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A Philosophy of Singing

## Tom Schilling Vocalway Newsletter Issues

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### **Warming Up**

What does “warming up” mean? How often do we hear, “I’m just not warmed up yet.”? There seems to be a big mystery in all this, and of course it has to do with our ability to align our bodies to assure that we get a complete breath. A “big breath” is not what we’re talking about here. The goal is not really to warm up the voice, but to find the alignment of muscles to allow this complete breath to happen naturally. The body knows how to take a breath, and yet we do not live that way. Warming up then, is remembering what we have to do to get out of our everyday pattern of living our lives.

In driving a car there is a pattern which we must follow—a formula which gives us the correct result. In a stick shift car, we used to have to follow a certain formula or you would “strip a gear” or go bouncing along if you didn’t. The coordination of shifting gears and using the foot pedals soon became a pattern in the brain. It didn’t take long to master this pattern because the conscious mind knew it *had* to follow the rules or the car would not go anywhere. It really never occurred to us that we should get out and push the car to get where we’re going. Yet in singing, this seems to be a universal pattern. “When in doubt, trill”, used to be the old adage. Now it seems it’s “When in doubt, push.” At least the former suggested a lightness of approach even though we really didn’t know what we were doing.

If you work a computer, you know that there is also a pattern to be followed to get the results you want. If you know the program you want, you simply follow the rules until you master the order in which it happens, and pretty soon it becomes “old hat.” The brain has switched the process from the conscious mind to the unconscious mind, and you already know how to get into the program you want before you start. *Before you start* is the main emphasis of this newsletter.

Because our breathing mechanism has been so altered since we were babies or small children, it is a return to that joy of living and breathing that we must reinstate. Fear is our worst enemy, because it tightens our solar plexus and the conscious mind is duped into believing this will get us the power we want. Fear centers itself in the pit of our stomach. This is exactly what we want to loosen and let go of to get our deepest breath. Autopsies were conducted on thousands of cadavers to ascertain the extent to which humans breathed deeply. 70% of the bodies had never breathed below their belt their whole lifetime. It is even taught to take a breath and hold it. “Build those stomach muscles, because that is your power.” In singing, the muscles needed to sing with great power build as a *result* of singing correctly, not as an isolated exercise for the

diaphragm, stomach, or throat muscles. Only the correct coordination can ultimately build power in the voice. That is what warming up should do—get us in touch with this coordination.

Nature in its wisdom hid the vocal cords in the windpipe. The windpipe lies behind the tongue and in front of the spinal column. Therefore, the *voice* is always warmed up. It is totally protected by the tongue. The tongue, being the strongest muscle in the body for its weight, naturally defends the very thing we're trying to open—the throat. The throat is opened by drawing air away from the vocal cords, closing them, {the Bournoulli effect}, and drawing them away from the base of the tongue. If this is to happen, the air has to enter the body through the windpipe. Only if the face is elevated and the tongue lifted out of the throat cavity to allow access to the windpipe can the body take the correct breath for singing. Any talk about deep breathing without setting up the facial mechanism is useless. It never leads to an open throat because the deepest breath can only be realized in this manner.

Therefore, in warming up, the first thing that must be addressed is the face. In another newsletter about the Upper Jaw, the 15<sup>th</sup> Vocalway Newsletter, the information is explained in detail. But to remember this information takes a long time because our patterns of everyday living are so thoroughly ingrained. Our brain, then, is the muscle that is the hardest to open. We are determined that the conscious mind can do what we're talking about. This is called ego. If we do not step out of way and allow the information to happen by itself, we are still manipulating, and even the correct information if held onto by the conscious mind never becomes knowledge. Somehow the old groove in the brain, which we put there, doesn't become erased to allow the new groove to be made. The old groove really doesn't need to be erased, it's only that the new information will become stronger by repetition of the correct pattern and allow us to intuitively access this new groove instead. We then don't go back to the old one even though it still exists. The body was designed to be efficient and will not tolerate the old abuse once it has experienced the correct coordination.

How long does it take to warm up? It should take no longer than five minutes at the most. Ideally, when the conscious mind finally gives up and allows us to access this new groove in the brain, we can switch to it immediately. The ego gives up, and now the body can take this deep breath through the windpipe without delay. The fears are gone, the face lights up, the body relaxes, and the deed is done. The mechanism is ready to sing.

Seem easy? Sure. But there is another problem afoot. By playing in voice studios when I first arrived in New York City, I took it for granted that every singer had to warm up for half an hour before I went in to accompany them. It seemed they all did this no matter how many years they had been studying. I thought it was great, because I had a half hour off for every hour I played. Then I began to accompany Winifred Cecil's lessons, and I had to play the whole hour! At 10:00 in the morning they were singing Wagner! Unheard of! Not being that knowledgeable in what was going on vocally at that time in my life, I was amazed. Not only were they singing, but they were singing with a different sound, a different ease, an innate musicality that I had not heard in any of the other studios. I eventually ended up playing in that studio five days a week, sometimes eight hours a day, for about 5 years. This association changed not only my concept of singing and sound, but awakened a whole new approach to music—namely getting back to the enjoyment of singing. Only if the music seemed to be going awry did a vocal exercise appear in

that studio. Then for only a minute or two, getting the train back on the track, and we were back in business. There I met singers from the Met, City Opera, San Francisco Opera, Munich Opera, Frankfurt Opera, Chicago Opera, etc., etc., etc.. Did they warm up? Yes—mentally. They had learned how to become aware *before they started to sing*.

What are the circumstances that make us forget this coordination? Maybe something happened before we started to warm up that angered us. Maybe our conscious mind is preoccupied with a financial problem. Any kind of emotional problem can stand in our way. Until the conscious mind has been trained to go into the realm of using our brain power—our higher power—we are locked into our everyday realm of likes and dislikes, loves and hates, highs and lows and so forth. Only when we can access our higher power at will can we begin to understand why some people must take a long time to warm up, and others no time at all. Our earthly cares must take a back seat to the art of singing. Any tension caused by these cares is manifested in our bodies. Sometimes on a particularly emotional or stressful day it can take a longer time to warm up, but sooner or later, the body learns what to do automatically and takes us away from our hum-drum existence and puts us into our higher power. If we aren't careful, we might even carry this into our everyday lives and begin to come out of our habitual sleep state.

This awakening is what warming up can do for us if done properly. It is a way to align the body and immediately help us access our higher power. In this state we can begin to sing. Until this is accomplished, the struggle continues. Sometimes the singer will warm up very well, and then forget everything when he starts to sing. There was a school of singing in New York City that insisted the singer only do exercises for 5 years. Ouch! No songs, no arias, no lieder, just exercises. The theory was that after that time they could sing anything. A reasonable assumption, but it did not result in creating any singers. Why? A good analogy would be that of learning how to drive a car. If you were not allowed to go out of the parking lot during this time, you would be a great driver. However, when you faced going out on the highway in traffic, this becomes another world that one is not prepared for. Even the simplest songs have their patterns that must be followed. If the singer has not learned to look at a piece of music to see these patterns, they have no idea how to maneuver their voice around the territory. *You must sing to learn to sing*. Warming up puts you in the correct coordination to sing, but the moment actual singing occurs, somehow our conscious mind forgets the warm up and goes right back to the old habits. Even though we drove the car well in the parking lot, the minute we are confronted with another vehicle, an S curve, or knowing how to get into the correct lane to get off the superhighway, the driver must learn these by experiencing the situation. The singer must from the start, take longer to warm up to allow the correct coordination to happen, but must begin to understand what to do in various situations in a piece of music. The Old Italian songs are terrific for this purpose. In them you can learn how to maneuver through the piece and understand what your coordination has to do to get to the end of the piece. With the experience of a few maneuvers our confidence grows, and we begin to tackle bigger songs, lieder, then arias, seeing that little by little we are mastering the art by understanding how to experience with confidence what used to be big obstacles. Now the coordination teaches us there are really no high notes, no low notes, no loud or soft, but simply our sound which *becomes* high or low, or loud or soft. Diction ceases to be a problem because now it is simply talking on air. Our brain is finally engaged, and with this most efficient computer in the world—and then some—singing becomes the great joy and art it was designed to be—both for you and the audience.

All this happens because one knows what to do to “warm up.” We can, however, easily sabotage ourselves by thinking we do not need to get into this warm up state. It is really the brain that must always be accessed, and the ego of our conscious mind decides it does not need to do that any longer. I have heard singers sing incredibly well for a year, then suddenly go into a decline. What happened? They did not stay in touch with their own sound. Always returning to the basics is the answer, and yet the ego hates the thought of that. Remember, your first lesson in your last lesson. It’s always the same old boring thing. The ego thinks we are above that after a while, so it starts creating the sound instead of allowing it to happen. The most creative are the hardest to keep doing the same thing over and over again. Even though the basics are the same, the voice will change naturally and become more efficient, causing a bigger sound. Smaller is bigger. Less is more. The most efficient use of the body creates the most powerful sound. The more you push the less we hear. I could go on ad nauseum, but you certainly get the drift. Changing your sound for the piece being performed is another trap. Sing everything with your own sound, and then all the emotion and color come in automatically.

If the singer is confronted by a coach or a conductor, it can be for many reasons. The most popular is diction. Remember, they all will have something important to say or they wouldn’t last in the business. This is where you must be in control of the situation. The singing position—the warm up position—is the first thing that bites the dust. The minute they start moving the words back into the position of everyday speech the diction improves immediately, but your sound has left. Singing is not an extension of speech. Some singers come out of these sessions with a knot in their throat. Now the process is to use this valuable information by going back to basics, finding your own voice again, and voila, we’re back on the track. Another is, “You’re singing too loud!” A student of mine tells the story when in a rehearsal at City Opera the conductor was screaming at them to sing softly. They all came out of the rehearsal hardly able to talk. After this session in the rehearsal room they proceeded to go upstairs and sing the same scene on stage. When on stage with the orchestra, the conductor furiously beat on the podium to stop the music, demanding to know why nobody was singing because he couldn’t hear them. Therefore, the singer must learn to keep his/her own council. Nod your head and say thank you, but get in your own space and begin to repair the damage. The real damage is to your confidence. Driving in the parking lot is one thing. Being confronted by a freight train coming at you is another. Just stay calm and relaxed, stay in your own space as much as possible, for the real collision is not with the freight train, but with your own sound being taken away from you for seemingly musical reasons.

As an old Russian teacher in New York used to say, “Metal in your voice is gold in your pocket.” The minute you lose this “metal”, this “squillo”, the voice is no longer efficient and will not project. This is what a warm up is about. The correct coordination will eventually give you this sound on the vowels, but add words or dynamics and we begin to compromise this sound. Even harder to understand and accomplish is the feat of not allowing the emotion of the music to interfere with this free sound. It is such a temptation to add emotion to the music, when the music already has the emotion written into it. Relax, say the words, move the air, and you will begin to see why the great composers were great. As Callas said, “It’s all on the page.” Put your own creativity on the shelf until you see what the composer had to say.

Warming up therefore is the job of relaxing and getting into this higher world. By going deeper into ourselves we can activate this process of opening the pineal gland and seeing the genius of the composer come to life again through us. We are not creators; we are recreating what was already written. It is very tempting to want to add our personality to the task at hand. Nothing is more intrusive in the world of great art than our own ego. Save personality for the entertainers. There is no room for it when going through the process of becoming an artist. Keep it simple, and the complexities take care of themselves. Being complex is easy. Being simple is the true task of our work. If you can make the habit of getting into this higher place a daily mental occurrence, very soon you can access it at will. Now even on the worst of days it will only take a few minutes to return to this place. Staying there in your everyday life will also begin to happen, and many stresses will disappear and make your life as enjoyable as your singing. Remember how to warm up, stay there while you sing, and your singing and life will change.