

Ep #5: Why YouTube Warm Ups Might Not Work for You

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

I want you to know that if you've been looking on YouTube for the perfect warmup video and you haven't found it yet, there's nothing wrong with you. And if you've tried the warmup videos on YouTube and you've found that they're impossibly difficult or you don't understand what's going on, or you get lost halfway through, there's nothing wrong with you.

And if you've gone to YouTube thinking that you're going to find something that will solve all of your problems and get you fixed just in time for the audition in half an hour, and you haven't found it, there's nothing wrong with you.

There's a lot of good stuff on YouTube, don't get me wrong, and there's a lot on YouTube that's really technical, and it's presented by people who really know what they're doing. And they might not be starting where you're starting.

In fact, I can guarantee they're not starting where you're starting because they're starting with themselves. And when you're warming up your body, whether it's for speaking or for singing – although there are way more videos for singers than for speakers, at least in my cursory search – when you're warming up your body for singing or speaking, you are warming up your body. And the people on YouTube are warming up their bodies.

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Now there are a lot of choral warm up videos where you have a choral director who's warming up a chorus, and those are often better places to start, because they're simpler and the person leading the warm up knows that they need to meet the needs of many different kinds of singers.

So what can I say that will be helpful for you now? Now that I've told you that it's not your fault, you still want to warm up, probably. At least, that's one of the most common questions I get asked is, “How do I warm myself up? What is the perfect warm up? What do I need to include in my warm up? How am I supposed to warm up?”

This is the thing about warming up, is that it, it is a practice. It's not something that you can cram for, like not have any idea how to warm up and then before you have a big thing, you have to figure it out now.

Don't wait for the big event before you figure out how to warm up. Start building it as a habit. Every day, if you can, a little bit at a time, and then your body will, gradually and dependably learn how to do it.

One of the things that's really important in order to sing or speak really well – we need to be calm. We need to have a grounded sense of being in order for the project to go well. And one of the things that your warm up needs to do is help you feel grounded, help you feel like the best version of yourself you can be.

And I don't mean the best version that impresses people. I mean the best version that feels most authentically “you.” Like you know where all your parts are and you know that they're working for you. And one of the best ways to do that is to warm up every day in a calm state of mind so that warming up itself has a habit of calm about it.

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I really can't stress that enough because performing is hard. It's stressful. It comes with its own set of anxieties and worries and nervousness. And when your warmup can be a calm place where you remember who you are, that your whole self is the instrument and your whole self is good enough, it's a real gift.

So here's how I think about it. When we're going to sing or to speak in any way that's bigger than just across the kitchen table, it's helpful to think about the project as we are moving a free-flowing stream of air through an open and grounded space, and that's what's making sound.

So the project is to direct a free-flowing stream of air through an open and grounded space.

Sounds pretty simple, right? It's got lots of parts, though. So let's start from the end with the space.

The space that you're directing the sound through includes your throat and your mouth and in that space, um, you have your jaw, which is probably pretty tense if you're a regular human living in the 21st century, and your tongue, which also has a certain amount of excess tension in it.

You can massage your jaw from the outside. So you can feel along your bottom jaw, you can feel your molars, and then up by your ear you can feel your top molars, and in between those two, there's a muscle. And it's probably pretty tense. And it's probably more tense on one side than the other. And you can just gently feel into that with your fingers. And maybe walk your fingers through it. Just be really gentle and notice how much tension is there.

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And with your hands still there, you can whoop [sound of whooping].

And you can sigh [sound of sighing].

What you're doing, you're massaging your jaw, you're letting your jaw hang and you're making sound – a generous sound, not a pressed sound, it's not [AAAAH]. It's not where you're pushing air out, but you're just allowing air to come out of your body. and that's a really good way to begin.

One of the spaces that we need to open up first is the mouth. And a great way to do that is with a yawn where you lift your soft palate. I'm gonna yawn now, and maybe that'll make you yawn. You can feel your soft palate go up – that's the roof of your mouth – goes up.

And if you make a really big yawn, you can feel that there's a downward stretch as well. You can feel your larynx go down in your throat, and you can feel the sides of your throat widen. There are like six directions in which you're, you're stretching yourself.

So, there's a stretch up, and there's also a diagonal stretch up. If you yawn really big, you can make it difficult for yourself to hear, you know? There's a big diagonal stretch as well as one that's straight up. And then your larynx goes down, and your throat gets wider. And that's a really good way to open up the space.

And if you're not used to, um, yawning on cue, this is something you can learn how to do. For me, I, in my imagination, put myself in a really boring meeting and then try to stifle a yawn to generate a yawn.

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Now, because I yawn so much, um, demonstrating for my students and warming up for myself, I'm able to yawn on cue. I can lift my soft palate so I can take a breath into my body that feels like it goes up into my eyeballs. That might be one way to think about raising your soft palate: you take a breath in that goes up to your eyeballs.

And another thought that's helped several of my students is imagining that you've got the Joker's smile from the Batman franchise, the Joker's smile on the back of your throat – making that shape.

Directing a free flowing stream of air through an open and grounded space. Your mouth, that space that's opened up by a yawn, that's a big part of the space. There's also space, though, in your trunk, in your torso, and in your neck.

So you might not think about space in your neck, you might not think about it as space, but one of the things that we need to do is, loosen the neck. So, putting your ear to your shoulder gently and feeling a stretch, and doing that on the other side, and maybe rolling your head around, rolling your shoulders back, seeing how much, uh, looseness you can bring to your head and neck and shoulders.

And then from there, we need space in the trunk around our ribcage. A lot of us slouch a lot of the time. A lot of us don't have the posture that our mothers would like us to have. And so, part of warming up, (it) can be really helpful to raise an arm straight up and lean over to one side and feel a stretch along your side waists, along the side of your ribs and breathe into that stretch. And do that on the other side: you raise your arm above your head, you lean to the opposite side and you breathe into the sides of your ribs.

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Your ribcage is a three dimensional thing. A lot of the time, just in regular life, we think about breathing as something that goes either up and down or forward and back in the front of our chest.

But actually, your lungs are expanding and contracting, like, they're balloons, right? They're expanding to the side and they're expanding to the back. So, having access to all of that space when you go to sing or to speak in an orating kind of way is really important.

One way to access the space in your back is to bend over and pretend to touch your toes, or intend to touch your toes, and let yourself hang there, or hold on to the back of a chair. You don't have to fold yourself all the way in half, but just enough so that it's hard for your lungs to expand in the front and take two or three breaths there, and feel how your breath can bring more space to the place between your shoulder blades, how you can expand your upper back just by breathing into it.

And then if you come back up to standing, you can feel, or try to feel into, "What's that like?" If I'm just standing upright, now more upright than normal, feeling space in the front and the sides and the back of my chest, when I take a breath in, can I feel it expand my back?

That can take, uh, quite a lot of practice. It did for me, anyway. But it's good thing to bring your attention to when you're warming up, to make it a habit, that question: can I feel the space in my lungs, not just in the front, but also the sides and also the back?

And if you make that a practice, you will learn how to do it.

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So we've talked about the open space of the mouth and the neck and the shoulders and the torso, and we need to talk a little bit about the “grounded” of your feet and your legs.

You need to feel connected to the earth, and you can do that in a number of ways. You can stomp your feet just to remind your body, look, there's the ground and here are my legs and they're strong.

You can stand and take two or three breaths that fill up the center of your body. And as you're taking those breaths that fill up the center of your body, imagine, feel energy move down your legs, past your knees, through your ankles, through your feet and into the floor.

And when you inhale, you can inhale in a way that feels like you draw energy up from the earth and exhale down into the earth, maybe. And you can reverse that. You can inhale feeling more connection to the ground, and exhale feeling less connection to the ground.

One direction isn't better than another. My point is, you need to open up the connection between your breath and your feet and the earth. And that's a really fundamental way to reconnect with a sense of feeling grounded.

I should say something about your posture.

So you want your, when you're warming up and when you're performing, you want your feet to be a comfortable hip-distance apart – hip-width apart. Um, you want your knees to be relaxed, to be soft. You don't want to lock your knees. You want to feel your hips over your feet, and your ribs over your hips, and your head on the top of your spine.

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Let me say that again. Your feet are hip-width apart, your hips are over your feet, your ribs are over your hips, and your head is on the top of your spine.

One way to check to see if your head's on the top of your spine, not that it's moved, but that it isn't, you know, too far forward is usually the problem, that our heads are too far forward, um, is just to turn your head from side to side and see if you can feel that joint where your spine, the top of your spine enters your skull.

Okay, “directing a free flowing stream of air.” Wow, what does that mean?

Well, you'll notice in a lot of the singing videos that they include a lip trill, a [sound of a lip trill], which is a great way to warm up the part of directing a free flowing stream of air. And there are plenty of people who have no idea how to make a lip trill, and they try it and they fail, and they think, “Okay singing isn't for me,” or “I'll never be able to warm myself up because I don't know how to do a lip trill.”

And I want to tell you that's not true. That's not true. And, you can learn how to lip trill. but I'm not going to try to teach that right now. What I want to say, though, is when we speak in normal everyday life, it doesn't take a lot of air. And that's by design. Like, people on their deathbed can make themselves understood. It really doesn't take very much air to make sound.

And in regular, everyday life, we don't use a lot of, most of us, don't use a lot of air when we make sound, right? We're interested in efficiency. We want our ideas to be understood. We're maybe only conscious of the

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breath that we're using when we're speaking if we're on a walk with a friend and we've just gone up a hill and it's harder to talk or you're on a run.

We don't think about the air we're using in normal, everyday life, but when we're warming up to sing or speak in a bigger way than across the kitchen table, we need to be aware of how we need to move air. And you can do that with a lip trill [lip trill sound]. You can do that with a hum [humming sound].

We can do that with a whoop [whooping sound].

That can be a lot of fun. Uh, you can go from low to high. You can go from high to low [whooping sound]. So the feeling of moving air, making a substantial sound, and feeling that that throat that you opened up with a yawn and that neck that you opened up with some head turns and some head rolls, and the torso and the shoulders and all of that is big, wide open.

So that's the main picture: direct a free-flowing stream of air through an open and grounded space. That's the very basic of what you need to do when you're warming up.

And now, on YouTube, you will find lots of videos with different patterns to sing. [singing]. Or, you know, all kinds. Absolutely all kinds. [more singing]. And going through all the different vowels.

Now, when you go to YouTube, the challenge is maintaining that open, grounded space that we just created. The challenge with YouTube is somebody's presenting a pattern, and you're going to try to sing it. And,

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if you're like most people, you're probably going to squeeze your throat closed, you're going to clench your stomach. You're going to work hard to try to get the pattern right and in that overworking to get it perfect, you're undoing, you're defeating the whole purpose of warming up, which is to direct a free-flowing, not grabbed, stream of air through an open and grounded, not freaked out, space.

So, if you found a video that you like and you know the pattern well and you understand it and it's not a stress for you, awesome! Try approaching it from this place of feeling strong, calm and grounded in your body with the goal of just sending air from your lungs, past your vocal folds, turning it into sound, just sending it out and not judging it, not evaluating it, just, on whatever note pattern you want, seeing how calmly and openly you can execute that pattern.

And if you're wanting to try a new one, start slowly. Often, the videos, they go really quickly like, [faster singing]. Like that, and it just goes that quickly up through all the different keys.

Don't do that to yourself if it's your first time through. Stop after the first one, rewind, do it slowly. Slow it down. Use the settings available in YouTube to, um, adjust the playback speed and go slowly. Let yourself learn it in a nice, calm, spacious way. Then it will serve you.

Then you'll get to the end of your YouTube warmup and you won't be hoarse. You won't be frustrated. You won't be wondering, is this really what I'm supposed to be doing with my life? Because you'll feel like you're supposed to, well, like I say you're supposed to, which is open, calm, grounded, and hopefully a little bit joyful.

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I really hope this has given you a useful perspective on how to approach the great, um, library of resources that is YouTube.

If you'd like specific suggestions of warm up videos that might work for you, I'll include a link in the show notes to my friend and colleague, Megan Dibble's website. She's another voice teacher. She's curated a short list of warm up videos. You can't go wrong to start there and see what suits you. It's as much about personality as anything.

So, I hope you hear that as long as you're paying attention to yourself, as long as you are attending to your body, your breath, your posture, your peace of mind, you really can't warm up wrong. If you can do that, you're already way more than halfway there.

Thank you so much for listening.

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