



Teaching Vocal Versatility

The Basics, Part III

Supporting the Sound

The Powell Method is a simple method of singing which offers three masterfully crafted techniques that allow singers to be able to sing many genres of music with ease.

by Katti Powell

The Basics

Before we can get started, we must first understand how the body of a singer needs to work. First we will learn the basics of breathing, then how to connect the voice to the breath, and lastly, the basics of supporting the sound. You will want to place yourself in front of a full-length mirror so you can observe what your body needs to look like as well as what it is doing wrong. In addition to looking in the mirror, pay special attention to what it feels like when you have done something correctly—most of the time you will not have the ability to watch yourself singing so it is important to be aware of how everything feels.

Basics of Support

This is probably the most important part of singing and can also be the most confusing. Your vocal cords are extremely tiny and are somewhat fragile. It is important to take very good care of them to prevent swelling which can lead to vocal nodules, or calluses.

Your diaphragm is just below (and inside) your ribcage. It is shaped sort of like a balloon or a tire and is fairly large—it can be felt all the way around your body when it is being exercised. What happens naturally in your body is that when you inhale with a relaxed belly, your diaphragm moves down and out of the way allowing your rib cage to have more room to expand for a deeper breath. Once you begin speaking or singing, your diaphragm tucks back in to support your sound. While this is happening, the air you inhaled is being exhaled. As it passes through the vocal cords, the cords (or folds, actually) flap together creating sound.

Since the vocal cords are so small and fragile, we don't want them to be responsible for taking the initial impact or force of vocal sound production. If we make a sound without engaging the help of the diaphragm, what happens is that the vocal cords—instead of the air flapping gently between them—slap together forcefully. If this happens repeatedly, the vocal cords can become swollen or callused causing a loss of the voice or worse, permanent damage.

So as singers, we want to engage the diaphragm early in the process of vocal production so that we can avoid damaging our fragile vocal cords. The other benefits of engaging the diaphragm are a) a fuller sound, and b) better control of the breath, including a healthy vibrato.

Now that I've bored you to tears with the mechanics of vocal anatomy, you are probably wondering how on earth you will “engage the diaphragm”. I will warn you that it is sometimes complicated to explain but once you figure it out it is easy to master.

First, let's locate our diaphragm. If you feel your breastplate in your chest, move down until you stop feeling the bone and feel something sort of squishy. It should be above your belly and just below your chest. It is in the region of your upper abdominal muscles. Have you ever laughed so hard that it hurt? That is an example of your diaphragm at work. When you laugh, your diaphragm is supporting the sound of your laughter to keep you from losing your voice. If you get a good enough laugh, your diaphragm will get quite a workout and you will feel it in your abdominal area, your sides, and even sometimes in your back. Try something else: try that sigh we did when first learning to breathe (The Basics, Part I: Breathing). Make a fist and give yourself a few firm pushes in the area of your diaphragm as you are sighing. What happens to your sound? Does your sound strengthen and get a little louder as you push in that area? Okay, now I want you to think about what kind of a sound you would make if someone were to punch you in the stomach. Maybe it would be a strong "huh" sound. Now imagine that you are sucking in extra belly fat. Most people are very skilled at tucking in their extra belly fat without having to inhale or hold their breath. Here comes the tricky part: I want you to tuck in that belly and make that "huh" sound at the same time. If this sounds confusing, imagine a full tube of toothpaste on the bathroom counter with the cap removed. If you pound a fist onto the open tube, toothpaste will come flying out. Your belly is the tube and your fist on the tube is the diaphragm tucking. The toothpaste is your voice. So let's try saying "huh" and tucking in your belly at the same time. Now relax and do it again. Try three tucks this time, making sure to relax in between each one—don't BREATHE in between each one, just RELAX in between each tuck—as if someone is performing CPR on your belly instead of your chest. Once you've mastered three of these, try five.

Obviously you aren't going to sing each pitch of a song accompanied by a tuck of the diaphragm—you would sound like you are convulsing!! What will actually happen is that you will take a deep breath and tuck as soon as you make your first sound. Your diaphragm will remain tucked through the phrase you are singing. Once the phrase is complete, you will relax your belly, inhale again, tuck again, and repeat the process through another phrase. The five tucks exercise is sort of like vocal sit-ups. And if you are doing them correctly, your abdominal muscles will feel as though you have just done 100 sit-ups.

So you might be frustrated at this point because it took a lot of concentration and energy to figure out how to relax your belly so that you could breathe properly and now I'm asking you to tuck it back in while you sing. Don't be discouraged—this truly is the hardest part and once you figure it out—through practice—it will become second nature and you'll actually have to think really hard to NOT do it.

Congratulations! You have just learned the basics of singing!!

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