

# Ouse Valley Singers - Vocal Technique

## Vocal Lesson #1

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### Posture: The Basis for All Good Singing

The goal is to teach you how to sing with a **freely produced, rich, open and resonated sound**, and it all begins with appropriate posture. *[See Illustration #1]* This posture allows our bodies and voices to be relaxed and tension free.

Try to ensure that you are **relaxed** before you sing. Do not hunch up your shoulders, drop or raise your chin, or clench your jaw. When looking in a **mirror**, your stance should be upright with your shoulders relaxed, hands loosely by your side, eyes looking straight ahead with your chin at a normal angle. Many singers make the mistake of presuming they must be facial contortionists but this is not true – a good singer is one who looks and sounds natural.

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### Exercise and Posture Drill

- Stand up as straight as possible with spine stretched tall and crown of head trying to touch the ceiling.
- Raise arms horizontal to floor with palms down. Think of putting your shoulder blades in the back pocket of your jeans!
- One foot should be slightly ahead of the other, with weight balanced forward on the balls of both feet.
- Unlock the knees and keep them flexible.
- Tuck the pelvis under and slightly forward.
- Now turn the arms over so that the palms are facing toward the ceiling.
- Notice the extra stretch that occurs in the ribs. The chest is now very wide, separated and high, with a lot of space between the bottom of the ribs and the waistline.
- Keep everything aligned and lower the arms to a normal position.
- The back of the neck is pulled back against an imaginary wall.
- Now put a smile on your face and walk around the room. Restate this good posture often.

### Common posture problems:

**Locking the knees:** When the knees are locked, the body is off balance. This causes body tension, which creates a tense singer. Be sure to put the weight forward on the balls of the feet and keep the tailbone tucked under to help avoid inadvertent locking of the knees.

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**Swayback:** Sometimes a singer tries to attain a lifted chest by pulling the shoulders back (and consequently tensing them) instead of using the muscles around the rib cage to lift the ribs out of the waistline. The intercostal muscles surrounding the rib cage are the muscles that should be used to lift the ribs and the sternum. When the shoulders are pulled back instead of lifting the sternum high, and the buttocks are not tucked under, but are instead thrust backward, swayback posture is the result. In this tense, unbalanced position, good vocal production is not possible.

**Chest droop:** As a musical phrase is sung and air is exhaled, it is easy to allow the chest to cave in and the rib cage to drop back into the waistline. At the end of the phrase, if this occurs, the singer has lost the height of the sternum. As you sing a phrase, consciously retain the height of the sternum and resist the collapse of the rib cage.

You might have other posture problems as well as these three common ones. To monitor your posture, look in a full-length mirror and compare your body alignment to the illustration here and *Illustration # 1*. Check each of the ten elements listed beside the illustration (feet, weight, knees, buttocks, etc.).

Practicing and attaining good posture will make a noticeable difference in the overall sound of the chorus. So we challenge you to master correct singing posture. When you do, you will notice a significant improvement in the quality of your voice, and you will be prepared to begin work on the next key ingredient of vocal production: breathing.

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## Breath: The Fuel for Singing

**BREATH is the fuel for singing.** The tone we produce when we sing rests on a cushion of air; thus, the breath is the fuel for the sounds we produce. The more control you have over the air flow, the more control you will have over your singing tone. We see, then, how important it is to supply the fuel properly. **The upper airway needs to be open and relaxed.**

**[See Illustration #2]**

**Breathing is movement** – movement of air, movement of muscles and organs, movement of energy. A healthy voice means **free movement of air and all the muscles** involved in breathing, and free movement of the vocal folds.

Imagine a kite flying high in the air. When the airflow is consistent, the kite will fly smoothly and steadily on top of the air current. When the airflow is inconsistent, the kite will bob and dive with no rhyme or reason. Your singing tone is much like that kite. If you provide a strong steady airflow, your vocal tone will have the opportunity to ride strongly and smoothly to our ears. If your airflow is uncontrolled and inconsistent, your voice will break and waiver.

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## Breathing For Singing: The Distinction

What makes breathing for singing different from other breathing is the **action of the rib cage**. In normal breathing, the rib cage expands to bring in oxygen, then collapses or lowers as the breath is used. In singing, we want to create a feeling of firm support for the lungs so that as we use the air, **the rib cage does not collapse**. It is a feeling of nonviolent resistance keeping the rib cage high and wide and not allowing the ribs to drop into the waistline. The singer must learn to inhale quicker and exhale slower than in a reflex, life-breathing situation.

Here's a simple exercise to discover the muscles and organs involved with breathing as a singer:

- Sit in a chair with your feet flat on the floor.
- Lean over and rest your forearms across your knees, relaxing your head, neck and body.
- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose.
- Feel your back and stomach expand; relax into your lap, while you are expanding your lower abdomen.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth and gently pull your tummy away from thighs, lifting your abdomen in.
- Let the chest stay relatively still.

Repeat as many times as you like. Recommended: try nine times as a start. Each time you repeat, move a little toward sitting upright, continuing to breathe, expanding your abdomen and ribs.

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## Abdominal Muscle and Breath Support

While keeping the rib cage high and wide, we use the abdominal muscles for support. As we sing, the diaphragm gradually lifts, pushing air up and out of the lungs as the tone is produced. Because the rib cage is kept high and wide, the diaphragm will lift gradually and we have better control of the breath. **[See Illustration # 3].**

Think of your rib cage as an accordion, keeping it expanded, rather than squeezed together.

## Exercises to Develop Strength in the Breathing Muscles

As you do these exercises, remember to keep the chest (rib cage) high and wide, with no tension. Notice that the basic breathing and posture principles from Exercise #1 apply to all exercises.

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## Exercise 1

1. Begin with a standing singer's posture, holding the chest high and wide.
2. Inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity.
3. Release any tension in the chest or shoulder area. Now exhale, using a hissing sound like air escaping from a tire, as you count slowly from one to eight.
4. Resist the inclination to allow the rib cage to collapse while exhaling.

Perform this exercise daily, gradually **increasing your exhalation time to 16 counts**. Note that the danger in this exercise is tension and overexertion. It is easy to become tense about not allowing the rib cage to collapse. Remain conscious of keeping free of tension, constriction and tightness in the shoulders and chest.

Repeat a few times each day, gradually increasing the amount of time you hold the breath until you can **hold it for a full minute** without tension. You can do this exercise while driving, working, etc.

## Exercise 2

- Inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity.
- Instead of "hissing," **count aloud to 20**. Work up to 40 counts over a period of time.

## Exercise 3

- Inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity.
- To let the breath out, count aloud extremely slowly from one to six, with much openness and resonance in the voice, constantly feeding the tone a great deal of warm air.
- To keep the chest high and wide, think of expanding the rib cage again as you speak each number.
- Your full breath should be used up when you finish speaking the number six. Now take another full breath and begin again.

## Exercise 4

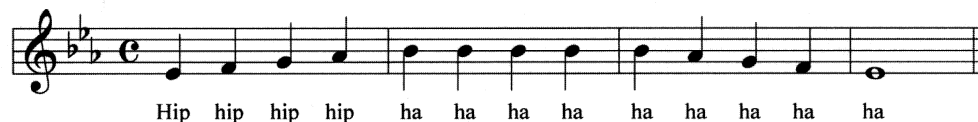
- To remind yourself of the proper muscular feeling when keeping the rib cage high and wide (nonviolent support), first place your right hand just below your breastbone, so you feel the inverted V of your rib cage (epigastrium/sternum).
- Make a **fist with your one hand**; place it against your mouth **and blow gently on the fist**, not allowing any air to escape.
- Be aware of your rib expansion and the firmness of your sternum area.

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## Exercise 5

- To strengthen the abdominal muscles, hold the chest high and wide, inhale through the nose as you expand the rib cage and lungs to capacity.
- Now sing the following exercise, thinking about the support and control provided by the diaphragm as it slowly rises, while the chest stays high, wide and quiet.
- Begin on a comfortable note in your range and sing up and then down the scale, making each note staccato and using the following sounds and notes.

*Go up by half steps with each repeat.*



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## To Recap, Breath is the Fuel for Singing

- Assuming that the upper chest is wide and the shoulders are level, neither the shoulders nor the upper chest should rise as air comes into the lungs.
  - Expansion ultimately will be felt in the lower rib cage and the back. The abdominal area visibly expands during inhalation.
  - Inhalation should be silent, with no audible sound upon breath intake.
  - During exhalation or singing, the lower abdominal muscles lift upward and inward, lifting the abdominal bulk up against the diaphragm.
  - While singing, the singer must resist the urge to let the rib cage contract and go down. The conscious maintenance of an expanded rib cage will aid the singer in developing a supported tone.
  - The more you exercise your breathing, the more control you will have over your voice. With a little time and practice you will be a master of breathing control. Breathing correctly needs to be a habit, meaning you need to do it without thinking about it. So in the beginning you really want to concentrate on the proper technique.
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## Some Typical Language Used During Rehearsal

- **Column of air:** A consistent source of air coming from the bottom of your lungs through the top of your head. Imagine a blow dryer pointing up from your diaphragm. A continuous column of air allows notes to be sung with the same excellent quality no matter where they fall in the singer's range.
- **Massage your vocal cords:** Visualize the air coming from the bottom of your lungs massaging your vocal cords and the sound will be smooth and relaxed. Tense muscles make tight, forced sound.
- **Energized breath:** A quick, deep breath that adds energy to the vocal line.
- **Forward motion:** The feeling/sense that the vocal line is moving toward something in anticipation, making the song interesting to listen to and keeping the tune from dragging. Proper breathing is critical to the success of forward motion.
- **3-D Breath:** Inhaling into the space all around you, in front, to the sides, in back. Establish the singing space inside your mouth and throat as you inhale.

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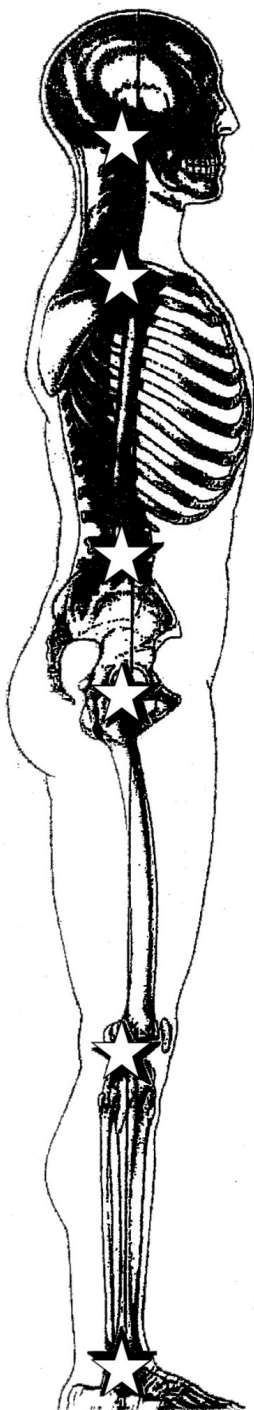
## Some General Considerations

- Singers are vocal athletes and must learn to be expert breathers. The chorus only sings as well as it breathes.
- A musical phrase is like a spoken sentence.
- The singer should mark breathing places on the music and memorize the breathing plan along with the words and notes.
- Too few planned breaths can cause the music to lose its energy and to sound strained.
- Too many breaths make the music sound choppy and difficult for the listener to follow the musical story.
- Rhythm (or lack thereof) is strongly affected by breaths. Taking too much time to get a breath can cause lost beats and poor synchronization.

**Rest assured that breath support and breath management are topics that are discussed, reviewed and refined continuously. You are as close to breathing properly as your very next breath!**

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## Vocal Lesson 1, Illustration #1

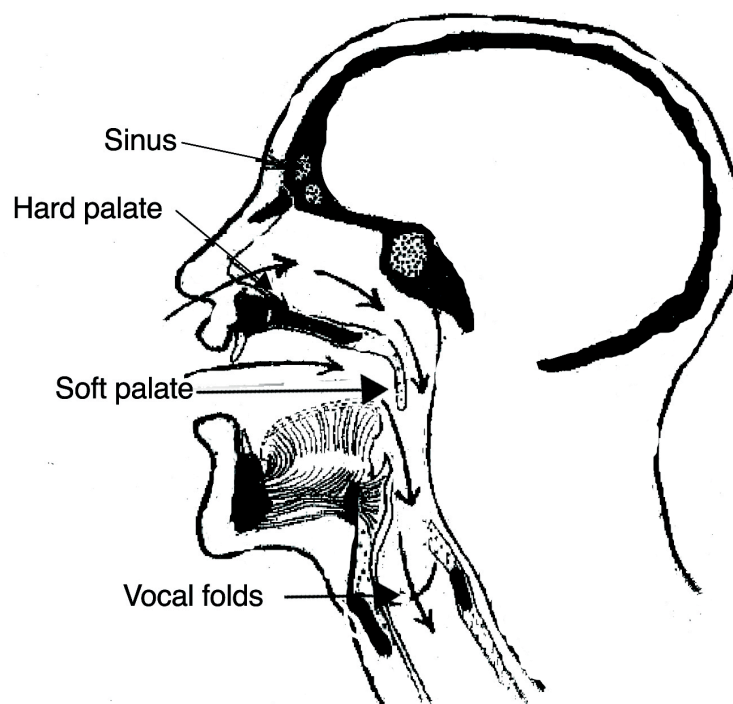
- Neck released, head able to move freely
- Head remains level
- Chest (sternum) lifted high and spread wide
- A feeling of the ribs being filled up out of the waistline
- Buttocks tucked under
- Knees relaxed and flexible
- One foot slightly in front of the other, feet comfortably apart for good balance
- Weight forward on the balls of the feet, heels on floor

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## Vocal Lesson 1, Illustration #2

### The Upper Airway

Arrows indicate flow of air through nose and mouth



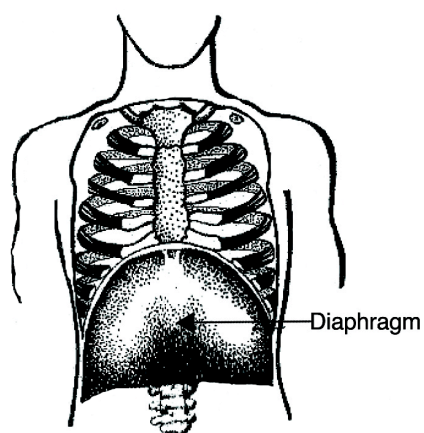


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## Vocal Lesson 1, Illustration #3

### Ribs – Lungs - Diaphragm

a) At Rest



b) Positioned for Inhalation and Control

