

The (im)possibility of performance with(out) fear: PART 3

BREATHING AND BEYOND

BY ELISABETH POMÈS



In the previous two articles we've looked at identifying the enemy and then the physical coping. This month we extend our ability to cope with nerves by using two simple and efficient tools: breathing and visualization.

THE BREATH 1

There is nothing more simple than breathing and yet we "forget" to breathe, hold our breath or breathe shallowly when we tackle a difficult piece.

This first exercise is as important as it is simple. I suggest, after reading the instructions, you try it before continuing with the rest of this article.

• Sit comfortably on a chair

• Put your hands on your abdomen for a count of five unforced breaths. Just follow the rhythm of your breath. Feel your abdomen inflating like a balloon on the inhale and deflating on the exhale.

• Next, put your hands on your ribcage for a count of five more unforced breaths. Feel the ribcage expanding on the inhale and gently retracting on the exhale. (I picture an umbrella slowly opening on the inhale and closing on the exhale.)

• Finally put your hands underneath your collarbone, for five more breaths. Feel the movement in the body.

(If you actually pause from reading right now to do this



first exercise, the rest of the article will probably make more immediate sense!)

How do you feel after this simple exercise? Any different in your level of energy? Do you feel any quieter? Breathing exercises allow you to remain in the present (as much as we can), to be mindful and attentive to whatever is happening.

THE BREATH 2

Here is a powerful breathing exercise: alternate nostril breathing.

Use your right hand (if you are right-handed). The thumb is used to close the right nostril and the ring finger to close the left nostril. You can tuck the 2 middle fingers into the palm of your hand or rest them on the forehead.

• Close the right nostril with your thumb and gently exhale. Then, inhale through your left nostril.

• Next, close your left nostril with your ring finger,

exhale gently and inhale through your right nostril.

• Repeat the alternate motion for as long as you want.

Can you feel the effect of the calming breath? This breath helps alleviate headaches, migraines, and generally frazzled states of being. I use this exercise quite often when standing in the wings. It gives me something precise to do rather than dwelling on negative thoughts; it helps me to stay focused and in the present moment.

MENTAL BLOCKS

Our final step is to deal with the mental blocks: understanding where they come from and how we can reprogram the mind; how we can switch from a negative channel to a positive one.

An artist ready to give a performance cannot afford to succumb to negative ideas. Negative voices can especially be heard when the event is

important; when important people are in the room; when the hall is foreboding; when it is "the chance of your lifetime".

I was first introduced to the concept of changing preconceived notions by Michael Colgrass. He was giving a talk at Carnegie Hall before the performance of one of his pieces. For him, more than the audience or the performing conditions, it was the Hall itself that was foreboding.

So he went into the Green Room at the intermission, took off his jacket, shoes and cuff links, did some yoga, and began to have fun miming the reaction of the audience if only they could see him. Then, he put himself back together and went to stand in the wings. Not only had the exercise given him some energy, it had also changed his image of Carnegie Hall from a place where you are supposed to be dignified, serious (and scared), to one where he could have fun.

Yoga in the Green Room of a concert hall might not be everyone's cup of tea! But the concept remains powerful: you have the ability by changing the way you look at things, to empower yourself. But (I can already hear grumbling!) how can we do it?

Consider this. When we worry, we are using our imagination to our disadvantage: imagining (sometimes very vividly and with great power) what we don't want to happen. Well, it is just as possible to use our imagination to our benefit, to use positive mental imagery and visualize our perfect performance. Try this simple exercise.



PERFORMANCE WITH(OUT) FEAR, *continued*

● Sit comfortably in a chair, close your eyes and allow relaxation progressively in every part of your body: eyes, cheeks, jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, back, abdomen, legs and feet.
 ● As you feel relaxation coming over your body bring to mind a performance that could be stressful and start to visualize your perfect performance: how you want the concert to be; how you want to feel; what you want to share with your audience; and how you would like your audience to react.

You may want to do this exercise several times especially as your performance gets nearer. Using the power of the mind to work towards achievement of goals is something athletes are very familiar with. And in a way, musicians are

athletes.

Assuming you have worked hard and are thoroughly prepared, nervousness is not to be feared, but welcomed as the body's way to tell you that you are ready for the performance.

On stage is not the time to correct any mistakes or rethink your interpretation (that work has already been done in studio)! To share your fullest ability, to release your utmost potential, fear forward! Good Luck!

Elisabeth Pomès is an award-winning soprano, a voice teacher and a certified yoga instructor. She has created a series of classes called Performance Awareness and a workshop called Performance Without Fear which she presents at the Glenn Gould Professional School (Royal Conservatory of Music).

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PROGRAM GUIDE

MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY

- 5:30 am **The Morning Show**
Bill Anderson and David Franco
- 10 am **Morning Concert**
Kerry Stratton
- Noon **News Package**
- 12:15 pm **Luncheon Date**
Arlene Meadows
- 1 pm **Musically Speaking**
Catherine Belyea
- 3 pm **Potpourri**
Terry Campbell and David Craig
- 7 pm **Sounds Great**
Michael Lyons
- 11 pm **Nocturne**
Arlene Meadows
- Midnight **Nightwatch**
Colin Fox

SATURDAY

- 5:30 am **The Saturday Morning Show**
Bill Anderson and David Franco
- 12:10 pm **Luncheon Date**
Arlene Meadows
- 1 pm **Saturday Supersounds**
Kerry Stratton and John van Driel
- 5 pm **Anything Goes**
Arlene Meadows
- 7 pm **Give My Regards to Broadway**
John van Driel
- 8 pm **Your Saturday Night Favourites**
Michael Lyons

SUNDAY

- 5:30 am **Gloria**
Richard Gale
- 9 am **Music for Sunday**
John van Driel and Kerry Stratton
- 12:10 pm **Luncheon Date**
Arlene Meadows
- 1 pm **Music for Sunday**
John van Driel and Kerry Stratton
- 5:15 pm **Concert in the Park**
David Craig
- 6:00 pm **Sinfonia**
Alexa Petrenko
- 8 pm **Canadian Showcase**
Terry Campbell
- 9 pm **Sunday Night at the Opera**
Catherine Belyea

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