

# Handling your nerves

It is important to remember that feeling nervous is natural and is indeed essential to being able to perform a song. The aim of this advice is not to eliminate nerves, but to understand and use them. This will enable you to communicate your song more effectively, and ensure that nerves do not get in the way. I gratefully acknowledge the help given to me on this subject from Frankie Armstrong and Chris Coe. Some of the ideas here come from them.

## Why do we get nervous?

The symptoms of nerves appear because our 'emotional motor system' (see 'Some reasons why songs are emotionally powerful') responds to a perceived threat. We feel fear, so our bodies get ready to fight the attacker or to run away. This was a very important response during human evolution, and is still a vital survival response. I am sure we all acknowledge that singing with emotional connectedness in front of other people makes us feel very vulnerable. This is what makes singing wonderful, but can also make it rather frightening.

## What can the effects of nerves be?

Each person will have their own symptoms of nerves – we all experience them differently. Here are just some of them.

Not only trembling hands, arms, knees, voice &c. / dry mouth / disrupted breathing / muscle tension / overfilling the lungs / shallow breaths / needing to pee / feeling sick / butterflies in stomach / disorientation / memory loss / increased heart beat / flushed skin / sweating / &c. &c.

But also heightened awareness / more alert / more responsive / more engaged.

## What can we do about handling our nerves?

Here is a list of some things that might help. There are many good reasons why these things work, but I cannot give all the details here.

I have divided the list into two sections. In section 1 are the things we should all do to prepare to sing. In section 2 are approaches that have been helpful to some people, not all of which will be relevant to you.

### Section 1

- Remember that your focus is on the song, not on yourself.
- Practise thoroughly. Be sure you have memorised the melody and words (see 'Memorising songs' for some helpful hints on this subject). Get the song into your 'muscle memory' as well as into your brain memory.
- Prepare yourself to sing. Make sure you have drunk sufficient water a few hours before you perform. Get enough sleep. Have a good diet. Keep fit and healthy. Not too much alcohol – it makes us dehydrated, forgetful and unable to monitor our performance.
- Don't try to inhibit nerves by force or 'push them down'. Use them to aid dynamism.

### Section 2

- Make friends with your nerves! Get to know them i.e. exactly how you are nervous. If, for example, you know your knees tremble, then before you get up, have an imaginary conversation with your shaking knees e.g. 'Hello, knees. I bet you are going to shake now. Well, go ahead. I don't mind &c.' A bit whacky, but I have tried it and it seems to work.
- When you know what you do when nervous, set about really exaggerating that movement very energetically. This has two important effects. 1. You make the movement under your voluntary control. 2. The muscles involved get tired and can't be bothered to move in that way when you perform. You may need to plan this approach carefully e.g. a visit to the loo

in order to shake your knees, or disrupt your breathing, or do whatever you do. I have found that if I use this approach in my practice and warm up, then those nerves do not creep up and surprise me when I perform.

- It can help to disrupt our normal patterns of movement e.g. walk around on your heels. This makes our bodies feel less controlled (as happens with nerves) but we are still in full control.
- Use up some physical energy a couple of hours before performing – walk, exercise, garden.
- Exaggerate the tension that can settle in parts of our bodies e.g. if your throat gets tight, increase the tension (though never too much – no pain!) and hold it a short while. Then let it go and feel the tension flowing out.
- You can unobtrusively massage your face and hands, giving yourself valuable sensory feedback.
- Give yourself a short pause (or a long one if you need it) before you start singing. Think how long some guitarists take to tune up!!! Vocalists can take the time they need to get ready to sing – indeed they must, if the song is to be properly honoured.
- Some people like to take the first breath in slowly through the nose. You can take two or more nose breaths to calm yourself. After that, you will breathe through your mouth as normal.
- Make sure you are using your diaphragm to breathe in (see ‘Breathing’). Upper chest breathing will increase anxiety.
- Recreate the setting in which you sing in your mind when you practise.
- Reassure yourself that you have as much right and privilege to sing as anyone else.
- Practise everything about your performance – including standing up, walking to your place, giving an introduction, getting your posture right, getting yourself ready to take your first ‘singing breath’. Or if you stay seated where you are, take up your stable posture, imagine the feeling as your turn arrives, how you settle yourself ready to sing &c.
- Think of a spotlight shining in the space just in front of you. That is where the song is. That is where people’s attention is.
- Practise where you will put your hands, how you might use them to help expression. Try not to make dramatic, tense hand gestures.
- Practise making mistakes – how will you manage when you forget the words (everyone does at some time) or start in the wrong key.
- Give yourself permission to make mistakes – it really is OK. Frankie Armstrong says ‘I don’t expect myself to be perfect’.
- When you make a mistake, let it go immediately. Do not fret over it or let it intrude on the rest of the song. Concentrate on what is happening ‘now’.
- It may help to put it in perspective. World peace does not hang on your song!
- Remember that you really are the expert in your song, the way you sing it and what it means to you.
- Look for a friendly face in the audience. Be encouraged by their responsiveness.
- Write down the first lines in a small notebook to carry with you.
- Give yourself a start note or a key to pitch to.
- Then hum the first phrase gently before you start singing.
- It is fine to visit the loo a bit before you sing.
- When you drink water, make sure it wets your lips and all round the area between the teeth and lips, and inside your cheeks.
- If you have done a session with me or Frankie, you may have done the ‘mirror images of yourself’ exercise. Practise it.
- Celebrate your nerves as an integral and exciting part of yourself. They add colour, sincerity and emotional truth to your song.

None of these things is easy. It will require consistent practice and will take time and application. Do seek out voice teachers who can help you. Remember, it is worth it!

Natural Voice Teachers can be found via the Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network website [www.naturalvoice.net](http://www.naturalvoice.net)