



## The Ins and Outs of It: Whispered Ah and BPP

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**Introduction.** With three foundational articles on *Breath as Postural Process™* 1) "The Theory and Practice of Alexander's Breathing Method," 2) "Alexandrians in Full: Reclaiming an Essential Dimension of Use," and 3) "Back to Beginnings in the Technique: The Evolution of BPP," I thought that I had completed the exposition of the conceptual dimensions of BPP, but this present one is necessary because of the peculiar role of Whispered Ah in the post-FMA Technique as virtually the only "breath work" directly derivable from him based on his writings. I write "peculiar" because it—the Whispered Ah—was not intended as breath work per se, but rather as a *vocal* practice to be undertaken only *after* satisfactory respiratory re-education had been accomplished. But more on that anon.

Speaking generally about breathing and breath work, accurate thinking presumes three distinctions: those between 1) erect and recumbent breath, 2) vegetative and managed breath, and 3) inhaled and exhaled breath.

	Vegetative	Managed
Erect	ErV	ErM
Recumbent	ReV	ReM
Inhalation	InV	InM
Exhalation	ExV	ExM

In the case of the first two (erect or upright as contrasted with recumbent or lying down, and vegetative or reflexive with managed or conscious), the respective Conditions of Use are so radically different that the Manners of Use must be also; in the third the difference is at the existential level of In or Out (inhalation or inspiration versus exhalation or expiration).

Examples:

- ErV = sitting or standing reflexive, unintentional breath for gaseous exchange, i.e., the majority of daily breaths
- ErM = sitting or standing performance breath, e.g., speaking, singing, blowing soap bubbles
- ReV = lying down breath in full unconscious sleep or conventional Semi-Supine
- ReM = lying down breath exercise, e.g., extended whispered count
- InV = as in ErV, ReV (above)
- InM = as in BPP and in other specific breath management techniques
- ExV = as in ErV, ReV (above) and in BPP solely for gaseous exchange
- ExM = as in ReM (above) and in Whispered Ah

The point of making explicit these distinctions is that recognizing the Relevant Conditions is needed for formulating the clear instructions that must accompany any practical demonstration of the Whispered Ah, because the internal muscular actions required are not directly observable, thus leading to the possibility of mischance via Unreliable Sensory Appreciation or simple misunderstanding.

What follows is FMA's statement regarding the priorities of respiratory re-education (CCCI, Centerline ed., pp. 204-5):

*"When [italics added] a satisfactory, co-ordinated use of the mechanisms concerned with the acts of inspiration and expiration is established, the teacher may then [italics added] proceed to help the pupil to employ the co-ordinated use in connexion with all vocal effort. As has been pointed out in Man's Supreme Inheritance, this should begin with whispered vocalization, preferably the vowel sound "Ah," as this form of vocal use, being so little employed in every-day life, is rarely associated with ordinary bad psycho-physical habit in vocalization."*

In essence, the horse must come before the cart, and a reliable and managed method of breathing learned *prior* to proceeding with the study and exploration of voice work, for which the Whispered Ah may well provide a sound (so to speak) beginning. How else could FMA have earned the nickname "The Breathing Man" in those early years? As BPP is *all* about the "satisfactory, co-ordinated use of the mechanisms concerned with the acts of

inspiration and expiration," here is examined in some detail:

**FMA's Whispered Ah.** In *Introduction to a New Method of Respiratory Vocal Re-Education* (FMA 1906) are these salient observations, relative to:

- the crux of vocal re-education: "The all-important, but generally neglected, factor is the controlled, motive power." (Merriam-Webster defines "motive power" as 1: an agency (such as water or steam) used to impart motion especially to machinery; 2: something (such as a locomotive or a motor) that provides motive power to a system.)
- the importance of the expiratory act: "The attention of teachers and others interested in the making of breathing systems for vocal use seems to have been wholly absorbed in devising movements for increasing and developing the inspiratory act, whereas the perfect control of the EXPIRATORY [FMA's caps] is all-important to the vocalist."
- the inspiratory vs the expiratory act: "An important fact for consideration is that in ordinary breathing the length of the expiration and inspiration is almost equal ... whereas in singing the expiration is far in excess of the inspiration."
- the whisper tone: "In cases requiring re-education the mind attitude [habitual thinking] will be wrong so far as the production of ordinary vocal tone employed in song and speech is concerned. ... We must resort to the whisper tone, which is rarely used in speaking, and is, therefore, little associated with cultivated bad habits."
- undue tension, facial and otherwise: "Most people will have observed the serious set facial expression of the singer, in many most painful to see."

In these selections, which reflect the tenor of the entire piece, we encounter FMA's primary interest in the respiratory act *as it affects vocalization*, spoken or sung. It is in the cultivation of exhalation that the performer is most helped because of its relative longer duration and importance to the desired result. The whisper tone, as seldom used in normal speech or singing, lacks the habitual conditioning of the "ordinary" tone, and hence is used in addressing the issues of the control of expiratory air flow and the reduction or elimination of the multifarious tensions of the face, mouth, lips, tongue, and throat, all dealt with on an individual basis according to need. (The enduring directive to "think a smile" was probably the Non-Doing remedy for a "serious set facial expression.") As the whispered Ah tone is produced by fully opening the glottis, there is virtually no resistance,

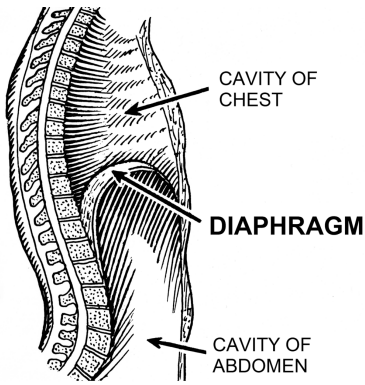
external or internal, to the outflow of air, thus making the correct muscular control in exhalation an absolute priority for both the duration and quality of the ultimately produced sound. In these pages, FMA is as usual long in the *description* of problems and proposed remedies, but remarkably short in the *prescription* of the necessary means-whereby. One may plausibly deduce that the variable transmission of these means-whereby was a function of the individuality of the pupils receiving FMA's direct tutelage, and therefore accounts in large part for the wide variation in Whispered Ah technique offered by post-FMA teachers.

“*The Whispered Ah was not intended as breath work, but rather as a vocal practice...*”

In *The Theory and Practice of a New Method of Respiratory Re-Education* (FMA 1907, included in all editions of *MSI* after 1918) the omission of "vocal" from the title sets the tone for and signals a shift of emphasis from the artistic and thus narrower dimension, to the health and thus broader application of his work relative to breath. The text is replete with anatomical and pathological observations, with only a brief (compared to 1906) yet nonetheless potent mention of the "controlled whispered vowel," from which "...very great [health] benefits accrue." Notable in 1907 is his observation that, with many performers, "the head is thrown back to open the mouth," and, pointing out that the act requires only lowering the jaw, he concludes, "Every voice-user should learn to open the mouth without throwing back the head," perhaps the clearest directive he ever wrote!

Now, as a contribution to the clearer understanding of this foundational aspect of Alexandrian doctrine and practice, is offered for consideration:

**The Whispered Hah in BPP.** To begin, it is suggested that a Whispered *Hah* is likely of more benefit than a Whispered *Ah*. A true Ah is always initiated with a glottal stop, however gentle and brief (try it yourself and see). Air bursts forward after pressure is built up and the stop released, making for disturbance in what should be, for a controlled whispered vowel, a smooth initiation and propulsion of air via large-muscle control, namely, the reciprocal action of diaphragm and abdominals. The quick release of glottal tension in phonating Ah sympathetically tends to induce a similar release of diaphragmatic tension with immediate



rib closure, resulting in a duration-robbing "bump" in the air stream as well as interference in the whispered tone. The Hah phonation automatically resolves these difficulties, though not to the exclusion of others.

There's also the matter of the Critical Moment between the end of InM (managed inhalation, remember?) and ExM. This is where the diaphragmatic contraction that expands the rib cage must be sustained as the abdominal contraction that moves the air out is initiated. A very strong tendency to release the diaphragmatic tension tends to arise at this point, because that is what happens in ExV, with the result being a premature and un-useful expenditure of air. The Italian Singing School (particularly with its *appoggio* technique, prominent in the vocal pedagogy of FMA's day) calls this moment the beginning of *la lotta vocale*—the vocal struggle—referring to the initially awkward but ultimately coordinated effort to maintain diaphragmatic tension—keeping the rib cage open as long as possible before it must perform close—while air is smoothly propelled outward and tone produced by the action of the abdominals and the relevant vocal mechanisms.

In terms of practice and teaching, I have found an Articulated Whispered Hah ("articulated" as in "jointed") to be useful, because it allows for brief pauses—allowing space for things we Alexandrians cherish, such as observation, inhibition, and direction—between successive elements of one entire breath cycle. Initially, these pauses may be as long as a couple of seconds, but gradually reduced over repetitions until eliminated, producing what may be referred to as the Continuous Whispered Hah.

1. Stop and think
2. Er/InM (a gently filling, managed, upright BPP inbreath)
3. Pause (hold breath)
4. Lower the jaw (about a thumb's width; tongue rests concavely, tip to bottom teeth; face gently energizes upward, in opposition to lowering of jaw) "Think a smile"

5. Pause (this is the Critical Moment...)
6. Er/ExM (a gently emptying outbreath using Hah, keeping the rib cage open, especially at initiation)
7. Pause
8. Raise the jaw (bring lips to touch, teeth lightly together or slightly apart)
9. Pause
10. Allow air to return via the nostrils, as in Step 2
11. Continue through two or three more cycles

Between Steps 3 and 4, it may be helpful to place one hand on top of the head and guide the jaw down with the other, reminding, via touch, "to open the mouth without throwing back the head." Likewise, between 5 and 6, to place both hands on the rib cage, checking that the initiation of Er/ExM is *not* accompanied by simultaneous rib cage movement. There should be no straining either to fill on Er/InM or to empty on Er/ExM.

The psycho-physical efforts in understanding and practice put forth here may appear to some as contrary to accepted Alexandrian principles, e.g., Indirect Means and Non-Doing, but if one is truly interested in what Whispered Hah in combination with BPP has to offer, its value can be assessed only in terms of practice and experience, and not in those of pre-conceived ideas. Although perhaps lacking in sufficient personal detail, and absent of practical demonstration, this piece and its associated articles nevertheless presume optimistically that Alexander teachers with their armamentarium of Inhibition, Direction, and Reliable Sensory Appreciation may follow this process closely enough to form a valid judgment upon it. The correlated writings and further information about *Breath as Postural Process™* may be found at [www.asbpp.org](http://www.asbpp.org).

**Postscript.** For those who may wish to venture further into the much-ploughed fields of breath and voice, I highly recommend *The New Voice: How to Sing and Speak Properly* by Alan Greene (Chappel & Co., 1975). Endorsed in its day by Harry Belafonte and Walter Matthau, this text/method demonstrates in theory and in practice how to build the vocal instrument before making sound with it, just as a violin or other instrument must be built before it can be played. Consonant in broad application with BPP and Whispered Hah, and quite Alexandrian in its full attention to oft-neglected Means-Whereby, this work needs be not only read but also experienced to be fully appreciated. Available new on Amazon.com and used on websites such as [abebooks.com](http://abebooks.com) or [thriftbooks.com](http://thriftbooks.com).