

Cantors

Weekend Warriors of Song

BY DAN MORRIS

WE'VE PROBABLY ALL HEARD OF MEDICAL STUDIES AND STATISTICS IN THE NEWS REGARDING THE PLIGHT OF THE so-called weekend warriors, these would-be Mark McGuires, Steve Youngs, and Michael Jordans who

to wind up in the ER, you could have one of those unintended vocal pauses. If that happens during an antiphonal piece, you're in deep trouble. So there are some things we should all do in preparation. Being

on the weekend. Add to that the fact that most of us (even professional musicians) spend the majority of the week running around doing things not related to music or not singing at all. So the most important thing is to keep working at it each day—if only for a few minutes, use your singing voice. Make sure the practice is good, however, because bad practice is worse than no practice. As with athletes, when you repeat a physical process with great frequency, you develop pathways in the brain along with conditioning the muscles used. Keep in mind that the vocal chords (or vocal folds to be more accurate) are not muscles to be built by weight lifting. My first rule for any voice student is "If it hurts, don't do it." Also as with athletes, the more often you use the muscles in question, the quicker you can get them going. The more often you sing, the faster your voice will respond to your warm-up exercises.

Maybe the worst thing about being a cantor is that you have to sing in the morning, on the weekend.

grace local emergency rooms having blown out their whatchamacallit on the field of battle. Often, singers are compared to athletes in terms of the type of training and practice required, as well as the fact that the body is the instrument used in either endeavor. The question to those out there in the ranks of the cantor/song leader vein is, Are you a "weekend warrior" of song?

Now, while you're not going

ready can be broken down into four key areas.

1. Be vocally active during the week.
2. Be musically prepared.
3. Be vocally warmed up.
4. Be physically warmed up.

Maybe the worst part of being a cantor is that you have to sing in the morning,



On all of these exercises *i* = *ee*, *a* = *ah* as in first syllable of *octave*, not *aw*, *o* is open as in Italian, similar to *off*; *u* is a long *oo* as in *moon*, *e* = long *a* as in *bay*.

Go up by half steps, on both patterns; then down, taking it easy.



On this exercise, do all the vowels on each pitch.



Again, on this exercise do each syllable on each pitch. The comma indicates a breath.



figure 1

Of course, we all have prepared and studied the music ahead of time. There is more to this than purely musical consideration. Sight-reading is not conducive to good vocal technique. In effect it is serving two masters. You may get by, but the result on both counts may be less than desirable. So don't neglect musical preparation. I often remind my choir that they can open their folders at home too! Have your music organized, so you're not fumbling (no football pun intended) in front of the assembly. Rehearse with the accompanist. If a full rehearsal is not possible, at least check the tough spots, interludes, how many verses, etc. Pastors take note that pay to professionals needs to cover rehearsal time as well.

Assuming now that you are musically prepared and vocally practiced, how do you get ready for Sunday morning? First, get up early. The vocal folds retain blood the way the area under your eyes does, so if your eyes are still puffy, guess what? Times will vary for different people. I like to be up three to four hours before singing (but no, I don't get up at 5:00 for an 8:00 am mass). Try to use your morning activity to help. I've never heard of a shower with bad

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WHERE'S GOD IN ALL OF THIS

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way, Are we worshipping God or are we worshipping the concept of meaningful community? Are we doing for effect or are we doing for praise (of God, that is)? Is community participation in and of itself the goal (e.g., choose songs the assembly members like and they'll sing better), or is giving glory and praise to God the goal? Are we letting the voice of God speak freely to us, or are we merely letting it through in

small doses, interspersed with a lot of talk by us, about us?

I challenge us to ask about each and every spoken and sung word considered for inclusion in Sunday worship: What do these words mean? Do we really want to place these words on the lips of this assembly on this occasion?

I challenge us to keep a lid on our egos. Is there a little hidden voice deep inside of us who minister to the

larger assembly that says, They're going to love the way I sing (or play) this one, or Wait till they hear this homily, or They're going to love the way I look in this suit/dress/chasuble, or I wonder how many people will compliment my voice this week, or I'm really pretty good at this, they love me! ♦

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acoustics, and the humidity is soothing as well as helpful in breaking up the morning fog. What we really need is to get our resonators working. Given the opportunity, I try to get a few notes out at the piano before leaving. This is a good time to review the psalm for the day (the brain needs warming up too). It also helps you get in touch with the mood for the liturgy.

On the way to church, if you're not driving with family, start vocalizing with something gentle. If you car pool, find a vacant crying room, furnace closet, or what have you (we even have an old vault).

There is no sense in doing "high impact" exercise. To return to the athlete model, a good athlete begins with easy stretches and moderate exercises. Humming in the lower middle register can be a good beginning. Sopranos and tenors should start in a comfortable place, maybe more in the middle of their range. Spend a couple of minutes humming (easily done while driving) and vocalizing some nice, long, neutral syllables.

The musical examples in figure 1 show some simple exercises. Most singers have their own, but I stress

simplicity so you can concentrate on technique. Start with half-scale vocalises, keeping the breath in mind. I like to use descending scales, like the ones in the first example. It feels more relaxing. Also try to employ all of the vowels, since different people have their own worst vowels. Warm-ups for a performance are not the time to try and work out vocal problems, only to get things working their best.

Finally, if you want, work into full-octave scales and arpeggios, or try a song or two. Remember that you are not preparing to sing Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Most congregational hymns are confined to a one-octave range, from C to shining C, so to speak. Don't stress out if your high R above Q is still rusty. You may do more harm than good. Push your range during the week if you wish. Make sure your middle voice is working first. Everything else is gravy.

It can also be easy to get tense from all that is going on around you, especially on high feasts and at major events. Having some relaxation techniques in your arsenal is important. First of all, sometimes you need to be alone for a moment.

My time is usually after everyone else has departed for the procession. If your parish is like most, Mass can't begin without you, so take a moment (and maybe a few relaxed breaths) to get centered.

There are, of course, other techniques you may be aware of. One example is to find a quiet corner and start relaxing by feeling imaginary weight, starting with your toes and working up to your head. The best thing is you can do this in plain view of everyone. Some cantors may need the opposite, like a few jumping jacks to get the blood flowing before an 8:00 AM mass. Just remember, if your body isn't limber, neither is your voice. Also do some facial exercises to get your tongue and lips activated.

Taking care of the "nuts and bolts" of singing can not only help us avoid a musical equivalent of a sprained ankle, but also allows us to participate more fully in the liturgy, since we're not worried about the next note coming out. ♦

Dan Morris is the music director and principle cantor at St. Joseph of Cupertino in Cupertino, California, and is currently working on a Masters of Pastoral Liturgy at Santa Clara University.