

CAPITAL ACCORD CHORUS

DIRECTOR'S CHALLENGE 2007



Straighten Up and Sing Right

The first part of good singing is posture. Can you assume the chorus position? Learn how the way you stand can improve your breath support and let you sing longer!

The Payoff

When you sing with the correct posture, it becomes easier to breathe properly, which helps us control our sound and sing with more vocal stamina. Good posture will also allow you to sing for longer periods of time, helping you leave the risers nearly as physically refreshed as you came to them. What a payoff for just standing up right!

Steps to Achievement

1. **Discover your center of gravity.** As women, we're blessed with a lower physical center of gravity than men (try the exercise in the sidebar with your husband or other good-sport male friend). We also have a center of gravity that we experience based on our emotions or psychological state. Think about a time when you were depressed or had the blues – it felt like a weight on your chest, and made it hard to breathe, right? Your psychological “center of gravity” was carried lower then. Now think about a time when you were very excited. You felt like your heart was going to jump upwards out of your chest.

Most of us usually carry that center of gravity at a mid-point between those two feelings in everyday life and in performance. Because it's so connected to our emotions, we're also experienced readers of other people's posture – when you see a quartet take the stage with chests up, you instinctively expect a good performance, and prepare yourself to enjoy the show. When you meet someone who hunches forward, you instinctively presume that something is wrong – they're sick, shy, or insecure, and you react accordingly, either with extra concern for them or (in the case of a performance) by becoming anxious for them. Sometimes, we send misleading signals with our demeanor for physical reasons -- women with osteoporosis, for example, always appear hunched.

Try This! What do you “lead with”?

A complex cocktail of mood, experience and self-image goes into your demeanor on a daily basis, so it's hard to see for yourself where your center of gravity is. To see what *your* baseline is, grab a partner. Have him/her stand at one end of a long room or hallway, and walk back and forth several times, exactly the way you walked in from the car (only not carrying anything, of course). Your buddy is watching to see which part of your body you “lead” with – the part that leads the way. That part will be at the same bodily latitude that corresponds to your mental center of gravity.

CENTER OF GRAVITY – TRY THIS WITH A GUY!

YOU NEED:

- 1 BLANK WALL
- 1 LIGHT CHAIR
- 1 GUY

START WITH YOUR TOES AGAINST THE WALL. PUT ONE FOOT IMMEDIATELY BEHIND THE OTHER, TOE-TO-HEEL, THEN ONCE AGAIN, SO YOU'RE EXACTLY TWO FOOT-LENGTHS FROM THE WALL. PLACE THE CHAIR BETWEEN YOU AND THE WALL. PUT THE TOP OF YOUR HEAD AGAINST THE WALL, AND PICK UP THE CHAIR. NOW STAND UP.

YOU CAN DO IT, HE CAN'T!

HIS CENTER OF GRAVITY IS IN HIS CHEST (OVER THE CHAIR), SO HE SHOULD HAVE A LOT OF TROUBLE GETTING HIS HEAD OFF THE WALL.

YOUR CENTER OF GRAVITY IS IN YOUR HIPS (BIG SURPRISE), SO YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO STRAIGHTEN EASILY.

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Tips for observing buddies: It may take several passes for a “leading body part” to emerge, as the walker relaxes into a natural gait and your eye learns to discern the leading part. Sometimes it’s obvious (teenage boys, for example, tend to lead with the pelvis – what a surprise).

Try This! Lead with your “energy ball”

Now that you know your usual leading body area, try this exercise. Imagine a small ball of energy, about the size of a tennis ball, sits just below your heart and lungs, right at the bottom of your ribcage. As the ball gains energy, it lifts gently against your entire ribcage, lifting your chest. Feel your chest lift as the energy ball gives it support. Now, as you walk up and down the room, let the energy ball lead. See if your buddy can tell the difference.

- 2. Align Your Body.** Check in with your “riser stance”. Start at the bottom, where the energy comes from. Your feet should be about shoulder-width apart, with one foot slightly in front of the other. Your weight should be on the balls of your feet, and the heel of the front foot. Your hips (and the center of power/gravity) should be over the balls of your feet (not your heels). Your shoulders should be directly above that, and the center of your head (ears) should be above that. Now that you’re lined up, get some distance between the elements of your singing instrument. Your knees should be flexed, not locked. Now lift the center of your chest (where a necklace would rest) slightly toward the ceiling. Last, lift the back of your skull away from your shoulders slightly, without tilting your head forward. Take a deep breath in, imagining energy running up the back of your body, and breathe it out deliberately, picturing that energy washing down the front of your body. Do two more of these breaths, and your body should have relaxed into your new “power posture” without too much shifting. If, while you’re singing, you find that you’ve gotten out of this posture, at the next breath, take the opportunity to re-set to this posture.

DON'T BE A RISER BUZZARD!

IN THE THE 90'S, IT WAS POPULAR TO LEAN FORWARD WHEN LIFTING THE CHEST, TO GIVE A MORE ASSERTIVE STANCE. THIS CAN MAKE YOU BRING YOUR CHIN FORWARD, AND YOUR HANDS BACK, MAKING YOU LOOK LIKE WHAT FAMOUS COACH DARLENE ROGERS CALLS A "RISER BUZZARD." REMEMBER TO LEAD WITH YOUR EYES AND "ENERGY BALL" TO AVOID LOOKING LIKE YOU'RE WAITING AROUND FOR SOMETHING TO DIE!

Try This! Stability in the Riser Position

With a buddy facing you, get into your riser position, except don't put one foot forward – keep your feet even with each other, “toeing” an imaginary line. Have your riser buddy push on one shoulder. Do you feel stable? Now move one foot slightly forward. Have your buddy push the shoulder again. How does it feel now?

Try This! Singing's a Ball

You need – a large exercise ball. Sit on the exercise ball, with your feet comfortably on the floor. Sing one of the contest up-tunes, preferably the one you have the most emotional connection to. As you sing the song, if you have a tendency to lose your aligned posture, the ball will let you know immediately.

- 3. Discover constructive tension.** Tension is a part of everything – without it we'd be like Gary Larson's “boneless chicken”, unable to stand! Since we want as little tension as possible in the vocal mechanism, we need to divert the tension to other parts of the body where it will help instead of hinder us.

Big muscles beat small muscles. If you put tension into large muscles, you will divert tension from small muscles (such as your throat and vocal chords). When you're singing, you want to use constructive tension – the tension that holds your back straight and your knees bent, or the tension used in choreo moves like spreading your arms – whenever you can.

Try This! Constructive Tension

You need – a tape recorder. Pick a phrase that you traditionally have trouble with, or use the tag of an up-tune, starting several measures back, such as at the “stomp”. Sing it through once, as you always do, tape

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recording it. While you're singing, see if you notice tension in your throat or head. Now, bend your knees and bring your weight onto the balls of your feet. Unless you're in great shape, you'll feel it in your thighs – hang in there. Now sing the same phrase again, in the “popped and dropped” position. See if you notice tension in your throat this time (how could you with your thighs screaming?). Play back both passes on the tape player. Do you notice a difference in the sound?

Beyond the Badge – a Springboard to Even More!

Everything that strengthens your muscles helps your posture. If you want to soar even higher in this area, consider exploring the following:

Alexander Technique is “a program for releasing unnecessary tension and accumulated bad postural habits, encouraging your own self-awareness, and giving conscious control back to the full person.” Many people find that practicing these techniques helps to relieve pain associated with bad posture or tension from stress. You can find learn about it via books and tapes (see Resources), and there are classes in Alexander Technique in many community Adult Education programs, such as the ones put on by Montgomery County.

Pilates is an exercise discipline that focuses on creating a strong “core” of back and abdominal muscles, and creating good breathing habits during exertion, which are the same skills we want! Since Pilates is such a popular exercise form, it's easy to find a class near you, and there are many videos. Pilates looks deceptively simple, so it's important to start slow – one short video that concentrates on building a strong back is listed in the “resources” section.

Resources

Alexander Technique, the Complete Illustrated Guide to, MacDonald, Glynn, Element, 1998

Winsor Pilates Back Workout, DVD/VHS, 21 minutes