What is a Vocalise? By Sheri Gould

What is a vocalise {voh-k*uh*-**leez**}? More commonly referred to in most church circles as a warm-up exercise, a vocalise is a vocal exercise. Usually without words, a vocalise is made up of vowels sung on various tones and using various rhythms. There are some vocalises that make use of consonants for specific reasons, but generally vowels are sung when warming up and learning new vocal skills. The singing of a vocalise is called vocalization.

Function of a Vocalise

The function of a vocalise can go well beyond simply 'warming-up' the vocal mechanism. Typically there is a specific purpose for each vocal exercise. It's important to be aware of what the purpose is when you are using an exercise for yourself, your worship team or your choir. Otherwise, you can find yourself slipping rather mindlessly into useless repetitions—it's easy to do this- especially in a group setting. If you are studying voice privately, be sure to get a clear vision of the purpose for each and every vocalise or warm-up exercise that you are given to do. Then with each repetition you have something that you're working toward. For example, I use a particular exercise with my students when I'm trying to get them to understand and/or feel the different places of resonance they can experience. I like to use a particular exercise when I'm trying to get a proper vowel shape. I use another exercise to help them find their diaphragm and learn to manipulate it. Each exercise is specifically designed to help learn those functions.

A problem can arise if the student doesn't really understand the intended use of the vocalise. Or, if he/she understands the 'why' but not exactly the 'how'. In cases such as these, the student may end up actually reinforcing BAD habits rather than learning the new GOOD habit I'm trying to teach. This is one reason it's very important to not only understand the exercise and it's intended purpose, but also to get feedback confirming that you are doing it correctly. This is the one drawback to books, DVDs, CDs etc. They can be great learning tools of course, but they lack the obvious element of feedback.

A Vocal Check-Up!

If you cannot afford to take private vocal lessons regularly or simply haven't been able to find a teacher you work well with, it would probably be worth it to at least *periodically* get a vocal check-up from a professional. I typically recommend looking to your local college or University for qualified teachers. Most teachers will teach privately outside of their school teaching schedule. Generally speaking I recommend avoiding music stores that give voice lessons. The teachers there are usually not qualified vocal teachers but rather some other type of musician or 'jack-of-all-trades' musician. The kind that teach piano, guitar, trumpet, etc.. It will be better for you if you can find someone who has studied voice *specifically* and even better one who has studied how to *teach* voice. (I know, I've sung this song before-but it's worth repeating!)

A check-up with a vocal coach can assure you that you are doing your exercises correctly and give you pointers on anything that you aren't doing correctly. In addition they can call attention to any areas that you may need to focus on as you are studying on your own. As always, use a mirror whenever you vocalize for immediate, constant feedback.

Is There Such a Thing as 'Just' a Warm-Up Exercise?

There are some vocal exercises that are specifically designed to help your voice warm-up. These are great to do anytime, obviously just before you sing! These are exercises that aren't working on any particular vocal technique, but rather warming and

gently stretching the vocal cords preparing them for a more rigorous work-out through singing. A great example of this might be simply humming a five note scale. A great exercise to do early in the morning first, before you move onto to other exercises.

I would still caution you to 'think' about what you're doing when you warm-up. Warm-up is such an important component of proper vocal technique and care that it must be given the right attention to be done well. That another reason to be sure and have a routine that includes vocalises that are more difficult for you to master as well as ones that are on the easy side to learn. Mix it up when you do a vocal work-out so you don't get complacent.

What Should I Look For in a Vocalise?

It's important to look for vocalises that challenge you. Again, if it's too easy for you, you might become lazy when approaching it. So look for vocalises that address specific vocal needs you have. This is where a qualified teacher would be helpful, but there are also other useful resources. Chris and Carol Beatty are very qualified vocal instructors and have lots of different options to choose from on their website atwww.vocalcoach.com . Steve Bowersox is a lot of fun and also extremely qualified and has lots of great stuff too. You can search his site at www.bowersox.net . These are two vocal coach resources that I can recommend without reservation. They teach sound, practical vocal technique.

Start by identifying the issues with your voice that specifically bother YOU. You may be frustrated with your range, breath control, tone quality or your ability to have a seamless voice from the top of your range to the bottom. All of these things can be dealt with through the proper use of vocalises.

Singing well requires an investment of time and work. Anyone or any system that tells you otherwise is simply 'hype'. As is true with so many things, the work will produce the fruit you're looking for…*in time*. Real progress rarely happens overnight and when it does it's usually the result of a lot of work, work with apparently 'no result' and then-BAM! It happens "all at once". It'll be worth the work in the final analysis, especially when you consider Who it's all for.