

Tension & Release  
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“Music is organized sound that creates feelings of tension & release (T&R) in the performer and audience.” This can take the form of “harmonic” T&R (play of a ii half-diminished chord resolving to the I chord or the V7 chord), “melodic” T&R (sing the song “Row, row, row your boat”), “rhythmic” T&R (do a drum roll ending with a cymbal crash, or a “waltz” with a pattern of T, r, r, T, r, r, etc.), or “lyrical” T&R (sing the passage “**Our song was a song of tomorrow, our hearts were as high as the sky; but songs are forgotten and skies often gray**”).

The kind of tension that good singers use is a special kind called “dynamic” tension. That means it is ever changing in intensity. It is NOT the tension you get when you “hold” something in place such as holding up a heavy object or pulling something tight and holding it there. It is the tension that you get as you pull against something “elastic” that stores your energy and ever increases its resistance to your tension. Try pulling slowly on a big elastic band. As you stretch it you are applying “dynamic” tension. Once you reach maximum stretch and hold it, you are applying “static” tension. Good singers, who make good music, know that static tension is bad as it doesn’t support good singing, it tires you out, and it annoys the audience. But what often gets overlooked is that applying dynamic tension while singing supports and encourages good singing as it is the way our body is wired to work.

Try this: get a big, heavy duty elastic band and hook your thumbs through the ends. Now try the following three acts while stretching the elastic band: 1) hold your breath and stretch it, 2) inhale slowly while stretching it, 3) blow air out – like a silent whistle – while stretching it. I’ll bet the one that feels the most natural is #3. That’s because your body wants to build tension as air goes out. Now try this: 1) inhale while holding a limp elastic band, 2) inhale while stretching the elastic band, 3) blow out all your air while stretching the elastic band then inhale as you release it. I’ll bet the one that feels the most natural is #3. That’s because your body wants to relax to “acquire” air. These are the two pieces of the “T&R Cycle”: dynamic tension (while air is going out – singing), followed by release (to let the body acquire air). Notice then that good singers don’t “breathe” – they “sing” and then release the tension and the body naturally acquires air. It actually acquires much more than if your act is to “inhale” which creates tension (listen to the “gasp”) and inhibits an optimal lungful.

This movement pattern of the T&R cycle is fundamental to improving ANYONE’S singing, regardless of natural talent and training. The best way to demonstrate how to get into the cycle properly is FIRST to demonstrate how to do it INCORRECTLY: when the pitch is blown just stand there and listen, then inhale to start singing. Done that way you create so much tension at the beginning of the line you have no where to build – your tension will only be static or even release while singing and the phrase loses energy. Instead, forcibly expel air – like a silent whistle – when the pitch is blown then release (and let the air in) and start singing. You’ll find that you now start the line relaxed (which allows for better singing technique) and you can gradually build tension right up

until the next moment you need air when you again release. Now you're in the right cycle. Good side effects of this are: 1) you'll find you make less and less noise when the air goes in – signaling less restriction - therefore 2) you start the line with maximum air and 3) an open throat. To further refine the release (if you are still a little “gasp”) open your throat by releasing to an “aw” shape in the throat.

This is called the FUNDAMENTAL T&R MOVEMENT PATTERN and the body needs to be conditioned by “feeling” it by either using elastic bands (stretching them between the thumbs as you sing then releasing) or rubber balls (squeezing them as you sing then releasing). This conditioning is critical because if you have to think about it or “remember” to do the movement pattern, you are doomed to failure because as soon as you are required to remember something else (notes, words, choreography, etc.) you will “forget” to do the movement pattern. The “body” must be conditioned to do the movement pattern because you can't rely on your brain! We all know what happens to the brain when we go on stage – it shuts down and can only one thing at best. It just goes to show you don't need to take your brain on stage with you. You DO need to take your body because it holds up your uniform. So train your body! The only way to do it is by “experiencing” the feel of T&R – “thinking” about it just isn't as good. It has been compared to sex in that regard.

“Practice makes permanent.” Practice the T&R movement pattern when ever you sing anything, even warm-ups. To get into the T&R cycle (which will help you do the movement pattern) when the pitch is blown, blow out air, then release and sing. Continually build tension until the next release (never get fully extended and static). Directors, always direct the tension during the pitch and the release when you want the chorus to start singing. Once you get good at this you'll notice the chorus anticipates and follows you much better. This T&R direction is good practice for what comes later for you.

To make the body of the singer most efficient a proper stance is critical. To give the body the best chance to have the range of motion necessary to support good T&R it's good to learn the modified “warrior stance.” To learn the “warrior stance” jump up and land on the ground with your hands up ready to fight, you'll notice your feet are wider apart than your hips and your feet are pointed (angled) outward with one closer to your adversary and the other back a bit. Try it. Now you're ready for action. I'll bet you would do a better job at “tug o' war” in that stance. Try a tug o' war with someone from that stance and compare your success to simply standing at “attention” with your feet under your hips and your feet pointed straight ahead. Good singers modify the warrior stance a little and bring the feet in just a bit so they have a relaxed stance that has plenty of range of motion.

This modified warrior stance is called a “skeletal” stance since it's mostly the alignment of your bones that hold you up (with just a little help from some little muscles called “accessory” muscles). This is important because bones don't get tired. As you become more proficient at building dynamic tension while singing, you'll notice you are building tension (storing energy in something elastic) not only in your elastic band or rubber ball,

but also in your body's larger muscles. Since your body is made of millions of little elastic bands when you use your "external" muscle (elastic band or rubber ball) you get them to do the same thing.

Eventually you'll notice that right before you release your rubber band your body may be in a stance that you could only hold with muscular tension – this is called a "muscular stance." Imagine a "bow and arrow." Your head is the top of the bow and your feet are the bottom of the bow. When the bow is drawn back the center moves away from the line between the top and the bottom of the bow. Your body does the same thing. Your core (the pelvis and the big bones around it) moves away from the line between your head and feet. This puts energy into the biggest muscles in your body (the "gross" muscles such as the glutes, the quads, the abs, and the lower back). To train your body to do this ADVANCED T&R MOVEMENT PATTERN always release to the skeletal stance and then slowly build tension in the core by moving it away from the head/feet line toward an ever increasing muscular stance, then release to the skeletal stance again. Many directors intuitively move their bodies in this exact manner so now the chorus singer should recognize that and draw comfort from that fact since he'll always have a visual reminder to move the core and not have to think so much. Notice, again, the director is directing the T&R movement of your CORE.

The REFINED T&R MOVEMENT PATTERN can be introduced once the advanced pattern is well ingrained. It is essentially the same but has two small refinements: 1) as the singer draws to the end of the line the stretch is "accelerated" to give the appropriate rebound to release the singing (and acquire air) so that the song has fluid forward motion and it always seems as if the song HAS TO go on to the next line. Obviously, in a ballad there might be far less acceleration in tender passages as opposed to an uptune where the singer must come right back in on beat. The other refinement, 2) is that once the air is acquired the lungs should be so full that air actually starts moving out before the singing starts. Some singers call that "singing on the air" or a "silent H." This opens the throat to the max (allowing better quality sound) and softens & synchronizes initial attacks so precision of delivery is enhanced. It also allows for far better dynamic "vocal texture" as the voice is less constrained and the singer sings with more freedom.

If good music is various forms of T&R then it makes sense that a singer will be more musical by supporting the sung music with a refined and unconscious T&R movement pattern.