

How to Learn a Song

Bit by bit,
Putting it together . . .
Piece by piece—
Only way to make a work of art.
Every moment makes a contribution
Every little detail plays a part.¹

1. “Partitioning” and “Layering” (Whole-Part Practice)—Single Tasking Method. A basic mistake that many singers make is trying to master too many things not only simultaneously, but too quickly. For example, if you are singing a difficult foreign language piece in an extremely high tessitura, you are dealing with text, rhythm, notes, and many different aspects of technique. And what if you are looking at this piece for the first time minutes before your voice lesson? If you read the previous article, [How to Practice](#), you now realize that you have challenged yourself inappropriately, which I refer to as a “self-induced crisis.” Songs and arias have multiple layers and deserve more than a “speed-through” or “drive-by rehearsal.” When you don’t give yourself enough time to absorb the multiple layers of information, and when you put your practicing off until the “mythical later,” you frustrate yourself and may give up too quickly, or at the very least, fall to pieces on your voice lesson. If you fall apart in your voice lesson, I will have Kleenex available for you! I would also prefer for your hysteresis not to be caused by a self-induced crisis.

As you also learned by reading [How to Practice](#), each practice session must have short-term, achievable goals. As part of your [Practice Focus](#), why not try [partitioning](#), or [layering](#), in which you break down your pieces into smaller, more manageable units? When you master each short unit, you can then reassemble them into longer units.

- [Partitioning](#): work with small, controllable units (short phrases or sections). Work each unit slowly and gradually speed up the tempo until each unit is mastered.

¹Sondheim, Stephen, and James Lapine, *Sunday in the Park with George* (New York: Dodd Mead & Co., 1986), 163-164.

- Layering/Whole-Part: separate each element and master each element at a time. Layers of vocal music include:
 - a. rhythm
 - “do the math” with your “rhythm calculator” (write the counting above each measure with your pencil)
 - clap rhythms
 - speak-count-clap
 - conduct
 - practice difficult passages 5 times each, slowly, until they feel familiar, natural and easy.
 - b. text
 - translate the text
 - transcribe text into International Phonetic Alphabet symbols
 - the dictionary is a very important tool for singers--look up any unfamiliar words in the dictionary!
 - speak the text
 - speak text in rhythm
 - continue to clap rhythm if necessary
 - memorize the text and translation
 - speak the text from memory
 - speak text in rhythm, from memory
 - c. notes+intervals=melody
 - write in the note names above the melody line
 - notice contours (conjunct, disjunct, combination)
 - notice and mark intervals
 - notice and mark chords
 - notice and mark phrases and breaths
 - “plunk” melody on piano
 - sing melody on a vowel or syllable, or count-sing, *mp* or *p*
 - sing the melody 10 times on the vowels, *mp* or *p*
 - d. accompaniment/harmony
 - play the accompaniment.
 - listen to a recording of the song to learn the accompaniment (harmonies, melodic doublings, cues) by heart. The accompaniment must be memorized as well

as your own part! Do you consistently tape your voice lessons? This is one of many compelling reasons to do so!

2. **Reassemble Elements—Multi-Tasking Method.** Work slow tempo to fast tempo (it is extremely helpful if you can sing slightly faster than performance tempo), connect the layers or partitions into gradually longer or larger sections, until you are singing the entire song with 100% accuracy.
 - a. sing the piece on the vowels, *mp* or *p*
 - b. sing text and rhythm on one pitch, *mp* or *p*
 - c. text, rhythm, and melody, *mp* or *p*

3. **Notice and highlight expressive markings, including tempo.**

4. **Do a sing-through of the piece.**
 - a. Sing the piece through once, in performance tempo, with a focus on accuracy. Mark mistakes or problems and go back and fix/work these.
 - b. Sing the piece through, in performance tempo, with a focus on expression.
 - when you switch your focus to expression, you may notice more mistakes or problems, but keep going!
 - mark mistakes and problems and go back to them later to fix and work out.

5. **Listen to at least one recording of the piece.** Watch videos of operas, musicales, recital performances. Listen closely for language, tempo, style.

6. **Expression/Communication**
 - a. Study and practice your interpretation as you study your music and technique.
 - oral interpretation: learn the text as a poem or monologue and recite it
 - attitudes and gestures: do you know what you look like when you sing? Have you practiced your expression as you have practiced your notes and rhythms? Have you

videotaped yourself or watched yourself perform in the mirror?

Each composer, each work, has its own style; to bring the whole to life, one requires that sense of recreating at the moment, which I can only call inspiration. It takes a long time for an artist to achieve the combination of both. It marked an important step in my work when I understood that style and inspiration can be friendly companions. I freed myself from the excessive search for perfection and from exaggerated subjectivity. I began to understand that the music must speak through the singer's mouth, that the singer must not simply swallow the music to satisfy his hunger for it.

This does not mean that we have to sacrifice our personality. To be a interpreter is fundamental a paradoxical situation: you place yourself at the author's service without giving up your identity. Both creator and performer must be reflected in an interpretation. If one of the two is missing, everything is lost. Some artists disappear behind their interpretations because they don't live them. Others may be such strong personalities that one feels they would prefer to be a creator; they can't forget about themselves. As an interpreter, I don't believe in giving free rein to emotions; neither do I believe in the possibility of an objective approach. The artist's emotions must be controlled, but we cannot do without them.²

The artist should not identify with what he has achieved, but with the unknown ahead of him. Every achievement marks an end. The struggle for achievement begins anew every day and is directed toward a seemingly unattainable goal—diffuse ideals in this mixed-up world. Picasso said: "Why do we speak of experience? Art is always a beginning." We keep learning and know nothing.³

²Souzay, Gérard, "The Mystery of Performing," *Opera News* November 25, 1967.

³*Ibid.*, 11.