Breathing
Correct Breath Control for Singers

(see wirth method handbook 4.9 and Teacher Video Training “The Voice – Our Instrument” chapter 5)

In a way, singing is nothing more than exhaling while letting the vocal chords vibrate, to produce sound. In order to produce a specific sound and to sing longer passages, it is necessary to have a strong and healthy respiration. The muscular respiratory system has to be trained, i.e. diaphragm, abdominal muscles, rib cage.

Appoggio (from Italian: appoggiarsi = to lean) is the trained singer’s respiration which can hold back the lungs from collapsing when exhaling. This is the basis of singing long phrases and being able to sing forte and piano.

Before training the muscles in any specific way, it is the goal and the duty of a choir director to build up such body awareness as to reach the ideal physical habit for singing. When singing, we do not need an artificial, stiff inhalation and expiration but a “natural, elastic, body-mind-united” breath. The basis for this is a good singing posture (see wm2ti and wirth method handbook 4.8): The body should be upright and relaxed and with a flexible body tension. This enables the diaphragm to contract properly, inflating the lungs to their full extent.

Reflectory Breathing:

It is important to learn to inhale passively. Instead of artificially pulling in the air, a relaxed abdomen lets the air flow into the body automatically. In this case, the inhalation is a reaction to the lack of air in the lungs. Ideally the diaphragm contracts properly leaving a lot of room for the air, this is called deep breathing. The lower abdomen moves in and out. When inhaling, it feels like even the lower back and sides are inflating.

Breathing in should always be silent (making a breathing sound is a sign of the throat or tongue being too narrow or stiff). The shoulders should not be lifted when breathing in. They should hang loosely, letting the air go deep into the lower abdomen. (Air in the lower abdomen is anatomically not correct, but serves as a mental picture for deep breathing.)

Information Sheet

The teacher can show the sheet to the children before talking about the correct breathing.

The teacher may also show the children the correct way of breathing, doing simple exercises (see below) and handing out the sheet as a summary.

Anatomical Instructions:

On the bottom of the page, there are two pictures that show an anatomical insight.

In the left picture, the air goes from nose and mouth through the windpipe (trachea) into the lungs. Underneath the lungs, the diaphragm contracts and therefore flattens and the belly expands.

In the right picture, the lungs push the air out again. The diaphragm relaxes and therefore arches upwards. The belly gets smaller.
This is the natural and most efficient way of breathing. When one is excited or nervous, the shoulders tend to lift up and the belly stiffens. For singing, we want to keep our shoulders and body relaxed and flexible (but not too loose).

When the diaphragm is active we can use our back muscles and belly muscles to influence our breathing.

**Lying on the Back Sleeping:**
See also Teacher Video Training “The Voice – Our Instrument” chapter 5

The students lie on the floor (on a mat if available) on their backs. The feet are stretched out (loosely lying parallel) or folded up (knees toward the ceiling), whichever feels more comfortable.

They try to relax completely, almost like falling asleep. (The teacher has to be careful not to let children make fun by making snoring sounds or acting asleep.)

**A:** When the students are relaxed, after a while only the belly raises and lowers. (The diaphragm moves with the inhalation and exhalation.) The students put one hand on the belly (by the navel) and the other hand on the chest in order to become aware of the movement. It can also help to put a light-weight object (like a rubber, paper or a small rock) on the belly in order to make the movement visible.

**B:** If this works well, the students breathe out with a sound, e.g. “s” or “mh”, while keeping their individual breathing rhythm.

**IMPORTANT:** The teacher has to observe each individual child. Only move on with the next steps if steps A and B were successfully carried out!

**C:** The students start by exhaling and then let the body inhale by itself (without intentionally helping). The abdominal wall is being lifted. The teacher determines a rhythm for the exhalation, e.g. “s, s, s__” (short, short, long). The group exhales in this rhythm. Every student takes their time to let the body breathe in without intentional help. With this rhythm the stomach muscles contract a little bit. (This exercise trains the direct link between stomach and back muscle with the breath.)

**Bending forward:**
(for middle school and older students)
See also Teacher Video Training “The Voice – Our Instrument” chapter 5)

The students work in pairs, alternating their tasks in the following activity.

One student stands behind the other one. The student in front bends forward so that the upper body (head, arms, chest) hangs loosely. The student behind puts his/her hands left and right onto his partner’s body, gently touching the part above the hip bone on their back.

The students behind the others have the task of controlling. At the same time the hands help the other student connect the breathing awareness with the right body part.

**A:** The student in front breathes in and out in their individual rhythm. The student in the back should feel the body widening when their colleague is inhaling.

**B:** The student in front exhales with a sound, e.g. “s”, in their individual pace.

**C:** The student in front exhales with a pitch, e.g. on the syllable “no”, in their individual pace.
D: The student in front carefully rolls up by bending the knees so that the coccyx (tail bone) points towards the floor while the upper body still hangs loosely. Starting by the waist, vertebra by vertebra the student rolls up, letting the head hang loosely until the end. Standing up, the student does step B and C in the upright position, i.e. exhal ing with a sound and with a pitch.

Exercise Sheet 20a
This sheet is for younger children at the age of about 6 to 8 years.

Music Notation Mandala:
The children can color in the mandala.
Before doing so, the students can fill the staff with either more clefs or with notes or rests.

Variation:
The mandala can be used as a dictation exercise for pitches. The teacher plays all the pitches they have learned so far (do, re, mi, so, la) as a reference. He plays one pitch and the children go into the corresponding position (see wm19ti), or they hold up a pencil with the matching color.

The students sing the pitch and write it down on the mandala.

Color the Pitches:
The students color in the pitches "do, re, mi, so, la" in the corresponding colors: do = red, re = brown, mi = blue, so = orange, la = green

Variation:
The teacher shows a pitch with their hand (points on a finger or between two fingers) and sings the corresponding pitch. The students color the corresponding pitch. For example, the teacher points on the ring finger for the so, then the students color the so in the keyboard with color orange.

Exercise Sheet 20b
Write:
This is a dictation exercise. The teacher sings or plays the melody and the students write the correct notes onto the staff. The teacher can sing the syllables “da, da-a, da-a-a” or the names of the pitches, or play the melody on the piano (singing the names of the pitches makes it easier).

Repeat the phrase at least once. The phrase can be split in shorter parts (one or two measures), because remembering a long melody can be difficult. Ask the students if they understood it or if they need to hear it again. Repeat as often as necessary and be as clear as possible (if it is difficult for the students, you can nod your head or snap your fingers on the beat while singing the melody). The children can count the beats to see if they have the correct amount per measure.

Before starting, the students have to draw a treble clef onto the staff. The teacher sings the melody with a clear accent on every first beat. The students guess which time signature it is and write it onto the staff. It might help to put down measure lines, so that it is clear beforehand that the melody is seven measures long.
All together, the group sings the melody with the names of the pitches (do, re, mi, so, la).

**Answer:**

![Melody with names of pitches](image)

**Compose:**

In this exercise the students create a rhythm and compose a melody for their rhythm. The compositions can then be presented by singing the note syllables (do, re, mi, so, la).

On the single line, a 4/4 time signature is given. To write a rhythm the students can use all note values and rests they have learned so far.

Before writing, it is helpful to repeat the note values and rests and doing a round of improvisation. The teacher counts to four and then speaks a measure in 4/4 time with the syllables (da, da-a, da-a-a-... and sh, sh-sh,...), e.g. a half note, a quarter note and a rest (da-a da sh). The students repeat. The teacher speaks a few more different measures and the group repeats.

Then the teacher claps the beat while each student, one after the other, improvises two measures.

The students write down a rhythm on the single rhythm line. The rhythm can consist of two to four measures. Don’t forget bar lines and a double bar line at the end.

The students think of a melody for their rhythm, using the pitches they have learnt so far. On the staff with the treble clef there is space for their composition.

For inspiration, the teacher asks questions like: Do you want to start with a low or with a high note? Should there be note repetitions or more movement of melody? Should there be small steps or big jumps?

Underneath the notes they write the names of the pitches (do, re, mi, so, la).

One student after the other, everyone presents their creation. The group can talk about the different compositions, finding words to describe them (similar to the questions the teacher asked). Be careful with judging the children’s compositions, but don’t abstain from giving feedback.

**Exercise Sheet 20c**

**Allegro or Adagio:**

The students sight-read this melody:

Clap the rhythm
Count the beats of each measure (1, 2, 3, 4) while clapping the rhythm
Speak the rhythm with the syllables “da, da-a, da-a-a” and “sh”

Sing the melody on a syllable like “ooh” or “lo”
Sing the names of the pitches (syllables) without the specific rhythm
Speak the sing-syllables (so, mi, la, do, re) in the printed rhythm
Sing the sing-syllables in the printed rhythm
Sing the melody with the lyrics.

The students sing the melody allegro. Then they sing it Adagio. They will find out that breath control is more difficult when singing Adagio.

The teacher can use the pictures from wm8c to indicate Adagio or Allegro.
Read:
First the students write the pitch names underneath the notes.

**Answer:** so la, do mi re, so la so mi, mi do, do
        do, so la, di mi re, so la so mi, mi do

The students sight-read the first line, then the second line, clap speak and sing as above.
The students will find out, that both lines have the same melody, only that the second line starts with the last measure. The teacher can tell the students that this is like a round, where the second voice starts one measure after the first voice.
The students split into two groups and sing both lines at the same time.

**Finish the Measures:**
The rhythm is incomplete. The students should complete the measures in the first line so that each measure holds four beats. Be careful, the second measure is already full, don’t confuse this full rest with the half rest.
The students clap or drum their rhythm or say it with the syllables “da, da-a, da-a-a…”.

The second line is in 3/4-time. The students complete the measures so that each measure has three beats. Then they clap or drum their rhythm or say it with the syllables “da, da-a, da-a-a-a...”.

**Exercise Sheet wm20d**

**Write the Pitch:**
The teacher sings or plays a pitch and the children write it onto the staff, on note after the other (see wm19c).
First the teacher plays every pitch (do, re, mi, so, la) so that the children have a reference. Then the teacher plays one pitch (e.g. so) and the children write the correct note onto the first measure on the staff. The teacher then plays another pitch (e.g. re) and the students write it into the second measure, and so on.

**Variation1:**
The teacher plays an interval of pitches (e.g. do, re and the students write both pitches into the first measure. The teacher repeats these two pitches so that the students can compare if they wrote the correct pitches.
The teacher again plays every pitch as a reference and then plays the next two pitches (e.g. mi, so) for the next measure, and so on.
Variation 2:
Instead of using all the pitches as a reference, the teacher uses only one note. In this case, the teacher tells the children which pitch the first note is (e.g. do) and the children can write it down. The teacher then plays this and another pitch (e.g. do la) and the children write down the second note.

For the second measure, the teacher again tells the students the first pitch (e.g. re) and then plays the first and another pitch (e.g. re mi). The students write down both pitches into the second balloon.

In this exercise the students practice hearing different intervals, before they even know what an interval is.

Variation 3:
For younger children (7-9 years), the teacher can sing the notes with the corresponding syllable. The teacher then does not have to give the reference of all the pitches. The teacher can sing one pitch for every measure or sing two pitches for each measure.

Additionally the teacher can tell the children to write a specific note value, e.g. half note.

Write the Rhythm:
The teacher sings or plays the rhythm and the children write the correct notes on the line. The teacher can either sing the syllables “da, da-a, sh” or play it on one key on the piano. (Using different pitches can be confusing for the students.)

The rhythm can be split in half at first or the teacher starts with only two measures, so that the students need not remember such a long phrase. The teacher asks the students if they understood it or if they need to hear it again. Repeat as often as necessary and be as clear as possible. The teacher can also clap the hands or snap the fingers on the beat while singing the rhythm.

The students can count the beats to see if they have the correct amount per measure.

Answer: 2/4

Read the Melody:
The students sight-read and sing this melody.
1) Write the names of the pitches underneath the notes.
2) Clap the rhythm
3) Count the beats of each measure (1, 2, 3) while clapping the rhythm
4) Speak the rhythm with the syllables “da, da-a, da-a-a” and “sh”
5) Sing the names of the pitches (syllables) without the specific rhythm
6) Speak the solfège-syllables (so, mi, la, do, re) in the printed rhythm
7) Sing the solfège-syllables in the printed rhythm
8) Sing the melody on a syllable like “ooh” or “lo” or any other syllable

Ostinato:
The students first read the first line and write the note names underneath, then read the second line, using the various steps as above. Then sing the melody with the lyrics/note names.

The teacher can ask if any student understands what “ostinato” could mean.
Ostinato is a small pattern that repeats itself. Ostinatos are sometimes used as accompaniment to a melody.

The teacher can sing the ostinato while the students sing the melody.

The students split into two groups, one group sings the ostinato, the other group sings the melody. Then they switch roles.

Other possibilities include two students singing the two parts as a duet. Or two students per line sing this as a quartet.