

CAPITAL ACCORD CHORUS

DIRECTOR'S CHALLENGE 2007



Hook up the Air

The air is what the sound floats on – it helps keep you in pitch and lets you balance the chord for the ring we all crave! Learn how to get more air and what to do with it once you've got it.

The Payoff

Singing is *all* about the air – if you've got it you can have volume, blend, and balance. We've all heard those powerhouse leads, and wished we could belt it out that way. The good news for the rest of us is that air control is more about the brain than the lungs, so no matter how much air you have now, you *can* get more.

Steps to Achievement

1. **Get the air in.** Breathing should be the easiest thing we do – we've been doing it since we were born, and we'll do it until we die. But breathing in a way that gives you the power for singing is a specialized skill.

When you breathe in, your mouth should be in the position it will be in when you let the breath out.

That means when you open your mouth to take in air, you should lift your palate, open your throat, and let the air "fall in" to your lungs. Your diaphragm will naturally move downward to make the air come in. From now on in this document, that's what we mean when we say "take a singer's breath." The air should come in silently – if you hear anything, you're putting tension in your throat. Practice several times, until you can take a noiseless breath.

Try This! Breathing to Sing with Lori Lyford

Watch and participate in this hour-long lesson from IES, given by Scottsdale Chorus master director Lori Lyford. Since this involves some partner work, so watch it with a buddy, or better yet, have a video party!

Try this! Breathing by the Book

You need a book or other flat, rigid object of roughly that size. This is a great exercise for those of us who were taught in our youth to breathe from our chests, because it's unladylike for your stomach to pooch out when you breathe. Nonsense! Watch little kids breathe...they breathe naturally from the diaphragm, and you can see their stomachs rise and fall, not their chests.

Lie down on the floor on your back, with your knees bent to protect your back. You can do this on a bed, but it's much better with a hard surface that will keep your back straight. The reason you're on your back is so that everything is relaxed, and we're not dealing with miscellaneous data caused by tension anywhere else in your body. Place the book on your navel and breathe in. The book should rise, *not* your bra cups. Do this several times, until you're comfortable with how it feels.

Now try this same kind of breathing standing up. Did your chest go out? If no, good! Did your shoulders go up? If yes, try the next exercise.

Try this! Short-circuit clavicular breathing

Put your hands behind your head, fingers interlaced. Take a singer's breath. Because your hands are up, your shoulders can't travel up, and you have to breathe into your torso.

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Try this! Breathing into your back

You need a chair. Sit on the edge of the chair, with your feet comfortably separated. Put your elbows on your knees, keeping your back straight. Your back will be at about a 45-degree angle to the floor. Take a singer's breath. Since your elbows are on your knees, and your abdomen is in close proximity to your thighs, you should be able to feel your whole torso expand, including your back. If you didn't feel it the first time, exhale again, concentrating on how your torso fills.

Now, stand up in chorus position. Put your hands on your ribcage, with the fingers pointing back (thumbs forward), so you can feel the back part of your ribs. Take a singer's breath. The rib movement will be less pronounced than in the chair exercise, but you can feel it with your fingers instead of having to "sense" it, so this may be more discernable for you.

2. **Get the air out.** When you're singing, you want to move a lot of air through as many resonators as you can. Three-time Queen of Harmony and Master Director Kim Hulbert calls this putting "hot air through your hum spot."

Try this! Hook up "hot air"

Put your hand in front of your face (as though you were checking your breath). Blow on your hand as though you were trying to dry your palm – air at this pressure is cool on your palm. It doesn't take much air, either. Now blow on your hand as though you were going to clean your glasses. The air on your palm is hot, and it takes more lung-power to do it. To do the "cool air" experiment, you close down the mechanisms of the airway, from your windpipe to your lips. To do the "hot air" experiment, you opened everything. When you're singing, you want everything open.

Try this! Find your "hum spot"

Bend over so that your head is below your hips, and upside-down. This helps your head resonators to "fall open". Sing an "A", or another note in your head range. You're looking for someplace on your face to be vibrating – mess around with the voice placement until you find the production that makes some part of your head "tickle" or vibrate. It could be your fillings, your sinuses, some place behind your ears or eyes – for lots of people it's the area where you would have a mustache if you were a guy.

Once you have your "hum spot", tank up with air and sing the vibrating note, while straightening up. Try to keep the same vocal production in place as you stand, keeping the "ring" in your voice. Now try getting that ring from a standing start. That's the resonance you're looking for.

Try this! Sympathetic Resonance

If you've found out how to resonate, and are lucky enough to have a really live space to sing in (any big empty room with not much soft stuff in it, such as a church, warehouse, school cafeteria, etc), then you can practice making the sound "ring" around the room.

If you don't have a room like that, you can use a plastic picnic cup as a resonance chamber. Hold the cup up in front of your face, as far away as you can comfortably get. Sing one note in your best resonant voice...if you're producing a "ringing" sound, you'll feel the cup vibrate.

Try this! Engaging the abs

Put one hand on your upper abs (front of the ribcage) and one over the lower abs (just below your navel). Sing a phrase until you're coming to the end of your air, and pay attention to which hand goes in further. Did you use mostly upper abs or lower abs? Chances are you use one or the other. The right answer is "both."

So, where are those muscles? To find out, put your hand over your belly with your fingers spread, as though you were plugging a leak in your navel with your palm. Now, whistle something (the Andy Griffith Theme, Me and Julio down by the Schoolyard, etc). Pay attention to which muscles in your stomach were called into action when you started to whistle – *those* are the ones you want to engage when you need to lift the end of a phrase!

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Beyond the Badge – a Springboard to Even More!

Cardiovascular fitness contributes to vocal stamina. Consider *starting a cardio fitness program* – even walking 5 miles a week can boost your stamina if you're currently sedentary.

For singing, as for many hobbies, the best training for the sport is to do the sport itself. There are lots of great vocalese tapes and CD's out there – get a few and rotate 'em so you don't get bored. Among them are "I'm not crazy, I'm vocalizing" and "Guideposts to Better Singing".

Above and Beyond Try this! Strengthening your Softs

Another way you can strengthen support, especially for supported softs, is to use this Darlene Rogers exercise – find the lowest volume at which you can hum a note that's in your comfortable range. Ideally, you'll practice with two notes, one in your head voice and one in your chest range. Take a singer's breath, and hum that note, supported, for as long as you can, as softly as you can.

At first, if you're doing your softest supportable sound, the sound will cut in and out as you gain control over that level of support. When it doesn't cut in and out any more, that's the time to go softer!

Additional Resources

How to Train Singers, Lara Browning Henderson

Breathing to Sing, Lori Lyford

Free Your Breath, Free Your Life, Dennis Lewis