

only 100,000 yrs. ago



It's as natural as breathing," goes the saying — implying that, of all human activities, inhaling and exhaling set the standard for simplicity. But what happens when we breathe not merely to fuel ourselves with oxygen, as we all do every five seconds or so, but to support an inherently unnatural activity like singing opera arias? Last May, in New York, I asked someone who ought to know. I'd be surprised to learn that even once in the course of her long career Dame Joan Sutherland found herself onstage without enough breath to do her work.

OPERA NEWS: A discussion of breathing is obviously the starting point for any consideration of how to sing.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: I think so. But today it's not always the starting point for young people, many of whom don't seem to conquer the art of breathing, supporting and projecting the voice. Instead of projecting, they tend to push the voice, and they have very little nuance. They just have a voice that's loud, louder and loudest. The breath control hasn't been worked on sufficiently. I remember asking one young person in a class that Richard [Bonyng] and I were giving, "What does your teacher tell you about breathing?" And she came back with the answer, "My teacher says breathing will take care of itself."

extend my rib cage." Then you let as little breath escape as possible. The sound is the minimum amount of breath passing over the vocal cords, which you then project with your vocal resonating cavities — the mouth, the cheekbones. You control that sound by the way you shape your mouth and allow your sound to project — against the front of the hard palate, using the hard palate to control and shape the sounds, to sing loudly or softly, to sweeten the quality, to warm the sound. The lips then form the actual words.

ON: That's a very useful précis of how to sing. Let's move back for a moment to the first step of that process — inhaling.

JS: You can't talk about breathing without talking about support. You can't just breathe and think that's how you sing. You have to feel that uplift of the body and a certain tension — a reflex tension down deep. It's hard to explain. I've made some notes from treatises that are important in their discussion of this. One was an article called "The Bel Canto, with Particular Reference to the Singing of Mozart," written by Herman Klein and published as far back as 1923 by Oxford University Press, then reprinted in 1990 in a wonderful book called *Herman Klein and the Gramophone* (Amadeus Press).

JAMES M. KELLER questions JOAN SUTHERLAND about the cornerstone of singing — breathing and breath support

Well, that's a cop-out of the first degree, because without the support of the voice on the breath, all the breath is going to escape with the voice, and you're going to end up with a "breathy" emission, uncertain pitch and probably a wobble. Breathing is the whole basis of singing.

ON: In Jerome Hines' book *Great Singers on Great Singing*, you said your mother gave you breathing exercises when you were a young girl.

JS: She did tell me that you took the breath and made a sort of hiatus, then you were locked in from the lower part of the chest, using the diaphragm as a solid base for the thrust of the voice. She didn't really go that far into it. But somehow or other, I watched her breathing, and I cottoned on.

Much later in my career, I heard the theory of breathing as though you had a happy surprise: a quick intake of breath, then you sustain that intake — some say you thrust the tummy forward, but I think it's more of a tuck in — then you feel the pressure of that breath against the ribs and in the back. With the diaphragm you react to the breath. You also feel support rather like guy-ropes on a tent; the tent-pegs are in the pelvis, and you feel that sustaining power right down into the pelvis. The breath then should float on that solid plinth, and as you breathe you extend the rib cage. It's a reflex — you don't think "I'm going to

also Garcia Jr

ON: What do Lamperti and García tell us about breathing?
JS: I'll quote from "The Bel Canto" — "Although scientific breathing stands both at the base and the apex of the whole vocal structure, it is, nevertheless, the thing most neglected and most misunderstood in the average modern practice of this art. One cannot too frequently repeat the words of Maria Celloni: 'Chi sa respirare sa cantar' (He who knows how to breathe knows how to sing)."

The old Italians advocated *respirare e poi appoggiare* (inhale, and then support the breath). And that's what I say, inhale — the "happy surprise" — and you have the voice sitting on this "strained" area down by the stomach/diaphragm. One takes the breath as if one reacts to the happy surprise, and then sustains that position. The diaphragm takes control, together with support

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from the pelvic area — as if with guy-ropes, as I said. Then the breath is impelled upwards, into the chest, towards the throat (where it becomes tone), towards the resonators (where it becomes the voice). The whole process is a single physical movement, with a smooth, even exhalation, best not in the throat or with any perceptible action of the glottis. All through, you feel something like a tension — but a feeling of strength, too — of those muscles actually helping you sustain the sound. If you breathe sloppily, you get wobbly sound, because there's no direction to it. Or you get breathy sound by letting all the breath escape. You don't sing *with* the breath, but rather *on* the breath, and you let as little escape as possible to project the sound.

It's as though there were this column of air, and you're supporting the sound like a ping-pong ball on the column of air or on a column of water. And that's how it *should* feel. You don't let the fountain go mingling with the ping-pong ball. Sounds silly, doesn't it? Something one has done for so many years — I know what I did, but it's hard to explain.

ON: Should one inhale through the mouth or the nose?

JS: A lot is discussed about closing the mouth and breathing through the nose. If you are singing coloratura passages, like the finale of the study scene in *Lucrezia Borgia*, when you're doing the cabaletta part with Gennaro, telling him to flee, flee — well, you haven't got time to close your mouth, breathe through your nose and then sing. You *have* to take a breath through the mouth. I would never have been able to sing coloratura passages if I had kept closing my mouth to breathe. There's no time.

ON: Is the principal objection to breathing through the mouth that it dries out the mechanism?

JS: Well, it can, if you intake air that way. If you lie on your back

and start snoring, you get a dry throat. But I really don't see [that as a problem], if the breath is taken correctly, then when you do have a chance to shut your mouth, and lick your lips, and bite your tongue, and cause your saliva to flow again — well, there you go. It simply cuts out one thing to do. If you breathe through your mouth, your mouth is all relaxed and ready to go.

ON: Is there a best way to expel stale air that has not been used up?

JS: If you're singing arias, where there's no time to release stale air, you basically “top off” your air. You can't let the whole thing collapse. Yes, you can let it collapse when someone else is singing, and you can refresh yourself with ordinary breathing while somebody else carries on the performance. But even then, I think it is a case of not *really* letting it relax to the bottom, completely. Maybe sometimes you choose not to fill up as entirely as when you're going to sing “Casta Diva.” I don't think you ever let it all go — there's always that feeling of a plinth from the pelvis down, with the rest of the body supported by it. You don't stand stiffly, like a soldier on guard would, but you have a feeling almost of levitation, really.

ON: Do we all have sufficient musculature to do this correctly, or are there muscles that singers need to develop through exercises?

JS: There are exercises. You start off singing things like “mee, meh, mah, moh, moo,” and you go up the scale singing those syllables, or whole scales on “ee,” then “ah,” then “oh.” I started off with a mirror in front of me, and you don't want any film on the mirror. You develop it with practice, and it should be done right at the outset. It's not something that should be left till the singer has been studying for five years, then realizes there's something wrong.

Here's another thing, from Lamperti's *Vocal Wisdom* — “By dynamic force and compressed breath, not muscular effort, one

...they should know *how* they're singing.”

supports the voice.” You have to make some muscular effort to control the compressed air, but you still have to control the issue of that air. “The voice must have an inexhaustible supply of both vibration and breath power for each phrase, and you must be able to renew both without observable interruption of rhythm, tone or diction, while keeping continually coordinated.”

It's true, you have a lot of things to think about. But you have to think about them while you're learning, not while you're onstage singing a big role, which is what some of my colleagues did — and which I've seen young singers today do. Then they get panicky, and they can't sustain high notes or sustain phrases properly.

ON: Lamperti's comment on compressed breath reminds me of a metaphor I have heard teachers use, comparing the breathing mechanism to a bellows.

JS: It's true. It is a sort of bellows, actually. A continual motion, a continuous chain — breathe, support, project; breathe, support, project. It's so simple. People start talking about the false cords, and the pharynx and the larynx and the glottis. I studied physiology at school, so I had a pretty good idea of the parts of the body. But I don't want to hear about it when people are studying roles. By the time they get to be singing difficult arias, they should know *how* they're singing. Today, unfortunately, they're singing because they're musically adept. They're able to learn roles and isolated arias that are really quite beyond their vocal ability at that stage. They may improve, but if they try to sing things that are too difficult, they're not being fair to themselves.

ON: Is deep, pelvic breathing the only kind that's of value to the singer?

JS: Well, there are some passages about that in Lamperti. “The precept ‘breathe low’ means ‘control the breathing low in the

body.’... It is a mistake to breathe in just one part of the body. Abdominal breathing alone brings high focused voice. But it remains throaty, small. Diaphragmatic breath alone secures good diction” — they say — “but resonance of head and chest will be lacking. Clavicular breathing alone brings low resonance only. It destroys diction. When the top and bottom of the lungs are equally full of compressed air, the voice will focus in the head and awake all the resonance in head, mouth and chest. Diction then is master over all.... Head, neck and torso form a drumlike elastic unit, feeling hollow down to the waist” — almost levitating — “the rest of the body solid” — like a plinth. You really sing from head to foot.

ON: Lamperti maintains, then, that singing can take place even if one engages in, say, clavicular breathing?

JS: Yes, I've certainly seen it, rather like panting.

ON: I should think one would grow light-headed doing that.

JS: Ha! You can get light-headed doing the other, too, dear! Also from the resonance of the higher range, because you feel the vibrations. But singing, to me, was such a joy always — that great feeling of expansion and excitement, of being able to stand there and deliver, a wonderful feeling of exuberance that sometimes isn't in all the singing we hear. Sometimes what we hear is so constrained — and there are times you have to be constrained. But when you have wonderful roulades to toss off — well, toss 'em off! Give 'em to the public! Let 'em fly! But you still hang on with that basic breathing and support. □

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