

Would you repeat that, please?

Developing structure and creative repetition in the voice studio

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It is the desire of singers and their teachers that in performance, the singer will provocatively convey the song's text, musical notation, and intended spirit. In turn, the audience hopes to be gathered in to the spectacle and pathos, or to share in the universal life experiences expressed through this art and artistry.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "Art is a house that tries to be haunted." (cited in Boyd, 1990, p.9) As performers seek this elusive haunting experience, they often forget that in order for a house to be haunted and haunting, it first has to be built.

In *On Studying Singing* (Kagen, 1950, pp. 49-51), Sergius Kagen outlines a step-by-step approach for learning a song with respect to pitch, rhythm, text and translation. In "Art an Intellectual Virtue," Jacques Maritain calls this acquired learning discipline "the habit of art":

Operative habit resides chiefly in the mind or the will...Habits are interior growths of spontaneous life...and only the living (that is to say, minds which alone are perfectly alive) can acquire them, because they alone are capable of raising the level of their being by their own activity: they possess, in such an enrichment of their faculties, secondary motives to action, which they bring into play when they want...The object [the good of the work] in relation to which (the habit) perfects the subject is itself unchangeable - and it is upon this object that the quality developed in the subject catches. Such a habit is a virtue, that is to say a quality which, triumphing over the original indetermination of the intellective faculty, at once sharpening and hardening the point of its activity, raises it in respect of a definite object to a maximum of perfection, and so of operative efficiency. Art is a virtue of the practical intellect. (Maritain, 1933, pp. 10-11)

The cultural encouragement for instant gratification is all around us, but whether the singer aspires to perform in opera, oratorio, or recital, it is impossible for them to have the freedom of the stage without first having the discipline of the practice room. Oscar Hammerstein II indicated this discipline more simply when he wrote in *The Sound of Music*, "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start." (Rodgers and Hammerstein, 1960, p. 39)

But how does one start? Neuroscience has shown that through repetition, actions are gradually transferred from the brain's area of conscious thought, to the area of subconscious thought. "As you do or think something repeatedly, your brain adapts by creating denser and more efficient neuropathways in your brain. The "trail" eventually becomes a neurological superhighway. This becomes part of the physiological structure of a habit." (Stoltz, 1997, p. 81)

In bringing students to building and refining their own "habit of art," they can be aided by the very patterns and varieties of sequencing that are demonstrated to them in their voice lessons.

There are four reasons for developing approaches for creative, repetitive learning:

1. To introduce the student to a variety of patterns and ideas that give them multiple, reliable reference points for singing well.
2. The various approaches deflect the perception of monotony, and allow for the repetition needed to refine motor skills and understanding.
3. To correct bad habits and dysfunctions that may be present.
4. To teach the student that it is good to alternate kinds of approaches, by shifting from physical to mental learning, and back again.

Three opinions calling for a variance of approaches within rehearsal techniques are put forward by Emmons and Thomas (1998), Harvey (1985), and Schmidt (1999). Emmons and Thomas counsel singers to avoid mindless, incessant rehearsing during which they would run the risk of strengthening dysfunctional habits; instead they encourage them to practice in "fewer, shorter, sharper sessions" (Emmons and Thomas, 1998, p. 267). They also suggest incorporating different kinds of rehearsing (including physical, and mental practice) in order to maintain vibrancy in their approach, attitude, and musical result.

Harvey purports that rehearsal repetition and variety is required for many reasons: (a) to create the required coordinated muscle movement and sound (b) for the singer to recognize the sensation and thought needed to produce and reproduce that sound, and (c) to evaluate the appropriateness of the sound as perceived by an expert listener (that being the voice teacher, coach, or conductor).

Repetition research by Richard A. Schmidt (Schmidt, 1999) has shown that learning by alternating skill areas (random learning) is superior to methods where repetition in one skill area is maintained for a longer period of time before any change of approach is made (blocked learning). In the area of vocal music, this invites research into what makes for optimal practice in building awareness of text, meaning, and singing skill. The extent to which musical elements can be varied in the learning process bears investigation.

Considerable teaching and learning possibilities exist within the present practices of transferring concepts through visual, auditory, and physical ideas and patterns. Using two aspects of singing (breathing, and learning the music), the following teaching approaches show how learning and performing experiences can be made more effective.

Breathing and beginning the sound

One of the greatest challenges for undergraduate singers is to physically and mentally gauge the differences between what is required for speech and what is required for song. In singing, the intensity directed toward the abdominal muscles and the sustained muscular antagonism between muscle groups allows for a long-standing control of the exhalation process. This is artificial when compared to the breathing required for regular speech. Developing this skill can be likened in part to a ballet dancer learning to dance "on point." The coordination is challenging to achieve, and is contrived when compared to walking.

I. Visual Cues

It is helpful for the student to watch as the teacher draws simple diagrams of the muscular interaction involved in the breathing process. By doing so, the teacher provides visual cues for the directed motion of the body and air. This can be augmented by using more detailed anatomical diagrams in books or charts. The student can also be shown pre-selected, short excerpts from instructional video recordings that highlight the fundamentals of breathing for singing (Wall and Caldwell, 1994).

Observing other student singers as well as professionals in performance will allow students to keep comparative notes on the most and least successful approaches. Guided attention to brief video playback moments of their own voice lessons can help a student identify successes as well as challenges to be overcome. Similar feedback can be gathered by using mirrors within the voice studio. Students often divert their eyes from the mirror just at the moment when they should be directing specific attention to themselves. As the student thinks, sings, and observes, the teacher should encourage the student to see themselves in a positive light.

II. Auditory Cues

The undergraduate singer should be introduced to terminology for the physical processes that occur. One reason for this is efficiency. Understanding labels that indicate identification and function makes teaching and learning more practical. It also avoids the problem of sorting out vague, ever-changing terminology. However, it is just as important not to tediously tangle the student in a web of jargon. You can decide when it is appropriate to say "vocal onset" instead of "beginning the sound," and when it is best to use the term *appoggio* rather than speaking of maintaining expanded abdominal muscles.

Metaphors, similes and analogies

The teacher's descriptive choices affects students' ability to form visualizations. Edward de Bono, a prolific researcher and writer on the subject of the thinking process, suggests that generally directed ideas lead the listener to develop a more specifically customized understanding of their own (de Bono, 1997).

After a systematic journey through the multiple aspects of breathing for singing, Richard Miller provides the image of "the 'and furthermore...' breath," invoking the gesture of a poised parliamentarian, with his right index finger extended (along with his suspended abdominal muscles) (Miller, 1986).

The teacher should use visualization ideas that are likely to be universal, or to cull images which you know will be readily understood by that particular student. One student, after showing indifference to anatomically-based explanations of how their abdominal muscles must be less tense when inhaling, may respond instantly to the idea of having the flexibility of a belly dancer, or to the thought of having an abdominal wall that feels like "waterbed abs." Another student might respond to the idea that like Goldilocks, in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," their abdominal muscles should be "not too hard, not too soft, but juuuuust right!" Once students are able to form their own mental pictures, they can then incorporate more specific elements in their understanding. Simple, wisely chosen images can often unlock the door to more complete and refined comprehension.

Physical Cues

In establishing proper breathing skills, there are three reasons for demonstration by physical association: (a) to show the student how much directed energy is required in breathing for singing, (b) to know where this energy should and should not go, and (c) to develop the student's understanding of the coordination that is necessary. Singers can, for any number of reasons, lack or lapse in their ability to maintain proper breathing muscular control, and this energy will instead be transferred to other parts of their body. The most common places to shift breathing energy are the tongue, neck, jaw, and shoulders and upper chest.

The following exercise helps students to successfully bridge this challenge of shunted energy, which mostly arises at the critical moment between inhalation and phonation: First, have the singer begin to trace the crossbar of a grand piano lid from left to right with the right hand index finger. Once they have begun, they may then inhale and sing the note or phrase in mind. Have them watch their finger as it moves across the crossbar. This allows the singer to visualize the required continuity, and avoid an inefficient tension transfer to other parts of the body. The same exercise can be done by drawing an imaginary line across a real or imaginary ledge, or by outlining the shape of a rainbow. It is imperative that the student begin the movement before inhalation, otherwise they may already have gripped or locked themselves at the point between inhaling and singing.

A modified version of this exercise can be done by slowly passing a long scarf over an extended hand or finger. With the timing as indicated before, doing this while singing a phrase will help develop legato singing skills. The singer will be able to correct themselves from singing syllabically, and from reinforcing bad habits involving tongue and lip tension. It is especially helpful in developing legato skills in lyric diction.

Concrete materials

Concrete materials are visual objects or manipulatives that aid in the visual and physical learning process. The above mentioned scarf would be considered a “concrete material.” Be on the lookout for such materials that would augment your teaching. These could vary from wraparound objects like a bicycle inner tube used for monitoring the expansion of abdominal muscles¹, or a “Slinky,” used to promote ongoing motion during coloratura exercises², or when held and extended vertically, to add a visual enticement for jaw relaxation or vowel modification. The materials you use and the ideas you connect to them are as limited as your imagination.

Developing appropriate visual, auditory, and physical associations comes with time, and with knowing each student’s affinities, tendencies, and skill level. Emmons and Sonntag (1979) counsel voice teachers and students to align their repertoire programming choices with the singers’ abilities, tastes, and experiences. This should hold true for their directed studio instruction as well.

Learning the music

In studies conducted to measure the effectiveness of cognitive study as compared with motor study of music (or mental practice versus physical practice), it has so far been concluded that “the less advanced the person is on the instrument and the more difficult the music is, the more important is the motor practice. Combination of physical, and mental training can be favourable...” (Gabrielsson, 1999, p. 507).

In studying and learning a song text, it is helpful for students to write out the words (which are often in a foreign language), their international phonetic alphabet transcription, their translation, and their dramatic subtext, placing one underneath the other:

Words
International phonetic alphabet transcription
Translation
Subtext

Once the students “have their ‘WITS’ about them,” they can then pair the text with other elements of the music: speaking it in rhythm, singing it slowly with attention given to legato articulation, and so on. Students will find that using their “WITS” needn’t be a regimented process. They can actually approach it in a seemingly random manner, by developing the dramatic subtext before the IPA transcription, or by variously interchanging the above mentioned elements when moving from one section of a song to the next.

Computerized pianos

With the performance mastery of the notated score in mind, advances in piano technology have made it possible to increase the frequency and efficiency of repetitive practice for singers. The Yamaha *disklavier*³ is a computerized acoustic piano which provides the capacity for unlimited repetition of melodies and accompaniments, in whole or in part, with the additional ability to alter pitch, volume, tempo, and timbre.

The learning possibilities for the undergraduate singer are considerable; frequent access to repetitive study allows them to improve the motor skills in addition to building their awareness of harmonic and structural progression in their repertoire.

There are also several advantages to using this technology when compared with recorded accompaniments on tape cassettes or compact discs: (a) a variety of tempos are possible, (b) the singer does not have to compete with the mental clutter that comes with singing over their own previously recorded performance of a song, (c) it is much more efficient to repeat passages with the *disklavier*'s "A-B" repeat function, than to keep rewinding a tape recorder, (d) the singer can make use of an accompaniment that was recorded with them and for them, rather than a commercially produced recording, (e) the young singer can compare higher and lower versions of an accompaniment to suit their abilities, (f) the percussive nature and nuances of the acoustic piano provide a more realistic performance environment for the singer, and (g) singers can use these MIDI files on another *disklavier* in the practice room, at home, or even play it through their own computer.

Teachers can help students to make masterful use of repetition by engaging and interchanging physical, visual, and auditory cues and strategies:

- Be enthusiastic and imaginative when reinforcing repetition with your students.
- Encourage your students to alternate between mental and physical practising, and to vary the kinds mental and physical practising they do.
- Use creative repetition technology in your teaching.

With refreshing approaches and alternations of experiences, your students will be living the adage "Practice makes perfect," infusing their rehearsals and performances with a richness of mind and artistic flexibility.

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Endnotes

¹ Concrete material and application used by Lorna Haywood, Professor of Voice, University of Michigan School of Music.

² Ibid.

³ Observations here are drawn from using the Yamaha grand piano *disklavier* in the voice studio, and Yamaha GT110 pianos in student practice rooms.