

## Vocal Education Series

# **Part 7: Health and the Voice**

By René Torres

In Part 7 we will provide tips on taking care of the voice in terms of preparing the body, mind and spirit for singing. Maintaining good physical, mental and emotional health plays an important role in how well you deliver that performance on stage.

## **I. Physical**

### **a. Care of the voice**

The first self-evident tip is to simply use common sense. Don't yell, scream, hack, or otherwise irritate the vocal chords. You are the best judge of what not to do. Here are some not-so-evident tips on hydration, stress, tension, and the ubiquitous phlegm.

#### **Hydration**

Hydration refers to the fluid amounts in your body and, as a result, in your throat tissues. Much is said about drinking plenty of fluids before a performance, but not much about how and why. The human body is about 70% water. Most of the water is in the form of fluids within cell walls. Too little fluid and you feel dry and parched; too much fluid, bloated and listless. Everyone is different, and the rule of thumb is eight glasses of water (not coffee, tea, soda, etc.) per day for a normal level. Some fluids, such as milk, tend to produce phlegm in some persons. Other beverages are water substitutes from which the body gleans water but, in reality, their use puts an extra burden on the body.

When and how to drink water deserves some discussion. Making it a habit to drink eight glasses of water every day is good. Bringing water to drink while getting ready to go on stage is an entirely different matter. This is not the time to properly hydrate the body. However, two good reasons for drinking water prior to singing are (a) wetting the throat to counteract nervous dryness (not too much or you will wash away necessary mucous) and (b) acclimating the throat to the temperature it will be exposed to as a result of breathing in and out through your mouth.

#### **Stress and tension**

Stress is an emotional factor that tends to create tension. On the other hand, tension can exist without stress, as in the case of using improper singing techniques. The relief of stress is both mental and physical. Proper warm-up of both the voice and body can help relieve stress. The warm, tingling sensation you get after a proper warm-up is a sign that blood is flowing and stress is at a minimum.

Relief of tension is brought about by a conscious effort to sing naturally, i.e., having a relaxed throat with proper diaphragmatic support. When the natural voice is supported, there should be no tension. Be sure to get plenty of sleep the night before and be prepared to give it your all the day of the performance.

## **Phlegm**

Everybody has phlegm and it is a very important factor in singing. Without moisturizing mucous, your throat would stick together. Your entire nasal/buccal passages are covered with it, and besides being a first line of defense against foreign invaders, it keeps everything lubricated.

Warming up the voice sets up vibrations within the cavities of the skull at frequencies that tend to loosen any pending mucosity, and this harmlessly dislodges and eliminates mucus. In this regard, consider warming up as shaking a snow-laden tree to remove the loose snow that was ready to fall off anyway. You get rid of it for a while until it builds up again. The same thing goes for singing. You shake off what would have gotten in your way, and you're cleared to sing for a while. How long it takes is again an individual matter. Even then, depending on what you have ingested and when, the time could vary greatly. Develop a formula that works for you. And remember, dairy product, especially milk and cheeses, are phlegm-producing foods. So be careful with these products.

### **b. Care of the body**

Getting plenty of sleep and drinking plenty of water have already been mentioned. In addition, our bodies play a significant part in our singing, inasmuch as stage presence requires a lot of physical movement. The better you look and feel, the better appearance you will have on stage. Losing weight, if necessary, adds to the enhancement of your appearance. Avoiding fats and concentrating on natural unadulterated foods will go a long way.

Stepping up and down and moving your arms, legs and other body parts takes energy, and aerobic exercises are good for developing the heart-lung capacity and the stamina required for a good presentation. Lifting weights will probably be of great help onstage, so don't think that exercise has to be strenuous and heavy. Just stay as fit as you can, and every little bit will help. Those risers will creak a little as well, I'm willing to bet.

## **II. Mental**

Mental preparation for singing is probably the most important part of all warm-up exercises. Without the mind being in gear, the voice is in neutral. The mind is necessary to internally hear your note, calculate its color, timbre, clarity, volume, expressivity, and any other nuances expected, and then combine them with a proper emotional cloak and a physical structure to make it all look effortless. No mere mortal can do that. But a properly trained and focused singer should make short work of it.

To properly focus all these items requires an enormous amount of concentration, but not so much that every chorus member can't reasonably hope to achieve it. Think of this. A trained pistol expert goes to the shooting range to practice. He brings with him all his skills, and does an excellent job. The next day he goes to the shooting match to vie for a trophy. This day his mind is on his skills, but also on the trophy. The division of concentration brings undue pressure to the event. He no longer devotes all his concentration on the proper application of his skills. He has allowed the trophy to rob him of the power of the moment! Don't let that happen to you. When you're on stage to sing, bring your skills to the arena. Don't let a medal interfere with the

application of those skills. It is the consistent and uninterrupted application of your finely honed skills that will gravitate the medal to you without your conscious help.

Mental preparation is also necessary to remove any stress-related thoughts for the duration of your warm-up, preparation, and performance. Meditation techniques that relax your mind, helping to clear it and focus it properly are very good for your singing concentration.

### **III. Emotional**

The emotional part of your being is responsible for the added “zing” that is brought to a performance. You may be physically and mentally prepared, but if you do not sing with emotion, the performance is no better than those computer-simulated voices that annoy you when you make telephone calls to utility companies. A flat presentation will win few points no matter how “technically” perfect it is. Therefore, it stands to reason that the emotion you bring to a performance can make or break the moment.

Imagine there is a zipper in front of your entire body. Give with your face as well as your heart. Remember that gestures and body movements have to be exaggerated in order to appear normal to the vast majority of the audience. This is especially true of facial expressions. If you are one of over a hundred people on stage, you still have to carry on as if you were the only one there. Your individual emotional output is synergistically multiplied through the chorus and propelled to the audience with overwhelming results. This *collective consciousness*, however, has to be made up of homogeneous parts so every singer must be on the same emotional wavelength.

How best do you do this? By arduous and diligent practice, individually and collectively, whenever possible. By knowing the words, notes, and stage presence cold. By then allowing your personality to color the performance within the framework of the overall meaning of the song you are singing. Only then can the true synergy of the chorus blossom forth. It depends on you! It starts with you! It is you!!