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Warming Up the Voice

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Listening to singers warming up is frequently amusing for the bystander. What takes place among singers during the warm-up process may be amazingly diverse, and the results of varying value.

The technique of warming up the voice should be a major part of any systematic vocal pedagogy. It should not consist of an improvisatory performance of vocalises. Every singer needs to have an established warmup procedure, probably of about twenty minutes duration.

Because the vocal instrument is physical, a graduated program of warming up is as appropriate to singing as to any athletic event. To start off with high-lying phrases and long sustained phonations is not advisable.

Before any vocal performance, it is wise to do some light physical exercises that produce a feeling of elasticity and freedom throughout the body. Heavy, prolonged physical exercise just before performance should be avoided.

The warm-up package ought to begin with gentle, brief onsets and offsets (attack and release technique) in a comfortable range of the voice. Humming in medium range, and syllables with nasals and vowel sequences, are useful devices. Exercises that induce flexible tongue and jaw action form part of the sequence. Agility patterns, both ascend-

ing and descending, may gradually be added. After initial exercises of this sort, a few minutes of rest should be taken before turning to passages that deal with vowel definition and modification, and sostenuto. Registration and passaggio vocalises follow. However, heavy vocalization must never form part of the warm-up series. The session should conclude with rapid arpeggios of extensive range, and rapidly moving scale passages.

The warm-up process ought not to dwell on specific technical problems. Treatment of problematic aspects of the voice should be reserved for the daily technical work.

There is a danger in excessive warm-up sessions. Singing thirty minutes of heavy vocalises before performing an operatic role of demanding proportions, or an extensive recital, is illogical. So is singing through the entire role or recital with your coach or accompanist! The old theater adage "Don't sing the bloom off your voice before the performance" is a wise one.

Warming up during Act I, or during the first group of the recital, is generally disastrous. It is true that an indulgent critic will occasionally excuse the evidence of such "warming up" but the long-range effects on the singer can be highly detrimental. Diving immediately into heavy vocalization is not healthy practice. The same common-sense advice pertains to rehearsals.

One of the advantages of a prearranged warm-up cycle comes from the information it gives the singer as to the status of his or her voice.

There are times when physical condition requires a longer warm-up period. An established warm-up routine offers psychological as well as physical security to the singer. The singer who has little notion of how his or her voice will feel until hearing it on stage is bound to be a nervous performer. The warm-up routine assures the singer that the voice is capable of functioning in the tasks that lie ahead.

Not only is warming up essential to the performance-day routine; it should be part of each day's initial vocal sound. The singer is unwise to break the silence each day with some untried combination of exercises. Before turning later in the day to more detailed technical work, the singing voice should have experienced "the daily regimen"

This "daily regimen" is of particular value to the singer/teacher who must use the instrument of performance in teaching. A singer invites problems if he or she walks into the voice studio to teach without first having sung. It is equally unthinkable for a choir director, who one would presume has vocal training, to approach the rehearsal without having made use of the singing voice. Even if the teacher or conductor does little vocal modeling, the speaking voice itself will have benefited from the warm-up procedure.

Except for those rare occasions when the singing teacher wants to hear the student's voice before he or she has sung, every singer should be warmed up before coming to a voice lesson. Otherwise time is lost, and teacher's opinion of the student is not enhanced. Some students, knowing that the studio teacher will probably begin the lesson with vocalization, falsely assume that such technical work constitutes warming up. As a result, the teacher may be unable to

move ahead with more systematic vocalization.

Sometimes it is useful for the teacher to take a lesson period in which the student goes through the pre-arranged warm-up package, to see that there is agreement on how the exercises should be executed. However, the singer should never become dependent upon the voice teacher for the warm-up process for public performance. Warming up is something one must learn to take care of on one's own.

Whenever possible, singers should be able to warm up by themselves without sharing space with other performers. In theaters where space is often at a premium, it may be wise for the singer to arrive early enough to go privately through the warm-up routine. Nothing is more maddening than to share a warm-up room with a colleague who nervously improvises a series of vocalises or who sporadically breaks forth into unexpected vocal noises.

The secure singer is the prepared singer. A large part of the performance preparation has to do with knowing how to use a systematic warm-up procedure. Every singer and teacher of singing should develop a reliable routine for warming up the voice. Even those who assume they do not need to warm up may soon be convinced of the benefits of a systematic warm-up, if they try it!



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