

The Right Yoga for the Right Person: Applying Restorative Yoga in the Voice Studio

Sara Schabas



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Yoga is an ancient Indian practice that supports optimal breathing, tension release, and mental clarity. Singers have practiced yoga since the 1920s when Konstantin Stanislavski taught yoga to help them regulate their breathing and cultivate better awareness on stage. In recent years, concerns have emerged about yoga, including cultural appropriation and the misconception that yoga is primarily about bodily fitness. However, yoga is intended for people of all body types, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. This article introduces a lesser-known type of yoga, restorative yoga, for use in the voice studio, and outlines key poses that can benefit singers of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.

THE BENEFITS OF YOGA—an ancient Indian practice that supports optimal breathing, tension release, and mental clarity—for singers is no secret.¹ Reports of yoga being practiced by classical singers date back to the 1920s, when Konstantin Stanislavski taught yoga to opera singers to help them regulate their breathing and cultivate better awareness on stage.² In recent years, misconceptions have increased about yoga, due to concerns around cultural appropriation and the idea that yoga is focused only on bodily fitness.³ Singers may feel intimidated by introducing traditional yoga into their singing practice for these reasons. However, yoga is intended for people of all body types, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. In the words of T.K.V. Desikachar, a prominent yoga teacher and the son of Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (who is credited with helping to bring yoga to the West), “Anybody who wants to can practice yoga. Anybody can breathe; therefore, anybody can practice yoga. But no one can practice every kind of yoga. It has to be the right yoga for the right person.”⁴ This article aims to dispel misconceptions surrounding yoga and to introduce restorative yoga, a lesser-known type of yoga, into the voice studio. It will outline a few key poses that can benefit singers of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.

WHAT IS YOGA? A QUICK DEFINITION

Yoga is an ancient practice originating in Northern India around 3000 B.C. that aims to help reduce attachment to the body.⁵ It began with a series of cleansing and fire-focused rituals associated with the Vedic religion and was compiled and codified by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras between the second and fourth centuries. Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word “yuj,” meaning “to

yoke or to unite,” and is comprised of eight *limbs*. These limbs include the *yamas* and *niyamas* (restraints and positive duties), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing techniques), *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal), *dharana* (forced concentration), *dhyana* (meditative absorption), and *samadhi* (bliss).⁶ Yoga came to prominence in the West over the last fifty years due to the influence of Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989), an Indian Sanskrit scholar, healer and yogi who taught influential yoga teachers including B.K.S. Iyengar, Indra Devi, and Krishnamacharya’s son, T.K.V. Desikachar.⁷

YOGA WITHIN THE CURRENT VOCAL PEDAGOGY LITERATURE

Many vocal pedagogy texts describe the benefits of yoga asana on classical voice training, including Judith Carman’s *Yoga for Singing*⁸ and Heather Lyle’s *Vocal Yoga: The Joy of Breathing, Singing and Sounding*.⁹ These texts posit that applying the mindfulness, breathing and somatic principles of yoga can help singers to learn body and breathing awareness to enhance airway physiology function, and to aid in rehabilitation for vocal disorders. Lloyd, Hoffman-Ruddy, Silverman and Lehman’s article, “Vocal yoga: Applying yoga principles in voice therapy” in *The Journal of Singing*, suggests structuring voice lessons in the same way as typical yoga classes, which begin with centering exercises and warmups, followed by repertoire or exercises to help build resonance and endurance, followed by a cool down or resting period.¹⁰

Yoga is also cited as a powerful tool to help mitigate music performance anxiety by many vocal pedagogy texts as well as mental health resources. Lynn Holding’s book, *The Musician’s Mind*, describes numerous instances in which the yoga asana practice successfully reduced performance anxiety amongst students and professional musicians.¹¹ Singh, Onima, and Singh’s article, “Benefits of Yoga Pranayama, Asana, and Meditation Techniques for Classically Trained Singers,” also describes the ways in which pranayama, one of the eight limbs of yoga, can benefit singers by helping them to increase energy and/or reduce performance anxiety.¹²

ABOUT RESTORATIVE YOGA

Restorative yoga is a healing practice that uses postures (asana), breathing techniques (pranayama), and medita-

tion (dhyana) to reduce stress and promote homeostasis. It was developed in the 1970s by Judith Lasater, a student of B.K.S. Iyengar (1918–2018), one of the 20th century’s foremost authorities on yoga.¹³ Restorative yoga aims to help practitioners reduce sympathetic nervous system activity and increase parasympathetic nervous system activity through resting poses on props that help to both stimulate and relax the body. In a typical class, practitioners lie in a series of resting poses for twenty seconds to five minutes at a time.¹⁴ Restorative yoga is a post-lineage practice, which has evolved away from yoga’s roots in the Vedic religion, a precursor to Hinduism.¹⁵ It can be practiced in conjunction with other religions and pose names can be translated into any language.

The benefits of restorative yoga include mediation of the fascial system, a system of connective tissue throughout the body that can hold tightness and tension, thereby increasing ease of movement and emotional regulation.¹⁶ Practicing restorative yoga has also been proved to bring down rapid breathing and pulse, optimizing the circulatory system.¹⁷ It can increase vagal tone (an internal process that helps to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system), as well as unwind habitual patterns of breathing, increase lung capacity, and restore the natural curvatures of the spine.¹⁸ Studies have also demonstrated how practicing yoga in a group setting can help to move practitioners who have experienced trauma into a relationship of self-compassion.¹⁹

APPLYING RESTORATIVE YOGA TO VOCAL PEDAGOGY

Many singers and other musicians suffer from performance anxiety and hyperarousal, which are symptoms of high sympathetic nervous system activity.²⁰ In non-restorative yoga classes, each pose builds out of a foundation of *tadasana*—Sanskrit for “mountain pose,” or standing pose.²¹ In restorative classes, *savasana*, “corpse pose,” serves as a foundation pose, which is a resting pose that in regular asana classes comes at the end of class to promote recovery and knowledge consolidation. Recent studies on musicians learning new motor skills have demonstrated how periods of rest can consolidate and transform new skills into long-term, retrievable motor memories.²² The poses outlined below, which stem from the *savasana* pose, could help students to

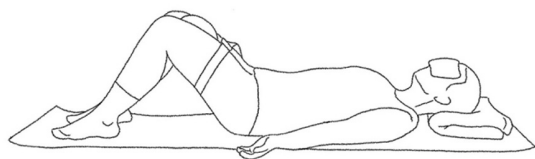


Figure 1. Constructive rest pose.

integrate new pedagogical information while releasing anxiety, which can reduce processing effectiveness.²³

Readers should note that while the poses outlined below are performed with yoga blocks, bolsters and straps, these props can easily be substituted with household items including books, pillows, scarves and blankets.

Constructive rest pose is a key pose used in restorative yoga and Alexander Technique (Figure 1). It was invented by Dr. Lulu Sweigard, the founder of ideokinesis, during the 1950s and 1960s.²⁴ Recent clinical studies of constructive rest pose for musicians have demonstrated the pose's ability to help balance the autonomic nervous system and reduce stress, tension, and pain in multiple areas of the body.²⁵ It helps to release the iliopsoas, reset the sacroiliac joint, and lengthen the lower back.²⁶

In constructive rest, practitioners lie on their backs (ideally on a hard surface or yoga mat) with their legs bent at the knees and soles of their feet on the ground. Practitioners may use a strap around their thighs to hold their legs in place, eliminating any extra effort that may impede total relaxation. If a student experiences anxiety, they may appreciate an eye cover, or a blanket or sandbag placed on their body when resting in this pose.

Singers may benefit from constructive rest pose due to its promotion of efficient body alignment and deep breathing through its release of the iliopsoas muscle, which connects to the diaphragm and the pelvic, thoracic and lumbar vertebrae.²⁷ Iliopsoas tightness has been proven to negatively impact physiological stress and vice versa.²⁸ Spending time releasing this muscle through constructive rest, either at the beginning of a lesson or during SOVT warmup exercises, can help singers to experience greater ease and relaxation when performing as well as in day-to-day life.²⁹ Ideally, singers would practice lying in this pose for at least three minutes a day, either in the voice studio or at home while reviewing lesson recordings, during audiation practice,

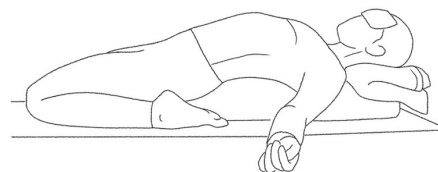


Figure 2. Reclining backbend over a bolster.

or simply as a mindful break to help integrate new skills or repertoire. There are several disclaimers to note about this pose: it is not encouraged during pregnancy. If a practitioner is experiencing tight hips or quadriceps, they may appreciate a chair underneath their calves.

Reclining backbend over a bolster is another restorative pose that can help singers increase breath capacity through its relaxation of upper body muscles and promotion of diaphragm extension (Figure 2). As noted by Pettersen, Bjørkøy, Torp, and Westgaard in their examination of neck and shoulder muscle activity and thorax movement in singing, relaxation in the shoulder, neck and upper trapezius muscles are necessary for deep inspiration and healthy vocal technique.³⁰ These muscles can activate in response to mental stress, inhibiting deep respiration.³¹

In reclined backbend, yoga practitioners lie on their backs with their knees bent and soles on the ground with a bolster under their upper thoracic spines and underneath their shoulder blades. It may be beneficial to use a strap around the thighs and to have light support under the head to help retain natural cervical curvature. Lying in this pose promotes chest expansion, softens the psoas muscles, extends the upper thoracic spine, and helps to increase expansion of the thoracic diaphragm.³²

This pose may particularly help singers who experience shoulder and neck tension. Due to the vulnerable nature of the pose, students may prefer to practice privately or with a blanket over them. Singers would benefit from this pose before a performance or audition as it promotes an open, confident stance and increased breath capacity.

A disclaimer about this pose is that people experiencing pregnancy, as well as neck or disc issues or lower back pain, may want to use caution when attempting this pose. Note also that the diagram demonstrates a deeper version with the legs folded; however, students may prefer having their legs outstretched.

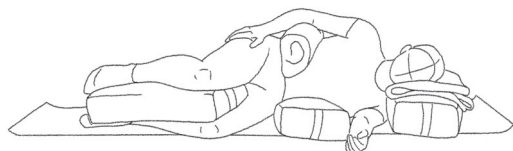


Figure 3. Side lying pose.

Side lying pose can help to increase breathing capacity through diaphragmatic expansion, lengthening of oblique, quadratus lumborum and latissimus dorsi muscles, and release of the intercostal muscles (Figure 3). In this posture, practitioners lie on their side bodies, with a bolster either on or above their hips and a blanket under their heads. The top arm may be outstretched alongside the ear and legs may be scissored in either version. Repeat on both sides.³³

This pose may be helpful to singers who tend to collapse their ribcages while singing. Due to the necessity of doing it for at least three minutes on each side, pedagogues may advise students to practice this pose outside of lesson time. One disclaimer to note about this pose is that it may prove uncomfortable for people with hernias, lumbar spasms, or rib pain.

Child's pose with bolsters may aid singers in lowering activity in the sympathetic nervous back and relieve shoulder tension (Figure 4). In this posture, singers lie in prone position with their chests on at least two bolsters and their knees spread around the two bolsters. The head may face downwards or towards either side, though it is recommended to switch sides halfway through this practice to promote balance.³⁴

A voice student experiencing stress or neck tension may benefit from mindful breathing within this pose at any point during a lesson. This pose also allows a singer to easily access breath sensation in their lower back, promoting deeper, lower breathing and increased breath awareness.

CONCLUSION

Restorative yoga is a largely untapped resource in the voice studio. Techniques promoting kinesthetic

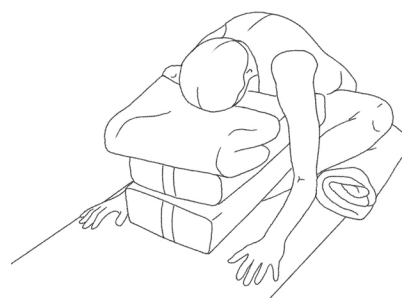


Figure 4. Child's pose with bolsters.

awareness and release of bodily tension—including Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique and hatha yoga—have been advocated by vocal pedagogues for many years. Restorative yoga, with its accessibility to a wide range of body types, abilities, and students of all cultural backgrounds and beliefs, merits inclusion in this list. Perhaps most notably, studies suggesting yoga's capacity to calm the body and mind and move practitioners into relationships of self-compassion, mindfulness, and connection, demonstrate the difference this type of practice can make within the singing community.³⁵

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