

Yoga in the Voice Studio: A Practical Guide

By Mollie Solow McReynolds

I took my first yoga class when I was in graduate school. Moving to North Carolina was a huge culture shock after spending my undergraduate career in San Francisco and I was lonely and overwhelmed. I went to my first yoga class just to get some exercise, but on that mat I found that I was more grounded, peaceful, and it lasted for hours afterwards. I kept going back and within a few months the anxiety I often struggled with started to diminish and I could feel some of the hard edges of tension soften. In moments of intense stress, I found myself turning to simple yoga poses to calm my nerves.



Mollie Solow McReynolds

After one semester of practicing yoga, both my mental and physical health had noticeably improved. In addition to a heightened sense of clarity, I had more strength and stamina and could now balance on my hands in crow pose. I also noticed the effects in my singing—my breathing improved and it was easier to check in with what was going on in my body. Instead of marinating in anxiety before a performance, I grounded myself backstage in a deep squat, breathing deeply and slowly. The longer I practiced yoga and felt its benefits both on my body and my singing, the more interested I became in how useful it could be for not just me, but for my students. I knew that I wanted to start teaching after graduation and wanted to find a way to share what I was experiencing with my students. The summer after my first year of graduate school, I took a 200-hour yoga teacher training at YogaWorks in San Francisco and immersed myself in yoga and anatomy. When I returned to school, I started work on my graduate thesis, a study of yoga in the voice studio, and I offered a weekly class to other voice students. I also taught non-voice majors and aspiring voice majors who were not able to come to my weekly classes. It was here that I realized that the best way to teach yoga to singers was to bring it to them, not ask them to bring themselves to yoga. I began to experiment with incorporating some simple yoga poses into their lessons.

Teaching fellow students at a university was the perfect place to build the theory of mixing yoga into a singing regimen. I had the support of the faculty and the other students were open and excited to try new techniques. Upon graduation, I moved back to the west coast and started teaching on my own, at a community music school, and even to software

engineers at Google. I often taught at studios the size of a small closet where it seemed crazy to ask the students to try yoga. The students were often less advanced than the university students I was used to working with and it seemed like I should focus on music fundamentals instead of introducing new techniques. The practical limitations of a real-world private studio slowly stopped me from continuing what I had started in graduate school—I taught voice and I taught yoga, but they existed in separate lanes. I still taught singers yoga, but in the context of workshops—not inside the voice studio.

My lightbulb moment didn't come until I joined an opera chorus. The director asked if there was anyone who could lead the singers through a quick stretch and I volunteered. It was a small company where choristers ranged in age from people in their 20s to older adults who had mobility challenges, so I created yoga sequences so every person in the room could easily manage and find benefits. I started teaching a warm-up at the beginning of every rehearsal and the chorus was really enthusiastic. This experience helped me understand that I had been making my incorporation of yoga to singers too complicated. I didn't need a larger space or more time—I didn't even need a yoga mat—I needed to adjust to the student, to their needs, and to the space. In sum, if you have enough room to stand or sit, then you have enough room to offer your students yoga.

What Are the Benefits of Yoga?

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word yuj, meaning to yoke, join, or unite, and is an apt way to describe how I use yoga in my voice studio. By joining the functionality of yoga with the practice of singing, it becomes easier for students to connect their mind, body, and breath, and build awareness of how their bodies can work with and for them as singers.

Yoga combines physical poses (asanas) with breathing (pranayama) and meditation to build strength, enhance flexibility, increase cardiovascular health and endurance, and enhance the connection between the mind and the body. The physical practice of yoga can also lower cortisol, the stress hormone, and “shifts the body from a ‘flight-or-fight’ response to a ‘rest and digest’ state.”¹ As all singers know, our

mental and physical health has a profound impact on vocal production and performance. It is impossible for a singer to effectively use their instrument without using both their mind and their body. The physical demands on singers are also incredibly high—we are expected to be vocal athletes. Even young and less experienced singers can benefit from learning how to care for their whole instrument. Yoga addresses the mind and the body as a whole, making it the perfect practice for singers at any level.

Mollie's Top 3 Poses for the Studio:

Tip: As I've taught yoga to more students, I've noticed that it feels a lot more natural to teach them the pose by doing it alongside the student. By doing the poses together with your student, you can demonstrate how to do the movement safely and effectively and make them feel less awkward, especially if they are new to singing or yoga. As I started to incorporate more yoga, I noticed that my students quickly became more comfortable and confident doing it on their own.

1. Modified Downward-Facing Dog

Modified downward-facing dog is an accessible and safe pose that strengthens and brings awareness to the core, stretches the muscles in the chest and front-body, and engages and strengthens key postural muscles. For singers who struggle with tension, this pose is an easy way to help them stretch and relax their muscles. Modified downward dog utilizes the piano, back of a chair, or other stable surface, takes up only a small amount of space, is easier to fit into a short lesson, is accessible for most students regardless of ability, and avoids risk of injury.

How to cue modified downward-facing dog:

- Place your hands flat on the piano or other stable surface, shoulder-width apart or slightly wider.
- Leave your hands where they are and slowly walk your feet back with a flat back until your torso is about parallel to the floor and your hips are above your ankles.
- Step your feet hip-width apart and bend your knees slightly.
- Pull your navel up and in to engage your core.
- Relax the back of your neck and let your head hang toward the ground.
- Draw your shoulder blades down your back and spin your upper inner arms toward the ceiling, so the inside of your elbows point up.
- Keep engaging your core, and press your chest down towards the floor to safely increase the stretch in the front of your body.

- You can deepen the stretch in your hamstrings by lessening the bend in your legs.
- Press your hands firmly down into the piano and draw your tailbone towards the back of the room to feel the stretch down your side body.
- To come out, slowly walk your feet back towards your hands and return to standing.

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2. Cat/Cow (traditional and modified)

Cat/cow is a great tool to use for teaching breath awareness, how to take a low breath, and gently stretch tight hips and the front and back body. By linking them together with intentional inhales and exhales, they also help calm the nervous system and strengthen the mind-body connection. Cat/cow is great to do on the floor if you have the space and your student can put pressure on their knees, and get on and off the floor with ease, but it can also be done standing or seated in a chair.

How to cue cat-cow pose:

- Come onto all fours in a table-top position. Align your knees directly underneath your hips and your hands underneath your shoulders. Untuck your toes. (Note: it may be uncomfortable to do this pose on a hard floor. If you don't have a yoga mat, consider placing a pillow or folded towel under your knees.)
- Cow: Inhale and draw your tailbone up towards the ceiling, drop your belly, and open your chest forward as you draw your shoulder blades down your back. Slightly lengthen the front of your neck by moving your gaze up to where the wall meets the ceiling.
- Cat: Exhale and tuck your tailbone towards the floor. Press your spine up towards the ceiling and shift your gaze to your knees.
- Continue to move through three to four more cycles of cat-cow. Inhale for cow, exhale for cat.
- When you've finished, press back into child's pose. Shift your hips back over your heels, and walk your hands forward until your arms are straight. Press your hands firmly into the floor and pull back, like you are trying to pull

the floor away from the wall. Relax your neck and let your forehead rest on the floor.

How to cue standing cat/cow:

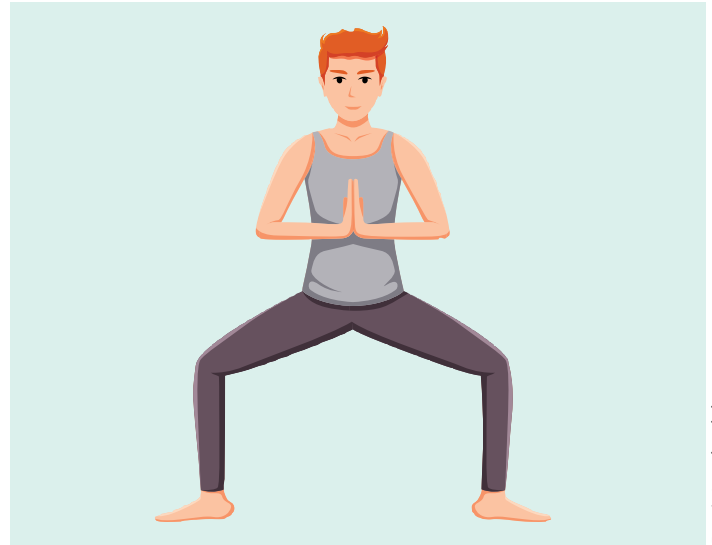
- Stand with your feet hip distance apart. Bend your knees slightly and rest your hands on your thighs, just above your knees. If this is challenging, you can also place your hands on the piano or other stable surface.
- Cow: Inhale and draw your tailbone towards the ceiling. Drop your belly towards your thighs, spread through your collarbones and draw your shoulder blades down. Lift your gaze towards the ceiling as much as is comfortable for your neck.
- Cat: Exhale and tuck your tailbone towards the floor. Draw your navel towards your spine and round your back. Relax the back of your neck and let your head hang.
- Continue to cycle through the two poses, moving with your breath, for three or four rounds of breath.
- When you are finished, slowly move back into a standing position.
- This same sequence can also be done seated in a chair, with your feet planted on the floor.

3. Modified Goddess Pose

New-to-me students are often nervous during their first lesson, or even first several lessons. I like to introduce a modified goddess pose as a grounding posture and tool that they can use if they experience performance anxiety, or have other anxiety around singing. This pose slightly elevates the heart rate, which stimulates mood-boosting endorphins and neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin. It is a balancing posture, which forces the student to focus on staying upright, deep core activation, and breathing rather than their nerves. Additionally, because this pose is practiced with a slight tuck to the pelvis, it strengthens and lengthens the muscles along the spine and is a great tool for postural correction in students with an exaggerated forward tilt in their pelvis. If you are teaching a student who is not comfortable balancing, they can practice this posture with one or both hands on the piano or other stable surface. This posture can be practiced alone, but also pairs well after warming up the pelvis and spine with cat/cow pose.

How to cue a modified goddess pose:

- Step your feet shoulder distance apart or wider (about three to four feet) with your toes pointed out at a 45-degree angle.
- With your exhale, bend your knees and drop your pelvis toward the floor. Press your knees toward the outside of the room.



Modified Goddess Pose

- Place your hands in a prayer position at your chest and press your palms firmly together.
- Tuck your tailbone slightly to lengthen your spine and draw your shoulder blades down and away from your ears.
- Take your gaze in front of you so your chin is parallel to the floor.
- If you would like to add a stretch for your upper body, you can place your hands on your thighs and as you exhale, drop your right shoulder toward your left knee. Keep your spine straight, inhale and come back to center, and exhale to repeat on the other side.

Want to learn more?

Mollie's YouTube Channel: www.youtube.com/@TheNightingaleCollective

Finding a yoga studio near you: If you are interested in practicing at a studio, many studios offer their first several classes free and have yoga mats to rent. Try as many classes and teachers as you can to make sure it is a good fit! There are dozens of styles of yoga and many studios will blend one style with another. Here is a basic guide to some common styles:

Vinyasa classes link "breath to movement," meaning that you will move through the series of poses quickly and vigorously. Many studios will offer leveled classes, with beginner levels that move more slowly to allow students to build strength, stamina, and learn the poses that they will find in upper level classes.

Hatha classes will usually hold poses for several breaths instead of moving quickly from one movement to the next.

Bikram, Barkan, Hot Power and more! These classes are typically practiced in a heated room (80°-100°) and follow a set sequence of postures that remains the same from one class to the next.

Restorative or Yin classes are a slow style of yoga that focuses on long holds to target building flexibility, regulating the nervous system, and releasing tension.

Endnotes

1. Cynthia Weiss, "Mayo Clinic Q and A: What's the Benefit of Yoga?," Mayo Clinic News Network, September 11, 2022, <https://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/mayo-clinic-q-and-a-whats-the-benefit-of-yoga/> (accessed July 7, 2026).

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Mollie Solow McReynolds is a professional soprano and voice teacher based in Lake Oswego, Oregon where she founded *The Nightingale Collective*, a private voice studio. She is the soprano section leader for the *Portland Symphonic Choir* and was honored to receive the 2026 *Joan Boytim Award for Independent Teachers*. A certified yoga teacher (E-RYT 200), Mollie specializes in integrating functional movement and anatomy into vocal pedagogy. Her diverse performance career spans the United States and Europe, including a featured appearance on Vince Neil's solo album, *Tattoos & Tequila*. She lives with her husband, two daughters, and a lively assortment of animals.

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