

Yoga, singing, and the singer: a balance of effort and ease

by

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## **Abstract**

This report explores how the practice of yoga can support singing and the singer. Through the actions of movement, proprioception, exteroception and interoception, yoga can improve body awareness and provide accessibility to a full, expansive breath. These combined skills can produce a healthy and consistent tone upon which a singer can depend and succeed. In addition to physical benefits, yoga can provide psychological and emotional support. This is accomplished through breathwork that balances the nervous system and allows singers to flourish under the many stressors of a performance or teaching career. This report will explain how and why incorporating a yoga practice into voice work and teaching is wholly beneficial.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Dedication .....	viii
Preface.....	ix
Chapter 1 - Posture and Alignment.....	1
Chapter 2 - Respiratory Wellness .....	13
Chapter 3 - Yoga and Singing.....	26
Chapter 4 – Yoga and the Singer .....	33
Chapter 5 - Yoga in the Voice Studio.....	86
Bibliography .....	91

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Postures.....	8
Figure 2. Correct Alignment and Startle Reflex .....	10
Figure 3. Clavicular Breathing Muscles .....	13
Figure 4. Intercostal Breathing Muscles .....	15
Figure 5. Abdominal Breathing Muscles .....	16
Figure 6. Diaphragm .....	18
Figure 7. Vagus Nerve .....	21
Figure 8. Tadasana / Mountain Pose.....	38
Figure 9. Uttanasana / Standing Forward Fold.....	39
Figure 10. Ardha Uttanasana / Standing Half Forward Fold.....	40
Figure 11. Prasarita Padottanasana / Wide Leg Standing Forward Fold .....	41
Figure 12. Utkatasana / Chair Pose.....	42
Figure 13. Parsvottanasana / Pyramid Pose .....	43
Figure 14. Trikoṇasana / Triangle Pose .....	44
Figure 15. Virabhadrasana II / Warrior 2.....	45
Figure 16. Viparita Virabhadrasana / Reverse Warrior .....	46
Figure 17. Utthita Pārśva Koṇāsana / Extended Side Angle Pose.....	47
Figure 18. Vṛkṣāsana / Tree Pose .....	48
Figure 19. Ashta Chandrasana / Crescent Pose .....	49
Figure 20. Virabhadrasana III / Warrior 3 .....	50
Figure 21. Ekapāda Uttānāsana / Standing L-Shape.....	51
Figure 22. Adho Mukha Svanasana / Down Dog .....	52
Figure 23. Malasana / Squat.....	53
Figure 24. Bharmanasana / Table Top.....	54
Figure 25. Marjaiasana / Cat-Cow .....	55
Figure 26. Dandayama Bharmanasana / Bird Dog Pose.....	56
Figure 27. Phalakasana / Plank Pose.....	57
Figure 28. Vasisthasana / Side Plank.....	58
Figure 29. Eka Pada Rajapakotasana / Pigeon.....	59

Figure 30. Utthan Pristhasana / Lizard .....	60
Figure 31. Ustrasana / Camel.....	61
Figure 32. Anjaneyasana / Low Lunge.....	62
Figure 33. Parivrtta Utthita Ashwa Sanchalanasana / Revolved Low Lunge.....	63
Figure 34. Bhujangasana / Cobra.....	64
Figure 35. Balasana / Child's Pose .....	65
Figure 36. Urdhva Mukha Svanasana / Updog.....	66
Figure 37. Salabhasana / Locust .....	67
Figure 38. Upavistha Konasana / Wide Legged Seated Forward Fold.....	68
Figure 39. Parsva Upavistha Konasana / Wide Legged Side Stretch .....	69
Figure 40. Janu Sirsasana / Wide Legged Hamstring Stretch.....	70
Figure 41. Parivrrta Sukhasana / Easy Seated Twist .....	71
Figure 42. Neck Stretch in Sukhasana .....	72
Figure 43. Cow Face Arms in Sukhasana with a strap .....	73
Figure 44. Navasana / Boat Pose .....	74
Figure 45. Urdhva Prasarita Padasana / Upward Feet Posture .....	75
Figure 46. Supta Padangusthasana A / Reclining Big Toe Pose.....	76
Figure 47. Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana B / Reclining Extended Hand to Big Toe Pose.....	77
Figure 48. Supta Kaponasana / Reclined Pigeon .....	78
Figure 49. Setu Bandhasana / Bridge Pose .....	79
Figure 50. Psoas Stretch.....	80
Figure 51. Savasana Variation / Constructive Rest .....	81
Figure 52. Jathara Parivrrti / Supine Lateral Bend .....	82
Figure 53. Supta Masyendrasana / Reclined Spinal Twist .....	83
Figure 54. Supta Prasarita Padangusthasana / Happy Baby Pose.....	84
Figure 55. Savasana / Corpse Pose .....	85

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## **Dedication**

For Dr. Patricia Thompson and Dr. Jennifer Kretsoulas.

You are the teachers I have always needed. Thank you.

## Preface

I became a graduate student because of a desire to “fix” my voice. I had been attempting to self-correct vocal flaws and work around a decreasing range and increasing vocal tension for a decade. This solitary effort was ineffective and resulted in performance anxiety, self-doubt, and sadness from the loss of my singing voice. Under the instruction of highly skilled teachers and guided by my own sense of curiosity, I discovered that my vocal limitations were stemming not just from faults in technique but they were largely due to a lack of awareness of my body and its relationship to singing. My attempts at perfection were causing a significant increase in mental and physical tension. I could explain the technique but I could not put it into practice.

I have had an on-again/off-again yoga practice for the past 24 years so I went back to my mat. I wanted to see what I could learn about my body, my breath, and myself. I practiced yoga daily but not just asana (the physical poses). The philosophy of yoga became equally important. Specifically, the yogic philosophy that asks practitioners to live a life of non-harm (*Ahimsa*) which includes the manner in which one treats themselves. This practice in its entirety could make me a better singer but it would also make me a better artist, in every sense of the word. In 2018 I completed the 200-hour yoga teacher training through YogaWorks and began teaching yoga. I studied with yoga therapist, Jill Miller, creator of Yoga Tune Up and master teacher of the diaphragm, vagus nerve, and nervous system. I then began a 12-month mentorship with yoga therapist, Dr. Jennifer KREATSOULAS, founder of Yoga for Eating Disorders, and became certified to teach in eating disorder recovery centers. I am certified in trauma-informed yoga and have recently begun studying trauma-informed voice care.

Yoga has provided me tools to heal my relationship to my body so I am able to put my musical knowledge into action. It has made me a better singer and a better voice teacher. It

changed the trajectory of my career in music and I am thrilled to share my discoveries in this report.

## Chapter 1 - Posture and Alignment

*“Posture isn’t a position. It’s not what you do with your shoulders, or your head, or your gut. Posture is your response to this moment and the next moment and the next...” – Mary Bond*

When a young child begins their musical journey, it is quite often with piano lessons. This excited but slightly apprehensive budding musician enters the teacher’s studio and takes their place at the piano. Before touching the keys, the child is likely introduced to the required posture at the piano. They are asked to demonstrate a tall spine, descending shoulders, level wrists, curved fingers, and elbows moving away from their sides like wings. A new singer is taught the “correct” posture as well: stand with the feet approximately hips distance apart, weight evenly distributed, arms at the sides of the body, relax the shoulders, eyes level, and jaw relaxed. For many singers, instruction to sit or stand with “good” posture causes them to snap to attention without consideration for their own unique body. They may think of posture as a manipulation of bones to move the body into an optimal position but bones do not move on their own. What else needs consideration in these assumptions about posture? How do we define posture and what should we regard as the “optimal” singing posture?

In 1977, Richard Miller wrote a book comparing the national schools of singing – English, French, German and Italian. When considering postural preferences in each of these schools it is necessary to examine their preferred positioning of the larynx, the ribs, and the chest.

### **The German School**

Postures in the German School begin with the feet under the shoulders and parallel, creating a strong and balanced foundation. The gluteal-pelvic muscles are engaged which results in a

tucking of the tailbone. A raised chest is avoided.<sup>1</sup>The low larynx is observed in the German School of singing. It was endorsed first by Manuel Garcia in 1841 and then by a student of Garcia's, Julius Stockhausen, in 1886. Stockhausen says, "The low position of the larynx which is favorable for the full quality of the voice, and which should be anticipated in singing, can be achieved in the same way as by yawning. Even the non-singer can easily convince himself that in the yawn-position, the production of the full tone is made more favorable."<sup>2</sup> The chin is tucked down and slightly in, resulting in a darker sound.

### **The English School**

The English School postural influences come from their rich choral music traditions. Aside from the oratorio bass, singers in the English School avoid the lowered larynx. Many tenors in the English school opt for a raised larynx to produce a brighter sound. This can be achieved by directing the chin up and out in order to release the jaw and the larynx. The chest and shoulders are raised, lifting the clavicles and engaging the sternocleidomastoid with the intake of air. A stable laryngeal position is preferred for most English School singers, neither lifting or lowering with the inhalation.<sup>3</sup> English School teachers often instruct singers to engage the back muscles in order to lift the ribs as they inhale. This may cause the singer's spine to round forward, a slight bend at the waist and an extension of the neck. Shakespeare was a practitioner of this posture and wrote, "Balance the body on one foot and touch the ground behind with the other...extend both arms forwards and outwards, keeping the elbows in....We now raise the chest but very slightly,

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Richard, *National Schools of Singing*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, INC, 1977). p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, Richard, *National Schools of Singing*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, INC, 1977). p.86.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Richard, *National Schools of Singing*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, INC, 1977). p.84.

and the points of the shoulders not at all.” The breath management techniques of the English School ask a singer to hold their sternum and chest high. As the singer inhales, the ribs move upward and expand out and the upper abdomen draws in towards the spine. This is called fixed diaphragmatic breathing. This is meant to draw the organs of the abdomen up and under to support the diaphragm and allow for an even exhalation of air while singing.<sup>4</sup>

### **The French School**

Posture in the French School of singing has a rather laissez-faire quality. The body is at ease, the breath natural. The head and chin may reach slightly up and at times, the mouth is wide. This elevated chin allows for an elevated larynx which is often found within the French School. The French School teachers ask their students lift and rotate their head until they find the place where the head is able to sit easily on the neck. This is much like the Alexander Technique. French School teachers may not desire a high larynx but their posture teachings create this positioning. Their theory is that by lifting the chin, the jaw and larynx can relax.<sup>5</sup> The breath techniques in the French School are loosely managed. These teachers suggest that if you don't think about breathing while you speak, why would you think about it when you sing? The music and the phrasing direct the breath and the singer must be completely relaxed and willing to give in to instincts. Teachers prioritize a lack of rigidity, often asking students to swing their arms, bend at the waist, become limp in their torso. In this effort to avoid over-analyzing the breath, French

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, Richard, *National Schools of Singing*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, INC, 1977). p.37.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, Richard, *National Schools of Singing*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, INC, 1977). p.84.

School singers often have a high breath as that is the breath people most often use in their daily lives.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Italian School**

The Italian School is in complete contrast to the schools of thought that advocate for a lowered sternum and collapsed ribs, or those which ask the singer to hold their ribs or diaphragm in a fixed position. The Italian School of Singing is based on Appoggio. Appoggio is a word to describe the Italian system of breathing. While it means “to lean” or “support” it also describes muscular, skeletal, and resonance factors in singing. It describes their relationships to each other and how the balance of these systems results in efficient singing. Appoggio begins with posture. One foot is slight in front of the other with most of the weight placed on the back foot. There is no tucking of the pelvis. The low ribs can expand freely. The sternum is moderately high through the inhale and exhale. To find this this position, the singer should raise their arms above their head and then lower them to their sides. The shoulders relax and the sternum does not fall. Miller calls this a “noble posture.”<sup>7</sup> In the Italian School, the singer experiences muscular engagement throughout the torso that is dependent on the posture of the head, neck, shoulders, torso, and pelvis. A balance of this muscular effort is the goal while singing.

Barbara Doscher wrote that how a singer holds their body “is of primary importance.” She goes on to say that posture is “a kinesthetic barometer for the entire body, continually giving us conceptual data on body position, muscle tone, energy potential, and balance.... Thus the

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<sup>6</sup> Miller, Richard, *National Schools of Singing*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, INC, 1977). p.40.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, Richard, *National Schools of Singing*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, INC, 1977). p.40.

kinesthetic sense, although not one of the commonly acknowledged five senses, is the subtle regulator of the complicated body patterns of movement and rest. The interdependent relationship between the breathing and the phonatory mechanisms is fostered by kinesthetic awareness. An intriguing hypothesis is the idea that changes in breathing patterns may be a result of changes in posture.”<sup>8</sup> William Vennard offered a simple definition of posture as “the position of the body.”<sup>9</sup> Oren Brown, author of “Discover Your Voice: How to Develop Healthy Voice Habits” refers to Further, Gould and Okmura (1974) who said that “the standard definition of posture is the totality of dynamic inter-relationships between neural, muscular and skeletal elements involved in determining, maintaining and changing not only postural attitudes but also the rate and volume of respiration in regard to the demands of the body’s need which includes voice production.”<sup>10</sup>

The subject of posture is at the heart of F.M. Alexander’s life’s work. He established the Alexander Technique in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and according to him, “The spine naturally lengthens as an individual becomes aware of their own movements, thereby maximizing the comfort of the body. When an individual forces himself or herself to follow an idea of posture, the body cannot naturally assume it because of the mind’s influence. Therefore, “poise”, a term associated with plasticity, would be a more appropriate word than “posture”, a static word.”<sup>11</sup>

With an established understanding of posture, the subject of alignment can be introduced. Alignment is to posture what appoggio is to breath management. While posture can be judged by its appearance, alignment draws upon physiology and biology. Optimal alignment of the body

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<sup>8</sup> Doscher, Barbara M., *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1994).p.69.

<sup>9</sup> Vennard, William, *Singing: The Mechanism and the Techni*. (New York, NY: Carl Fischer Publishing, 1967).p.240

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Oren L., *Discover Your Voice*. (San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing Group, 1996). p.18

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, F.M., *The Use of the Self*. (London: Orion Publishing, 1985).p.27

allows all its systems to work as intended without interruption. A mechanic checks the alignment on a vehicle to keep it working smoothly and to avoid avoidable wear and tear. Such is body alignment for the voice. Alignment considers a singer's unique body. Doscher believes the basis to "achieving a dynamic, well-balanced skeletal alignment is the feeling of spinal stretch. If one imagines strings attached to the skull behind each ear and to the top of the sternum, like a puppet, the rest of the body does not have to be pushed and pulled into place in bits and pieces."<sup>12</sup> F.M. Alexander says something similar in what he named "primary control." This term describes the relationship of the head to the neck and then that relationship to the rest of the torso. Alexander found that sensations in the back of the neck directly affected the connection between the head and the trunk which in turn influenced how the muscles in the rest of the body were used. "The dominating nerve-inputs from neck muscles help to determine how the brain controls muscles in posture and movement – primary control."<sup>13</sup>

Comparisons can be made between a singer and an athlete. Both must be aware of how they hold their bodies in preparation for action. A runner takes their mark with feet in starting blocks, a center on a basketball team prepares their legs to jump at the tip-off, and a singer prepares their body to breathe and produce sound. While a variety of factors influence these physical choices - musicality, text, dramatic blocking – if standing on their feet, Doscher encourages these postural guidelines.<sup>14</sup>

1. The head is directly above the shoulders, not jutting forward or pulling back.
2. The chest is lifted comfortably allowing the ribcage to expand.
3. The shoulders are slightly back and down without force.
4. The arms are relaxed at your sides.
5. The pelvis is resting in a neutral position.

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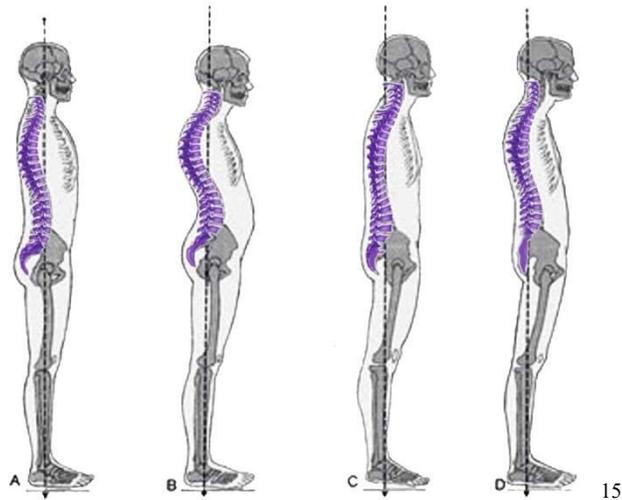
<sup>12</sup> Doscher, Barbara M., *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1994).p.70.

<sup>13</sup> Heirich, Jane Ruby, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*. (Berkley, CA: Autumn Press, 2005). p.10.

<sup>14</sup> Doscher, Barbara M., *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1994).p.71.

6. Balance your weight evenly on your feet, neither rocking forward or back.

**Figure 1. Postures**



Note the differences in the low back in the postures show in Figure 1. These can be corrected by the positioning of the pelvis. Lumbar lordosis (B) is an excessive sway in the low back caused by an anterior pelvic tilt. Thoracic Kyphosis (C) is over rounding of the thoracic spine caused by a posterior pelvic tilt. The positioning of the chest and head (D) can be adjusted by understanding how to move the spine. These building blocks of alignment will be further explored in chapter three as they are applied to a physical yoga practice but first potential posture and alignment problems must be identified. A singer's awareness of their own body is dependent upon the sensory aspect of their nervous system. The three primary categories of sensory input received by the brain are proprioception, interoception, and exteroception.

Proprioception is the awareness of positioning of the body through nerve endings that sense movement. For example, one can close their eyes and touch their finger to their nose. While wearing shoes, one can tell if they are standing on concrete or sand. A fascinating study was published in the *Journal of Scientific Voice Research* in 2008 by Nicole Scotto Di Carlo.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.voicescienceworks.org/breath.html>

She wanted to examine the use of proprioceptive memory in a professional opera singer's relative pitch. The theory was that those with absolute pitch (the ability to produce a particular pitch without external assistance) are successful by using proprioceptive awareness of the vocal mechanism as an "internal tuning fork." An osteopathic doctor changed the height of this singer's larynx by manipulating the tension between the hyoid and occipital bones. The before and after results provided evidence that the change in laryngeal position also changed her ability to find the accurate pitch without external assistance.<sup>16</sup> There are many proprioceptive nerve endings that sense movement but the two that are most relied upon in singing are mechanoreceptors and nociceptors. Sensory feedback from mechanoreceptors in the larynx influences vocal control and nociceptors provide feedback to the body that something is unpleasant or painful.<sup>17</sup>

Exteroception provide us with information about our external environment, including sight, sound, taste, scent, and touch. To a singer this could provide information about the temperature in a concert hall, singing on pitch with an orchestra, or finding their light on stage.

Interoception is an awareness of your internal sensations. Examples include balance, breathing, nervousness, gut function, joy, fulfillment.<sup>18</sup> Yoga can strengthen this ability to notice internal sensations through breath and slow, intentional movement. When a singer is familiar with these feelings and how their body responds, they will be a more prepared and confident performer. They will have more emotions to explore and make stronger creative choices. A

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<sup>16</sup> Scotto di Carlo, Nicole, "Role of Proprioceptive Memory in a Professional Opera Singer's Relative Pitch." *The Journal of Experimental Voice Research*. Vol 1, No. 2 (2008): 35.

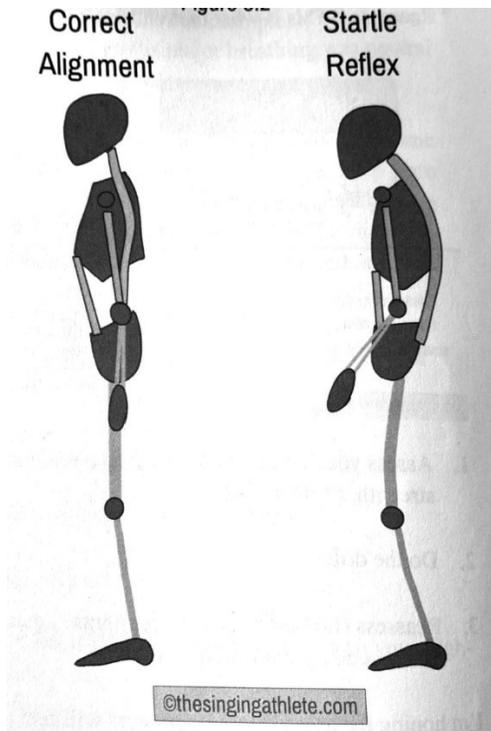
<sup>17</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Byrne Studio Inc, 2020). p10.

<sup>18</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Byrne Studio Inc, 2020). p10.

strong interoception is critical in developing and maintaining the breath required of a singer. Yoga can provide extra support in that understanding.

When a singer is lacking sufficient sensory input, postural and alignment problems will present themselves. Andrew Byrne refers to the balance of sensory input, posture and alignment as efficiency. “Doing just the right thing at the right time with just the right amount of energy.”<sup>19</sup> Many things get in the way of efficient singing. Byrne continues by describing the “startle reflex.” This is an internal reaction to a threat and the body responds by drawing in and back, closing the front of the body (flexion) and drawing the sides in (adduction).<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 2. Correct Alignment and Startle Reflex**



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<sup>19</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Byrne Studio Inc, 2020). p.24.

<sup>20</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Byrne Studio Inc, 2020). p.24.

<sup>21</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York,, NY: Andrew Byrne Studio, Inc, 2000).p.24.

Byrne asks the reader to note that the facial muscles tighten and the head is pulled down and forward, protecting the throat. The shoulders are pulled up and round forward and the chest muscles tighten and constrict the ribs. The abdominal muscles lock and the glutes and thighs tighten. Byrne recommends recording yourself as you sing. Watch the recording back and notice if you see parts of this startle reflex. Be aware of any patterns in the occurrence of this reflex as a response to pitch, phrasing, or emotional demands. The startle reflex is a response in the nervous system. The body interprets this response as if it is under threat and needs to protect itself. The brain feels unsafe and it will “close off neural pathways that create performance improvements.”<sup>22</sup>

Doscher cautions against other posture impediments. Standing with the feet too close together can disrupt balance and pelvic alignment. Assuming an overly rigid stance will increase muscular tension in the body. This will negatively impact the quality of your breath and the color of your sound. She refers to the posture of whom she calls the “eager beaver.” This singer is reaching their head and chest forward which disrupts the alignment of the spine. The chin reaches up expectantly, tightening the sternomastoid and trapezius muscles on the front and sides of the neck. Conversely, pulling the head back and chin down compresses the spine and disrupts the positioning of the larynx. The posture also easily allows the shoulders to round forward and the chest to collapse. This effects the breath and causes excess pressure on the abdominal muscles. In turn, the muscles in the jaw, neck, and tongue overly-engage in an attempt to balance this pressure. The singing tone becomes dark and lacks resonance. Doscher recommends modern

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<sup>22</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Byrne Studio Inc, 2020). p.24.

dance training to singers because it teaches fluid, graceful body movement and a balanced muscular workout. “Immobility” she says, “is an enemy of singing.”<sup>23</sup>

It is important to consider other causes of undesirable posture in singers. The especially tall singer may have adopted a slouching position as they were growing up in choir. Singers who spend increasing time on their electronic devices may habitually round their shoulders and reach their chins forward. Singers experiencing the pressures of diet culture may struggle to inhabit a posture that allows them to take up the necessary space needed to sing efficiently. Singers who experience anxiety or depression or who have lived through trauma may find the postures required for singing feel unsafe or inaccessible. In addition to support from mental health professionals these are singers who can especially benefit from a holistic movement practice such as yoga.

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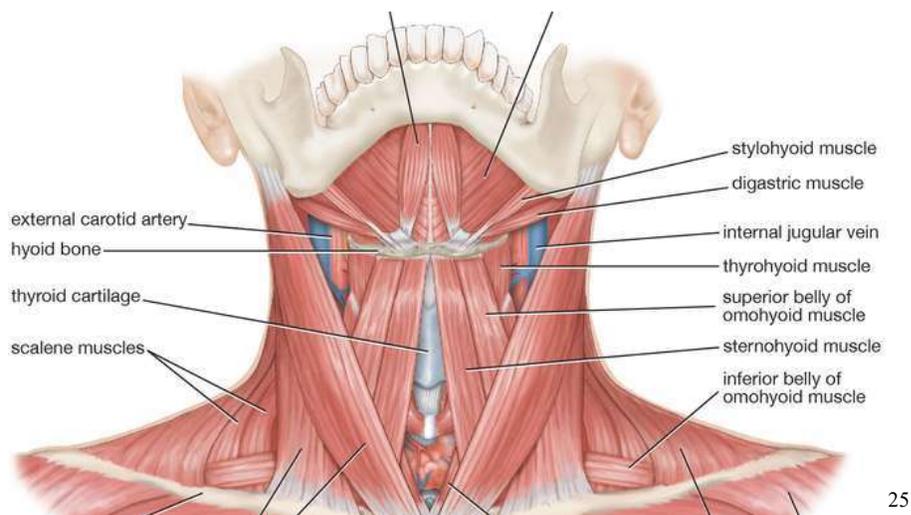
<sup>23</sup> Doscher, Barbara M., *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press Inc, 1994). p. 76-79

## Chapter 2 - Respiratory Wellness

*“I am a student of my breath.” – Jill Miller, Yoga Tune Up®*

Breath mastery is a career-long pursuit for a singer. They must understand the mechanics of the breath and possess the self-awareness needed to make adjustments according to the demands of a song, role, acoustics, environment, and mental or physical health. Richard Cone says, “the practice which must precede all others is the method of taking a breath.”<sup>24</sup>

**Figure 3.** Clavicular Breathing Muscles



Also known as chest breathing, clavicular breathing happens when the upper torso lifts to make space for the inhalation in the lungs. This breath involves the chest and shoulders. If watching themselves in a mirror, a singer would notice a lift across the collar bones. This is the breath most used in a person’s normal, waking life. It is faster and, for some, easier to find space for breath here. For singers, it is not encouraged. The lifting of the chest during an inhale, a

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<sup>24</sup> Brown, Oren L., *Discover Your Voice*. (San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing Group, 1996). p.25.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/science/sternocleidomastoid-muscle>

singer must engage the muscles of the neck rather than the abdominal muscles. As a result, the jaw tightens, the larynx is too high, the tongue tenses, the pharyngeal space is constricted. There might even be clenching in the teeth and engagement of the lip muscles to support this breath. The appropriate breath musculature in out of balance and smaller muscles not build for the task are asked to step in instead.<sup>26</sup> Justin Stoney, in his book, “Sing Like Never Before,” claims that the clavicular breath provides a singer the greatest amount of air. He argues that a solid voice technique does not require this much air and overfilling the lungs invites tension into the voice. It is also difficult to control the exhalation with that much air causing a singer to “run out of breath” too quickly.<sup>27</sup> Another problem with clavicular breathing is it’s potential to invoke a stress response. This type of breath is present in someone experiencing a panic attack. This indicates the presence of too much air and the inability to calmly exhale. This may happen if you breathe too frequently in a song. The inhale becomes high which creates tension in the neck and jaw, and the exhale becomes too forced. This causes a singer run out of air too soon and they take another clavicular breath, starting the cycle over again.

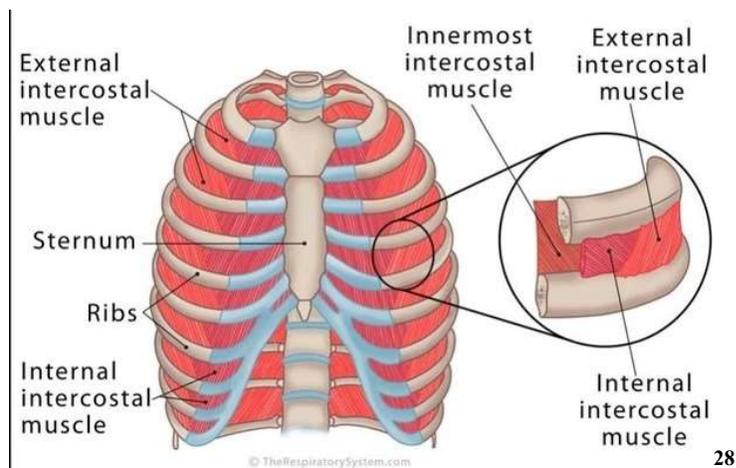
Yoga can be a tool to ward off the clavicular breath. While the body is in a physically challenging position, a singer can focus on a low, controlled inhale and exhale. A vinyasa style yoga flows from posture to posture with the inhale and exhale. This can help a singer trust their own breath and their ability to inhale and exhale smoothly.

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<sup>26</sup> Doshier, Barbara M. *The Functional University of the Singing Voice*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1994). p.122.

<sup>27</sup> Stoney, Justin, *Sing Like Never Before*. (Traverse City, MI: Mission Point Press, 2020). p.6.

**Figure 4.** Intercostal Breathing Muscles



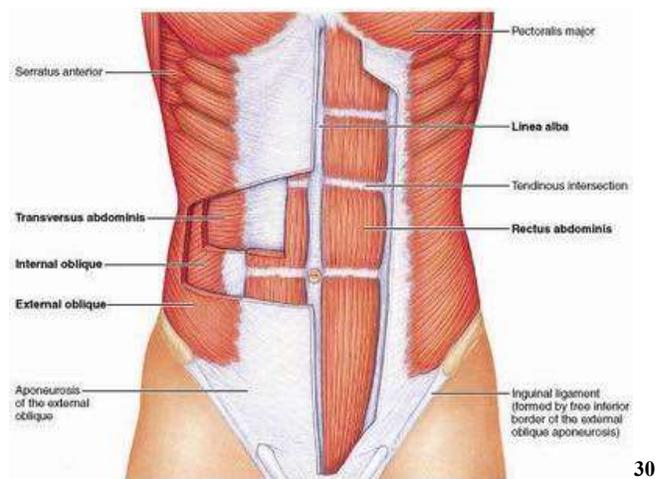
Also known as rib breathing, this occurs when the rib cage expands on an inhalation. The external intercostals, the muscles between each rib, are responsible for this movement. They engage upon inhalation and widen the distance between each rib to open the rib cage and allow air to enter the lungs. This is done with very little movement in the abdomen. Stoney points out that this is a helpful breath style for performers who need to sing and dance simultaneously. It allows the core to stay engaged for movement while having breath for singing.<sup>29</sup> Intercostal breathing asks a singer to have an awareness of the front, back, and sides of the body. The ribs expand in all directions and for many, the awareness resides solely on the front of the body. Many postures in yoga stretch the side-body and direct breath attention to the back side of the ribs.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.therespiratorysystem.com/glossary/intercostal-muscles/>

<sup>29</sup> Stoney, Justin, *Sing Like Never Before*. (Traverse City, MI: Mission Point Press, 2020). p. 10.

Figure 5. Abdominal Breathing Muscles



This is commonly referred to as belly breathing or a diaphragmatic breath. On an inhalation, the abdominal muscles release and relax. This allows the diaphragm to descend deeply, the ribcage expands, and the lungs fill. On the exhale, the abdomen draws in as the diaphragm lifts back into place. One can notice the absence of any chest movement during an abdominal breath. This breath is helpful to singers because of its efficiency. It uses the innermost abdominal muscles, the transverse abdominis, therefore eliminating the engagement of the muscles in the neck and shoulder. This keeps body tension to a minimum. It also draws in less air and decreases the temptation to “push” the voice.<sup>31</sup>

The abdominal breath can be a challenge for singers with little body awareness - internal or external. When directed to use a “belly breath,” the instinct might be to draw the abdominal muscles inward on the inhale. This breath becomes a clavicular breath. Special care must be taken to teach a singer how to expand on the inhale. Yoga provides the time and space for this

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.sagemusic.co/breathing-muscles-and-singing/>

<sup>31</sup> Stoney, Justin, *Sing Like Never Before*. (Traverse City, MI: Mission Point Press, 2020). p.8.

instruction as well a non-singing application. Finding a low breath while in a forward fold or a twist may be the physical approach a student needs to access these breath and body sensations.

For singers who struggle with body image, body dysmorphia, and eating disorders, the abdominal breath can be very difficult. Letting the belly expand with an inhale might feel very foreign or even impossible. The instinct on the exhale might be to forcefully and quickly draw the abdominals back in, creating more tension throughout the body. This is a complicated part of managing all the expectations of a singer and deserves support. Singers need access to mental health experts who can help them navigate this struggle. A consistent yoga practice can provide some of that support. It encourages a student to move at a pace that feels safe and comfortable for them. There is no expectation, just an invitation for curiosity and compassion. This is the cease-fire zone. With time, a student can begin to trust their body and what their breath can do for them. Ideally, this curiosity is brought into the practice room and into performance. A yoga practice helps build a strong relationship with the self. This is needed because the pressures on a singer to perform and look a certain way do not stop. Having access to the abdominal breath at any time is a valuable tool for resiliency.

### **Appoggio breathing**

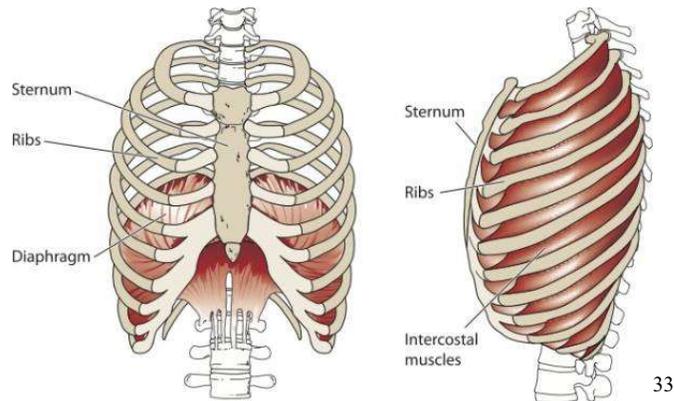
Mentioned earlier, appoggio is a combination of the abdominal breath and intercostal breath. On an inhale, the lower abdomen, lower rib cage, and low back expand. On the exhale, the sternum and upper rib cage remains lifted, avoiding a sense of deflation with the breath. The coordination of the inhale and exhale results in an efficient management of breath pressure.<sup>32</sup> In yoga, a student will sometimes be instructed to draw the belly inward either in a transition or in a

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<sup>32</sup> Stoney, Justin, *Sing Like Never Before*. (Traverse City, MI: Mission Point Press, 2020). p.12.

pose. A singer should feel empowered to ignore this direction and use the breath that supports their singing, likely the appoggio breath that allows for expansion and abdominal support.

**Figure 6. Diaphragm**



“In lessons, I’m interested in watching a student’s breathing when they are vocalizing, but I’m particularly focused on their habits when they are talking about their audition from last week. What shows up in everyday interactions is often more telling. As an artist, you need to train your respiratory competence in life, not just in your voice lesson. And when it comes to reflexive breathing, the diaphragm is the most important muscle.” – Andrew Byrne<sup>34</sup>

The diaphragm is the muscle responsible for drawing air into the body and the ability to get a full breath relies on this diaphragmatic movement. The diaphragm is a thin muscle, shaped like a dome. As a person inhales, it contracts and descends and widens in all directions. This creates a vacuum that allows air to fill the lungs. The lungs are passive organs and do not inflate on their own. The diaphragm is attached to the ribs and sternum and spine. As the diaphragm lowers, the ribs expand and the lungs fill. This also causes the abdominal viscera to descend and with the right amount of the relaxation, the pelvic floor can lower and widen. When a person

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.sheddonphysio.com/relax-just-breathe-things-you-didnt-know-about-your-diaphragm/>

<sup>34</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Bryne Studio Inc, 2020). p.46.

exhales, the diaphragm ascends back into position as well as the organs of the abdomen and the pelvic floor.<sup>35</sup>

The diaphragm is in communication with many body parts through the fascial system. Fascia, according to Robert Schleip and Thomas Findley of the First International Fascia Research Congress, is “the soft tissue component of the connective tissue system that permeates the human body, forming a whole-body continuous three-dimensional matrix of structural support. It interpenetrates and surrounds all organs, muscles, bones, and nerve fibers, creating a unique environment for body systems functioning.”<sup>36</sup> It covers everything in the body – muscles, bones, nerves. Fascia allows everything in the body to be separated yet still connected. When the fascial system is healthy, it is pliable and loose. When a person has physical or emotional trauma, injury, or long-term stress, fascia becomes tense and restrictive. This effects the comfort-level and flexibility in the body, causing headaches, additional stress, and a decreased range of motion. It is advantageous for singers to keep their fascial system in optimum condition. This can be done with massage balls, massage therapy, and yoga. A slow yoga class can be an entire hour dedicated to a person’s awareness of their diaphragmatic breath without the additional work of singing. This consistent dedication to breath awareness on your mat is the work required in order to transfer those observations and learnings to your daily life. These patterns will then inform your singing with less effort.

The diaphragm is made of two units. The costal region is attached to the ribs and its purpose is to expand the torso for inhaling. The crural region is attached to the spinal column and aids in digestion and reflux prevention. Together, these parts perform three separate functions.

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<sup>35</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Bryne Studio Inc, 2020). p.48.

<sup>36</sup> Lesondak, David, *Fascia: What it is and Why it Matters*. (Edinburgh: Handspring Publishing, 2017). p.2.

According to Andrew Byrne, author of *The Singing Athlete*, the diaphragm is responsible for respiratory function, visceral function, and postural function.<sup>37</sup> Respiration brings air into the body. The visceral function keeps the organs in their appropriate place. The postural function keeps the torso stable by working with the abdominal and back muscles, and the pelvic floor.

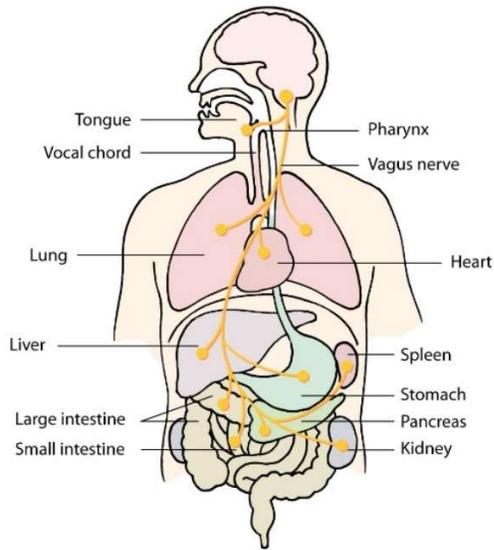
The diaphragm also exists in relationship with two nerves. It is innervated by the phrenic and vagus nerves. The phrenic nerve begins out of cervical vertebrae three, four, and five and gathers input from the pericardium, the liver, and the peritoneum. The phrenic nerve aids in swallowing, phonation, coughing, and sneezing. The concept of appoggio is reliant upon the phrenic nerve as it helps to create intra-abdominal pressure for body movement and singing. The phrenic nerve is also in communication with the hypoglossal nerve which is responsible for tongue movement.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Bryne Studio Inc, 2020).p.49.

<sup>38</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Bryne Studio Inc, 2020).p.46.

**Figure 7. Vagus Nerve**



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The vagus nerve is the tenth cranial nerve. Cranial nerves originate in the brain and connect to the sensory organs, skull, face, and organs in the chest and abdomen. These nerves innervate many of the structures used for singing and we stimulate them every time we phonate. The vagus nerve is in the category of sensory, motor, and parasympathetic nerve. Its function is providing sensation from the posterior cranial meninges, posterior ear canal, cymba conchae of the ear, pharynx, larynx, thoracic and abdominal viscera, and aortic arch.<sup>40</sup> It innervates all muscles of the larynx, the pharyngeal constrictors, the smooth muscles and glands of the larynx, pharynx, thoracic and abdominal organs, and cardiac muscle.<sup>41</sup> There are branches of the vagus in the back of the tongue, the esophagus, the stomach, and the intestinal tract. It is the longest of the cranial nerves and runs from the brain to the pelvic floor. Research has proven that the benefits of a calming practice like meditation and yoga are from the vagus nerve. These activities

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.breatheology.com/delicate-nervous-system/>

<sup>40</sup> Byrne, Andrew. *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Byrne Studio Inc, 2020).p.82.

<sup>41</sup> Byrne, Andrew. *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Byrne Studio Inc, 2020).p.82.

increase vagal tone, the ability of an individual to lower the heartrate. The breathing patterns mentioned in Chapter 5 have a vagal element meant to provide grounding or calming.

The fibers of the vagus nerve gather input about the well-being of the body, particularly from the throat and abdominal organs, and sends that information to the brain. It is less responsible for movement and more for sensory processing.

The vagus nerve is the primary parasympathetic channel in the body. Without it, the resting heart rate would be approximately 100 beats per minute. It originates in the brain in a section called the medulla oblongata. It shares this space with other cranial nerves that coordinate to provide motor output for and sensory input from sucking and swallowing, breathing, facial expressions, vocalizing, and hearing.<sup>42</sup>

The vagus nerve innervates the diaphragm. When a singer is using a diaphragmatic breath, this stimulates the vagus nerve, activating the parasympathetic nervous system. The singing voice also stimulates the vagus. And when practicing yoga, the vagus nerve is stimulated. These habits increase the body's vagal tone which will serve the singer in times of stress because the body will be able to rely on the vagus nerve to come back into a calm and relaxed state without disrupting the singing voice.

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<sup>42</sup> Miller, Jill, *Yoga Tune Up Breath and Bliss Immersion*. (Los Angeles, CA: Tune Up Fitness Worldwild, Inc, 2016).p.34.

## **Muscles of inhalation and exhalation<sup>43</sup> - the attachments, actions, and an associated yoga pose**

### **Pectoralis Minor**

- Attaches at ribs 3-5 to the scapula
- Helps to lift and open the upper ribs
- Camel – Figure 31, cobra – Figure 34, Cat/Cow – Figure 25, Updog – Figure 36

### **Pectoralis Major**

- Attaches at the clavicle, at the midline of the sternum, the top seven ribs, and the humerus.
- Widens the mid-ribs
- Camel – Figure 31

### **Serratus Anterior**

- Attaches from middle of shoulder blade to ribs 1-9, wraps around the back and side of the ribcage
- Lifts the ribs up, out, and backward
- Plank – Figure 27

### **External Intercostals**

- Attaches at the ribs
- Expand ribs 2-12
- Side bends – Figure 52

### **Serratus Posterior Superior**

- A small muscle in the upper back, often stiff and can create a stooped posture
- Assists in moving ribs 1-4
- Cat/Cow – Figure 25, Down Dog – Figure 22

### **Sternocleidomastoid and Trapezius**

- The only two muscles not innervated by spinal nerves from the spinal cord. Their nerves come from the brain and they control head rotation. The SCM is slightly involved with inhalation as it lifts the clavicles and sternum. The trapezius is not directly involved with inhalation but dysfunction here can disrupt appropriate breathing habits.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Bryne Studio Inc, 2020).p.66.

<sup>44</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Bryne Studio Inc, 2020).p.77.

- Forearm Plank – Figure 27, Warrior 2 – Figure 15, Cow Face arm variation with strap – Figure 43

### **Scalenes**

- Attaches at the top two ribs and to the sides of the cervical spine
- If the diaphragm is not functioning properly on inhalation, the scalenes step in. This leads to a forward-leaning head posture and tension in the neck and jaw.
- Neck Stretches -Figure 42

### **Muscles of Exhalation**<sup>45</sup>

Rectus Abdominis, External Oblique, Internal Oblique, Transversus Abdominis – these are 8 abdominal muscles, four on each side, often thought of as a unit.

#### **Rectus abdominis:**

- Forms straight line at the front of your body from the pubic bone to the fifth rib. When highly pronounced, this is known as a “six-pack.” They split down the middle with connective tissue called *linea alba*. These muscles lie close to the surface but below the navel they reach deep below the other abdominal layers.
- They contract and stabilize the pelvis because of this deep abdominal connection.
- Navasana – Figure 44, Bridge – Figure 49

#### **External obliques:**

- Connect the pelvis with the rib cage and extend up to the fifth rib.
- Helps control air flow.
- Side Plank – Figure 28

#### **Internal obliques:**

- They run deep within and around the torso. They attach from ribs 10-12 to the crest of the pelvis and the lower back.
- They assist with intra-abdominal pressure.
- Triangle Pose – Figure 14

#### **Transversus abdominis:**

- The deepest layer of the abdominal muscles with the most connection to the diaphragm. It attaches the deep layer of back fascia to ribs 7-12 and the front of the pelvis.
- Its primary purpose is to condense the abdominal viscera during exhalation.
- Plank – Figure 27

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<sup>45</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Bryne Studio Inc, 2020).p.57.

**Internal intercostals:**

- These are small muscles that lie deeply below the external intercostals. They form a continuous connection with the internal obliques.
- They can lift or lower the ribs and work only in a vigorous exhale.
- Side Bends – Figure 52

**Quadratus Lumborum and Serratus Posterior Inferior:**

- These muscles are on the backside of the body. The QL connects the 12<sup>th</sup> rib to the lumbar spine and pelvis.
- The serratus posterior inferior pulls ribs 9-12 in and down toward the lower back.
- Side Bends – Figure 52, Extended Side Angle – Figure 17

**Pelvic floor:**

- This is a diamond shaped area of the pubic bone, the coccyx (tailbone) and the ischial tuberosities (sit bones). It is in close relationship with the diaphragm.
- On an inhale, the diaphragm contracts, the pelvic floor should release. At the onset of exhalation, the pelvic floor “should coordinate with the abdominal layers to gently draw in, with the diaphragm rising and relaxing.”<sup>46</sup> The anatomy of the pelvic floor can be confusing and misunderstood to many people. To some it is inaccessible. There are high rates of pelvic floor dysfunction and pelvic floor physical therapists are available for treatment and support.
- Tadasana – Figure 8, Chair Pose – Figure 12, Happy Baby – Figure 54, Bird Dog – Figure 26, Pigeon – Figure 29

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<sup>46</sup> Byrne, Andrew, *The Singing Athlete*. (New York, NY: Andrew Bryne Studio Inc, 2020).p.65.

## Chapter 3 - Yoga and Singing

*“Opera singing is almost like its own yoga. It’s amazing how the way you do one thing is the way you do everything. The magical pause and calm one can find in yoga is perfect for the combination of relaxation and self-possession we need to sing well.” – Rebecca Ringle Kamarei, mezzo-soprano*

Tirumalai Krishnamacharya was a yoga teacher in India, born in 1888 deceased in 1989. He is considered the father of modern yoga and is widely accepted as the developer of vinyasa, a style of yoga which combines breath and movement. Vinyasa is the yoga style explored in this report. Krishnamacharya’s students include his son, T.K.V. Desikachar, Pattahbi Jois, B.K.S. Iyengar, Srivatsa Ramaswami, Indra Devi, and A.G. Mohan. From these teachers and their students, came most of the main styles of yoga teaching available today. There are between fifteen and twenty unique schools of yoga in the United States. While each school is different in their focus and style, they all demonstrate a kind of hatha yoga, meaning physical postures, and include other types of practice: prānāyāma (breath patterns), meditation, chanting, the study of Patañjali’s Yoga Sutras, and relaxation.<sup>47</sup> Most styles of yoga can be adapted into an appropriate practice for a singer. It is important for the singer and yoga teacher to have a willingness to acknowledge and honor the body within which they are working. Each pose has variations that can be adjusted to fit into a specific body. Any pressure to fit a body into a pose should be released so the singer is physically and mentally available to receive the benefits of the pose and of the yoga practice in its entirety.

There are many movement modalities that provide benefits for singers. Dance, somatic movement techniques, swimming to name a few. Yoga is a practice that strengthens

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<sup>47</sup> Carman, Judith E., *Yoga for Singing*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2012).p.xiv.

proprioception, interoception, exteroception, and neuroception and is also physically accessible to most singers. Knowing how our joints are positioned at any given moment is proprioception. It is the ability to sense the body in space. In cooperation with auditory feedback, a singer uses proprioception for phonation, intonation and dynamics. It is the result of sensory input. Proprioception is required for vowel modification, arm and hand gestures, distributing weight on the feet and changing posture. A yoga student strengthens the body's proceptivity with the repeated practice of asana. Following anatomical cueing at a slow pace in order to notice sensations is an essential part of developing these neural pathways. The word "mindfulness" appears frequently in wellness areas. Mindfulness is making intentional choices, being present in the current moment, noticing sensations and emotions in the body and thoughts in the mind. Judith Carman, author of *Yoga for Singing*, calls it the attention mode vs the thinking mode. The thinking mode is when one can "plan, coordinate, and execute" activities. Attention mode is when one is able to eliminate thought of the past or future and bring their awareness to the moment at hand. "This awareness mode often needs special training because we are educated to be mentally active, analytical, and rational most of the time....It is a spiritual quality that can be developed in concentration practices and nourished in meditation. Yoga offers many different concentration techniques that train the mind to be "one-pointed," that give the person mastery over the mind rather than letting the ever-active and distracting mind have mastery over the person."<sup>48</sup>

Neuroception, also called nociception, is the way our subconscious evaluates a person, place, or experience and determines whether it is safe or dangerous. It is how we perceive pain, damage to tissues, or a potential threat. A singer knows when they are vocally fatigued or

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<sup>48</sup> Carman, Judith E., *Yoga for Singing*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2012).p146.

pushing on the voice, in part, because of neuroception. How can a yoga practice strengthen this ability in a singer? Mindfulness must be a part of the process. Maintaining a consistent yoga practice will help a singer develop an awareness of what does and does not feel good in their body. When a body is consistently rushed, stressed, anxious, moving quickly from one responsibility to the next, it is easier to ignore pain and discomfort. It becomes a person's normal. However, once this body awareness is established, a person can detect sensations of pain, discomfort, tension or ease, relaxation, comfort. When these feelings are connected to parts of the body, to movements of the body, our practice becomes embodied. Embodiment is the experience of being in your own human body as it is in this moment. Such it is with singing. When a singer can identify sensations of ease or discomfort within their process of phonation, they are using neuroception. This can reduce vocal injury and support progress and sustainability in the voice.

Exteroception is the body's reaction to external stimuli. Singers must respond to the temperature and humidity of a room, the dimensions and lights on a stage, the size of the recital hall and the people in attendance. While this may seem straightforward, there are factors that can muddle a singer's ability to process this sensory intake. Anxiety is one of those disruptors. A person who is running late to a rehearsal, has a limited time to rehearse in a performance space or maybe no access to the performance space at all, may not remember or have presence of mind to determine the feel of the room, the quality of the lights, or the size of the hall. These details can become overwhelming in a performance and distract from technique and artistry. One of the definitions of yoga is to prepare to sit. The sitting in this circumstance is for meditation. Yoga uses the effort required in physical postures to prepare the body for stillness. This duality of effort and ease on a yoga mat can be felt in the body and mind of a singer. A singer with a yoga

practice can more easily react to and manage these external stimuli so they are better able to sing, perform, and create.

Interoception is our ability to notice the inner workings and feelings of our body. Hunger, breath, nervousness, temperature, and anger are all examples of interoception. Research has shown that one's ability to identify the sensations attached to these internal experiences greatly impacts one's ability to manage these feelings. A singer who can label a feeling of nervousness could find support in naming the physical sensations they experience while "feeling nervous." They can ask themselves these questions. Where does their breath live in those nervous moments? Is it high or low? Do they feel it on the front side of the body or back side? How does that feel different from the breath they enjoy when they are singing in a relaxed state? With the help of a teacher, that singer can create a plan to manage the breath while under stress. This requires mindfulness and body trust, both skills that are developed in a yoga practice. Consider the breathwork that takes place in a voice lesson. So often breath is to blame for struggles in singing. A student who cannot notice sensations of the breath inside their body will be continually frustrated when they cannot manage their breath or improve the quality of their breathing. This task is made even more challenging when done in combination with note reading, lyric memorization, diction, acting, and perhaps choreography. Once again, the balance of effort and ease found in a yoga practice is helpful. The asana practice is meant to elongate the spine and find space within the body in order to deepen the breath and find comfort within the pose. The singer in a yoga practice is presented with an opportunity to focus solely on the sensations of their breath. When this is done mindfully, this awareness can become a habit and one can live with consistent awareness of the quality of their breath,

Judith Carman stresses the importance of a focused mind in a professional singer. One must be able to coordinate many skills in a performance. Beyond the singing voice, a singer must express textual meaning, connect with other performances on stage, follow blocking, and communicate with an audience. She says, “Even the most gifted require training, and many fail for lack of discipline. It is a common observation that the most disciplined singers sometimes lack the spontaneous freedom and openness to communicate well in performance, while the open and spontaneous personalities sometimes lack the discipline to perfect the instrument for their desire to communicate. So it is that the great coordinator of all singing activities, the mind, must be trained for both disciplined focus and open awareness.”<sup>49</sup> She goes on to say that in order to develop this coordination, a singer must have a “friendly and observant” connection to their body.<sup>50</sup> Many singers (of all ages) lack this awareness for a myriad of reasons.

Some singers have a natural talent for singing at an early age and are able to easily phonate. As the voice and the body mature, well-established habits may no longer work and a greater understanding of technique and the singing body is required. Singers may struggle with this if they did not grow up playing a sport, or dancing, or participating in a physical activity. The culture in a which a singer was raised may also play a part in this body-connection. Some people are discouraged from speaking openly or asking questions about the body and its functions and abilities. There are also religious cultures that connect the body with sin and shame and people develop without a sense of knowing their body. Singers with these conscious or sub-conscious beliefs may have very little experience knowing how to connect to their own body-awareness.

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<sup>49</sup> Carman, Judith E., *Yoga for Singing*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2012). p146.

<sup>50</sup> Carman, Judith E., *Yoga for Singing*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2012). p146.

This is directly related to a singer’s ability to have a “friendly” relationship with their body. It is a critical component of an embodied singer which must be safely addressed within the voice studio. A singer who feels shame about their body, who does not trust their body, who is afraid of their body, is a singer who will likely struggle greatly with the coordination of singing and performance requirements. Dr. Hillary McBride, author of *Mothers, Daughters, and Body Image* says that “The percentage of women who hate or extremely dislike their bodies is between 85 and 95 percent.”<sup>51</sup> While this statistic acknowledges women only, this would include an alarmingly high number of singers who are attempting to sing with a body they view very negatively. This subject will be explored further in Chapter 4.

The physical postures in yoga offer singers an opportunity to strengthen both their body awareness and body neutrality. The asanas train the mind to focus on the body positioning, function, and relationship to other parts of the body. At the same time, yoga encourages a sense of freedom and acceptance about the body part being used and the body as a whole. Through practice and repetition, a yoga student can develop a sense of familiarity and trust in their own body. These feelings happen at first on the yoga mat but eventually support other physical, emotional, and mental endeavors. The singer will ultimately find that ease and stability in their singing as well.

What Carman calls the “instrument of learning” in a singer is not solely vocal technique. The mind must learn pitches, text pronunciation and meaning, dynamics and rhythm, and memorization.<sup>52</sup> This requires a focused mind that is able to avoid or ignore distractions both internal and external. Yoga is a tool to continually strengthen that skill and keep a singer focused

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<sup>51</sup> McBride, Hillary. *Mothers, Daughters, and Body Image*. (New York: Post Hill Press, 2017).p.27.

<sup>52</sup> Carman, Judith E., *Yoga for Singing*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2012).p.147.

on their work. This refined concentration is combined with a sense of relaxation that creates balance within the body and nervous system of a singer. It is obvious when a singer is able to perform with total freedom. The balance of effort and ease create an ideal state in the body through which technique and artistry can thrive.

## Chapter 4 – Yoga and the Singer

*“A lot of my yoga practice has to do with silencing that voice that would have you come out of the posture or not remember the words or think negative thoughts or dwell on things that aren’t important. It kind of speaks to the psychology of singing.” – Measha Brueggergrosman, soprano<sup>53</sup>*

The expectations of a professional singer are formidable. To be hireable, marketable, and versatile, a singer must offer the “total package” – an extraordinary ability to sing, dance and act, with a beautiful face, in a desirable body, and an agreeable disposition. The pressure to manage these expectations while tending to a personal life, financial responsibilities, and physical and mental health can be quite overwhelming. The physiological benefits of a yoga practice for singers clearly support the activity of singing and movement. Similarly, many people use an asana practice to achieve a desired appearance of their physical body. Western yoga culture has demanded classes that offer these results. Classes such as power yoga and hot yoga boast of calorie burning and weight loss potential. This is not the true purpose of yoga. When an individual’s yogic intention is to change the outer appearance of the body, the ability to focus on the mind and internal sensations of the body decreases or disappears altogether. Though physical changes may occur as a result of this movement practice, this ought not to be the purpose of asana. There is a myriad of ways to achieve a desired physical shape. Yoga is unique in that it presents an opportunity to shape the mind and strengthen the relationship one has with their body. It is not uncommon for people to be disconnected from their own body. In the process of making those connections, one might start by *thinking about* their body. True embodiment is much deeper than that and brings us to a place where a person can *feel* what is happening in their body. This space can trigger judgement and mental and emotional discomfort. Yoga invites us to

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<sup>53</sup> Classical Singer Magazine. March, 2011.

sit in this space a little longer and see what we have to learn. Amber Carnes, a trainer for accessible yoga, recommends that practitioners allow their mat to become their “cease fire zone.” Allow the yoga mat to be the space void of expectation. Singers need this space for curiosity, discovery, and stillness. Not only does it give attention to mental and emotional well-being, but it inspires creativity. When one can soften their grip on fear, anxiety, and self-doubt, they clear space to make different choices. These choices can improve artistry and musicality, quality of relationships with others and yourself, and steps a person takes to build a sustainable career in music. This internal transformation is lost when a yoga practice becomes about abdominal strengthening and weight loss.

As mentioned, there are many styles of yoga with varying degrees of rigor. A singer new to yoga should begin with a public or private class for beginners where they are taught poses and the appropriate alignment cues. Do not rush to move on to a seemingly more advanced level of asana. Allow the repetition to develop a sense of familiarity in the mind and body. This is where the foundation of body-awareness is built and how the focused mind is strengthened. In a beginner yoga class, students may start with a short meditation and an introduction to the importance of breath within a yoga practice. Rather than approaching the breath with a singer’s mindset, the student has an opportunity to study their breath as a human being. A singer asks a lot of their breath. There are expectations, requirements and judgements. A singer’s breath has a job to do beyond just keeping them alive. It shapes a phrase, allows a crescendo, fills a crescendo, colors the text, enhances emotions. On a yoga mat, a singer can develop an intimate relationship with their breath, one that does not necessarily include phonation.

Once the student is settled on their mat and in-tune with the breath, the teacher will move into a gentle warm-up followed by the sequencing of that particular class. Ideally, the yoga

teacher will offer variations to poses. This supports all bodies in the class without presenting an ideal execution of the pose. Teachers will often refer to these options as modifications. This is an inaccurate labeling. A yoga student does not modify a pose to accommodate a short-coming or inability. To suggest they do is a judgement that may negatively affect the practitioner. It takes them out of their embodied experience because they are working to achieve the fullest expression of a pose. This is ego. Yoga asks students to honor their inner-knowing and feel how a pose is best suited to their unique body in that moment.

Judith Carman tells singers that yoga leads singers to “knowledge and expression of the soul. They are natural partners.” With training, over time, yoga leads to the command of the singing body, breath, mind, and communication of the heart and soul.<sup>54</sup> Posture and alignment, the functioning of the vocal mechanism, and the muscles of respiration will develop slowly and steadily in that time. Any person studying yoga will come across the Yoga Sutras written by Patanjali. Little is known about him and when he lived but he (and possibly others) is credited with writing the Yoga Sutras. The sutras are a collection of yogic thought and guidelines meant to help a person discover their true self and achieve enlightenment. Sutra 1.14 says, “Practice that is done for a long time, without a break, and with sincere devotion becomes a firmly rooted, stable, and solid foundation.”<sup>55</sup> Yoga is teaching the importance of discipline. Recall again the young musician at the piano. In addition to posture, this child is immediately taught the importance of consistent practice and discipline. Singers know that the benefits of practice are revealed with long-time, regular practice. In this same way are lessons revealed on the yoga mat. The command of the body as the source of movement is necessary for success on stage. Not only

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<sup>54</sup> Carman, Judith E., *Yoga for Singing*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2012).p159.

<sup>55</sup> Carreras, Reverend Jaganath, *Inside the Yoga Sutras*. (Virginia: Integral Yoga Publications, 2006).p.38.

in the moment of performance but in the warm-up before and the transition to a “normal” state afterwards. This is seen in singer’s ability or struggle to relax and sleep after a performance. It is the balance of effort and ease.

“The most important spiritual growth doesn’t happen when you’re meditating or on a yoga mat. It happens in the midst of conflict – when you’re frustrated, angry or scared and you’re doing the same old thing, and then you suddenly realize that you have a choice to do it differently.” – Tara Gerris

The same is true when considering the benefits of a yoga practice for a singer. The breath connection does not prove itself on the yoga mat but in musical moments when a long phrase finds its shape, when coloratura cascades smoothly, when vibrato spins consistently. The execution of these skills relies heavily on an embodied breath. Similarly, the body connection is strengthened in a yoga practice and elevates a performance on stage through embodied characters, acting choices, expression, and presence. And just as valuable is the way a yoga practice provides the skills to balance all parts of a singer’s life and prioritizes mental and physical wellness.

## **ASANA FOR THE SINGER**

The following images are yoga poses accessible to most beginner and intermediate students. These are poses that would be taught in a yoga class or could be done in a personal yoga practice. Each figure is labeled by its Sanskrit and English names. Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism, is used in historical Buddhist texts and is the original language of yoga. Each Sanskrit word is believed to have its own consciousness. When someone used the work, they are brought into close relationship with that consciousness. Western yoga uses Sanskrit

posture names as well as their English equivalents, depending on the style of the studio. There is a current movement in Western yoga to return to the full use of Sanskrit in yoga. This preserves the integrity of the practice, honors its origins, and guards against cultural appropriation.

Below the pose name is an image of the posture. Notice the use of blocks in the images. A block is a prop used to support the body in a pose and to bring the floor closer to the yoga practitioner. It enables the student to find more space and comfort while in the pose. It is a way in which many instructors teach and practice yoga. The poses described here can be done with or without props. Following each photo is a list of alignment cues, how to create the pose. These are suggestions but the practitioner should always feel charged to make adjustments that accommodate their own body. Many poses are meant to be executed on both sides of the body but for efficiency, only one side is described. Next is listed the physical benefits of the pose that are specific to singers. The benefit of breath awareness is present in each pose but is not mentioned unless there is a specific direction to notice. Below the benefits of the pose is any additional or cautionary information. And finally, possible variations are listed. These directions do not take into account specific medical conditions or injuries. Please consult with a medical professional before starting any new physical practice.

**Figure 8. Tadasana / Mountain Pose**



**Alignment cues:** Feet underneath the hips, weight evenly distributed on both feet, lengthen the tailbone towards the floor, arms at side, palms facing front, spine lengthens, shoulders descend away from the ears, head draws back slightly to be in line with the spine

**For singers:** similar to the optimal alignment for singing, lengthens the spine, opens the chest, strengthens legs, brings awareness to feet on the ground and balance, prepares the body for other poses, just as this position or expansion prepares the body for singing

**Notes:** keep a slight bend behind the knees, avoid drawing the ribs forward and lifting the tailbone

**Variations:** mountain pose with arms lifted up and reaching through fingertips, arms lifted with hands interlaced and palms reaching for the sky, arms lifted with fingertips touching

**Figure 9. Uttanasana / Standing Forward Fold**



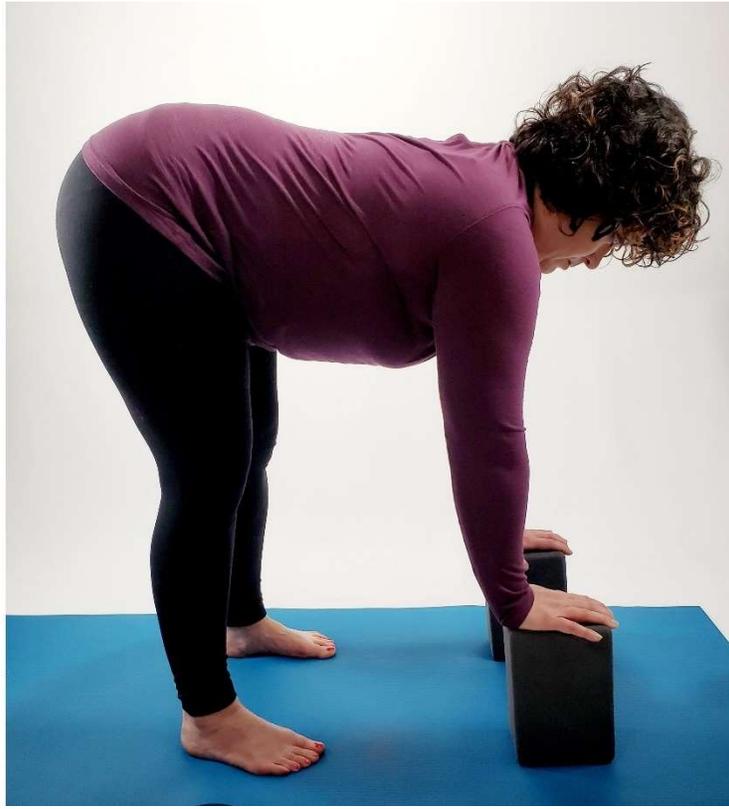
**Alignment cues:** feet together or separated, slight or generous bend in the knees, folded at the hips, drawing chest toward the thighs, hands to the floor, head down

**For singers:** deep stretch in the spinal muscles, a forward fold provides effective feedback from a low breath in both the low belly and low back/outer hips, this works hip flexors, hamstrings, quadriceps, and shoulders, engages abdominal muscles throughout the movement of the pose

**Notes:** be mindful not to hyperextend the knees, walk feet wider to help release the low back or to accommodate low belly

**Variations:** hands may come to the feet, ankles, or blocks

**Figure 10. Ardha Uttanasana / Standing Half Forward Fold**



**Alignment Cues:** a version of Standing Forward Fold with torso and hands lifted, bring hands to shins and extend the spine long, gentle reach through the crown of the head, gaze towards to floor

**For singers:** engages the lower abdominal muscles needed for the diaphragmatic breath, pause here to inhale and feel that breath, this elongates the spine, strengthens the back as the pose is held

**Notes:** keep a slight bend in the knees, do not lift the chin, be mindful not to tip the pelvis, lift the shoulder heads up and away from the floor

**Variations:** hands can come to blocks in front of the feet, or arms reach behind at hip-level while shoulder blades move towards the spine

**Figure 11. Prasarita Padottanasana / Wide Leg Standing Forward Fold**



**Alignment Cues:** Step the legs wide, toes pointing forward, legs are straight, hands come to the floor between the feet, release head towards the floor

**For singers:** strengthens the back and legs, stretches muscles of the spine, notice the inhale and exhale along the spine while in the forward fold, feel the lift of the upper ribs on the inhale, strengthens the hamstrings, and inner thighs, works the abdominal muscles on the return to standing position

**Notes:** bring a slight or significant bend to the knees, if the knees are bent – send the hips back and put the weight in the heels, do not lift the chin

**Variations:** hands can come to blocks, hands can be in front of the feet

**Figure 12. Utkatasana / Chair Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** feet are hip distance apart, bend the knees and send the hips back as if to sit in a chair, keep heels on the floor, lift the torso, reach the arms overhead, in line with the ears

**For Singers:** strengthens the quads and spine to accommodate sitting and standing for long periods (choral singing), feel the strength of the quads here and recall this sensation while working on melismatic passages, this works the major abdominal muscles, the upper back, and shoulders

**Notes:** lean weight back into heels, think about opening the knees vs letting them fall towards each other, draw belly in towards spine, avoid pelvic tilt, keep lifting the sternum

**Variations:** adjust the degree of knee bend but keep sending the hips back, bring palms together and thumbs to chest if shoulders are fatigued or injured

**Figure 13. Parsvottanasana / Pyramid Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** step one foot forward, legs are hips distance apart as if on railroad ties, back toes are out at an angle, both legs are straight, brings prayer hands behind your back, inhale to lengthen the spine, exhale to fold over the front leg, bring face to the front leg, draw the hip crease of the front leg back, firm the outer hip of the back leg in

**For Singers:** strengthens abdominal and back muscles, deep hamstring stretch and brings awareness to the back of the legs, avoid locking the knees and keep the calves and hamstrings engaged, this sensation applies to standing in a voice recital or choral performance.

**Notes:** be mindful not to hyperextend the knees, keep weight on both feet, press into the outer edge of the backfoot to strengthen the back leg, keep lengthening the spine as you fold, avoid collapsing the chest

**Variations:** lift the arms on the inhale and bring hands to the floor or blocks on the exhale

**Figure 14. Trikoṇasana / Triangle Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** step left foot forward, legs are hips distance apart as if on railroad ties, back toes are out at an angle, both legs are straight, reach arms long from end to end, reach left arm out long over the left toes, lower the left hand to the floor in front of the left foot, reach right arm up to the sky, leaning the right shoulder back

**For Singers:** deeply stretches the side body, including ligaments and fascia in ribcage, lengthens the spine and strengthens spinal muscles, experiment with the costal breath in triangle pose and notice the expansion of the ribcage on all sides, this pose stretches shoulder girdle, works hip flexibility

**Notes:** rather than going as deep as possible into the pose, think about lengthening out of both sides of the waist first, the priority is length in the spine, not bringing the hand to the floor, think about feeling broad across the collarbones, gaze can come up towards the sky, straight out, or towards to floor, do not lift the chin

**Variations:** bring bottom hand to a block or to ankle or shin

**Figure 15. Virabhadrasana II / Warrior 2**



**Alignment Cues:** step the left foot forward, feet are approximately hips-width apart, the back toes are up at an angle, bend the front knee, reach the arms long from end to end, gaze over the left fingers

**For Singers:** strengthens the legs, arms, and shoulders, lengthens the spine, engages the abdominals, broad across the chest, feel the strength of the foundation (feet, legs, pelvis, torso) and look for a sense of ease in the shoulders, neck, head, consider this balance of effort and ease while singing

**Notes:** draw the left hip back and allow the right hip to roll slightly towards the ground, be mindful not to lean the torso over the left thigh, lengthen up through the spine, let the shoulders fall away from the ears, keep pressing into the back foot

**Variations:** lower the back arm if shoulders fatigue

**Figure 16. Viparita Virabhadrasana / Reverse Warrior**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in Warrior 2, flip the front palm over to face the sky, reach that arm up and back over the ear and towards the back of the mat, the back arm rest along the back leg

**For Singers:** strong foundation as in Warrior 2 with an added side body stretch, breathe into the ribs

**Notes:** keep the front knee moving open, lengthen the spine while reaching through the arm, adjust the gaze to bring ease into the neck

**Variations:** the top arm can reach up towards the sky instead of back, with the rhythm of the breath, move from Warrior 2 to Reverse Warrior

**Figure 17. Utthita Pārsva Koṇāsana / Extended Side Angle Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in Warrior 2, bring the left forearm to the thigh, reach the right arm up overhead and over the ear towards the front of the mat

**For Singers:** strengthens the legs, lengthens the spine, stretches sides of the body, including the lower ribs, opens the hips, feel the breath in the low ribs along both sides as you lengthen out of both sides of the waist

**Notes:** press evenly into both feet, lean the top shoulder back to create space across the chest, keep the bent knee open and firm in the bottom hip

**Variations:** lower the bottom hand to a block at the inside of the front foot or to the floor, keep leaning the chest back and firming the lower hip in while reaching up into the top arm

**Figure 18. Vṛkṣāsana / Tree Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in mountain pose, lean weight onto the left foot, firm in the outer left hip, float the right toes and rotate them to the right, bring the right foot to the inside of the left ankle, calf, or inner thigh, lift the arms up, reaching towards the sky

**For Singers:** strengthens the standing leg, opens the hip of the lifted knee, engages the abdominals, requires focus, quiet mind, balance, and confidence, this pose requires a coordination of effort and ease to maintain balance

**Notes:** falling out of the pose is normal, simply set up the pose again, re-engage the outer hip of the standing leg, press the foot into the leg and the leg into the foot, both hip points aim forward, the pose will feel different on each side

**Variations:** hands can come to hips, prayer hands, or arms reach up in a v-shape as branches of a tree

**Figure 19. Ashta Chandrasana / Crescent Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** step the left foot forward, feet are approximately hip-distance apart, press into the ball of the right foot, bend the left knee, reach the arms up and reach through the fingertips, work the back leg towards straight

**For Singers:** strengthens the legs, lengthens the spine, deep stretch through both sides of the body, brings attention to the pelvis positioning and space in the low back

**Notes:** if there is back pain, bend the back knee, avoid a pelvic tilt by sending the tailbone towards the floor,

**Variations:** there are multiple arm options available in crescent pose

**Figure 20. Virabhadrasana III / Warrior 3**



**Alignment Cues:** the body is balanced on one leg, work that standing leg towards straight and firm in the outer hip, reach the other leg back at hip-height, reach through the heel, the arms reach forward at ear-level, parallel to the ground, palms facing each other

**For Singers:** strengthens a stable and focused mind, strengthens legs and torso, balance, and confidence, requires a coordination of muscular effort, body positioning, concentration, and balance

**Notes:** do not lift the chin, head is in line with the spine, be mindful not to -let the hip of the lifted leg roll up, both hip points are pointing down

**Variations:** arms can reach back next to the hips, lift the shoulder heads, shoulder blades reaching towards the spine

**Figure 21. Ekapāda Uttānāsana / Standing L-Shape**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in Warrior 3 and release both hands to the floor, keep reaching the lifted leg back and up, release the head towards the floor

**For Singers:** strengthens the legs, glutes, and back, works balance and flexibility, brings an awareness to the back side of the body and a release in the head and neck while still requiring effort in the legs and hips

**Notes:** firm the outer hips in, hips points are level, in case of back pain, lower the lifted leg, do not hyperextend the standing leg, lift inner thigh of lifted leg up more than outer

**Variations:** brings hands to blocks

**Figure 22. Adho Mukha Svanasana / Down Dog**



**Alignment Cues:** begin on hands and knees, hands are slightly wider than shoulder distance apart, tuck toes under and lift the hips up and back, keep a slight bend in the knees, arms are straight while you press the ground away, draw the chest towards the thighs, spine is straight

**For Singers:** lengthens the spine, strengthens shoulders and legs, especially the calves and achilles tendon, this position allows for informative breath sensations, note the expansion through the low belly, low back, and rib cage while keeping space in the chest and activating the legs

**Notes:** put as much bend in the knees as needed, heels can meet the floor but they do not have to, do not lift the chin,

**Variations:** put blocks underneath the hands

**Figure 23. Malasana / Squat**



**Alignment Cues:** step the feet apart, heels in, toes out at an angle, knees moving outward, inner thighs work towards each other, hips reach back and down, lift the chest and crown of the heads, prayer hands

**For Singers:** strengthens legs, hip flexibility, lengthens the spine, space across the chest, access to sensations of the pelvic floor during the breath

**Notes:** be mindful that the knees do not fall in and the chest does not collapse

**Variations:** lift the hips up if there is knee pain, bring hands to the floor or blocks while still lengthening the spine

**Figure 24. Bharmanasana / Table Top**



**Alignment Cues:** come to all fours, hips above knees, hands beneath shoulders or slightly wider, neutral spine, gaze down at the floor without tucking the chin, press the ground away

**For Singers:** engages shoulders, muscles along the side body, lengthens the spine, stabilizes the hips, notice the sensations of the breath along the spine here

**Notes:** fingers can point towards the front of the mat or dial the hands out, hands can be wide than the shoulders

**Variations:** come down to forearms

**Figure 25. Marjaiasana / Cat-Cow**

**A**



**B**



**Alignment Cues:** start in table top, for cat pose (B) tuck the tailbone, round the upper back, tuck the chin toward the chest, press the ground away, for cow pose (A) lift the tailbone, release the ribs towards the floor, reach the chest between the shoulders, lift the head

**For Singers:** awareness of sensations of the spine, ribs, and backside of the body, fluid movement in the neck, spine and ribs, strengthens the shoulders and arms, notice the length of the inhale and exhale and match this to the spinal wave

**Notes:** connect movement of the spine to the breath, inhale for cow, exhale for cat, notice the expansion through the ribs, think about a wave of the spine as it moves

**Variations:** add other movement, shift the hips and shoulders, blend the elbow, circle the forearms, come to the forearms

**Figure 26. Dandayama Bharmanasana / Bird Dog Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in table top, extend and lift the right arm forward alongside the ear, palm facing in, extend the left leg back and lift the heel to hip-height, reach from end to end with a neutral spine and hips, do on each side

**For Singers:** engages the back side of the body, lengthens the spine, strengthens the abdominal muscles and muscles along the rib cage

**Notes:** draw the abdominal muscles towards the spine, keep the hips and extended leg parallel, do not lift the chin

**Variations:** bring the hand and foot to the floor or a hand to the block

**Figure 27. Phalakasana / Plank Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** start in a table top position, step both feet back, engage the glutes and lift the back of the thighs up, press the ground away, lengthen the spine, head in line with the spine

**For Singers:** engages and strengthens the full body, notice spaces of breath expansion with an abundance of muscular effort

**Notes:** notice the breath during the full-body engagement, keep pressing away from the ground, draw the belly in towards the spine

**Variations:** lower the knees, come down to the forearms

**Figure 28. Vasisthasana / Side Plank**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in plank position, shift onto the left hand and spin onto the outer edge of the back foot, stack the ankles, lift the right arm towards the sky, lift the left hip up and away from the floor, draw the abdominal muscles in towards the spine

**For Singers:** engages and strengthens the obliques and upper back, strengthens the shoulder, arm, and outer hips, lengthens the spine, balance

**Notes:** keep engaging the obliques and lifting the bottom hip up

**Variations:** lift the top leg and hover the top ankle over the bottom ankle, bend the top knee and bring the foot to the floor for support, reach the top arm over the head, come down to the forearm

**Figure 29. Eka Pada Rajapakotasana / Pigeon**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in down dog, draw the right knee towards the chest, place the knee down between the palms with the right heel by the left hip, the left leg is lengthened long towards the end of the mat, press into the top of the back foot, press onto the fingertips and lift the chest (A), inhale here and on an exhale fold over the front leg to forearms or rest the head on the floor (B)

**For Singers:** opens the hips, length across the chest, notice sensations of breath expansion in the low back and outer hips in the fold

**Notes:** draw the left hip crease back and firm in the outer right hip, draw the inner thighs towards each other

**Variations:** come down to forearms, bring a block under the hands or chest or under the right hip for support

**Figure 30. Utthan Pristhasana / Lizard**



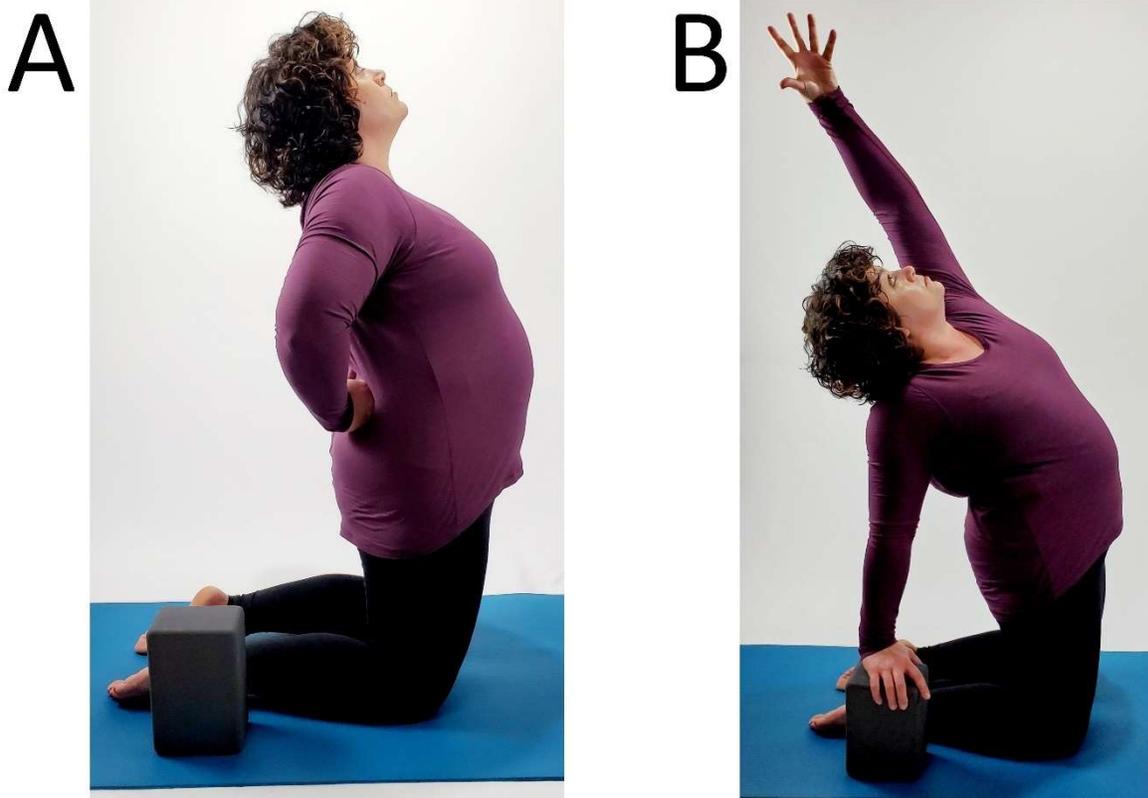
**Alignment Cues:** begin in a standing forward fold, step back with the right foot and lower the right knee, heel-toe the left foot off to the left, the left heel is on the mat and the toes are out at an angle, both hands are on the mat, left knee follows the direction of the left toes, lengthen the spine and lift the chest

**For Singers:** opens the hips, lengthens the spine and the torso on both sides of the waist, feel the breath expand and lift the chest

**Notes:** keep the front knee moving open

**Variations:** come to the forearms or bring hands to blocks lift up off the back knee

**Figure 31. Ustrasana / Camel**



**Alignment Cues:** knees under the hips, thighs perpendicular to the floor, bend the elbows and bring hands to the low back (A), draw shoulder blades towards the spine, deeply arch the back and lean the head back, reach the hands down to find the heels, lift the sternum

**For Singers:** deep stretch of the front side of the body, draws the shoulders back and expands the chest

**Notes:** lengthen the spine before arching the back, keep the glutes engaged, do not let the chest collapse, reach the hips forward, to come out of the pose, lift up out of the chest and engage the abdominals

**Variations:** bring hands to blocks by the feet, reach one hand back at a time and raise the opposite arm (B)

**Figure 32. Anjaneyasana / Low Lunge**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in a standing forward fold, step the right leg back and lower the right knee, bring the hands to blocks or the floor, reach the hips towards the front of the mat

**For Singers:** stretches the side body and ligaments in the ribs, strengthens the inner thighs, stretches the front of the back thigh

**Notes:** firm-in the outer hips, if there is pain in the low back, draw the hips away from the front heel to eliminate the arch in the back,

**Variations:** sweep the arms up and reach fingertips to the ceiling or stack both hands on the thigh of the bent knee and lift the chest

**Figure 33. Parivrtta Utthita Ashwa Sanchalanasana / Revolved Low Lunge**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in low lunge with the right leg back, right knee can be up or down, bring the right hand to the mat, lean the left shoulder back and lift the left arm up towards the sky

**For Singers:** strengthens the legs, opens the hip, strengthens the arm and shoulder, engages and opens the obliques

**Notes:** if the back knee is lifted, draw that hip away from the floor, lean the right shoulder back, finding space across the chest

**Variations:** hand can come to a block

**Figure 34. Bhujangasana / Cobra**



**Alignment Cues:** lie on the front side of the body, bend elbows and bring palms under the shoulders, press into the hands and lift the chest while keeping the elbows bent, press into the tops of the feet, engage the glutes, keep the head in line with the spine

**For Singers:** strengthens the muscles of the upper back, keeps the chest up, strengthens the lower abdominal muscles which stay contracted through the entire pose, good access to low breath sensations, feel the power of the low breath here

**Notes:** if there is low back pain, lower the chest

**Variations:** lift the chest further and work the arms towards straight, keeping glutes engaged

**Figure 35. Balasana / Child's Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** from table top, bring the toes together and walk the knees apart, send the hips back towards the heels, release the chest towards the floor and rest the forehead on the floor, arms rest by the sides or by the head with bent elbows

**For Singers:** lengthens and stretches the spine, gently stretches the hips, thighs and ankles, an opportunity to check the breath and feel expansion along the backside of the body, elongate a smooth exhale

**Notes:** adjust the knees and feet to comfort

**Variations:** bring a pillow under the torso and head to ease low back and neck pain

**Figure 36. Urdhva Mukha Svanasana / Updog**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in cobra pose, press into the tops of the feet, engage the glutes, press the hands into the floor and straighten the arms as the chest lifts, the hips and legs come away from the floor, draw the shoulder blades towards the spine and lift the sternum

**For Singers:** deep stretch across the front of the body, including the ligaments in the front of the ribs, deep arch in the low back, strengthens the arms and shoulders

**Notes:** the only things touching the mat in updog are the tops of the feet and the hands, if there is back pain, return to cobra

**Variations:** tuck the toes under, bring blocks under the hands

**Figure 37. Salabhasana / Locust**



**Alignment Cues:** begin lying on the front side of the body, rest the forehead on the mat, bring arms to sides, palms pressing down, engage the glutes, lift the shoulder-heads up and away from the floor, inhale and lift the chest, lift the feet, and lift the arms, lengthen the spine and keep the gaze towards the floor in front of the mat

**For Singers:** strengthens the upper back and abdominal muscles, engages the glutes, deep stretch along the front side of the torso, lengthens the spine, feel the low belly breath pressing into the mat on the inhale and gently lifts the torso

**Notes:** lower the chest with back pain, keep the glutes active, do not reach the chin up, the head should remain in line with the spine, keep the shoulder-heads lifted

**Variations:** bring hands and/or feet to the mat and lift just the chest

**Figure 38. Upavistha Konasana / Wide Legged Seated Forward Fold**



**Alignment Cues:** sit with legs stretched wide, lengthen the spine and fold the torso forward, hands come to the floor or feet, draw chest towards the floor

**For Singers:** deep stretch in the lower back and inner thighs, arms, and shoulders, notice the low breath along the low back and into outer hips here

**Notes:** kneecaps point up, reach through the heels, keep a little bend behind the knees to prevent hyperextension

**Variations:** blocks under the knees, do not fold the torso – lengthen the spine and keep the chest lifted

**Figure 39. Parsva Upavistha Konasana / Wide Legged Side Stretch**



**Alignment Cues:** sit with legs stretched wide, reach one arm overhead and reach to the opposite side, reach the bottom arm along the leg

**For Singers:** deep stretch and opening across the ribs, one side at a time, stretch behind the legs, opens the hips

**Notes:** keep a small bend behind the knees, reach through the heels

**Variations:** put blocks under the knees

**Figure 40. Janu Sirsasana / Wide Legged Hamstring Stretch**



**Alignment Cues:** begin with seated wide legged forward fold, inhale and reach the arms up, rotate the torso to the right, bring hands to either side of the right leg, walk the hands towards the foot and fold the torso over the leg, the opposite leg is straight or knee bent and heel drawn in towards the inner-thigh

**For Singers:** stretches the low back and outer edge of the leg, including the hamstring

**Notes:** reach through the heel, avoid hyperextending the knee, lengthen the spine before folding over the leg

**Variations:** put blocks under the knee

**Figure 41. Parivrrta Sukhasana / Easy Seated Twist**



**Alignment Cues:** sit cross legged with lengthened spine, bring the left hand across the right thigh and right hand behind the back, press into the right fingertips to lengthen the spine and move into the twist, chin stays in line with the chest

**For Singers:** rotation of the spine, increases strength and flexibility of the spinal muscles, stretches muscles in the ribcage, notice the breath while in a twist

**Notes:** do not force the body into the twist, lengthen the spine with each inhale

**Variations:** put a block under the hand in the back

**Figure 42. Neck Stretch in Sukhasana**



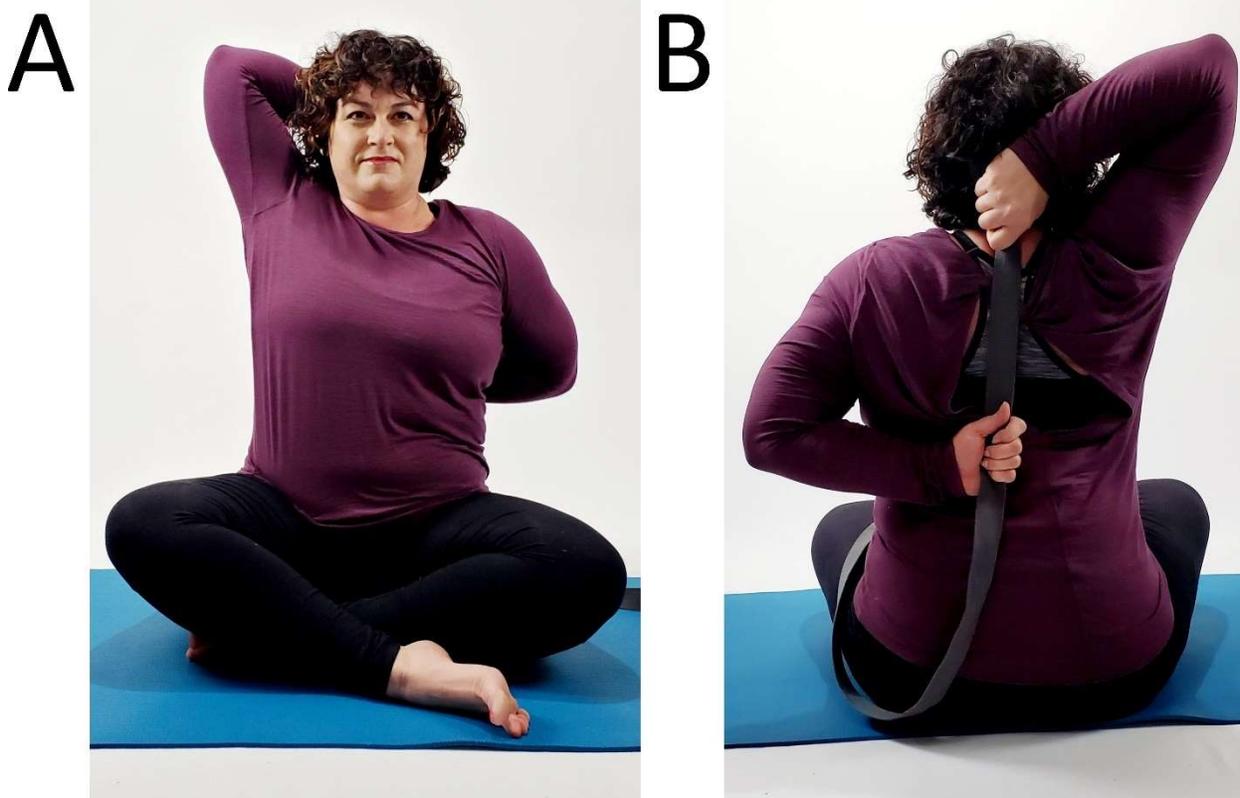
**Alignment Cues:** begin in a seated position, wrap the right hand around the head and draw the right ear toward the shoulder, let the shoulders drop away from the ears, lengthen through the spine

**For Singers:** deep stretch in the shoulder and neck, lengthens the spine

**Notes:** do not press the hand onto the head, let the pressure be natural

**Variations:** for a deeper sensation, bring the left hand to the mat next to the leg

**Figure 43. Cow Face Arms in Sukhasana with a strap**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in a seated position, take a strap into the right hand, open arms wide like a T, bend the right elbow and bring the right hand to the back of the neck, bend the left elbow and bring the hand behind the back and find the strap, walk both hands toward each other, work the shoulder blades towards the spine, elbows draw back, press the back of the head into the top arm

**For Singers:** deep shoulder opening, lifted chest, counter motion to the position at the piano or computer

**Notes:** avoid arching the low back

**Variations:** eliminate the strap and grip hands behind the upper back

**Figure 44. Navasana / Boat Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** sit with knees together and feet on the floor, bring hands behind the hips, lift and straighten both legs, bring hands behind the thighs or reach them forward on either side of the legs, lift the chest, lengthen the spine

**For Singers:** intense abdominal engagement, strengthens the low back, balance

**Notes:** do not round the upper back

**Variations:** bend the knees 90 degrees, bring toes just above the floor, bring hands behind the thighs, bring fingertips to the floor

**Figure 45. Urdhva Prasarita Padasana / Upward Feet Posture**



**Alignment Cues:** lying on back with arms reaching overhead on the floor, draw knees in to chest and extend the legs up, reaching through the heels

**For Singers:** spinal extension, stretch through arms and legs, lengthen the exhale and lower the heartrate, bring attention inward and feel breath expansion on the inhale and release on the exhale

**Notes:** avoid pelvic tilt, do not hyperextend the knees

**Variations:** put a pillow or bolster under the hips, bend the knees, do the pose with legs up a wall for a restorative posture, keep arms by the sides

**Figure 46. Supta Padangusthasana A / Reclining Big Toe Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** lie on the back with bent knees, feet on the floor, draw the right knee in to the chest and loop 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers around the big toe and extend the foot towards the ceiling, reach through the right heel, keep the shoulders and head on the floor, left knee can remain bent or extend the leg long, draw the front of the right thigh towards the chest

**For Singers:** stretch in the glute and behind the hamstring, notice the positioning of the hip points/pelvis

**Notes:** avoid hyperextending the knee

**Variations:** loop up the ball of the foot with a strap or interlace the hands behind the right thigh

**Figure 47. Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana B / Reclining Extended Hand to Big Toe Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in padangusthasana A, lower the leg out to the side while continue to hold the big toe

**For Singers:** stretch in the out hip and behind the extended leg, engage the abdominal muscles and stay broad across the chest without adding shoulder tension

**Notes:** avoid hyperextending the knee, spin the inner thigh up and the leg lowers, keep reaching through the heel

**Variations:** loop up the ball of the foot with a strap

**Figure 48. Supta Kaponasana / Reclined Pigeon**



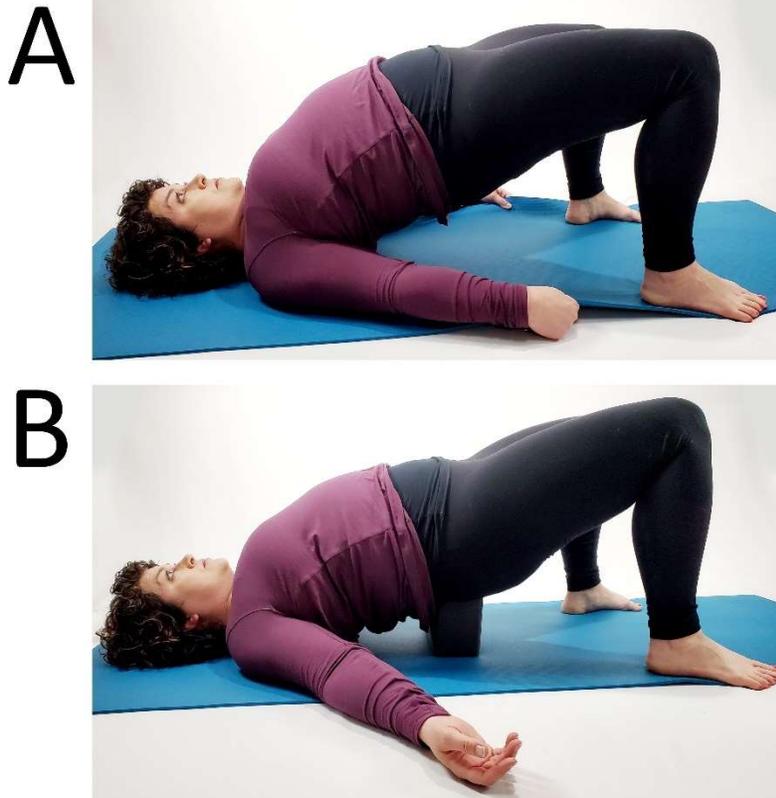
**Alignment Cues:** begin on the back with the knees bent, cross the right ankle over the left thigh, engage the outer right hip and glute and keep the knee moving towards the front of the mat, draw the legs in towards the chest and interlace the hands behind the left thigh, rest the shoulders and head on the floor

**For Singers:** stretches the left hamstring and outer hip, increases flexibility in the right hip, keep the length across the chest and soften the shoulders, feel the breath deep in the body and perhaps into the pelvic floor

**Notes:** allow the left knee to align with the left shoulder, soften the shoulders, keep engaging the outer right hip and glute

**Variations:** keep the left foot on the floor with hands by the sides, this pose can also be done standing

**Figure 49. Setu Bandhasana / Bridge Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** lie on the back with knees bent, feet on the floor about hip distance apart, draw the heels in towards to sit-bones, arms down by the sides, engage the glutes, press into the feet and lift the pelvis, draw the shoulder blades together and interlace the hands underneath the low back, extend the hands towards the heels, lift the sternum

**For Singers:** stretches muscles of the chest and quadriceps, strengthens the hamstrings, glutes, and upper back, notice the breath expand across the front of the torso in this balance of effort and ease

**Notes:** walk the feet wider if there is knee pain, draw the tailbone towards the calf muscles to create more space in the low back

**Variations:** grip the outer edges of the mat(A) and draw shoulders down and towards the spine, place a block under the sacrum for a supported bridge pose (B)

**Figure 50. Psoas Stretch**



**Alignment Cues:** begin in a supported bridge pose, lengthen one leg and bring heel to the floor, then the other leg, bring the arms out to the sides of the body, palms up, keep the glutes engaged

**For Singers:** lengthens the psoas muscle which is attached to the diaphragm by fascia and ligament, tight psoas muscles can push the ribs forward, drawing the breath up and causing an overuse of the neck muscles, stretching the psoas muscle helps to stimulate the vagus nerve and lower heartrate

**Notes:** lengthen one leg at a time if that is more comfortable

**Variations:** adjust the levels of the block

**Figure 51. Savasana Variation / Constructive Rest**



**Alignment Cues:** lie on the back, hands resting on the ribcage, walk the feet to the edges of the mat and allow the knees to fall together

**For Singers:** a restorative pose, bring attention to sensations of the breath and length of the inhale and exhale, release expectations of a “singer’s breath” here and notice the natural rhythm of the breath

**Notes:** do this pose after deep backbends to bring the pelvis back to neutral

**Variations:** allows arms to rest out at the sides of the body with palms up or down

**Figure 52. Jathara Parivrtti / Supine Lateral Bend**



**Alignment Cues:** lie on back with straight legs, arms reaching overhead on the floor, walk both legs to the right and reach arms back to the right, outer hip stays on the mat

**For Singers:** deep stretch on the left side of the body, including between the ribs, lengthening and movement of the spine

**Notes:** also known as C-shape or banana shape, bend the elbows if there is shoulder discomfort, cross the left ankle over the right for a more intense stretch

**Variations:** keep the legs center and only stretch the arms to the sides

**Figure 53. Supta Masyendrasana / Reclined Spinal Twist**



**Alignment Cues:** lie on the back and draw knees to the chest, lower both knees to one side, open the arms to a T-shape with palms facing up

**For Singers:** deep stretch of the spinal muscles, gently compresses the belly and stretches the hip and neck muscles, keep the length across the chest on the inhale and soften the outer shoulder on the exhale

**Notes:** breathe deeply in the twist, inhale to lengthen the spine, exhale to soften into the twist

**Variations:** bend elbows to make goal-post arms, take the left arm to the legs to soften the twist, put a pillow between the knees

**Figure 54. Supta Prasarita Padangusthasana / Happy Baby Pose**



**Alignment Cues:** lie on the back, draw knees in towards chest, let knees fall to the sides of the ribs, bring hands behind the thighs, keeping knees bent, lift heels up and grip outer edges of the feet or loop up the big toes with fingers 2 and 3

**For Singers:** deep stretch in muscles of lower back, back or legs, and inner thighs, notice the inhale sensations in the backside of the ribs, the low back and belly, and pelvic floor

**Notes:** happy baby pose can be still or rock side to side

**Variations:** leave hands behind the thighs, and let heels release towards the backs of the thighs

**Figure 55. Savasana / Corpse Pose**

**Alignment Cues:** lie on the mat with legs extend and arms comfortably at the sides, allow feet to fall open

**For Singers:** provides deep relaxation and calms the breath, no effort is required here – just a surrender to ease

**Notes:** resist the temptation to fall asleep

**Variations:** savasana can be done in any position where muscular effort can be released, use props if preferred

## Chapter 5 - Yoga in the Voice Studio

*A note from the author: The information shared in this chapter is based on 22 years of observation in my private voice teaching and voice learning. I have worked with young singers in middle school, high school, and college. I have had my own yoga practice for the same number of years. In those two decades I have studied many forms of movement including musical theatre and jazz dance, tap, Movement Fundamentals, Nia (neuromuscular integrative action), and yoga. I have been teaching yoga for just over two years. I have been influenced by many voice and movement teachers through books and live instruction. The connections I have made between yoga and singing and share in this chapter are based on my own thoughts and experiences as a result of this life-long study.*

Should a voice teacher bring yoga into their voice studio without a certification in yoga teaching? While it would certainly be beneficial, it is not required. A familiarity and dedication to their own yoga practice will largely influence how they incorporate this into voice teaching. It is necessary for a teacher to have experienced the benefits and made the mind-body connections on their own before teaching it to their students. The frequency and preferred asana will then match the style of the teacher, the needs of the student, and the goals of the lesson.

Consider the high school voice student who comes to a lesson after a full school day and before sports practice or dance rehearsal and then homework. This is 30-60 minutes of singing that could be energizing and efficient if the singer is in the right frame of mind. High school students are often over-scheduled and overwhelmed. Starting a voice lesson with a short breathing exercise followed by 3-4 yoga postures can help set the student up for successful learning and singing. There is a solid chance this student has paid little attention to their breath

throughout the day. Invite the student to begin by noticing the breath moving in and out of their nose. Let them remember the breath exists in their body before adding phonation. Ask the student where they notice expansion. Discourage any kind of judgement or story around what they notice, they are simply looking for expansion in the body. Invite them to notice the back side of the body. As people move through their day, it is easy to forget the back of the body is even there. Then invite the student to notice their inhale and expansion again, then the exhale. Maybe the exhale is an opportunity to release the shoulders. Inhale for expansion, exhale to release more tension – palms, jaw, forehead, neck. Now that the mind has had a moment to settle, the student can more easily access these body and breath sensations. This is an opportunity for the voice teacher to address breath as it relates to singing.

Once the student is present with their breath, yoga postures can be added to the warm-up. Begin with neck stretches while continuing the breath awareness. Reach the arms up and do a side bend to both sides, then hinging at the hips for a forward fold. Sway side to side and find a release in the low back and neck. Roll the spine back up and do a standing spinal twist to each side. Next, step one leg wide, bend the knees and lower the hips back for a squat. This is a great opportunity to invite awareness of the pelvic floor with the appoggio breath. Return to a standing position and gripping a strap, lift the arms up and back to open the shoulders and chest.

Another option for a more advanced student, or a well-coordinated singer, is to move through a sequence of yoga poses during vocal warm-ups. Hold a deep squat while working on agility. Work on long phrases in a standing twist to challenge the breath. Move from warrior 2 to peaceful warrior back to warrior 2 while lip-trilling up and down an octave. Test the singer's balance in tree pose while singing a vocalize. These same examples could apply to difficult passages in a student's repertoire. Invite the student to notice how the experience differs while

singing in a yoga pose and then discover why. Is it a sense of widening and expanding? Is it finding strength in the foundation of the legs and feet? Is it access to pelvic floor sensations during the inhale? Invite the student to choose a pose as a way to encourage their own sense of body awareness and self-discovery. This builds trust in their own body and trust in the teacher-student relationship. Remind them that all results are okay, that this is a process of curiosity and discovery. Allow time to talk about why and where the singing and body felt different.

Encourage students to ask themselves these questions in their own private practicing. Many artists enjoy the process of journaling and could document their findings through writing in a journal. Some students will need more prompting than others. Similar to the eye doctor asking, “Is it better with one or two?” these singers may need the instructor to ask them to notice specific sensations until they have a better awareness on their own. If the responses from students are quite broad, ask more questions to narrow their sensory focus and help them identify what it is they are trying to find. It is important for both teacher and student to have patience and compassion while working in this vulnerable space. While there are timelines in the studio when preparing for performances or auditions, the body does not follow that same schedule. A singer comes into the studio with so much history and those experiences are stored in the body.

Working with the voice and the body can bring feelings and experiences to the surface that may need attention and time to work through. Teachers can hold space for that and stay within their scope of practice by providing professional resources if needed. There are people, like Meghan Durham of Respire Vocal Wellness, who are doing the research on the effect of trauma on the singing voice. It is helpful to remind students that tapping into strong emotions is a normal response when working with the breath and body so deeply while singing. The diaphragm is stimulating the vagus nerve and so is the voice. In an ideal studio space, this is telling the body it

is safe, and emotions that need to be expressed are going to come to the surface. If it brings a lesson to a stop, restorative yoga postures and calming breath patterns are a helpful tool for both student and teacher. The fluid motion of the spine in a seated cat/cow will start to calm the body and breath. Seated twists and seated pigeon are gentle choices. Before coming back to the lesson, lead the student through a few rounds of breath with an elongated exhale. This might allow the student to feel ready to resume the lesson.

There are many yogic options to explore within the lesson. The more familiar the instructor is with a yoga practice, the more ideas they will have and the more creative they can be with students. It is important to remember that each student will have a different comfort level with movement. It is the job of the instructor to create a safe container (the studio) so the student feels able to make brave choices. This is how the benefits of a yoga practice become embodied and can be applied to the process of singing. After these practices are established in the private lesson and into a student's own practicing, a teacher can bring this process into low-risk performances, such as the group studio class or a masterclass. The stakes are slightly higher here but there is space to play and experiment for an audience as well. Let the observers notice what works and what does not and talk about why. Include the performer. Where do they feel specific sensations in their body – the breath, the text, nervousness? Then try singing the same thing but without the yoga poses to see if results change. This trial-and-error process is helping the singer build trust in their body and voice, and their relationship to each other. If a singer has performance anxiety, no amount of rationalizing and practice will take that away if they do not understand why their body is reacting the way it is, where the sensations are originating, how the anxiety shows up in their body, and how to react. A well-established yoga practice will equip a singer with the skills of awareness and provide a sense of grounding during times of stress.

When singers develop a yoga practice, it presents themselves with an opportunity to use their bodies without performance expectations. Performers require much of their bodies and a yoga class can be very therapeutic. Moving slowly and in opposition to habitual direction is a soothing and restorative practice of self-care. Prioritizing physical, mental, and emotional down-regulation in a demanding schedule is crucial to a sustainable performance career and will enhance their overall well-being.

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