

# How to Belt Without Destroying Your Voice

I have been teaching private voice lessons for over 30 years. Female singers frequently ask me, "How do I belt without destroying my voice?" My answer: classical vocal techniques are the tools you need to maneuver through your belt. This article tells a female singer how to do this.

## Use Your Combined-Head-Chest Voice

A woman has three voices: chest, combined-head-chest and head. The combined-head-chest voice is a mix of both the chest voice and the head voice. I often explain it as having a devil (chest voice) on your left shoulder and an angel (head voice) on your right shoulder. The chest voice wants to be in charge. It's strong and cocky and thinks it knows best. It doesn't. The head voice needs to take control. Once the head voice angel is singing, then the chest voice devil can come out to play by adding chest to the head voice.

When a singer belts, she brings her chest register above her natural break. The forced use of the chest register can cause extreme tension in her throat and damage her vocal chords. By using classical vocal techniques, a belt singer can sing freely without pain or stress to her voice.

Singing in your combined-head-chest voice is the key to a healthy belt. The temptation when trying to belt is to sing in your chest voice as high as you can. This doesn't work. You must bring your head voice down, not your chest voice up.

## Exercise

Sing a descending scale on "OO." Start in your head voice on a high F5. Bring your head voice down to F4. While still in your head voice, sing an ascending scale starting on F4 and ending on F5. Repeat this a few times singing louder each time. The combined-head-chest voice will appear. At first, the combined-head-chest voice will sound weak. That's fine. You can always add more air to make it stronger.

Practice this for about five minutes a day, taking the scale up in half-steps until you reach A6. Then try the scale on the other vowels: "EE," "EH," "AH" and "OH." Finding this voice takes patience. Don't be discouraged if it takes awhile.

## Breathe From Your Diaphragm

As a woman, you are used to holding in your stomach (think-bathing suit shopping). To breathe from your diaphragm, you must allow the stomach to

go out. Breathe deeply right now, focusing on the way your body moves. If your shoulders or chest move, you are chest breathing. If your stomach goes out, you are breathing from your diaphragm. The classical technique of diaphragmatic breathing is the best way to breathe.

The diaphragm is below the rib cage and above the belly (See Illustrations 1 & 2). When you inhale, the diaphragm goes down and the abdomen goes out. Exhale, and the diaphragm goes up (back to its original position) and the abdomen goes in. Once you learn how to breathe from your diaphragm, you will belt comfortably, because you will have removed the tension in your shoulders and neck that is caused by chest breathing.

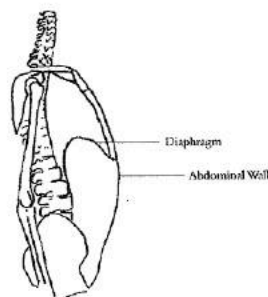


Illustration 1  
Diaphragm and abdominal wall before inhalation

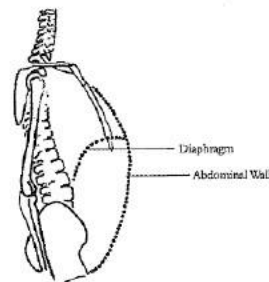


Illustration 2  
Diaphragm and abdominal wall after inhalation

## Exercise

Place both hands on your upper abdominal muscles. Put the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth. Breathe through your nose and mouth simultaneously over a count of eight. Your shoulders and chest shouldn't move and your stomach should go out. Now, exhale over a count of eight.

To confirm that you are breathing from the diaphragm, repeat this exercise. Inhale over a count of eight and sing as many scales as you can on one breath. If you can only sing five scales, then you are still chest breathing. Do this as part of your daily vocal warm-ups.

Diaphragmatic breathing helps you take a deeper breath and control the use of your air. A strong belt singer needs lots of air.

## Raise Your Soft Palate

Yawn, and you'll feel your soft palate rise. The soft palate is the soft tissue in the back of the roof of your mouth. Run your tongue along the roof of your mouth. The hard palate is behind the top teeth. The soft palate is behind the hard palate (See Illustration 3).

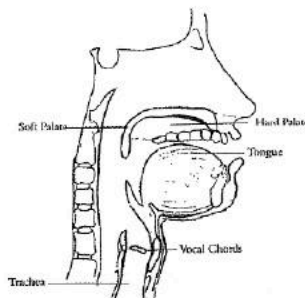


Illustration 3  
Soft Palate, Hard Palate, Tongue, Vocal Chords, Trachea

Belt singers often sing with a lowered soft palate. This causes tension in the throat. Raise the soft palate, and the tension disappears.

I once told a student to raise her soft palate by picturing an orange in her throat. She tried and replied, "It feels like I have a grapefruit in the back of my throat!" I congratulated her: grapefruit is good. Experiment and find your fruit.

### Exercise

Sing an "AH" over eight counts with a lowered soft palate. Then do the same, this time with a raised soft palate. You'll feel and hear the difference. Now, sing a chromatic scale keeping the palate up. Try this exercise using "EE," "EH," "OH" and "OO."

### Sing On the Pure Italian Vowels: "EE" "EH" "AH" "OH" and "OO"

Much like Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, a belt singer must find and sing on the pure vowels (no regional accents). The pure Italian vowels help with pitch and proper placement of a note. Each vowel has its own placement in the mouth as shown on Illustration 4. The order of the vowel placement from front to back is: "EE," "EH," "AH," "OH," "OO."

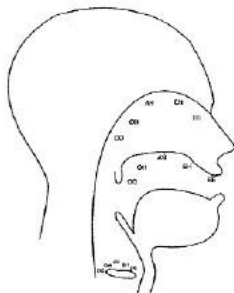


Illustration 4  
Vowel Placement EE, EH, AH, OH, OO

### Exercise

On one note sing, "EE," "EH," "AH," "OH," "OO." By singing the vowels in this order you should be able to feel the proper vowel placement. "EE" is the most forward and "OO" is the furthest back. Next, try each vowel separately. Take this exercise up in half-steps.

One day, I asked a girl to tell me what "EE" felt like to her. She remarked, "It feels like a horse is jumping out of my mouth." An apt description: she felt her "EE" placement forward and her soft palate up. As you do these exercises focus on what the vowel placements feel like, then find an image that works for you.

What will it feel like when you are belting while using these classical vocal techniques? Effortless. Painless. Ten-

sion-free. One of my students said, "It feels like velvet." When done correctly, it feels like you are doing nothing at all.

Explore your voice and trust yourself. No matter how scary it may seem, you can master the art of belting without destroying your voice. Last month a new student entered my studio. She was paralyzed with stage fright. She couldn't even sing with me in the room. I stepped into the hallway and let her sing alone in my studio. A beautiful voice emerged. She needed to trust herself. We worked on stage presence and three weeks later she auditioned in front of hundreds of people and landed a role in a touring Broadway show.

Anything is possible!



*Carol Luttrell teaches private voice lessons at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She instructs her students how to sing jazz, pop, R&B, rock, country, Gospel, classical and musical theater while using classical vocal techniques.*