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The Contemporary Singer
Elements of Vocal Technique
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Chapter 7
Practicing
Section III

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III. SONG STUDY (15–20 MINUTES)

It takes more flexibility to sing words and melody together, so after you have warmed up and worked out, your voice should be ready for the more demanding task of singing songs. This part of your practice routine is set aside to perfect notes and rhythms, study lyrics, add stylistic interpretation and combine all these details into a technical and musical whole.

Seven steps to learning a new song

1. Rhythm

It is important to learn the notes and rhythms of your songs first. Take the time to read through the song rhythmically, and clap, or say “tah,” on the written rhythms. Use a metronome to maintain a steady beat, and don’t skip this step just because you already know the song from a recording. Recording artists take liberties with written notes and rhythms. You need to know the original written notes and rhythms to see what the composer intended—then you can make it your own interpretation. In some styles of music you can take a great deal of liberty with the rhythms, and in other styles it is not appropriate.

2. Melody

After learning the rhythms, plunk out the melody on a keyboard. Learn the shape of the tune and review any tricky intervals, without worrying about keeping a strict rhythm. How does the melody lie in your voice? You should be able to sing through the song without straining.

If the song feels too high or too low, experiment, singing it in different keys. Once you have decided on a key, you need written music or a lead sheet in that key. Do not ask an accompanist to transpose on sight during an audition or performance. Computer programs can transpose tunes and produce charts that are easy to read. *Band-in-a-Box*, for example, includes the accompaniment for many tunes and allows you to transpose them easily. *Finale* and *Overture* require more skill, but can produce better, more sophisticated charts.

Jazz standards and pop tunes are often transposed into a key that suits the singer’s voice. Some musical theater pieces, such as songs by Cole Porter, have become jazz standards and also can be transposed. Opera arias, however, are usually performed in the key in which they were written. The same goes for classic musical theater repertoire (e.g., *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *The King and I*) and other music of this genre, which is generally intended for specific voice types.

3. Rhythm and melody without lyrics

Stand up, away from the piano or keyboard, and sing your song in rhythm on a favorable vowel sound, but without the lyrics. Make the melody flow from note to note, observe dynamic markings, and check tricky rhythms and intervals. Plan where you will breathe, and work out your phrasing by marking (') in your music. This basic groundwork will save you time in the long run. If you've planned your phrasing well, you won't get stuck having to breath in the middle of a word or run out of air at the end of phrases.

4. Add basic accompaniment

Sing the melody in rhythm on a favorable vowel with the accompaniment or basic chord changes—don't skip this step. Never take a song into an audition or performance situation without first working with the accompaniment. It can change your entire concept of the melody and throw you off balance in the pressure of a performance situation. If you are working from a lead sheet, there are many ways a song can be harmonized or played with a different rhythmic feel. It depends on your accompanist and how well you describe the rhythmic feel and tempo you want.

5. Study the lyrics

Look up words you don't understand, and look for underlying meaning in the text. Can you relate to it enough to give a good interpretation? You don't need to have lived the story of a song to sing it, but you should be able to empathize enough with the lyrics to give a meaningful interpretation. Think of yourself as an actor interpreting dramatic text for an audience.

6. Listen to recordings

Listen to recordings by other artists and make observations that help you define your concept of a song. Constantly imitating the sound of other singers is not vocally healthy. However, you can learn a great deal from recordings by observing the phrasing, tempo, rhythmic feel, and interpretation. How does the singer interpret the melody, rhythm, and harmony? Is the key of the song higher or lower than the key

you are singing? Notice the singer's voice quality. Do you like it? Is the rhythmic feel or groove in the accompaniment what you imagined it would be like? How is it different from the printed music? What is the style the song (ballad, up-tempo, rock, jazz, Latin, etc.)? Answering these questions when you listen will help you fine-tune your concept of a song.

7. Interpret the song

Interpreting means adding your own personal expression to a song. It can be in the way you deliver the lyrics, or if stylistically appropriate, changes to the melody or rhythm. It also includes changes from specified dynamics, a different harmonization, addition or subtraction of vibrato in your voice, and experimenting with different vocal colors. Interpretation should come after you do the basic groundwork to learn a piece.

The best way to begin is to study the text. If you address the lyrics, the rest will come with practice and experience. Understand what you are singing and try to express the feelings and emotions of the lyrics to your audience. If you watch yourself in a mirror, you will see that subtle expression in your eyes can enhance your communication of a song. Singers can also learn to interpret by studying standard songs and transcribing the actual melodies sung by great singers. Studying what great singers do with a song can spark your own ideas.

