

Making the most of The Preston Passion

Paul Leddington Wright, who has written these notes on singing, started conducting orchestras and choirs at the age of 15. His early career was spent in the professional theatre as a Musical Director and keyboard player. From 1984–1995 he was Director of Music at Coventry Cathedral (where he is still on the staff). As one of BBC 'Songs of Praise' principal conductors, he has conducted over 200 programmes including 65,000 people from the Cardiff Millennium Stadium in 2000, as well as the annual 'Big Sing' from the Royal Albert Hall.

Getting Ready

Any athlete preparing for a race will spend time warming up the whole body ready for what will be a very physical experience. Singing is just the same, and has huge physical and mental benefits. It is most certainly not something that happens just in the mouth and throat, but is a whole body activity from brain to big toe – so be prepared for a workout!

Essentials

- Excellent posture with good balance
- Full and deep breathing
- Whole body control
- An alert brain and great concentration
- In-depth knowledge of the music and all the techniques required to make a worthy performance

Warming up

I have heard of singers who will deliberately arrive late for rehearsal to avoid the warm-ups. What folly! Not only is it unprofessional to be late, but warm-ups are also 100% as essential to the singer as they are to a world-class athlete.

So, take time to:

- Think about posture – upright (not like a tin soldier), relaxed, feet slightly apart, head tipped very slightly down (for relaxed vocal chords), eyes up, chest held up and expanded
- Practise deep breathing – think of filling up your 'tank' with air and slowly releasing, gradually increasing the time it takes to empty your lungs, preparing for those long phrases
- Gently sing some sustained notes on different vowels to get the voice going. Simple vocal patterns of a few notes, gradually extending the range
- Introduce consonants, words and phrases as the voice warms up

It cannot be emphasised enough how important it is to prepare by warming up. The voice is a delicate instrument and you will need to use it all your life, so take care of it!

"You know, when you're making a great sound, be it in a cathedral, be it in a pub, be it on the terraces at Arsenal (where I do sing quite a lot!), there's something really exciting about it. There's something really gratifying about it as well."

Aled Jones, Singer and Presenter, Songs of Praise

Great hints and tips about singing

Having prepared one's body and mind for singing, we can turn our attention to essential elements of which we need to be aware.

• **Stamina:** a rehearsal can often last over two hours. A concert of a major choral work may have over an hour of demanding choral singing. Another reason why attendance at rehearsals is so important – to build up vocal stamina. Again, long-distance marathon running requires a huge amount of stamina, and no marathon runner would contemplate a race without an enormous amount of preparation.

• **Posture:** whether seated or standing, posture, as mentioned above, is of vital importance. If the singer is seated, as so often happens for parts of rehearsals, this is fine, so long as the singer has both feet firmly on the ground, and is sitting upright on the front half of the seat. The music should be held with both hands, at a position where a small movement up and down of the eyes can switch the vision from the music to the conductor with ease.

• **Breathing:** breath is to singing as oil and petrol are to a car. Without good deep breathing, there is no proper support for the voice, and the sound will quickly become tired, thin and sore. Additionally, good breathing supports the tone and provides support for musical phrasing and direction.

• **Placement – vowels:** an essential part of warming up, and of actually singing, is the placing of vowels and clearly defined shapes for the vowels. Our speech and accents vary enormously throughout the country, but when we sing, there should be unanimity of vowels such that any trace of accent disappears. Vowels need to be pure, clear, and reflected by the mouth shape. Placing does vary slightly but should always be towards the front of the mouth. Remember, all the singing tone we produce

is on the vowel; the consonants just get us going, finish off a word or punctuate the sound mid-word. *Good vowels encourage and support good intonation.*

• **Diction:** words can never be clear enough. Crisp consonants with plenty of 'bite' help bring the music and sense of the words alive.

• **Confidence:** good attention to necessary techniques along with good preparation/rehearsal will enable singing to be done with confidence which is what the audience wants to see as well as hear. Overall enjoyment of the experience will also be enhanced.

• **Singing outside:** this is always more of a challenge, because it is harder to hear yourself and those around you, and there's a tendency to try and sing too loud, and so distort your voice. Try not to do this.

• **If you're participating from the audience, join in!** If everyone sings, it makes it a wonderful collective experience. If everyone mumbles into their coats, it makes it a bit flat and depressing. All eyes are on Preston for this performance – sing out and be proud of your part in this great event.

• **And finally... TELEVISION!** The one thing the television director will be desperate for is 'good faces'! There is nothing more guaranteed to get that close-up than an engaged and characterful face. And yes, that is possible while singing too! A 10-year-old boy once said that when you are singing, 'you smile through your eyes' – such wisdom!