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The Etiquette of Bursting into Song

Jerriann Watkins

There are some people in this world who say that musicals are completely unrealistic because in real life, people don't randomly burst into song. Some of us know better. We know that the real reason is not because of the musical outbursts, but because these outbursts are perfectly on pitch, and because of the synchronized dances in the middle of grocery stores. Of course, those of us who know this are either the ones bursting into song, or the victims of said song-burster-outers.

While a lot of people may be overjoyed to discover that the wonderful world of musicals can be a part of the tangible world, others may find the idea of nonstop musicality a bit overwhelming. Therefore, I have drafted the following guidelines for those who always have a song in their head waiting to come out, but enjoy being liked. If practiced correctly, these rules should contribute to making life bearable for all.

Maxim #1: Be aware of your affect on others.

If your outburst is a bit on the loud side, take a glance around to observe others' reactions before continuing. If people look like they want to rip out your esophagus, you might want to tone it down a bit so you can sing another day. However, if people are joining in, feel free to carry on at your current energy and sound level, or even increase it. Some call it volume, but others call it sharing.

Maxim #2: Change it up a bit.

Some people really do enjoy listening to impromptu concerts and/or random musical musings. However, even the most appreciative person can get annoyed at hearing the same line of a song over and over again, so it's good idea not to be too repetitive. If you only know a line or two of a song, try humming to figure out more of it, or move on to another song. This gives your audience a bit of variety and keeps them happy.

Maxim #3: Collaborations are always fun.

If people want to join in, let them! Don't be too picky about pitch, not everyone can sing as perfectly as you! The point is to have fun! If your song happens to remind someone of their favorite song and they start singing it instead, join in, or at least wait a polite minute before changing back to your song or moving on to a new one.

Maxim #4: Consider the studious ones.

If someone is trying to focus, or has asked you to stop, it may be best not to annoy them; they may throw a calculus book at you. Try to at least keep your outbursts at a respectful volume. If you continue to get carried away and really can't keep it down, it may be beneficial to all involved if you relocate yourself.

Maxim #5: Singing over existing music.

If someone is listening to music or watching a movie with music in it, singing along with the music is perfectly reasonable, even expected. However, singing a different song is quite rude, and changing the lyrics to the song is pretty unforgiveable as well.

Exception: Changing the lyrics to a song and sharing them AFTER the song is finished or stopped is perfectly acceptable. Also, if your friend knows your revised lyrics and feels like singing them with you, then really no one is being bothered, are they? In this case, it could be suitable to sing "Jingle Bells, Batman Smells" even though the original "Jingle Bells" is playing on the radio.

Maxim #6: Caroling isn't just for Christmastime.

Have you ever knocked on someone's door and all of a sudden gotten the urge to serenade them as they open the door? This makes for great laughs, but there are a few precautions to be taken. First of all, make sure the intended person answers the door. You don't want to be singing "You sexy thing" to your boyfriend's mom. It is always important to be on your toes. Since they are unprepared for your musical gift, it is very important to be adaptable. If they come to the door in a towel, "Rubber Ducky" may be appropriate. If they are on the phone, you may want to hum "Banana Phone."

The more obscure the situation and the more appropriate your song, the more your friend will appreciate your humor and quick wit. It is also good to be prepared to cancel your outburst plans completely, in case your friend answers the door in tears or something equally unpleasant.

Maxim #7: Gauge the situation.

There are times when certain songs just aren't appropriate. For example, when babysitting five year olds or tutoring disturbed teenagers, songs about the "effing" world going to "effing" hell would be very inappropriate. Also, it would not be good to burst into "I'm Walking on Sunshine" at a funeral (or any upbeat song for that matter, you inconsiderate monster). When your best friend just got dumped, love songs will not improve her mood. Songs about Ben and Jerry's will. It's just a fact of life.

Maxim #8: Don't sing to strangers.

Yes, singing in public is fun-and a great way to get attention- but it can get old fast. Here are a few key tips to avoid being labeled as a nuisance. Don't sing off key on purpose. It's not funny, and people don't appreciate it. They may even get offended, especially if they happen to be a music major. Save the tone-deaf act for your car, or the shower. Also, respect the personal space of others. Overly loud outbursts in closed spaces-such as buses and trains-can really irk people. Finally, if you are singing to impress an attractive stranger across the room, proceed with caution. You could either scare them off by being too "out there", or you could attract a life time stalker. This is the real world, people. There ARE serial killers in airports.

Maxim#9: Don't use your singing for evil.

No matter how tempting it is, using your vocal instrument to purposely annoy people is wrong. Not only is it wrong, it will come back to bite you in the butt. Loudly singing "You're So Vain" when your arch-nemesis walks into the room may seem clever, but just you wait. When you have a massive headache and the freshmen who live in your hall won't stop singing "The Song That Never Ends", you'll know that Karma has had her revenge.

Maxim #10: Pay Attention!

It may be easy to slip into a dream world where you star in your very own cheesy musical, but take some advice. Stay away from the white light! Look both ways before crossing the street. Try not to run into anyone (unless they're cute; but there's a completely different set of etiquette for "accidental-on-purpose-bumping").

I hope these simple maxims for musical living help you in your quest for a harmonious life. Of course, there are always exceptions, or situations that these may not apply to. As with most rules, these are best taken as guidelines, a roadmap toward- not a blueprint of- the best possible existence. If you are disappointed that there are not more pointers for you, fear not! In the words of one of the many famous Johanns of the composing world, "I'll be Bach!"