The Ultimate Vocalist by Sheri Gould

The Ultimate Vocalist

I have decided to put together a short list of what I consider to be some of the most important aspects of being a great vocalist. I have put them into a simple list of 5 words starting with "P". These are simplified steps to becoming a great vocalist even without a lot of training. They are easy steps you can do on your own— even without the help of a coach (although the help of a coach is always better). They are each distinct and yet all connected to each other. If there is even one of these aspects that we don't get right, the whole "ship" can go down, so make sure you have a good grasp of these basics. Here's the list:

Prepare

Being prepared means being vocally and musically prepared. It's imperative to prepare your body, mind and spirit. Many an opportunity has been lost simply due to lack of preparation.

Vocally: warming up is essential for the vocal mechanism to work at its best and to avoid unnecessary stress/damage to the cords. NEVER sing without warming up. You will not only sound a lot better, but you'll save (and extend the life of) your cords.

But beyond simply warming up before your presentation, you need to be preparing your voice to sing whatever song(s) you've selected. Each song will present unique and different challenges so you may find the need to work on certain technical aspects of a song until you feel more confident. This often means breaking the song down into smaller sections and isolating the specific areas that need work. Oftentimes there are vocalises that are applicable for exactly the problem you're facing in your song. Having mastered a few of these key exercises can prepare you long ahead of time to be able to apply the technique right where and when you want to.

Musically: It's important to choose music that is well suited for you. This includes range, style and appropriateness for your event. Just because you really like a song, doesn't mean it's right for you to sing. (Having said that, there are times when a song can be adapted for you) Having the right song, in the right key with the right accompaniment is a very important component of being prepared.

Spiritually: Take time to pray about your upcoming event. Ask God to give you a clear vision of what He wants to do through you and you'll have a much better chance of accomplishing more than just a "performance". You can actually touch people's lives.

Practice

Practice may not make "perfect" but it will get us a lot closer. 😉 We need to get really comfortable with whatever we're singing if we're going to be able to present our song in a manner that reaches people. So we need to practice whatever song we're singing until we not only get it right, but it's like a second nature to us.

I like to quote my college vocal coach who once told me, "You can't even START to work on a song until its memorized, and NEVER sing a song in public that you haven't sung at least 100 times in private." He was on to something. Practicing well can truly help with so many things; including nerves. When you are confident that you know your song and that you can sing it effectively, you

will be much less nervous. When you are less nervous and more relaxed, you can help your audience to be more relaxed and be able to enjoy your song and respond t the message instead of your nervousness.

Position

Position your larynx properly. Many are the problems associated with high larynx singing. Make sure you learn how to relax the muscles in your throat and neck. When the larynx rides up, it creates tension and also squeezes up against the trachea making the area you have for air and tone flow in the throat—much smaller. The throat can be a great source of resonance leading right into the chest area, but not if the larynx rides high and cuts it off. When that happens, you are relegated to only being able to sing with a resonance from the jaw upward. Therefore you're much more likely to have a thinner resonance (upper head register) with a high larynx. Most of us prefer the richer sound of a lower register (chest) or would at least like to have the option of choosing between the two. When you constantly sing with a high larynx you have fewer options.

Additionally, keeping the larynx low not only eliminates tension, but it paves the way for extending your range because of it. So learning how to relax and master this technique will really help you in your quest to deliver your songs with the tone quality that you want.

Perceive

The mind is an amazing thing. Scientists tell us that we only use about 10% of our brain; I can only imagine what capabilities lie locked inside. I just know that I wish I could use what I have more effectively! When it comes to singing, there is much that we can do to get our mind working for us rather than against us.

Take stock of the many mental messages that play over and over again n your head with regard to your singing—or singing a particular song, or even a specific part of a song. Often the messages coming from within are not always helpful or encouraging. We need to take hold of these thoughts (…taking every thought captive) and make a decision about whether or not they are helping us accomplish our goals.

I want to just look at one common thought process and it's regarding pitch. Most of us think of pitch as something that goes "up" (or down). We tend to envision the pitches we sing in this way. As we do so, oftentimes we begin to react physically to what's going on mentally and we may tend to tense up. Perhaps we'll raise our eyebrows, or stand on our toes in an effort to "reach" the pitch. All of this goes against what we should be doing; which is relaxing.

I try to think about pitch as rolling put in front of me on a slight decline. That way when I picture the pitch, I'm actually "stepping down" in my mind to scoop up the pitch: I'm not reaching up for it. This has a significant effect on my whole body—but it's my mind that's controlling it.

There are so many aspects to this particular application that there is no way to cover it in a small section here. I do ask you to try and take an inventory of your personal thoughts with regard to your singing though and don't let them get the better of you—take control and you that fabulous brain of yours!

Present

Presenting your song is probably the most critical part of the whole process. Why? Because even if you have done everything else I've listed but fail to present your song well, it could be all for naught. On the other hand, even if some of the other things don't get handled as well as you might have liked, there are certain things you can do with your presentation to help smooth over some bumps.

The actual presentation of a song is really the culmination of all the other work you've done so far. Yet, in spite of the importance of all of those—none compare to the impact of this particular aspect. In actuality, if you could somehow get a hold of your presentation and do a great enough job with it, you could conceivably accomplish nearly all of your primary goals as a singer. I say this confidently because of the incredible number of singers out there who clearly have not worked on some of the finer points of singing and yet they touch us. They move us. Why? The answer is: their presentation.

The Goal

So what is your goal as a singer? You need to remember that everyone who comes to see/hear you sing is looking for an experience (even if they don't immediately realize it). Depending on the venue, the experience they're seeking will likely be slightly different. For example, if you're singing in a coffeehouse, people may be looking for one type of experience. If they're coming to see you at a large outdoor concert, then it could be a slightly different type of experience they're looking for. If they're coming to see you in a church…you get the idea. Yet even though these experiences are different to a degree, they're likely to be very similar in that it's an emotional response most of us crave when it comes to music, especially singing.

Unlike other types of music, singing can direct your thoughts more pointedly. All types of music are capable of moving you and creating a response, but with vocal music we can communicate more specifically. Because we have the advantage of language in our music, we can communicate very specific concepts. These concepts are designed to touch people and reach them where they live. Those are the types of experiences that people enjoy and remember. So we need to make sure that our primary goal as a singer is to be a servant. A servant that serves up a message that can touch, effect and even change our audience.

What It's Not

Many singers, intuitively recognizing the goal as stated above, can get confused as to how to get there. I often see performers mistakenly thinking that THEIR emotional response to the message or the song itself is what will move their audience. There is a big difference between a displaying of your own emotions versus an evoking of emotion in your audience. Make sure you understand the difference. Try to remember this: the audience is not so interested in how **you** feel, but you make **them** feel. Lots of outward emotional responses and overused hand motions simply become distractions for the audience and prohibit them from getting in touch with the message themselves.

Along this line it's important to remember that when you are nervous or uncomfortable in any way, this will also greatly affect your audience. They will naturally respond to your needs and find themselves concerned for you rather than simply responding to the song. This is because your message has changed, it's no longer rooted in the song you're singing or its message, but instead the message has become all about you and your emotional state.