

Range Extension and Vocal Strengthening Series

Part 1 - Warm-up Redux

by Dr. René Torres

Some time ago I wrote an article entitled “Warm-ups Are Not For Sissies,” which stemmed from a remark a fellow singer made during warm-ups at one of our chorus rehearsals. I am happy to report that my riser mate is now part of a medallist quartet. So, things do get better if you give them a chance.

And a chance is what I’m going to discuss in this first of three articles on *Vocal Strengthening and Range Extension*. You will have a chance to:

- Put your vocal instrument more at ease when singing.
- Minimize exertion, fatigue and effort when singing for prolonged periods of time.
- Add (maybe) a few well-sung notes at the top, bottom, or both ends of your singing register.

The best way to start discussing vocal strengthening and range extension is to say what it is not. The tips and exercises that follow should not be used in place of regular vocal warm-ups. They should not be undertaken when you are going to sing later that day. Lastly, they should not be done if you feel indisposed, are tired, have a sore throat, or are in any way physically indisposed.

Strengthening your vocal chords and entire vocal apparatus is done thorough exercise and repetition just as a weightlifter trains and develops his or her muscles. But every weightlifter knows the need for both warm-up and cool-down sessions before subjecting the muscle group under training for that day to a vigorous workout. Do the same with your voice. As a singer, it would benefit you to get into the habit of warming up your voice every day. A little vocalized humming (even while brushing your teeth) for a few minutes daily will prepare you for the speaking day.

Vocal strengthening

This is really weightlifting for singers. It’s a systematic approach to exercising the vocal muscles to (guess what?) *strengthen* them. Through exercise the muscles will endure more work with less energy expended. As a result, you will be less fatigued at the end of the session.

In addition to the “weightlifting” aspect of vocal strengthening, we must be careful not to produce a muscle-bound voice. In other words, we need *flexibility* in the vocal muscles to properly and accurately negotiate rapid passages, large leaps in musical intervals, and overall floridity in interpretation. This part of the “strengthening” process can be called vocal aerobic exercises. I will be discussing both vocal weightlifting and vocal aerobics in future articles.

Range extension

What about range extension, you ask? Aren't you going to give us tidbits and pearls of wisdom to extend our ranges? Well, the short answer is no, I'm not. I'm not going to give out any range extension techniques because there are none. Range extension is a natural by-product of the weightlifting exercises and aerobics. There is no magic pill for range extension. It just happens when you have a flexible, conditioned vocal apparatus.

Warm-ups

The warm-up exercises presented here are to be undertaken prior to any vocal workout. They are similar to the vocal exercises you may do to prepare for singing. In that regard, you could almost say a warm-up . . . is a warm-up . . . is a warm-up. It consists of conscious muscle awareness and activation, slight stretching, and a range and phlegm check.

Try to do these exercises three times a week. More than that is even better, but give yourself at least a day in between to rest the muscles and allow for their development.

a. Humming

Find a pitch towards the lower side of your range and without "pushing" hum the pitches 1-2-3-2-1. Go up a half step and do it again. Repeat this procedure until you reach almost the upper end of your range, but not quite, and then repeat the exercise coming down the scale in half-step intervals back to where you started. Do this softly and effortlessly, and just concentrate on two things: Maintaining pitch and checking for phlegm. Make a mental note of the approximate pitch (or pitches) where any phlegm interferes, as you will want to cross check this (or these) pitches again when you do the closing humming exercise. Most often the vibrations of your vocal muscles during warm-up are enough to dislodge any phlegm that may be lurking. In most cases, by the time you do the closing humming exercise, the phlegm should be gone.

b. Soft-loud-soft combination

To awaken and strengthen the muscles that control volume, select a pitch in the middle of the lower third of your range, and on a "yah" sound, start singing as softly as you can. Slowly increase the volume to the loudest level you can, and then slowly decrease the volume to its softest level. Do this exercise twice in the lower third, twice in the middle third, and twice in the upper third of your register. Think of your voice as a laser beam and try to point it to the far wall of your room as you do this routine. The objective is to do it on one breath as slowly as possible without wavering in pitch. Strive for a seamless sound (without breaks or gurgles) from soft, to loud, to soft again. This exercise will be an eye opener, I assure you.

c. Humming redux

Repeat the humming exercise from above, but this time start at the middle of your range and go as high as you can. Then go up a little further even if pitch suffers. Now hum down the scale to almost your lowest point, and then keep going a little bit lower. Keep the volume soft throughout. This stretches the muscles a little (don't overdo it!) and gets you in shape for the "weightlifting" to follow. More on this in the next article.