

## **“Common Mistakes”** by Roy Sander

For this first column, I’d like to talk about mistakes I’ve observed many singers making over the past few years. They fall into two categories: (1) dropping focus and control, and (2) piano bar missteps.

### **Dropping Focus and Control**

I’m not talking here about the demanding art of song interpretation. I’m referring to easy-to-correct errors made by singers at all artistic levels.

For example, do not take a sip of water during an instrumental break in one of your songs. This shifts the audience’s attention from your artistic interpretation to your physical needs. You should maintain full focus and control from beginning to end. Even when you are not singing, you are still performing the song.

What *should* you do during an instrumental interlude? You could turn and watch the musician(s). This is a bit of a cop-out, but it’s OK. Better, but far more difficult, would be to continue facing the audience and show us what you, the teller of the story (i.e., the song), are thinking and feeling—the emotional journey you are going on from the last word you sang before the instrumental break until the first word you sing afterwards. If the musical arrangement supports your artistic vision of the song, as it should, the instrumental solo will reflect that journey. (If by chance the accompanist goes on a private musical trip instead, you should disabuse him/her of this self-indulgence while you are putting the show together.) Be aware that silently revealing your thoughts and emotions during the break is tough to pull off without seeming hokey; be very careful of overacting. If you cannot master it, you’d be better off watching the musicians or, perhaps, looking down or aside. But never leave the song.

Do not introduce your accompanist(s) in the middle of the song—for example, at the beginning or end of an instrumental solo. If the pianist’s (or bassist’s or whoever’s) work in that song is especially fine, you might want to acknowledge him/her right after the number. Note that some up tunes might allow for mid-song introductions or acknowledgments, especially those that are based on a playful exchange between the singer and musicians. Also, because some forms of jazz have a different esthetic, jazz can frequently support mid-song intros. Even granting this distinction, however, I think that many jazz vocalists need to give more thought to the way they acknowledge their musicians.

While I’m talking about introducing musicians, do try not to refer to them as your partners in crime. While that was cute at one time, it has become such a cliché.

Finally, on ballads or serious songs, don’t sing directly to a specific person in the audience. It shifts focus to that audience member; others then becomes acutely aware of your target’s reaction—or discomfort. (Yes, I know that Andrea Marcovicci does this, but

she sets up a dynamic with her audience that is quite marvelous but most particular. I do not suggest emulating her approach—at least not unless you know exactly what you are doing.)

### **Piano Bar Missteps**

As is fairly widely understood, getting up to sing at a piano bar can yield a number of benefits. For one, it gives you a chance to sing—and if you're diligent and serious about your craft (and, oh yes, talented), the more you sing, the more you will learn and the better you will become. The second principal benefit is that it gives others an opportunity to hear and see you; if they like you, they might come to your show. I have seen so many good singers mishandle this opportunity, that I thought I'd offer some do's and don'ts—even though they are all basically simple common sense.

Know what you want to sing. Once you've expressed your desire to sit in, don't take forever to deliberate on what song to do. You will waste the audience's time and come across as unprofessional.

Have your music with you. Note that not all pianists are adept at sight-reading charts; therefore, know a few standards that most pianists are likely already to have in their repertoire. And know what key you sing each song in.

Know the lyrics...cold. It's dismaying how frequently people stumble over the lyrics of the very song they've chosen to sing.

Be dressed appropriately—not necessarily as nattily or purposefully as you would if you were doing a show, but don't look as though you were in the middle of doing your laundry. After all, while you may not be the star of the evening, you're still on stage. And you never know who might be in the audience.

If the pianist doesn't know you and, so, asks your name, give your full name. Giving just your first name creates the impression that you're an amateur. Besides, you want the audience to keep an eye out for your future engagements or perhaps tell others about you; unless your first name is wildly distinctive, it, alone, won't do the trick.

When you've finished the song, don't be so self-effacingly quick to announce the pianist's name. He/she will be getting applause all evening; this is *your* moment. Take the applause—it was meant for you. Then thank or acknowledge the pianist.

If people come over to you afterwards and compliment you, ask whether you can have their names for your mailing list. If you have a web site, offer them a card that has the address of the site. Finally, if you are in the middle of a run, or have one coming up soon, have your flyers with you. (I threw this last one in—I've seldom known performers to leave home without their flyers.)