

The Art and Skills of Learning (New) Music: Lucy Shelton's Practice Guide

Lucy Shelton



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INTRODUCTION

I HAVE ENJOYED A LONG CAREER in music, singing repertoire of all periods and in all forms—as a choral singer when I first came to New York in 1968, then as a chamber musician, solo recitalist, oratorio and orchestral soloist. Still ahead in 2020 is my operatic debut in the world premiere of Kaija Saariaho's *Innocence* at Aix-en-Provence. Contrary to the popular belief that singing new music can damage one's voice, I believe that the longevity of my career is in large part due to my embracing new music with all of its challenges. Voice and imagination must stay limber in order to deal with the difficulties of new scores. Over time I have developed a method for practicing the “gnarly” music of my esteemed composer colleagues that removes the guesswork and facilitates a more expressive rendition beyond simply being correct. It is a pathway into any unfamiliar music, whether spiky or smooth. The process is immensely satisfying, and it brings great joy.

In this article, I share my “toolkits” for learning contemporary works that may initially seem too daunting to tackle. In my experience almost all students are initially fearful when assigned a contemporary piece, but, after guidance using these tools, they perform with confidence and are newly open to learning other challenging repertoire. My hope is that the method explained below will give singers the courage to explore more of the music of our time and of our recent past and help them to enjoy the process of practicing it!

THE IMPOSSIBLE SCORE

In the late 1980s I was asked to sing György Kurtag's *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, Opus 7, for performances with the pianist Sir Andras Schiff. The score was the craziest I had ever seen, with extreme ranges and dynamics for both voice and piano, and rhythms that were utterly complicated (Example 1). It was almost an hour long and in Hungarian, with a vocal range of more than three octaves, no key signature, and rarely a time signature. It was a monumental task to learn, but I was determined to prepare it well before the first rehearsals with Andras, which Mr. Kurtag would also attend. It was the discovery that the disjunct intervals when inverted were often simply chromatic lines, easy to hear as seconds rather than sevenths or ninths, that prompted me to develop my “pitch toolkit.” I also created a “rhythm toolkit” designed to allow Kurtag's rhythmic complexity to become expressive and

Calmo, leggiero

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system features a vocal line starting with the lyrics: "Mint az me-ze-i vi-rá-gok, mint az ár-nyé-kok, mint az" (Like the meadow flowers, like the shadows, like the). The piano accompaniment is marked "ppp" and "tre corde". The second system continues the vocal line with: "bu-bo-rék, mint az á-lom, csak o-lyak (va) gyunk..." (bubble, like a dream, only such we are...). The piano accompaniment includes a triplet and is marked "ppp" and "calando".

Example 1. Gyorgy Kurtag, *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* (1963–68), Part III, No. 9.

natural. Ever since, both toolkits have continued to provide me with an engaging process for bringing a new work to a satisfying and expressive performance level.

COMPLEXITY DIFFUSED BY SEPARATING THE BASIC ELEMENTS

The fact that the mere *look* of a score with complex rhythms and a jagged pitch profile is daunting is the first stumbling block that must be removed. There is simply too much information to digest. So rather than trying

to take everything in at once, it makes sense to separate the elements of text, rhythm and pitch, and put them together again only after each is secure on its own.

A primary responsibility for singers is delivering the words, clearly, expressively, and accurately. To appreciate how the composer has interpreted the text, I like to recite from the author’s original, as a poem, before beginning to assimilate a composer’s specific rhythmic, melodic, and dynamic setting.

I then turn to my rhythm toolkit, which starts with score study and the marking of beats, and includes many

variations for productive practice. I think of it as a playground in which many games are played that eventually allow me to comfortably “perform” my vocal part with all of the composer’s choices — except for the pitches.

Then I move to the neighboring playground, with my pitch toolkit. To release the pitches from their daunting context, I transfer them from the score to manuscript paper, creating what I call a “pitch chart.” Here there is no rhythm or dynamics or text (everything that I just took care of with the rhythm toolkit), but each melodic phrase simply occupies a single box. This jungle gym of pitches within one measure gets lots of play as I add octave displacements (so that intervals of a 9th or 7th can be seen and sung as 2nds) and introduce pedal tones to encourage vertical listening. The process will be fully explained below, but the immediate thrill in making a pitch chart is that suddenly ten pages of the score become less than one page of pitches to learn!

(N.B. Certainly much can be said about the ways to work on developing your presentation of text. However in this article I am focusing on pitch and rhythm. I look forward to sharing my ideas about a singer’s relationship to text at another time.)

Rhythm Toolkit

The goal here is to develop an expressive and accurate rendition of the rhythmic text that is natural to you and which simply awaits “pitching.”

Step One: study and mark your score

Always use pencil and make use of colors to help focus the eye. Avoid marking in any way that “besmirches” the pitch, rhythmic, and text information in the vocal staff.

- Study all tempi (metronome markings, meters, ritarando, accelerando, etc.); already you are learning the piece, gaining an understanding of its form, style, and pacing.
- Consider other markings such as dynamics, articulations, and expressive indications. Make sure you understand *all* these indications and have translated the foreign words.
- Mark the strong beats with short vertical lines neatly *above* the staff. (I strongly advise against marking beats with numbers, as they are used for beat patterns [e.g., 2+2+3] and time signatures.) It is crucial to keep your vocal line uncluttered and easily legible (Example 2).

Step Two: rhythmic practice

- Check *actual* tempi to know where you are headed, but always start your practice *under* tempo.
- Speak the rhythms (without any text) on random syllables, while pointing to the beats on your staff. This keeps your eye alert. The goal is for the rhythms to become comfortable and natural, so vary your choice of spoken syllables. It is crucial to keep a steady beat and commit to getting to each downbeat on time, in spite of inaccuracy along the way. Use a metronome! This will also clarify what needs detailed attention in your practice. Keep in mind that in all of your collaborations, rhythmic security is initially more important than pitch accuracy.

Rhythmic playground variations:

- Conduct, tap, or clap the beats as you *speak* the rhythms. Use your fingers as subtle timekeepers on the edge of the stand or music. (Singers have an obvious advantage here!)
- Count the beat patterns and clap or tap the rhythms.
- Clap or tap all beats; then strong beats only; then downbeats only.
- Now speak the text in rhythm while continuing to point, conduct, tap, or clap the beats. Never re-articulate melismas, but simply stay on the vowel. The goal is for precision, making sure to observe all rests as well as phrase end durations. When this is secure, then focus on communicating the words with naturalness and your own expression, within the composer’s rhythmic choices. Please note that vowels traditionally occur *on* the beats and are what determine “being in tempo.” (Correctly notated scores place vowels directly under the noteheads.) Consonants traditionally occur *before* the beat, and can be expressively elongated to great effect.
- In order to organize breathing and phrasing, proceed to intoning the text in rhythm, using a sustained monotone, as in a chant. (*Do not* shape phrases by approximating the written pitches.) Pay attention to the durations of note values, placing final consonants accurately. Consider the variety of expressive and rhythmic incentives for breathing, based on the punctuation and written rests.
- Gradually add all the markings in the score (dynamics, tempi, articulations) to your chanting. Try moving away from the single note intoning and experiment with doing a melodramatic reading with absolutely

A noise-less pa-tient spi-der, I mark'd where on

a li-ttle pro-mon-to-ry it stood i-so-la-ted, Mark'd how to ex-plore to ex-plore

the va-cant vast sur-roun-ding, It launch'd forth fi-la-ment, fi-la-ment, fi-la-ment, out of it-self,

Example 2. Oliver Knussen, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," no. 3 of *Whitman Settings* (1992).

everything notated in the score except the actual pitches. Read once again the poet's text as shown in the preface, and appreciate the specific interpretation of the composer. The composer's rhythmic setting of the text will become your own with this practice.

EYE to EAR to VOICE

This is the order in which a singer processes a written score: the notation must be recognized by the eye, which then transfers it to the ear; the inner ear must then hear the pitch before it can be sung securely and freely.

Not having perfect pitch, I have always needed to relate to the musical context for the voice part, both melodic and harmonic. We singers have spent years learning traditional Western music with key signatures that appear at the beginning of each staff line. The eye most likely has become lazy in truly identifying the pitches (for instance, that in A major every C is actually a C[#]), since we are blessed (or cursed?) with singing by ear only, unlike our instrumental colleagues. (Wouldn't sight reading be simple if each note had a fingering?) Truly understanding the staff (where every line and space is not equidistant) is a basic need for learning atonal music.

The pitch-work practice will make the eye to ear connection ever more secure. The voice will not be free to resonate if there is any insecurity as to where the pitch actually is. Composers do not want us to "reach" for high notes, or "dig" for low notes. I believe every pitch we sing must be *heard* by our inner ear prior to vocalization in order to be fully resonant and responsive to the specific needs of the phrase, as our imagination suggests. What constantly astounds me is that while we have only twelve pitches to nurture, how incredibly different they all feel depending on context, register, text, dynamic, articulation, tempo and emotion! As we explore the practice of making and using a "pitch chart," we will

take advantage of years of singing traditional Western music and practice "ear" and voice in an easy range, with no interval larger than a fifth. In this playground you will find security and, after incrementally adding the text and all the composer's markings, you will be free to communicate expressively.

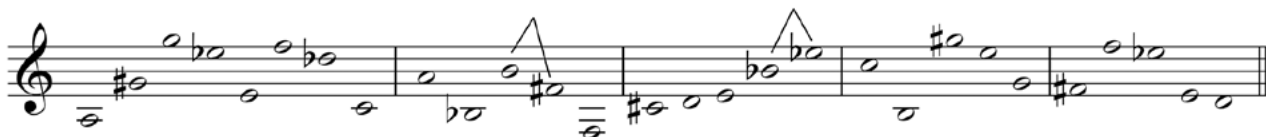
Pitch Toolkit: How to Make and Use a Pitch Chart

Step One: pitch chart preparation

- A pitch chart is nothing more than all the pitches you must learn written on manuscript paper in whole notes (no rhythm, no stems, no dynamics, no text), with a bar line at every rest or comma, and at each phrase end. (A breath should be taken wherever there is a bar line.) If there is an extended rest in the vocal part, use a double bar line to indicate the end of one section and a new beginning. Since there is no rhythm, do not notate immediately repeated pitches. Accidentals apply only to each directly following note, so you do not ever need to use a natural sign. Every "measure," which is a musical phrase, then becomes your practice unit (Example 3).

Notice how this page of score becomes only one line of pitches to learn.

- Study the pitch chart and mark the following intervals: perfect 5ths with a bracket; perfect 4ths with a carat.
- Add the octaves within your range above and/or below each of the composer's whole note pitches in what I call dot or shadow notation (stemless small quarter notes). You will now readily see that each phrase can be sung in an easy range, with the pitches in a contracted version where no interval is larger than a 5th. Your practice unit has now become far more user friendly (Example 4).



Example 3. Kurtag, pitch chart for *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, Part III, No. 9 (see Example 1).



Example 4. Kurttag pitch chart with octaves added, showing interval inversions, revealing condensed version.



Example 5. a) Kurttag pitch chart with all information in condensed version; b) with all information in composer's version.

Notice how all the challenging 7ths and 9ths become simple 2nds. Looking at your condensed shadow version, now mark: major and minor triads with a slur; chromatic or whole tone lines of 3 notes or more with a straight line above the staff (Example 5).

You may find other recurring pitch intervals or groupings, such as tritones and diminished or augmented triads. I do not advise marking them in the pitch chart because they are harmonically unstable. But of course anything that recurs is worth noting, as it must mean something to the composer.

Notice how you are getting familiar with the composer's distinctive pitch language.

Step Two: pitch-chart practice

The initial work to develop your eye to ear facility can be done anywhere, anytime (airplanes, subways, buses, before sleep . . .), since you need only use the lightest hum or a kind of exhale/whistle to hear the pitches in your head. It is the eye to the ear that is getting the training here, not "the voice." When the ear is secure the vocalism will be easy.

- To encourage listening vertically (in a harmonic context) rather than horizontally (interval by interval)

I make use of pedal tones or drones. (This system is purely for practical learning purposes and makes no presumption whatsoever about the logic behind a composer's language.) By putting a nontonal piece "into a key," our traditionally trained ears can make use of the harmonic context known since childhood. Viable tonal centers can be determined by your marked perfect 4ths, 5ths, and triads, and/or by simple pitch recurrences. By playing on a keyboard what I call a "three-note drone" of *doh-sol-doh* underneath the melody, the focus is on recognizing the consonant and dissonant intervals and always tuning to the drone. After using at least three different drone choices, the melody will be secure in ear and voice. Of course, all 12 tonalities could be applied—go ahead and try it! However, my advice is to stay with the "white-note" drones (C, D, E, F, G, A, B) in order to avoid an overload of enharmonic rethinking.

- Before vocalizing each full phrase with the drone, look ahead to see where the consonant intervals occur, that is, the tonic, dominant, major and minor 3rds. Name them—then tune them to the drone. (It may be helpful to use scale tone numbers when you first sing the phrases with the drone.) This is crucial eye to ear

Example 6. 1st Kurtag phrase with 5 different drones.

development as you identify (eye) and anticipate (ear) these consonances and then recognize their neighboring dissonances. Reinforce the consonant intervals of the phrase by re-articulating the drone and adding fermatas; then do the same with the dissonances. With this practice, and the variations listed below, you will gain a harmonic context for all intervals and develop your pitch memory (Example 6).

Notice how radically different the melody feels with each drone . . . and that the trouble spots will differ with each one.

- When comfortable with the condensed melody phrase, gradually introduce each of the composer's registral choices, thus returning to your original pitch chart profile (see Example 7). Always hear the smaller interval when singing its inversion. This will eliminate any sense of reaching for an interval, because your ear is confidently engaged. Soon you will be singing the wide ranging melody with the same ease as the condensed version, and having already tried it with three different harmonic contexts, your melody is ready for any context, including the composer's.

Pitch chart playground variations:

- Sing the dissonances *forte* and the consonances *piano*; do the reverse.
- Sing the phrase staccato (but still in one breath).
- Give the phrase a consistent rhythmic pattern of duple, triple, or dotted figures.
- Improvise rhythms and dynamics.
- Sing the phrase backward.

- Practice the octave displacements as 2nds then 9ths, forward and backward.
- Remember to breathe at every bar line and to sing each measure *molto legato* and in a single breath.

A Review

As a review of the tools and the process in the Pitch Toolkit, let's look at a Charles Ives song "Soliloquy" (Examples 8 and 9).

- Returning to the score, now work in the text, rhythm, dynamics, articulations, and tempi, which have become "natural" with your earlier rhythmic practice. Consider the expressive effect of the composer's particular intervallic choices: How does an ascending minor 6th differ from a descending major 3rd, or an ascending 2nd versus an ascending ninth? Why might the composer have chosen it? Is there a correlation with the text? Commit to and celebrate all the composer's choices.

Notice how you have gained accuracy and confidence

and are now free to listen to more than your own part. At this point rehearsing becomes an exciting process of discovering more about your part in its greater context.

- Finally, study the score for the context of the line. Figure out how to find starting pitches, and look for any doubling of your part; mark these in your score. In the case of an extremely atonal work, you may still want to reference a tonal center to give you security. It is always interesting to see if your favorite

a. 1st phrase original condensed



b. with C drone Sing consonances only



Add original registers



Play drone with consonances with dissonances



c. Sing in rhythmic patterns



Example 7. a) Kurttag pitch chart; b) bringing in the original registers; c) playground phrase variations.

drone pitches (just *doh* and *sol*) are corroborated by appearing on strong beats, hopefully in the lowest notes. Maybe the score suggests an entirely new tonal center, so return to the playground to see if you can feel confident with it. But most likely the pitch chart work you have done has put the composer's pitches so clearly and expressively into your voice, that now

in rehearsals and performance you can be inspired by what you hear around you and simultaneously inspire your colleagues and your audience.

THE ONGOING PROCESS

Let me suggest that a musician's most essential creative art is how to practice. Teachers and coaches offer crucial

Soliloquy or a Study in 7ths and Other Things

Adagio

When a man is sit-ting, be-fore the fire on the hearth, he says "Na-ture is a sim-ple af-fair" Then
(Chanted or half spoken and somewhat drawling, rather slowly and quietly)

Allegro

he looks out the win-dow and sees a
hail storm, and he be-gins to think that
"Na-ture can't be so eas-i-ly dis-posed of!"

8^{va} basso loco *8^{va} basso loco*

al Fine

cresc. e accel. *poco a poco*

* If there may be two players, all the chord in each 16 measure may be struck; and other chords need not be rolled.

(1907)

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Example 8. Charles Ives "Soliloquy" (1907), with rhythm marked above vocal staff.

The image displays five musical examples (a-e) related to Charles Ives' "Soliloquy" (1907).
 a) A single-staff pitch chart showing a sequence of notes with intervals of 4ths and 5ths indicated by lines above the notes.
 b) A single-staff musical notation with various annotations including octave displacements (indicated by lines above notes), chromatic lines, and triads.
 c) A single-staff musical notation showing a condensed melody with all information, including accidentals and interval markings.
 d) A piano accompaniment for the final phrase, showing four different drone possibilities labeled C, G, A, and D. The notation includes both treble and bass staves.
 e) Piano accompaniment for playground variations, showing two different rhythmic and harmonic settings of the melody, each with its own key signature and time signature.

Example 9. Charles Ives “Soliloquy” (1907); a) pitch chart with 4ths and 5ths; b) with octave displacements and chromatic lines and triads; c) condensed melody with all information; d) final phrase with 4 drone possibilities; e) playground variations.

In celebration of NATS 75th Anniversary.

Add your own dynamics:

Hap - py Birth - day to you! Hap - py Birth - day to you!

Hap - py Birth - day dear NA(TS) T S Hap - py Birth - day to you!

outside ears and specific expertise to guide us along the way, but the true responsibility for making progress is ours and occurs in our private practice time. This is a time to make discoveries, develop self-awareness, stamina, and discipline—but always with positive mindfulness. (If your work becomes mindless or is done by rote it is time to take a break!) For the most efficient practice you need simply to stay engaged, keep your imagination active, be playful, adventurous, and daring. I know that the process will reward you and that it truly can be fun!

The only artist ever to have won two Walter W. Naumburg Awards, internationally acclaimed soprano **Lucy Shelton** has premiered over 100 works, many of which were written expressly for her vocal talents. She has worked closely with major composers of our time, such as Elliott Carter, Charles Wuorinen, David Del Tredici, Milton Babbitt, Shulamit Ran, Oliver Knussen, Kaija Saariaho, Gyorgy Kurtag, Joseph Schwantner, and Pierre Boulez. Shelton has performed across the globe with major orchestras and conductors in repertoire of all periods, and as a chamber musician she has been a frequent guest with ensembles such as Emerson String Quartet, eighth blackbird, Da Camera of Houston, 21st Century Consort, Da Capo Chamber Players, Schoenberg-Asko Ensemble, and Ensemble InterContemporain. Among the many Festivals in which Lucy has participated as both faculty and soloist are Aspen, Tanglewood, Santa Fe, Ojai, Banff, Yellow Barn, Chamber Music Northwest, BBC Proms, Aldeburgh, Kuhmo, and Salzburg. Her supreme musicality has been captured on over 50 recordings. Currently Shelton teaches at Manhattan School of Music's Contemporary Performance Program, privately at her studio, and as a guest faculty at both Juilliard and Curtis.

Shelton's primary mentor was the legendary American mezzo soprano Jan de Gaetani, whose integrity and intensity in music making continue to be an inspiration.

“There is not much that I can do,
For I've no money that's quite my own!”
Spoke up the pitying child—
A little boy with a violin
At the station before the train came in,—
“But I can play my fiddle to you,
And a nice one 'tis, and good in tone!”

The man in the handcuffs smiled;
The constable looked, and he smiled, too,
As the fiddle began to twang;
And the man in the handcuffs suddenly sang
With grimful glee:
“This life so free
Is the thing for me!”
And the constable smiled, and said no word,
As if unconscious of what he heard;
And so they went on till the train came in—
The convict, and the boy with the violin.

“At the Railway Station, Upway,”
Thomas Hardy