

# Deborah Birnbaum: Breath Technician

BY CLAUDIA FRIEDLANDER

Breathing is the foundation of all solid vocal production. Master teacher Deborah Birnbaum shares her insights on the subject while her students and colleagues share their views on her expert instruction.

I've been familiar with Deborah Birnbaum's reputation as a breath specialist for many years. Numerous friends, colleagues, and students credit her with helping them advance their technique and artistry to new levels of ease and skill. Joyce DiDonato has long been a fan of her methods. "We go about tearing apart the blockages in my way," DiDonato explains. "It is thrilling work based in real love for singing, for the music, and for the voice."

Birnbaum's ability to hone in on disconnects or tensions that impact a singer's breath led DiDonato to invite her to work with her Carnegie Hall masterclass participants. That is where our paths finally crossed, leading to an opportunity to sit down with her and learn more about her approach.

Birnbaum credits the great soprano Montserrat Caballé for providing the foundation for her breathing technique. "I sang for Caballé when I was young, and she invited me to come to Europe to work with her for the summer," Birnbaum recalls. "When I came back, my singer friends asked me, 'What did you learn? What did you do?' and I realized that we had concentrated primarily on the breath." Birnbaum also found that Caballé's exercises resonated with her early training as an instrumentalist. "I had started out as a cellist," she says, "and my practice had similarly focused on patterns and technical exercises outside of repertoire for the purpose of developing facility."


Birnbaum found that she was effective at sharing with others her ability to reduce technical skills and musical passages to structural patterns, particularly in the area

of breathing. "I found that I was very good at diagnosing where people were holding tension, what was happening for them . . . most everyone holds their breath in some weird, creative way!" she laughs. Her students agree. Countertenor Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen, a winner of the 2017 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, credits Birnbaum with a kind of "X-ray vision—an ability to watch and listen to someone sing and somehow diagnose exactly what is happening internally with their air."

Word began to spread. Birnbaum was invited to contribute her breathing expertise at a number of Young Artist Programs. "So, that's how it started," she reflects. "It was unintentional. But now that I'm in it, it's definitely what I'm meant to do."

"Every one of our artists loves working with her," says Dan Novak, director of the Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center at Lyric Opera of Chicago, "and they all improve as a result. I recall a colleague at another Young Artist Program saying the same thing: 'Everyone sounds better after she's been here.'"

Lee Anne Myslewski, director of artistic administration at Wolf Trap Opera, comments that "We've found that once singers have worked with her on supporting the sound evenly and consistently, other things fall into place. . . . They're more easily able to communicate effectively on a musical and dramatic level because they're not trying



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Deborah Birnbaum  
photo by Kristin  
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to micromanage the air flow—the breath serves the text and subtext."

Birnbaum enjoys the niche in which she now finds herself. "I like being part of a singer's team, along with their teacher and their coaches—it really suits my personality," she observes. It means a great deal to her that voice teachers trust her with their students. "Deb's work impacts singers' overall technique and musicianship through a better understanding of breath support," observes Beth Roberts-Sebek, coordinator of the Vocal Department at Mannes, noting that working with Birnbaum improves their students' ability to "maintain legato, sustain longer phrases, solve intonation issues, and increase agility."

Lenore Rosenberg, associate artistic administrator at the Metropolitan Opera, finds that Birnbaum's work often fills a vital gap in singers' development. "I cannot tell you how many times I have asked a singer, 'What does your teacher tell you about breath?' and the answer I get is 'Oh, we never talk about it,'" Rosenberg says. She wishes that those who send their students to Birnbaum would seek her out themselves in order to become more proficient at teaching breathing.

Birnbaum says that singers often approach her because they feel that they need more "support." "But when I start working with them, it usually turns out that they're just tight," she finds. "If they're able to free up their body so that it can function in a natural way, they get the sense that support is not a rigid thing but rather that there is flexibility, that breathing is a natural function—there is not this isolation between resonance and breath."

A first session usually begins with a little vocalizing to give her a sense of how a singer engages their voice and breathing at a variety of tempi. "Once I hear what is happening or not happening, we'll often start with some exercises on the floor, to get them to feel what is the natural movement of the body, what it feels like when they're just breathing, without making sound."

Many students come in with a strong conceptual understanding of breath technique without necessarily grasping how to apply it. "I start by translating that vocabulary into their own unique physicality so that they own it and it works for them," Birnbaum says.

The vocabulary itself can sometimes be misleading. "I think the word 'support' can paint the wrong picture, if we think of it as depicting a kind of rigidity, holding up, or stiffness," she muses. "I like to think of 'support' as creating ease and comfort. In the same sense as emotional support, I think that breath support ought to imply reliability."

"Deborah really helps singers examine their own body structures and designs patterns for each individual, which is critical," says Sheri Greenawald, director of the San Francisco Opera Center. "It's not a one-size-fits-all approach."

Birnbaum emphasizes respect for the unique quality of each singer's instrument. "People have different body types, so singers come in a variety of shapes and sizes," she explains. "I'm not talking fat or thin, but more their overall physicality. . . . If you have a student who is tall, thin, and narrow through the ribs, then asking them to think wide is extremely



inefficient. They aren't wide and they never will be! They will just get tighter and tighter. Conversely, people who are the opposite, whose torsos are more triangular, must initiate the breath in a very different way."

She chuckles as she compares breathing strategies with fashion sense. "I might really like that Lycra miniskirt, but it's just not going to work for me!"

Birnbaum has a variety of tools to address onset and release. "You have to learn to allow your inhalation to convey the emotional content of what you're about to say," Birnbaum explains. "And is a singer stopping efficiently? That affects how they breathe and then how they start again. Just learning to finish a note by finishing the breath, same as when we talk, without any change to the mechanism, can be so helpful."

Soprano Jennifer Zetlan describes the difference that mindfully preparing her onsets has made for her singing. "When I inhale," she says, "I do it with intention of the phrase—and instead of holding that intention above my collar bone, I have to send it to my pelvic floor. And everything else can sit on top of that cushion."

Birnbaum's students also discover that freeing up the breath greatly expands their options where volume is concerned. "The word 'dynamic' means movement, but to create a *piano* a singer will tend to



Birnbaum with Joyce DiDonato (left) and Sasha Cooke (right)

pull back and use half of their voice," she explains. The key to performing dynamics, both loud and soft, often lies in allowing the voice to grow or diminish in volume in an organic way.

"When singers try to create dynamics, they often focus on mechanically extending or altering their sound rather than discovering what it wants to do," she finds. "They'll try to change volume before their voice is ready to go where they want it to. When you're driving and need to change lanes, most people signal first. But most singers just cut over and hope it works out that they don't crash!" Birnbaum encourages them to metaphorically read their own driver's manual in order to enjoy a smoother and more graceful ride.

As a former clarinetist, I find the way that Birnbaum's methods draw on technical and interpretive skills she first learned as a cellist particularly fascinating. She feels that there are many ways that singers would do well to adopt a more instrumental paradigm. "Instrumentalists don't take things so personally," she points out.

"When you're a singer, you *are* the instrument," she continues, "and it makes it so much harder to be objective. Singers go to sound too fast," whereas instrumentalists are usually taught to accept the fact that it may take some years of study before they become capable of producing a full, stable,

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you're aware of a metric pulse, it makes it easier to inhale in a rhythmic context."

Encouraging singers to channel their breath into the harmonic architecture of their repertoire can also be a real game changer. If they

are invested in the overall musical direction of a long, sustained phrase rather than worrying about having enough breath to get through it, they will not only be able to negotiate the phrase with ease but will also be able to shape it much more expressively.

"It's integral to the breath to know where you're going," she comments. "You'll notice that when a singer is fixating on a high note, nine times out of ten what looks like the climax of an ascending phrase is functionally

the beginning of a descending phrase, structurally and harmonically. The high note is really the beginning of the descent." Once a singer understands this, their musical instincts will triumph over any tendency to tighten around and "hold" the high note, allowing them to sustain through it freely and sail into the conclusion of the phrase.

"Feeling the harmonic progression of a complicated phrase without any of the extra counterpoint or orchestral information really helps," agrees Zetlan. And DiDonato loves the way that Birnbaum continually challenges her vocal prowess and musicianship. "Vocalizing," she says, "is one of my favorite activities on the planet—I am a total voice geek in that regard! I don't think in our sessions we have ever done the same warm-up, as she's constantly inventing new puzzles for me to try and solve, vocally."

professional sound. She encourages singers to enjoy the process, take a more exploratory and playful approach, and allow their sound to develop at an appropriate pace.

Birnbaum teaches singers how to allow rhythmic and harmonic content to motivate the breath and propel it forward. She thinks of the breath "as having a metric content. If

Breath work is also often the perfect prescription for performance anxiety. Rosenberg points out that "In any situation in which the singer is nervous—and let's face it, that's a lot of the time in this profession—a secure breathing technique provides the foundation on which to start. Auditions, performances, illness—anything that affects human emotions affects our breathing."

Birnbaum observes that "Breath can alleviate stress. . . . Take a deep breath, and it organizes you physically." She notes, however, that not everyone responds to nervousness in the same way. "You have to know what is your reaction to stress. If you get overexcited, I would do something very calming; if you shut down and become catatonic, I'll need to do something to help activate you."

Even in the course of day-to-day life, heightening a singer's breath can lead to powerful emotional experiences. "Sometimes we have what I call 'the big cry,' when something just unlocks," Birnbaum suggests. "That's a very positive thing, but the singer has to feel very safe."

Myslewski feels that Birnbaum's temperament is at the heart of her success in teaching breathing. "Her knowledge base allows singers to trust her," she says, "but it's her warmth and affability that allows singers to open up and really take in the knowledge she shares."

DiDonato admires Birnbaum as much for her humility of spirit as for her coaching prowess. "While she is unrelenting in her expectations and dispersion of technical mastery, it is all conveyed without an iota of ego or self-aggrandizement," she emphasizes. "She is simply in the service of the singer."

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