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Attaining a good choral tone (part 2)

by Chris Lamb

Editor's note: Dr. Chris Lamb resides in Bend, Oregon. She has a Doctor of Arts degree from Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, in choral conducting and vocal performance. Her experience includes public school teaching, collegiate work, and church work. She currently owns her own voice studio. This is the second of a four-part article on choral tone, which includes the following outline:

Step #1: Taking the Time to Make It Happen

Step #2: Proper Breath Management

Step#3: Focusing the Tone

Step #4: Matching Vowels

Breathing may seem an easy concept, since every living creature must take in air in order to survive. However, most young singers do not realize that the way one breathes plays such an important part in the quality of choral tone. This is one reason we have so many students with breathy tones in our choirs.

Normally, our lungs take in only as much air as needed to support our bodies, whatever the level of exertion, until the next breath is taken. This process is not thought through or performed; it is something that our bodies do automatically. Because we don't normally think about the process of breathing, people don't often realize what actions are being performed. This is one of the first things you should teach.

Shallow breathing is typical in the inexperienced singer. This can be seen through the raising of shoulders when the singer is asked to inhale. If the inhalation process is done correctly, the only part of the body that should move is in the stomach area. It should expand outwardly.

Many of my students have never experienced this. Two techniques are helpful in demonstrating deeper breathing. The first requires them to put their hands up in a "stick-em-up" position, hang their tongues out, and pant like a dog. (I generally do this exercise with them so that we both look and feel foolish.) Uplifted hand helps keep their shoulders from rising. Their stomachs should expand with each breath.

If this technique fails, I try another. I have the student lie down on the floor on their back and breathe deeply as if they were asleep. I have them place their hands on their stomach area so that they can feel the rise and fall that takes place as they breathe deeply.

When the “expansion” concept is understood, I have them place their hands on their stomach region and do “hissing” exercises to help them feel their intercostal and outercostal muscles work. The hissing exercises consist of making four short hisses and a long hiss. With each hiss, they should feel their stomach area contract as the muscles work and the lungs deflate. I then increase the number of short hisses by four, eight, twelve, etc.

Connecting breath support to their singing tone is next. The “vocal siren” works well to achieve this connection. Again, with their hands on their stomachs, have the students take a deep breath. Using the syllable “ee,” have them begin on a low pitch, slide up to a high pitch and then come back down to a low pitch. Students should feel their muscles pushing in and their lungs deflating. I often tell them that they should feel as if they are pushing their stomach against their backbone. If this exercise is successfully done, the students’ tone should be clear and focused. If they don’t perform the “siren” well, have them put their hands on their stomach areas and grunt loudly as if they have just been hit in the stomach. While this doesn’t help them understand the importance of utilizing more air for high pitches, it helps them to understand how the muscles should work to support the tone.

My students, both young and old, are constantly amazed at how much work and effort goes along with proper singing. I always tell them that it is not impossible to sing with little effort; it is just impossible to sing well. Once they figure out that singing is a lot easier when utilizing proper breathing techniques, they never challenge me again on the subject. Helping them come to that understanding is the hard part!