

## Some ideas for keeping our voices healthy

This guide (modified from one I wrote during the Covid lockdown, when SPS only sang on Zoom) is designed to keep our aging voices healthy and confident within a choral setting.

Techniques	What is it for?	Comments
<p>SABARD (acronym)</p> <p><b>S = shape</b> Imagine a big curving space over your tongue and going down into your throat and chest. Visualise, open and sense the actual shape of your mouth. This doesn't mean you have to open your mouth wide at the front; try biting an imaginary apple and you'll get the right shape. Also a silent yawn.</p> <p><b>A = alignment</b> A bit like with yoga, align head over neck, neck over chest, chest over pelvis, pelvis over relaxed knees. Check you are in the right alignment by rocking forward then back and ending up in "neutral". Also align your vocal folds and make the space, lifting the soft palate in the mouth. Try groaning gently in the back of your throat, then turn it into a sung note. Keep your head still as you sing, without forcing the sound out.</p> <p><b>B = breathing from the belly</b> Singing is all about breathing out. We need to train our core muscles to breathe out with control.</p>	<p>A routine to follow for getting ready to sing.</p> <p>To get the most resonant sound out.</p> <p>Get your whole body in the right place to sing. You need to get the right balance between feeling relaxed and having good posture. N.B. You can do this sitting down. One of my campaigns would be to get everyone <b>always</b> to "sit well" (as Paul says) with two feet on the floor, as symmetrical as possible.</p>	<p>One of my favourite tutors, Ghislaine Morgan, formally in the Tallis Scholars choir and now an international vocal coach, devised this overall method.</p> <p>As well as helping us sing better, it is also a safer way to sing without strain, meaning we can stay singing as we age.</p>

1. Breathe in for 4 (fill your belly) and out for 6.
2. Breathe in for 4 and out for 8 on a sh, then a v
3. Think of two long musical phrases (eg Are you going to Scarborough Fair..[breathe]...Parsley, sage rosemary and thyme). Pull your belly in as you sing the first phrase, release on a reflex then pull in for the second phrase (This is a “splat” breath).
4. Practise sounding different rhythms on v, f, sh, z (eg 3 crotchets; crotchet quaver quaver crotchet) and exaggerate the in and out of your belly breathing after each sound.

**A = air pressure and support**

Put your hands, in turn, at the side of your waist, at your lower back, on either side of your groin (ladies, think pelvic floor exercises) as you cough (safely!), giggle, do the rhythm exercise above. See if you can locate which muscles are working for you. Those are the ones to try to exercise.

1. Sing some music you want to practise but with an rr sound, blowing raspberries with your lips, or pretending to be a trumpet (all sounds that help you feel the resonance). Check your muscles as you do this.
2. Plan a piece of music (and mark it in pencil on your score) so you know where you will breathe.

This is the challenging bit as it requires you to understand how to breathe correctly. Next time you lie down on your back, put your hands on your tummy and breathe in then out. You should feel your belly expand on the in-breath and shrink as you breathe out. When you are standing or sitting to sing, it is harder to feel this. If you breathe from your abdomen, it should stop you lifting your shoulders.

The next aspect of breathing is how to sustain the breath over longer phrases through good support. This is partly to do with knowing where your support muscles are.

Ghislaine trained us to be proud of our fat bellies, which is quite a liberation for those of us with a wide girth!

Incidentally abdominal breathing is a good technique for relaxing and relieving stress. I count and lengthen my breath as an aid to going to sleep. I have also taught “singers’ breathing” to students experiencing anxiety or exam nerves.

Be aware of breathing **out** right through the phrase, with particular attention to the beginning and the end of the phrase.

3. If you find you don't have the support to get to the end of the phrase, then take an earlier in-breath.
4. Imagine each phrase is ultra-legato (smooth) as you breathe evenly.

**R = range and register**

Some visualisation and physical exercises:

1. Visual a lift shaft for going up and down your range as you sing. Try to keep the motion smooth, by breathing out evenly.
2. For higher notes, tilt your head and neck slightly downwards (pouring a drink).
3. For lower notes tilt your chin up slightly (drinking a drink).
4. For high notes try to sing with a posh sob in your voices (practise a phrase using really sad words!)
5. For lower notes (this is my weak area) try to make it more like your speaking voice. Try saying something to someone but at a low pitch.

**D = diction and intonation (staying in tune)**

When singing words, good singing relies heavily on the vowel sounds. The best language to sing well in is

We all have a natural pitch range, depending on our voice type and within that, we have awkward areas (breaks or "passagio"). We can exercise our voice to get more resonance for high notes and low notes. It helps to know a little bit about the anatomy of the larynx (do some research). Basically the vocal folds tilt and stretch as they vibrate.

<p>Italian, as its vowels are bright and pure, so easier to control in the voice.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Keep the consonants short and precise and the vowels long.</li> <li>2. Keep the breath control smooth. We tend to lose pitch if we run out of breath at the end of a phrase.</li> <li>3. Be aware that some vowels are easier to sing in the higher register, so it is ok to modify them slightly, eg ah is easier than ee when singing high.</li> <li>4. When I sing Latin I try to do it in an Italian accent.</li> <li>5. English is hardest to sing in tune. We can't afford to be on auto-pilot because it is our mother tongue. Concentrate even more on a controlled line.</li> </ol>	<p>Some choral conductors seem to think being able to sing accurately in pitch comes naturally or is just a mind set. However, there are some techniques, which bring together breath control, vowel sounds and diction.</p>	
<p>A bit more on posture:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Keep shoulders relaxed</li> <li>2. Open the chest space by drawing shoulder blades together at the back</li> <li>3. Bend the knees to reach high notes instead of straining upwards.</li> <li>4. Smile to keep cheek bones high</li> <li>5. Be more aware of different tongue positions for different vowel sounds (explore for yourself)</li> <li>6. Focus on which notes need more breath outflow to work well, e.g. just before a leap in pitch.</li> </ol>	<p>Being tense or too stiff doesn't help with resonance and flow of breath.</p>	<p>Sarah Wright Owens, my singing teacher, has done a lot to help me be less tense but still poised when I sing.</p>

**Some notes from sessions we had during lockdown on Zoom. You could dip into these techniques to develop practice exercises for yourself at home.**

### **Alignment**

- **Sit/stand** with 2 feet on floor hip width apart
- If you can, try not to rely on the back of the chair, forward/back/neutral
- Don't sit up ultra straight, but sit up proud, open chest
- Look calmly ahead
- Loosen shoulders
- Bring shoulder blades together
- Shake it all out
- Put it all back together: getting ready to sing.

### **Breathing**

- Hands on waist, try to locate the abdominal muscles that move when you breathe. If you can't feel it, then cough...
- Breathe in naturally, out for 6. As you breathe out, visualise tightening the zip on some tight trousers...then let it out to splat breath in. Zip pops open!
- Breathe in, out on a long sh, v, z...
- Breathe in, out on a rhythm: sh sh sh (energy, tone up your core muscles).

## **Mouth flexibility and openness, but not just opening wide**

- Tasty food (mm), Chew, siren conversation as you chew.
- Bite an imaginary apple
- Laugh...
- Pant like a dog to get energy in your voice



- Sigh/sob for high notes like one of my favourite sopranos, Ailish Tynan.
- Groan/creak for low notes

## **Cockpit drill**

- Check alignment.
- Look at your music and hold it ready
- Preview the first phrase (long/short, loud or soft, demand on breath).
- Know your first note (preferably without humming it),
- Know your first word. Form the right mouth shape,
- Look up and respond to the conductor to get the mood (happy, angry, sad...)
- Ready, BREATHE, sing.

### **Tone and resonance in the lower range**

- Check your speaking voice. Altos, female tenors and basses will be singing mainly at their natural speaking register, using chest voice. Male tenors and sopranos will mainly sing above this, in their head voice, but do need to have a chest voice too.
- Groan, say 'oh no', feel your chest for vibration.
- Siren up then sing a descending scale. See how low you can go. Maintain as much breath support as you can.
- Resist the urge to tuck your chin inwards as this can actually constrict you more.

### **Legato (smooth) line**

- Prepare the mouth shape
- Sing up and down 5 note scales on EE, ey,ah,oh,oo
- Maintain the breath control from low down
- Don't be tempted to put a h (aspiration) at the start of notes
- If in doubt take more breaths rather than fewer. Running out of breath but trying to keep going means you lose your tone.

### **Articulation (getting your words in) when you want to sing fast**

- Ideally try to learn the words off by heart so you can concentrate on the notes
- Or use a highlighter pen(only if you have your own music!) to make either words or the notes stand out (one or the other not both!)
- Practise the words like an actor, first normally and then in rhythm but without pitch.

- Start by singing a tricky phrase to an active consonant sound, like ta, ba (to hear the rhythm more clearly). This is also good to get a choir to do, to listen for ensemble between parts.
- Have extra good breathing control for singing fast
- Mark in the places where you need to breathe so you don't run out of breath and lose the thread.
- Trying singing in slow motion and then speed up in stages

### **Here are some other sources of advice**

<https://vocalist.org.uk/>

A great source of detailed vocal technique

**Especially** <https://vocalist.org.uk/singing-exercises>

<https://www.aussievocalcoach.com/>

Some great vocal training videos.

Especially if you want to find out your voice type and vocal range, there is a “Take the test” video. Lots more on his YouTube channel.

**Sue Partridge, February 2026**