

Benign Opine

You've got to make the song your own!

By Priscilla Bagley

To a performing artist, the importance of making a song “your own” cannot be overstated... and it certainly isn't! More than likely, we teaching artists have been on the receiving end of this advice from judges, directors, coaches and teachers. As industry professionals, we have probably doled it out pretty frequently, as well. Throughout my career, there certainly have been a number of singers who walked into the room already possessing a keen sense of themselves and their own voice. They had already developed a signature riff, vocal styling or some unique defining characteristics. Fantastic! But, that is not the majority. More often, the person in front of me is still “finding their voice” and developing a sense of who they are as an artist. So, when singers cover a song and are encouraged to make it their own, they may have little idea where to begin. I want to share some jumping-off points that have proved helpful. The keys are to avoid imitation, observe punctuation and convert challenges into creative solutions.

“Imitation cannot go above its model.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Let's first delve into what might be the biggest impediment to “making it your own.” Singers have a dependence upon listening to recordings to learn repertoire. This trend takes no prisoners and observes no boundaries across all ages and musical genres. Our pupils need to learn new vocal literature, but if they cannot read music, they depend entirely upon their ear to learn. This is not a recent development. Back in the “Olde Days,” I would go to the college campus music library, locate a vinyl record (if it existed, please merciful muses) and hope a listening room was available in order to hear the newly assigned song or aria. Then, I'd listen to that one diva about 20 times. Breaking the influence of that first recording is often harder and may take longer than learning a completely different song. My warning never changes: “Be very careful while you are learning. Practice does NOT make perfect; practice makes permanent!”

In this digital age, multiple recordings of vocal music are readily available online and listening is convenient and



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mobile. Nevertheless, students will most often find one single recording and listen to it on repeat until they imitate every awkward breath, inaccurate rhythm, wrong note, hard r [ə] and diphthong ... hook, riff and stinker! They won't even realize it. So many singers take breaths in places that make ab. Solutely no sense, and for no reason ex. Cept that it was where they heard other. Singers breathe. Even some of our most universally beloved recordings are chock full of musical inaccuracies and/or vocal choices we would absolutely caution our students against.

“Variety's the very spice of life.” — William Cowper

Teaching artists are passionate about both being and building unique performing artists, not just vocal impressionists. The truth is that simply replicating that last iconic recording will not create the next iconic performance. A near exact imitation of another artist won't help a singer “find their voice” or fully realize their own potential. To combat the issue of imitation versus creation at the collegiate level, my students were required to listen to six different artists' recordings of the newly assigned repertoire and write a compare and contrast paper focused on the differences they heard. After listening to six different recordings in a row, students would write their observations in an informal stream of consciousness. By about song rendition number four, students had formed pretty strong opinions that were



occasionally insightful and often hilarious. Ultimately, this comparison exercise helped them develop a much more discerning ear.

Another resource to help avoid vocal impressions, if time or inclination allows, is if a teacher/coach records “plunk tracks” of the vocal line exactly as written by the composer. We can also create or help locate suitable accompaniment tracks for them to use while practicing. It sometimes feels like a priority or even a necessity to provide these services and resources in addition to vocal direction during their private lessons.

“Let’s eat, kids!” “Let’s eat kids!” Punctuation matters! — The Grammar Police

Observing punctuation may be the single greatest aid to “making a song your own.” In my experience, the quickest and easiest way to distinguish yourself from just about everyone else is to sing lyrics grammatically. Sounds overly simplistic? It’s much easier said than *sung!* Consider for a moment obstacles such as long sentences requiring tremendous breath control, written rests that awkwardly interrupt a phrase, intricate rhythms, plus hitting all those darn notes! Yet, how we shape a phrase is crucial to our personal expression and in conveying the intention of that particular text to our audience. When phrases are shaped observing punctuation and delivered in clear clauses and sentences, a better understanding is inevitable for artists and audiences, alike.

Try creating a monologue of the song. Extracting the lyrics from the music and analyzing their meaning allows vocalists to achieve a deeper understanding of the thoughts they are to convey. Turning the lyrics into a spoken monologue clarifies the shape of phrases as guided by punctuation, allows the natural lilt of the language to emerge and creates dramatic changes in character portrayal.¹ Artists are able to more fully realize their subtext and personally connect to the material. This monologue exercise has elicited incredibly positive responses from clients. Performing artists feel more authentic and present in their performances. Monologuing the song text is also a fantastic tool to reinvigorate old

¹ If the song selection is in a language foreign to the singer, a word-for-word translation is to be done. Do not depend on the English poetic translation typically found directly beneath the original language on sheet music for an accurate translation. Those English poetic translations are often rearranged to form a rhyme scheme, therefore the translated words do not align correctly. After translating word-for-word, artists can begin to analyze the text meaning, create subtext and then monologue.

repertoire. Look at tired text with new eyes, and it will brighten in the light of additional life experiences. Your color palette has expanded. What may have become dull can gleam when newly infused with current information. Music will grow and evolve with us.

“In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity.” — Albert Einstein

Another fantastic opportunity to make a song “your own” can be located wherever the biggest challenges or obstacles within the piece exist. Most songs/arias have a few places that prove troublesome. But, those trouble zones themselves can become highlights. We are creatives, after all, so here is where we flex that muscle! I am a purist when it comes to classical repertoire, but I do not hesitate to rearrange or re-create a cadenza to best suit the artist in front of me. We will exchange standard optional high notes (“Opt Ups”) for alternative notes that are more successful for the vocalist, as long as they are tasteful, tonal and stylistically on point. Tempo and phrasing are usually the biggest playgrounds for classical singers. Andante ranges from 76-108 BPM, and allegro is 120-156, so obviously, we have flexibility. Even if a tempo is specifically notated, there is no point in being rigid to the detriment of the artist. The ideal tempo is the one that best suits whoever is currently performing the song. That being said, if too many accommodations have to be made, this particular piece may not be a good fit, and it may be time to replace it. The way we accelerate when we get excited or slow down to emphasize a point is unique to each of us. Finding that natural ebb and flow to each phrase and letting phrases breathe allows for authentic individual expression.

In non-classical music genres, it is widely accepted that notes and rhythms are altered and adapted, though I suggest learning the song exactly as written first. Once the notes the composer actually wrote are learned, the text understood and vocal challenges discovered, *laissez les bons temps rouler!!* Is the song just a bit low on some notes? Rewrite that part of the melody line higher. Is the tessitura of the bridge a bit high? Add some downward riffs or “Opt Downs.”

While these adjustments are designed to troubleshoot and showcase strengths, they also highlight unique choices and create a customized version of the song.

Encourage artists to try anything and everything on this journey. Get ready for terrible sounds, sloppy riffs and atonal cadenzas. How many great voices crack and hit stinkers on their way to greatness? I daresay every single one. What a small price to pay for the exclusive seats we occupy as we witness their glorious discoveries.

Building and exercising that creative muscle is crucial. In the end, “making the song your own” is not just a critique, assignment, or advice — it is an artistic necessity.

Priscilla Bagley, founder of [Motivate the Arts](#), has more than 30 years of voice teaching, coaching, and directing experience while performing internationally in opera, musical theatre, cabaret and concertizing with orchestras. Her private voice clients

include Grammy Award, Tony Award, and Metropolitan Opera competition winners as well as Certified Platinum recording artists. She has worked in film, television and the recording industry since 1998, advocating for the inclusion of global music and diverse musical styles. She has been a proud NATS member since 1998 and an adjudicator for the National Musical Theatre Competition since 2020. She holds a master's degree in music history and literature (G.A. conducting) and a bachelor's degree in vocal performance.

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