Breathing Exercises â€“ the Myths Jay

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Itâ€™s unfortunate that some singing instructors and some Internet platforms encourage their students, especially those who are just LEARNING TO SING, to participate in breathing exercises that have little or no effect on developing proper breathing techniques or breath-management skills. While most of these exercises are not particularly harmful, they can be unnatural and hinder rather than improve a studentâ€™s ability to ultimately perform at his or her best.

One such exercise involves having the student lie down and place a thick book on their chests. The thinking here is that lying on the floor allows them to watch the movement of the book, thus giving them feedback about the correctness or incorrectness of their breathing. The myth is that body movement in the chest area is the proper breathing technique when singing, while the truth is all of the bodyâ€™s movement should be seen not in the chest, but in the soft area of the abdomen.

Moreover, donâ€™t you imagine itâ€™s highly unlikely that a singer will ever perform while a weight, such a thick book, is resting on their chest or that a singer is going to be lying down while performing? Thatâ€™s why it is always better to develop the connection and coordination in natural ways that the singer will face in normal singing situations.

Another myth of this â€˜bookâ€™ approach adopted by some misguided teachers is to have the student place a heavy book on their stomach instead of their chest. The thinking here is watching the up and down movement of the book as the student breathes deeply in and out, ensures that this movement is from the diaphragm. If the â€œproperâ€• movement does not occur, then the student is perceived to either be breathing from the chest or are not breathing deeply enough.

There are several negatives to this approach. First, placing any heavy object on the stomach while breathing has the potential to put undo strain on the support muscles, especially in singers and students who have not yet developed good strength and control of these muscles. Putting excess and unnatural weight on the abdomen inhibits its ability to freely and naturally expand during breathing. This can lead to the student using other muscle groups to force the abdomen to move, which inhibits the proper muscles to gain strength and perform the job they were intended to do.

Another myth that is thought to strengthen the muscles that support breathing is having the student learn to inhale deeply and quickly, taking in as much air as possible, and then pushing the air out of the lungs in three staccato (short quick breaths) with the third breath used to rapidly expel as much of the remaining air as possible. Some teachers will also ask the student to suck the stomach inward at the spot where the ribs come together in the front, a motion that acts as if the stomach is being drawn back toward the spine. The student is encouraged to watch that he or she is not simply creating the illusion of forceful exhalation by making noises with the mouth. In reality, it is the diaphragmatic muscles that are used to vigorously push the air out, which creates the sound. Stated another way, the staccato breaths should be originating from the brief, rapid and forceful pushes of the diaphragmatic and partnering muscles.

While it is true that this exercise might be of some help in strengthening the support muscles because of the rapid contractions required, a singer should never breathe in such an irregular way that creates this much force, rapidity and unevenness during phonation as it places too much air pressure on the vocal folds, which can lead to vocal injury. Furthermore, during singing tasks a singer does not exhale in several quick fits and starts, and teaching this technique will not allow the singer to maintain the initial inspiratory position, meaning to â€˜sing on the gesture of inhalationâ€™, but it encourages a rapid, forceful and irregularly paced rising of the diaphragm. Plus, this rapid breath

expulsion has absolutely no relationship to controlled breath management because it does not train the singer to pace airflow for the tasks of the literature to be sung.

Another teaching technique that is troubling is the one some instructors use for theatrical singing. This involves a Lamaze style of rhythmic breathing that is often taught during childbirth classes. Unfortunately, this breathing technique has very little or nothing to do with the natural breath cycle or the augmented breathing patterns associated with well-supported singing. In fact this type of breathing can easily lead to lightheadedness and hyperventilation, which is hardly favorable to a singerâ€™s performance. The myth with the â€˜lamazeâ€™ style of breathing is that there must be consc induced breath emission over the vocal folds in order to produce a singing tone.

Teaching the kind of exercises discussed in this article can lead a student to believe that if the muscles of the abdomen are not moving inward and upward with enough force during phonation, the tone is not being well supported while just the opposite is true. In other words, distension of the abdomen and lower ribs upon inhalation should be minimal (especially during a short phrase that requires less breath) and the inward and upward movement of the diaphragm and abdomen need only be subtle during well-supported singing.

It is easy for the student to fall prey to these unreliable and unproven exercise techniques. The best course of action is to be sure you find a VOCAL COACH that not only has the knowledge to provide the best possible breathing techniques, but one who also has the experience to apply these techniques to â€œreal lifeâ€• singing situations.

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