

TIPS ON LEARNING A SONG

There are probably as many different ways of learning a song as there are singers! However, singers have to deal with these five points every time they learn a new song.

Choosing a song:

For your first song chose one that you know you already like. A song that you have heard sung on the radio, the TV, a CD, at the movies etc. Also, ask for advice on choosing repertoire that both suits your current abilities and provides you with an opportunity to improve.

Words:

A song is a poem that has been set to music by a composer. Read the poetry and understand it if you can. If the poem is in a foreign language, read a translation or translate it yourself. Know what each and every word means. Learn the pronunciation of the poem. Check every syllable for correct speech sounds regardless of whether the language is familiar. Practise speaking it aloud until it is perfect and you can speak it without any strain. Now imagine how an actor speaking in the language of the poem would recite it and search for the right inflections. See “Performing a Song” at the end of this section.

Rhythm:

Learn the rhythmic pattern of the vocal line independently of the melodic line. Tap the rhythms or speak them to “la”. Work in small manageable segments at a slow tempo until the rhythm is perfect, then gradually increase the tempo until it is faster than necessary. When the rhythm is secure, add the words and recite the poem in strict time with the proper inflections. Once you can speak the poem in rhythm easily, chant it in rhythm on a single pitch paying careful attention to maintaining proper vowel and consonant sounds (in particular the on-glides and off-glides of diphthongs, and the sounds of /l/, /r/). Pay particular attention to the length of rests at the ends of phrases. More on this later.

Tune:

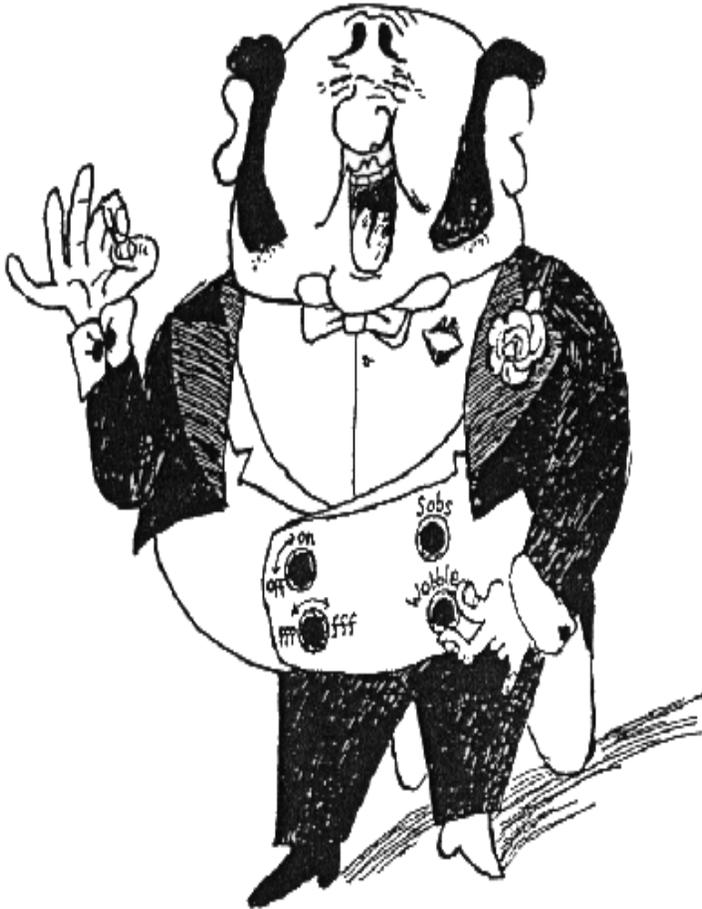
Now you can learn the tune! Don’t worry about rhythmic accuracy here. First, work in small segments and ensure absolutely perfect intonation and ease of production. Once you can sing all of the notes of the tune perfectly, then sing the tune with perfect intonation and perfect rhythm on different syllables (la, do, tu etc.). Finally add the perfect pronunciation and you’re almost finished!

Music:

The last step in *learning* a song is to learn the accompaniment, which is the framework that supports you and leads you through the song. The best way to learn this, if you don’t have the piano skills yourself, is to have someone record it for you so that you can play it back while studying the score. Pay particular attention to what happens when you are *not* singing, for instance in the introduction and between phrases and verses. Figure out the road map: where do the repeats for the different verses go, where do you skip to the coda etc. This gives you an understanding of the complete structure of the piece and by now, you will probably have the entire song memorized!

PERFORMING A SONG

After you have completed the five elements necessary to learn a new song: choosing the song, learning the words, mastering the rhythm, perfecting the tune and understanding the accompaniment, you need to polish and perfect this song to make it truly your own. Here are some questions to ask in order to give an honest and compelling performance:



Who is the narrator? How old? How educated? What economic bracket? What is the narrator's emotional and physical state? Does the narrator's state change? Where does it change? How does it change? Why does it change? What or where is the Narrator's focus? Does it change? How does it change? What causes it to change? Are these changes gradual or sudden? Am I singing to anyone in particular? What is their relationship to me (the narrator)? What is the setting? Location? Time of day/year? Past, present or future? What has happened just before the song begins? What happens in the introduction? What happens during interludes when I'm not singing? Does the music follow out of what I just sang or does it lead into what I'm about to sing or does it do both? What happens after the words are finished? What happens after the music is finished? Do I realise that the audience's experience of the song begins before the accompaniment begins and ends after the accompaniment has ended? Does my accompanist know this? Have we worked it out? Have I identified and eliminated inhibiting

physical and emotional tensions from my performance?

Are physical gestures appropriate? What kind of gestures? Where should they be?

Do I realize that critical self-monitoring has no place in performance?

Am I aware that I can trust my skills and techniques to allow me to perform in a rich and compelling way?

These are just some of the many questions that you can ask of yourself to help you delve deeper into a song to give a truly unique performance that is entirely your own.

SONG STUDY SHEET

Song Title _____

Composer, source or arranger _____

Date Started _____ Memorized _____ Performed _____

1. What key(s) is (are) this song written in? _____
2. If the original language is not English, what is it? _____
3. Use the back side of this sheet to do a word for word translation into English if necessary. Then, paraphrase, or write in your own words what the song is about, even if the original language is English.
4. Mark in logical breath spots, usually at rests in the music or punctuation in the text with a check mark (✓). Next, mark in safety breaths with a comma ('). Some singers put these marks in the music, others in the text. It doesn't matter as long as you pay attention to them!
5. Is there anything about the form of the song that would help you to learn it more easily? (repeated sections of music or lyrics, contrasting sections, etc.) Mark these in the music in a manner that will work for you. Clarify the “road map” of the song. Some singers use different colours to mark contrasting sections.
6. Look for the dynamic markings and highlight them. Find the loudest and softest parts of the song.
7. If there are spots where the rhythm is difficult, mark the beats either with a slash (|) or arrow (↓) above the music (make sure the mark is in the right place!), or by the actual beat counts (1-ee-and-a 2-ee-and-a etc.). Also highlight tempo changes (slowing down or speeding up) and articulations (staccato, legato etc.).
9. Mark difficult consonant and vowel combinations, use IPA symbols to simplify them.
10. Learn what the introduction sounds like as well as any interludes.
11. Take notes on the score itself or on the back of this sheet of anything else that will help you learn the song or be more expressive with it. Also write down suggestions as you receive them in lessons or as you discover them on your own either on the score, in your practice journal or on recordings. Refer to the “Learning a Song” and “Performing a Song” handouts for more ideas.