

Troupers Light Opera Company

Memorizing Vocal Music

The following are three different, and sometime very similar, methods that you can use to help you to memorize the lyrics and music for *The Sorcerer*. Choose a method that works for you. Most importantly make a plan and get started.

Bill Lamoureux - October 26, 2004

Method # 1 by Chris Hisey

- When I memorize something, I start at the end and work backwards. This way I'm always working into something I already know. It works for anything.
- If you have a long dialogue part, start by memorizing the last sentence, and then do the sentence before that and continue into the sentence you already know. Continue working backwards until you get to the beginning.
- When I start memorizing the score to *The Sorcerer* for example not only will start by memorizing the end of the whole show, but I will start with the very last line of music and work line by line, number my number until I get to the beginning.
- There are a few things you have to be really careful of when memorizing. Be sure that you have learned it correctly! It takes twice as long to un-memorizing something you have learned wrong, than it does to memorize it correctly the first time.
- Memorize with a purpose and take frequent breaks. Memorizing is so much easier when you break everything down into small pieces and memorize it one bit at a time. If you have a section of dialogue you wish to memorize do it a paragraph at a time and walk away from it in between each paragraph. Studies have shown that your retention level is best when you work in short highly concentrated periods rather than long not so concentrated ones. A common mistake is saying "I have to sit for two hours right now and memorize 25 pages of dialogue." You'll never get it done. Take 15 minutes and memorize a paragraph. take a five minute break and come back and take another 15 minutes to memorize the next paragraph. You also don't have to spend your memorizing time all at once. Spread it throughout the day. Take 15 minutes in the morning before you go to work, then 15 minutes when you get home, and 15 minutes before you go to bed. 15 minutes is much easier to swallow than 45 all in one shot.
- Make note cards for yourself and have someone cue you on dialogue. Writing your dialogue out will help you to memorize it. This way you can also involve someone in your family so they don't feel left out when you have to take time to work on the show at home.

Method # 2 by Bruce Schoonmaker

- Brute repetition. Speak the text repeatedly. Sing the text repeatedly.
- The rule of three: Work a long phrase until you can repeat it perfectly from memory three times consecutively. Do the next phrase the same way. Combine the phrases and work them as one longer phrase. Build by phrases until you sing perfectly from memory an entire section of the aria/song three times consecutively. Build by sections until you have memorized the whole song.
- Memorize the text without the music. In other words, memorize it as a poem, rather than as a song. Then put it with the music.
- Speak the rhythm. Sing the rhythm, on one pitch.
- Try memorizing while lying on your back. Studies have shown that actors memorize roles faster while working on memorizing in a supine position.
- Memorize the song backwards. Memorize the last section first, then the next-to-last section, working your way forward.
- Reward: Reward yourself with each song memorized. Get a frozen yogurt or goody that you really like. Don't get it until you've sung the piece successfully in the presence of others (in other words, performed it from memory under pressure).
- Write the words on paper while repeating the song from memory.
- If you visualize the words in order to memorize, visualize the words in the upper left quadrant of your vision. I read this in a book on Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Oddly enough, it seems to settle in the memory quicker and more deeply by using the upper left quadrant.
- Try to "hear the piece in your head," and to "listen" to it, preferably right before you go to sleep -- or to "hear" it while you are listening to something else.
- Delay Gratification: When working on an entire role (opera, musical, or song cycle), memorize your favorite piece last. Memorize the most difficult music first. Memorize ensembles before solos. In other words, delay the gratification of memorizing your favorite parts until the other sections are memorized.
- Try working on memorization while doing some mindless chore. Repeat phrases over and over again while cleaning up or washing dishes or sweeping. Refer to the score when necessary, then return to the mindless task and work the memory.
- Get a friend to "repetiteur" for you, playing the piano accompaniment over and over again while you sing, in order to memorize. Don't try to make the song technically perfect while doing this kind of drill; you may even "mark" the voice. Just repeat the music many, many times in order to drill it into your mind.

Method # 3 Memorizing Music by Takashi Yogi

- Learn the correct notes and rhythms before you try to memorize. Check your notes with a piano, practice tape, or performance tape.
- While you are learning the notes, memorize the text. Study a translation. Text with meaning is much easier to memorize than nonsense syllables. Understanding the text also helps you sing more expressively. If you don't speak the language, get a pronunciation tape and try to mimic the tape. Write the text until you can do so accurately. Speak the text as you write it. The aim is to get the text memorized by your body rather than just your brain.
- Memorize in small sections, such as a page. Spread out the process as much as possible. You can't eat a whole weeks worth of food in a day and you can't memorize 95 pages of Brahms in the week before performance.
- Memorizing the rests is as Important as memorizing the notes. Memorize entrances and pay special attention to entrances other than beat one and to offbeat entrances. Memorize the number of blank measures and count them out silently: 1,234 2,234 3,234 etc.
- Don't depend on the conductor for entrance and cutoff cues. These cues may be omitted and in rare instances may be wrong. Don't depend on other parts for timing; count for yourself.
- Look for patterns in the music. If a section is repeated, carefully compare the notes for differences.
- Once you have a section memorized, reinforce the memory by singing it at least once a week. One advantage of having the music in your head is that you can practice anywhere: while washing dishes, taking a shower, or even silently during boring committee meetings.
- Memorizing is hard work and requires time and determination. If you think you can't do it, reflect on how many songs you already have in your memory. The reward for your effort will be the joy of being able to watch the conductor and recreate a piece of music in its full glory.