



Vocal Music Virtual Learning

MS Honor Choir

Vocal Technique: Breathing (Part I)

May 4, 2020



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Lesson: May 4, 2020

Objective/Learning Target:

What goes into proper breathing to support good singing, and why is it important to the singing process?



Warm-Up Activity

Take a deep breath and attempt to fill all of your lungs with air. Once your lungs are filled, try to freeze mid-breath and see if you can hold your air for a slow count of 10.

How did it go? Were you able to keep your air that long before needing to take another breath?



Warm-Up Activity

Now try taking another deep breath just like that, and see if you can hold your breath for a count of 20, or 30, or even 60 or more!

Note: relax and breath if you start feeling dizzy!



Second Warm-Up Activity

Now, stand in front of a mirror and watch your body as you take another deep breath like before. Specifically, watch the movement of your shoulders and the space in your lower torso (your ribs and abdominal muscles)

How much do both of those sets of body parts move as you breath in?



Breathing for Singing

In today's lesson, our focus is going to be on **breathing**.

This may seem a little unnecessary (we breath all the time! We're breathing RIGHT NOW!), but there is a very big difference between the way we approach breathing to support our singing, and the breathing we do in our normal routine.



Breathing for Singing: How does the body breath?

Before we can learn how to breathe correctly for singing, we need to go over some of the parts of the body that play a role in this process:

- Lungs
- Nose, mouth and throat
- Shoulders
- Ribs
- Diaphragm

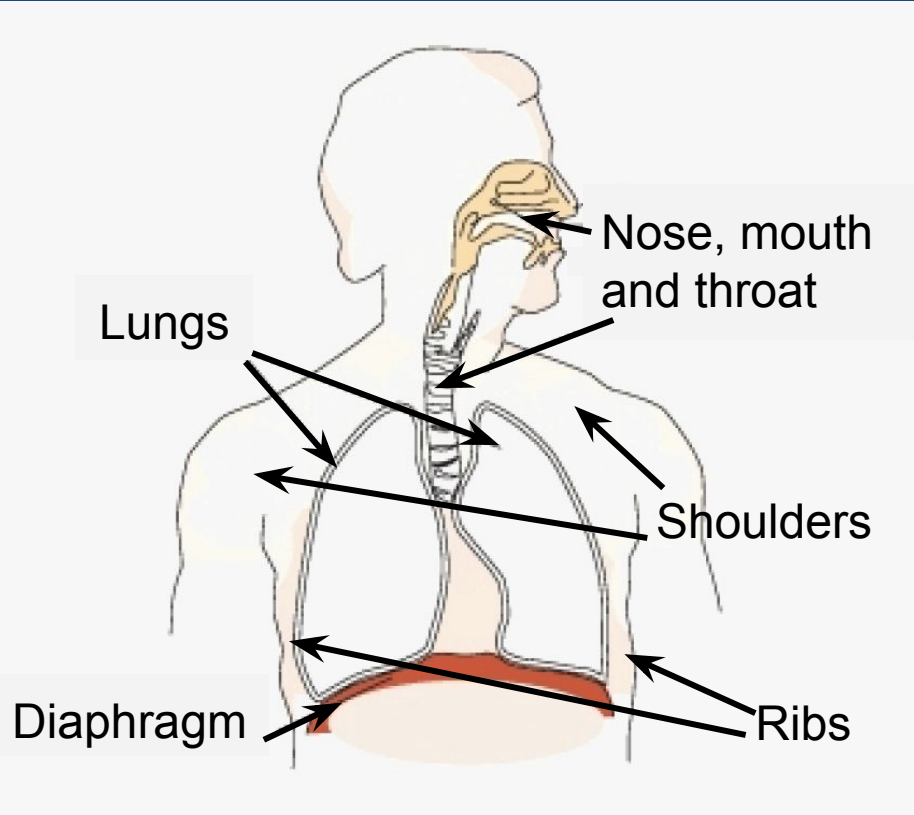


Breathing for Singing: How does the body breath?

Focusing on these body parts as we breath can help us feel the difference between “normal” breathing and the breaths we take as we are singing.

Let's start by identifying where these body parts are!

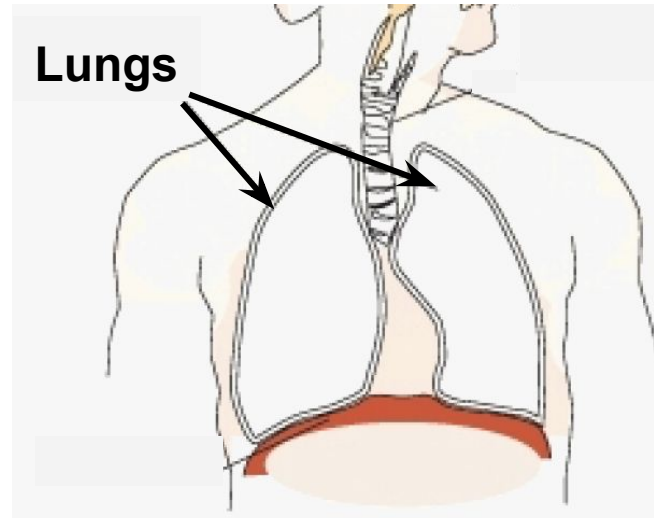
Here is a diagram of a human body. Point to each of the body parts the diagram labels, and then find that body part on your own body.



Lungs

Your **lungs**, as you probably know, are the two internal organs that fill up with air when we breathe in. They are basically like two empty balloons we fill up and let out.

What you may not know is that your lungs cannot move on their own (like a muscle can). It takes the muscles and bones around the lungs working together to draw the air in and expel it out.





Lungs exercise:

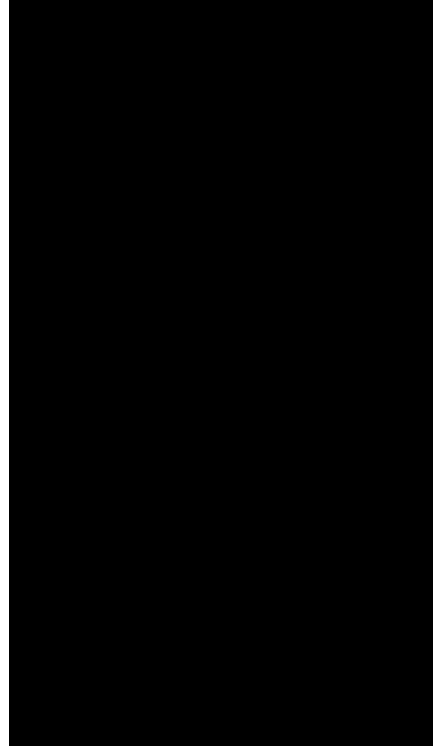
Sitting up tall with relaxed shoulders, close your eyes. Breathing through your nose, take a deep breath like before and see if you can fill up your whole lungs.

Hold that breath for a second, then blow the air out through your mouth as though you were blowing up a balloon.

Repeat five or six times, and as you do, pay attention to which parts of your body are moving and which feel like they are working as you breath in and out.

Lungs exercise:

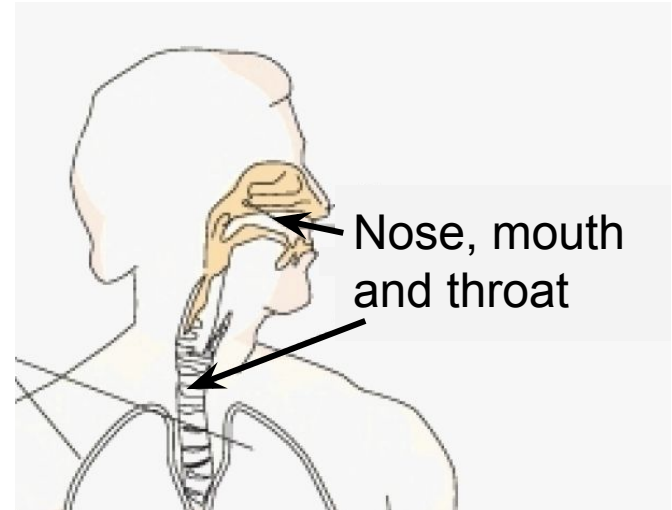
Here is an example of
what that should look like:



Nose, mouth and throat

When you breath in, air starts entering your body through either your **nose** or your **mouth**, and then continues down your **throat** (through a part of the body called the trachea) down to your lungs.

To set up open, relaxed singing, we try to breathe in through our **mouth**. The goal is to have your **mouth** and **throat** as open as comfortably possible as the air is entering.





Nose, mouth and throat exercise:

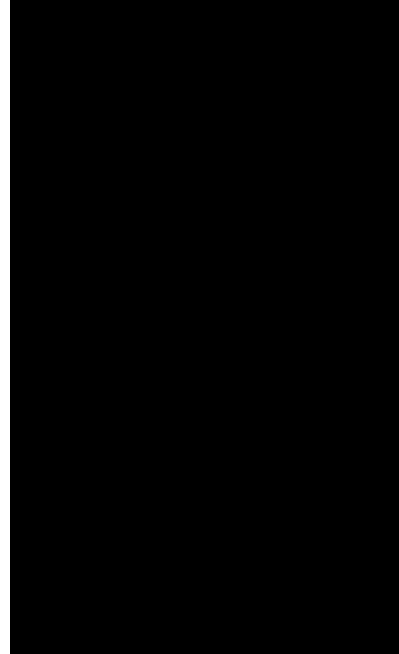
Sitting up tall again, close your eyes. This time, before you breathe in, drop your jaw and open up your mouth wide and tall.

Make an “Oh” vowel shape, like the middle of the word “MinnesOta”. You don’t actually have to say the vowel, just form your mouth into that shape.

Now, relax and open up your throat and the back of your mouth, and then take another deep breath in. Try it five or six times, and see if it feels any different than when you breathed in through your nose.

Nose, mouth and throat exercise:

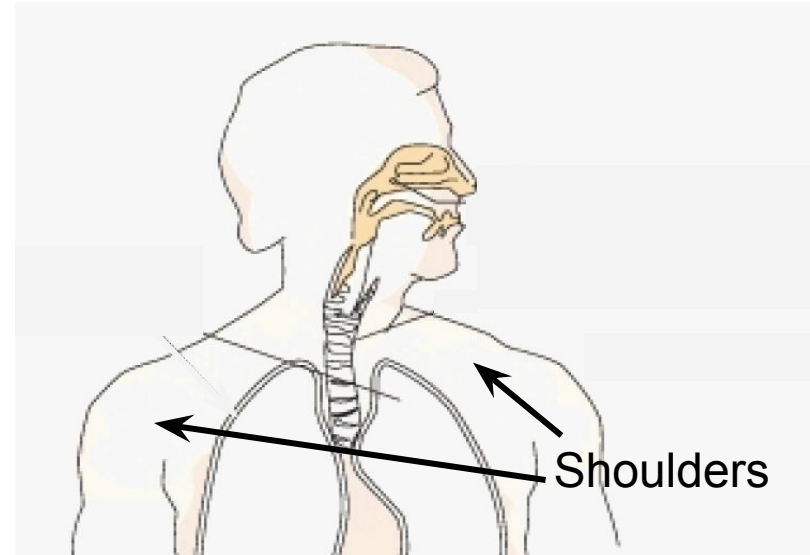
This is what this exercise
should look like:



Shoulders (and clavicles)

Your shoulders do not directly contribute to the breathing process, but they are an important indicator about whether or not we are breathing correctly.

When you breathe using only the upper-torso muscles, we only fill up about half of our lungs, which does not support good singing.

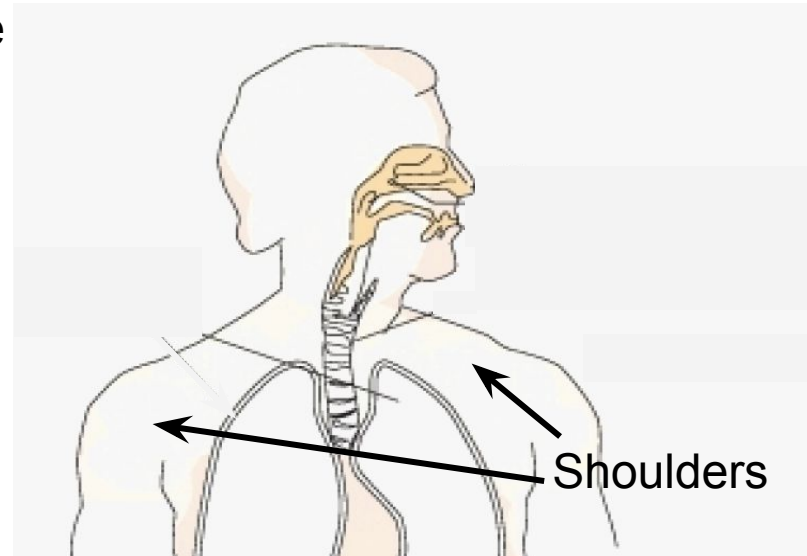


Shoulders (and clavicles)

When you breathe this way, it naturally raises your shoulders and clavicles (the medical name for your collarbones).

You breath this way on purpose every time you exercise, when replacing the air in your lungs quickly is more important than filling your lungs all the way.

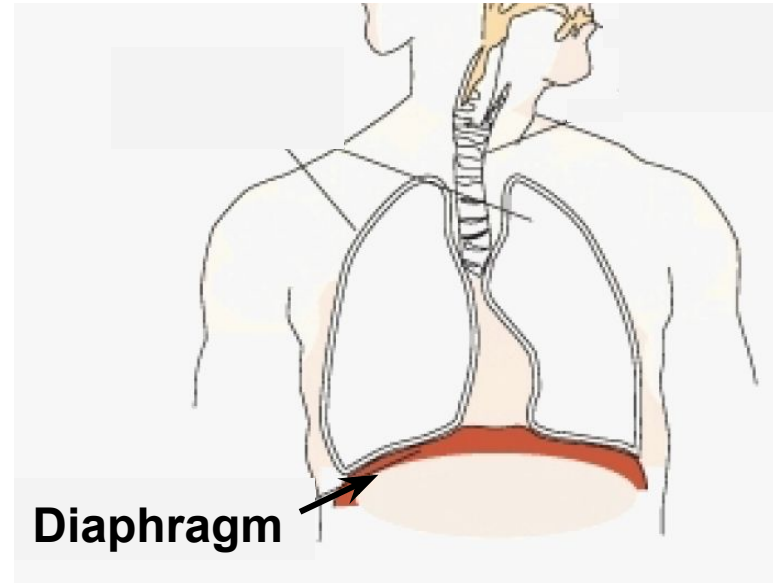
This is why your shoulders raise up and down when you are breathing hard from running!



Diaphragm

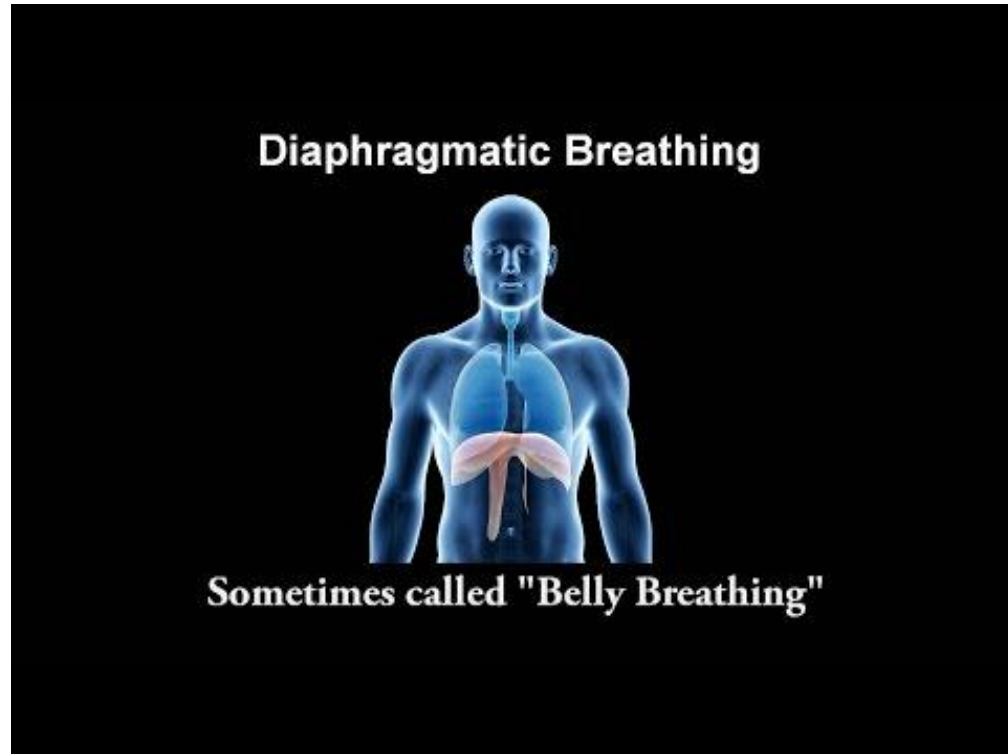
What is your **diaphragm**? Your diaphragm (pronounced “DYE-uh-fram”) is a band of muscle that sits underneath your lungs.

When you take a deep breath that fills your lungs all the way up, your diaphragm pulls on the bottom of your lungs and pushes your other organs below out of the way to help your lungs fill up from top to bottom with air.



Diaphragm

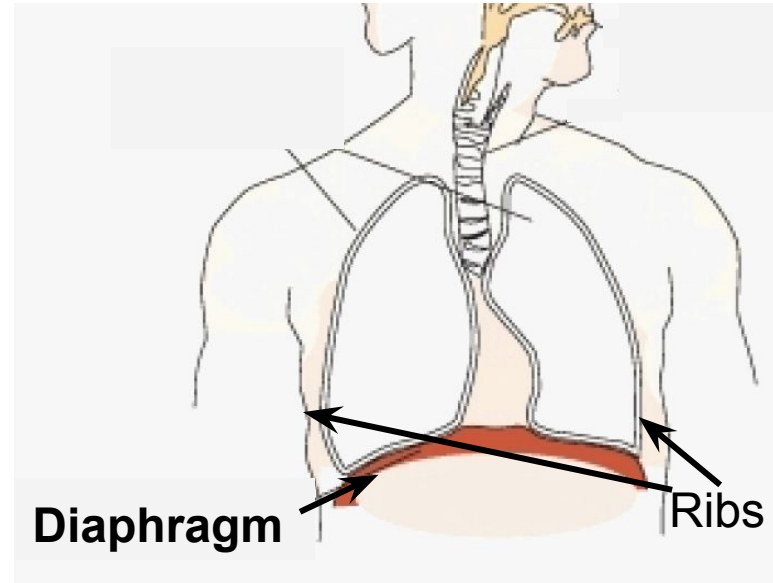
Here is a video from the Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates that illustrates how the diaphragm works in more detail:



Ribs (and abdominal muscles)

Working with your diaphragm to help fill the lower half of your lungs are the abdominal muscles around your ribcage. As you breathe in deep and low and your diaphragm contracts, the sides of your ribs should open up and expand outwards.

If this happens correctly, you should be able to see and feel both sides of your torso open wider just above your belly button.





Diaphragm and Ribs exercise:

Sit up straight, or stand tall. Now, pretend that you have a delicious shake in one hand (you get to pick the flavor; you've earned it!). You are about to "drink" the shake through a straw.

Hold the pretend shake up to your mouth in one hand, while setting the other hand gently on your side, resting on your rib cage.

Now, with slightly pursed lips as though using a straw, "drink" your shake, pulling a deep, full breath into your lungs. Breathe in until your lungs are all the way filled up!



Diaphragm and Ribs exercise:

If you did this right, you should have not only filled your lungs completely, you also should have felt your ribs move outwards with your other hand.

If you did, than you were breathing correctly for good singing. Good job!

If you did not feel your ribs move, than experiment with it again and see if you can get to where your ribs are constantly moving outwards a little bit every time you take a deep breath in!

Diaphragm and Ribs exercise:

Here is a quick video demonstration of me holding my pretend shake, drinking in through my “straw”, and feeling my ribs move out as my diaphragm contracts and my lungs fill up.





Follow-Up activity:

Find a recording of your favorite song on YouTube, and sing along to the song. As you sing, practice taking deep breaths before each phrase:

1. Your mouth and throat are open
2. Your shoulders and collarbones are set and not moving
3. Your ribs expand outward as you feel your diaphragm open up the bottom half of your lungs



Extension Activity for more challenge:

Listen and watch this recording of Voces8 singing the song “Lux Aeterna”, written by the famous composer Edward Elgar.

After you watch the first time, zero in on one singer. You can pick any of them, whichever singer you find most compelling to watch.

Then, watch it again, and pay specific attention to how often that singer breathes. If you can, count how many beats they sing continuously between each breath. If you want, try singing along and only breathing when they do!

Extension Activity for more challenge:

