



CHORAL SINGER

Float Like a Butterfly

September 2004

You don't have to be a competitor like Olympians Michael Phelps or Amanda Beard in order to enjoy swimming. And you don't even have to be a swimmer to understand the benefits this so-called "best overall exercise" confers. As singers, we can take at least two useful lessons from swimmers.

A whole body experience

In the basic front crawl, the swimmer "windmills" his or her arms in order to propel the body forward in the water. Since reliance on the arms alone would tire the swimmer very quickly, in order to move ahead with speed and power, the swimmer has to engage the entire upper torso in a kind of rolling motion.

For stability, try this experiment while sitting in a chair.

- Reach up, out, forward and then down with one arm and then the other, alternating left and right, as if you were swimming. Feel how your ribcage rises and expands
- Next, when you reach forward, really lift your arm from the shoulder, and extend it

fully before bringing it straight down in front of you. This time you should also experience a quick, involuntary uptake of air.

While it is important for singers to breathe deeply from a relaxed abdomen, in order to make room for an adequate supply of breath they also need to feel this expansion of the upper body.

Fuel to burn

Lack of oxygen will tire the swimmer even faster than relying on the arms alone. Since swimmers have their faces submerged much of the time, they have to learn to coordinate taking breaths with that part of the stroke when the head is raised from the water. While the head is in the water, the swimmer exhales, blowing forcefully.

For choristers, singing is the equivalent of having our face in the water. You can't take a breath while you are singing; you either have to stop the sound and "grab" a breath, or breathe at a resting place in the music. To exhale, we don't blow; we sing "on the breath" as it flows out.

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Keep breathing

This sounds pretty basic, but there is another dimension, as well. A jerky alternation between inhaling and exhaling is an inefficient way to breathe, and as such, very tiring. Both singers and swimmers have to get into a rhythm of breathing. In addition to taking substantial breaths when needed, both should feel that their breath is flowing in and out of both nose and mouth in a way that is synchronized with what the rest of the body is doing. This is what provides a steady stream of air energy for the long haul, and can help put singer and swimmer “in the zone.”

