

THE RIGHT VIBES?

Some warm-up tips for singers, with especial reference to group singing.

WHY WARM UP?

As for any physical activity the body needs to be prepared; the various tips and exercises below can be used to get physically ready for singing. Warming up has other uses too: it helps us forget other concerns and lets our minds focus on singing and music; it helps a group to relax together and to listen to one another; it can be fun. Laughter is an important part of a productive rehearsal and it's good for relaxing the voice and livening up the diaphragm!

YOUR BODY

For the singer, your body is your instrument; it needs care and attention.

Basic Needs – sleep, water and appropriate food! Real life does not always make any or all of these easy to stick to, but they are helpful guidelines, especially if you are prone to problems such as nasal congestion, dry or irritable throat, or plain old loss of voice.

- Sleep - get plenty before big events; the voice is a prime indicator of tiredness.
- Drink - before singing avoid: anything very hot or ice-cold
sticky drinks
milky drinks (especially if you are prone to catarrh)
alcohol (much better afterwards...)
- Food - before singing avoid: anything very hot and spicy
dairy products (see above)

Posture

The key to good posture is a relaxed, straight back – neither arched nor slumped. Keep feet shoulder width apart, weight evenly distributed, and knees 'soft' – i.e. slightly flexed, not locked back with calves pushing backwards. This releases the muscles below the diaphragm so that deep breaths can be taken freely and fully.

Exercises: circle shoulders
turn head side to side (look over shoulders!)
drop head, then tilt back keeping jaw loose
swivel hips
flex knees

BREATHING

Breaths need to be taken in a deep relaxed way. Observation of an animal or a young child at rest will show the natural movement at the base of the rib cage, or diaphragm. When breathing in, the lungs fill up, the rib cage expands, the diaphragm is pressed down and the adjacent muscles move outward.

Care needs to be taken to avoid raising the shoulders or pushing up the upper chest.

Exercises to experience the feeling of deep breathing:

Imagine having a 'happy surprise'.

Flop forwards (either from standing or sitting) and breathe in and out very slowly. This helps to discourage over-raising of the upper torso.

Imagine that your mouth is low down, a little below your naval, and breathe through it!

Exercises to monitor effective breathing:

In pairs, or in a line, take turns to put hands on shoulders, then waist, while slow deep breaths are taken.

Repeat for very quick breaths.

Repeat holding (imaginary) music copies.

Pant like a dog – check that your diaphragm is moving vigorously and that your shoulders are not!

Reminder – keep checking for 'soft' knees.

RESONANCE

Resonance and the body

Our whole body, in particular our head and chest, acts as a resonator in the same way that the body of a violin or 'cello, or sound board of a piano, is involved in the sound production. The nearest part of our bodies to the sound source is of course the mouth. For maximum resonance it is important to maximise the space inside the mouth, so that, as far as vowels permit, the tongue needs to be flat on the floor of the mouth, with the tip touching the bottom teeth, when not momentarily moved to produce certain consonants. The soft palate – the soft area at the back of the roof of the mouth – needs to be raised, as though one is about to yawn.

Exercises for space:

The dinner party yawn – practice yawning with your mouth closed; notice the feeling of space inside.

Blow on to the back of your hand as though blowing away a fly – feel the cold air. Breathe gently on to the back of your hand as though making a hole to see through a misted-up window – feel the warm air. The second breath was taken with an open throat and raised palate.

Drop your jaw by first parting your back teeth, rather than your front ones!

Exercises to loosen and invigorate the face / throat area:

Lip Trills – 'brr' (like a shiver!) – extend over as wide a range of pitch as possible, sliding.

Rolled 'r's – as lip trills; you should be able to keep going for longer as these use less air.

It is important to slide on these sounds as a way of ensuring that the breath is engaging freely throughout the voice. They can both be used very profitably, also, to practice difficult vocal lines, especially high passages.

Resonance and Blend

Exercises:

Humming – on ‘m’ and ‘n’ and with mouth open (‘ng’).

Singing on each of the five ‘Italian’ vowels:

I (ee) E (ay) A (ah / u) O (oh) U (oo)

I is the ‘brightest’, A is the ‘darkest’, and U is naturally gentler. Try to even out the tone between each vowel.

Or use the vowels one at a time – I, A and U are particularly useful and need to be well blended in choirs. Try on simple five or six note exercises, or longer scales.

Sing a passage on one vowel sound or on the vowel sounds of the passage itself (i.e. drop all the consonants); this helps to maintain blend and pitch and build a legato line. It also helps singers to be very conscious of when exactly the consonants should be placed!

ARTICULATION

Good articulation is crucial, but not to be confused with over-articulation. Consider how the sounding of a consonant affects the musical articulation (legato, staccato, accented, etc), the colour and mood of the phrase, the surrounding vowel sounds. Practice tongue-twister-type exercises, keeping a relaxed jaw and articulating with the tip tongue and front teeth without distorting vowel sounds.

Exercises:

Sing up and down the scale: red-leather, yellow-leather
unique New York (up on ‘nique’!)
copper-bottomed coffee pot

VOCAL FREEDOM

All of the above contribute to the freedom of the voice; unwanted tension, either mental or physical, does the opposite. The exercises above will relax and prepare the mind as well as the body; a few things commonly impinge on the minds and bodies of performers and can therefore inhibit the performance. Here are a few that we all experience from time to time:

Insufficient familiarity with the music to be performed (not to be confused with that edge given by not overdoing things!)

Uncomfortable concert clothing /shoes.

Problems about the venue – poor lighting, strange acoustics, unfamiliarity.

Over-anxiety about tuning – good tuning will come only from relaxed and alert singing.

Some of these creep up by force of circumstances once in a while, but all can be avoided most of the time with a little forward planning; they might seem small, but the effects can be crucial!

Another musical cause of tension:

high notes!!

For some reason even the thought of high notes produces lurking feelings of tension in some singers. The important thing is not to change the lovely open, relaxed production used for any other notes; keep the throat open, the palate high and the tongue down and think 'down and out' in your body!!

Exercises:

Using scales, arpeggios or similar patterns:

Raise arms before starting, lower arms as sound goes up and vice versa.

Bend knees for highest notes.

Swivel hips – this frees the muscle that joins the hip area and the diaphragm (the psoas muscle) and can have a remarkable effect on the freedom of the voice.

"But I can't possibly do that in a concert!" No, well, not usually.. but, having learnt the sensation YOU CAN IMAGINE IT.

A FEW OTHER TIPS

Starting a phrase Prepare the mouth shape of the first vowel sound and take your breath through it.

Breathe in well in advance of a phrase wherever possible; avoid the quick snatch unless essential.

Imagine the note that you are going to sing; feel it in your head; approach it (mentally) from above – think of a netball going in a goal. Sing it in your mind, then let it out!

Most of all have fun and try not to forget that singing well is really a process of re-discovering what the body does naturally – then developing and enjoying it.

Some useful books:

Giving Voice	Hill, Parfitt & Ash	Kevin Mayhew
Kick Start Your Choir	Mike Brewer	Faber
The Inner Game of Music	Green/Galway	Pan
Vocal Technique for Choristers	Pamela Cook	Cook via the ABCD?*
Discovering Your Voice	Tona de Brett	Schott
Becoming a Singing Performer	James Kenny	Wm. C. Brown, Iowa

* Association of British Choral Directors