You can decide for yourself which way serves you best or come up with your own places to breathe. But I think you will have a clearer picture now that sometimes 'less is more' when it comes to taking and using breath. In addition, I hope you've seen that you may have more breath capacity than you previously thought. Practice will make a big difference when it comes to gaining and maintaining breath support and control. So keep working!