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The Art of Breathing by James Gini

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Why would we refer to breathing as â€œThe Art of Breathing,â€• after all isnâ€™t breathing something we subconsciously with little or no effort? The simple answer is yes, since the action of breathing is controlled by the autonomic nervous system which works â€œsubconsciouslyâ€• to regulate the proper input of oxygen and balance of carbon dioxide in the body. However, some breathing is, or least can be, controlled in tandem with the autonomic nervous system and the conscious mind, such as holding our breath, choosing how deeply we breathe in or exhale, or choosing how rapidly or how slowly we perform each phase of the breath cycle. These actions are what allow us to develop breath management techniques that are essential to â€œfuelâ€• the voice and give it the energy necessary for a singer to control tone and sustain passages or notes.

It all begins with the diaphragm, a shelf of muscle and tendon that stretches across the lower part of the ribcage where it responds to signals from the nervous system. When inhaling a breath, the diaphragm move downward as it shortens and tightens. This depression of the diaphragm creates a vacuum in the lungs which allows air to rush in and fill the vacuum. Just the opposite occurs when we exhale, the diaphragm relaxes and rises, lung volume decreases and air rushes out. Moreover, without the diaphragm and the numerous muscles that support its work, air can neither enter nor exist the lungs. Itâ€™s the expulsion of air from the lungs moving upward and out of the body via the system of tubes in the chest, neck and head that causes the closed vocal folds to oscillate and buzz thus producing sound, or voice.

What it boils down to, in simple terms, singing and speaking are little more than breathing out the noise made in the voice box or larynx. However, how we approach breathing and how we master breath management techniques will make a dramatic difference in the quality and skillfulness of the voice, especially if youâ€™re a beginner or one who just wants to LEARN HOW TO SING BETTER.

Breath management can be difficult for most new vocal students, as attempting to control breathing while to trying to sing can feel like an unnatural activity and seems to be two separate tasks. However, itâ€™s critical that they train themselves to do both simultaneously in order to produce quality sound and thus sing skillfully. It requires a great deal of concentration to breathe correctly and effectively while vocalizing and while some students may struggle initially, over time it will become more natural and automatic.

How we breathe when singing and how we breathe when speaking are distinctively different. That is to say, itâ€™s not in the mechanisms of breathing, but how we regulate our airflow to accommodate the demands that our bodies have for different activities that makes the difference. As an example, â€˜natural breathingâ€™ used for speech is not sufficient enough to meet the more intense demands of singing. In other words, when the body doesnâ€™t require as much oxygen, such as for speech or during leisure time, we tend to inhale and exhale more slowly and evenly, but when singing phases and notes itâ€™s necessary to inhale quickly and deeply while exhaling slowly and steadily.

In order to LEARN TO SING, breath management is imperative if a singer hopes to be able to sound great and to sing with skill. You should be aware that not all singing instructors understand the importance of proper breathing techniques, nor do they all teach good or safe methods. In future articles we will discuss, in depth, proper techniques as well as some errant methods of managing the breath and why they are too often ineffective and unhealthy, as well.

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