

The floating pillars of the art of singing; a practical guide

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Pillars form the support of a building; the “building” in question, is the art of singing. Clearly a building that should not be pinned down, but one that should be supported with auditory and physical control. In other words; it can thrive only when a good balance keeps it afloat.

This abstract intends to provide you with the basic information on the importance of the knowledge and control of the pillars on which the art of singing is build.

It consists of four legs that can partly be trained independently of each other, but must always cooperate whilst singing; singing is a matter of coordinating a programmed muscle control that can only take place after the singer has made a clear mental picture of the sounds or tones he wants to produce.

The pillars:

- 1** Posture
- 2** Breath control
- 3** Articulation
- 4** Resonance

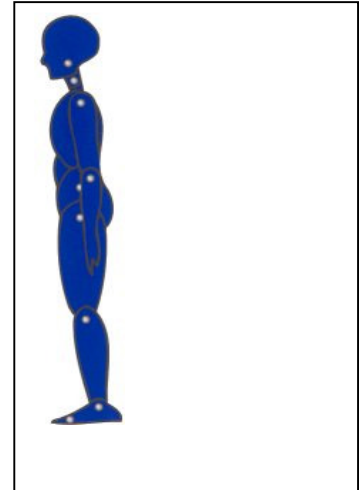


Pillar 1 Posture

A good, active posture is a basic and very important prerequisite for a free flowing breath, a well opened chest & throat and a well-placed head. A perfect symmetrically build body is rare, but in using the following tips, a happy start for a good posture is made.

- Distribute the bodyweight well over both feet, whilst leaning on the front part of the foot
- Do not tighten up the knees
- Keep the pelvis balanced in the middle
- Stretch out the back upward
- Carry the head symmetrically, during which it is lifted up slightly

*In the average person good posture will feel as though the body
is leaning forward slightly.*



Warming up the body, standing position

To get away from the daily humdrum and distractions, it is wise to always do some physical exercises at the beginning of a practice or rehearsal, to “get into” the body and tune it up into its singing mode. The following exercises can be combined with inhalation and breathing exercises, as described in the chapter “Breath”.

- Build up the posture following the points written above and stand on your toes. That position must be reached in one go, without swaying back and forth.
- To open up the chest: rest arm next to hips, spread fingers, tighten arm muscles and move arms backward at waist height. Pull the arm together towards each other as tight as possible. The chest is now completely opened. Leave it there and now move one arm via the front next to the ear (exhale) Move it back again. (inhale). Do the same movement with the other arm. Repeat each arm two or three times.
- Move the right ear to the right shoulder. Keep the chin tucked in (exhale). Keep the head position (inhale) now move the left ear to the left shoulder (exhale). Keep the head position (inhale). Repeat about four times.

Always keep on breathing during the exercises.

Sitting position

Of course a singer will do most of his work standing up, but during rehearsals or practice, a good sitting position is also possible. If the torso has a good posture from the pelvis up and the head can move freely, the singing does not have to suffer.

Some examples of:

An active sitting position with a stretched back and a more relaxed back



(Do not sing in this position)

The “sitting bones” at the bottom of the pelvic crest are pointing straight down into the chair.

Warming up in a sitting position

- Make a hollow back, then a rounded back (like a cat) and feel the changes in the position of the bones at the bottom of the pelvic crest. In the hollow back position they point backward and in the rounded back position they point forward. Go back and forth between these two positions, so that with the “in between” position the “sitting bones” point straight into the chair.
- Sit straight up and rotate the head from left to right and from the front to the back, without moving the torso.
- Push the pelvic bones into the chair and stretch the arms one by one as high as possible.

Always keep on breathing during the exercises.

Pillar 2 Breath control

Anyone can breathe, but a singer has to be able to do it consciously and regulate it, to use it well for singing. The same goes for professional speakers; a conductor therefore is a bit of both.

To inhale well for singing:

- Do not lift shoulders and chest. Assuming posture is good, the chest already is uplifted into a well opened position
- Inhale all the way around the waist area, including the flanks and back. Tie a scarf or elastic belt around the waist to check this.
- Do not only breath in, in the belly area

Breath control...breath support?

At the start of tone or phrase, do not actively push in the ribcage and belly, but try and keep the stretch of the fully filled out ribcage (inhalation position). If anything, try and stretch further out as though you are inhaling. After about half of the air is used up, do help the air going out, by pushing in gradually. In a nutshell, this system is called **breath support**. To inhale, release the tension that has built up in the muscles that pushed out the air.

Inhaling is the start of all vocal sounds

In the lower register of the voice, the vocal cords make a bigger vibration. This makes it necessary and possible for more air to pass by them. Therefore more air is needed in the lower register. In the higher ranges there is more tension in the vocal cords, which causes a singer to use up less air. Because of the air does wanting to leave the body and the more constant and higher tension in the vocal cords, more tension is created in the breath support-muscles and mouth and throat. To relax and inhale regularly when singing in higher ranges is therefore extra important. After each inhalation all muscles will be refreshed to do their work again! It also leaves more capacity for louder passages or big jumps. Remember too that the coloring or mood that is needed for the passage and phrasing that is to be sung, is "loaded" via the inhalation; it needs to "programmed". Besides all this a singer needs to be able to inhale quickly and on time.

Breathing/inhalation exercises:

Always start with good **posture**.

- Inhale and use up the air by saying the letter S or F ;2x mezzo piano & 1 x mezzo forte. Strive for a supple, free flowing letter and try and keep the dynamics even till the end of the breath.
- Inhale and pronounce the letter S or F mezzo piano. Make an interruption (preferably directed by a third party) inhale quickly and keep going. Optimally the body remains still during this process.

Pillar 3 Articulation (and tone programming)

Before sound can commence the body has had to be programmed via a thought that imagines the pitch, length and color of the sound. This thought or command sets the vocal cords in vibration, be it for speech or for singing. The difference between speaking and singing is found in the intensity of the vibration, the tessitura, dynamics and the length during which a sound or tone is maintained. In speech the sounds are shorter and consonants play a relatively big part, in singing the vowels that are the most prominent carriers of sound, play a bigger part and consonants a relatively smaller part. This makes singing a prolonged form of speaking; the instrument is the same. Because we start to speak at an early age, the programming for speech is done in an automatic way with almost everyone. The ease with which this is done for singing is not necessarily as easy for everyone. Not everyone has sung a lot since a young age.

We sing (mostly) on vowels and consonants function as a kind of percussion. Legato singing, the sum mum of singing, is done on vowels. To make a beautiful legato, a fluently, well connected string of vowels with as little interruption of the consonants as possible is needed. Some consonants can be sung, but they do not make up the fundament of singing. To let the sung tones float up to the optimal resonating cavities (see Pillar Resonance), it is advised to strive for a more" internal" articulation; that is not to send the sung sound forward and out. Shape the vowels in the middle of the mouth as much as possible and send or float up the sound in the direction of the resonating cavities.

Articulation laws:

- In the lower and middle register of the voice, maintain a normal articulation ("speech-size)
- Towards the higher register gradually make the articulation size bigger. This results in a less pure vowel. In the highest possible note for a singer, the mouth may be opened wide, but never in the biggest possible aperture. This would push down the larynx and inhibit the freedom of movement for the vocal cords.
- Do not use the consonants too often as hammers for accents in the texts or melody, but give accents on the vowels aided by good breath support.

Articulation exercises

Always prepare **good posture and the breath/support**.

- She stood on the balcony, inexplicably mimicking him hiccupping, and amicably welcoming him home. 3x in a fast tempo
- A big black bug bit a big black bear and the big black bear bleed blue black blood. 3x in a fast tempo
- Naming names, neem, noom, nûûm, nááám, nèèèm, nôôôm, slowly and well connected
- Recite the text of the music that is to be sung in the rhythm in which it is written, on a comfortable speech note.

Pillar 4 Resonance

The usage of resonance (overtone activity) is the same for every singer, whatever his/her voice type may be. The vocal cords vibrate and produce a tone. The air in several facial cavities vibrates along, thus amplifying the sound and giving it different colors. In classical singing this method is a given, but in pop/musical singing less so. Pop singing uses the rawer, rougher throat and mouth sound a lot more.

In general the location where the air in the cavities vibrates coincides with specific notes. In the appendix you will find a drawing of a singer's head and a staff with notes. The lines drawn between the notes and the spots in the head where the lines end show the "optimal" points where a singer can start or turn on the notes shown on the staff. For men the same placement applies with notes starting an octave lower.

Furthermore it is important to keep the produced stream of notes floating up in a sound shaft that is found centrally in the head. A note can start at a certain spot, but always has to be kept in constant motion in an upward floating mode. Ideally a singer knows his/her inner resonance possibilities. It is a very effective tool to give one's sound character and stability. The sound shaft is located in the middle of the head, starting in the larynx. A good resonance can only be achieved after pronouncing pure, clear vowels.

Resonance exercises

Always prepare **good posture, breath/support** and use **an articulation with pure vowels**

- Sing an N on a low note and carefully open up to a vowel. Move up the scale in this fashion. For instance start on a low A and work your way up the scale. Beyond C (in the middle of the voice, the N cannot be sung freely anymore).
- Naming names, neem, noom, nûûm, nááám, nèèèm, nôôôm, slowly and well connected
- Make several different animal sounds (chicken, cow, sheep, dog, cat, birds, etc.) to find out what different resonance the different vowels (and placement of the vowels) make.
- Sing a note in a comfortable range with different colorings: sad, excited, happy, etcetera, to find out what effect emotions have on the sound and resonance.

Important extra information for conductors

General advice:

- Take singing lessons
- Consult a speech therapist to prevent problems and/or to solve them. Always use breath support when speaking, privately or in public. This will prevent the most common vocal problems.

Some thoughts on working on the “sound” of your choir(s)

- ***Always prepare breath placement, articulation and phrasing for the repertoire, next to all other musical preparations!!!***
- What is the current sound of the choir, what is the target, what technical abilities does it have and what are their ambitions? Try and find common ground that is realistic and achievable. The kind of repertoire and the age of the singers can make big differences.
- A singer can evolve constantly and therefore so can a chorus.
- Age and experience changes the sound of a singer and again a chorus.

Some thoughts concerning the choir singers:

Not every singer can sing every kind of repertoire comfortably: a lighter voice will have difficulty with heavier, romantic repertoire and a heavier voice will have more difficulty with light-footed repertoire that moves in the softer dynamic ranges. Singing with discomfort can cause vocal problems, especially with singers with little technique.

Warming up the voice, aimed at rehearsals:

- Always start warming up with lighter exercises, if necessary work toward heavier exercises. The weight of the music often moves synchronically with older to newer repertoire (for instance from Ockeghem to Bruckner)
- Do not necessarily move from lighter to heavier exercises when singing light repertoire.

Warming up for vocal maintenance and choir maintenance:

- Work on the “opposite” vocal-musical difficulties of the current repertoire.
- Pay extra attention to flexibility when the heavier repertoire is sung. Also train louder dynamics and longer notes when rehearsing light repertoire, but balance out the work.
- Organize auditions every three or five years to take stock. Ask to professional singing teacher to sit in on the commission and give advice.
- Organize vocal choir singing lesson with a good vocal teacher
- ***Always advise your choir singers to take singing lessons!***

Help to prevent and solve problems for conductors and

Use specialist help:

- Speech therapist with speech problems, a singing teacher with singing voice/singing problems.
- Physiotherapy with physical problems, tight muscles or muscle misbalances.
- Mensendieck or Cesar therapy, or Alexander technique, to relearn and train good posture; a lot of physical discomfort finds its origin in bad posture.
- Breathing therapy to learn how to breathe properly and train it.

Vocal hygiene

- Drink lots of water or herbal teas
- Do not smoke
- Sleep and rest sufficiently
- Use a good speaking technique

Physical training and body maintenance.

The following disciplines provide good maintenance training for the whole body and have a low injury rate:

- Yoga
- Pilates
- Jogging
- Swimming

The internet is a good source for further information

Keywords: vowel, vocal, vocal resonance, singer's formant, et cetera.

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