The Singer as Communicator

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DEDICATION

To my students, past, present, and future.

ABSTRACT

The singer's ability to communicate with an audience comes from work done well in advance of a performance. Young or inexperienced singers tend to have challenges communicating effectively, though, because so much of their training and practice is wrapped up in technical, left-brained exercises; consequently, their performances seem awkward and self-conscious. It is the responsibility of the young singer's primary instructor and mentor – the voice teacher –to encourage a broader understanding of "practice" that leads to both technical growth and expressive freedom. This document seeks to provide such a practice framework, one that will hopefully maximize a singer's personal engagement with a piece of music, and that will facilitate masterful singer-audience communication.

A singer's involvement with a piece of music takes four steps: initial familiarization, investigation, expressive play, and performance. In the initial steps of practice, singers learn to connect with the music and text before approaching and solving technical challenges. Singers then search for clues about a piece's meaning by investigating the structure and syntax of the text, the characters portrayed in the text, and the way the composer sets the text to music. Investigation is followed by expressive play with diction, physicality, and facial expression. In the end, the singer is not limited to a single "perfect" way to perform a piece, but has freedom to make choices and to own the performance. The resulting confidence will hopefully yield a performance that is everything the singer wants and everything the audience needs.

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FOREWORD

When I began my voice studies at SMU in 1995, all I knew was that I loved music. I had only a vague notion of where that love would take me. As I proceeded, I knew I had found my perfect fit in the study of voice since I was able to study a variety of things that fascinated me – languages, literature, culture, acting, dance, visual arts, teaching, and music theory. I also learned how to approach history – always one of my weakest subjects – in a whole new way because I finally had a musical hook on which to hang historical information. Opportunities to make music with others, one of my favorite things from high school, were daily events, and the level of repertoire I was capable of performing grew, as well. I was hungry for experience, for knowledge, and for personal transformation.

I now look back on that period with pleasure, awe, and nostalgia. The world was my oyster and the opportunities ahead seemed endless. Such optimism seems idealistic now, almost laughable, but youth is idealistic and silly. In fact, I wish I had been sillier – a mentor never fails to remind me I was born thirty. In any case, music was a catalyst for personal and spiritual growth. I grew in self-awareness and self-confidence, which in turn gave me greater opportunities for self-expression and self-fulfillment.

I can see, though, that the strong musical work ethic, superior musicianship skills, and drive for excellence that Doug Johnson – my band director at Creighton Preparatory School – drilled into me were perhaps the most valuable preparation for advanced musical study I could have had. I watched students with similar backgrounds thrive, while those without basic skills floundered. I realized that a love of music was not necessarily sufficient for someone to make music his or her life's work. I felt sorry for the students who were weeded out not for lack of talent but for lack of basic skill, and knew my calling included finding ways to bridge that gap.

Coming from a family of teachers, I know the importance of borrowing as many ideas as possible from professors, teachers, and colleagues for one's own teacher's toolbox. I have always viewed curricula with a critical eye, and have seen many things both positive and negative that have shaped my teaching. I've had chances to try many ideas over the last ten

years while teaching at Omaha North High School, the University of Minnesota, and the University of South Dakota.

Tenor Hugo Vera talks about voice teachers being either “starters” or “finishers” (personal communication, May 2007). Indeed, some teachers excel at the teaching of fundamental vocal technique, while others are extremely talented at polishing mostly-finished voices. This distinction does not mean that one is more important than the other, or that there is no overlap between the two. Starters cannot get by without an understanding of how to address advanced skills. Likewise, finishers must continue to build on and reinforce the fundamentals, lest they become the stereotypical New York voice teacher who charges one-hundred-fifty dollars an hour to say, “Try it again. Honey, just make it beautiful.”

I hope this document can bridge the gap between starter and finisher, and between technique and expression. It is nothing less, then, than a collation of the information I feel is vital to the formation of young singers but is underrepresented in most undergraduate and even some graduate curricula. It is a pedagogical text in the sense that it is about teaching singers, but it is atypical in that it purposefully avoids discussion of vocal technique except where absolutely necessary; I presume that someone reading this text will already possess that knowledge. Rather, this document delves into the fields of psychology, linguistics, aesthetics, acting, communications, and, of course, music to get to the heart of what singers can do to communicate effectively with their audiences.

INTRODUCTION

Music's beauty lies in its balance and its ability to convey emotion. Rhythm, melody, and harmony give it structure. Variations on these elements and the human touch infuse music with feeling. Classical scholars believed music worked by stimulating the various humors of the body, causing both physiological and emotional responses (Opsopaus, 2004) – pulses race, breathing changes, tears fall, tempers flare, and passions burn. Despite having disproven the theory of the four temperaments, we still wonder what it is about music that causes these things to happen. Despite our refinement over the years, music is no less mystical, magical, and wonderful today than it was in the days of Pythagoras, Hippocrates, and Aristotle.

The best musicians are and have been the ones who are able to balance technical mastery of their craft with artistry to communicate strong human emotion through music. Consider the paradox, though, that music is actually a highly structured art, but that the emotions it conveys and induces are highly unstructured. Music requires a constant balance of the rational and the technical with the emotional and the creative. These elements form a yin and yang relationship, where opposing elements come together to form a whole. When in perfect balance, the strength of a musician's ability to convey and induce emotion is maximized, as is his or her ability to communicate through music.

Modern science has provided insight into the balance of reason and emotion in its finding that a different hemisphere of the brain is responsible for each. Though the theory has been "grossly oversimplified…the opposites presented by the theory are a meaningful metaphor for much of life's activities, and they are especially apropos to music theatre." (Balk, 1985, p. 88) The left brain is the locus of structured thinking and language: it is objective; it handles reason and logic; it is detail-oriented; it analyzes, looking for patterns and sequences. Musicians employ left-brained thinking when counting and keeping a steady beat, when decoding written music, when considering instrumental and vocal technique, when analyzing and understanding musical form, and when structuring practice and teaching. Too much left-brain and a performance may seem dry and dispassionate. In its proper balance, the left brain is the adviser, but when it becomes overactive, it can become a crippling critic. The right brain is the locus of non-linear,

creative thought: it is intuitive; it accepts randomness, subjectivity, and paradox; it seeks synthesis of the whole. Musicians also employ right-brained thinking when interpreting a musical score, when seeking to convey the message and emotion of the music, when deciding – often on the fly – what sounds good, when taking risks, and when calling on and following instincts. Too much right brain and a performance may seem unfocused and self-indulgent. When functioning at a proper level, the right brain can be thought of as a muse, but when overactive it becomes a devil-on-the-shoulder encouraging excess. For whatever reason, it seems more difficult for performers to tune out the left brain, perhaps because musicians spend so much of their training focusing on technique, self-analysis, and perfectionism that the musician is conditioned to listen to left-brain's critic before the right-brain's devil.

At all stages of a singer's involvement with a piece of music – initial work, investigative work, expressive work, and performance – he or she must learn how to let both the left brain and the right brain have their say. If such balance is not a skill a singer has inherently, then it is one he or she must learn and that a teacher must be able to offer; it requires a new approach to practice. Though it may be initially unsettling to change the way in which a teacher presents a piece of music or the way in which the singer prepares it, one must learn there is room for both reason and emotion at every step from selection of repertoire to performance. In my experience, the communicative results at the end of the process are worth the extra work.

ACADEMIA: THE SEPARATION OF TECHNIQUE AND EXPRESSION

Perhaps because the ability to enjoy music seems to be an inherent human trait, the concept of academic study of music is simply perplexing to many people. Rock stars don't go to college to be rock stars, they just *are* – at least, that is the perception. I recall overhearing a fellow trumpet player in marching band my first year of college say, "all a degree in music means is that you can play your instrument." The concept can seem even more ridiculous when speaking of singing – instrumentalists have to learn how to manipulate their instrument, but why do singers need to study something that seems like it should just come naturally? When my mother has told people about my studies, they are surprised; the response occasionally comes back, "I didn't know you could get a doctorate in singing!"

Legitimizing the study of music

Those unfamiliar with music study might have the mental image of individuals gaily making music from morning till night. Though making music in solo and ensemble settings are important components of the education of those majoring in music, music schools are not the playground some might imagine. Music students are hardly slackers; fundamental studies include music theory, sight-singing, ear training, keyboard skills, and music history and literature; advanced studies include conducting, pedagogy, and music history and literature specific to one's area, per the requirements of the accrediting body for collegiate music programs in America, the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM, 2009). Though many of these courses go beyond pen and paper, there is an inescapable – and for some musicians, perhaps unpleasant – rational/logical side to the music curriculum. The non-performance – i.e., academic – component of a music student's work in a typical four-year undergraduate institution can vary from as much as ninety per cent for students pursuing a B.A. degree in music to as little as forty-five per cent in the case of students in music theatre and pre-opera programs. Even the small number is probably more than most people realize, some aspiring musicians included.

National Association of Schools of Music curricular guidelines for undergraduate programs

	Performance, Voice (B.M.)		Performance, Pre-opera (B.M.)		Music Education		Music Theatre, Music emphasis		Music Theatre, Theatre emphasis		Music B.A.	
	%	Hrs	%	Hrs	%	Hrs	%	Hrs	%	Hrs	%	Hrs
Music Performance	25-35	30-42	25-35	30-42	20-30	24-36	20-30	24-36	10-15	12-18	10-15	12-18
Music Core / Electives	25-35	30-42	20-30	24-36	20-30	24-36	20-30	24-36	10-15	12-18	20-25	24-30
University Core / Electives	25-35	30-42	25-35	30-42	30-35	30-42	25-30	30-36	25-30	30-36	55-70	66-94
Theatre / Movement			15-20	18-24			20-25	24-30	50-55	60-66		
Professional Studies					15-20	18-24						

Percentages of study (%) are taken from the NASM (2009) guidelines, and credit hours (Hrs) have been calculated accordingly, based on a typical 120-credit undergraduate course of study. Compiled from the NASM *2009-2010 Handbook*.

Figure 1: NASM Curricular guidelines for various undergraduate voice programs (2009).

The study of vocal music is, by its nature, wider-reaching in scope than instrumental music, requiring integration of knowledge and skills from the fields of language, literature, linguistics, and theatre, to name a few. Such breadth of study "presents unique challenges" for those responsible for educating singers. "Dr. Joseph W Polisi, Juilliard's president, says…, 'Of all the degree programs at every level, the most compressed is voice…. There are more things out there than can be done. Where do you push and where do you pull?'" (Hershenson, 1999, p. 18)

Where, indeed? It seems in most programs, what is "pushed" is the common technical skills and background, and what is "pulled" is often the peripheral study mentioned in the previous paragraph. Because NASM states, "The study and use of foreign languages and diction are essential," (2009, p. 87) voice departments widely offer courses in diction to help students unlock the linguistic web with which they are confronted when they sing. In many programs, Opera Workshop is also a common course offering, since it naturally bridges singing and physical / emotional expression and provides an outlet for students to explore performance skills and to learn by doing. Beyond that, the individual institutions choose what additional voice courses to teach, such as "Movement for Singers," (Maryland, 2009, p. 62) "Acting for Singers," (Penn State, 2008) and "Vocal Performance Seminar" (Millikin, 2009), to name a few. Unfortunately, not all singers take these courses and even those who do only get a limited chance to apply the knowledge gained with regularity.

Empowering the muse

The responsibility of reinforcing right-brained learning – for empowering the muse – falls to the voice teacher, the common link among all students. We voice teachers must certainly emphasize the importance of solid technique and musicianship and teach them to our students, but that cannot be the limit of our teaching. Like it or not, in addition to being diagnosticians and technicians, we are theorists and guides; we are linguists and translators; we are dramaturges and stage directors; we are critics, cheerleaders, and drill sergeants; in sum, we are fonts of technical and artistic knowledge. Whether in the lesson, in studio class, or in the hallway, we must never lose sight of our guiding role.

Despite the fact that music curricula have been deemed sufficiently academic to allow their continued inclusion in higher education, professors may still feel the need to "legitimize"

music as an academic pursuit by over-emphasizing music's rational side and de-emphasizing the creative in the classroom. The great composer and arranger Alice Parker viewed this over-intellectualization of music as exactly backward. "Absent for her were the larger human and social contexts of music, the connection points of imagination and creativity." (Poole, 2005, p. 17)

> In theory class the part-writing was guided by rules, and the pupils were evaluated by how well they conformed to those rules. They were made to approach score study like scientists in white lab coats, rather than with the excitement and focus of high school boys in an auto-mechanics class taking apart car engines. (Parker as quoted in Poole, 2005, p. 17)

That said, it is extremely easy for teachers to fall into the trap of teaching technique first and expression later. It is understandable – in addition to the precedent set in classroom teaching, teachers with well-developed ears just want singers with unfinished voices not to hurt their ears! Rather than place technical training and performance skills on par, the teacher focuses on technique until a student is more advanced. But why teach technique and expression serially when common sense suggests a parallel approach? Are teachers really afraid that allowing students the freedom to explore emotion will prevent them from developing good technique?

It is possible for teachers to forget how disheartening and insurmountable all the challenges of technique-intensive study that new singers face can seem. With all the stops and starts, admonitions and reminders, suggestions and corrections, singing becomes immensely complex, and even the simplest exercises and songs become technical minefields. Is it any wonder some teachers have a difficult time retaining students, and then getting the students they do retain to be expressive later on in training?

The teacher understands the larger picture and sees the course the student must take, but students may have a difficult time fully grasping the relationships, being unable to "see the forest for the trees." Consequently, teachers should consider how they would define "good

singing" and identify the guiding principles. By communicating these principles to the student, the teacher helps the student place all the detail work in a larger context. Some examples[1]:

- Is it accurate?
- Is it simple?
- Is it efficient?
- Is it consistent?
- Is it free of tension?
- Is it engaged?
- Is it balanced?
- Is it honest?
- Is it effective?
- Does it communicate?

The ultimate goal of creating a list of guiding principles is to prevent the act of making music from becoming little more than an academic endeavor whereby the student disassociates "voice studio singing" from real-world scenarios[2]. It is imperative that the teacher give the student a framework for singing that, while rooted in the world of academia, is not dependent on it since the student's singing in his or her personal and professional life may stray far afield from classical voice.

INITIAL FAMILIARIZATION WORK: GLOBAL AND SPECIFIC

No matter what pearls of wisdom a singer may encounter from teachers, coaches, directors, books, articles, or the like, it is unlikely that that wisdom will find its way into a singer's singing without practice. Practice, then, is the bedrock upon which a singer's ability to communicate is built. Unfortunately, a common complaint among teachers I have encountered is that inexperienced students don't know how to practice. It is not uncommon for

[1] I informally asked my colleagues via Facebook to "boil down good voice production to a few words." In addition to the ones listed here, suggestions included natural, speech-like, energized, released, effortless, visceral, grounded, clean, sincere, unique, and breath.

[2] Anecdotally, I worked with a music theatre major who had studied with a prominent local teacher while in high school. She seemed to have good vocal technique, but the persistent hoarseness she exhibited suggested otherwise. When I asked her to sing one of her musical theatre pieces, the reason became clear – she was belting in a way that was causing her problems. She had learned from her prior teacher that music theatre was "bad," so she never dared bring that repertoire to her lessons. The teacher mistakenly believed the student would be able to effectively learn to incorporate good singing technique into her musical theatre performance, but instead, she just learned to sing with two different techniques; for thirty minutes a week she sang "correctly," and the rest of the time – presumably hours a week – she was injuring herself. When the student understood I wanted to save her voice, regardless of the repertoire, she began making progress in both her classical and musical theatre singing.

inexperienced singers to have the erroneous impression that “practice” consists simply of filling the allotted time by singing through their pieces a few times. It amounts to little more than rote memorization and certainly does little in the way of preparing singers to sing expressively. It is imperative, then, for singers not only to have specific times set aside for practice, but that they know how to make the best use of that time.

Practice must be habitual; it also must be structured in a way that is effective and must culminate in success. Karen Pryor gives a list entitled “The Ten Laws of Shaping,” pertaining how to approach practice, regardless of discipline:

1. Let each new step in the learning process be small enough so that you are likely to succeed, and thus be reinforced.

2. Learn one thing at a time; don’t try to take two steps simultaneously.

3. Before moving to a new step, put the most recently learned step on a variable schedule of reinforcement.

4. When taking a new step, don’t worry about getting the old steps right.

5. If you are a teacher, stay a step ahead of the student: If a new step is suddenly mastered, always have the next one ready.

6. Don’t change teachers in midstep; any new step can have a new teacher, but only one teacher per step.

7. If one approach to a new step is not working, try another; there are as many ways to learn a new step as there are teachers.

8. Don’t casually interrupt a learning session in mid-step; that’s a punishment, not a reinforcement.

9. If learned steps fall apart and nothing is working, review all the steps leading up to that point. “Go back to kindergarten” and work your way up, reinforcing along the way.

10. Finish each session with a success, if possible, but in any case quit while you’re ahead. (Pryor as cited in Balk, 1991, pp. 185-187).

It is not enough to say "practice makes perfect," but rather, "perfect practice makes perfect." Ineffective practice models can reinforce the wrong things; a particular phrase becomes "the place where I always stop because it's always wrong" and a particular note becomes "that note I can't sing," thoughts that become self-fulfilling prophesies. This sort of practice must be avoided at all costs. Without question, the more effective the practice, the deeper and more interesting practice will become and the more motivated the student will be to practice.

Rather than bemoan the lack of practice skills, teachers must teach students how to practice much in the same way he or she teaches vocal skills. By instructing the student and by modeling the practice method in the lesson, students will catch on, especially after they begin to see results.

Initial impressions and global understanding

One of the most important first steps is the selection of repertoire for study. Repertoire is the "laboratory" for exploring and developing necessary technical and expressive skills. Additionally, repertoire that resonates with students musically and textually will help inspire them to put in the work necessary to improve and grow. The selection should excite the student, or at the very least, arouse his or her curiosity. This curiosity will be the motivation to take the first steps toward bringing the music to life[3]:

- *Read the text* – It doesn't seem possible for a singer to perform without ever having considered the text, but any teacher can attest that it happens regularly, particularly if the text is in a foreign language. This is inexcusable, and you must read the song's text very early in the process of learning the song. If the song is in a foreign language, a literal, word-for-word translation is necessary[4]. It is helpful, even if the

[3] Throughout this text, bullet points are intended for the singer, and are written in the second person.

[4] If the singer is not familiar enough with a language to create his or her own translation, there are many key resources available in a good library, including *Word by Word Translations of Songs and Arias* by Berton Coffin, Pierre Bernac's *The Interpretation of French Song*, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's *The Fischer-Dieskau Book of Lieder,* Timothy LeVan's *Masters of the Italian Art Song* and in opera, Nico Castel's extensive *Complete Libretti* series. Internet resources include the Lied and Art Songs Texts Page (http://www.recmusic.org/lieder) and the Aria Database (http://www.aria-database.com). For further references, please see a selected bibliography from the University of Michigan (http://www.lib.umich.edu/music/services/translations.shtml)

song is in English, to find or make a copy of the text that is separate from the music, allowing you to focus solely on the words. Read through the text several times until the meaning is clear. Look up words that are unfamiliar; in foreign texts, find several translations of important words. Pay close attention to words and phrases that particularly resonate with you, both positively and negatively, as they will be important in later steps. Try to discern the general story the text is telling.

- *Listen to the music*. Whether listening to a recording or listening to yourself sing and play the music, listen a bit absent-mindedly at first, as a listener would, and pay attention to what strikes you. Then, listen again. Begin to try to understand the connection between the music and the poetry (I will discuss this in more detail shortly).

Given the preceding statements about practice, it may seem counterintuitive to suggest the first steps of practice are not singing at all, and can be done from the comfort of an armchair or computer chair. Without a roadmap, though, singers can easily get lost in all the black ink on the page, so it really is the crucial first step.

Woodshedding

After the work has been selected and the initial study has been done, the process of learning the piece begins in earnest. It is time for the singer to go out to the "woodshed" and work on the ugly parts in a safe place. The purpose of woodshedding is to identify problems and to rehearse them correctly again and again to build muscle memory early on so that technical problems will not interfere with expression later. This involves working with an eye toward technical details of notes, rhythms, pronunciations, and an ear to vocal production. This is the one step of the process where it is allowable to divorce technical and expressive components. As already mentioned, practice must be accurate to prevent mistakes from becoming habits; "perfect practice makes perfect."

- *Read through the piece*. Literally read the piece from top to bottom. Do not sing yet, but use your mind's ear to hear the piece. Put parentheses around phrases that cause you to stumble. Once a phrase is marked, move on. The point is not to fix problems at this point, but to identify them. Do not sing until this step is complete, lest you begin to habituate mistakes.
- *Strategize* – Consider the phrases you have marked and come up with a plan for solving the problem. You are less likely to make a mistake in the first place if you have a plan.
    - Pitch problems can usually be solved by playing the phrase on the piano, and then singing the melody back, repeating the steps until the pitches are correct and feel comfortable.
    - Rhythm problems typically require identifying the count, then slowly counting the rhythm out loud until it is correct and feels comfortable. Gradually increase speed to the performance tempo. Finally, add text, then notes, until the rhythm makes sense in context.
    - Pronunciation problems are usually fixed by speaking the troublesome word or phrase slowly and correctly numerous times until it is no longer difficult to say. Gradually increase speed. Finally, sing the text in context until it no longer causes you to trip over it.
    - Technical problems may be difficult to solve without consulting a teacher or coach. Once a problem is identified, see if it is similar to a problem you have solved elsewhere in the piece or in another piece and try to apply a similar solution.
- *Put trouble spots in their context* – Get yourself in performance mode. Start far enough ahead of the trouble spot so that you encounter it in roughly the same conditions you would in performance[5]. Do not stop until you are well into the

[5] For example, the high F# at the end of The Count's aria from *Le nozze di Figaro* is not difficult just because it is high; it is difficult because it requires the singer to master the pacing of the highly active phrases leading up to the high note without having the chance to stop for a full breath and prepare for the note before singing it.

phrase following the trouble spot. In this way, you implement your plan, rather than merely fix the problem.

- *Evaluate* – Did the plan work?
  - If so, try to lock that moment into memory – what exactly did you feel, hear, and see? Make notes, whether mental or on paper. Try to sing it out of context again to check for accuracy.
  - If the plan did not work, consider other options. Do not be afraid to try things that seem wrong; at this point, there is no "wrong," merely useful and not useful. Try to remember that many times the best solutions come from forgetting about technique and focusing on something else. Try a lot of different things in quick succession and see if any achieve results. Consider also that perhaps it is not the solution that is wrong, but the degree to which it was implemented.
- *Cement it or let it go* – Depending on whether you found something that worked, you will either want to put the trouble spot back in context or to let it go and move on to the next trouble spot.
  - *Put the spot back in context* – If you are successful, try it one or two more times in context to build muscle memory. This allows the left brain to give up conscious control of the trouble spot, and allows the mind, voice, and body to sing freely, instinctively, and without the "critic's" interference.
  - *Let it go* – Particularly if you are not consistently successful, you must let it go. Tomorrow is another day, and continuing to practice a mistake will only compound the problem by making you feel worse in addition to habituating failure. If you are not successful after a couple of days, you will definitely want to talk to someone you trust so you can come up with another plan.

INVESTIGATIVE WORK: WORDS, CHARACTERIZATION, AND MUSIC

At some point during these initial steps, the singer or teacher will begin to get the sense that practice is becoming stale and that it is time to move on. Though the music may still be in need of some woodshedding, it is permissible to move on to detail work, provided the global work is done. The deeper a singer examines the text, character, and music, the more expressive he or she will be able to become.

Making sense of language

An inexperienced singer typically does not concern him- or herself too much with the rhythm of the text or its grammatical structure. After all, isn't it the composer's job to set the text in a way that makes the text come alive? Leaving the text on the page, though, is like leaving an unlocked treasure chest unopened, for there is so much about the way a writer crafts language that can serve as clues about meaning and intent. Opening this treasure trove requires a close examination of the text's rhythmic and grammatical structures.

Hierarchy of words

One definition of diction is one's "choice of words, especially with regard to whether they are correct, clear and effective in expressing [a] thought." (Forward, 2001, p. 13) Even though singers' words are provided by poets, writers, and librettists, singers must express texts as clearly and with as much conviction as if they are original to the singer. Additionally, a singer must be able to maintain the sense of a line of text even if a composer sets it in a less-than-ideal manner. For that, the singer "needs a *conscious* grasp of English structure to understand how the listener receives lyric messages." (Uris, 1971, p. 21) Dorothy Uris's thoughtful (1971) concept of *sense stress* – "The prominence of those words of a phrase or sentence to which proportionate attention of the hearer is directed, thus revealing the relation of the ideas" (Uris, p. 20) – is indispensible in the preparation of texts, both sung and spoken, and has been positively transformational in my own singing and teaching.

In order to understand the sense of a line of text, one must first understand the hierarchy of words within that text.

- *Action verbs* and *nouns* are of primary importance in any text. (p. 22) If an audience misses them, a statement will simply not make sense, leaving the audience to rely on context to fill in the blanks.
- *Modifiers* are of secondary importance and include adjectives, adverbs, and negations. They are often the most colorful words in a text and "singers have the interpretive option of emphasizing [them] strongly," but even so, the primary words "will dominate structurally." (p. 24)
- Any other words are structurally unimportant, including articles, conjunctions, linking verbs, prepositions, and pronouns (p. 31). These words may be emphasized, however, in order to clarify the meaning of a text or to verify the truthfulness or validity of a statement. If one hears "it was the *Ninth* **Symphony**[6]," one is most likely to call to mind Beethoven's great Choral Symphony. Likewise, if one hears "he was cheating," there is the implication that someone had questioned the statement and the speaker wishes to emphasize its validity.

Consider Robert Herrick's poem *To daisies, not to shut so soon* (Hale, 1895). The primary words of its first verse are "**shut**…**night**…**begun**…**make**…**seizure**…**light**…**seal**…**sun**." If these are the only words a listener hears clearly, he or she can still get a broad sense that the poem has something to do with the onset of night. The secondary words by themselves do not make the same sort of sense on their own: "*not so soon…dull-eyed…not…yet…"* They assist the primary words: "**Shut** *not so soon…dull-eyed* **night**...*not…yet* **begun...make…seizure…light…seal…sun**." Note the importance of the negations in the line; without them the listener would hear the line as a directive for night to close in, the opposite of the poem's intent. Finally, the remaining unimportant words (the, has, as, to, a, on, or, up) fill out the text:

Shut *not so soon*; the *dull-ey'd* **night**
Has *not* as *yet* **begun**
To **make** a **seizure** on the **light**,
Or to **seal** up the **sun**.

[6] Throughout this section, primary words will be indicated by bold face, secondary words by italics, unimportant words by reduced size, and emphasized unimportant words by underlining.

One of my favorite examples of what happens when important words are obscured is the poem *Jabberwocky*, in which Lewis Caroll (1902) completely obscured the meaning of the text by replacing primary and secondary words with nonsense.

'Twas *brillig*, and the *slithy* **toves**
did **gyre** and **gimble** in the **wabe**.
All *mimsy* were the **borogroves**,
and the *mome* **raths outgrabe**.

Some might be surprised that pronouns are included in the group of unimportant words. Typically, the pronoun's antecedent is fairly clear, so there is no reason to emphasize it. It is when clarity is needed, though, that one may consider promoting the pronoun. An example is Sergeant Meryll's line in the trio of *The Yeomen of the Guard*, in which he sings, "The **air** I **breathe**, to <u>him</u> I **owe**: My **life** is <u>his</u> – I count it *naught*." Up to this point, the characters have been discussing the plan to free Colonel Fairfax; since this is the first time the focus switches to the Colonel himself, Sullivan intentionally placed the words "him" and "his" (referring to Colonel Fairfax) on strong beats to give them emphasis. In similar cases whenever the unimportant word is crucial to the clarity of the sense of the text, pronouns should be thusly promoted.

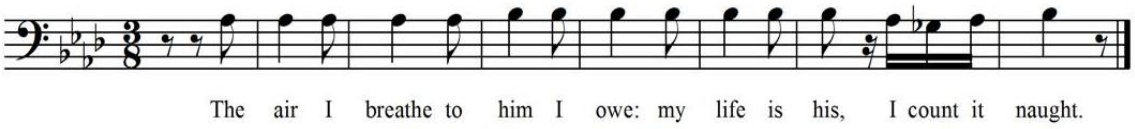

Figure 2: Excerpt from *Alas, I waver to and fro* from Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Yeomen of the Guard*.
Note the words are placed on downbeats for emphasis

Verse and meter: the music of the text

Another kind of detail work involves the rhythm of the text itself. The syllabic stress of a text – its pattern of strong and weak syllables – is particularly important in verse, otherwise known as accentual-syllabic verse, "the verse system which involves such patterns as 'iambic,' 'dactylic,' etc." (Hollander, 1989/1981, p. 3). In this system, each line of text has a set *foot* or pattern of stresses, and in many cases, a meter of a set number of feet per line. For example, iambic pentameter – one of the most typical meters, also known as blank verse – contains five weak-strong iambic feet per line. It reads like so:

A patriot both the king and country serves:
Prerogative and privilege preserves:
Of each our laws the certain limit show;
One must not ebb, nor th' other overflow:
Betwixt the prince and parliament we stand;
The barriers of the state on either hand
(Dryden, 2005/1699)

Though important, the choice of foot or meter is less important than the way in which it is used and varied. The writer can change the lines by adding or subtracting feet, by stopping or continuing the lines, and by changing the rhythm of the line. When the rhythm is varied from the fundamental meter, it should give pause, for a writer's change from the basic meter is not an arbitrary choice.

The writer can make a line *over-full* by adding more beats than expected, giving the line a sense of exuberance and of overflowing, as in this continuation of Dryden's poem:

May neither overflow, for then they drown *the land*.
When both are full, they feed our bless'd abode;
Like those that water'd once the paradise *of God*.

Lines that are *under-full* not only appear empty, they sound empty because the missing feet are expected and still "sound" in the reader's mind. Take, for example, the following moment, the gravity of which is heightened by the use of under-full lines in a field of blank verse.

Macbeth: Direness, familiar to my slaught'rous thoughts
cannot once start me. Wherefore was that cry?
Seyton: The queen, my Lord, is dead (xxx XXX xxx XXX) [7]
Macbeth: (xxx XXX xxx XXX) She should have died hereafter.
There would have been a time for such a word.
(Shakespeare, 1906, p. 1028)

It takes Macbeth a few moments to let the news of the queen's death sink in. On the other hand, if the actor maintains the inner pulse of the words through the pause, he will not take too much time, which seems appropriate given his following statement that time is short.

[7] The *x*'s are added merely to show the empty beats. Since there is no marking to clarify where the empty beats are supposed to be, the actor can choose to place them at the beginning or the end of the line. I have chosen what I believe to be the best option – one long pause between Seyton's line and Macbeth's.

One other element to consider is whether the line ends with a stressed or unstressed syllable. The unstressed or *feminine* ending can be used to suggest thoughts that are ongoing, while a stressed or *masculine* ending causes the line to sound finished and final. Particularly when the final syllable is also the end of a thought, the line is said to be *end-stopped*. Take, for example, Hamlet's famous monologue. The first four lines have an added unaccented syllable at their ends, giving them feminine endings; it is as if Hamlet is lost deep in thought, trailing off into the world of his mind at the end of each line. When he begins to come to a conclusion, though, the additional syllables at the lines' ends are dropped, and the masculine endings seem much more definitive as Hamlet plans to take action.

> To be, or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them? To die, to sleep—
> No more—and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
> (From *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, 1906, p. 911)

Writers may not be entirely able to dictate the pacing of readings of their texts, but they may use several literary tools to assist in that endeavor. When the writer allows an idea to spill from one line into the next, a concept called *enjambment,* the lines form a single thought and the words trip along. For example, a reader does not stop after the word "suffer" at the end of line two, but continues directly on to the next line because the two lines form a single thought[8]. The concept of enjambment also typically means that a line seems to be complete when one reaches the end, but as the text moves on to the next line, the meaning changes. On the other hand, writers also suspend time with a *caesura* using punctuation or visual space: it causes one to stop and take notice. Perhaps this first line is one of the most famous examples – not to pause after "To be or not to be" simply sounds wrong. When a writer uses a caesura or

[8] When preparing texts, I often rewrite enjambed lines together in order to maintain the integrity of the idea and to help the lines make sense together, like so:
"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,"

enjambment, one can only hope a composer will follow suit; if the composer goes against the writer's intentions, the singer must find a way to retain it if possible.

Though writers typically try to maintain the meter, it is common to vary the rhythm. This variation is hardly arbitrary, and has the striking effect of drawing attention to the incorrect foot. Notice the second line of Hamlet's monologue begins with a dactylic word, "whether." Though the word seems innocuous enough, the switched foot should call some attention to it. If the actor gives the word a slight stress as a consequence, then he would likely also stress the word "or" in the fourth line, causing that line to begin with a trochee, as well. By slightly enhancing these two reversed feet, the idea of "*whether* this *or* that" will be perceived by the listener, and the depth of the dilemma Hamlet faces will be made explicit[9].

In the Twentieth Century, writers began moving away from regular metrical systems and began to favor free verse. While devices such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, echo, and rhyme[10] had long been used to make words "sing," they became structurally significant in free verse. Figurative language and rhetorical tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, irony, synecdoche, hyperbole, and metalepsis also became more important[11]. Just like meter and rhyme, these literary devices must be taken into consideration when exploring the meaning of a text.

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[9] There are several ways the stress pattern could be interpreted: "OR to take ARMS" (Trochee-iamb, the simplest and the one I believe Shakespeare intended), "OR to TAKE ARMS" (trochee-spondee, also a likely candidate, since it emphasizes both noun and verb), "or to TAKE ARMS" (pyrrhus-spondee, possible), or "or TO TAKE ARMS" (iamb-spondee, unusual, with its accent on "to").

[10] Alliteration – words beginning with the same consonant sound. E.g., "shoe shine"
Consonance – words end in the same consonant sound. E.g., "light-weight"
Assonance – words contain the same internal vowel. E.g., "nine miles high"
Rhyme – the final vowel and consonant sounds are the same. E.g., "fine wine"
(Michael Cherlin, "Music and Text" course notes, Spring 2007)

[11] Verbal Irony – The discrepancy between what is said and what is meant.
Dramatic irony – The difference between what the audience knows and what the characters know.
Metonymy – Something tangible substituting for something intangible.
Metaphor – A parallel is drawn between two objects that are not necessarily associated.
Synechdoche – The part stands for the whole or vice versa.
Hyperbole – Exaggeration to provide emphasis.
Metalepsis – A figure that refers us to yet another figure or requires an additional imaginative leap; the troping of a trope. (Michael Cherlin, "Music and Text" course notes, Spring 2007)

Finding your character

The steps thus far have been fairly heavily left-brained. As the singer becomes more familiar with the text, though, some of the details and subtleties he or she may not have noticed before will begin to come into focus. This next phase allows the right and left halves of the brain to work in tandem to help shoo away the clouds of mystery. The singer begins to approach the piece as a detective, to investigate the details of the text and music, and to draw creative conclusions from them[12].

Questions of identity

Poetic texts are a small window into a much larger world. If a singer has not spent enough time looking through the window to investigate every possible aspect of that world, he or she will certainly not be able to give a clear picture to the person who hears him or her sing. "Whether you feel you are playing someone else or you are yourself singing the words, the same basic acting principles apply. You must find the meaning and emotion of the words in yourself first, then communicate them to the audience." (Forward, 2001, p. 250) The importance of spending time getting to know one's character in any piece of music cannot be overstated.

Now is the time to begin asking what Stanislavski calls "the magic *if*" – "What would I do if I were in [my character's] position?" (Moore, 1984, p. 25) This is the point to let the imagination wander, to come up with numerous choices, and to enjoy the art of the possible. The singer has quite a bit of latitude in making character choices, and in general, anything that is not forbidden is allowed. The singer should avoid judging his or her ideas at this point – the more creative he or she can be at this point, the more vibrant the piece will be in the end. Ultimately, what is the truest for the singer will sort itself out over time.

[12] Since the needs of each singer and each selection differ, the singer should work through the following steps in the order that will seem to work best, not necessarily in the order in which they are presented here.

- *Who* are you?
    - What is your character's social background?
      (economic status, religion, family, relationships, etc.)
    - How old is your character? What does he/she wear?
    - Does your character work? Have hobbies?
      How long has he/she been doing these things?
    - What are your character's vices? Virtues?
      Psychological/personal/interpersonal issues?
- *What* is the fundamental problem, situation, cause, and/or "setup?"
  What over-arching issue are you trying to solve?
  What do you want? Why do you want the things you want?
- *Where* are you? How is the weather? What do you see from your point of view?
- *When* does this occur (era, year, season, month, day, time of day, etc.)?
- *Why* am I singing this right now? Why am I compelled to open my mouth and sing?
  What has happened immediately preceding this, the "moment before?"
- *How* does your character look, act, and feel? How do you stand? How do you move?
  How do you speak[13]? How do you interact with others?

In the end, it is the way in which the singer answers these questions that helps to answer the magic *if*. The more specific one is, the more clearly one will answer the question. Asking, "What would I do if I were in Don Giovanni's position" is very different than "What would I do if I were in the position of a nobleman named Don Giovanni who travels through Europe with my servant and seeks to seduce women in my unique and godlike way to give them a gift of awakening?" The answer to the second question will be far clearer than the first.

Action within units

Once the singer knows his or her character fairly well, he or she will want to examine the moment-to-moment development of the character. Actors call each discrete moment a *beat* or a *unit*. To quote Stanislavski,

[13] In English selections, you should know fairly early in the process whether your selection calls for proper/British diction or not. Factors to consider are your audience, the nationality of the writer of the text (and composer for musical selections), the setting of the scene, and the acoustic setting in which you will be performing.

> The technique of division is comparatively simple. You ask yourself: "What is the core of the [piece] — the thing without which it cannot exist?" Then you go over the main points without entering into detail… What is essential to it?... You now have a general notion of how to divide a play into its component units, and how to mark out a channel to guide you through it. (Stanislavski 1988/1936, pp. 115-116)

Within each moment is a single objective, one single thing the singer is trying to accomplish. When that objective is clear and the situation is approached with honesty, the actions – the things the singer does to achieve the objective – will also become clear and meaningful, not just to the singer but to the audience as well. According to Stanislavski, "An actor must learn to recognize quality, to avoid the useless, and to choose essentially right objectives," (Stanislavski 1988/1936, p. 118) and gives the following characteristics:

1. They must be on our side of the footlights. They must be *directed toward the other actors*, and not toward the spectators.

2. They should be *personal* yet analogous to those of the character you are portraying.

3. They must be *creative and artistic* because their function should be to fulfill the main purpose of our art: to create the life of a human soul and render it in artistic form.

4. They should be *real, live, and human*, not dead, conventional, or theatrical[14].

5. They should be *truthful* so that you yourself, the actors playing with you, and your audience can believe in them.

6. They should have the quality of *attracting and moving you*.

7. They must be *clear cut* and typical of the role you are playing. They must tolerate no vagueness. They must be distinctly *woven into the fabric of your part*.

[14] Bear in mind that Stanislavski's admonition against "theatrical" is not an admonition against large actions but against hammy ones. In fact, actions must be large to read from the back of the house; the actor needs to find a way to inhabit that large gesture to make it real.

8. They should have *value and content*, to correspond to the inner body of your part. They must not be shallow, or skim along the surface.

9. They should be *active*, to push your role ahead and not let it stagnate.
(Stanislavski 1988/1936, pp. 118-119, emphasis added)

The ideas sound simple enough, but they do not come easily at first. Even when singers think their objectives are clear, they often stutter and search for words when a coach or director stops and asks, "What are you doing?" Since a good objective must be clear and simple, a good formula is "I want you to do or feel (something)." (Paul Douglas Michnewicz, course notes, Sept 2002). A simple example is a little boy who wants a toy his sister is playing with; in the above syntax, the boy would say "I want you to give me the toy."

Theatre is inherently complex, so a direct path to the objective would be uninteresting. An *obstacle* is anything that stands between the actor and the objective; what the actor does to overcome the obstacle and to achieve his or her objective is the *action*. Consider our little boy who must overcome the obstacle of his sister currently playing with the toy. He can take many actions to try to overcome the obstacle; he could ask nicely, demand the toy, grab the toy, hit his sister and steal the toy, cry until his sister gives him the toy, or go to a parent to get the toy for him.

This example of the little boy is a particularly good one because the objective is clearly stated, the obstacle is obvious, and the action has a clearly associated active verb; unfortunately, not all objectives are so clear. Consider, for example, an atmospheric poem; it may be hard to determine who is being addressed. Bear in mind, the addressee does not necessarily need to be physically present. The addressee can be God, oneself, someone not present, or an object; the addressee can also exist at any moment in time, and is not necessarily limited to the present moment.

Inexperienced performers may be tempted to "play an emotion," performing the lines in such a way as to embody a certain feeling. Though emotions can certainly be a useful tool to help uncover the objectives and actions of a unit, particularly for kinesthetic learners, and provide suggestions for the sort of action to take, emotions alone lack the specificity of clear

objectives. Back to the example of the little boy – simply “being sad” or “being angry” are not enough to achieve the objective. However, the emotion would make him act differently in each case, and the action rooted in the emotion will be the means by which he achieves his objective. If the boy is sad, he might cry until his sister gives him the toy, or if he is angry, he might hit his sister; in the sense of achieving the objective, neither is more right than the other.

Bear in mind that the diction and inflection one uses can communicate just as effectively as a gesture. For example, if the singer “spits” the consonants of a phrase, he or she will seem angry, and a possible objective is, “I want you to feel ashamed / inferior / dirty.” If one colors one’s voice darkly, a possible objective could be, “I want you to feel afraid.” As mezzo-soprano Michelle Rice so succinctly stated, “Diction is action.” (personal communication, Fall 2002).

If diction is action, what is the singer to do when there is no text? He or she must still be fully involved in the moment. If the singer is not singing at all, then he or she must still “sing the rests” by creating a scenario and filling it with its own intentions, actions, and obstacles. Likewise, when the composer assigns a hum, an “ah,” or another vowel, the singer must do more than make beautiful tones, but continue to play objectives, actions, and attitudes. Rather than being moments of emptiness, the singer should challenge him- or herself to make the moment of silence and moments of abstraction just as important and just as full of meaning as moments that employ text.

Musical elements

Fortunately, the singer is not alone in the journey to find his or her character; the composer does much of the initial work. Many times, a close look at the music’s structure can clarify the division of important dramatic units; investigation of the musical language can clarify the character’s emotional state and, therefore, his or her objective. One must ask, “Why did the composer write the music this way? How else could he or she have written it, and how would that change its effect and meaning? What did he or she see in the text to suggest the markings

on the page?" By uncovering the composer's intent, the singer and composer become an effective team[15].

Though traditional theoretical models of musical analysis can be useful in their own right, a recent framework based on the literature of musical communication may be of particular help when examining the intent of the music. "Performance expression is better thought of as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, consisting of five components of expression…collectively [referred] to as the GERMS model." (Juslin, 2003, p. 281) GERMS is an acronym for generative – i.e. structural – components, emotion, randomness, motion, and stylistic unexpectedness.

- *Generative/Structural elements:*
  - What is the general shape of the piece? Does it match that of the poem?
  - How is the piece structured? Are there distinct sections?
  - If the poem or the music is structured by verses, how do the verses differ?
  - How long are the phrases? Are they balanced or uneven?
  - Where is the music going? How does the music build? Where does it climax?
  - Do the phrases close or continue the suspense into successive phrases?
  - How do the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic structures shape the work?
  - Where are there textural shifts and color changes? What do they suggest?
  - Do themes and motives help define the structure and tell the story?
  - What might the musical elements and gestures represent?
  - Are the voice and instrument(s) equal partners? Does the accompaniment have its own voice, or does it simply support the singer?
  - Is there repetition of musical material or text? Musical sequences? If so, how do they vary, and how can one make each variation distinct?[16]

[15] These questions are provided as points of departure, and though every question can be answered about every piece, the ones that seem most and least obvious are the ones that probably deserve the most attention.

[16] This ties into the word play exercises in the next section. When one is presented with repeated text or music, each repetition must be different than the last, either in intention or intensity; the same is true for a list or a musical sequence.

- Does the composer use sounds that turn the voice into an instrument, like a hum or an "ah?" What could this mean?

- *Emotional elements:*
  - What is the general mood of the piece?
  - What musical elements contribute to the overall mood(s), particularly happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and tenderness? (See Figure 3)
  - How does the piece build to its climax? How is that resolved?
  - At what points are there emotional changes?
  - How do the emotions ebb and flow as the piece progresses?
- *Randomness*[17]*:*
  - Is randomness built into the piece in any way?
  - What moments seem complex and could lead to difficulties in consistent execution?
- *Motion:*
  - Does the movement of the piece feel natural? Does it walk, run, or swim? How is time altered?
  - Does the pace remain consistent? Does it surge ahead or hold back?
  - Does the natural flow of the spoken text match the music?
- *Stylistic Unexpectedness:*
  - What moments seem surprising?
  - At surprising moments, what is it that the listener is expecting?
  - How do the musical surprises relate to the elements of structure, emotion, randomness, and motion? How do they relate to the text?
  - What textual elements are surprising? How are they handled in music?

[17] Randomness actually pertains more to the performer than the piece itself. Usually, though, the more technically challenging a spot is, the more likely the voice or instrument is to sound different from one performance to the next.

	Happiness	Sadness	Anger	Fear	Tenderness
Tempo	Fast	Slow	Fast	Fast	Slow
Tempo variability	Small		Small	Large	
Mode	Major	Minor	Minor	Minor	Major
Harmony	Simple & consonant	Dissonance	Atonality & dissonance	Dissonance	Consonance
Sound level	Medium-high	Low	High sound levels	Low sound levels	Medium-low
Sound level variability	Small	Moderate	Small	Large; rapid changes	Small
Pitch	High	Low	High	High	Low
Pitch variability	Much	Narrow	Small		
Pitch range	Wide			Wide	Fairly narrow
Pitch direction	Ascending	Descending	Ascending	Ascending	
Intervals	Perfect 4^{th}s & 5^{th}s	Small (e.g. minor 2^{nd})	Major 7^{th} and augmented 4^{th}	Large pitch contrasts	
Intonation	Rising micro-intonation	Flat or falling			
Singer's formant	Raised	Lowered	Raised		Lowered
Articulation	Staccato	Legato	Staccato	Staccato	Legato
Articulation variability	Large	Small	Moderate	Large	Small
Rhythm	Smooth & fluent		Complex; sudden rhythmic changes (e.g. syncopations)	Jerky	
Timbre	Bright	Dull	Sharp; spectral noise	Soft	Soft
Tone attacks	Fast	Slow	Fast; fast decays	Soft	Slow
Timing variability	Small	Large (e.g. rubato); Pauses; ritardando	Small; accelerando	Very large; pauses	Moderate
Contrasts between long and short notes	Sharp	Soft	Sharp		Soft
Accents on			Tonally unstable notes		Tonally stable notes
Vibrato rate	Medium-fast	Slow	Medium-fast	Fast	Medium fast
Vibrato extent	Medium	Small	Large	Small	Small
Micro structural regularity	Regularity	Irregularity	Irregularity	Irregularity	Regularity

Figure 3: Summary of musical features correlated with discrete emotions in musical expression most commonly found in the literature. Blank cells reflect Juslin's lack of indication of the specific characteristic as a factor influencing the perception of emotion. (Juslin, 2005, p. 96)

As an example, let's take a moment to examine the simple but densely packed opening phrase of Ernest Chausson's *Le Charme* (Fig. 4). Structurally, the phrase is well-balanced, ending on the dominant chord in the second bar, and journeying to the tonic chord in the fourth bar.

The fact that Chausson opens with a dominant chord, rather than the tonic, is the least bit disorienting at first, but seems to suggest entering the scene *in medias res*. Emotionally, the phrase fits most of the characteristics of tenderness, including major key, steady motion, and narrow range. Due to the simplicity of the phrase, and particularly its stepwise motion in the voice line, there is not much chance for random error, except for the leap of a fourth on "frémir" (shiver); should the note land not quite in the center of pitch, the resulting adjustment may actually contribute to the sound of a shiver in the voice. Motion plays a crucial role in the line, and the ambling eighth notes of the first bar slow to quarter notes and finally a half note pace at "frémir," the phrase seems to slow comfortably from a stroll to a near stop, though with a bit of a misstep and shake on the last beat of bar three. Finally, the line is full of surprising moments that deftly paint the text. The way in which the motion switches from eighths to quarters is slightly jarring because the pattern is broken in the second bar when the treble "jumps" an eighth note pulse and sounds on the downbeat with the bass, leaving a gap on the offbeat, which nicely paints the word "surprit" (surprise) that immediately follows. The voice and treble line ascend to the third at the end of the fourth bar rather than drop to the tonic as the ear might expect. The tonic would sound more "closed," more final, but avoidance of the tonic makes the phrase end sound tentative. It is as if the singer is just a bit nervous to admit his or her love to the beloved and even a bit jumpy, considering the premature arrival of the bass F on the downbeat of bar four.

Notice that this analysis is based in the music and text and does not make any wild interpretive leaps. Consequently, as long as the singer and pianist perform the phrase correctly, it is possible that they will convey all these ideas implicitly, even if they are unaware of the underlying symbolism. Awareness is undoubtedly better, though, as it will help the musicians connect to the work. In more elaborate and less obvious musical setting, one may have to make creative leaps. Though it is generally advisable to stick with what the composer seems to have intended, unusual choices are not necessarily wrong, provided the musicians can totally commit to them and they do not contradict the suggestions of the composer's music. Whatever the case, the performers must strive for more than just an accurate musical portrayal, but an enlightened one, allowing performer and listener alike the chance to connect to a piece's humanity and universality.

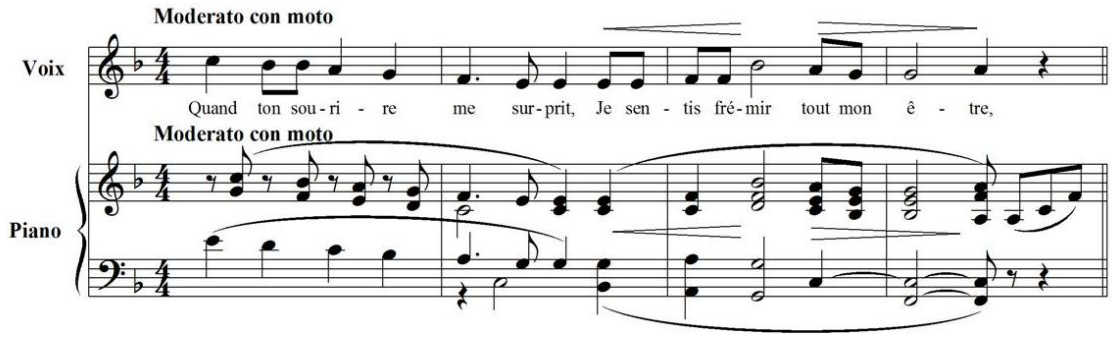

Figure 4: mm 1-4 of Ernest Chausson's *Le charme*. Translation: "When your smile surprised me, I felt all my being tremble."

EXPRESSIVE PLAY: VOICE, BODY, AND INSTINCT

As the singer refines the musical interpretation and develops a clear point of view about the meaning of the text and music, he or she begins to narrow the choices to a short list of possibilities for performance. From the investigative work, the singer now moves to the "sandbox" phase, where there is the opportunity to get the piece "on its feet," and see how the possibilities he or she has identified might work in performance. On the way to truly owning the piece, the singer must devote attention to diction and physicality.

Words

The singer's ability to clearly and effectively deliver a text is crucial if he or she wishes to communicate with his or her audience. Teachers insist on good diction – that is, clear delivery of spoken or sung text – and audiences find it "very important" in order to understand what is going on (Fine & Ginsborg, 2007, p. 256)[18].

> [Diction] isn't an "add-on." It's a fundamental part of "playing the instrument." If you aren't understood, you aren't communicating. If you aren't communicating, you might as well not be singing. (Shannon McGinnis in Gloss, 2009, p. 56)

[18] This result pertains to text in the audience's native language; when asked about the importance of diction in foreign language, only 17% of respondents rated understandability as "very important." (Fine & Ginsborg, 2007, p. 256) Since American classical singers can and do sing for foreign audiences, though, I believe good diction is still crucial.

The singer's duty: "Articulate, pronunciate, enunciate. Spit."[19]

In the Stanislavski Opera Studio, students were taught that "The first [of two main objectives] was to achieve expressive, incisive diction, thanks to which they could convey clearly and colorfully the words they sang…. 'Not a single word must fail to reach the audience.' That was the 'leitmotiv' of Stanislavski's work with singers.[20]" (Rumyantsev & Stanislavski, 1998, p. 4) It would be a shame for all the preparation of the character, music, and text to be for naught.

Diction, in its most familiar definition, is mechanical in nature and encompasses articulation, enunciation, and pronunciation. According to Uris, "*Articulation* refers more specifically to the adjustment and movement of speech organs…. *Enunciation* emphasizes clarity in [delivering] words resulting in ease of perception by the listener. *Pronunciation*…is 'the act or result of producing the sounds of speech.'" (Uris, p. 14) If any element is compromised, the words become muffled or distorted and difficult to understand. Incorrectly enunciated consonants, overly modified vowels, and a singer's other idiosyncrasies can obscure the text or render it unintelligible. On the opposite end, some singers become overzealous and their over-enunciation can be almost as distracting as muffled singing – the listener may clearly hear every sound, but miss the sense of the line.[21] Consequently, the singer must find a happy medium by speaking through the text, and recording one's practice. The singer should try to place him- or herself in the position of the listener, making sure the primary, secondary, and emphasized unimportant words are clear. Over time, the singer will detect patterns and begin to find ways to adjust his or her singing to make it more understandable.

In addition to muffled or overzealous diction, singers must be careful of mispronunciations. This is particularly problematic in English because the language has numerous pronunciation rules and many exceptions to those rules. Additionally, English speakers are prone to regional variants of which they may or may not be aware. Singers must become familiar with their own idiosyncrasies which are inconsistent with standard stage

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[19] The exaggerated spoken delivery of this grammatically incorrect but humorous text was a choral warmup I observed Dr. Cornell Runestad of Wayne State College use at the Wayne State Summer Music Camp in the early 1990s.

[20] The other was freedom from tension while singing.

[21] I once heard a young tenor sing Handel's *Total Eclipse* and explode his *t*'s so violently I could focus on nothing else.

speech, including addition of sounds (['hwi.əl] for [hwil], ['sɪŋ.gɪŋg] for ['sɪŋ.ɪŋ]), deletion ([klæs] for [klæsp], [dɛps] for [dɛpθs]), or substitution of sounds ([æks] for [æsk], [heŋ] for [hæŋ], [tɪn] for [tɛn][22]). Since singers commonly encounter texts in foreign languages, the singer should take the text to someone with a good knowledge of the language – a vocal coach, voice teacher, or native speaker, for example – to make sure the language is understandable and to prevent unintentional and potentially embarrassing mistakes[23].

Prosody

Pronunciation is a subset of *prosody*, "the patterns of stress and intonation in a language" (Prosody, 2009), and it is prosody, not pronunciation, that makes a language distinct. Because of the emphasis on pronunciation, though, singers tend to underestimate the importance of prosody in singing. As with any of the left-brain-dominant fields, mechanical diction can be blown out of proportion, and singers sometimes need to be given permission to let go of details in order to move on to global elements[24]. It is my estimation that learning how to create the fundamental "music" of a language is just as important as pronouncing it correctly. It is incumbent on anyone learning a language, but particularly singers, to be conscious of prosody and learn how to hear the prosodic elements that make languages unique.

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[22] For those not familiar with IPA: whee-ul for wheel, sing-ging for singing, class for clasp, Depp's for depths, axe for ask, heng for hang, tin for ten.

[23] When preparing the Act I finale of *Don Pasquale*, my voice teacher burst out laughing when instead of singing "corriamo al gran cimento" (we are running to a great trial), I sang "cim̲iento," which, when sung a bit muffled, sounded to him very much like "scimietto;" "Corriamo al gran scimietto" meant "We are running to a great little monkey." In another example, I caution my students to be sure to close the first vowel of the Italian word "pene" (pain) ['pe.ne], because an open vowel would render the word ['pɛ.ne] – the Italian word for "penis."

[24] Many diction courses overemphasize the use of IPA and pronunciation rules, largely because these are quantifiable and therefore easily gradable. Though these are, indeed, crucial pieces of knowledge, they are not the be-all and end-all of diction study. Also, particularly analytical students can get wrapped up in the details and become afraid of making mistakes. Case in point: I had an excellent Italian diction course in my undergraduate studies, so much so that I became quite concerned about my Italian and really grew to dislike the language. This was largely due to the numerous strict rules I had to learn about opening and closing *e*'s and *o*'s. I only got over this years later when I asked Nico Castel what rule he suggested about *e*'s and *o*'s; he gave me a wry smile, simply said, "My dear boy," and walked on. He turned back and explained that *bel canto* singing only mandated the opening or closing of the vowels when accented, and in all other cases, it was what worked best for the individual.

When beginning to study a language, most individuals impose the prosody of the language(s) they know best upon it, but for singers, this is simply unacceptable[25]. One must listen to native speakers and excellent singers in order to begin to hear the subtle differences among languages. Videos, movies, and news broadcasts from other countries are excellent means by which to attune the ear. Another useful exercise is to observe native speakers of a language speak English – patterns of the target language will perhaps become clear when one hears them imposed on English in a non-colloquial way[26].

Listening may be helpful in training the ear in the sounds of a language, but singers must absorb, practice, and demonstrate the mastery of those sounds. Voice study in general and lyric diction classes specifically should include regular and extensive speaking exercises, such as reading texts aloud – song texts, opera libretti, news articles, and children's books are all good sources. Since the pace of speaking is so much faster than singing, even short texts provide excellent drills and help singers develop speech fluency. Singing in the language becomes easier with time, and instead of fearing languages, singers will hopefully develop a love for languages.

Obviously, there is no substitute for actual language study or spending time in another culture to truly understand a language. However, since most singers are excellent mimics and have good ear for sounds, it is possible for them to sound more fluent in a language than they really are, particularly when there is an understanding of the structure, diction, and prosody of languages. There is much more to be said on the subject of diction than can be presented here, and I would direct the reader to Mahaney's (2006) document surveying the use of different texts in college diction courses as an excellent starting point for finding further resources.

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[25] Consider leisure travelers who are perplexed when they aren't understood despite using a phrase book. This is only slightly different – but no less comic – than the beginning singer who croons, "Ah-merrrrr-rreallll-lee, me-uh bell-luh."

[26] Think of the stereotypical Italian chef, wildly gesticulating while lilting, "I'm-a gonna make-a you a pizza." Another example is the transcription the great Italilan tenor Enrico Caruso used when singing the National Anthem:

"Oseichen iu si bai de dons erli lait / Huat so praudli ui heil / Et de tuailaits lest glimin.
Hus brod straips end brait stars / Tru de perolos fait, / Or de ramparts ui fot / Uer so galantli strimin.
End de rochets red gler / De bombs berstin in er / Geiv pruf tru de nait / Det auer fleg uas stil dere.
Oseidos det star spangled / Bener iet weiv. / Or de lend o de fri / End de hom of de brev."
(Nico Castel, lecture handout, June 28, 2004)

When the text's music doesn't match the composer's

Ideally, the composer will place the most important words on the *strongest beats*, the *longest notes*, and the notes at the *peak or nadir of a phrase*, and avoid placing unaccented syllables and unimportant words in these places. Though many composers follow these rules, whether explicitly or by instinct, some do not. What is a singer to do when a composer sets text in a way that obscures the meaning of the text? The singer must make adjustments in order to minimize the awkwardness of a text's setting and has five main tools at his or her disposal to mitigate it[27]: (Uris, p. 26)

- *Volume* – If a word is overemphasized, it is easy enough to sing the word a little quieter than its neighbors. Likewise, one can sing an underemphasized word louder for it to be heard. Additionally, to assist the lead-up to a crucial word, one will naturally crescendo, and decrescendo as one falls away from the word.
- *Intensity* – The more intense the enunciation, the more noticeable the word will be; the reverse is also true, and less intense enunciation will decrease the attention called to a particular word.
- *Vocal quality/color* – If one sings a word or phrase with a specific timbre, color, or vocalism, it will be noticeably set apart. This is particularly useful when a word or phrase comes between a modifier and its object, and giving the parenthetical phrase its own color helps to establish both the parenthetical idea and the main idea.
- *Duration* – Though musicians are taught to obey the notations on the page, there are times when modifications are unavoidable. Common examples include shortening a note for a breath or lift, pulling back the tempo at the end of a section, and giving a bit of a "lilt" to a series of evenly spaced notes to make them sound more natural.
- *Pause* – Though some phrases may require inserting a grand pause or fermata, not all solutions need be this drastic. A common trick used by instrumentalists is to

[27] These rules must be applied within the prosody rules of the language being sung. With languages like French that do not have tonic stress, one must be careful not to impose them. Likewise with languages like Italian that minimize consonants, "spitting" consonants to emphasize the text would be a mistake.

"place" a note, lifting ever so slightly and delaying the beat for subtle emphasis. This does require careful coordination between the singer and pianist or conductor.

Many folk songs and hymns have terrible text setting. As an example, consider *My Country, 'tis of Thee*. Because the song is steeped in our culture and national identity, we turn a blind eye to its problems. The text begins: "My **coun**try, 'tis of thee / *sweet* **land** of **lib**erty, / of thee I **sing**." Important words are "Country…thee, sweet land… liberty… thee I sing," but when sung as written without expression, the stress of the music distorts the message into "My…'tis…sweet…lib(erty)…of…sing." Notice, the words that are missing all pertain to the indirect object, "country…land…thee;" the subject, "I," is also missing, though it can probably be deduced from context. Using intensity and volume, one can clarify the text, accenting the important syllables and singing unimportant words on strong beats softer, as notated here:

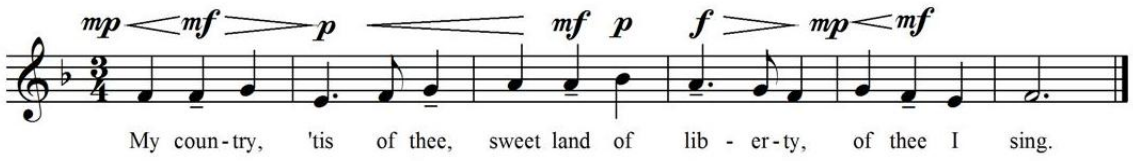

Figure 5: First phrase of *My Country 'tis of thee*
Dynamic and articulation markings are editorial.

Though editors have been known to insert such markings into music to try to help the text setting, it is really the singer's responsibility to determine for him- or herself what the best musical shape of a text should be if the text and markings on the page do not jibe. Over time, this adjustment will become instinctual. Without considering the differences between the sense of a text and the musical rhythms and phrase shapes of a piece of music, a singer leaves it more or less to chance whether his or her audience will be able to decode the message, no matter how knowledgeable the audience might be or how good a singer thinks he or she is.

Body and gesture

Many beginning singers focus so much on "the voice" that they neglect the physical aspects of singing. Thus, all manner of tensions develop in the body and face. Singers must first learn to sing without undue tension, because "the slightest physical tension can block what would otherwise be a free flow of communicating energy." (Balk, 1977, p. 52)

Practice should always begin with some sort of physical exercise to engage the muscles and the body. The sun salutation from yoga is an excellent warmup (Clark, 2002, p. 9). Another useful exercise is Clifton Ware's "rag doll" exercise:

> 1. Begin by lifting and stretching your hands overhead while taking a deep, relaxed breath. [Let your arms fall back to your side. Repeat this several times.]
>
> 2. Next, let your arms… [lead] your head and upper body into a bent-over position, with your arms and head dangling loosely and knees bent. While falling, let the air escape quickly with a lip-buzz [or siren].
>
> 3. While bent over… [dangle] loosely, hum a few "m-m-m-m's" as though expressing great delight over a yummy meal. [Place your hands on the small of your back and feel the expansion as you breathe into them. Relax enough that each breath causes your body to rise and fall.]
>
> 4. Gradually and slowly start to straighten up, beginning with the knees…, then the buttocks, up the spinal column to the shoulders, neck, and head, finally lifting the arms upward as though you're reaching for the sky, [all the while, keeping the abdominal muscles engaged]. When you reach a full-stretched position, observe the position of your chest, which should be fully expanded with a high breastbone (sternum).
>
> 5. Next, drop your arms while keeping your elevated chest position. The feeling you should aim for is an upward, buoyant stretch, as though you're being gently pulled by a rope or wire attached at the crown of your head… At the same time, your feet should be firmly planted on the ground approximately [shoulder width] apart, and your knees should remain flexibly unlocked. [Shake your entire body, roll your head, and shift your weight back and forth to release any remaining tension.] (Ware, 2004, p.9)

It is difficult to maintain stillness, and even trying to do so for thirty seconds can expose unfocused energy: hands and fingers move, weight shifts, shoulders rise and fall, etc. This is because the energy is not yet focused. Learning how to remain energized in stillness is essential, since so many of a singer's actions start from stillness. Developing a visceral awareness of groundedness takes time and practice, and even professional singers can benefit from a simple grounding exercise:

- *Locate your center of gravity* – Place your hands just below your belly-button, about two inches. Imagine a point about two inches inside. Let the breath fall into the body, imagining it sinking all the way to that spot. Be at your center of gravity by focusing your attention there; get out of your head. Close your eyes if you find it helpful.
- *Let the energy flow through you* – Imagine yourself growing roots down to the center of the earth. Imagine energy flowing from the center of the earth to your feet, through your center of gravity, out the crown of your head, and into space.
- *Scan for tension* – Do a quick head-to-toe scan of your body. Send energy to the spots that are tense and give them permission to release. Take as much time as you need.
- *Set an intention* – What do you want to accomplish in the practice in the next few minutes? Keep it simple and positive: "I will remain grounded." "I will make complete gestures." "I will focus on expression." "I will shut off self-critical talk."
- *Pick a reminder word* – Think about your intention. Find a single, short word or mantra tied to your intention that you can recall if you find yourself becoming ungrounded or drifting away from your intention. Anything short that is meaningful to you works: "God," "peace," "love," "fire," etc.
- *Adjust your energy level* – Some singers need to feel very calm in order to sing and move well, others need their energy extremely high. After you've opened your eyes, do something to help you achieve your optimum activation level. If you perform best at high energy levels, you may need to do something physical; do some jumping jacks or run up and down stairs, for example. If you need to be very calm, continue deep breathing. Listen to music that you like that helps you reach the right level. Do anything that will help you achieve your ideal focus. (Adapted from Greene, 1998)

Stanislavski required the students in his opera studio to move to music to help free the body of unnecessary tension and allow the body to move easily in coordination with the music. (Emmons & Sonntag, 2002/1979, p. 124) Learning to keep the body free while being confined to a particular rhythm can be challenging enough, let alone doing so while singing. This becomes

easier as one becomes aware of bodily tensions and of one's own natural gestural vocabulary before trying "to project physical and emotional energy." (Balk, 1977, p. 55)

- *What is your own gestural language?* – Take stock of the gestures you make in both every-day encounters and in moments of extreme emotion. Can they be translated to singing?
- *Build your gestural vocabulary* – Observe people. Watch good actors on the stage and on TV. Read lists of arbitrary gestures from books like Balk's *Performing Power* (1985, p. 207-208). Then, in a place where you are free from peering eyes, try to recreate these gestures, such as "one hand on hips," "both hands over head," etc. Do this in fairly rapid succession while staying grounded, energized, and filled with intention – no easy task!
- *Gesture while singing* – While you sing, try to incorporate arbitrary gestures. Do not judge them, because they will look silly at first, no two ways about it. Remain grounded. Try to understand, though, what the gesture makes you feel. Why would you be making the gesture? How can you "fill" this gesture? "Whether [you] agree with the concept is immaterial; how to make it work for [your]self and for the audience is the point." (Balk, 1977, p. 61)
- *Change the intensity* – Sometimes, singers may think an instinct to change requires a wholesale shift from one gesture to another. Often forgotten is the degree of intensity of a given moment; instead of shifting from an angry physicalization to one of misery, for example, why not ramp up the intensity of the anger from a three to an eight on a scale of ten?
- *Move to another gesture* – When the gesture becomes stale, change to another one. Consider what would motivate the change, then move smoothly when the moment feels right.

Gestures, as with emotions, can sometimes be the key to unlocking the meaning of a particular musical or textual phrase. On the other hand, the singer needs to be open to gestures that are inspired by the objectives, actions, and emotions one encounters in the text and music. Before being fully comfortable with gesture and movement, the singer may "twitch" because he

or she has an impulse to move, but doesn't know quite what to do. Singers must learn to detect these impulses and trust their instincts; though initial gestures are usually ill-formed and awkward, they often lead to growth and ultimately to the results for which the singer strives.

As much as one would hope that all this preparation would lead to expressive singing, "To leap to transcendence without a firm grounding in the reality of oneself can lead to the grandiose and the pompous – 'operatic acting.'" (Balk, 1977, p. 54) Even if the singer is grounded, free of tension, and capable of making large gestures, there is no guarantee that he or she will fill them with intent, resulting in nervous fingers, "superglued elbows,[28]" "ham and cheese" gesturing[29], awkwardly released gestures, and all manner of other "operatic" configurations. The underlying problem is the same – the singer has not made total sense of the moment and lacks confidence as a result. Not only do such moments feel awkward to the singer, they confuse the audience, who can detect when a performer is expressing no emotion (Gabrielsson & Juslin, 1996, p. 87). If a moment doesn't make sense to the singer, how can it make sense to the audience? If a singer admits this and reconsiders his or her choice of objective and how to motivate a change of objective, he or she will feel more confident, and will be more capable of filling the gesture with meaning and emotion.

Face and eyes

One of the things that helps make a performer believable is his or her face. The face is the main means by which people communicate non-verbally, and its primacy in non-verbal communication is possibly due to "a belief that the face reveals a great deal about a person's personality or character." (Knapp & Hall, 2006, p. 295) People can readily and accurately decode six main affects from facial expression: happiness, surprise, sadness, anger, disgust/contempt, and fear. (p. 56) The face is also capable of combining affects by simultaneously presenting contrasting expressions on different areas. (p. 302) It can "open and close channels of

[28] My term for what happens when singers feel self-conscious about gesturing, and keep the upper arms close to the body, causing it to appear that the singer cannot make a fuller gesture because the elbows have been attached to the body.

[29] My improv teacher at Maryland said the gestural vocabulary of most singers was limited to "ham" (an extended right hand with palm facing up) and "cheese" (the same on the left side).

communication, complement or qualify verbal and/or nonverbal responses, [and] replace speech." (p. 296) Needless to say, an inexpressive face can be a severe handicap for a singer.

Trained actors are taught to avoid overusing the face, lest they be accused of "indicating or mugging, the cardinal sin of Stanislavski-based acting methods" (Balk, 1985, p. 141); it seems it would be quite difficult to be fully expressive with the body, though, if one does not learn how to be expressive with the face and eyes, and vice versa. Consequently, it seems wise for the singer to learn to make facial expressions while singing:

- *Facial calisthenics* - Begin with some form of facial exercise. For example, look in different directions; move the bottom and top halves of the face in the same direction, then in different directions; expand and contract the face. (Balk, 1985, p. 240) Become aware of any tension in the face and work to release the tension.
- *Arbitrary attitudes* – Once the face feels pliable, move on to some expressive exercises by using arbitrary – though specific – attitudes, such as worried, explanatory, condescending, meek, monotonous, rapturous, etc.[30]
- *Applied arbitrary attitudes* – Next, try singing. Continue making arbitrary expressions. As with gesture and body exercises, take risks and don't judge the outcome. Allow the "mask" to display a wide range of affects and attitudes, from the familiar to the extreme.

Whether the face itself is active or neutral, the singer can communicate much with just the eyes. Especially when one does not have another person or object on the stage to sing to – as in a recital or concert setting – knowing where to look can be particularly troubling. There are really very few ways in which the eyes can move, though, and each communicates something slightly different. When the singer knows what it is he or she wishes to communicate, the choice of gaze becomes much easier.

[30] For further examples, please see Balk, 1977, pp. 132-133; Balk, 1991, pp. 391-392; and Clark, 2002, p. 117.

- *Moving focus* – The eyes move from point to point, stopping briefly at each point then moving on as though trying to find the thought. If the search…wanders casually, it conveys boredom – a wandering mind. If the search is rapid and intense, it suggests anxiety or fear.

- *Fixed focus* – When the eyes are focused on a point, the mind is also focused on a single idea…with great concentration. … One should be careful not to imply that the performer should actually "see" things, although some do. When used properly, the singer may appear to see a vision or to be singing or speaking to the image of someone.

- *Eye shutter* – When one closes one's eyes, one is pulling inside the self either to concentrate or to deal with something strongly emotional… . Because of the intensity suggested by the eye shutter, it…must be used judiciously.

- *The light bulb* – The name comes from the well-known cartoon technique. … It is like seeing a new piece of information or hearing a sudden sound: the eyes (and sometimes the head) shift suddenly to another point of focus.

- *Environmental focus* – The vast imaginary space between the performer and the audience can be transformed into an actual environment. The performer can focus on actual elements of the imaginary environment, looking at trees, mountains, moon, clouds, armies, etc.

- *The vision* – While all focus techniques tend to create a sense of the performer seeing things, events, and experiences, the heightened fantasy focus becomes literally visionary. It is one thing to think about a series of ideas and another to envision the face of one's beloved, a field of skulls, one's deadliest enemy astride the world, or any powerful fantasy. Such visions can become panoramic, filling the entire proscenium frame. (Balk, 1985, p. 166-167)

The face, though powerfully expressive, has one flaw, or advantage, given one's perspective; it is not guaranteed to match the performer's inner state. If an audience member sees facial engagement that appears believable, he or she automatically starts formulating a story to explain the performer's mental state without questioning the performer's sincerity, whether that scenario is actually true[31]. Case in point: a young soprano sang *Star vicino* for the

[31] Perhaps this is why Stanislavski forbade facial indicating – it was one way to really appear to be conveying something genuine without actually doing so.

diction class I was teaching. She sang it well, but did not seem engaged, so I whispered a suggestion to her, and she dutifully applied it as she repeated her song. The class responded favorably, and when I asked what they thought I told her, I got a range of suggestions from, "you told her she was looking for someone," to "you told her to feel lost." When I announced I had told her to imagine watching a close tennis match, the class laughed. The intensity of her attention to the tennis match was (mis)read by the class as intense emotion, and her shifting gaze was read as her search for someone or something. Though I hope singers look to scenarios a bit more pertinent to their texts to keep them – and consequently their audiences – engaged, arbitrary exercises like this one can lead to wonderful expression and freedom and help singers to remain engaged in their performances. In the end, was the performance any less meaningful? I don't believe so – I found it a very moving performance, and obviously the rest of the class did as well.

PERFORMANCE: SHOWING OR DOING?

As a singer learns to be expressive with the voice, body, and face, there comes a time when he or she ventures forth to apply the skills he or she has learned in study and practice. If a singer approaches performance as a chance to engage an audience in the singer's process of growth and discovery, the prospect of performing can be an exciting one rather than an intimidating one. Paradoxically, the singer must forget the audience is even there and be totally engaged in the imaginary world that performance creates.

Because singing is so complex it is natural for singers to want to impress their audiences and hopefully have their egos stroked for their performance abilities. Unfortunately, this desire for validation is one of the most common obstacles to good communication between singer and audience. Though the singer must always identify with the audience, he or she must learn to do so in a way that is not self-conscious. Rather than seeking the audience's approval, the singer must be totally confident in his or her ability to be engaged and believable.

Communication specialists consider attraction an important part of the communication process, for if a listener is attracted to the speaker – or performer in our case – he or she is more likely to remain engaged. Several factors contribute to attraction, including physical attraction

and identification (Edward Schiappa, personal communication, October 2008). *Task attraction* – the idea that someone's expertise makes him or her more attractive – is particularly important for the singer; expertise makes up for in spades what other attractions might lack. Consider recent viral pop sensation Susan Boyle – though she appeared somewhat dowdy and awkward in her audition, her ability to sing with strength and conviction brought the audience members to their feet and moved listeners the world over to tears (Britain's Got Talent, 2009). When the one does not seem confident, he or she does not seem expert, and is consequently much less attractive. The connection between singer and listener is lost.

Thompson (2007) performed a study in which he asked audience members a series of questions about performance enjoyment. He identified pre-performance factors of *mood, musical anticipation,* and *environment*[32] that established an audience member's level of receptivity before a performance; these are largely out of the performer's control. Thompson determined that once the performance begins, however, most of the issues that detract from the performance are the performer's responsibility. *Static issues* are continuous distractions and have a variable effect on the audience's receptivity, but these tend to be subjective – dislike of performers' dress/costumes, venue/set, program selection(s), etc. *Dynamic issues* – unpredictable occurrences that momentarily distract the listener – are statistically the least important, and include incorrect notes, technical problems, audience or traffic noise, a sense that the performance is going on too long, and acoustic/seating issues. *Engagement issues* are the most distracting. The study drew no distinctions between disengagement on the part of the performer or on the part of the audience, giving credence to the notion that a singer who seems disengaged is a distraction for the audience. Again, when the audience does not understand the singer, communication ceases.

Though the face cannot show the inner thought process, it can betray a singer's moments of weakness. Singers tend to be particularly bothered by dynamic issues, often citing them as reasons a performance was not good, perhaps because these items are discrete and memorable. To audiences, however, engagement issues are much more problematic. When a

[32] I find mood, musical anticipation, and static issues slightly clearer terms than the ones Thompson offers in his article: self, music, and background issues.

singer cracks a note, for example, a momentary look of embarrassment, frustration, or anger may cross his or her face. The audience can see the facial expression and it pulls them out of the moment. Their disturbance is not necessarily a result of the cracked note itself – for most, that is a forgivable offense. What is not forgivable is breaking character and asking the audience's forgiveness for the offense. The suspension of disbelief is broken, and the singer goes from being a larger-than-life character to being a garden-variety singer.

Another perhaps harsher way of saying this is, "An audience can smell fear." They may not be able to detect exact emotions or intentions, but they can detect the degree to which a performer is engaged, particularly when the performer is showing little or no expression (Gabrielsson & Juslin, 1996, p. 87).

No less distracting is the performer whose intention is to demonstrate his or her expertise in addition to or instead of communicating. Rarely does a singer do this overtly, but the audience member can detect the subtle difference between the authentic singer and the one who indicates his or her expertise. The authentic singer has completely mastered the techniques of singing and acting, and is able to put it to work effortlessly; the technique serves the singer. In distracting performances, the singer appears to say, "Look at how good I am," but ultimately comes across as both cocky and self-conscious. The singer's left brain is still over-involved, and the singer serves the technique. Another way of looking at this is to consider the objective of the self-conscious performer; though the performer may be trying to execute meaningful objectives with interesting action, he or she is also playing the objective of impressing the audience, breaking Stanislavski's rule that objectives live on the performer's side of the footlights.

> As soon as an actor "goes for the laugh," the moment is no longer funny. Here's a famous theater story: Alfred Lunt once said to Lynn Fontanne after a performance, "Lynn, I used to get a laugh on that line when I ask for a cup of tea, and now I don't. Do you know why?" Her reply: "Yes, Alfred. You used to ask for a cup of tea. Now you ask for the laugh." (Tolins, 2004, p. 24)

One of the best pieces of advice I have received in recent years was "Don't *show* me you know how to sing this recit. Just sing the recit." (Bruce Staysna, personal communication, May

2006) It drove home the importance of being just as honest in music-making as one is in character development. Self-consciousness can be communicated in the music just like it can by gesture or attitude and yield "artsy-fartsy" musicality in which a singer exaggerates dynamics, overdoes vocal coloration, paints the text artificially, and ultimately manipulates the audience. Some may leave with the question "That was impressive, but why was I not moved?" Audiences can tell the difference between art and what is merely artistic, regardless of the art.

The need for confidence is equally important in the realm of characterization. A mistake that inexperienced singers make is not to give over to the chosen objective completely. Just as the eye roll, grimace, or shrug says, "I'm sorry for that musical mistake," a slight grin or smirk says, "I'm sorry for what I'm doing on stage." Think about what one does when making a sarcastic remark; there is the slightest lift of the cheeks and the corner of the mouth to convey insincerity. On the stage, the grin says, "See? It's me. I'm still in here. I'd never actually do this, but I'll pretend that I would." A lack of commitment and engagement in characterization is just as inexcusable as a lack of commitment and engagement in the music.

A corollary to total character commitment is the need to make strong choices and to take the risk to move beyond choices that are "safe." It is best to jump into the cold waters all at once and even though it may give an unpleasant shock at first, adjustment happens fairly quickly; lowering oneself slowly into the water may make sense and seem wiser, but actually it only prolongs the agony. Acting teacher Eric Morris "urged each actor to do the most difficult thing first, because then all the less difficult problems were done away with in one fell swoop." (2002/1977, p. 2) Though the initial exercises will feel extremely uncomfortable and embarrassing at first, that discomfort will fade quickly, particularly when one realizes that big gestures and "hot" choices get the audience more excited, more involved, and are more rewarding in the end.

There is a bit of a paradox here: how can a singer-actor honestly do something that he or she would not do in real life? If, in real life, a singer-actor has made a habit of not displaying emotion – something many cultures value – how can showing emotion on the stage be honest? (Balk, 1977, p. 60) Because the discipline calls for it, the singer-actor must learn how to release psychological tensions – otherwise known as inhibitions – in much the same way he or she

learns to release physical tension. Often, it is fear that prevents a singer-actor from fully exploring the depths of his or her psyche and that consequently limits his or her character choices. On the one hand, the singer-actor must be well-grounded, a quality that will ensure that he or she will maintain integrity in challenging situations. On the other hand, he or she must not be afraid to explore the baser aspects of humanity; the singer-actor must not stand in judgment either of his or her character or of him- or herself, lest he or she remain unable to fully commit to the character. By looking for *points of connection* to that character – elements where the character and the singer-actor overlap – one will be able to release into the experience, stay grounded and maintain integrity, and be convincing, no matter how unsavory the character is, how uncomfortable the character makes the singer-actor feel, or merely how unlike oneself the character seems.

As one nears performance, he or she will have rehearsed each section of the piece literally dozens of times and must be careful not to forecast the outcome. Even though the singer knows exactly where the piece has been and where it is headed, the audience does not. To prevent tipping one's hand, one must always imagine he or she is encountering the situation for the first time. He or she must set new challenges, try incorporating new attitudes – arbitrary or selected – and ultimately be open to new and unexpected ways of approaching the situation in mind, body, face, and voice. When the performer remains free, performances remain fresh.

When one learns to convey confidence, self-consciousness disappears, and the audience is more aware – though perhaps more subtly aware – of the performer's ability. By staying wholly committed to giving honest performances, the singer will be unconcerned with dynamic issues, will prevent problems of engagement, and will give the best performance possible.

CONCLUSION

By the time of the performance, the musicians have built confidence, muscle memory, and thorough understanding of every aspect of the piece – music, words, meaning, character, and bodily engagement. Each singer has found his or her own ideal balance of left and right brain; the singer has built his or her own framework within which to allow creativity to happen in performance. The more one has challenged him- or herself throughout the process outlined here, the more rewarding the final product will be; "There is no moratorium on excellence" (Doug Johnson, personal communication, 2007).

Teachers and singers need to remember to go easy on themselves. Just adopting the mindset of becoming a musical communicator takes time; honing the skills is a lifelong pursuit. Sometimes, audiences will respond positively, and other times, they will not. All one can do is devote him- or herself to giving honest, committed performances, and trust that that will be sufficient. All that remains is to make art.

Though the inner critic may still be watching with a raised eyebrow, it is the inner muse's turn to take the lead. Sometimes, it is as if the performer steps outside of him- or herself and watches the performance unfold. Time seems both to slow down and speed up simultaneously. The singer is transformed into someone and something else, something much bigger than him- or herself. The singer reaches across space to connect with the smiling old lady in the third row and the young student in the nose-bleed section. For a brief time, the boundary between the mundane and the divine becomes extremely thin, allowing audience and singer alike to experience the world in an entirely different way. Why would anyone settle for anything less?

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