

Chapter 1

Warming Up for Singing

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining a warm-up routine
- ▶ Stretching and balancing the lower and upper body for singing
- ▶ Warming up the body and voice with a sample warm-up

The sequence of every practice session you do as a singer includes a warm-up (both physical and vocal), your vocal exercises, and then the application of the skills you work on during your vocal exercises to your songs. Warming up the body before you warm up the voice helps get the muscles flexible so your warm-up takes less time. If you warm up your body first, that early morning practice session becomes much more productive because you can get to your vocal exercises more quickly.

In this chapter, you explore the steps of a warm-up for singers. You find out how to warm up your body, stretch your muscles, and maintain good balance by releasing tension. Each section has you warm up a different part of the body with one or more stretches and balance exercises. Then at the end of the chapter, I give you a vocal warm-up that both prepares your voice and lets you take stock of your body.

After your vocal warm-up, you're ready to start working on the practice exercises in this book that help you develop technique. You can look through the table of contents to find a topic that interests you and dive right in, or you can move on to Chapter 2 to work on breath control and then explore the rest of the chapters in order. You may want to take a quick look at Chapter 15, which can help you set up productive practices, before you start exploring other chapters.

Preparing Your Instrument: Stretching Out from Head to Toe

Warming up and stretching your body before a vocal warm-up helps you feel like your body is flexible and open from head to toe. Feeling *open* means that you feel as if you have a lot of space inside your body that you can open for sound to resonate. Although your body is full of muscles, organs, and tissues, the stretching and releasing of tension that you do during your physical warm-up can make you feel like you're creating an open area between the organs.



Remember whatever physical sensation you feel after you stretch so that you can create that same opening every time you start your warm-up. After you get your body warm, you want to maintain the feeling of flexible movement throughout your practice session.

Don't feel like you have to follow every part of this chapter word for word during your warm-up. You know your body better than anyone, so use the information I present here as a guide

for structuring the warm-up that best suits you. For example, you can use your yoga routine or your cardio workout at the gym to get your body warm and your blood pumping. Even your power walk around the neighborhood can get your body quickly warmed up and ready to stretch. Then you can use the stretching sequence in this chapter to help you stretch just the right muscles to get flexible for singing.



Make notes of any stretches in the chapter that may be more than your body can handle. Here are some ways to modify the stretches to work for your body:

- ✓ If standing for long periods of time isn't comfortable for you, feel free to modify the stretches and do them seated in a chair. Practicing your singing in a chair can help you really focus on the movement and not worry about holding up your whole body.
- ✓ Lower-back problems or balance problems may prevent you from comfortably leaning over or stretching. When an exercise calls for stretching, feel free to alter the movement to get the stretch that feels good for your body. Start with a limited amount of movement and gradually add more as you explore what's comfortable and safe for your body.

Opening and Positioning the Lower Body

To create the most efficient movement in your body for singing, you need to line up all the parts of your body and evenly distribute your weight, starting at your feet and moving all the way up to your head. When you do so, no one muscle has to work harder than necessary for singing. As you work through the lower-body stretches and balance exercises in the following sections, notice how the stretch affects the weight distribution throughout your body. It's easy to forget all about your legs and feet when you sing since they're so far away from your mouth. However, taking the time to balance your weight on your legs and feet gets you better prepared for singing by increasing flexibility in your torso.



If you're getting ready to sing in a performance, do your practice sessions in the shoes you plan to wear at the performance. Guys, even the slight heel on your dress shoes may change your alignment. Ladies, wearing high heels changes your balance quite a bit. Hence, I don't recommend wearing stilettos for any performance because they offer such little support on the tiny heels. Choose heels that are more solid for better support and remember that you need to keep your feet flexible inside your shoes. If your feet lock, you may lock muscles all the way up your back.

Connecting your feet to the floor

Three points on the bottom of each foot help you balance your weight to keep the muscles throughout your body flexible. You need to know where these three points are so you can balance when you practice singing and stay balanced when you perform on the stage.

Stretch

While standing or sitting, lift your toes up and then curl your toes down to stretch the muscles in your feet and toes.

Balance

To balance the right way on your feet, you need to distribute your weight evenly on three points of the feet: the heel, the point under the little toe, and the point under the big toe. To help you find the right points, take a few minutes to work through the following steps, which can help you identify the right (and wrong) sensations to feel when balancing on your feet

for singing. I recommend that you do this sequence without shoes so you can really feel the connection between your feet and the floor.

1. Rock slightly forward so that you're balancing your weight on the balls of your feet.

As you lean forward, you should feel a tightening sensation along the back of your body. You don't want to feel this sensation when singing.

2. Lean back so that you're balancing more on the heels of your feet.

Leaning back creates tension in the front of the body. You don't want to feel this tension when singing.

3. Lean on the outsides of your feet (from the heels to the little toes).

As you lean on the outside of each foot, notice that you feel most of the weight in your heel at the back of the foot and at a point underneath your little toe. Leaning on the outsides of your feet tightens the muscles along the outsides of your legs.

4. Lean on the insides of your feet (from the heels to the big toes).

As you lean on the inside of each foot, you should feel most of the weight in your heel at the back of the foot and at a large point under your big toe. Leaning on the insides of your feet tightens the muscles on the insides of your legs.

The points you identified in Steps 3 and 4 (the heel and the points under the big and little toes) are the points you want to balance on when singing. You can roll your feet around on the floor to feel these three points even more distinctly. Just follow these steps:

1. With both feet flat on the floor, gently press each heel to the floor.

2. Roll to the point under your little toe and press that point to the floor.

3. Roll to the point under your big toe and press that point to the floor.

Rolling through these three points helps you figure out where the middle of your foot is and how you need to situate your feet to make sure you're spreading out the balance equally. Work through these three steps several times until you can feel the sense of balance. After you know what that balance feels like, you can roll through the three points at the beginning of each warm-up just to remind yourself to balance on the three points.



Balancing equally on the three points of the foot is a lot like using a tripod for a camera. Forming a tripod helps you feel grounded or connected to the floor. To make sure you're making a solid tripod, lift your toes while you're standing with the rest of your feet flat on the floor. You're more aware of the three points of your feet when your toes are lifted. Keep in mind that the toes are there to help you balance, but they shouldn't be tight. After you feel the points, find the same sensation of balance with your toes released.

To release any tension in the feet and reconnect with the floor, take a breath and release into your feet. Imagine that you have a mouth on the bottom of each foot that opens when you inhale; that's what the release into your feet should feel like. It also feels as if the feet were spreading out and then reconnecting with the floor.

Balancing on the ankles and knees

The ankles and knees are pretty far away from the mouth, but how you balance at both of these places helps you keep muscles flexible in your torso. Use the visuals I mention in the following sections to help you explore and remember the sensations you should feel when positioning your ankles and knees.

Stretch

To stretch the ankles, sit in a chair with one foot lifted off the floor. Draw an imaginary circle with your toes and gradually allow the circle to grow larger and then smaller. Reverse the direction of the circle. Repeat with the other foot.

To stretch the knees, bend your knees to warm up the joints. Bend them in a way that's comfortable for you. Don't worry if you can bend your knees only slightly. As long as you bend or move them enough to warm up the joints, you're good to go. Another way to warm up your knees is to sit in a chair and move your feet to touch underneath the chair and stretch the muscles around the knees.

Balance

To position your ankles for maximum balance, stand or sit in a chair with your feet well balanced on the floor. Your heels are behind your ankles, and each ankle should feel like a camera on a tripod, the tripod being the three points on the bottom of the foot (the heel, the point under the big toe, and the point under the little toe).

Balancing the knees requires that you keep your knees straight but not locked. Bending your knees makes you shorter, and locking your knees tenses up the muscles around the knees. To feel the locking sensation, push your knees back. Now release the muscles in your thighs and feel your knees move forward just enough to release but not bend. That's where you want to be when singing.



To make sure you're getting the right balance of weight in your knees, imagine that your knees are lengthening or opening. This lengthening sensation is the opposite of what it feels like to sink into the knees or feel heavy in the knees.

Distributing weight in the legs and hips

Singers often forget about their legs when they sing. But you need to focus on both your legs and your hips during your stretching and warm-up to remind yourself to keep your hips balanced and your legs flexible. **Note:** Women often sink into their hips because their hips are wider than their shoulders. But when they sink into their hips, they end up slouching and allowing the chest to fall and the hips to push forward. If you have this problem, pay close attention to the following sections, which help you lift up out of your hips so that you can evenly balance weight throughout your torso.

Stretch

To stretch out your legs, lean on your left leg and stretch the right leg out to the side to stretch the inside of the leg. Do the same thing with the other leg. For a slightly different stretch, squat on one leg while keeping the other leg out to the side. The leg that's out to your side can be balancing on either the heel or the inside of the foot. You can try one stretch and then the other to feel which one helps you stretch the most.

While standing, make small circles with your hips. Pretend to hula hoop very slowly. As you continue the circles, allow the circles to grow larger. Reverse the direction of the circles and repeat. Then sit in a chair and rock your pelvis forward and backward several times. Finally, lift your left hip while keeping your right hip on the chair; then do the same thing with your right hip.

Balance

You need to distribute your weight evenly on both legs. You don't want to lean on just one leg because the opposite side of the body will tense from the unequal distribution, and that tension will affect your singing. Also, if you don't balance your hips and instead move your

buttocks forward, you'll feel the muscles along your sides tighten. Tightening along your sides tightens your ribs and affects your breathing.

To help you achieve the right balance in your legs and hips, inhale and visualize your legs opening from the hips all the way down into your feet. If that visual doesn't work for you, imagine that your legs and hips are a shock absorber or bed spring that lengthens on the inhalation. The lengthening helps you evenly distribute the weight in your legs and hips instead of pressing down through the legs and sinking into the hips. Just placing your awareness on your legs helps you release tension and lengthen.



How you position your feet affects the amount of balance you achieve in your legs. So be sure to stand with your feet parallel and about hip-width apart; doing so allows you to feel the muscles in your legs engaged but not tense. If you stand with your toes pointed out, you tense muscles on the outsides of your legs. Likewise, if you stand with your toes pointed in, you tense muscles on the insides of your legs.



If you know one of your legs is longer than the other, try standing with the longer leg slightly in front of the shorter leg. You may find that this position helps you balance your weight more evenly because the legs feel like they're the same length.

Positioning the Upper Body for Easy Movement

How you position the parts of your upper body matters a lot when you're singing. Holding your arms tightly at your sides directly affects your back alignment and your ability to breathe successfully during your song. How you balance your head affects the muscles in your neck that you use for singing. This section helps you stretch and position the torso and upper limbs. As you work on balancing your upper body, make sure you stay connected to your legs and feet to achieve better alignment throughout your entire body.

Lengthening your spine

The spine is made up of 33 vertebrae, which divide up into sections of the spine: 7 vertebrae in the cervical spine (neck), 12 in the thoracic area (the chest), 5 in the lumbar area (lower back), 5 that are fused together in the sacrum (pelvis), and 4 in the tailbone. The discs between the vertebrae are like cushions that keep the vertebrae from rubbing against each other. With this many vertebrae, several muscle groups function together to move the spine. You need to stretch all the muscles that move the spine before you sing because the ribs are attached to the spine and you want the ribs and the spine to be flexible so you can develop good breath coordination for singing.

Stretch

Stand upright or sit upright in a chair. Raise your arms over your head and reach high to the sky with your right hand; then reach high with your left hand. On each side, feel the stretch all through your back and ribs and down into your hips.

Now lean to the right and lift the left arm over your head. Stretch as far as you comfortably can to the right to stretch the ribs on your left side. Inhale and then stretch a little bit farther as you exhale. Repeat the same leaning stretch on the left side.

While standing or sitting, lean back enough to feel a stretch in your abdomen. **Note:** If you have back problems, you may be more comfortable rocking your pelvis forward to stretch the abs.

Balance

Your spine curves naturally at your lower back and in your neck. You want to maintain this natural curve as you sing because it helps you stay balanced. On the inhalation, visualize your spine lengthening and the discs between the vertebrae expanding. Feel your head move toward the ceiling and your tailbone move toward the floor on the inhalation. You should experience a feeling of buoyancy, not pressing down.

Releasing the shoulders

Stretching the muscles around the shoulders helps you feel the right position of the shoulders, as well as the relationship between the shoulders and the arms. Your shoulders sit on top of your rib cage with the collarbone, or *clavicle*, connecting the shoulders to the arms. Feel along the collarbone from your neck out to your shoulder. At the end of the collarbone, you can feel the top portion of the shoulder blade as well as the edge of the bone of the arm. Knowing how to position your shoulders and arms helps you keep all the muscles that you need for singing flexible and ready to move.

Stretch

While standing, raise your right arm over your head so that your fingers point toward the ceiling. Then make forward circles to the side of your body; your arm points to the ceiling, then in front of you, then down to the floor, then straight behind you, and finally, back to the ceiling. Then reverse the direction of the circles. When you get the hang of making the circles with one arm, try making the same circles with your other arm at the same time, only make the circles in the opposite direction. Twist your torso to correspond with the movement of both arms circling at the same time in opposite directions. If swinging the arms in opposite directions is too complicated, start by moving one arm at a time and then try moving both arms in the same direction and then in opposite directions.

Lift your right arm and place it across your chest with your left hand at your right elbow. Use your left hand to gently grasp your right elbow and bring it closer to your body. Take a breath; as you exhale, bring your right arm closer to your body to stretch the right shoulder. Repeat this stretch with your left arm across your chest.

Place both arms behind you and grasp your hands. After connecting your hands, lift your hands higher to stretch your shoulders. Reach only as far as you can comfortably go. If you can't comfortably stretch both arms behind you, stand in a doorway with both arms out to your sides. Allow your arms to touch the walls on the side of the doorway as your body moves a little farther through the doorway. Take one step forward to see what stretching your shoulders feels like. If you can take one step comfortably, take one more step for a little more stretch of the muscles. Just be mindful of what your body can handle; you don't want to force the muscles to stretch too far.

Balance

To find just the right position of balance for the shoulders, move your shoulders up and then drop them down. Press them down and then release them. Doing so can help you figure out how far up or down your resting position needs to be (it should be in the middle). Move your shoulders forward and then release them. Then move your shoulders back and release them. Doing so can help you determine how far forward or back your resting position needs to be. Note that it shouldn't be fully forward or back; it should be in between.

Why is finding a balanced resting position for your shoulders so important when singing? It's all about the breath. With each inhalation, the shoulder blades release down and out. If your shoulders hunch or round forward, your chest is partly collapsed, making the release and

opening of the torso for the breath more difficult. If your shoulders thrust back too far, you can feel the muscles around the shoulder blades tighten. Roll your shoulders forward and then back to find the center; that's where you want to be when you sing.

Balancing the head and neck

The balancing of your head directly affects the muscles in your neck, and because the main vocal muscles you use when singing are in your neck, you need to take some time in every warm-up to stretch and balance your head. Your head is designed to balance on the end of your spine. The specific shape at the end of the spine allows the head to balance perfectly so that it can move in any direction. Stretch your neck muscles to release them and then explore what balancing the head feels like. Also, take some time to stretch the tongue and jaw so that they're ready to sing when you are.

Stretch

While standing or sitting, drop your head toward your chest. Take a breath; as you exhale, drop your head a little farther toward your chest. Move your head slightly to the left to stretch the muscles in your neck at an angle. Take another breath; as you exhale, drop your head a little more to the left. Move your head slightly to the right of center. Take a breath; as you exhale, drop your head a little farther to the right.

Lift your head and look left as if you were looking over your left shoulder. Turn your head slowly so that you don't stretch the muscles too quickly. Take a breath; as you exhale, turn your head to look over your right shoulder. These stretches are great because they increase the flexibility of your neck muscles and warm them up so they're ready to help balance your head, which weighs about the same as a bowling ball. No wonder you need your neck muscles to be strong and flexible!

To stretch your tongue, stick your tongue forward and out of your mouth. Feel the stretch from the tip of the tongue all the way to the back of the tongue, which curves down your throat. If your tongue won't stick out of your mouth, then place the tip of your tongue against your bottom front teeth and roll the tongue forward. To stretch the jaw, close your mouth and open your jaw by opening your back teeth. You want your jaw to drop by opening the space by your ear, not by pushing down your chin. Opening the space by the ear helps keep the space in the back of the mouth and throat open. Find out more about dropping the jaw in Chapter 12.

Balance

Move your head forward in front of your body and then back behind your body. Where you want to balance your head is right in between too far forward and too far back. After you get your head in the right forward/back position, focus on balancing it on the curve of your cervical spine without letting it press down into your neck. Your head should feel buoyant as if it were made of helium; it shouldn't feel like it's pressing down into your neck and shoulders.

Managing the arms and hands

When you sing, your arms probably hang down at your sides most of the time and then gesture when you want to emphasize something important. As you warm up, you want to eliminate any tension you feel in your arms and hands so the tension can't spread to your back or any other area in your body.

Stretch

Stretch your right arm out to your side and point your fingers to your right. Draw circles in the air as if you were drawing circles on the wall on your right side. Switch to the other hand and repeat the stretch. When you're comfortable making circles, try drawing figure eights in the air with your right hand. Allow the whole hand to move to make large figure eights in the air instead of just drawing small figure eights by pointing your fingers. Draw the figure eights with the opposite hand.

Balance

While standing or sitting, allow your arms to hang at your sides. Notice the effect this position has on the muscles in your arms and hands. You should feel a sensation of suspension, not one of pressing down or feeling heavy.

Because you may want to gesture during your songs, you need to be aware of how you move your arms and hands as you sing. If you move your arms out to your sides, you have to engage the muscles in your back, which is okay as long as you don't tighten or grip the back muscles in the process.



At no point when you're singing should you tighten the muscles in your back or anywhere else in your torso; if you do, you'll impair your ability to breathe smoothly and deeply.

Intentionally tighten the muscles at your elbows. As you tighten these muscles, notice that you also tighten the muscles across your back. As you release the elbow muscles, you release the tension in your back. Although you may not think the elbows are connected to the back, any tension in your elbows affects your ability to release the back and ribs for breathing.

Intentionally tighten the muscles in your hands. As you tighten these muscles, notice that you tighten all the way up your arms and into your lower back. Release this tension and notice the open sensation you feel in your torso. That's the open feeling you want when singing.



When you gesture during a song, be sure to notice how you shape your hand during the gesture. Tightening the muscles in the hands as you sustain a gesture can cause you to tighten across your back. Feel free to move your hands as you sing, but focus on keeping the muscles flexible rather than squeezing or locking them.

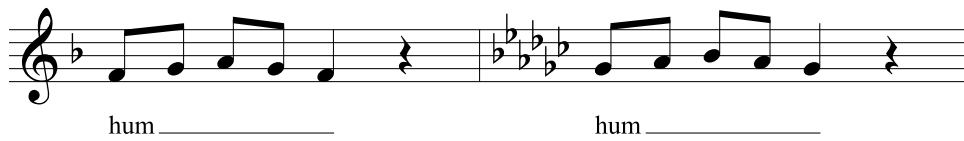
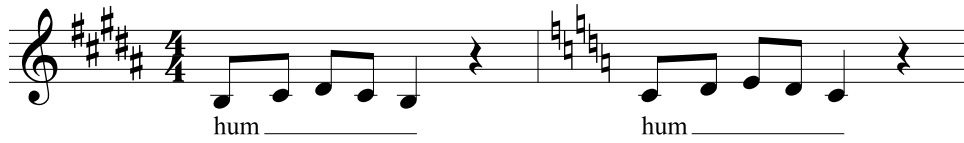
Putting It All Together with a Vocal Warm-Up

After your body is warm, you're ready to warm up your voice. The exercise in this section, featured on Track 1, allows you the chance to sing a short phrase that gradually moves up the scale. It doesn't go very high, but it goes high enough to get the voice going before you go back down the scale. I use this sequence every time I warm up.

Notice that the pattern in this exercise includes the word *hum*; this word indicates that you should hum the pattern rather than sing it. Humming sounds like you're sustaining the sound of an *M* consonant. Humming is a great way to gently warm up the voice.

As you sing through this exercise, use the following steps to help coordinate your awareness of how you're using your body. In the beginning, you may need several tries to get each step just right. Play the track as many times as you need to and take your time getting through each step.

TRACK 1



1. As you take a breath before the first measure, open all the way down into your feet.

As you inhale, check in with your feet to make sure you feel a balanced connection between them and the floor. Visualize a mouth on the bottom of your foot and pretend that you need to open your feet to take in air. This visual helps you remember to maintain flexibility and movement in your feet as you sing. **What not to do:** Don't grip your feet on the floor or tighten your toes. Tightening your toes tightens the muscles along the back of your body.

2. Open the space around your ankles.

Pretend each ankle contains a shock absorber that springs up and opens as you inhale. **What not to do:** Don't sink into your ankles, or you'll feel like your body is really heavy.

3. Open the space around your knees.

On the next inhale, breathe into your knees. Feel an opening around the knees and balance the weight evenly throughout the body. The bones in your knees should feel oily and glide easily. **What not to do:** Don't sink into your knees. If you sink into your knees, the weight of your body will be supported only by your legs and knees, and you'll feel much heavier.

4. Open the space around your hips.

Feel the muscles around your hips expand and open with the inhale. If the muscles in your pelvis are tight, you'll most likely feel tension up your back and through your legs; you can do a few pretend hula hoops or sit in a chair and lean forward to stretch the muscles in your hips. **What not to do:** Don't sink into your hips. If you sink into your hips, you'll feel more pressure and tension in your hips; plus, you'll look like you're slumping.

5. Open your spine.

Feel the sensation of lengthening the spine on the inhale. You want the discs in between the vertebrae to expand and open, not press down. **What not to do:** Don't push up to force the spine to stretch, but don't allow your posture to slump either. Both positions cause your muscles to tighten to hold you up.

6. Open your neck and head.

On the next inhale, pretend that your throat is expanding in all directions to open. This expansion feels as though your neck is lifting and opening on the inhale. As your neck opens, you should feel a release of the muscles in your head. **What not to do:** Don't let your head be heavy. Notice any pressure you feel in your neck and eliminate it by opening the neck more. Also don't let the muscles in your head tighten; if they do, the inside of your throat will also tighten.

7. Open your eyes.

You want the eyes and all the muscles around the eyes to release and open as you inhale. On the next inhale, open your eyes as if your eyes were mouths and you had to take in air through your eyes. When the space around the eyes releases and opens, you should also feel a releasing sensation in your throat because all those muscles are connected. **What not to do:** Don't squint. Squinting tightens the muscles throughout the head.

8. Open your jaw.

On the inhale, allow your jaw to drop and release. You want your jaw to be very flexible so that it can move freely when you sing. **What not to do:** Don't press the jaw tightly. This tight sensation creates a very tight tone.

9. Release your elbows.

On the inhale, allow your elbows to release and notice that the muscles around the torso move more freely when you eliminate any tension in your elbows. **What not to do:** Don't tighten your elbows as you inhale or at any time when you sing. Tension in the elbows causes tension throughout the torso, which affects your breathing.

10. Release your hands.

On the inhale, allow your hands to release and notice that your tension-free hands help you maintain tension-free arms. If you want to gesture or point for emphasis as you sing, feel free to do so. Just don't tighten your hands in the process. **What not to do:** Don't tighten your hands at any time as you sing.

11. On the inhale, release from the toes all the way up to the skull.

Notice that you can open the body and keep it free from tension by keeping it in motion (which you do simply by breathing in and out while singing) so that no muscle group has a chance to tighten or hold.