

Vocal Education Series

Part 1 - Warm-Ups Are Not For Sissies

by René Torres

One of the most forgotten and least talked about aspects of singing tends to be the warm-up. Volumes have been written on how to bounce, enounce, and pronounce while singing. But how do you prepare to do that? How do you really get your body, your heart, and your mind ready to sing?

At a recent chorus rehearsal, when it was announced that it was time to warm up, one of the members said, “Warm-ups are for sissies!” I was at first dumfounded, then upset at the remark, especially when the surrounding chorus members laughed at the utterance. Then, I decided that getting mad over it was not the solution. The solution is this article.

Begin the warm-up.

The way to flexibility, confidence, and assurance in singing is to be properly warmed up. If you are properly warmed up, you will sing more, sound better and think less consciously about your voice. You will sound more natural and there will be less stress. There will be more space in your mind left for the important things, such as feeling the words and music. When you are through singing, you will feel high, not hoarse.

The process of warming up begins long before you utter a note. If you are scheduled to perform on a given evening, begin getting your mind warmed up during the afternoon. Go over the pieces you are to perform in your head. Visualize the stage, the audience, and the performers. Get enthused about singing tonight! Promise yourself to do your best.

Stretch the vocal muscles.

About two hours before the rehearsal or performance, start getting your body warmed up. Remember, your vocal chords are a set of muscles—very small muscles, in fact. They are about as big around as your pinky. Being muscles, it stands to reason that they must be stretched gently before putting them into violent motion.

Runners would not dream of running a 100-yard dash without stretching or warming up their legs. They prepare properly to avoid running a poor race. Yet there are those who may think nothing of standing on the risers, singing for three hours, and then wonder why their voice is not responding or why they feel hoarse after they're through.

The best way to start warming up your vocal chords is to gently stretch them. For vocal chords, this means humming softly to yourself. Forget volume, forget pitch. Hum at YOUR speaking voice pitch, softly sustaining the sound for as long as you can. Do this about three times. Then, begin to coordinate your breathing movements with your vocal production until the breathing becomes second nature. You'll be better prepared for the evening's performance if you don't have to think about how to breathe.

Stay in “Neutral.”

You may have noticed that I said at YOUR speaking voice pitch. If you are a bass with a low speaking voice, you cannot possibly warm up in the same way as a tenor with a high speaking

voice. That's because the normal resonant frequency of the vocal chords for the basses is different than for tenors. So, what is your "neutral position" is yours alone. That's where you must start.

Stay in your range.

As the next step, from your speaking pitch, hum up and down the scale for two whole notes (1-2-3-2-1). Then take a breath, pitch it up a half tone, and do it again. Keep doing it until you can go no higher. When you cannot physically go any higher, pitch it down one half tone, and go down the scale to a little below where you started. Keep it soft, keep it constant, keep a rhythm. The whole procedure should take about three minutes.

Now, vocalize.

Once you have done the humming, it's time to do a little vocalizing. Take the same 1-2-3-2-1 pattern, only now do it by singing a vowel. The "oh" sound, for example, is a good place to start. To make sure you have the proper "oh," start the exercise by singing "bwoh" instead of just the pure "oh" sound. This forces you to breathe properly and get the breath started slightly before the sound. Sing the vowel in 1-2-3-2-1 note pattern the same way you did the humming, only don't force the voice to go any higher than it naturally can, and then come back down the scale. Go to a 1-2-3-4-3-2-1 pattern, and do it again. Continue this until you have a string of about 10-12 notes being sung up and down the scale. This exercise should take about 10 to 15 minutes.

By now, you will notice that your breathing is becoming "connected" to the vocal chords, and some raspiness caused by mucous has or is being cleared away. The mind and body are coordinating the singing with less conscious effort on your part. Your throat may also start to feel "warm" (get it?).

Watch your breathing.

The next step is to exercise the breathing muscles a little more. They are larger muscles and need more stretching. This is done by using a 1-3-5-3-1 pattern, three times in succession, on one breath, using the vowel sound "oh," then "eh," then "be." This is progressively forward in placement, and requires progressively stronger breath support. Again, start with "bwoh" to assure good original placement and go up and down the scale with the pattern, as far as comfortable, one time. Give utmost attention to pitch. Until you become proficient with the exercise, it may help you to vocalize the sounds as "ho," "heh," and "hee." The added "h" forces you to contract the diaphragm if you are not already doing so. This exercise should take about three minutes.

Warmed up yet?

Other exercises can be added if desired. For example, use a very rapid 1-2-1-2-1... pattern up and down the scale for short-interval flexibility. Add some jumps (octave jump, then down the scale, or a 1-3-5-8-5-3-1 pattern) for long-interval flexion. Also good is a medium interval pattern sung in full voice on "oh," then at the lowest possible volume on "oo." Spend about ten minutes on these.

Now, cool down.

By the time you have finished this series, anywhere from 30 to 40 minutes have gone by, and you need to close the series by "cooling down" the muscles. Do this by repeating the same humming exercises you did to warm up. Notice that less effort is required and the sound quality will be much smoother and less raspy.

You're through.

Now shut up. Yes, that's right. Shut up for about 10 to 15 minutes to let it all sink in and let the muscles settle. Shutting up means NO talking at all for this time. You can spend the time getting your heart and soul ready to sing. They need to get warmed up, too!

If you have a 30 to 45-minute drive to rehearsals, you can do all this in the car, but it helps to be in proper singing position to do it at its best. Either way, you will find this series of exercises will give you a "high" for singing. You should not be hoarse or tired after three hours on the risers. Believe me, this is not for sissies!