

Region #17 Fall Harmony Weekend

September 2016

Lining Up is More than Riser Placement

The Singer's Stance

Think about performers that you enjoy watching. Their energy, their stance, and their physical involvement draw us in to their performance. Imagine if the same performer stood in a lifeless body delivering a lackluster performance. Would we be as likely to buy into their message? Singing is a physical activity. It involves strength in parts of our bodies and freedom in others.

Posture is a word that is often viewed in a negative light. We may think of a soldier with rigid posture, a ballerina with impeccable stance, or maybe our mothers making us walk with a book on our heads. In Sweet Adelines, we have drifted away from the word "posture" because of the negative connotation, usually related to that nagging voice from our childhood. We often use the term "alignment," which makes perfect sense. The term "singer's stance" may be even more descriptive. Whatever we call it, posture/alignment/stance is the foundation of good singing. As directors, it would be a great help to our singers if we borrowed from our mom's playbook, insisting on better posture throughout rehearsals.

The way we carry ourselves affects everything that we do. We tend to think of posture as a static concept – a position that we hold. Posture is anything but static. It involves balancing our bodies against the forces of gravity, load, and velocity. Posture is most certainly a dynamic process. We are constantly shifting and moving to create the best possible conditions to allow movement and support. There are many components of good posture, and they're all intertwined. When one part of the body gets out of whack, chances are, the body compensates somewhere else. Let's review the basic components of a singer's stance.

Starting at our feet, we first must have an adequate base of support. Feet should be shoulder or hip width apart. If feet are close together, we can't shift weight very far from side to side without losing our balance. Placing one foot slightly in front of the other allows even greater mobility. When singing, we want our feet apart in order to be able to MOVE. Again, posture is not static. It's a dynamic concept. Knees should be free and easy, not locked.

The position of the hips and spine are closely related. Imagine that your pelvis is a bucket. If you were to pour liquid out of the front of the bucket/pelvis, your lower back would be in an arched position (not ideal for singing.) Pouring liquid out of the back of the bucket flattens the low back (not ideal for singing). Holding the pelvis in a neutral position allows the spine to remain in good alignment.

The spine is designed to have four curves (cervical – neck, thoracic – mid-back, lumbar – low back, sacral – tailbone), allowing movement forward and back, side to side, as well as rotation. If we exaggerate or eliminate one of the curves the other curves must compensate. If the pelvis is tucked, the curve in the low back flattens, eliminating the normal curve and affecting the remaining areas of the spine. It is wise to focus on elongating the spine for good alignment.

The position of the ribcage affects alignment of the spine as well as being a major factor in our breathing mechanism. It's fairly easy to get the ribcage properly aligned for singing. Often when we stand at rest the ribcage sags. When standing, check distance between your belly button and the bottom of your breastbone. When you actively increase this space (perhaps an inch or two), the ribcage elevates and the thoracic spine falls into better alignment. You may find that the back muscles fatigue – a good indicator that those muscles need to be strengthened!

The position of the ribcage is directly related to breathing. When we slouch, the ribcage droops, the diaphragm may not work efficiently, and the lungs don't have space to fully expand. Our bodies WILL find a way to get air in, though, and that's when accessory muscles are used. Neck and shoulder muscles will work to get enough air to survive, causing tension in the neck – the area that should be tension free. Performing isometric rib expansion exercises will help to strengthen the muscles involved. A singer's breath does not happen by accident; a singer's breath requires attention.

Shoulders naturally fall into place when the ribcage is elevated. Nothing special needs to be done at the shoulders if the thoracic spine and ribcage are properly aligned. Shoulder blades float on your back. Actively pulling the shoulders up or back causes tension, the enemy of a singer.

The head should be perched on the spine like a basketball on a broomstick. A ball on a stick would necessarily be centered. When the head, which weighs about 12 pounds, is held forward of the centered position, it increases the load on the neck muscles to as much as 30-40 pounds. Imagine holding a bowling ball close to your body. Then imagine how difficult it would be to hold that same bowling ball with your arms fully extended. The forward head position creates a

similar difficulty for the neck muscles, and the result is undue tension in the very area that we want to be tension free.

Jaw position is a crucial part of our alignment, and like other parts of the body, tension in the jaw will affect how we sing. Let the jaw drop. Don't actively open it. With your mouth open, nod up and down, feeling what happens to your jaw. It closes a little bit when you look down, and stretches open a bit when you look back. There is probably room for 1-2 fingers between your teeth, depending on your anatomy. Now actively open your mouth widely. What happens? Sing "AH" with the jaw in both positions and compare the results. When the jaw is opened actively, the result is tension, the enemy of a singer.

As a quick review, we want to have a stance that allows movement, hips neutral, lifted expanded ribcage, shoulders relaxed, head aligned, jaw relaxed, face lifted. This stance is our "home base" – a position that we can easily move out of and return to when needed. A singer's stance is not rigid or fixed, but instead allows movement to enhance the vocal product.

Our bodies are our instruments, and how we present ourselves greatly impacts our performance. Posture is as much about performance as it is vocal production. We look more engaged and more involved when we follow the principles of good alignment. We sing better and we look better.

Singing is a physical activity. It's not just about what happens from the neck up. Our goal is free and easy vocal production. It involves strength in parts of our bodies and freedom in others. When we are strong and better aligned, we have the opportunity to become even better singers.

Thanks to Mary Rhea