

Vocal Education Series

Part 11: Throw Old Habits Out the Window

By René Torres

The formation of habits is a natural process. You start something, it feels good, does you no harm, so you keep doing it. Pretty soon it becomes the only way to do something, and a habit is born.

We acquire habits as children, keep learning them as we grow older, and they seem to set in more and more as we age. In fact, some people become nothing but a collection of habits, and woe betide the person that tries to change them!

Singing, too, can be a habit. In fact, some people argue that it is nothing more than a habit since it involves the repetition of learned responses in a set pattern. But wait! There's another point of view that we should explore.

The “habit” of singing

It would be easy to think of singing as an acquired habit if we apply the definition expressed above. The subtle difference is that, when the *scientific* side of singing (words and music only, singing by rote) becomes a habit, the *artistic* side suffers greatly due to lack of interpretation.

A truly professional singer never lets interpretation become routine. You can be the best singer in terms of pitch, volume, sound and timbre, yet still be less musical than a singer who feels the music and lets the feeling color his or her vocal production. Even the most perfect singer never sings a musical piece the same way twice. Each time it sounds fresh, as if it were his or her first time. Although the overall interpretation may be observable during the performance, the mood, feeling, and ambiance are different each time the song is sung as the conscientious singer makes adjustments. The result is then a seemingly spontaneous performance, an outpouring of energy that is contagious.

Cultivate good habits.

As choral singers we must continuously strive to cultivate good singing habits and look for ways to color our interpretations. In barbershop we see that “feeling the interpretation” is stressed more and more. This welcome approach to singing allows more freedom of individual expression within the framework of the interpretive plan. It's the “freedom” that fosters resonant singing and, ultimately, a better chorus sound. When it becomes second nature (a good habit), you no longer have to worry about sound production.

Break the old habits.

Old habits are not just limited to singing. Many factors that affect performance, as well as our attitude toward being a participating chorus member, are rooted in things we do every week at rehearsal or on stage at the performance. How many of these can you identify with? Better yet, how many of these can you correct?

- Rehearsals are once a week, so that's the only time you need to worry about preparation.
- There are usually three rehearsals past the one when you were told to have the music “off the paper.”

- Never mind warming up before you arrive. Warm-ups are for others to waste time until everyone arrives. Besides, warm-ups have nothing to do with learning to sing.
- Let somebody else help with setting up and tearing down the risers. It's not your problem.
- Don't bother to sign in. It doesn't matter anyway. Someone else will check you in.
- You know every move cold. Why bother with stage presence rehearsals?
- Learning tapes? What for?
- It's not that important to be at the rehearsal on time.
- It's OK to talk on the risers. Nothing important is going on unless you're singing.
- It's OK for your focus to wander from that of the others while you sing. After all, who will notice?
- Forget about smiling. Nobody notices that either.
- Don't listen to the announcements. They don't concern you.
- Try to stretch the break as long as possible. It will make the evening end faster.
- Don't emphasize makeup too much. Nobody can see you anyway.
- At the performance, give your ALL only while you have an audience. The rest of the time you can pace yourself.
- When the curtain opens, nobody can see you in the crowd, so move around. Adjust your glasses, too.

Let 'em go!

Are you beginning to see the absurdity of it all? Yet, look around and you'll probably see these traits everywhere. It's important to recognize and then to let go of these habits. They have no place in a disciplined chorus. Show your fellow chorus members and your director that you are *"dedicated to excellence."*

It's OK for your focus to wander while you sing. After all, who will notice?

Think about it. Here's a wonderful opportunity to reach another level of performance excellence. Don't let old habits keep you from taking full advantage of it.