

# **The Changing Female-To-Male (FTM) Voice: Pedagogical Notes**

## **Pedagogical Note 1: Retraining ourselves in diaphragmatic breathing**

For the novice, the best way to start is by relaxing in bed or on the floor. The FTM participant can use either his hands or a book for a form of weight placed right below the end of the sternum, with hands resting alongside the body if not in use. Since this exercise can take quite a while in the beginning, it is advisable for the beginner to raise the knees with two pillows to avoid straining the lower back. While trying to establish abdominal (diaphragmatic) breathing, it is also important to ensure that the transman is not slipping back into the old habit of using the upper chest to breathe. My own experience is that, unless a teacher is actually overseeing the practice, the student needs to create visible and audible warning signs that will be activated if his technique is not perfect. I myself remember using various noise-making-if-moved props attached to my upper chest as well as correctly placed mirrors.<sup>1</sup> The second stage, after establishing the right type of breathing, is to attempt to control it. The best way to start is by fully exhaling and then letting your diaphragm do the inhaling 'automatically'. Then the FTM participant should try to hold his breath while initially counting to three, and then five, seven, ten, etc. Once again one should exhale fully, and repeat as before. When this stage has been perfected, the participant should stand against the wall with legs forming a 45-degree angle to the wall and repeat the previous stage's instructions. When comfortable enough, an upright chair can be used. Finally, one should stand unsupported and repeat the same exercise. During each stage the transman needs to make sure that old incorrect breathing habits do not reoccur. Mirrors properly situated can be the best assistants for this task.

Those confident enough with their breathing technique should take care because bad habits, especially during the most challenging times in the vocal transition, can easily go unnoticed. In truth, regular supervision by a knowledgeable practitioner is advisable so that the principles of diaphragmatic breathing are observed. This way the vocal progress would be more stable and remain uninhibited by other than transitional factors.

## **Pedagogical Note 2: Daily Practice**

A. Five minutes of simple freestanding breathing exercises, to relax and warm up the whole vocal instrument. The student should exhale soundlessly through the mouth.

B. Perform the same exercise for five more minutes, with the difference that you should now exhale using the consonant V (formed by the closed lips). The pace should be initially slow and gradually accelerate.

C. Perform ten minutes of rhythmic breathing exercises using the consonants S, Z, soft S, and finally soft Z. You are allowed to improvise in the choice of rhythmic patterns. For example, I have been using a lot of dotted rhythms, as well as triplets and semi-quaver values in my daily routine. It is extremely important to remember that, no matter how vigorous the exercises are, when

the method of exhaling is proper, inhaling should happen automatically and with no signs of stress. If you notice otherwise, it is better to stop immediately and relax for a few minutes before completing the exercise (Alexander technique can prove very useful).

D. The next phase involves five minutes of exercising using pitch: initially this means indefinite pitch, in the form of 'sirens' with the mouth shut or 'Ng – sirens' with the mouth open. Try to explore your full range after warming up – this exercise cannot harm you.<sup>2</sup>

E. Perform exercises with definite pitch, involving rolling the letter R or doing lip trills on music patterns of easy to moderate difficulty. Please note: if the continuation 'line' on the exercise is breaking that implies incorrect use of breathing patterns and *appoggio*/support.

F. Apply the previous principles and vocal placement to exercises with soft open and closed vowels. Do not try to produce loud or 'full' sounds – during the dramatic changes in an FTM voice, the pitch cannot be controlled if the dynamics are louder than *mezzo piano*. Nevertheless, remember to keep the throat open and the soft palate raised! Do not be afraid to use your falsetto when it is finally acquired – it can actually help your singing and, contrary to its reputation as being effeminate, is truly an innate male vocal ability.

G. Finally, apply the principles of the previous exercises in singing parts from simple folk songs and later pieces from the Niccolò Vaccaj method (Italian and English edition).<sup>3</sup> It is better to obtain both high and low versions of the above book – your voice will change several times during your transition before reaching its final pitch. Therefore, feel free to transpose the pieces slightly, if required.

H. Only when you reach the final stages of your vocal transition should you try to sing something more demanding!

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more scientific method see Erik Peper and Vicci Tibbetts, *ELECTROMYOGRAPHY – Effortless Diaphragmatic Breathing* (San Francisco: Institute for Holistic Healing Studies, San Francisco State University, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> The technique means sliding up and down one's vocal range, thus reproducing the sound of a siren (on 'humming' or 'ng', as in si-**ng**-ing). This way, the singing student focuses on two different areas: his facial resonance and the palate. For FTM voices, it is important that the daily practice in sirens starts with their middle range before extending it gradually and gently to both ends.

<sup>3</sup> See Nicola Vaccaj, *Metodo Pratico di Canto*, ed. Elio Bataglia (Milano: Casa Ricordi, 1999) (Italian and English).