

Side Stretches at the Barre

Purposes of the Exercise

- To stretch the body
- To expand breath capacity
- To coordinate breath release with open tone
- To release tone with freedom and rich resonance
- To find easy pitch range

A Brief History of the Exercise:

I studied ballet, modern, and jazz dance from the age of six through college. Stretching at the barre was a basic foundation in all three dance genres. When I started exploring voice work as an acting student (at L.A., City College, Carnegie Mellon U., and Wayne State U.) and then as a teacher/coach, I found that variations from dance directly enhanced and solved problems of breath expansion, coordination, and support. I benefited from many dance teachers. I was inspired by voice and speech leaders Robert Parks and Edith Skinner, and mentored (“parented”) by Jerry Blunt. This particular exercise is probably an evolution of all these influences, and it continues to evolve with each new student and actor. — Jan Gist

THE EXERCISE

Most voice/speech teachers work to expand the rib cage and belly, for expanded breath capacity. I’ve found that by supporting yourself on the barre, the stretches are more focused on release and less constrained in the effort to lean over. By going through these different positions, a fairly thorough opening occurs. By releasing on easy open glides from high pitch to low, coordination is developed between large breath, full, open tone, and pitch-range confidence.

It is helpful to go through this whole series on both sides of the body and then go into speaking long sentences of text, to apply the breath and tone to thought and intention.

1. Stand at the ballet barre (you can substitute a table or wall; anything strong enough to lean your weight into). Your left side is at the barre. Your left hand is on it. Stand with good, easy alignment, knees unlocked, weight distributed equally between both feet.
2. Reach your right hand and arm up above your head, stretching the right half of your rib cage up and out of the pelvis. Continue to reach up and over to the left side, slightly, enough to really open the right side ribs. You are supporting your weight with your left hand on the barre. Inhale richly and deeply as you stretch, opening the right side and belly vigorously. On the exhale, keep reaching up and over to the left and release an open tone through loose neck, throat, jaw, and tongue. Let the release be an easy open pitch glide from high to low. Repeat in this position two to four times.
3. Lift the sternum and nose towards the ceiling, the right arm slightly up and behind your head, exposing the front of the rib cage and belly by a slight backward arch. (There should be no back strain here. Make sure knees are slightly bent; the arch is about opening the front of the body, not about bending the spine backwards.) Vigorously lift the ribs up and open. Explore the angle of the arm so

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that the shoulders are as free as possible, though engaged in the stretch. Inhale fully, taking time to expand the front ribs and belly. Release on an open pitch glide from high to low. Repeat two to four times.

4. Turn to face the barre, both feet pointing toward it. Hold onto it with both hands and drop into a crouch, with knees open. Arms are up, hands are on the barre so both the back and the sides of body are being stretched. (For sore knees, some people may want to sit on the floor here, instead of crouching.) Breathe deeply into the open back, sides, and pelvis. Swing ribs open on both sides equally, then release on an open glide from high to low pitch. Repeat two to four times.
5. Keep your feet on floor. Tilt the tailbone towards the ceiling and hang the torso over the body. Your knees are bent. Let your head hang down freely. Fill with air, chew, and glide pitch up and down as you roll the spine to standing; head is the last to roll up.
6. Return to the left side of the body, place your left hand on the barre, and repeat step #1.
7. Reach your right arm forward diagonally over the barre so that your back is flat and parallel to the floor (you are bent at the hip sockets). The sternum and nose should face the floor. Reach your tailbone away from your head and your right arm away from your tailbone. Open the ribs at the spine and stretch the shoulder blade. Fill with air on the inhale then release by gliding pitch from high to low. Repeat two to four times.
8. Drop the torso over the left knee from the hip sockets. Release both arms, torso, and head over the left knee. Slightly bend both knees. Fill with air, glide pitch from high to low. Repeat two to four times.
9. From here, swing the torso forward so that it hangs over both legs. You are now balanced equally over both feet and knees. Fill with air, glide pitch from high to low. Repeat two to four times. While here, you can hum as you shake the head “no” to loosen the neck. Roll the spine to standing while humming and chewing.

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10. Turn to have right side at barre, right hand on the barre, and repeat the whole series on this side.

FOLLOW-UP

This exercise can be done with partners: one doing the exercise, the partner putting his/her hands on the “speaker’s” ribs and belly to help him/her feel the potential to fully expand on inhales, and to stay loose and free throughout entire breath cycles in each position.

In the crouch position, other breathing patterns can be explored, such as taking four counts to breathe in, expanding for six more counts, then exhaling from the belly first and then the ribs at the end of the exhale.