

ESSENTIAL BREATHING FOR SINGERS

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE
FOR VOCAL MASTERY

PART I

ESSENTIAL BREATHING EXERCISES FOR SINGERS

A Practical Guide from Dr. Ken Querns-Langley, FRSM, PhD



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is an elite vocal pedagogue and bel canto specialist with over 20 years of teaching experience and 300+ students worldwide. His students have achieved placements at the Royal Danish Opera, Danish National Opera, Vancouver Opera, and prestigious training programs including the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House and the Royal Danish Opera School.

As a PhD-trained musicologist and former professional tenor, Dr. Querns-Langley brings a unique combination of academic rigor, historical scholarship, and practical performance experience to his teaching. He has performed over 30 productions of opera and musical theatre.

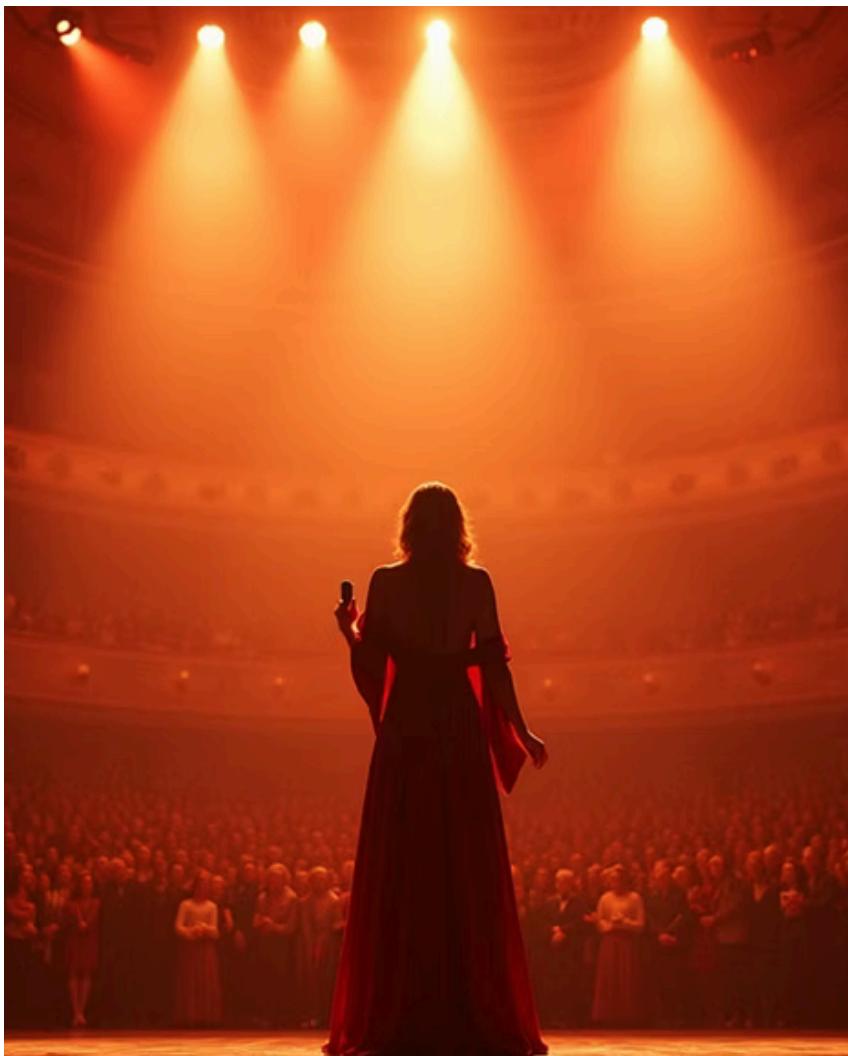
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INTRODUCTION

TL;DR



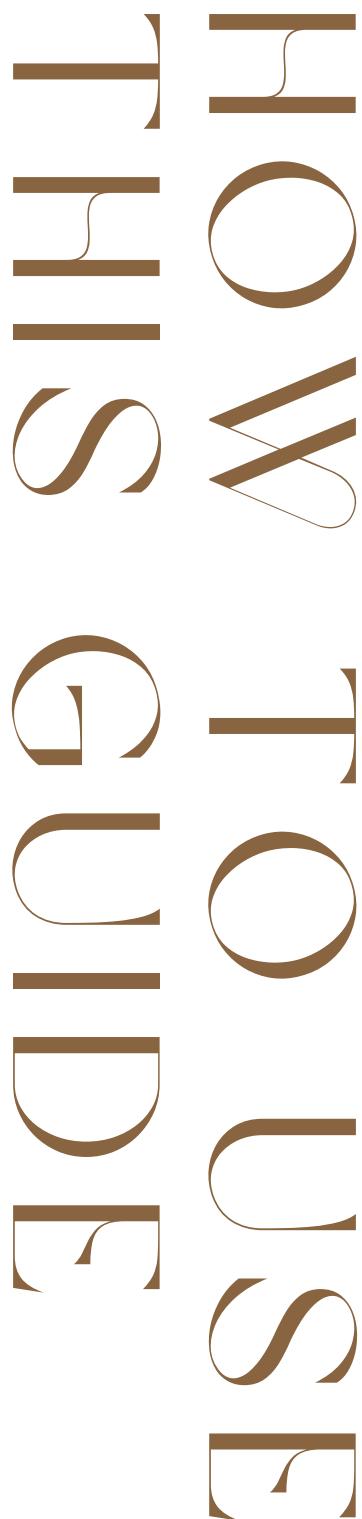
These three foundational exercises develop optimal breathing coordination for singers by addressing common faults and building the respiratory control necessary for effortless, powerful singing. Practice daily for 5-10 minutes to transform your vocal technique.



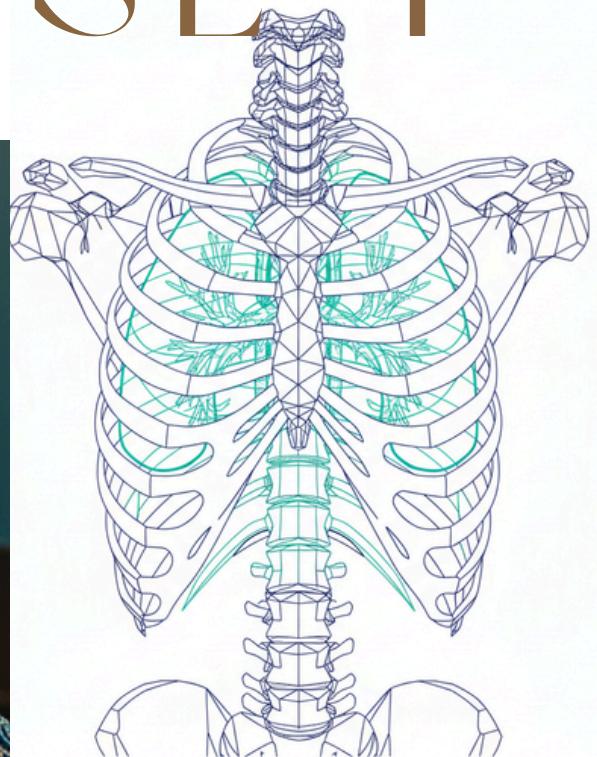
These three exercises form the foundation of optimal breathing technique for singers. Based on 300 years of bel canto pedagogy and modern voice science, they address the most common breathing faults and develop the coordination necessary for effortless, powerful singing.

Each exercise builds on the previous one, creating a systematic approach to respiratory training that has helped hundreds of singers—from beginners to professionals—transform their vocal technique.

- Practice each exercise daily for 5-10 minutes
- Follow the instructions precisely
- Be patient—coordination takes time to develop
- If you experience tension or discomfort, stop and consult a teacher



EXERCISE 1



THE EXPANDED RIBCAGE

THE PURPOSE

Develop awareness and control of lower rib expansion and suspension—the foundation of appoggio (the “leaning” of the breath).

THE PROBLEM IT SOLVES

Most singers either collapse their ribs immediately when they begin to sing (Collapsing Breathing) or raise their shoulders and upper chest (High-Tension Breathing). This exercise teaches the correct sensation of rib suspension.

TL;DR: Learn to maintain lower rib expansion during singing—the foundation of appoggio. This prevents rib collapse and creates steady breath support without throat tension.

INSTRUCTIONS

STEP 1: FIND THE STARTING POSITION

- Stand comfortably with feet hip-width apart
- Place your hands on your lower ribs (just above your waist, below your chest)
- Inhale gently through your nose, feeling your ribs expand outward and sideways under your hands
- Notice: Your shoulders should NOT rise; your belly may move slightly, but the primary movement is in your lower ribs

STEP 2: ESTABLISH THE EXPANDED POSITION

- Take a comfortable breath (not too full—about 70% capacity)
- Feel your lower ribs expand in all directions: front, sides, and back (360-degree expansion)
- Without holding your breath or closing off your airway maintain this expanded position for 3-4 seconds
- You should experience the resistance from your ribcage and not be able to release as if you are relaxed.
- Exhale slowly through pursed lips (like blowing out a candle gently)
- Key point: As you exhale, try to keep your ribs expanded as long as possible
- Only at the very end of the exhale should your ribs return to their resting position

STEP 3: ADD PHONATION

- Inhale to expand your ribs (70% capacity)
- Begin a gentle [s] sound (like a snake hiss)
- Focus: Keep your ribs expanded while making the [s] sound
- Sustain the [s] for 10-15 seconds
- Notice: Your belly will move gently inward, but your ribs stay open

STEP 4: PROGRESS TO SINGING

- Inhale to expand your ribs
- Sing a comfortable 5-note descending scale on [a] (sol-fa-mi-re-do)
- Focus: Maintain rib expansion throughout the phrase
- Repeat on different vowels: [e], [i], [o], [u]



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COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

- ✗ Raising shoulders during inhalation
- ✗ Collapsing ribs immediately when you start the [s] or singing
- ✗ Taking too much breath (over-inflation creates tension)
- ✗ Forcing or pushing—the movement should feel natural and easy

WHAT SUCCESS FEELS LIKE

- ✓ Ribs expand gently and stay open during phonation
- ✓ Belly moves gently inward while ribs remain expanded
- ✓ Breath feels steady and controlled
- ✓ No tension in throat, jaw, or shoulders
- ✓ Sensation of “buoyancy” or “floating” while singing

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Manuel Garcia (1894) described this as “the chest remaining dilated” during singing. Francesco Lamperti (c. 1877) emphasized that “the ribs must remain expanded” to maintain steady breath pressure. This is the essence of appoggio.

EXERCISE 2



SILENT INHALATION

THE PURPOSE

Develop the habit of silent, deep inhalation with optimal pharyngeal (throat) opening—eliminating gasping, audible breathing, and upper chest tension.

THE PROBLEM IT SOLVES

Many singers inhale loudly (like a gasp), which indicates tension in the throat and upper chest (High-Tension Breathing). Silent inhalation ensures the throat is open and relaxed, preparing for free vocal production.

TL;DR: Eliminate gasping and audible breathing by training silent, deep inhalation with an open throat. Silent breathing indicates optimal vocal tract configuration for free tone production.

INSTRUCTIONS

STEP 1: ESTABLISH NATURAL BREATHING

- Lie on your back on the floor or bed
- Place one hand on your belly, one on your chest
- Breathe naturally for 1-2 minutes
- Notice: Your belly rises and falls; your chest moves minimally; breathing is silent
- This is your natural breathing pattern—we want to preserve this while standing

STEP 2: STANDING SILENT INHALATION

- Stand comfortably, arms relaxed at sides
- Exhale gently to a comfortable (not forced) empty
- Allow the inhale to happen naturally—don’t “take” a breath; let it “come in”
- Key point: The breath should be completely silent
- If you hear any sound (gasp, wheeze, sniff), your throat is too tight

STEP 3: INCREASE DEPTH MAINTAINING SILENCE

- Exhale to comfortable empty
- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose AND mouth (both open)
- Focus on expanding your lower ribs and back (360-degree expansion)
- Critical: The breath must remain silent even as you inhale more deeply
- If it becomes audible, you're taking too much breath or tensing your throat

STEP 4: QUICK SILENT INHALATION

- Exhale to comfortable empty
- Take a quick (1-2 second) breath through nose and mouth
- Challenge: Keep it silent even though it's quick
- This is the breath you'll use between phrases while singing

STEP 5: APPLY TO SINGING

- Sing a comfortable phrase (e.g., first line of a song)
- At the end, take a quick, silent breath
- Sing the next phrase
- Focus: Every breath between phrases should be silent and deep

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

- ✗ Gasping or sniffing (creates tension and audible breath)
- ✗ Breathing only through nose (too slow for singing)
- ✗ Breathing only through mouth (can dry out throat)
- ✗ Raising shoulders (indicates upper chest breathing)
- ✗ Taking too much breath (over-inflation creates tension)

WHAT SUCCESS FEELS LIKE

- ✓ Breath is completely silent
- ✓ Throat feels open and relaxed
- ✓ Lower ribs expand easily
- ✓ Breath feels deep but effortless
- ✓ No tension in jaw, neck, or shoulders
- ✓ Ready to sing immediately after inhaling

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Garcia (1894) emphasized that inhalation should be “silent and rapid.” Lamperti (c. 1877) noted that audible breathing indicates “constriction of the throat” and interferes with free tone production. Modern voice science confirms that silent inhalation correlates with optimal vocal tract configuration for singing.

EXERCISE 3



BREATH MANAGEMENT - CONTROLLED EXHALATION THE PURPOSE

Develop precise control of breath flow during singing—sustaining phrases without running out of air or forcing.

THE PROBLEM IT SOLVES

Many singers either run out of breath too quickly (Collapsing Breathing) or push excessively (Paradoxical Breathing). This exercise trains steady, controlled airflow.

TL;DR: Develop precise control of breath flow to sustain phrases without running out of air or forcing. Train steady airflow with rib suspension for 20-30+ second capacity.

INSTRUCTIONS

STEP 1: BASELINE ASSESSMENT

- Inhale comfortably (70% capacity, silent, lower rib expansion)
- Exhale on a gentle [s] sound (like a snake hiss)
- Sustain the [s] as long as comfortable (don't force)
- Time yourself—this is your baseline
- Goal: 20-30 seconds for most singers; 30-40+ for advanced

STEP 2: CONTROLLED [S] WITH RIB SUSPENSION

- Inhale comfortably (silent, lower rib expansion)
- Begin [s] sound at moderate volume (not too loud, not too soft)
- Focus: Keep ribs expanded while making the [s]
- Key point: The [s] should be steady—not getting louder or softer, not wavering
- Sustain for 15-20 seconds
- Rest and repeat 3-5 times

STEP 3: DYNAMIC CONTROL

- Inhale comfortably
- Begin [s] sound softly
- Gradually increase volume (crescendo) over 5 seconds

- Hold the same increased volume for 5 seconds
- Gradually decrease volume (decrescendo) over 5 seconds
- Challenge: Maintain rib expansion throughout; don't collapse during crescendo

STEP 4: PULSED [S] (COORDINATION TRAINING)

- Inhale comfortably
- Make short, rhythmic [s] sounds: "s-s-s-s-s-s" (like a sprinkler)
- Each pulse should be even in volume and duration
- Continue for 15-20 seconds
- Focus: Ribs stay expanded; belly pulses gently inward with each [s]

STEP 5: APPLY TO SINGING (SUSTAINED TONE)

- Inhale comfortably (silent, lower rib expansion)
- Sing a comfortable pitch on [a] vowel
- Sustain for 10-15 seconds
- Focus: Ribs stay expanded; tone is steady (no wobble or wavering)
- Repeat on different vowels and pitches

STEP 6: APPLY TO SINGING (PHRASES)

- Choose a simple song phrase (e.g., "Caro mio ben" or "Amazing Grace")
- Inhale silently with rib expansion
- Sing the phrase, maintaining rib suspension

- Goal: Reach the end of the phrase with ribs still somewhat expanded (not collapsed)
- You should feel “comfortably empty” but not “squeezed dry”

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

- ✗ Collapsing ribs immediately when starting [s] or singing
- ✗ Pushing or forcing air out (creates tension and wastes breath)
- ✗ Unsteady [s] sound (indicates poor control)
- ✗ Running completely out of air (you should always have a small reserve)
- ✗ Tension in throat, jaw, or neck

WHAT SUCCESS FEELS LIKE

- ✓ [s] sound is steady and controlled
- ✓ Ribs stay expanded throughout exhalation
- ✓ Belly moves gently inward (not forcefully)
- ✓ Can sustain [s] for 20-30+ seconds comfortably
- ✓ Singing feels effortless and buoyant
- ✓ Reach end of phrases with ease (not gasping for air)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lamperti (c. 1877) described this as “the ribs remaining expanded while the abdominal muscles engage gently inward.” Garcia (1894) emphasized “steady, controlled exhalation” as essential for beautiful tone. Modern research confirms that rib cage stability and controlled abdominal engagement create optimal subglottic pressure for efficient phonation.

PUTTING IT DAILY PRACTICE TOGETHER



5-MINUTE QUICK ROUTINE

Exercise 1: Expanded Ribcage with [s] sound (2 minutes)

- 5 repetitions, 15-20 seconds each

Exercise 2: Silent Inhalation practice (1 minute)

- 10 repetitions, focusing on silence and depth

Exercise 3: Controlled [s] with rib suspension (2 minutes)

- 3 repetitions, 20-30 seconds each

10-MINUTE FULL ROUTINE

Lying Down Natural Breathing (2 minutes)

- Establish natural pattern, release tension

Exercise 2: Silent Inhalation (2 minutes)

- 10 slow repetitions, then 10 quick repetitions

Exercise 1: Expanded Ribcage (3 minutes)

- With [s] sound, then with 5-note scales on different vowels

Exercise 3: Breath Management (3 minutes)

- Sustained [s], pulsed [s], then apply to singing phrases

INTEGRATION WITH SINGING PRACTICE

Once you've practiced these exercises for **2–3 weeks**, you're ready to integrate them into your daily singing routine.

DAILY PRACTICE STRUCTURE

Begin every practice session with the 5-minute quick routine. This establishes proper breathing mechanics before you sing repertoire.

APPLY THE PRINCIPLES TO YOUR REPERTOIRE

As you work through songs and arias, maintain these three fundamentals:

- **Silent inhalation with 360-degree rib expansion** Every breath should be quiet, deep, and felt around the entire lower ribcage.
- **Rib suspension during phonation** Your ribs stay expanded while you sing—resist the urge to collapse immediately.
- **Steady, controlled airflow** Breath release is gradual and even, not pushed or forced.

TROUBLESHOOTING IN REAL TIME

If you notice tension or poor breath management in a phrase:

- **Stop immediately**
- **Return to the foundational exercises**
- **Reset your breathing mechanics**
- **Approach the phrase again with correct technique**

This disciplined approach prevents bad habits from taking root and ensures your technique remains solid as you tackle challenging repertoire.

TROUBLESHOOTING COMMON ISSUES



Even with clear instruction, breathing technique can feel elusive at first. If you're experiencing difficulty with any of these exercises, you're not alone—these challenges are extremely common and entirely solvable.

This section addresses the most frequent obstacles singers encounter when developing correct breathing mechanics. For each issue, you'll find a clear explanation of what's happening, why it's problematic, and specific strategies to correct it.

Remember: technical challenges are part of the learning process, not evidence of failure. With patience and systematic practice, these issues resolve.

ISSUE: “I CAN’T KEEP MY RIBS EXPANDED WHILE SINGING”

Solution: You may be taking too much breath (over-inflation creates tension). Try inhaling to only 60-70% capacity. Also, practice Exercise 1 daily—coordination takes time to develop.

ISSUE: “MY BREATH IS AUDIBLE (I HEAR A GASP)”

Solution: Your throat is too tight. Practice Exercise 2 lying down first to establish the natural pattern. Open your mouth wider during inhalation. Inhale through nose AND mouth simultaneously.

ISSUE: “I RUN OUT OF BREATH QUICKLY”

Solution: You’re likely collapsing your ribs immediately when you start singing. Focus on Exercise 1—maintain rib expansion throughout phonation. Also check that you’re not taking too shallow a breath (expand lower ribs fully).

You will also find a much more detailed discussion of the causes of running out of breath in **Part 3: Breathing Faults & Corrections for Singers**.

ISSUE: “I FEEL TENSION IN MY THROAT/JAW/NECK”

Solution: You’re working too hard. These exercises should feel easy and natural. Reduce breath volume (don’t over-inflate). Make sure your jaw is relaxed and your tongue is resting on the floor of your mouth. If tension persists, consult a voice teacher.

ISSUE: “I CAN DO THE [S] EXERCISE BUT NOT SINGING”

Solution: This is normal—singing adds complexity. Practice Exercise 3 Step 5 (sustained tone on [a]) before moving to phrases. Choose simple, comfortable phrases in your mid-range. Gradually increase difficulty as coordination improves.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THESE EXERCISES

WHY RIB EXPANSION MATTERS

The lungs are housed in the rib cage. When the ribs expand, lung volume increases, creating negative pressure that draws air in. When ribs stay expanded during singing, they provide steady support for controlled exhalation—this is the mechanical basis of appoggio.

Research by Hixon (2006) demonstrates that professional singers maintain greater rib cage expansion during phonation compared to untrained singers, resulting in more efficient breath management and better vocal quality.

WHY SILENT INHALATION MATTERS

Audible breathing (gasping) indicates constriction in the pharynx (throat) and larynx (voice box). This tension carries over into phonation, creating pressed, strained tone.

Silent inhalation requires an open pharynx and relaxed larynx—the optimal configuration for free, resonant singing. Garcia (1894) and Lamperti (c. 1877) both emphasized this principle, and modern acoustic research confirms it.

WHY CONTROLLED EXHALATION MATTERS

Optimal singing requires steady subglottic pressure (air pressure below the vocal folds). Too much pressure creates pressed, harsh tone; too little creates breathy, weak tone.

Controlled exhalation—with rib suspension and gentle abdominal engagement—maintains steady pressure throughout the phrase, resulting in even, beautiful tone. This is the physiological basis of bel canto technique.

NEXT STEPS FOR DEEPER TRAINING

These three guides provide a comprehensive foundation, but there is always more to learn and refine. To take your breathing technique to the highest levels:

Online Course: "How to Sound Amazing! Breathing" - Launches Late January 2026 - Video demonstrations of all exercises - Progressive training protocols - Integration with pharyngeal voice technique - Join the waitlist: <https://www.belcantovocalstudio.co.uk>

Private Lessons with Dr. Ken Querns-Langley - Personalized diagnosis and correction of breathing faults - Integration of breathing technique with your specific repertoire - Available online (FarPlay/Zoom) or in-person (London/Copenhagen) - Book a discovery call: www.belcantovocalstudio.co.uk/book-now

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