

# Comparative Voice Pedagogy

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**prov·e·nance** (prŏv'ə-nəns) *n.* Place of origin, source. [LAT. *Provenire*, to originate.]

**C**OMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN ITS MOST SIMPLE form is examining two or more objects and documenting the similarities and differences. The roots of this methodology of research has been traced back to Greece in the sixth century.<sup>1</sup> Scientific fields of inquiry, including voice pedagogy, have developed practices for their specific areas of study using comparative research.

Iconic voice pedagogue and prolific author Richard Miller was the first to extensively use the term comparative voice pedagogy (CVP).

Comparative vocal pedagogy reveals an immense stratified structure of both fact and nonsense.<sup>2</sup>

Comparative vocal pedagogy (a subject unaccountably much neglected in this analytical age) reveals that in any area of technique—take, for example, breath management (often termed “support” in voice-teacher parlance)—many assumptions are made about muscular actions during the respiratory cycle that simply cannot be verified. Indeed, many of the existing techniques of breath management cannot be reconciled with each other.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who has made a comparative study of pedagogical systems must be amazed at the number which are based upon false information as to anatomical construction of the head, neck and torso, and upon ignorance of the physiology and acoustics of singing.<sup>4</sup>

There is evidence of the term CVP being used prior to him; nevertheless, there is ample evidence to support the theory that Richard Miller was the first voice pedagogue to bring CVP into the modern terminology of voice pedagogy.

For the purpose of this article, I will use the following definition for CPV: a research methodology utilized to find similarities and differences between teaching practices of voice professionals.

“Provenance” is a resource for CVP. Readers are presented with historical information from voice professionals. You, the learned consumer, are invited to compare these writings to your own knowledge learned from textbooks, experts, your own experience, etc.—and, yes, one way to deal with some information is to place it in the garbage. But we must not overlook what history offers; we must keep an open mind in exploring the past and glean whatever is helpful to continue our development and advancement as teachers.

I found an article in *The Etude Magazine* that provides differing opinions about the technique of breathing. The article was published in 1915 and includes voice professionals describing methods of good breathing. Some descriptions overlap, while others are divergent in approach. As the reader, you should not take every word as fact simply because it is in print. Study. Explore. Compare.

**THE SHORTEST ROAD TO CORRECT  
BREATHING: A SYMPOSIUM  
BY NOTED AUTHORITIES**

**Laura Sedgwick Collins.**

*[The Etude Magazine, February 1915 (137–138)]*

*The Etude has asked a number of well-known voice teachers to give their opinions upon a subject which has been so frequently discussed in The Etude that one might assume that it had entirely “thrashed out.” However, breathing is one of those very simple things that needs all sorts of detailed investigation before it can be properly imparted to others. From the opinion of many the reader should be able to form an excellent idea of his own. The following contributions are presented in the alphabetical order of the names of the teachers contributing.*

**D. A. Clippinger.**

In breathing exercises two points are to be kept in mind—how to take the breath, and how to control it. In both of these the diaphragm is the main consideration. With the diaphragm properly trained and controlled all other things involved fall easily into line. Therefore train the diaphragm.

Place the tips of the fingers at the diaphragm and take a short breath with an outward impulse of the diaphragm. Expel it with a short inward impulse.

In the same way practice the consonant combination “hm.” It should be practiced softly and staccato. This trains the diaphragm, develops the proper way of attacking a tone, and the lips being closed it opens the channel through the head.

The diaphragm is the point of control, and the student is likely to lose this control on the first note of the phrase. To overcome this tendency practice in the following way. Take four measures of quadruple measure and at the pitch G, sing one, two, three, then hold the breath

one beat, doing the four measures in this way with one breath. This is to get the machinery of breathing under the student’s mental control so that he may be able to stop and start it at will without losing control.

Take a full breath and at the pitch G, count softly and rapidly as many as possible.

Singing softly compels one to control the breath pressure and counting rapidly keeps all the muscles of the vocal mechanism loosely in motion thereby eliminating the tendency to contraction. The chest should be carried well up.

**Laura Sedgwick Collins.**

Fundamentally, the first requisite is attention to correct position in standing, physical rigidity or nervous tension being frequent evidences of our national constraint and lack of ease and repose.

I use the exercises for controlled respiration as adopted by the National Association of Teachers of Singing (Carnegie Hall, N. Y.) and as these have been printed in leaflet form and can be had, it is not needful here to repeat them as you may wish to present them at a future date in their entirety. It must be born in mind that breathing is an entirely natural action—were it not so life would be impossible. The babe is not taught how to breathe; but with growth and the desired development of faculty, comes the necessity of understanding our forces—how to direct them that they may produce the best expression in result.

For the pupil, too much technical, physiological or anatomical information is not a help, but a hindrance, for in the struggle to compass it, the way of impediments. We must not lose sight of pulse is clogged, as with confusing the fact that singing is not an abnormal performance—the trouble is that the pace of so-called civilization has swept us too far away from the better part of spontaneity, and the atmosphere of large cities, overcharged with soft coal dust and the “step lively” microbe do not encourage the desire, nor do they permit the enjoyment of deep breathing. It is essential even in the beginning of vocal study that the student develops some sense of pitch if it be not inherent, for in the delivery of single tone, or phrase, the quantity of breath required, and the degree of its exhalation are affected by the pitch variation whatever it may be, and the instinct of calculation is therefore involved. Not all exercises require the

fullest inhalation, and the inhalation of more breath than is needed prevents ease of action, fluent delivery, or calm *sostenuto*.

The comprehension of pitch is most important—as the aim one takes with the eye is the guide for the arrow from the bow, and a guided and growing sense of pitch will often insensibly correct a pupil’s previous failure to breathe well—these subjects of pitch and breath being so interdependent for speaker and singer. It is a mistake to confine the pupil to the vowel *ah*—and indeed it is often dangerous in elementary work to use that letter very much, for as a nation we do not sound our vowels well—they are not breathed out as they should be, that is the sound form at the top of the column of air—they are usually knocked out, struck out by a spasm of attack in the throat which is dire in its results.

One thing which is often overlooked is the practice of quick inhalation frequently necessary in certain songs and arias, and when not studied and prepared for, often results in a noisy respiration painful alike to auditor and performer.

The student should be informed as to the question of the rest, which does not always indicate the completion of the phrase and therefore the place for inhalation—frequently, and more particularly in the works of classic composers, or composers whose songs have become classic, the rest is the indication of suspension in tone, and sometimes in syllables of a word, which must be made by suspension of breath and the result when properly done produces a more artistic effect than could be given by *legato* delivery.

A most important exercise is very slow inhalation (mouth closed), suspension, and very slow exhalation. This exercise should frequently be practiced with a view to increasing the length of time of its performance, and, in the open, when the air is clear and pure, it is the finest possible exercise to practice while walking not too rapidly.

Many, many necessary and valuable exercises cannot be even referred to without extending these notes unduly for this symposium.

The practical value of full and deep breathing should be more generally realized and taught than it is, for with a finer and deeper physical realization would come the spiritual understanding of the Psalmist’s injunction: “Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.”

Pupils who have attended school until seventeen or eighteen years of age should not need greatly detailed instruction regarding the action of respiration and the attendant mechanism, for this should properly be included in the study of physiology; unfortunately in the haste of trying to do too many things, the practical study of the principles of breathing and their exercise is much neglected in the majority of schools.

#### Frederic W. Root.

If the larynx acts to advantage the singer may use the breath in anyone of the diverse methods taught. In making the larynx act rightly the only essential of breathing is to abstain from forcing.

Theories of vocalization put such over-whelming importance upon breathing that they obscure the main point; and this because the singer feels vaguely the action where tone is produced, whereas all breathing operations are conscious and obvious. There is mystery about the one; so we talk about the other.

#### Clara Kathleen Rogers.

The proper purpose of Breathing Exercises is not to obtain control over any particular set or sets of muscles, but to bring about the best conditions for inflating the lungs both thoroughly and speedily, by rendering all the different muscles pliable to the ever-varying needs of the singer.

To this end I recommend the following fundamental exercises:—

##### Exercise 1.

Stand erect,—the body well poised,—the chest high. By a slight extra expansion of the free ribs a full inflation will result.

Retain the breath for a few seconds, then exhale gently.

(This is the quick inhalation constantly required in singing to renew and to sustain the vital force where the breathing space in the musical phrase is minimized.)

##### Exercise 2.

After following the above directions for inhaling, bring the lower lip into contact with the upper teeth, and, on the full inflation,—make the continuous whispered sound of *Fh*,—allowing the breath at once to flow freely from the lungs.

Put your Will into steadily maintaining the Flated whisper Fh, and none into holding back, or economizing the breath.

This is the right action of the breath in sustaining a vocal sound. The way it works is this:—

The valvular action of lip and teeth regulates the outflow of breath at the mouth, in the same way that the vocal cords do in the throat in singing. The breathing muscles meanwhile furnish the staying power automatically.

The only thing that could defeat the steady and easy sustentation of the tone would be rigidity of the muscles, as, that would act as a restraint to the necessary flow of air toward the glottis.

When such restraint is used the sound becomes suddenly exhausted;—not because there is no more breath, but because the restraining muscles have arrested its proper action on the glottis.

#### W. Warren Shaw.

From the technical standpoint the question of respiration is perhaps the most important for the singer's consideration. The experience of singers and vocal teachers alike bear witness to the importance of correct breathing, without which no vocalist can hope to accomplish the best possible results,

From its very importance as a factor in the making of a singer, breathing or breath-control is frequently brought to the attention of the student as a matter of first consideration. The mental attitude towards this functional operation of nature—the viewpoint—the kind of consideration—determines its influence for artistic development or retrogression, as the case may be.

In my recently published book, *The Lost Vocal Art and its Restoration*, I have viewed the subject of breathing and breath control, referring to the views of many learned scientists and celebrated vocal teachers, regarding correct and incorrect methods. In this work I have endeavored to point out the very necessary distinction between the Synthesis and Analysis of the vocal phenomena, and to make clear what I consider to be the necessary mental attitude of the Singer, as to breathing and breath control.

Generally speaking, the attention to the matter of taking breath is, of necessity, a matter of first consideration, but attention to the matter of breath control,

that is, direct willful and purposeful breath control, I regard as one of the most, if not the most, pernicious doctrines extant.

The general ignorance of singers of the natural automatic control of breath and the supposed necessity for willful breath control is to my mind the crying evil of the day.

Almost all the difficulties attending the artistic and effective delivery of the “*fila di voce*”—the crescendo, the diminuendo, as well as of expressive *sostenuto*, is directly traceable to the iniquitous doctrine of purposeful breath control.

The amount of attention which should be given to the taking of breath depends entirely upon the physical condition and breathing habits of the Singer. The “Setting Up” exercises of West Point, and many other physical exercises are effective in bringing about a healthy normal respiratory action of the lungs, where there is necessity for physical development. Expanding to breathe instead of breathing to expand, should be the rule. Breath should be taken low with lips parted, and should not be willfully restrained in singing. This type of breathing is known as inferior costal. Thus we avoid the mode of breathing which can be heard in respiration, thus we fill the lungs without undue effort, and thus we actually develop correct breath control without being over-burdened with the thought.

#### Geo. Chadwick Stock.

You can have breath without voice, but cannot have voice without breath.

You can sing without especial breath development but can in no possible way reach the limits of your vocal talent without complete breath development. There is but one right way of breathing in singing, and the cornerstone of that system is nature and common sense. The success of teaching this method lies in its simplicity of explanation and practice, and it is needless to say that it is built upon the foundation of a normal respiration.

For example: Give close attention, for a few moments, to the manner in which you inhale and exhale in ordinary breathing. In doing this be careful not to allow your consciousness to interfere with your natural breathing while observing it.

Next: Apply the principle of natural breathing as follows:

Inhale for three seconds.

Exhale for three seconds.

Take care to breathe easily and rhythmically. Forget lungs, diaphragm and all breathing muscles; they will take care of themselves and work perfectly if let alone.

Your cue to right action, in all breathing exercises, is to be taken from your natural breathing habits. The difference lies in this: that you are merely extending your natural respirations to cover a longer than ordinary period in order to meet the requirements arising from the greatly extended use of the voice in song.

Practice the above exercise several times a day for a week, two weeks or three according as you make progress in mastering this particular breathing exercise. Then extend breathing practice to four seconds. Continue this for a month or two, then try five seconds. Hold to this for six months or more. Six seconds will be the maximum length of breath in most cases.

Another good breathing exercise is to blow through a clay pipe stem or an Eton breathing tube for four, six or eight seconds. Repeat several times a day for a month or so, after which time increase to ten or fifteen seconds. Also inhale through the tube same length of time and same periods.

The above exercises bring all breathing muscles into perfect, co-ordinate action and of course processes are unthought of, and thus reposeful deep breathing is the result.

A valuable out-of-door breathing exercise is as follows: Inhale as you walk a certain number of steps, say five or six, and exhale while you walk an equal number of steps. Increase from time to time as you feel that you can do so with perfect comfort. Always breathe through your nose.

A simple and effective mode of controlling exhalation of the breath is to count from one to twenty, in a whisper or aloud, in a conversational tone, in as many seconds. Practice until you are able to count from one to fifty in as many seconds. Increase the count gradually, and in time you will learn how to spin out the breath with an even, continuous pressure with the least possible waste.

Finally, remember that without the physical development resulting from breathing exercises you will never be able to realize your fond hopes of becoming a thoroughly capable and artistic singer.

### **Mrs. Stacey Williams.**

That tone which responds to a perfectly balanced breath is a true tone. There is a volume for thought, investigation and deep study embodied in that one sentence. Let us dissect it.

“That tone which responds.”

A tone is said to respond, when it automatically answers the thought, or mental impulse, without hitch or flaw. It may not burst into sound with that audible “click” which is born of the resistance of the false cords. It is “willed” and simultaneous with the willing, it is. It ceases in the same manner, without perceptible muscular action of the throat.

“A perfectly balanced breath.”

Inasmuch as there can be no force without a compelling power, we know that, apart from the purely spiritual impulse to “will,” there must be a corresponding physical impulse to create and support the physical impulse to create and support the physical manifestation. That impulse is the power we call the breath. To the proper development of the breath much of the attention of the student must be given.

The muscles which play the most important part in breath control are the costal, diaphragmatic and abdominal. So much has been written on this subject that it is unnecessary to enter into it in detail. The simplest rules to observe are the “don’ts.”

Don’t raise the chest with the clavicular muscles.

Don’t raise it above the normal at any time, but—

Don’t let it sink while sustaining a tone.

Don’t grip with any of these muscles, as all breath action to be of value must be light, easy, and, above all, elastic.

If you think it an easy matter to acquire a full and free breath control, try this: Take a deep quick breath by the simple expedient of expanding the lower ribs, leaving the chest in a normally high position, and then slowly, softly and very quietly exhaling through closed teeth. You will discover that exhaustion speedily overcomes you, and you will find yourself compelled to breathe deeply and quickly several times after the experiment. This simple exercise, however, if persisted in will so develop the resisting power of the inspiratory muscles, that in a short time you will be able to control the exhausting breath

for a full minute. The stream of air must not fluctuate, but be firm and steady after continued practice.

**D. A. Woodruff.**

Panting like a dog, you find the diaphragm moves rapidly, flutte, just below the breast bone, between the floating ribs. That must be the seat of the breath control, as you cannot pant unless perfectly relaxed, and then you breathe naturally. This should refute any question of clavicular or abdominal breathing.

Standing erectly but not stiffly, with the shoulders in natural position, the abdomen drawn in slightly, the chest rounded, take a deep breath. It starts with the floating ribs moving sideways, the diaphragm moving both down and out. Keep the chest still. Do not let the shoulders raise.

Let the diaphragm control the motions.

Inflate the lungs fully.

Gradually let the breath out, the ribs drawing in and the diaphragm coming up until the lungs seem empty. Place your hands on your sides over the floating ribs to

be sure they have good lateral motion. Lie on your back, placing your hands over the diaphragm and floating ribs and inflate, feeling with the hands that the ribs and diaphragm are working well. The chest always still, but not held stiffly. Practice both ways frequently, twenty-five times in one period and gradually good breath control will come.

**NOTES**

1. Stavros Moutsios, "On comparative inquiry: the Ancient Greek origins" (Research paper presented at the conference of the Comparative Education Society in Europe, Freiburg, Germany, 2014.)
2. Richard Miller, "The Singing Teacher in the Age of Voice Science," in Robert T. Sataloff, ed., *Vocal Health and Pedagogy: Science, Assessment, and Treatment* (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2017), 8.
3. Richard Miller, "The Misuses of 'Scientific Information' in the Teaching of Singing," *The NATS Bulletin* 39, no. 3 (January/February 1983): 28.
4. Ibid.

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