

Warm-ups for singers

- Warming up is the preparation undertaken before you begin technical or repertoire practice. It is the process by which you prepare your mind and body for the demands of a practice session, rehearsal or performance. It is essential to prevent injury, to reinforce good habits and to focus the mind and body on the matter in hand.
- All warm-up exercises need to have a direct relationship to good vocalizing, they are not just 'for fun'. If you don't know exactly what the exercise is achieving, leave it out.
- The structure of your warm-up is important; you need to cover the right aspects in the right order. It doesn't matter if it's not exciting or varied, mindful repetition can help to eliminate distractions.
- These guidelines are for the ideal warm-up. There are occasions where you have to do a quick warm-up while driving, or even on public transport (yes, it is possible). However, whenever you can, give yourself the time and space to warm up and practice effectively, not while you are trying to do something else.

At the start of warm-up, the principles of postural balance must be addressed. The body as a whole must be in a state of alert poise.

Set up your mind

Theory

Your practice or performance will be more effective if you can focus mindfully on what you are doing.

Practice

- Take a moment to think about what you want to achieve.
- Stand still, take a breath.

Wake up the body

Theory

Some daily loosening is necessary; to re-align the posture after sleep and to increase the blood flow to all muscle groups used in singing. Overall body movement comes before specific stretches.

Practice

- Begin with a pause – close your eyes and breathe; notice any places which are held, observe your thoughts and feelings.
- Reach up with both hands, then one at a time. Flop your body over so that your head hangs down. Repeat this.
- Circle the shoulders. Raise and tighten the shoulders then drop them.

- Let your head fall to one side so that your ear moves towards your shoulder. Feel the weight of your head without pulling it. Repeat the other side.
- With the feet apart, bend sideways to the right, take your left hand towards the ceiling and allow the right to dangle towards the floor. Breathe freely and hold this position for a couple of breaths. Repeat for the other side.
- Draw a figure of 8 with hips
- Walk through your feet on the spot, bend your knees, loosen all the main postural joints in the legs and hips.
- Wake the muscles of the face and jaw passively with the fingers and then actively with stretches. Blow air out on an unvoiced lip trill.

Body balance

Theory

Good posture is vital to enable efficient voice use. Any imbalance in the alignment of the body will result in unnecessary muscle tension and inefficient use. Attention to the body as a whole can help you to minimize overall muscular effort; when the forces are reduced to a minimum, then technical control is at its optimum. Aim for an alert stillness; establishing balanced and effort-reduced posture may utilize techniques such as Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, Tai-Chi or yoga.

Practice

- Check the weight is evenly balanced over the toes and heels, releasing the knees - try the weight over the toes, then back onto the heels and find the balance point with the least tension in the legs and ankles.
- Check hip balance, stick bottom out and the back will hollow, tuck bottom under and the back will slouch, find your mid-point.

- Check shoulder position, too far back will be too stiff, too far forward will be slumped.
- Head and neck alignment: the back of the neck should be soft with a sense of lengthening, imagine that your head is suspended from the tops of your ears.
- Release the jaw, lay fingers very lightly on the jaw hinge in front of your ears and feel this loosen.
- Wiggle your knees to check they are not locked.

Breathing

Theory

The most effective focus for breathing movement in the singer is the lower abdominal region. It is important to exercise this area, whilst remaining stable elsewhere. Breath flow for singing does not need to be driven, but it does need careful coordination. Breathing exercises need to remind the singer of the area for attention, and often need to then reduce the effort levels to the most efficient.

Once the breathing has become habitual in the lower abdominal area, it is helpful to bring the attention to the relationship between the 'zipping up' of the lower abdominal muscles and the corresponding lengthening of the lower spine.

Practice

- Put hands on lower abdomen (between tummy button and pubic bone). Blow the air out on a hiss or a 'shh'. Feel the tummy moving inwards as the air leaves the lungs. This is more of a slow 'zipping up' than a kick.
- Let go of these muscles without collapsing or lifting anywhere else and the air rushes in, you don't need to suck air in.

- Now try this to short repeated hisses or shushes and feel the flexibility of these muscles. The abdominal muscles should feel like wobbly jelly, movement is more important than effort.
- Remember to keep the upper ribs and shoulders open and relaxed
- Try shaking or jiggling whilst breathing before coming to stillness with it.
- Now try these rhythmic hissings and buzzings on voiced sounds

Release the throat

Theory

This is primarily to deconstrict the larynx; the tendency to constrict is a natural swallowing reflex and can arise as a result of anxiety, over-working, or an unfamiliar sensation. A tight sound can be laryngeal constriction, pharyngeal constriction or tongue tension. If in doubt, loosen all of them. A constricted voice will sound scratchy or crack. It is not possible, or appropriate, to open the entire throat. If the back of the tongue is tense, the larynx is not free to move. The sound is hard and can sound pressed or hooty.

Practice

- Breathe in as if you have just had a happy surprise (eg winning the lottery).
- Do this silently, remember your low abdominal release. Put hands over ears and do the same: you will hear if it is a silent inhalation.
- Imagine a silent giggle in your throat.
- Now consciously open from a neutral position into this wider feeling and return to neutral (not to be confused with a yawning sensation which is not helpful as it encourages the tongue root to press on the larynx)
- Sing through partly closed lips (not the nose), allowing the cheeks to puff out; this will encourage deconstriction. The muscles of the face and lips are soft, the sound is gentle.

In order to facilitate aerobic muscle function, the warm-up needs to build muscle activity from a slow and gentle start.

Warm-up the larynx

Theory

In order to ensure that the muscles of the larynx are warmed up effectively, begin with small and gentle movements leading on to extended movements. For example, using a small pitch range before an extended pitch range. Then you work on specific flexibility exercises, allowing the muscles to lengthen. These exercises will also address voice qualities originating within the larynx; such as breathiness, harshness and register bridging. It also includes onset: breathy, glottal or simultaneous.

Practice

Always start quietly in the lower middle of the range, then extend the pitch up and down

- Slide up and down on small intervals to ‘puffy cheeks’. The lips are nearly closed allowing a small release of sound (no sound comes through the nose), the cheeks are puffed out.
- Gradually move to higher and lower pitches, keep the sound small and easy.
- Try using less breath while keeping the sound clear and mobile
- Extend the pitch range of each siren
- As you extend the pitch range, move freely between speech quality and your upper register (falsetto), sliding off the sung sound at the bottom.
- Open onto vowels with vocalized sighing, staying quiet

- Move from puffy cheeks to ‘ee’, then through ‘eh’, ‘ah’, ‘oh’ and ‘oo’
- Slide arpeggios
- Do the same sliding exercises on voiced fricatives (‘vv’, ‘jj’ [as in regime], ‘zz’), If possible, then move on to a rolled rr, all the time sliding and not fixing the pitch.
- Onset onto an open vowel. This can be glottal, breathy or simultaneous. The latter is the best for everyday use, the others are for special effects. Practice a gentle glottal onset followed by a breathy one (haa), then imagine the ‘h’ and sing a series of short ‘ah’s using virtually no air.

Resonance

Theory

This covers the voice qualities that are dependent on the alignment of the vocal tract; such as voice projection, tongue position, jaw release, larynx

lowering/raising, soft palate raising and pharyngeal widening/narrowing.

Tongue position is essential for clear articulation and for achieving the right tone quality on each vowel at each pitch. Flexibility and a quick, active response are needed in the muscles of the tongue.

The jaw is for eating not for singing. Jaw-closing muscles need to be let go of.

Larynx lowering (for richer qualities) should not use any tongue root activity, it is more of a dropping action; larynx raising is normally for brighter or speech-like qualities – musical theatre or pop.

Voice projection tends to rely on developing ‘twangy’ or ‘ringing’ sounds.

Soft palate raising reduces nasality and increases the resonant space. If in doubt, hold the nose when singing; if this alters the sound quality, the palate is dropped.

Practice

- Breathe in over an 'ee' vowel to raise the back of the tongue and release tongue root pressure.
- Feel the tongue root under the chin with the thumb, this should be soft and mobile.
- Feel the jaw hinge in front of the ears; keep this soft and loose.
- Play with witchy noises and quacking, making sure that you are de-constricting (see 'Release the throat'). Then try this sensation with the resonance in the mouth and not the nose ('munchkin' sound).
- Sing whole phrases in this quality and feel the lack of effort required for a lot of noise. Loosen the jaw slightly and you will soften the edges sufficiently.
- You may feel vibration in the roof of your mouth or in the front of your face.
- Feel that all of these exercises involve the least necessary effort. While singing; try drawing around an imaginary 5p piece with the end of your nose, raise and lower your shoulders by 1cm, wiggle your knees.
- Sing to ng-gee, ng-gah, ng-goo with a really explosive 'g', imagine the back molars rising. Do the same with 'bee', ba', 'boo'. These exercises will help to keep the soft palate raised.

In order to prevent muscle fatigue, activities need to be varied throughout the warm-up.

Articulation

Theory

This covers the singing of text; in general, make sure that all articulation is primarily with the tongue, not the jaw. Highly energised consonants are very useful for re-balancing muscle use and air flow. Feel that the consonants are propelling the energy of the sound, rather than allowing them to stop the air flow.

Practice

- Drop the jaw without pulling it forwards (feel the jaw hinge just in front of the ears).
- Sing 'ya, ya, ya' exercises keeping the jaw loose but still.
- Touch all round the outer edge of the upper and lower lips with the tip of the tongue, without moving the jaw forward.
- Release of tension - A good way to gain awareness of tension is to increase the tension level before releasing.
- Pin lips up with two fingers, sing a phrase, release lips and sing again
- Bite a knuckle and do the same.
- Bite the end of your thumb and do the same.
- Drop the jaw, let your tongue hang out and do the same.
- Check tongue position on all vowels. 'ee' has highest tongue with the sides of the tongue against the upper molars.
- Check that your tongue does not press back as it moves towards 'ah', there should still be a feeling of lift in the middle.
- As you move from 'ah' through 'oh' to 'oo', the change will be primarily by bringing the lips forward. You may not feel the movement of the tongue.
- Practice tongue-twisters to descending scales, invent your own combinations.
- Bree, Bray, brah..... rolling the r on any pitch

Allow yourself to now move from this place of warming up into singing... there should be nothing different in the way you approach your repertoire.

Never stretch cold muscles. Use small stretches during practice and rehearsal, use longer stretches after performance.

At the end of your singing time, don't forget to cool-down.

Theory

Some of the muscles you are using will have been worked hard in a shortened position. It is important to restore the function to an easy speaking mode.

Practice

- Use descending slides to come into the lower part of your pitch range.
- Do some gentle buzzes and hums in speech quality.

This document is based on a paper written by Jenevora Williams and Alan Watson, 2011 (see *Research* section in www.jenevorawilliams.com) and information prepared for the National Youth Choir of Great Britain by Jenevora Williams and Felicity Cook, 2010.