

# "SING AS IF..."

*President-elect Joan Boutilier describes her daily performance practice*

I've been giving thought to the phrases and words "practice makes permanent," "practice performing," and "perform." I know I should perform when I practice, but do I really do that ALL the time? Here are the ways I warm up, rehearse, and perform on my own:

**Singing in the shower.** The shower is where I vocalize. The sound of the shower masks vocal imperfections, allowing me to sing without judgment. I take advantage of the warm, humid air to sing throughout my range with ease. I like the "bathroom ring," and I listen for ring on specific vowels. I have my favorite song that sits comfortably in my range which allows me to sing "real music" and not just a series of scales, tones or nonsense syllables. In this way, I'm able to sing without judgment and allow my instrument to get literally "warmed up" and ready for the day.

**Singing with a warm-up CD.** When I warm up with my favorite CD, I'm methodically guided through exercises. It feels like doing yoga for my instrument, allowing me to stretch my range, increase vocal flexibility and listen for vocal resonance. Because the warm-ups are accompanied by an instrument, I know that my key changes are accurate, tempo steady, and breathing rhythmic.

**Singing while I vacuum.** Like singing in the shower, singing with the white noise of the vacuum in the background allows me to play with my voice in a non-judgmental way. The action of vacuuming, while not highly aerobic, helps me build physical stamina while singing. I'm not "performing," but I am

continuing to build vocal and physical stamina required for an onstage performance.

**Singing with the keyboard to check notes.** The goal behind plunking notes on a keyboard is specific: to check notes. The tuning of a piano is different than the Pythagorean tuning used in barbershop, so practicing with the piano all the time is not going to help me to learn to sing a high third but will identify wrong notes. I'm not literally performing while singing with a keyboard, but I am applying the basics of good vocal production such as breathing, aligned posture, and proper resonance.

**Singing full voice.** This is the time when I stand and sing with authority, filling the room using dynamics, vocal inflections, and emotion. Unlike when singing with the shower, the vacuum, or the keyboard, I use my full voice and sing my entire song with as much vocal freedom and energy as possible, and I sing a song from my repertoire. I start with just a phrase or two, progress to a larger section of the song and then sing the entire song. I allow my body to move and be characterized. I emulate performing, no matter how small or large the section of the song, as if there's an audience. I avoid judging or correcting myself and instead praise myself for the progress I'm making.

**Singing in front of a mirror.** There are two ways of singing in front of the mirror: silently and with singing. As silly as this may sound, when I'm into focused preparation mode, I use those couple of minutes while I'm washing my hands in the bathroom to mouth a phrase of a song. I can see if my vowels are

shaped correctly, if my spine and facial postures are generally lifted, if my eyes are expressive and smiling, if my chin is level, and if my head is moving slightly. These moments are like taking a quiz or doing flash cards — they are not lengthy practice sessions, and they are private moments when I can experiment in a non-critical way. I snap out of regular life and momentarily snap into my alter ego. Is this “performing”? You bet! Silent singing of a full song in front of a mirror gives me a chance to check my whole self out and apply the things I’ve been told by a coach. When I begin actually singing out loud in front of the mirror, I start feeling like I’m at a real rehearsal or a real performance. It’s more challenging to sing the ENTIRE song from beginning to end because now I begin using my inner voice to analyze and coach as I go. I’m putting everything together!

**Singing with my quartet.** When I’m singing with my quartet, I aim to always be “performing.” First of all, as preparation for the rehearsal, it’s imperative that I warm up on my own, have listened to my previous week’s rehearsal, have practiced my new songs, and am ready to sing songs as I intend to put them on stage. When we’re learning or reviewing a new song, I still “perform” to a certain extent because I sing with a confident sound, a lifted facial expression, good posture, and as much intent behind the lyrics as I’m capable of doing at that time. When we run a song to simulate a performance, I try to avoid “going through the motions,” and when I make mistakes, I keep my inner voice positively coaching me along and thinking ahead. I contribute to the vocal and visual

energy of the quartet and feed off of it at the same time — I give and take. Because I record every rehearsal, I know I can go home and analyze what I did so I can do better for the next time rather than going over something for my personal benefit during that session. As long as I’m “performing” I know I’ll bring that sound, that look, that story on stage with consistency.

These are my own ways of vocalizing, rehearsing, and practicing performing. Perhaps rather than saying “always perform,” we should say “sing AS IF you are performing,” meaning that each time we sing, we have our instruments built properly, that our facial and bodily postures are always in place, that we sing with confidence and with our best sound. It means that when we come to the ensemble, we’re ready with our instruments, our music, and our technique, and we’re warmed up and ready to work together as a team so that together we can “SING AS IF...!” 🎵

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