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QUESTION AND ANSWER

Response to Christine Chen: Tips for Warm-Ups Prior to Playing By Malva Freymuth, DMA

As you know, time is at a premium—there’s never enough! Therefore, any warm-up routine needs to be as efficient and focused as possible, involving the mind as well as the body. Below is an outline of warm-up procedures, with an emphasis on enhancing the quality of physical movements. (Since verbal descriptions of movements tend to be lengthy, I’ve chosen to address these only in very general terms.)

Muscles need warmth in order to function easily and with reduced risk for injury. This means exercising to increase your circulation: you can jog in place, jump rope, dance vigorously...whatever you like, as long as you’re moving your entire body, increasing your heart rate, and breathing more deeply. (Wear clothing that keeps you warm, particularly the arms; cut the ends off of some tube socks and wear them on your arms before and during your practice session.) In addition to exercising, you need stretches which include your front, back, both sides, and some rotation around the vertical axis (spine). All stretches should be slow and sustained, taking advantage of your natural body weight rather than muscular force to help the stretch along. Deep breathing throughout helps carry oxygen to the muscles and further aids in releasing tension. (Chronically tense, “knotty” muscles may need additional help in the form of massage or bodywork. One favorite strategy for hard-to-reach areas like the back muscles, is to lay on a few tennis balls, gently moving around to let the muscles “melt” in response to the pressure.)

Since the mind has such a strong influence over the body, physical warm-ups can be enhanced by imagery specifically designed to aid in muscular release. One effective image is something that I’ve called “Energy Rays”. Visualize a ball of golden light (like the sun) resting in your pelvis, and imagine that it spreads warmth and energy throughout your body. (As you visualize, be aware of the physical sensations in your body. With practice, you will in fact feel warmth and energy as your muscles relax in response to the image, allowing an increase in circulation.) As you begin stretching, imagine five luminous rays of light radiating from this central light sphere: down through both legs, out both arms, and up through your torso and head. (If this image presents difficulty, you may find the image of a powerful stream of water shooting out of a hose helpful.) As you sustain your stretch, imagine the energized light flowing swiftly outwards, beyond the periphery of your body. Visualize it washing through the joints and muscles, dissolving any pain or tension, and allowing your body to expand with the stretch. (To clarify: allow the “energy rays” to bend and flow within the form of the stretch, filling every motion from beginning to end.)

At first, creating these images may take effort and concentration, but as with any skill, persistent practice is the remedy. As you become proficient in imaging, you can add affirmations or words that evoke a desirable quality in your movements. For example, let’s say your hip joints feel tight during a stretch, and so you send extra golden light to that area. Simultaneously, begin repeating the word “release”, saying it in a gentle, slow, encouraging manner, stretching the vowels, and letting the repeated word flow on a sustained outbreath. Keep focusing on the sensations in your joints, and let them respond to your directive. (Other possibilities include “lengthen”, “open”, “flow”, “energize”. Experiment to find which words are most effective for you.) A lot to think about at once? You bet! But well worth it, as experience shows.

Once your body feels loose and flowing, change the focus of your warm-up to working the shoulder, arm, and hand muscles. Raising muscle temperature efficiently (the optimum is 102-103) involves actually working the muscles in question, so you’ll need to do a sufficient number of repetitions, moving from the larger muscle groups to the smaller ones. But beware of mindless action! Keep using the image of golden light flowing through the arms, and adopt a creative attitude—give each motion the quality of a

dance, imbue it with rhythm and a sense of phrase, let it flow aesthetically. Quality, not quantity, is the key! (If any aches or pains remain, do some gentle massage of the muscles, again imaging golden light melting any residual tension.)

When you feel ready, spend a minute “miming” or “shadow playing” your instrument. Focus on sensations of ease and balance, and tune your mind into creating a lovely sound: “hear” yourself playing in your imagination—the sky’s the limit! At this point, you want to be in a positive frame-of-mind, relaxed but energized, and ready to enjoy your practice session. (Of course, efficiency during practice is paramount. Again, creating a balance between mind and body, incorporating imagery and releasing tension should be the underlying theme. A guide to mental practice techniques can be found in American Music Teacher, April/May 1994)

These suggestions, which outline a brief warm-up just prior to playing, can and should be expanded to become part of your overall health maintenance and fitness. If you keep yourself fit as a fiddle, and pursue a tension-free technique, your playing career will gain in enjoyment and longevity!

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