

PRACTICE GUIDE

Time Management and Vocal Stamina

Frequent, short practice sessions are most effective for building muscle memory and keeping your mind focused. Try for 20-30 minutes at a time, and schedule these just as you would your classes; one in the morning and one in the evening, 5-6 days a week. You will want your voice warmed up before choir, which is part of your daily practice effort. Learn to discern when your voice is feeling free and resonant, and then begin your other work.

- Practice difficult things when you are fresh and on your game; coloratura or technical work in the morning, perhaps.
- Don't allow interruptions such as cell phones or email. Make this a time to take a break from worries and stress, or find a way to use them in your interpretations.
- Use a timer if you need to, and break up the sessions with walks if that helps.
- Total singing for any day should not exceed 2 hours. This may mean that you will need the discipline to stop even if it feels great. Your voice needs time to rest and for any swelling to go down. Give yourself frequent rests during a practice session; perhaps with breathing exercises.

Mental Game and Health

A positive mental attitude is important; sometimes a well-developed critical ear is a tremendous asset but can also be a hindrance. If you are in there, practicing deliberately, that is all you can ask of yourself. Learn to accept that some days will be vocally easier than others and to reward yourself just for being consistent and putting your time in.

- Think about the way you are thinking. Do not let your creativity be impeded by perceptual and emotional barriers. Oftentimes negativity goes straight to your throat.
- Hydrate. Sleep. Keep your stress level manageable. Consider all of this a requirement for maintaining your instrument in optimal condition.
- Do not sit at the keyboard to sing.
- Try rehearsing in different types of spaces.
- Do practice runs for friends, help each other memorize and develop characters and even set deadlines.
- Help is available on campus if you feel that you are having trouble with either too little practice, or with being too intense about your practice, at either the Tutoring and Academic Skills Center <http://www.wvu.edu/depts/tutorialcenter/index.shtml> or the Counseling Center <http://www.wvu.edu/chw/counseling/index.shtml>

Warm Up/Centering

If you can build a consistent routine, this will be an asset and a comfort before an important audition and performance. ("I'm just going to do what I always do.") A good way to begin the transition from the rest of the day is to start with stretching, posture and breathing (the rag doll exercise especially helps with backpack shoulders.) Then do your lesson vocalises, remembering to start with a free and easy sound and let it grow.

- You should have a binder section of vocalises transcribed from your lesson recording arranged into the following categories: stretching, breathing, onsets, resonance (humming/nasals into vowel sequences), flexible articulators, agility, registration/passaggio, finishing with wider arpeggios and scales. Each exercise should have a purpose and range guidelines.
- Try using the metronome to focus your mind – print one of the online vocal methods and work on your agility, scales and arpeggios, gradually increasing the tempo.
- Sometimes it's just getting started that is the hurdle you need to get over. Remind yourself that "repetition is the soul of art". (Ralph Richardson) One team of researchers has suggested that to rise to an elite level of musicianship, it is necessary to put in 10,000 hours of practice. While it is probable that quality is more important than quantity, it is still a good idea to just get going. 😊

Deliberate Practice

Have a plan for each practice session, that includes such areas as work technique, study/memorize new music, polish older songs, work on expression and interpretation. Strategize how much time you will spend on each of these activities. You should have a list of specific physical and interpretive practice targets from your lesson. Circle tricky areas and remind yourself with notes about technical goals: “Lighten up in the passaggio”, “round lips”, “open, silent breaths”, etc. What does it feel/sound like when it’s good? What will you do about them?

- Do what you did in your lesson and see if you can recreate the same feelings. Practice to the recording. Sing along with part of the last lesson, then stop and work on your own. Try this in chunks, interspersed with other activities.
- Practice repertoire or technical elements in small sections. Match tones that work to more difficult sections in this way. Then string larger phrases together. Really pay attention to detail and concentrate. Especially try starting from the end and working backwards. Relate new things to familiar songs that you sing well.
- Experience the music in different ways. One great strategy is to walk the phrasing or mime the interpretive ideas, to get a sense of them kinesthetically.
- Write breath marks in the score. Indicate the upcoming vowel for each onset, and include releases. Do at least one repetition where you just concentrate on the use of breath in this piece or exercise.
- Use the mirror to watch articulation shapes, posture, appoggio, and how your presentation reads to the audience.
- Choose other elements to use in one-aspect repetitions, just focusing on articulation, resonance, character, expressiveness, etc.
- Try the melodies just on a favorite vowel or the vowels of the text to work on your phrasing and legato. Concentrate on onsets/releases, vowel modification in the passaggio, etc. Use different vowels each time through. You can also toggle back and forth with the straws.
- Run the song on sight-singing syllables so that you can really get the contour of the melodic line into your ear. Work on intonation with the computer or with octave doubling.
- Pay attention to phrasing – look for apex and arcs. Work these instrumentally and see if you can get the dramatic idea into the phrase much the way feelings well up and recede.
- Work the rhythms with a metronome. Relate to rhythm of the poem and of the accompaniment.
- Add in layers gradually; do the monologue in rhythm, then on just one note with good vocal production, then add melody.
- Cup your hand behind your ears and listen. Also, record yourself and act as your own teacher. Compare what you are doing to what professionals are doing.

Non-Singing Activities

Voices have a time limit on any given day, but here are other things which you can do to keep developing as a musician; the amount of time here is limitless.

- Language study. Best of all would be finding a native speaker to talk with, but you can also compare recordings and write the text in IPA, really saying the sounds as you write. Even watching favorite movies with the dubbed French, German, Italian or Spanish track on can be helpful.
- Listening Journal. Compare as many recordings as you can find, and study the different choices singers make. How does this help you define your own values and interpretation? How do they create colors or feelings?
- Examine the text for nuances. Do the character analysis and try it as a monologue. Think fourth side, circumstances, action, obstacle, reacting, subtext, personalization, energy, words (clarity, communication), use of space/control of body, continuity during interludes. Then do it again, another

way, and see what you find. Where are the dynamic arcs? Try it with a partner and ask him/her for feedback on your emotional communication.

- Do the background research and program notes, focusing on the musical representation of the dramatic idea. How can you add to this as the performer, and what are the reasons for your choices? Make a list of ideas about text painting, including metronome markings for each section to discuss with your pianist.
- You can rehearse the songs without speaking at all. Just rehearsing in your mind is worthwhile because it helps you remember what to expect and helps you practice thinking ahead. One teacher says to think 10 times and sing once. (Bruce Schoonmaker)
- Play the accompaniment, or just the bass line, or any section you can manage. Make a recording of it or ask someone to help you do this. Note accompaniment figures to talk about collaboratively. *Work on your keyboard skills as much as possible.* When you rehearse with the pianist, be sure that you use your interludes and breaths expressively.

Memorization

Memorize early. Write it down, look at meaning/pronunciation. The longer you have with it in memory before juries, the more part of you this performance will be.

- Sing and speak the text at every opportunity; walking to class, waiting for the bus, etc. It is also good to do this while doing chores, or with a recording of the accompaniment. Jory says that repetition is freeing because it allows us to be spontaneous. On the 4th try, a measurable increase in concentration, openness, and discovery, and fear and constraint melt away. You can rise above the situation/circumstances and be used to them (technique, obstacle, musical issues) and find new things.
- Memorize text without music. Write the words over and over. Indicate dynamic markings in your writing, or dramatic ideas “I’m saying ____ but I really mean _____”. Write the translation until you don’t need it anymore and can think in the new language. Copy out the text with some way of indicating the dynamic markings (perhaps write the piano sections small and the forte sections big.)

This is meant to be a resource for you, not overwhelming. Please let me know if you think of any other great ideas. I would also love to hear, anytime something terrific happens in the practice room. If I’m on campus, please come in and show me. Just as there can be bad or plateau days, there can be fantastic leaps forward too. That is part of what makes singing so exciting. 😊

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT SHEET

Name:

Date:

Song Title:

Text is by:

What is happening in the text? (give a short summary)

Meaning of text (literal or symbolic or poetic)

Who am I?

How do I perceive myself?

What am I wearing?

What am I doing?

Primary emotion

Secondary emotion(s)

Set the scene in your mind:

Am I in a historical setting or present day? (your choice)

Where am I?

Is there anyone with me?

When is it taking place (hour, light, temperature)?

What am I seeing ? (Fourth Wall)

What am I smelling?

What am I hearing?

What am I feeling kinesthetically?

What do I want?

What might be in the way of getting what I want?

What is my plan for getting what I want?

What story can I imagine that will bring me to the beginning of this piece? What has just happened that causes me to sing these words and not something else?

What has happened in my own life that I can bring to this piece which will help me to convey the character; to express the emotions; and to anchor my focus, no matter what the text is literally about? (you do not have to write this in if it is private, but put in a code word so I know you have thought about it and have something to use.)

(based on Pat Hodgins and Uta Hagen)