

by Mike O'Brien - themikeo.com

This information is geared specifically towards the church singer who sings before noon for services, but it can apply ***to any singer for any gig.***

I've been singing since I was a little kid: in church choir, school choir, rock bands, worship bands, and along with the radio for over 30 years. My voice was always resilient, and I never had to do anything extra to make it "work". I would get a compliment every now and then, but honestly, I just stopped thinking about my voice. And then it happened, my "a-ha" moment…. the sound guy handed me a recording from the mixing board after church. I was flat, my tone suffered, and I realized that it didn't sound at all like what I thought it did. I decided at that moment, in my mid 30's, that I wanted to take a bold step to improve my singing voice.

There was a world-class voice teacher (to the "stars") in my area. She had a waiting list, and I had to pull some favors to get just one lesson. That one little lesson cost me $200! **The crazy thing is that I never sang ONE NOTE in that $200 voice lesson!** She taught me more about my voice in one hour than I learned in 5 years of music school. Mind blown. It's been several years since that lesson, and I would like to share with you some game changing tools that I have been using for years that have transformed the quality and longevity of my singing voice.

1. Sleep

Your voice resonates from your body which, you already know is made of flesh! It's a one-of-a-kind living instrument. One of the best things you can do to prepare your voice to work is to give it rest. Worship music in the modern church is one of the only places in all of world where voices are put to stress in the EARLY morning. If you are up late at night talking, drinking, and eating, know that all those vocal muscles are working. Give your body and vocal cords 7-9 hours of sleep to recover. Seriously.

2. Water

This might seem like the last thing you want to do, but **when you first wake up drink two massive glasses of water.** Just do it. It should be just enough water to make you feel extremely full. Your vocal chords are made of flesh, and that flesh absorbs water. This water takes time to work through your system. By the time you are actually at the stage, your body will have the hydration it needs to function. Coffee in the hours before you sing is NOT AN OPTION if you are serious about singing at your best. Caffeine is a diuretic and will pull hydration OUT of your system. Drink coffee AFTER the gig if you must! Start the day with water, and continue with water until after you are done singing.

3. Shower and Hum

When you start your shower and all that steam fills your lungs, take several long, slow, and deep breaths. Next, simply start to hum. Mumble. Make motorboat sounds. Get the engine warmed up. Don't sing yet; just vocalize: Low tones. Do this for the duration of your shower and beyond. These are VERY SILLY sounds, and it will take those around you a while to get over how ridiculous it seems to be. Here's an example of my shower humming

4. Eat

In order to sing, your body needs fuel. **You must break the fast!** Even if you are not a breakfast person, the idea of not feeding your instrument is a bad plan.

There are lots of theories on what foods are best and worst for singing. The reason people tell you not to drink milk, eat bananas, and pound last night's cheese pizza, is that these elements can create a coating that will inhibit your singing voice. I prefer dry cereal, nuts, apples and really anything that doesn't causes phlegm to build.

5. Mind Your Mouth

This might seem obvious for other reasons, but you should brush your teeth before you sing. Brush your tongue. Floss. Brush again. Wake your mouth up. Get every remnant of last night's meal gone. Gargle and squish with mouthwash for 15-20 seconds and then do it again. I prefer the kind of mouthwash with alcohol that stings. This gets all the bacteria and phlegm to start working out of your system. Along the humming exercise, this will alert your body that it's time to work.

6. Make Tea

Using a variable temperature hot water kettle, warm up water to a drinkable heat (not boiling) and drop a non-caffeinated tea bag inside. I prefer the Throat Coat by Traditional Medicinals because it sounds like the right thing to use, and honestly, I love the taste of it now. Avoid adding sugar, milk, or honey. Suffer if you must. A boiling hot beverage will constrict your voice. As you travel to the place you will be singing, drink the tea and more water.

7. Warm Up on the Way

This is the step where you start to really get your voice ready. Singing along to a quality warm up CD/mp3 will calibrate your ear and voice with all 12 pitches on the scale. It will get you

thinking about intervals as well as various consonant and vowel sounds. You will arrive to the rehearsal or sound check ready to sing! There are many great vocal warm up Apps and products on Amazon.com. Here is one I suggest for more advanced singers: http://jansmith.com/product/mama-jans-no-nonsense-vocal-warm-up/

8. Sing

As you are on stage, in the "green room," and in the bathroom, keep vocalizing You will notice that GREAT SINGERS create a culture where they are always making interesting sounds to stay focused and warmed up. Much of this is similar to the shower humming exercise, as well as the warm up exercises from the CD or App. People may laugh at you and call you silly, but in time it will become part of the culture for everyone.

9. Warm Down

Before you rush out to sign all those autographs :), allow your instrument to come down off the "high." Start with humming out those tones high to low, and work your way back down to where you were at shower time. This can take 20-50 minutes. Just keep working it down.

EXTRA TIPS:

- These disciplines are not a "once-and-done" thing. They should be done every time you sing or use your voice extensively. Don't grow weary of doing the same vocal warm-ups, not drinking coffee on the day of the gig, etc… As you get older, it's even more important to have a scheduled regimen.

- On the way to church, I use a smart phone with my vocal warm-up uploaded on it. I like just having it with me so I can sing even as I walk into the building. In order to hear the music, I put the phone in my shirt pocket with the speaker facing up. When I am in the car, I put the speaker face down in my cup holder, giving it a volume boost.

- Breathe! Many vocal warm-ups are simply tricks to get you to take better, deeper breaths. The secret to great singing starts and ends with how and where you support your breath. Master this, and you will sing at your highest potential.

- Great singing is all about releasing tension. From your lowest note, to your highest peak, your vocal chords should be controlled and relaxed. "RELEASE THE TENSION" might be the most common phrase uttered in vocal studios around the world. Relax.

- Watch the documentary "Don't Stop Believin' - Everyman's Journey". It documents a young man who just got the lead singing job for the band, Journey. Although not the purpose of the, documentary, you can see his many methods of preparing and caring for his voice. It's really inspiring!

- Reading all this means nothing if you don't activate it. Consider actually taking a vocal lesson to get a "hands-on," "ears-on" approach.

My name is Mike O'Brien and I am passionate about teaching and mentoring through music. I use my experience as producer, worship leader, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist to come alongside musicians to help them more fully worship God with their instrument and lives. This teaching is part of my Worship Team Training I do at churches all around the country. Check out more at themikeo.com or email me