

Benefits of Yoga Pranayama, Asana, and Meditation Techniques for Classically Trained Singers

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(Received 15 January 2019- Accepted & Published 10 February 2019)

Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study is to examine and explore Hatha Yoga and how it relates to a practice consisting of singer-friendly yoga postures, how these postures may benefit the singer's mental and physical health, and how these techniques relate to designated research.

The study also investigates yogic breathing techniques and how these exercises relate to selected research. Lastly, the paper examines how the voice student and professional singer may alleviate anxiety by introducing a practice of daily yogic mediation of mudra and mantra techniques, and how voice teachers may better understand and assist their students with stage performance anxiety.

Keyword: yoga, Pranayama, meditation and singer.

INTRODUCTION

Singers and singing teachers contend with numerous distracting difficulties. Professional opera singers face demanding travel, rehearsal and performance schedules all compounded by financial, health and social considerations. These common characteristics of the profession may prove detrimental to the singer and his or her vocal health. Similar to the professional singer, vocal performance majors attending college might have comparable conflicts and anxieties on a daily basis including: managing a curriculum of required classes, maintaining a grade the late American baritone Robert Merrill, Grammy Award-winning singer Beyoncé Knowles, and Professor, Carol Webber at Eastman School of Music have all benefited from their yoga practice. This paper first identifies and explores Hatha Yoga and how it relates to a practice consisting of singer-friendly physical exercises encompassing basic asanas, spinelengthening, and chest-opening asanas. The document considers how these asanas may aid the singer's physical, vocal and mental health, and examines how these exercises relate to research in vocal pedagogy. Secondly, the study investigates three breathing exercises: Ujjayi pranayama, Nadi Sodhana and Kapalabhati and how these breathing techniques relate to pedagogical research. In addition to the asana and pranayama exercises listed, the research examines the use of daily mediation in the form of yogic mudra and mantr meditation. Such meditation might relieve persistent anxiety and be useful to the voice point average, providing time for productive practice, attending rehearsals for performances and financial stress. Lastly, the voice teacher may encounter numerous complications relating to singers' demanding issues, everyday college stress and possible performance anxiety. Yogi and Professor of Voice.

History HathaYoga

The term yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root yuj, meaning to bind or yoke. The exact dates of the inception of yoga are uncertain, but researchers believe the practice originated in India around 3000 B.C. Early archaeological evidence is found in stone seals that depict yoga poses dating to this time period. Scholars believe that the roots of yoga existed long before, and have traced its origins back to Stone Age Shamanism. Both of these ancient cultures advocated similar beliefs that were thought to better the lives of individuals and strengthen a sense of community. Yoga is better understood when broken down into four historical periods. First, the Vedic Period during which The Vedas, the oldest scriptures of Hindu, were written. The time of this period is uncertain yet philological and linguistic documentation indicates that The Vedas were composed between 1700 and 1100 B.C. The end of the period occurred in 500 B.C. The Vedas are considered to be the oldest teachings of yoga, known as Vedic Yoga. People sought to live in total harmony with nature and their immediate families during the Vedic Period. The second period is the Pre-Classical Period, introducing both The Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. The writings of The Yoga Sutras introduced the third period known as the Classical Period. Patanjali, estimated to have lived between 400 B.C. and 200 A.D., composed The Sutras in 150 B.C.

Patanjali compiled in a systematic way, the art and science of Yoga in the Yoga Sutras. The name Patanjali is a surname, and is the name of a lineage and school of teachers, students, and sages, rather than being only one person. Sutra rules in Sanskrit literature. Yama commandments. Niyama self-control. Pratyahara preparing the mind for meditation. Dharana the concentration of the mind. Dhyana positive thinking or meditation. Samadhi the end result where one reaches super-consciousness.

The term Hatha originates from the Sanskrit word hatha. When broken into two syllables, ha (sun) and tha (moon) refers to physical yoga. The ha refers to the hot energy of sun while the tha refers to the cooling energy of the moon. Hatha Yoga, also known as forceful yoga, shares a similar concept with Kundalini and TantraYoga. Desikachar suggests that nadi are located

The Power of Pranayama Techniques

Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar is considered one of the world's most respected yoga instructors. He states that pranayama, the fourth limb in the Eight Limbs of Yoga, is best defined as the science of breath. When broken into two words, prana is defined as breath, vitality, wind, energy or respiration. Ayama relates to having expansion or length. Pranayama may then be translated as the extension of breath and its control. The three stages of such control are puraka rechaka and retention. Singers may find it arduous to sing particular phrases because of the great length of certain vocal lines. These expansive phrases might have to be sung while moving frantically on stage. The singer's heart rate may rise and cause the singer to have an insufficient amount of breath. For example, in Act Four of the opera La Bohème, the male characters might have choreography that involves running around the stage. The character of Lucia in the opera Lucia di Lammermoor may find her "Mad Scene" in Act Three physically and mentally fatiguing. In Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, the performer singing the title role might have difficulty balancing his breath with the physical effort exerted during the intense staging. All of these roles and many more require performing exhausting vocal lines during active staging while maintaining healthy respiration. Pranayama may be practiced on a

daily basis so the singer might witness physical and mental benefits. The act of breathing in performance may be involuntary rather than a conscious action and, technically helpful or not, possibly become a habitualized response for many singers as they vocally mature. Singers may know how to breathe for singing and still not breathe appropriately on stage. Through the study of pranayama and with conscious attention to their breathing, singers can benefit by becoming more aware of their breathing habits and improve their performance

Nadi Sodhana

Defined as alternating nostril breathing, may prove advantageous for singers and teachers. Iyengar defines the term nadi⁵⁰ as a passageway similar to a vein or artery in the body. The term Sodhana refers to the purifying of the nadi. The two words can be defined as the cleansing of the nerves. Iyengar suggests that nerve blockage is similar to an obstructed water pipe. Blocked nerves result in a lack of vital blood flow and prana energy.

Nadi Sodhana may prove beneficial for calming the mind and respiration. Singers and teachers contend with hectic schedules that tire the mind. Performance psychologist Alma Thomas works with singers on overcoming a host of mental distractions. In the book, *Power Performance for Singers*, she collaborates with voice teacher

Kapalabhati

The third breathing technique singers may find helpful is Kapalabhati. When broken into two words, Kapala refers to the skull and Bhati translates as light. In Western culture it is known as Skull Shining Breath or Breath of Fire. Iyengar's book, *Light on Pranayama*, describes the technique of Kapalabhati as consisting of aslow inhalation and quick exhalation. The exercise consists of repeated exhilarating exhalations. Iyengar and Lister's suggestions for Kapalabhati Sit comfortably with a block under the buttocks, as in Ujjayi. Exhale all air out of the lungs and inhale through the nose. Contract the abdomen inwards four to eight times in rapid succession with a partial exhalation on each contraction, similar to doing a staccato exercise. The singer may exhale in a succession of hissing sounds. (The image of blowing out candles on a birthday cake.). Take a few deep and slow breaths, using Ujjayi. This allows the lungs and diaphragm to rest before repeating another round. Keep the chest and shoulders still and bring focus to the abdominal muscles.⁶⁸ Singers who experience high amounts of adrenalin levels before a performance may not want to practice this technique because it can create a feeling of exhilaration. In contrast, singers who are feeling sluggish could find this technique invigorating. Iyengar strongly suggests that students exercise care and remain aware of their bodies, and stop the exercise immediately if there is any stress on the lungs or diaphragm.

The Power of Asana for Healthy Body Alignment

T.K.V. Desikachar defines the term asana as posture. The third limb in the Eight Limbs of Yoga, the word asana derived from the Sanskrit root as, which means to stay, to be, to sit and to be established in a particular position. In the commentary of the Yoga Sutras, Sri Swami Satchidananda (1914-2002), defines asana as a "steady and comfortable posture." Iyengar suggests that the practice of asana focuses on every muscle, nerve and gland. He states that a stretched and elastic body protects the student from fatigue and comforts the nervous system. The Yogi also suggests that asana is a gateway for training and purifying the mind. ⁸⁵ Singers and teachers may find benefits of asana to include: stronger body alignment, improved respiration, greater body awareness, relief of stress, and better focus. Iyengar states: Many actors,

acrobats, dancers and musicians possess superb physiques and have great control over the body, but they lack control over the mind, the intellect and the Self...they often put the body above all else. Though the yogi does not underrate the body, one does not think merely of its perfection but the senses, mind, intellect and soul.

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine and explore Hatha Yoga and how it relates to a practice consisting of singer-friendly yoga postures, how these postures may benefit the singer's mental and physical health, and how these techniques relate to designated research. The research suggests that a daily practice of Hatha Yoga can be beneficial to the singer's body and voice, and minimize performance anxiety.

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Conclusion

Voice students, professional singers, and teachers face numerous obstacles in their studies and teachings. The research that has been chosen for this document derives from professional voice pedagogues, sport psychologists, yoga teachers, and from my own experience having passed a 200-hour, Hatha Yoga Teacher Training Program. The research suggests that a daily practice of Hatha Yoga can be beneficial to the singer's body and voice, and minimize performance anxiety. Hatha Yoga may also benefit voice teachers by incorporating these techniques during voice instruction. Singers should always check with their health care physician before beginning any yoga practice. In my personal experience, a routine doctor visit for sinusitis resulted with me having been diagnosed with hypertension. I was prescribed extremely powerful medications that can cause damage to the kidneys and the liver. I knew I needed to be responsible and bring my blood pressure down, but the thought of taking numerous medications was unacceptable. Although my blood pressure has decreased, I continue to focus on my body, and visit my doctor in combating this chronic medical condition. My yoga practice has played an integral part in keeping my hypertension from worsening. The practice of pranayama, mantra, and mudra has also assisted me in overcoming my performance anxieties. Since being introduced to Emmons and Thomas's research for this document, I have begun to feel more confident with the memorization of text. I have battled with memory issues for years. Their suggestions have allowed me to feel more comfortable on stage and reduced my stage fright.

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