

Yoga for Performers

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In our busy technology-driven culture, it is especially important that we intentionally seek rest and re-creation. At least a small portion of life must be about non-performance and non-egocentric pursuit, or we forget our life's purpose. Richard Rohr

When I first started studying yoga in 1999, I instantly saw how useful this practice would be for performers in general, and for singers, actors, and instrumentalists in particular. With a vocal performing background in opera, oratorio and recital, and a long teaching career involving singers engaged in all those areas (as well as musical theatre) it was a great discovery for me to find this “natural fit.” Because the postures (asana) of yoga are based on creating particular physical and mental challenges and breathing through them, yoga practice becomes a metaphor for what both the singing-actor and instrumentalist is creating physically and mentally in performance. Singing and performance of most instruments is based on breath, as is yoga. All musicians and actors must have core strength, flexibility, coordination, focus, and the ability to multi-task. Yoga successfully nurtures all of those attributes.

I could see that I (and most of the rest of the western world) had certain misconceptions about yoga. While other physical training techniques such as the Alexander and Feldenkrais Methods had been parts of music curricula in a number of training programs, yoga was rare. I could understand too, that many unfamiliar with yoga would believe that a lot of flexibility was a prerequisite, or that yoga was mostly about meditation, or that it was possibly associated exclusively with Hindu religious practice. But what I discovered was that the beauty of yoga is that it is non-competitive (musicians need this activity to balance the often extremely competitive nature of developing and maintaining healthy technique) and that the degree of flexibility that exists in each individual allows the discovery of a current “edge,” or that point where challenge begins, which is a relative starting point for each individual. Meditation can come after yoga practice, but is not a direct component of the practice, and indeed some styles of yoga can be quite active and athletic. Also, yoga practice is secular. While it originated in Asia, it is practiced internationally today by those of many different religions.

As soon as I personally discovered these benefits, I began to take extensive yoga teacher training and achieved the 200-hour RYT certification from Yoga Alliance, the international yoga teacher training authority, so that I could also incorporate yoga practice into my work with singing-actors. After years of offering this practice to singers/actors in the collegiate vocal studio, opera classes, and in conference settings including the National Association of Teacher of Singing, I wrote and proposed the course, *Yoga for Performers*. I have had the opportunity to teach it (now for the past 4 years) at the University of Mississippi, where it is part of the curriculum in the Department of Music. I currently teach one class a semester, and it is always filled to capacity with students representing departments including Music (vocal and instrumental), Theatre, Dance, and others.

As I found in my own case, with the proper entrée, students could quickly get comfortable with the benefits of yoga. In this practice, I have selected postures from several styles of yoga that would be most beneficial for singing-actors, while avoiding those at first that might be more difficult for larger bodies. My background in vocal performance and pedagogy also made it useful for me to craft this practice so it would be most beneficial for the voice as well.

A typical class includes developing the following concepts:

- Drushte – steady focus on a point
- Ujjayi breathing – concept of deep, broad breathing through nose.
- Uttiyana Bhandha – concept of drawing the navel to the spine on exhalation.
- Mula Bhandha – concept of engaging low musculature at pelvic floor.

Practice is done in bare feet on thin mats in a warm room, where muscles are protected by the warmth, and sweating out toxins is beneficial. Students are guided carefully through the following process, which can be modified for each individual based on size, weight, degree of initial flexibility, and any disabilities or other individual needs. Great care is taken to protect knees, cervical spine, wrists, or any other delicate parts of bodies.

Elements of a Typical Yoga Practice Progression

While sitting in **Sukhasana (Easy seated posture)**, focusing on long, deep, expansive inhalation with equal and complete exhalation, breathing through the nose only, building internal warmth, we initiate one of several possible **Pranayama Breathing Cycles, Balasana (Child's Pose) Simhasana (The Lion)** – which gives the face, eyes, and fingers a good stretch. Then **Biralasana (Cat pose)**, to warm the spine.

Benefits – Calming the mind and body into a state of focus and self-awareness.

Vinyasa, or flowing postures, begins with the components of **Surya Namaskar “A” (Sun Salutation): Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog), Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), Tadasana (Mountain Pose) Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose), Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward-Facing Dog),** and the **Surya Namaskar “B”** version of Sun Salutation, which adds: **Utkatasana (Chair Pose),** and **Virabhadrasana I (Archer I Pose).**

Benefits – Warms and detoxes the body as we learn to intimately integrate deep breaths through a series of fluid movements.

Other standing asanas can then include: **Ardha Chandrasana (Standing Half Moon), Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose), Virabhadrasana II (Archer II Pose),** and **Virabhadrasana II “B” (Dancing Archer Pose).**

Benefits – Expanded thoracic cavity which allows greater achievement of true lung capacity, resulting in an increase of both air intake and resultant level of blood oxygenation.

These are followed by a selection of balancing postures: **Vrksasana (Tree Pose), Garudasana (Eagle Pose), Natarajasana (Lord of the Dance),** and a sitting to standing variation of **Virasana (Hero)** for building the abdominal and calf strength.

Benefits – Increased bodily awareness and coordination in multiple physical configurations. Throughout the process, we achieve the ability to remain calm, focused, and accepting of ourselves, even when struggling or feeling unstable, as we often do in performance. We learn to value ourselves for our effort during the process, as opposed to defining ourselves by a particular final outcome.

Seated asanas can include: **Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend) , Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-Knee Pose), Marichyasana “C” (Sage Twist), Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), Setu Bandhasana (Bridge Pose) Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose),** and **Supta Parsva Utkatasana (Static Spinal twist)** Some seated twists will include the intonation of “om”, which builds warm internal resonance, and is an ideal combination of three useful singing vowels (ah, oh, oo, leading to buzzy forward resonance..mmm). Breathing deeply and initiating the sound while twisting.

Benefits – Builds greater thoracic capacity and flexibility of the entire torso.

The hour-long practice ends with several minutes in **Savasana (Corpse Pose)** - a pose of total relaxation—making it one of the most challenging asanas.

Benefits – This culmination of all the yogic processes brings the mind, body, and spirit into a state of total surrender as we relinquish control over them all. We find stillness, quiet and ease, and come in contact with our true unique selves. From this stillness, we find our strength, creativity, courage and joy.

Additional Resources

Bell, Baxter. “Yoga for Musicians.” *Yoga Journal*, Feb14, 2013.

<https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/yoga-for-musicians>

Farhi, Donna. “The Breathing Book.” Henry Holt & Co, New York:1996.

Lister, Linda. “Yoga for Singers: Freeing Your Voice and Spirit Through Yoga.” Linda Lister, Lexington: 2011

Moliterno, Mark. “The Musician’s Breath: The Role of Breathing in Human Expression.” GIA Publications, Chicago: 2001. (with companion DVD)

Olson, Mia. “Musician’s Yoga.” Berklee Press, Boston: 2009.

Web resource: University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance website for “Wellness Research & Resources.” (Includes information on books, websites/blogs, webinars and conferences)

<https://smt.d.umich.edu/about/wellness/research-resources>