

"Vocal Warm-Up" - by Gilles Denizot

What does *vocal warm-up* mean ? How can I warm my voice up without my teacher ? Should I always observe the same routine ? How do I know that my voice is ready for technique, repertoire study, a rehearsal, or a performance ? What can I do when I feel vocally unfit and still have to sing ?

During an intensive vocal course, I suggested to devote one morning to the idea of vocal warm-up. Trainees were of advanced and professional level. Voices were as follows : three sopranos - light, lyric, and spinto - and three tenors - also light, lyric, and spinto -. It is interesting to add that these three tenors had been wrongly trained as baritones by their previous teachers.

Individual vocal technique sessions occurred during mornings, from 9am. It was therefore imperative to have effective solutions to help singers quickly regain their full vocal potentials. Simultaneously, coaching sessions with pianist were taking place, then interpretation sessions in the afternoon, often followed after dinner by improvised music sessions. The schedule was heavy and there was no waste of time. A badly-warmed-up voice or wrongly-trained voice would not have resisted long.

It is of course very pleasant to always be able to rely upon the ear and expertise of our voice teacher when we need to warm-up under guidance. Nevertheless a singer must be able to warm-up alone. It frequently happens that singers are incapable of warming-up by themselves. Beginners or anxious singers experiencing a stressful situation such as an audition or when they are sick especially do not correctly prepare themselves for vocal activity. How can we thus apprehend and effectively elaborate our very own vocal warm-up ?

Preliminary Physical Warm-Up

During this intensive workshop or at workshops in the various OperaLab Studios, most singers speak of their necessity to go through a preliminary physical awakening. Indeed, the first step of a vocal warm-up must be physical. It can take various forms but the goal is to awake the body, to create a condition of well-being and availability before vocal work. Some singers choose to go through physical exercises or stretching movements, to jog in a natural environment even simply to take a hot bath or a refreshing shower. Whatever you choose, it is wise to awake your body before your voice, especially early in the day. Remember Régine Crespin who would first jog in Central Park before recording the Ring in the morning.

Training Suggestion

A flexible lumbar region is essential. This part of the singer's body may be very easily trained with rotative movements. You also may associate sounds to these movements. Singers gain numerous advantages from this practice of flexing their bodies and improvising sounds.

Breath

I often explain during *vocal warm-up* OperaLab workshops that the simple action of walking while consciously breathing has a double advantage : it awakes the body and it includes the notion of breathing which is essential for singers. Some singers have already incorporated breathing exercises in their physical preparation. It is now time to "get back in touch" with your breathing. Select the breathing exercises you practise with your teacher. He or she must have taught you at least one. When you practise and train breathing functions, it is

unwise to force the body to open and maintain the rib cage stretched. Healthy singing is about balancing antagonistic functions and it has been observed that "*the exaggerated opening of the ribs, associated with a too important tension of the area surrounding the vertebrae, hampers the movements of the abdominal wall*" (in "*Les troubles de la voix et leur rééducation*" by Claire Dinville). Why don't you notice instead how flexible and available your body becomes thanks to this training and how well it responds to breathing in and out. Montserrat Caballé says she never misses "*her several daily 15-minute sessions of pure breathing exercises*" which she also names her "*vocal gymnastics*" and which allows her a capacity to breathe out for two minutes. She also states that as far as the diaphragm is concerned "*it should weigh down and not push down. When strength is used not to push but to hold back, what we let go seems to be flying away*". It is therefore not recommended to go beyond a comfortable elasticity while working on the body and the breath. I would not emphasize too much the necessity to train your breathing daily. It is absolutely useless to imagine a progress in your sound if you cannot count on the efficiency of your breathing management. And yet, there are many singers who never train or badly train this essential component of their instruments !

First Vocal Warm-Up Exercise

Your body is now awake and available. Your breathing is trained for singing. It is time for proper vocal warm-up. Some singers have produced sounds as part as their physical warm-up, maybe they have hummed scales and sounds. But here we are dealing with a real vocal warm-up and we naturally need to begin with an exercise. It is precisely now and here that numerous singers get lost because they are unable to spontaneously answer the three following questions :

- what is your ideal first vocal exercise ?
- what first danger or vocal trap do you need to detect and avoid in your voice ?
- which vocal quality are you looking for ?

You should ask yourself these questions - maybe in a different order, as they are complementary - and find answers for yourself. There are, per se, no good or bad answers : you need to find your keys to your own vocal warm-up. When the first vocal trap is identified, you will probably select your ideal vocal exercise (provided a voice teacher has shown it to you). By correctly using this exercise and the others you know you will control your gradual vocal warm-up while avoiding your usual first vocal trap. You will then be able to reach your ideal vocal quality in a shorter time.

Suggestions

Here again, every individual is different and it is unthinkable to apply to all singers the same first vocal exercise. However, as we may notice it in *vocal warm-up* OperaLab workshops, the needs of singers are often similar within the same vocal categories : singers with light voices almost systematically try to imply their bodies, to anchor their voices to their bodies in order to avoid "under-singing". Those with a heavier, more dramatic voice were rather looking to obtain a comfortable relaxed throat feeling as to avoid pushing.

The Cuperto (c.f. article "[The Beginner Singer](#)") : in its one-octave version (for female singers) but especially in its two-octaves version (for male singers), this exercises - as long as it is used correctly - is ideal if you only have a short time available for your vocal warm-up. It implies and involves a flexible and toning physical posture, correct breath management, pharyngeal stretch because it uses the Italian "u" vowel (necessary to cover sounds), and last but not least, it allows the cords to approximate on their thin edges with gentleness rather than with force.

Continuation of Warm-Up

Another crucial question occurs at this time : how much time and how many exercises are necessary to complete a vocal warm-up ? In practise, it seems that the more experienced the singer, the less he feels the need to add exercises and to lengthen the duration of the vocal warm-up routine. All singers who experience a healthy and daily vocal activity claim that the voice is often very quickly available, as if it was always warm. On

the opposite, beginners or singers with a poor vocal technique feel that they need to warm-up for a long time, throughout their tessitura, using a maximum of exercises. These singers strain their voices even before working with it on music. This overdose of exercises and time for their warm-up clearly indicates how insecure they are.

In reality, five different yet complementary vocal exercises, not exceeding a total of ten minutes, are amply enough for your voice to be available before vocal training. We of course refer ourselves to a warm-up in globally-positive conditions. We shall later give tips for a warm-up in negative conditions.

Suggestions

Apart from the Cuperto in its one-octave for female singers and two-octaves for male singers, you might want to use (this list may be extended) :

- short exercises on your middle register using the five Italian vowels and the semi-vowel "y" (as in "yes"), which not only relaxes the lower jaw by a simple down-and-back chewing movement, but also has the advantage to even vowels without loosing breath at vowel transitions;
- slow exercises on single sustained notes, notably on the "a" vowel, in the middle register for beginners, from bottom to top for advanced singers. This vowel is the most difficult of all because it implies the balance of vocal antagonisms. Great Italian voice Masters used it priorily to train their singers;
- fast exercises on staccati, ideal for singers who push and weigh down their voices;
- the "g" (as in "glottic") and "k" (as in "key"), which have the advantage to regulate the tongue movements (and the inactivity of the lower jaw) while implying the velum (or soft palate) which is a passive muscular organ. The velum may be considered as the upper side of the oral cavity (c.f. article "[Oral Cavity in Singing](#)"), a sort of cube that we may modify in order to produce the various vowel and consonant sounds used in singing;
- the Italian "u" sound, necessary for pharyngeal opening, high register, and sound cover;
- Garcia's pharyngeal vowels (c.f. article "[The Beginner Singer](#)");
- improvised "siren" ascending exercises (by modifying the "a" vowel at the beginning of the scale until you reach the Italian "u" vowel) very useful for female singers since they should apply Garcia's concept of the rounding of vowels and typical of female vocal cover;
- "i" then "ü" sounds, often useful for tenors, as long as the posture of the lips is well-understood and respected so that the larynx is in a "stabilized" position (if we refer to Miller's definition);
- the short "Rossini arpeggio" and its variations, so we may work on legato and sustained singing, and the transition of registers, especially in the Passaggio or upper middle register areas;
- a simple exercise that immediately involves a perfect approximation of the vocal cords;
- Lindquest's and Bjoerling's scales (c.f. article "[The Beginner Singer](#)") for velocity.

We may also, if time allows, use one of the Sieber vocalises. They allow a safe transition between pure vocalization and repertoire. Going from technique to vocal and musical practice of the repertoire is often an unfortunate occasion for singers to loose their marks. As my current voice teacher says, technique must create automatic actions which will spontaneously occur during the interpretation of the repertoire. We do not acquire technique abilities by working on a score that lies above what we can do technically but by using the technique we previously have acquired.

Should We Warm-Up Before A Voice Lesson ?

Yes, I still take lessons with a voice teacher. At a certain point of my training (mostly to discover my true Heldentenor voice), I have experienced problems in my vocal warm-up routine. I would go to my lesson

without having warmed-up, so I could go through the warm-up routine my teacher had designed for me. Nevertheless I would not be able to find "MY own vocal identity". The voice was either too "tenorish" and not enough anchored on the body, or it was too close to a "baritone voice", too heavy and large in the low and middle registers. By repeating exercises in order to understand and perfect them I was getting tired and I did not have a perfect voice for the repertoire part of the lesson. First we reduced the duration of lessons and avoided working on my repertoire for months. Simultaneously we modified the technical routine so it would be more adapted to my vocal and physical specificities. Then we decided that I would warm-up alone before the lesson. I could do a shorter routine of usual exercises (yet covering all vocal aspects, including high notes) or do all my exercises until I would get to the high register. Then I would leave my teacher supervise this part of my technique.

As a teacher I ask of all beginner singers NOT TO warm their voices up before our appointments. It is of the utmost importance that the student be supervised at the beginning of his/her vocal training, so he/she may learn the appropriate mechanisms before reproducing them during their individual practice. It is also quite enlightening for the teacher to hear and study the "raw" voice of the student and to understand how and why it reacts to the various exercises. When the beginner singer arrives with an already warmed-up voice (provided he/she knows how to do it, which is exceptional) the teacher is robbed from this essential aspect of vocal training. On the other hand, an advanced singer should be able to warm-up alone and to be ready for technique exercises when arriving to the lesson. Also, the advanced singer must be able to warm-up and go through the technique routine without his/her teacher before meeting with a conductor or a coach for a rehearsal. It is a matter of personal hygiene to wake one's body and voice, to prepare oneself and to place oneself in proper physical and mental conditions for a lesson or a rehearsal. I often devote a considerable amount of lesson time to awaken the singer, to allow him/her to be available, and while nothing is done in vain, it would be preferable if more advanced singers became more responsible and more professional in their attitude.

Should We Warm-Up If We Find Ourselves In Negative Conditions ?

All singers have some day found themselves in the typical alarming and apparently unbearable condition of vocal unfitness. If the singer is really sick, then vocal treatment and rest is necessary to regain health. But should the singer simply be in bad shape, tired, slower in regaining vocal capacities, or if the stress before an audition or a performance is unusual and painful, then he/she must know how to warm-up with even more care and confidence in the desired results. These moments in the professional singer's life are particularly painful, but they are inevitable and are a part of the road. You might as well know how to overcome them. Preparation will be longer, but especially not more demanding which would be counter-productive. Forget about the five exercises and the ten-minutes session. You should respect your sleeping time and a very meticulous awakening of your body, always gently and confident in the success to come. Regulate your breathing functions with care, notably everything that will allow a deep, quiet, mastered breathing in the rib-abdominal area. The state of quietness that will gradually happen will be a major help for the vocal warm-up and as you enter the stage. It will also give you a more focused concentration. I am not at all in favour of those warm-up sessions which recommend relaxation of the body and the mind, and loosen your concentration (or only in rare occasions before a very demanding training if the subject is too nervous or too tensed). Classical singing requires toning and a firm body. It has nothing to do with being stiff, nor does it deal with being too loose. Once again, the balance of antagonisms is needed. After having meticulously awaken your body and trained your breathing, you should select exercises which address vocal cords approximation and toning of your vocal bands rather than forcing them together (which is anyway to be avoided). Find again the comfortable sensations of the pharyngeal stretch, of the narrow sound (as in the concept of the reversed megaphone), insist upon the resonance of the sound rather than upon forced breath. Use the "ng" sound (as in "sing" or "Engel") which will give you a more ringing voice without pushing. Kirsten Flagstad and Lilli Lehmann used it. When this very

specific routine of exercises is performed several times a day, briefly but with care, the unfit singer gradually finds his/her capacities back and may well sing in the evening. Lilli Lehmann shares with us in her book *Mein Gesangskunst* her experience of breathing and practising her vocal exercises through a sponge that had previously been placed into boiling water then pressed before being applied on the face. On the day of my Montreal debut for a recital that was going to be live-broadcast on Radio-Canada, I had the unpleasant experience to wake up hoarse after the long transatlantic flight and the discovery of the famous cold Canadian winter weather. I remember that I first invaded the fitness room of the hotel early in the morning so I could regain my physical power. Then, after a brief vocal warm-up, I went through the usual balance check with sound technicians in the concert hall. I spent the rest of the day, in the solitude of my hotel room, pursuing my voice. In the evening I had no problems singing and got immediately hired for the following season.

Finding One's Vocal Identity

The warming-up of the voice is indispensable before working technically and studying repertoire, before an audition or a performance. But the conscious and meticulous vocal warm-up allows the singer to find his/her vocal identity back and the very personal qualities and aspects he/she wants to reveal. Warming-up the voice is like opening a closed room, so air and light may come in, in order to fully use it. So many singers deprive themselves not only of the essential technical knowledge that allow them to quickly use their full voice. But most of all to understand the nature of THEIR own specific and unique vocal identity so they may give it to their audience. It is, in my experience, absolutely necessary to be in perfect adequacy with the person you are and the voice you produce. A few well-chosen exercises will allow you to avoid your usual vocal traps and to regain your vocal identity.

Corrected and revised in May 2006.

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Articles

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