

Singing, The Full-Body Exercise

A voice teacher once told me, "Sing from your feet." Another once told me, "Sing from your diaphragm." To this day, I have no idea what either of them meant. Lillie Lehmann also describes this apparent lack of clarity (100 years ago!) in her book. While I cannot honestly say that I know what was meant by what the teachers told me, I believe I can theorize.

Singing from your diaphragm, breath support, breath control are all commonly used terms among singers. Of course, what does one mean when he uses these terms? It would help the singer to learn about his own body, his organs, their functions and how they all relate to the production of sound.

In this particular case, your diaphragm is what we normally call the stomach. It is the largest muscle in your body, located directly below your ribs. You can, if you wish, use this muscle to breathe, or to control your breathing. Many teachers suggest that you use this muscle exclusively to control the amount of air coming out of your lungs. The problem with this method is that it ignores your lungs, your ribs, the position of your body, etc.

Now imagine instead tightening (contracting) your diaphragm, using that to loosen the muscles in your lower back, opening and closing your ribs to breathe, but leaving them stationary while singing, and instead of directing the air out of your mouth or nose, directing it against your chest. In your opinion, wouldn't hearing that and an explanation of how to do each of these things be much more useful?

Now, on to the subject of "singing from your feet." Like I said, I do not know what was meant by that. What I do know is if you place your feet flat on the floor and stand with "good posture," (many books can tell you how to do that) you can actually use that to your advantage. If you lift weights to increase your strength, you may already be aware of the fact that your legs are the strongest muscles in your body. You use these muscles every day, and a 160-pound person who may not be able to lift 100 pounds with his arms can easily lift twice that with his legs. In baseball, a pitcher who throws 95mph with his arm only soon hurts it. Mr Nolan Ryan pitched 90 mph until he was 50! (not a common thing)

You may have also heard the expression "lift with your legs." you can actually apply this to singing (unless you're not on your feet). You may have to change your thinking about your body, though. Try thinking of your entire body as an instrument, with your voice only being the end product of various exercises you are performing simultaneously. Your legs provide power, your bones all the way to your skull provide vibrations and overtones (or at least they should), your lungs, diaphragm, and ribs provide the air, your vocal cords create sound, your head amplifies the sound, your tongue and otherwise shape the sound you make and your brain controls your comprehension of the music, and allows you to put your own personal slant on the music you are making.

As with any athlete, the physical acts involved in the actual competition, or in this case the actual performance, are preceded by what may be days, weeks, months, or years of training to get each and every aspect of the body's performance to its optimum level. Lack of preparation results in sloppy performances and disinterested audiences. Proper preparation by one with half as much skill in any given area often outweighs the performance of even the most gifted individual. This is true for academic tests, sports, singing, etc.

You, acting as an athlete (in the sense that singing is an athletic as well as aesthetic performance) should be, preferably, in complete control of your instrument and its various parts, and have full knowledge and understanding of the various functions of these parts in order to maximize the desired effect of your performance.

Breathing exercises, callisthetics, light jogging, etc. may seem like overdoing it, but the strengthening of your various muscles holds many rewards with regard to performance and what is commonly called "overall health." One should find workout techniques (singing and non singing) that give the various muscles the greatest amounts of strength, flexibility and control. A good physical trainer who can explain why each exercise works for what it works for the way it does is a good option.

Keeping these things in mind, the singer can easily (with the right material) capture the audiences' attention and hold it for the duration of his performance, as well as getting a nice workout in the process.

