

## Principle 5: *Engaged Respiration & Embodied Learning* Power Breathing

### THE PRINCIPLE:

This is a tool to be taught and then *used as needed*.

Breathing is a neurological function, and overall the breath energy we need for what we're doing will be there naturally if (and when) the brain is able to predict what is needed (familiarity).

Often, particularly in the case of high mixed phonation (and even more particularly, an "M1 dominant" high mixed phonation) the singer has not yet experienced the breath energy needed. This is also true of the "belter" or baritone voice who "shies away" from their M2 function.

In order to learn how to balance that vocal function, they need to experience what is needed. Initially they will feel that this is physically strenuous, and they are correct. But *with familiarity comes integration*, and over time they will get consistent results in a way that doesn't feel so strenuous to them.

This tool will do two things very well:

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- allows M2-shy singers to experience that register as being easy and strong.
- help singers “bridge their breaks.”

The former (M2 application) will be part of *learning* Power Breathing, and the latter (bridging breaks) will more often be the application of the skill. Again, as needed.

Once the singer knows how to apply Power Breathing effectively, it can also be used in song coaching.

The efficacy of this principle requires very strong muscle contractions. The energy of the muscle contractions in the abdominal wall (transverse abdominis) must mimic laughing.

If there is adequate strength in the contraction, the larynx will continue to feel free and efficient, if there is not the singer can experience a sense of tightness or pushing in the larynx.

## OBJECTIVE OF THIS PRINCIPLE:

The objective of this exercise is:

- to introduce the singer to a particular deliberate behavior; one they can implement as needed to achieve greater range, coordination, and/or volume without laryngeal strain or stress.

## NOTES TO THE COACH:

Teach this skill *to be used as needed*. Help the singer realize that, nearly always, their body will provide the breath energy they need. This tool is to help them get the feel for a degree of breath energy they are typically unaccustomed to.

Allow them to be uncomfortable with the physical strength required, and reassure them that *it will become easier as they become more familiar* with the feeling.

## SCRIPT: Power Breathing

YOU: What we're going to do now is called *Power Breathing*. In this exercise we're going to discover how you use your muscles to laugh, and then apply that on purpose. We'll be able to do the same thing to making singing sounds.

You've never lost your voice from laughing too much, right? :)

THEM: Ha-ha. No, I haven't.

YOU: Well, we don't know this for sure, but the reason for that is probably because of your body's relationship to the kind of breathing you engage when you laugh. It's also the same way you breathe when you sneeze or cough.

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The first thing we'll do is find the muscle, then I'll explain a little, then we'll try it out. Ok?

THEM: Ok.

YOU: So, standing with good alignment, you're going to put your thumbs on your lederhosen (or overalls, or spaghetti straps...)

*(You both do it.)*

...then draw a line straight down your torso until you get to your lowest rib...

*(You both do it.)*

...then go another inch (or, couple of centimeters) down, and push in.

*(you both do it.)*

Now, nice and loud, with a big, fat "h," say "HA."

THEM: HA

YOU: Did you feel those muscles push on your thumbs?

THEM: Yes!

YOU: Great! Because that's the whole exercise! You're going to push your thumbs into that muscle\* - it's called your transverse abdominis muscle - I'm going to give you a pattern, and you're going to say "HA" on the pitches I give you.

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The objective is to *feel the connection between the flexing muscle and the sound you're making*. That's all. We're not trying to make any special kind of sound, just sound.

Before we do the exercise, I need to tell you that the first time or two that people do this exercise it can feel impossible to sing in tune. You'll have an intention to match the pitch, and something else will come out of your mouth. It can be very disconcerting. But please don't try to fix it. It will fix itself. I promise.

So remember: *all we care about* is feeling the connection between the flexing TA muscle and the sound you're making. Crazy pitches or whatever else that happens is fine.

*Descending patterns that start in a comfortable M2 range will be most successful in the beginning, e.g. so-mi-do.*

*Once they have the feel for it you can change it up, and use ascending patterns.*

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The first time they do this, simply affirm and reflect whatever happens. Remember the objective you told them. All you want is for them to feel that connection.

In subsequent sessions, once they recognize the exercise, you will almost certainly have to get them to flex harder than they think they need to.

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*I've found that an effective way to do this is to actually get them to laugh when they have their thumb (or whatever) pushing against the muscle. As soon as they laugh you quickly say, "Did you feel that?!? THAT is how hard you have to flex that muscle in order for your larynx to act like you're laughing. It's harder than you thought, right?"*

Once they know how to do this, you can bundle up the concepts to get some amazing range and power.

For instance, you've given them a simple pattern of do-re-mi-re-do on an "eh" sound. They begin in a comfortable range, and they're feeling their placement, allowing for the *Nasty Triangle*, and using *Dog Mouth* (appropriate to the pitch and vowel).

## Once they're familiar...

You can pull out this tool in either exercises or song coaching. For instance, when they start losing the "point of the triangle" or you notice they're starting to pull on their ZM muscles, you say, "Stick your thumb in your side and let's give that top note a little energy." As they do, they stop working from their collar bone up, start engaging the TA muscles, and you'll hear everything get easier.

## Alternatives

Not everyone can use their thumbs to push. For various reasons, you'll want to have alternatives at the ready.

- Use the thumbs but switch out hands. Both sides of the abdominal wall are doing the same thing, so you only need to push on one side at a time. This gives a chance for Right Thumb to rest and relax while Left Thumb is pushing, and vice versa.
- If this is too taxing on the thumb joint, hand, or wrist, they can try using their first two/three knuckles. Be aware that in this position there will be a tendency to roll the shoulders forward, so you'll want to help them be aware of that.
- If this is too taxing for the arms and/or shoulders, you can use a ball (tennis or small exercise ball) and have the singer put the ball between the transverse abdominis and the wall, leaning their weight into the ball. This is typically less effective, and you'll have to modify your objectives. Look for the singer to feel the connection between the flexing and making sound.