

The Vocal Athlete

Application and Technique for the Hybrid Singer

Third Edition

**Marci Rosenberg
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Preface

hy•brid sing•er (n). refers to the vocal athlete who is highly skilled in multiple vocal styles possessing a solid vocal technique that is responsive, adaptable, and sustainable to meet the demands of current and ever-evolving vocal music industry genres.

Voice teachers today are often expected to be skilled in teaching and cultivating multiple vocal styles encompassing classical to pop, musical theater, and more. Since the publication of the first edition of this text, more vocal pedagogy training programs focusing on contemporary commercial music (CCM) vocal styles have emerged. Despite this, most vocal pedagogy degrees in the United States are focused on Western classical pedagogy despite the continued growing need for competent CCM voice teachers. We initially conceptualized this book to help bridge a gap in the vocal pedagogy world by compiling a collection of CCM voice exercises for voice teachers of all levels to use as a resource in their studios/practices. Designed to dovetail with its companion singing science, pedagogy, and vocal health textbook, *The Vocal Athlete* (LeBorgne & Rosenberg, 2024), this book contains over 90 CCM voice exercises from some of the most well-respected and sought-after CCM voice experts internationally.

How to Use This Book

The exercises presented in this book represent numerous techniques shared by the contributors. We divided the book into two primary sections. Section I encompasses exercises for the mind and body, including mental focus, breathing, alignment, and jaw/tongue relaxation exercises. Section II focuses on technical vocal work, including vocal warm-up and cooldown, registration, and style-specific exercises. Readers will note that some exercises may be used in both habilitative and rehabilitative settings; however, the intent of the exercises included in this book is for the *vocally*

healthy singer, and none of the exercises should cause vocal strain, fatigue, or discomfort. Further, if a singer or teacher notes the onset of new voice difficulties such as voice fatigue, change in quality, or loss of range in the absence of an obvious illness, a laryngeal examination from a laryngologist is warranted.

In the vocal pedagogy arena, most vocal exercises stem from experiences, personal training, and input from multiple teachers. Vocal exercises have been handed down from teacher to student, who then becomes a teacher. These exercises evolve and change over time. Many of the exercises included in this collection are modifications and adaptations from former voice teachers or other methods. Contributors' backgrounds and experiences draw from a variety of arenas, from performance psychology and physical therapy to prestigious voice teachers and speech pathologists/singing voice specialists.

Although some exercises included in this workbook may seem similar, each contributor brings a unique perspective to their exercise. As with almost all vocal pedagogy techniques, none of the exercises included have been rigorously researched for efficacy in their specific format, but they have proven to be empirically effective through the experience of the pedagogues who have used them for years. The present authors believe that there are many ways to approach the same vocal problem or issue. However, a vocal exercise is only effective if the teacher has firmly established the intent and purpose of that exercise for a given student's vocal needs/development/growth. A teacher must be prepared to modify and adapt in the moment as needed.

Vocal pedagogy is not about learning a broad recipe of exercises to use systematically across all students. Voice pedagogy is about choosing exercises that are appropriate not only for the moment but also for the long-term development of the student. It is about recognizing when a student requires modification or adaptation, knowing when to push a student, and when to pause. Effective pedagogy is not about goals and outcomes; it is about the learning process and experience that leads to the outcome. It is knowing

that instability is welcomed and part of the learning process and understanding that sometimes a teacher's role is to merely "poke the boat" and then get out of the way, allowing the student's nervous system to get back on course and reorganize on its own around a new task. None of these attributes are conveyed through merely an exercise. At this level of understanding, vocal pedagogy becomes an art form in addition to a science.

Several exercises include either photographs or audio clips to help augment understanding of how to execute that exercise. Readers are encouraged to continue to explore these exercises beyond what is written on the page or provided as an online resource. We have taken care to relate exercises back to the textbook

when applicable to provide the reader with a broader framework for reference and consideration. As stated previously, with a broader context and understanding, teachers are encouraged to play, experiment, modify, and adapt exercises and techniques to suit the specific needs of their students. Additionally, if the exercise ultimately does not yield the intended outcome, it is incumbent upon the teacher to reassess and modify to suit the specific needs of the student, for it is the process that is important, not a specific exercise. We encourage you to explore and experiment. Not all exercises will appeal to every teacher or learner. Take what is useful, and modify and adapt to the needs of your students.

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SECTION I

Preparing the Singer's Mind and Body

Introduction and Overview

Given the physical demands of many contemporary commercial music styles, this section includes exercises that help provide a holistic foundation for efficient performance. The exercises included in this section address the singer (mentally and physically) as a whole. We included exercises to promote mental focus and centering as well as exercises for posture, alignment, and breathing. Stretch and relaxation exercises for jaw and tongue are also included in this section.

Chapter 1: Exercises for Mental Focus

Chapter 1 begins with a variety of exercises designed to promote mental focus and centering. We open with Lynn Holding, who introduces a nonpractice, practice strategy using *motor imagery without muscular activation*. Barbara Walker (performance psychologist) provides guided meditation to center the breath and clear the mind. This exercise can be useful to increase mental focus and reduce performance anxiety, allowing the performer to reduce apprehension and feel mentally prepared for performance. Robert Sussuma takes the reader through a voice scan exercise to increase the singer's awareness and kinesthetic feedback of their instrument prior to active voice use or performance. This exercise may be useful for singers who are kinesthetically "blocked" with reduced awareness of what

they are sensing and experiencing when singing. He also presents a Feldenkrais-based lesson on reorganizing the vocal tract. Joanna Cazden's exercise also promotes self-discovery of the voice but with a unique intention. Her exercise encourages the creation of a dialogue with your voice to explore feelings and emotions about your vocal history with the intention of moving past vocal negativity and frustration, allowing the singer to move toward a healthier vocal viewpoint. This type of exercise can be useful for singers who currently have or are having vocal issues or injuries, as it gives the singer a method to verbalize and express fears and emotions associated with singing while facilitating a process of re-establishing a level of trust with the vocal instrument. Jessica Baldwin describes creative tools to build stronger connections between the artist and the authentic sounds they aim to make. Jeremy Mossman's vocal exploration exercise provides an enjoyable arena for a singer to explore various qualities of vocal sounds outside of the context of singing. This exercise has usefulness from a cross-training perspective allowing for the exploration of a variety of vocal colors and nuances that can be drawn upon for performance. Martin Spencer introduces several variations of a mental focus and breathing exercise including a group mental focus exercise to connect and synchronize multiple people through movement and breath. He encourages this exercise to unify and optimize the ensemble dynamic. The scale of vocal effort (SoVE) rating scale described by Marci Rosenberg is designed to heighten the singer's awareness of their baseline level of perceived vocal effort expended for various vocal tasks. The intention of this exercise is to increase

awareness of vocal effort and establish a consistent internal scale allowing the singer to self-monitor for subtle changes in vocal effort. In addition, Rosenberg introduces a new voice-tracking tool inspired by Dr. Bastian's "mucosal ceiling" checks. Given the variety of settings and environments, the vocal athlete performs in, this is a useful tool for singers to internally gauge possible vocal issues before they become problematic over a longer period.

Chapter 2: Physical Stretches and Alignment

Chapter 2 includes a collection of exercises designed to stretch, release, and align the body. This chapter begins with Sarah Schneider's exercise using body movement to draw attention away from areas of tension, creating a "constructive distraction" to free vocal sound. Marya Cordes provides an Alexander-based stretch, movement, and vocalization exercise to promote fluidity throughout the body in preparation for singing. Marina Gilman's two Feldenkrais-based exercises dovetail nicely to balance the head and release the neck and shoulders while singing. Caroline Helton's "Climbing the Ladder" exercise is used to open the torso and rib cage. Physical therapist Jill Nader's exercise provides a set of stretches and myofascial release techniques for the upper body, serving to both improve posture and increase mobility and range of motion of the rib cage, chest, and upper back. Suzan Postel describes a posture and alignment exercise to neutralize posture and connect the body to the breath. Sarah Maines adds to these by providing an exercise promoting stretch and freedom in the lower back explicitly designed for vocal athletes.

Chapter 3: Stretches and Exercises for Breathing

Although breathing is incorporated into several of the exercises throughout this book, Chapter 3 includes a handful of specific breathing exercises for the vocal athlete. Erin Donahue and Wendy D. LeBorgne provide a set of exercises designed to prepare the respiratory

system through chest and abdominal stretches and contractions of the respiratory muscles. Joan Melton describes two techniques to free the abdominal muscles and connect the voice to the body. Barbara Fox DeMaio provides a specialized exercise for building breath stamina in the aging voice. Bari Hoffman Ruddy and Adam Lloyd provide a stylized breathing exercise for vocalists who engage in vocal percussion. This exercise trains the coordination and agility needed for this unique contemporary commercial music skill.

Chapter 4: Stretching and Relaxation for Jaw and Tongue

As the jaw and tongue are often problematic across various CCM (contemporary commercial music) vocal styles, we included a chapter specifically addressing issues related to jaw and tongue tension release. The first two exercises are provided by Miriam van Mersbergen. Exercise one is composed of four individual exercises to stretch and relax the four primary muscles of the jaw. Her second exercise addresses the relationship between the back of the tongue and the jaw. Van Mersbergen also provided guidelines to promote a healthy jaw. Physical therapist Walt Fritz provided a self-treatment protocol for the jaw. Christina Jackson-Menaldi provided an exercise combining phonation with a base of tongue release. This useful sequence is helpful for singers who struggle with tongue tension. Finally, Tracy Bourne adds another base of tongue release exercise with vocalizations on both staccato and legato patterns.

The exercises provided in this section have relevance for numerous singing styles. They can be used in preparation to sing, during active training to relax muscles or realign posture, and as part of a cooldown to recalibrate as needed. Singers may discover that their needs will vary from day to day and across different vocal demands. Furthermore, alignment posture, and general musculoskeletal integrity, can be impacted by a variety of factors such as the physicality of a role or even a cumbersome headpiece (see Chapter 1 of *The Vocal Athlete* text). The importance of regularly tuning into one's body and psyche to determine what is needed is a vital component of the vocal training regimen, and this practice should be established early in the vocal training regimen.



Exercises for Mental Focus

The No-Practice Practice Routine: A Mental Practice Regimen

Lynn Holding

Purpose of Exercise

It is well established in the motor learning literature that “whenever possible, physical practice is preferable to mental practice for learning” (Schmidt et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there are at least three scenarios in which robust physical voice practice is either unwise or impossible, yet some kind of practice is warranted. In these situations, singers should consider the myriad benefits of mental practice, also called motor imagery (MI), simply defined as “the mental rehearsal of an action without engaging in actual movement” (Moran et al., 2012).

Origin of Exercise

I developed this exercise based on research for my book *The Musician’s Mind: Teaching, Learning, & Performance in the Age of Brain Science* (Holding, 2020). The initial discoveries of the mirror neuron system in humans revealed that simply thinking of actions we already know how to do causes the motor neurons responsible for those actions to fire as well. In voice,

MI has shown a remarkable capacity to evoke activity in the motor neurons responsible for speech without actually making a sound (Watkins et al., 2003).

Overview of Exercise

This exercise was designed for performers to use when it is either not advisable or not possible to use the voice to its full extent, yet when practice is still needed, specifically in the following three scenarios. (*Note:* The intended cohort is intermediate to very skilled singers but not rank beginners, simply because beginners do not yet possess the solidified “motor map” for cultivated singing.)

- 1. Same Day:** On a performance day, while a light vocal warm-up is wise, it is generally unwise to use the voice to its full volume capacity or sing excessively for long periods of time; singers should budget their vocal resources on a performance day and preserve them for the performance itself. Nevertheless, singers should still focus on the upcoming performance, especially if there is a significant amount of memorization involved (music, text, movement, staging, or a combination). MI can solve these same-day conundrums.
- 2. Recovery:** In the case of illness or injury when it is not possible to use the voice at all, MI can be recommended because it takes the

brain through the movements cognitively, yet with no impact stress on the vocal folds. “Movement planning” is an integral part of motor performance, and MI has shown itself to be an effective supplemental practice strategy for athletes as well as surgeons in training (Weinberg, 2008).

- 3. Performance Anxiety:** In the final days leading up to a performance, it is fairly impossible to refrain from thinking about it. Yet worrying about the performance (also called “excessive rumination,” a common symptom of music performance anxiety [MPA]), could cause the performer to overpractice and deplete their vocal budget, not to mention the deleterious effects on mental health caused by worrying. While there is no cure for MPA, there are strategies that have been shown to be effective in ameliorating it; one of those strategies is “deliberate practice” (Ericsson et al., 1993). Since MI is specific, planned, and cognitively effortful, it is a form of “deliberate practice.” In addition, during MI, the script of what happens is up to the doer; since preplanning of motor execution is an integral part of motor performance, it is theorized that actual performance can be improved when imagined as successfully accomplished beforehand.

- **General Benefits of the No-Practice-Practice Routine:** Given that no singer has an infinite daily voice budget from which to draw, this exercise is equally beneficial as a practice supplement for healthy voices when one has simply reached one’s daily vocal limit.

Exercise

- 1. Step One:** Sit or slightly recline in a quiet room and close your eyes to shut out all extraneous stimuli.
- A full supine (or lying down) position is not recommended because it might cause you to fall asleep; sitting or slightly reclining is better for MI practice because rather than trying to empty your mind, you will be aiming for heightened cognition.
- 2. Step Two:** Take yourself through each and every phase of your performance, starting with the moment you take the stage. For example, a standard voice recital might be scripted like this:
- walk out on stage
 - bow
 - turn slightly to your collaborator(s), close your eyes momentarily, and compose yourself
 - gather the first line of the song text in your mind
 - open your eyes
 - turn to face the audience
 - sing
 - sing through each recital set, making sure to bow, exit, and reenter the stage for each set
- 3. Step Three:** It is recommended that you imagine pleasure, delight, gratitude, or joy as attending emotions throughout the exercise. Rehearsing recurring thoughts such as, “I love to sing this song” or “I am so grateful to be here,” can inculcate personal agency as well as guard against excessive MPA.

Notes

- It is important to note that practicing MI is not the same as meditation. In meditation, the aim is often simply observation, with no goal in mind. Partly because of this, mind-wandering is common during meditation, especially in the beginning of establishing a meditation practice. By contrast, this “No-Practice Practice Routine” is goal oriented and is also cognitively effortful.
- Aim to stay mentally with each of your movements. Take yourself through each phase of your performance in real-time; this is important—do not skip around or go ahead. Mentally manage each phase of the movement. If your mind wanders or you skip any component of your performance, reset, go back, and try again.
- Practice with maximal cognitive effort. Think of it as a real workout for your brain cells.
- Throughout the exercise, you should aim to actually feel the movements yourself rather than just mentally observing yourself doing them. If you achieve the former, you may notice slight muscular movements and/or twitching of lip

and tongue muscles. Some singers even prefer to mouth the text silently. Experiment with what works best for you, as long as you are not whispering or voicing (i.e., the vocal folds should not vibrate).

- If any technique or portion of your program is difficult in reality, go deep into this difficulty (mentally) rather than imagining yourself cruising past it. Know that you are preplanning your motor program for real performance; why not plan for a successful outcome?
- Be sure to include positive emotions for yourself as a performer throughout the exercise.



Centering the Breath

Barbara J. Walker

Purpose of Exercise

- To encourage relaxation of the vocal tract
- To create whole-body relaxation and clear the mind from performance anxiety on cue
- To allow one to feel in control of their body and mind before and during performance, allowing for optimal performance

Origin of Exercise

This exercise is based on diaphragmatic breathing, which is a well-known exercise that Zen masters and spiritual leaders have been using for centuries and psychologists and yoga instructors for decades. Focusing on the breath allows one to be aware of and have the capacity to take control of one's mind and body. Utilizing cue words and phrases is based in cognitive psychology.

Overview of Exercise

When singers are experiencing stress or performance anxiety, it is usually a result of negative or anxious thoughts or images about their performance rather

than an actual threat or emergency. This reaction may occur after there has been an error at a previous performance or if they have just recovered from an injury, and now they may be feeling anxious that they will not be able to perform optimally. Regardless, their body reacts to these thoughts as if a true emergency were occurring, a fight-or-flight response. From this reaction, which is driven by a conscious or subconscious thought or image in their mind, their breathing may naturally become shallow and rapid. A vicious cycle then begins, and the singer may also experience the physiological symptoms of an increased heart rate, sweating, muscle tension, decreased oxygen intake, dry mouth, and sudden loss of energy or feelings of fatigue. Mentally, they may experience worry, feeling overwhelmed and out of control, and loss of concentration (sometimes losing track of where they were in a song or forgetting words). Behaviorally, this may cause them to sing more quickly and/or have a disrupted/broken voice. All these symptoms can be triggered by a single anxious thought or image.

To ward off any anxiety, in addition to being prepared mentally and physically for their performance, singers visualizing themselves performing well is also very helpful. Implementing this simple-centered breathing technique at the right time will keep the stress symptoms at bay and will also allow one to recover quickly if any of the previously discussed anxiety symptoms develop.

Exercise

When first learning this exercise, it is best to find a quiet environment and a place where you feel comfortable closing your eyes. After the exercise is mastered, it can be accomplished in any environment.

1. You can begin learning this exercise either by lying down on your back or simply sitting up in a chair. Begin by placing one hand on your upper chest and the other just below the rib cage. This will allow you to feel the diaphragm move as you breathe.
2. Breathe in slowly through the nose (if possible) so that the stomach moves out against the hand. The hand on the chest should remain as still as possible.

3. Tighten the stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale through the mouth.
4. As you feel comfortable with the rhythm of the breath, visualize your chest and heart muscles loosening and opening up, and visualize your breath coming up and down your chest smoothly and easily.
5. Silently to yourself, count the number of seconds it takes you to inhale, and then make it equal to your exhale, for example, inhale 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and then exhale 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. If you find yourself having any thoughts other than counting going through your mind, count as loudly as you need to inside your mind, allowing any other thoughts to dissipate.
6. After you have become fluid with your breathing and counting, you will experience a specific feeling state. What words best describe how you feel: Peaceful? Calm? Relaxed? Quiet? Clear? Ready? Energized? Identify two words that you feel when you breathe and relate that to how you feel when you perform (for example, Confident and Clear, Focused and Relaxed).
7. Whenever a performance is drawing near or if you begin to experience any anxiety symptoms, I suggest repeating these cue words to yourself along with the breath or simply begin the breath along with the counting. With practice, even with just a couple of breaths, this technique will allow you to override and avert any stressful or anxious feelings you may have.

How Often Should I Practice This Exercise?

At first, practice this exercise for 5 to 10 min about three to four times per day to master the breath. A great time to practice this exercise is at nighttime, just as you are going to bed. Once the breath is mastered, implement the breath about 30 min prior to a performance or just before you typically begin to feel any anxiety symptoms.

Vocal Athlete Laryngeal Release/Throat Chakra Meditation



Wendy D. LeBorgne

Purpose of Exercise

- To release throat tension
- To create a positive focus in the laryngeal area
- To open the throat chakra

Origin of Exercise

This exercise evolved from coursework this author undertook in partial fulfillment of an integrative medicine certification. In traditional ayurvedic medicine, the fifth chakra is considered the “throat chakra” (vishuddha). The word chakra is a Sanskrit word translating to “wheel” or wheel of energy. The throat chakra is considered the area of the body where you literally and figuratively find and use your voice. As a vocal athlete, the freedom of expression through your voice is essential. In addition to freedom of vocal expression, in ayurvedic tradition, throat chakra freedom is associated with engaged listening to others. Depending on the tradition, most chakras have an associated color, frequency, and matra syllable associated with them. Typically, the throat chakra color association is blue, the frequency is 741 Hz, and the associated matra syllable is Ē ham. Typically, it takes many years to fully cultivate meditation practices within the authentic ayurvedic tradition.

Overview of Exercise

This exercise is a simple 5-min meditation that focuses on the vocal athlete awareness and freedom within the throat chakra. All vocal athletes present with varying degrees of stress that may impact their throat, and this simple 5-min exercise is designed to bring awareness and freedom to the throat chakra so that the vocal athlete can freely use all aspects of voice and associated components of an open throat chakra.

Exercise

For this exercise, it is recommended that the vocal athlete utilize headphones/earbuds. For optimal experience, noise-cancelling headphones are preferred. Additionally, you may complete this exercise in a sitting, standing, or laying position. It is recommended that this exercise be completed daily as continued daily practice of meditation has been shown to improve awareness and focus.



The Voice Scan

Robert Sussuma

Purpose of Exercise

The purpose of this scan is to bring one's awareness to the sensations of the vocal mechanism at rest in preparation for sound and movement. By paying close attention to these sensations before and after singing, we are better able to know our instrument and track the many changes that occur along the way, allowing us to move and sing with more accuracy and clarity of intention.

Origin of Exercise

In the Feldenkrais method, almost every lesson begins with a body scan. The purpose of the scan is to notice how we sense ourselves and what we are aware of *before* we do a lesson (or exercise) so that when we do and things change, we can compare the changes to what we sensed at the beginning of the lesson.

One of Moshe Feldenkrais' most famous utterances was: "When you know what you are doing, you can do what you want!" This is a provocative statement. Do we really know what we are doing as singers or otherwise? And, if we do not really know what we are doing, how can we do what we want, especially with our voice?

Overview of the Exercise

The voice scan will systematically guide you through sensing your vocal apparatus so that you can become more and more aware of the background sensations connected to your voice. This will form the sensory foundation for all the intricate movements associated with each sound you can and will make. As this sense grows, one can more easily move away from just listening to the sound or relying on others to know what one is doing.

Exercise

Lie on your back. Sense your contact with the floor. Notice your heels, your legs, your pelvis, your lower and upper back, your ribs, your shoulders and arms, your neck and head. Which parts feel heavier or lighter? How is your right side different from your left?

Bring your awareness to your face. Notice the expression. How soft are your eyes, your cheeks, your lips?

Bring your awareness to your jaw. How heavy is your jaw? How big is it? How does your jaw connect to your skull?

Leave that, and now, naturally, without doing anything special, begin to pay attention to your breathing: the timing, the shape, the movement as you inhale and exhale.

Now, with your mouth closed, breathe through your nose and ask yourself:

How does the air get from the nostrils to the lungs?

How much of your airway can you actually sense as you inhale and exhale?

Which parts are clear to you, and which parts are murky or confusing?

Which parts do not even seem to be there at all?

(I have found that most people have a clear sense of the air passing through their nostrils and may even clearly