

Strategies for achieving performing excellence of twentieth and twenty-first century art song

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Strategies professional singers use in the selection and preparation of twentieth and twenty-first century art song were gathered from an international study carried out by email during 2006-07. These strategies were applied in the preparation of 34 Australian art songs for a recital in 2008 by three professional singers in a practice-led research project involving the author. The 84 resulting performance and learning strategies from the professional singers' study are discussed in relation to the literature and their application by the three singers who strove for performance excellence in their preparation and performance of a recital of these Australian art songs. The application of how these strategies can ultimately benefit singers and vocal teachers learning and performing twentieth and twenty-first century art song is discussed, along with the categorization of the strategies with reference to the literature.

Keywords: practice strategies; learning strategies; art song; practice-led research; performing excellence

The challenges singers face in relation to performance excellence of twentieth and twenty-first century art song are seldom discussed in the literature. Singers perform with a partner—an accompanist—and must together interpret the text of the song they perform (Fine and Ginsborg 2007). The demands modern composers have placed on performers involve challenges in rhythm, new vocal techniques, and often new notation approaches in scores, to name but a few (Mabry 2002). While each performer will rely to a certain extent on their intuition and innate musical talent (Rink 2002), various skills involving the preparation of the music can be learned and may go towards enhancing the singer's path in achieving perceived excellence.

Within the scope of practice (Hallam 1997) and learning strategies (Nielsen 1999), a performer has the possibility to develop and maintain their skills

in many areas. Skills such as sight-reading/sight-singing (i.e. being able to sing notation) is one many singers struggle to master despite its importance (Killian and Henry 2005). The skill of memorizing the words and melody together was found to be effective for singers (Ginsborg and Sloboda 2007), with the formal structure of a song providing the basic framework for memory. Communicating emotion through both psychological and physiological means is essential for a singer, with strategies involving both speech and singing (Sundberg *et al.* 1994).

Other strategies musicians use in their pursuit of performance excellence (Williamon 2004) include the areas of analysis, practice (Jørgensen 2004), imagery (Emmons and Thomas 1998), rehearsal, memory (Barry and Hallam 2002), self regulation (McPherson and Zimmerman 2002), technique, goals, organization, and time management (Jørgensen 2004).

This paper presents the findings of (1) a study investigating strategy use by professional singers of the selection and preparation of twentieth and twenty-first century art song and (2) the practical application of those strategies in the preparation and performance of twentieth and twenty-first century Australian art song.

METHOD

Participants and data collection procedures

Data were collected from two sources, the first being a group of $n=14$ professional singers from America (2), Australia (7), Canada (1), New Zealand (3), and Spain (1) in a study from 2006-07. Six were male, seven female, and their voice types were soprano (6), mezzo soprano (2), tenor (4), baritone (1), and bass/baritone (1). The professional singers completed a series of three email questionnaires, the first of which sought responses about the selection and subsequent preparation of twentieth and twenty-first century art song repertoire from a program for a recent performance. The second email questionnaire sought information on learning and preparing one twentieth and twenty-first century art song contained in the submitted program. Participants were requested to send a score of the song, which they could annotate to illustrate their answers. Specific and generic questions (relating to *any* twentieth and twenty-first century art song) about learning strategies, procedures (i.e. order of learning), and the use of vocal techniques and challenges were asked in the third and final email questionnaire. The resulting qualitative data was categorized into a list of either performance or learning strategies. The draft list of strategies ($n=50$) was informed by a list of strategies drawn from the initial literature review, combined, and made available to

three professional singers to apply as they prepared a recital of Australian art songs.

The second source of data collection came from three professional Australian singers in a project that involved the author (a soprano), a mezzo, and a baritone who all applied the collected strategies in their preparations for a 2008 recital of 34 Australian art songs. The recital was recorded and the singers and accompanists were interviewed following the performance. This practice-led research project (Aggett 2008) required the three singers to record their practice sessions and keep and reflect on practice diaries, choosing and adopting appropriate strategies as a means of improving their performances. Their new strategies resulted in further expansion to the existing list of strategies.

Materials

The 34 songs for the recital were chosen as a result of an extensive search of all the Australian art songs in the Australian Music Centre (submitted from 2005-09) and other sources including the Mitchell (Sydney, New South Wales) and National (Canberra, Australian Capital Territory) libraries, in an attempt to select a repertoire of songs suitable for all voice types and addressing a range of pedagogical aspects.

RESULTS

Eighty-four strategies drawn from the literature review and first group of participants were categorized and coded as being musical (M), performance (P), or contextual (C) according to themes evident in the literature. Many of these strategies can be viewed as performance (self-regulatory) strategies for the singer and/or learning strategies (for a teacher or singer). Performance strategies (n=55) included overall strategies to help prepare a piece (10), pitch strategies (12), rhythm strategies (5), textual strategies (7), vocal techniques (7), and ensemble and accompaniment strategies (7). Learning strategies (n=29) included general strategies (14), order of learning (8), pitch strategies (1), aural strategies (1), and strategies for preparing a whole song cycle or program (4).

The second group of participants adopted n=118 performance strategies—42 musical, 49 performance, and 27 contextual; a total of n=43 learning strategies were adopted, with 21 being musical, 11 performance, and 11 contextual, with singers introducing 13 new strategies to the list (see Table 1).

Table 1. Strategy use in relation to recurring musical (M), performance (P), and contextual (C) themes existing in the literature on and about twentieth and twenty-first century solo vocal music and Australian song. The performance and learning strategies used by professional singers as reported in the study conducted in 2006-07 were sorted into M, P, and C themes, some of which were adopted by the three professional singers in a 2008 recital.

	<i>M</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>C</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Occurrence in literature</i>	163	70	269				
<i>2006-07 prof singers study</i>							
Performance strategies (PS)	14	41	13	Learning strategies (LS)	12	14	21
<i>2008 recital: Application of strategies</i>							
Soprano (PS)	24	29	14	(LS)	4	6	1
Mezzo soprano (PS)	3	6	5	(LS)	11	-	9
Baritone (PS)	15	14	8	(LS)	6	5	1
<i>Strategy use total</i>	(PS) 42	49	27	(LS)	21	11	11

DISCUSSION

Most frequently encountered performance strategies in the first study were pitch and overall strategies to learn a song (see Figure 1). Because of the breakdown of tonality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, vocal repertoire of this period can be musically challenging, and it is not surprising to note the emphasis on pitch. However, few participants had definite learning approaches to tackle the repertoire, and their responses demonstrated that many had a lack of understanding of current trends in song composition. General strategies were the most frequently employed learning strategies reported by singers; for example, both a mezzo and tenor found it helpful to use a sound file from a composer to help learn a melody when no recording was available. Many of the strategies can be viewed as performance/self-practice strategies for the singer and/or learning strategies for the teacher or singer. The number of composer biographies and articles included in the review of literature consulted explains the high reference to contextual strategies found (see Table 1).

Strategies that second study participants found most useful related to performance rather than learning strategies. From the practice journals, it was apparent each singer had tailored their learning, practice, and strategy use to suit each song, their own personal challenges, and the technical de-

2006/7 Professional Singers Study



Figure 1. Distribution of performance and learning strategies collected from responses by 14 professional singers in the 2006/7 international study conducted by email questionnaires.

mands specific to the repertoire. Both an ensemble and pitch learning strategy used with the sixth song of Peggy Glanville Hick's *13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* involved the accompanist playing the notes of each bar as a block chord to familiarize the singer with the tonality, gradually adding in the rhythm.

The use and application of performance rather than learning strategies, drawn from literature and the experience of professional singers, were found to be effective in striving for performing excellence when preparing twentieth and twenty-first century Australian art song. Categorizing strategies by the themes apparent in the literature and cross-referencing them with the experiences of professional singers can offer singers and singing teachers a way of tackling the challenges offered by twentieth and twenty-first century vocal art song.

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