Title: *Vocal energy and vocal tension common misunderstandings* by Marcos Santos

As both a professional singer and as a teacher of singers I have experienced voice lessons in a great variety of settings world wide and it has been my observation that one regularly hears the same concepts and ideas addressed and discussed in many different ways. Issues such as breathing technique (diaphragmatic vs. abdominal), position of the soft palate (always high and lifted vs. dependent upon which vowel being sung), body posture, relaxation etc.
And thus we come to the focus of this article, the concept of “relaxation”  in the process of singing as well as the instruction to simply “relax” - one such seemingly positive concept which is used with great frequency in the teaching of singing but (which my experiences and observations reveal) does not always result in the desired outcome.  I have seen students who - when repeatedly instructed to “relax” - became so focused on relaxing that the resultant sound became weak as they lost control of their technique all the while struggling to remain “relaxed.” Consequently, though the teacher repeatedly instructs them to “relax,” they are anything but relaxed which, in turn, usually promotes a great sense of frustration with their vocal technique which is now producing a sound which has no freedom, resonance, projection or focus because of the tension created from their attempts to “relax.” And, sadly, this is usually the typical result.

Rather than using the word “relax” or “relaxation” to achieve the desired vocal sound, I have often asked why the word “energy” and/or the concept of “energizing” the vocal tone is neglected or often absent in some voice teacher’s vocabularies.  The most common answer I am given is that it can “cause the singer to become very tense” and, while I truly can understand this response, one must find a way of using the right amount of energy while singing.

The eminent vocal pedagogue and author Richard Miller on page 122 in his book *Training Tenor Voices* addresses this issue thus: “the yawn-sigh technique is still found among some teachers who believe singing should always feel relaxed. Such doctrine is ruinous for tenors. Muscle tonus is essential in all singing (…).” Also, the author refers more specifically that: “one of the most detrimental approaches to breath coordination is based upon false assumptions about relaxation during singing, but muscle tonus is vital to all energized physical action.”

Energy in singing is equal to energy of air spinning through the vocal resonators and a too relaxed singer can easily misunderstand this very important aspect of vocal technique.  Spin of air is achieved through muscle tonus, aka energy, and the use of the diaphragm which then results in a free sound which is both brilliant and focused.

A number of years ago, when participating in the extremely prestigious summer vocal academy IVAI in Montreal, an internationally recognized and acclaimed voice teacher demonstrated the difference between energy and tension by showing how the arms are used to lift a large bag full of groceries: if the arms are too loose and “relaxed,” it will be next to impossible to lift the bag; likewise, if the arms are too “tensed” it will take a tremendous physical effort to lift the bag BUT with energized and focused muscular momentum, lifting the heavy grocery bag is accomplished easily and with minimal effort; and the same thing will occur in vocal technique.  Following inhalation - and with the onset of sound - the singer must feel and be energized throughout their body with air spinning in the vocal resonators while vocal sound is being produced; it’s a question of balance and the right amount of energy.

When singing a scale throughout the entire vocal range and while utilizing the energy of air spinning throughout the full range (always starting in this manner at the beginning of the vocal exercise) the singer will obtain an open throat and a brilliant, focused vocal sound.

Here are some tips to assist you in achieving and maintaining an energized sound:
1.  Before singing even the first note of your vocal exercise, create the sensation of the air arriving first in your resonators and preceding the onset of the vocal sound.
2.  Energetically articulate the consonants, most especially those at the beginning of words.
3. While producing sound, feel air flowing on your soft palate.
4. While sustaining a note, create the sensation of singing the same vowel many times.

This is a vocal technique which I employ in my own singing and teach regularly to voice students with outstanding audible results as the sound becomes more even and with easy projection and a natural brilliancy.  It is as critically important for singers to avoid tension in their bodies as it is to avoid an overly relaxed body, one which is devoid of the energy necessary to produce a sound which is rich with harmonics and capable of projecting in ensembles or over an orchestra in a large hall.

 BIO of the author



Tenor Marcos Santos has an international career in the US, Europe and Asia, where he performed as a soloist in Recitals, Concerts and Operas singing main roles in La Traviata, Rigoletto, Manon, Goyescas and Medea by Theodorakis. Performed at the Carnegie Hall and at the Merkin Hall in New York City, at the Gulbenkian Foundation and Teatro Nacional de São Carlos in Lisbon, at the El Escorial in Madrid, at the Suntory Hall in Tokyo, at the Conservatoire Superieur in Paris, etc. Mr. Santos has taught voice in Savannah GA, Boston and New York city , actually he teaches voice in Portugal at Evora University at the Acting Department. Marcos holds a BM from Mannes College of Music in NYC and a MM and DMA in Musicology from Evora University in Portugal.