



ASK A VOICE TEACHER

HOW DO I SING WELL WHEN I'M EXHAUSTED & OVERWHELMED?

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As a full-time voice teacher and administrator, I am always grateful for the time I actually get to spend singing. But when my alarm goes off at 6:45 am and I see an evening choral rehearsal in my calendar at the end of a full day at the university, I will admit that my spirits sometimes droop. How can I ensure that I will contribute to the rehearsal effectively when I am already spent? And how will I use my voice properly now in order to be able to keep singing as long as possible? I offer here a few strategies for those of you who may be facing these same questions.

The first and most obvious strategy is to do a personal warm-up before heading into the rehearsal. Many choir directors don't begin their rehearsals with warm-up exercises. Even when they do, these exercises are often designed primarily to unify the choir's sound. I find group vocalises less effective for preparing my own voice, in large part because I

can't hear myself. I may end up making physical choices based on the sound coming from someone near me rather than on my own vocal production. Your pre-rehearsal warm-up can be as simple as taking a few targeted breaths, standing in a quiet posture and being careful to release your abdominal muscles and lift your soft palate. If there is time to move on to some lip trills and some basic vowel patterns, that is more helpful than traveling aimlessly around the keyboard. Being ready to sing is mostly about moving breath and forming vowels.

It is critically important to warm up your body, and this is perhaps even more important than spending time vocalizing. When your body is tight, you will have difficulty moving your breath and forming distinct vowels. I am always careful to do a few stretches. If there is time, ten minutes of light cardio can also be enormously helpful. I know that I am warm enough to sing when my breath is moving freely to my soft palate and my lips are loose enough not to interfere with my breath flow.

My second strategy is to be extremely mindful about posture and breath during the rehearsal itself. It's all too easy to fall into "folder posture" with a collapsed rib cage and the head jutting forward instead of balancing in alignment with

the torso. In order to take efficient breaths, the body must be in optimum alignment. Check in on this repeatedly during the rehearsal, especially if you begin to feel tired. Poor posture (and how it negatively affects breathing) is a major contributor to vocal fatigue.

The third strategy is really a necessity for all musical endeavors: prepare the music ahead of time whenever possible. In my life as a soloist, I have found that thorough preparation is the best safeguard against performance anxiety as well as physical tension during the performance. You can spare yourself a great deal of vocal tension when you are confident in the notes, rhythms, and text placements. If you identify and solve trouble spots beforehand, you will have more energy to spend during the rehearsal on singing well (see above comments about posture and breathing).

Finally, try to bring a positive attitude to the rehearsal, especially when you have already put in a long day elsewhere. Sometimes I remind myself on the way in that this is something I *wanted* to do, which may or may not have been the case with the day's other activities. There is something so very special about communal singing, which is why people have been singing together for centuries. Enjoy every moment! •