

Basic Vocal Exercises

for

Singers

By Doreen Van Bree

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Introduction

Doreen Van Bree was a professional singer for over thirty years and has been teaching the art of singing for some twenty-five years. Now semi-retired, she kindly agreed to write several lessons on the basics of good vocal use, which have been brought together in this booklet for the first time.

To be effective, each lesson requires approximately four weeks of practice before moving onto the next. Once the student has completed all the lessons, it is recommended that 20-30 minutes be put aside every day to practice all the exercises from start to finish. The course is designed to be done in your own time and at your own pace; there is no pressure to have it done in a set period of time and there are no exams.



Feedback from past students using these vocal techniques has been very positive with remarks that the lessons are very quick and easy to understand and by all accounts, extremely helpful. If you experience difficulties with any of the lessons or the exercises, email your problem or question to Doreen at doreen@masonia.net .

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Lesson 1: LEARNING TO USE YOUR INSTRUMENT

Good singing comes from breath control and breath control can only be obtained by strengthening of the support system within.

In order to strengthen the support system, the student can start with learning what that system is. In other words, learning to understand the INSTRUMENT within. Awareness, daily practice, and dedication are the requirements for the success that you want to achieve. If the student is not ready to commit to this, no improvement will ever be made.

The support system consists of the muscles supporting the lungs, such as the DIAPHRAGM (pronounced die-a-gram) which is a membrane-like muscle which sits at the base of the lungs, the ribcage muscles and the muscles surrounding the lungs. The main muscle is of course the Diaphragm, as it controls the inhalation and exhalation of the lungs. The stronger this muscle becomes, the better it will support the lungs and the better control you will have over the amount of air you use according to what is required. Our brain controls the action or pumping of the Diaphragm, for this reason, we don't have to think to breath. But it is important for the singer to learn to control the Diaphragm so as to be able to control the amount of air needed for singing.

Breath control should eventually take all the strain off the throat area, so that singing with an OPEN THROAT becomes a natural way of singing. This means learning to flatten the tongue which touches the bottom teeth. More about that later.

Let's begin with some simple breathing exercises to become aware of what correct breathing is all about...

1. Stand upright, feet slightly apart, hands hanging loose at sides.
2. Inhale through your nose till lungs are full. Keep shoulders down. Remember there are no lungs under your armpits!
3. Exhale through the mouth, very slowly, lips in a pout as though you are blowing on something. Keep breathing out until you can feel your mid-drift pulling in and continue till your lungs are really EMPTY.

Repeat 3 times.

The pulling in of the mid-drift means that the diaphragm is pushing against the base of the lungs, pushing the air up to the vocal chords to activate them. Remember to release the stomach muscles when inhaling again, otherwise the diaphragm will stay up and you will only fill the top half of the lungs when re-inhaling.

**It is important to learn to fill ALL of the lungs
when inhaling.**

Singing with open throat (BASIC SHAPE) is essential for clarity of voice. Following, is an exercise to obtain BASIC SHAPE of throat:

Look in the mirror – open your mouth and YAWN.

See and feel the action of the throat.

Do this several times until you become aware that the tongue flattens on the 'inhaling' action.

Now learn to YAWN without yawning. In other words go into a pretend inhalation. The whole idea is that you create a HEART-SHAPED opening, which you can see when you look in a mirror. The uvula must be hanging loose and the soft palate relaxed. The tongue, when flattened, gives you a good opening of the throat. This tongue position is to be maintained at ALL TIMES.

Now practice – open your mouth, jaw right down – remember tongue must be flat and forward and RELAXED. Pretend that the tongue is just a loose piece of flesh.

Now make a sound on AH – do this several times to feel the sound come over your flat tongue. You have now created a clear PIPELINE from your vocal chords, over the tongue and out. You have created your own 'trumpet'. If you feel tension anywhere, then learn to relax that part of the instrument.

When you have accomplished everything learnt so far, make all the VOWEL sounds: a, e, i, o, u, - ee and oo (as in book) keeping your throat as BASIC SHAPE.

So, concentrate on 'open throat', then reshape your mouth, jaw and lips to make the different vowel sounds.

If you have come this far – Congratulations – you have learnt much of the basic points for singing.

Now sing any song of your choice and ENJOY.

With all that needs to be learnt about the technical side of singing, remember not to get bogged down with it. The whole idea is to enjoy what you sing. Just remember the basics, and your own feelings will tell you where to go with it. It's YOUR instrument – look after it and it will become as good as you want it to be. But only with effort and dedication can this be achieved.

“ The voice lessons are going good so far. I would like for Doreen to address something for me. I think that I usually sing with my diaphragm but still sometimes I find myself saying that my throat hurts, especially after singing in my break. Does that mean that I am not singing with my diaphragm even though I think I am or is there something else?”

- Angie

Lesson 2: TALK TO YOUR THROAT!

Many singers suffer with throat problems when they don't need to. In Lesson 2 we will discuss the throat mechanism, how it works and how to look after it.

Why is it that even when we seem to be using our diaphragm properly, that we sometimes find our throat hurts? It's a problem that many vocalists come across and the answer is usually as simple as RELAXATION. Often our entire upper body (throat, arms, neck and shoulders) tense up when we are singing and we don't notice because we are concentrating on breath, diaphragm, diction, tone etc. Yes, there is a lot to remember!

**Study singers like Jessica Simpson, Celine Dion or Michael Bublé.
You can see how they open their mouths and you can hear the
'open-ness' of their throats.**

As with everything, practice and awareness is the key. Try this simple exercise:

1. Stand straight but relaxed with your arms hanging loosely beside you. Do a few minutes of your breathing exercises.
2. Now I want you to start singing something you've been working on. Sing like you are in front of an audience. Give it all you've got!
3. At the end of the song, stop and notice your throat. Really 'look' at it. Is it tight/closed up and sore? Is your neck tense? What about your shoulders?
4. Start again, with your back straight but relaxed and your arms hanging loosely beside you. Do a few minutes more of your breathing exercises and notice how your throat relaxes.

One of the key factors to keeping your throat relaxed is to keep it open. What does that feel like? We do it everyday without even realising it – when we yawn. Open your mouth and let your jaw drop down with your tongue sitting relaxed in its natural place inside the lower teeth.

Notice the open-ness of your throat now. You may even find yourself start to yawn. Notice the open feeling of your throat when this happens.

Another key factor is how you use your mouth when you are singing. It is all too common to see a singer force words out through a barely moving mouth. I can almost guarantee a sore throat in this circumstance because if the mouth isn't opening, neither is the throat! Practice opening your mouth when you speak. Study singers such as Jessica Simpson, Celine Dion or Michael Bublé. You can see how they open their mouths and you can hear the 'open-ness of their throats.

Lock yourself in the bathroom and talk to yourself in the mirror. Exaggerate the movement of your mouth:

“I must move my mouth.”

(breath)

“STAY – ME – EYE – OH – YOU.”

(breath)

“I must keep my throat open.”

Keep your throat open as you repeat this. Be aware of your body. Keep you neck and shoulders relaxed and really work your mouth. Go back to the first exercise again. This time, be aware of your throat as you are singing. Open your mouth. Gradually, with practice and awareness you will find you throat will be less inclined to hurt and you will be able to sing for longer periods and really enjoy it! So relax and keep talking to your throat!

"Thanks for sending the lesson (#1), and especially send my thanks to Doreen for taking the time to write it up. I've definitely found an improvement in my sound and consistency over the past few days using those techniques. The only thing I can think of that I would like to see addressed is vibrato".

- Jay (Jammico) Shaw

Lesson 3: DEVELOPING VIBRATO

Those of you born with a natural vibrato are surely blessed. I was not one of them and for years tried with the help of my teachers to develop it. I was told, "It will happen eventually". At that time and desperate to give my voice a warmer sound I set out and developed my own ways to get the result I wanted. Some singing teachers may not agree with my methods, but it worked for me.

All I have to do now is try to teach vibrato to you by these written means, which is not easy when I cannot physically show you.

I trust that the following examples are of benefit to you; with patience and concentration they should work quickly. But you must keep at it.

The **BASIC SHAPE** as previously taught is essential. Remember, a piece of cloth stuffed into a trumpet does not give a clear sound. So, keep the tongue out of the road by relaxing it and give a nice **"open throat"** action.

1. Take a comfortable deep breath, jaw down and open throat.

SING ' AH '.... on any note for about 5 seconds. Repeat this a few times.

Listen for the nice even tone. Look at your watch if you want to.

Now sing it again, but on each second SING - ah - AH - the lower case is very soft - the upper case is louder so in five seconds you would sing:

ah - AH - ah - AH - ah - AH - ah - AH - ah - AH

NO BREAKS in this sound - just one long note.

Keep repeating this exercise and increase the speed until it becomes a vibrational sound.

Do the exercise a few times daily. The more you do it, the faster you will get results.

The next example is my favourite and worked best for me:

2. Choose any note, and sing AH.....

Now repeat, and this time move to the next note up, then back to the first note and up to the second note again. Repeat these 2 notes for about 3 seconds (like a wave without a break).

Now sing these 2 notes over and over again, increasing speed, to the fastest speed possible and you will start to feel a reaction of the throat. You should feel that the vibrato is made by the action of the throat.

Good Luck and Happy Singing.

"Thanks for that first singing lesson. Its nice to find free lessons when you don't have the money to afford or can't find lessons near you. I guess the thing that I want to learn is how to project better and get myself to sing louder. I also want to know how to stretch my vocal range".

- Kori

Lesson 4: PROJECTION OF THE VOICE

People with soft speaking voices, usually sing softly. There are many reasons for this. One is when the voice is "held back" because of embarrassment. You want to sing but you don't want anyone to hear you. Familiar? The other is not using the whole of the "instrument" correctly.

So go back to the beginning of the lessons. **Practice and more practice** is required. When you know you have achieved the knowledge about the voice and how to use it, you can start to concentrate on projection.

Can you remember the time you had a conversation with another person across your street, or in the school grounds, or calling out to your mum from your room? That's projection. Projection is a form of "calling out".

Try this one:

CALL OUT to your mother and ask her if you can go to the movies.

Call out again and make sure she hears you. And again-----and again-----

Louder ----- Louder-----

NOW SING IT!

DON'T strain your voice - you shouldn't, when you use the **Basic Shape** correctly. Can you hear the difference?

Always remember - When singing, it is the **QUALITY**, not the **QUANTITY** that is important.

“ I am wondering how to keep from losing my voice all the time! I am a teacher so I use my voice a lot. I keep losing my voice because I have to yell a lot. It is really starting to interfere with my singing. Thanks”

- Angie

Lesson 5: Avoiding Voice Loss

This is more a ‘pep talk’ than a lesson but its important to understand that your voice is a delicate instrument that must be cared for, especially in light of the fact that you can’t go out and buy another one if it ‘breaks’!

There are several reasons for voice loss.

1. Overuse of voice - singing over a long period without enough breaks. If you are singing regularly, you will know this one very well! With a combination of adequate breaks and continued practice of the Lessons 1-4 to strengthen your voice, you will overcome this problem.
2. Singing with a closed or tight throat – Practice **BASIC SHAPE** as outlined in previous lessons.
3. Laryngitis – when vocal chords are inflamed they cannot vibrate to make sound. Total rest of the voice is needed here.

YELLING IS DEFINITELY OUT !!!

I tell all my students the following:

Vocal chords are like two thin pieces of skin. When yelling, these two skins rub together. And you can imagine the results. You create inflammation. This teaching is important. The voice is one instrument we cannot buy new strings for – so look after it.

This information is particularly important if, like Angie, you work with children or you are a parent. Instead of yelling, try absolute silence until they notice your quietness. Just look at them. They will become silent. Then explain that in no way are you going to loose your voice because of them. Do it kindly, but **be in charge**. It may take a little time to change their unruly habits, but children are fast learners. Unbelievable as it may sound – it really works.

The same applies to students who play competitive sport. Screaming on the field sometimes cannot be avoided. But you either want to play sport or be a singer. If both are chosen, then make sure that you are responsible for the condition of your throat. Cool sips of water are beneficial. Take another look at Lesson 4 where vocal projection is discussed. You can project your voice to be heard without having to damage your vocal chords.

"I would like to be able to hold my notes longer..."
-Terrance

Lesson 6: LUNG CAPACITY AND DIAPHRAGM CONTROL

Control of the diaphragm is the key to good breath and vocal control. In order to hold notes longer, you need to learn how to control your diaphragm and develop your lung capacity. Lesson 6 contains an exercise I have used successfully with my students for years and is one of the most valuable exercises taught to me by my own singing teacher years ago.

1. Place your hand over your lower rib-cage area when doing the exercises in Lesson 1. You will feel the expansion of the diaphragm. It expands to allow air into our lungs and contracts to push the air out again. The secret is to build up this muscle so that you can use it to control your breathing more effectively as a singer. The diaphragm is a muscle like any other in the body and with continued practice it will strengthen and you will automatically use it to its fullest potential without even thinking about it. Keep doing the breathing exercises. They are designed to help strengthen and control your diaphragm.
2. Take a deep breath and hold it for as long as possible before slowly exhaling. Remember, your lungs are in your chest, not under your arms so allow the air to expand your chest (diaphragm) and keep your shoulders down in their normal position. At first, you may find yourself feeling light-headed as the extra oxygen goes to your head! Don't overdo it. Just repeat a couple of times a day.
3. Breathe IN through the nose, until lungs are FULL. Breathing OUT through the mouth, count from 1 to 10 - fast, and keep counting 1 to 10 till lungs are completely EMPTY. The extra effort to get the last 10 out is what counts (It is like doing extra "push-ups"). Count on your fingers how many 10's you can count in one breath (One finger for each 10). Write your score down. Do this exercise at least once daily. Work toward one lot of 10's each week, aiming for 20 counts of 10's. Any counts over 20 are plusses!!!!

The diaphragm is a muscle like any other in the body and with continued practice it will strengthen and you will automatically use it to its fullest potential without even thinking about it.

Remember, use your diaphragm to support your lungs to get that last little bit of air out. You will soon notice the improvement in both your diaphragm control and lung capacity.