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Literature for Teaching

A GUIDE FOR CHOOSING
SOLO VOCAL REPERTOIRE FROM A
DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

with Lauren Athey-Janka

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges for voice teachers is choosing repertoire that meets a pedagogical end without exceeding the student's ability. Very often, colleges train their undergraduate students to become teachers of singing without teaching them how to evaluate and select repertoire. As a result, these new teachers turn to repertoire they sang during their own training—repertoire that may not be suitable for the unique technical issues of their current students. The most extensive problem is the assignment of repertoire that is too difficult (not musically, but technically), and that is not aligned with the teacher's pedagogical goals.

The intent of this book is to give you tools for selecting age and skill appropriate repertoire for your students that will help you achieve your pedagogical goals for them. We will explore some key topics:

- How to evaluate your student's current skill level
- How to evaluate repertoire and determine difficulty level
- How to use repertoire as a tool to improve technical skills
- How to create a long term repertoire plan for your students that will foster growth of their singing and lead to the assignment of more difficult repertoire, such as operatic arias
- How to broaden your own repertoire knowledge

We have included an index, which provides examples of songs intended for specific technical challenges.

Student Profiles

Before you can select repertoire, you need to get to know the student, the voice, previous musical experiences and pre-established skill sets, so that you can determine short and long term goals and decide upon repertoire that will help to achieve those goals. Aural evaluation of singers is a challenging skill that takes time and practice to develop. Pedagogy students in graduate programs are encouraged to begin developing these skills early on through the creation of student evaluation profiles and the use of audio and video recordings. They are asked to assess singers in these recordings to hone their listening and evaluating skills when developing repertoire assignments and then to apply those skills to their own students. It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong answer. The intent is not to diagnose issues at this point, it is to learn, listen to the sound, watch the actions and then evaluate what is seen and heard.

What can you quantify?

The first step to creating a profile of the students is to evaluate what you see when they are singing:

- How is the student's natural posture when talking?
- When he starts to sing, are his feet a shoulder's width apart?
- Are the knees bent slightly?
- Is the sternum held high with the shoulders relaxed?
- Is the face looking straight ahead or angled up or down?

- How free is the student's body when singing?

The majority of young singers have at least one area of tension when they are singing:

- Where does your student "hold" tension?
- Start your observation at the toes and work your way up. Are the knees locked?
- Is the posterior juttled out?
- Is the back arched?
- Do the arms pull away from the body?
- Are fingers tense or rigid?
- Are the elbows locked?
- Are shoulders locked in a shrug?
- Does the jaw rotate to one side?
- Are veins protruding from the neck?
- Is the chin protruding?
- Are the eyebrows lifted, wrinkling the forehead?

All of these are symptoms of tension in various areas of the body that will need to be addressed as lessons progress.

Once you've evaluated a singer's body while singing and where tension lies, pay close attention to how she is breathing:

- Are the shoulders moving up and down, or are they in a relaxed position?
- Is the student pushing the abdomen out when inhaling, or is it expanding naturally?
- Is the chest expanded freely or is there tension creeping up the chest into the neck?
- Is she able to sing a two-measure phrase in common time on a single breath?
- How about a four-measure phrase?
- Is the inhalation silent or noisy?
- Can he exhale without making a sound?
- How about when the student is engaged in conversation?
- Is breathing the same for talking and singing?
- Is the speaking breath more efficient than the singing breath?

Next, evaluate the sound the student makes when singing simple vocalises. Instead of starting with things that are wrong, identify factual information:

- What is the singer's total range?
- What part of his vocal range is strongest?
- Which notes are weaker than the others?
- Are the registers "mixed," or is there a significant register shift?
- If there is a significant register shift, on which pitch does that shift occur?
- Where is the voice the purest?
- Where does it sound forced?
- Does the voice move freely or is there weightiness to it?

After you have evaluated the quantifiable parts of the singing voice, move to the subjective. Remember that there is no right or wrong answer to these questions; these are your

personal impressions of the voice in front of you, using the collective input of all the singers you've heard and worked with in the past. Start by asking yourself how you would describe the color of the voice:

- Is it warm?
- Dark?
- Round?
- Bright?

Comparing the sound of a voice to other, non-musical images creates connections to emotions that can lead you to repertoire choices later.

What about the size of the voice?

- Is the sound big?
- Is there a natural resonance that will cut through an orchestra?
- Are there cues that a larger voice may be uncovered after a solid technique is acquired and when they are older?
- Is the voice vibrant?
 - Is the speed of the vibrato fast or slow?
 - Is the vibrato consistent in speed across the range?

Now that you have some general impressions about the student's posture, alignment, respiration, breath management, phonation and resonance, it's time to see what the student knows about music:

- Is the student able to match random pitches played on the piano?
- How difficult a pattern can she repeat?
- Does she have any musicianship skills?
- Can she read music?
- Can she sight read a basic melody?
- When asked to sing a simple song, is the student intuitively musical, or does she just sing the notes on the page with no sense of line or emphasis on important words or climactic sections?

Of all the evaluation tools discussed, perhaps the most important information comes from asking questions of the student:

- Why does the student want to study voice?
- What are the goals for the lessons?
- Is there an affinity for certain kinds of music?
- Is there a desire to sing classical music, show-tunes, jazz, pop, country or other genres?
- Was there prior musical education either in school or through private study?
- Does he play an instrument?
- What is her performing experience?
- Are there any fears of speaking or singing in public?
- How does the student present himself during conversation?

- Are there signs of poor self-confidence, such as staring at the floor or over your head when speaking?

It is critical to determine students' goals for being in your studio. Not every voice student has aspirations to star at the Metropolitan Opera. It is important to know why your students want to learn to sing better, and what it is they want to sing, so that you make repertoire choices that are appropriate for their interests, as well as their skills.

Here is a student evaluation and observation form, which can help you organize this information.

Student Profile and Evaluation Form

Student Name _____

Years of Singing _____

Musical Interests (Genres) _____

Instruments Played (How long?) _____

Extracurricular Activities _____

Why take singing lessons? (If applicable) _____

Assumed Voice Type _____

Observation and Evaluation Form

Posture/Body Alignment _____

Breathing _____

Phonation/Tone Quality _____

Registration _____

Resonance _____

Articulation _____

Diction _____

Pitch Memory/Intonation _____

Sight-Singing Skills _____

Expressivity/Musical Intuition _____



Repertoire Ideas

Genres _____

Difficulty _____

Languages _____

Other Comments _____

Evaluating Repertoire

Now that you have gathered information about your student's voice, you can start to think about repertoire. Not all songs are created equally. Choosing the right repertoire for each student requires some detailed analysis. The analysis protocol takes into consideration a number of things. What do you see the first time you look at a piece of music? How do we make sense of the music without playing through it? There are many elements to consider when choosing repertoire. It is much easier to evaluate whether or not a piece will be potentially helpful for your student when you know what to look for.

The Basics

The first thing to notice when you look at a piece will be the basic information, starting with the name of the composer and, possibly, the birth and death dates (depending on the publication). General periods of composition, composer output, and historical context are also helpful. Other things to consider might be the language of the text or the length of the piece.

Basic Musical elements

Clues about a song are found in its basic framework. If you have very little time, these elements will be the key to helping you decide whether or not to look further into a piece of music.

The first musical element to look at is the key or mode of the piece. Each key possesses different properties, different energy and mood, and different aural requirements for the musician. In terms of vocal development, certain keys may be easier for one Fach versus another to sing, or even one student over another of similar voice timbre.

Perhaps the most important element when considering a piece for a young singer is the range of the vocal line. For a beginning singer, it is ideal for a song to have a range of an octave or less. Consider the tessitura of the piece. For beginning singers, look for pieces that stay around a comfortable middle range, with lines that extend outward.

On a non-tonal level, one can get a good sense of a piece simply by looking at the meter, rhythms and tempi. Is the piece written in simple or complex meter? Are there meter changes in the piece? The same questions should be considered when looking at rhythms. How many notes are there per bar, on average? Are there rhythmic patterns that repeat? Are the rhythms easy to read? This is important to consider, because many pieces can look either easier or more complicated than they actually are. For a beginning student, looking at a piece with challenging rhythms or a non-traditional time signature may cause some unnecessary anxiety, so appearance should be considered. The solution may be as easy as finding a different arrangement or publisher.

Next, consider how fast or slow the composer expects the singer to execute those rhythm and meter changes. Is the tempo unrelentingly fast with many notes per bar, as in much of Handel and Scarlatti's florid writing? Is the tempo slow and drawn out? Different meters have an effect on the tone, timbre, and breadth of singers' voices. For instance, triple meter in a moderate tempo can be extremely effective for encouraging lightness in the voice and good breath flow.

You also can learn a lot about a piece simply by looking at its form. Different forms have been favored in different eras of music. How long is the song? Does it have any repeating sections? Does the piece require ornamentation? Is the ornamentation already written in? Is the poem strophic? In most cases, a song with repeating patterns, either melodic or rhythmic, will

be easier to teach and learn than one that is through-composed and evolving constantly throughout the piece.

Melodic elements

It is important to take a detailed look at the vocal line. What is the intervallic structure? What are the properties of the phrases? Is the piece primarily driven by melody or text?

When thinking of beginning singers, look at phrase length. Is it possible to break up phrases and insert breaths? Do the phrases build upon each other? Is there a pattern in the way the phrases are organized? Are there sequences? Consider which direction the phrases go; are they mostly ascending or descending? Look for melodic or intervallic patterns, as these will make your work easier when breaking the piece into manageable sections.

A small range is best when choosing repertoire for a beginning singer. By the same token, pieces with primarily small intervallic leaps or common interval patterns will lead to greater success for beginning singers. Melodic lines that move mostly stepwise should also be considered. Conversely, a line that has many large leaps may be more difficult to learn. Look for the intervals that are most common in the piece and whether there are any tricky leaps. Vocal fold coordination is more difficult in non-diatonic intervals. A piece with difficult patterns or large leaps could be used as an opportunity to teach musicianship to your students, but proceed with caution and ensure that they are not left feeling frustrated if they cannot accomplish difficult passages quickly. Musicianship training is important for your students and should be incorporated into their warm-ups and repertoire; there will be more discussion on that subject in a later chapter.

Once you have taken the vocal line apart, consider the melodic writing as a whole. Does the melodic line reflect the intent and mood of the poetry? Could it express the story without words, or is it primarily supportive of the text? Is the writing syllabic or melismatic? Is the melody memorable?

Harmonic elements

Harmony can make a seemingly simple piece sound extremely complicated. It can also be the support a singer needs to get through a passage that is difficult in other ways. On a visual level, it is easy to scan a page for accidentals and marked key changes. These will be your first indications of how complex the harmony is. There are other things to consider. Are there many accidentals? How are key changes dealt with? How fast are the harmonic changes? Are harmonic changes in the vocal line supported by the accompaniment? In that vein, for a young singer, it will be important that the accompaniment be as supportive as possible. In the most supportive instances, the vocal line will be doubled in the piano. If that is not the case, is the harmony supportive of the melodic line? Remember, the more supportive the harmony, the more easily the student will be able to sing the music expressively.

Expressive Considerations

Vocal music is a marriage of music and text. Once you have evaluated the piece from a musical standpoint, it is important to consider aspects such as language, meaning, and expression.

Language considerations might include questions such as: Does the piece have a lot of text? How does the composer treat the text? Is the writing primarily syllabic or lyric? Every language has its difficulties when it comes to singing. What challenges could this pose for your

singer? For instance, are the vowel sounds familiar or mostly foreign (i.e. not familiar to produce, such as the German *ichlaut* or *achlaut*). Does the language lend itself to legato singing (e.g. Italian or French), or is it consonant-driven (e.g. German and English)?

Much of the traditional canon is not appropriate for a young singer. Take this into consideration when choosing repertoire for your beginning singers. If the text is difficult for the singer to connect to, it will be difficult to encourage the singer to be expressive. You should look at the poetry in depth, if possible, before assigning a piece of music:

- Who is speaking in the poem?
 - A narrator?
 - A character?
- Is that character male or female?
- To whom is the character speaking?
- What is the subject of the poem?
- Are the poetry and language easy to understand or are they dated, obscure, or flowery?

You should also consider what type of text it is. Does it encourage outward expression, or is it more contemplative? All of these considerations will determine how well your student will connect with a piece of music (this will be different for each student) when it comes time to join expression and musicality.

When considering the text of a song, it is important to keep the specific student in mind. Selecting a song that is outside of the realm of experience for the student can result in difficulty connecting to the lyrics. Without that connection, the student will attempt to manufacture a sound instead of expressing the lyrical line organically. For that reason, it is best that a teacher get to know the student so that repertoire selections align not only with the technical ability of the student, but also with his emotional maturity.

Other considerations

Once you have determined that you like a piece and will find it useful for your student, there are some other practical things to consider. For instance, is the piece available in other keys if the tessitura is too high or too low? Is the piece available in an easier or more authentic arrangement from a different publisher? Where can you find the piece (which volumes or where online)?

Categorizing Repertoire

While some teachers are blessed with opportunities to work with professional singers who come to the studio just to polish repertoire or prepare for a new role at a large opera house, the majority of us work with children, young adults in the academic setting and amateur singers, all of whom have gaps in technique. The use of repertoire to meet a pedagogical end is critical in creating and meeting goals set by you and your student. Where evaluating repertoire requires an in-depth look into the musical aspects of a song, categorizing repertoire requires the application of pedagogical knowledge of vocal skills that can be addressed by the elements found in a piece.