

THE VOCAL COACH APPROACH

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Foreword: Support for Ashbaker's Work

The Vocal Coach Approach (When Practice Makes Perfect) by Susan Ashbaker joins a short, but distinguished list of books that should be considered essential for all who instruct and guide young performers of Opera and Art Song. It goes without saying that young singers can benefit greatly from listening to professionals who offer their experience and knowledge of performance traditions and communicate the information in an organized, logical manner. But good coaches who understand voices and vocal technique and have extensive knowledge of repertoire are very hard to find. Books written by professional voice coaches who can also share expertise in the intricacies of the business aspects of Classical Singing are fewer still.

In this book, Susan helps young singers work toward a synthesis of music, text, and style, utilizing all three of these components to fully enliven a character, a story line, and/or an event. Many young singers will never enjoy the benefits of working in person with a coach like Susan—one who has conducted operas, played piano reductions of opera scores, coached and accompanied for art song recitals, directed young artists' programs, and run entire opera companies. Drawn from a long and highly successful and productive career, Susan has skillfully distilled her knowledge into this handy *toolbox* for singers. The techniques and insights she shares will guide singers and their teachers as they tackle challenges of style, diction, and phrasing, and work toward a form of vocal expression that more faithfully reveals the intentions of both composer and poet. *The Vocal Coach Approach (When Practice Makes Perfect)* should be required reading for anyone wishing to be involved in the development of the next generation of great singers.

Christopher Arneson

Director of Voice Pedagogy, Westminster Choir College at Rider University

My longtime esteemed friend and colleague Susan Ashbaker has put together a most useful and practical set of techniques and methods for singers, vocal coaches, and other musicians to use in the study of music that they are learning and perfecting. In our field, she is widely admired for her honest and easy communication, and the ideas that are set forth here are exactly in that vein—they are simple to understand and quickly can be integrated into the habits of those persons who are unlocking the secrets of music as they improve their artistry. *Learning how to learn* is one of the most important skills anyone can develop. Such writing is a wonderful addition to the canon of thought and process for all of us, and I congratulate her on her accomplishment with this enlightening text!

Warren Jones

Pianist, Vocal Coach, and Conductor

Susan Ashbaker has worn many wonderful career hats in the many years I have known her. *The Vocal Coach Approach* combines these hats to share her practice ideas and strategies, which are vital to the growth of the singer's musical and performing abilities and enhance training with the voice teacher.

This diligent and detailed practice outline shows the singer how to pay close attention to details concerning the music, style of the composer, text, and communicating with the audience. Many singers are well disciplined, but it also takes curiosity, drive, patience, and perseverance when learning, practicing, and performing the music.

I believe this book is a wonderful addition to the voice studio library. Along with the voice teacher's guidance, it shows how diligent one must be with practice time and regimen. There is something for everyone in this book to learn or revisit, discuss, and pass on. The whole practice and learning routine never get old and it should never end throughout one's career. And yes, after 45 years I still find this truly rewarding and fun!

Sally Wolf

Voice Faculty, Westminster Choir College and Academy of Vocal Arts

Extraordinary performances are often described as "magical." Indeed, that is probably the most accurate description for those transporting experiences that defy the confines of language; but the nomenclature, however flattering, presents a dilemma for those who endeavor to become the delivery systems for making that kind of art. If "magical" is the result, then one might assume that the process is mystical, mysterious, or (even less helpful) just the result of a huge talent, or some ever elusive "it" factor. In truth, the "magic" we all seek is the result of work that has been enormously methodical. And this is where the brilliance of Susan Ashbaker steps it.

I have known Susan for much of my professional life, initially as a coach, producer, and assistant conductor, more recently, as a cherished co-teacher and collaborator. For several years, we led a series of workshops full of aspiring opera singers. Class after class we all marveled at her abilities to demystify the richly complicated processes of thorough preparation. At Susan's hand, these lucky young artists learned how to unearth, explore, develop, and ultimately inhabit the musical, textual and dramatic needs of any musical moment. Her methods are clear, concise, dependable, repeatable and (most importantly) fruitful!

I recommend this book to all who do, or teach, or simply aspire to understand. The kind of "magic" we all seek requires an egoless, humble, specific, and ordered process. Susan Ashbaker offers such a process... a method, indeed, for the magic.

Nova Thomas

Professor Voice, The Shepherd School of Music, Rice University

Teaching-Artist: Santa Fe Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Utah Opera, Palm Beach Opera

Introduction

Do you like to practice? If your answer is no, this book is for you! If your answer is yes, this book is for you, too! In the life of a singer, no matter what level, practice is the most significant portion of what you will be doing for those phenomenal hours in rehearsal and that glorious moment of performance.

What do *you* do when you practice? Let's start first with what it means to practice. According to Merriam-Webster it is, "to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient, to train by repeated exercises, and systematic exercise of proficiency." So, practice includes repetition. But what happens if something goes wrong, and you repeatedly practice an error? That's right, you've practiced it perfectly wrong. Our repertoire is fraught with mistakes by the frequent practice of errors. That is why the idiom "practice makes perfect" is only possible if the practice is perfect¹; otherwise, it will be perfectly incorrect. You need to have the right tools in place for practice, and your practice should include many tapas-sized portions of work.

In my home, I have a modest toolbox. The contents include a hammer, nails, and hardware for hanging pictures, a tape measure, a flat screwdriver, a Phillips screwdriver, and a set of very small screwdrivers. That is sufficient for what I do around my home. Everything else requires the expertise, interest, and toolbox of someone more skilled than I, whether it is re-grouting, putting up crown molding, renovating a bathroom, or building a closet.

As a singer, you need a professional-size toolbox for your craft; this book is just that. It can be read, reread, and regularly referenced. You can use the tools that will be most effective for you first, and then, as you integrate the skillsets into your practice, you can add more tools to your practice. This book is a lifelong study and is useful every time you learn a new piece or revisit a piece that is an old friend. It doesn't matter whether you are a freshman in college, have completed several young artist programs or are several years into a successful career. It doesn't matter if your chosen career path is as an opera singer, a choral singer, a music teacher, or a hobby musician. The exercises and ideas in the following chapters will help you learn to be more detailed and efficient with your time and in your practice and will show you multiple ways to get to a result you are amazingly proud of.

This book is the result of over 40 years of coaching singers. It is the result of the many teachers and mentors who taught me. It is the result of learning from the fabulous singers I've had the privilege of working with. It is the result of my love for finding ways to clarify concepts, provide particulars and help all singers become the very best possible version of themselves.

Susan Shiplett Ashbaker

¹ "Perfect" is a curious word. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary online, the definitions include "being entirely without fault or defect, flawless, satisfying all requirements, accurate, corresponding to an ideal standard or abstract concept... expert, proficient." In the arts, there are so many subjective opinions that "perfect" can be different for everyone. In this case, what can be right (satisfying all requirements) are the pitches, rhythms, and words. So, please proceed with caution, and don't let the word "perfect" stifle your artistic vision or creativity!

Part 1: Daily Musical Tools to Optimize Your Singing

Everyday Tools for Musical Technique

If you are a serious student of singing, you likely begin your practice sessions by warming up your voice with exercises that your teacher has assigned. Like an athlete training for an event, these exercises are crucial for properly preparing your voice, body, and mind to work on your assigned repertoire. Some teachers also assign books of vocalises, such as *The Technics of Bel Canto* by Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *Practical Method of Italian Singing* by Nicola Vaccai, or *Bel Canto: A Theoretical and Practical Vocal Method* by Mathilde Marchesi. These volumes, among a great many others, are important to consider for your daily practice. But there's more you can do on your own!

I have identified five exercises for daily practice that are incredibly useful and can be applied to all repertoire (not just classical).

Before beginning, I ask you to close your eyes and touch your nose, and then touch your ears. I'm sure you were successful. How in the world did that happen when your eyes were closed? Well, you've been touching them your whole life. When you were fifteen months old, the adults in your life were thrilled if you got anywhere near your face when doing this, but now it is routine. The musical notes you must produce with your throat, body, and brain can become equally routine. These exercises will help you get there.

Pianists start practicing scales very early in their studies. Beginning with one hand, they gradually progress through playing two hands, extending the scales from one to two, or four octaves, in contrary motion, parallel thirds and sixths, and with varied rhythms and complexity. And then there is work to be done on arpeggios and various exercises by Czerny, Hanon, and multiple others. As skills develop, the pianist might move on to the incredibly difficult Chopin *Études*, highlighting very different skillsets in each of the 12 *Études* of Opus 10, the 12 *Études* of Opus 25 and three additional *Études* he wrote in 1839 (*étude* means study, a learning, practice, or preparation). Singers usually don't get this sort of progressive, systematic musical technique for their voice. Indeed, singers are different from pianists and other musicians; not only must they learn vocal technique, but they also are required to build their own instrument. Imagine if all instrumentalists had to spend the first few years in college building their violin, flute, or piano? Not so easy. Yet generation after generation of singers has risen to the occasion. I have the greatest respect for singers and everything they are required to do.

Process

Each day you identify your *pitch of the day* and your *vowel of the day*. Over the course of a year, you will have cycled through each pitch you sing in your range as well as all vowel sounds found in lyric singing (English, Italian, French, and German, at a minimum). For the following examples, we'll begin with C₄ (middle-C on the piano) and the vowel /i/. You can choose a metronome marking, if you like, as a reference for a consistent tempo; ♩ = 60 is a good starting point. Except for exercise five, I would not sing *with* the metronome. In these exercises, you need to find the center of the sound immediately so that you learn

by doing, feeling exactly where the pitches are within you. It only takes five to ten minutes each day.

Tips

- Audio record your musical exercises frequently so that you can hear your work as immediate feedback to your actions.
- It might be helpful for you to create a chart for yourself of every pitch in your range and all the vowel sounds. Each day you can mark off the pitch and vowel you choose.

1. Half step whole step

- a. Begin on C and move upward a half step to C# on one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes and one of half note and half rest.
- b. Begin on C and move upward a whole step to D on one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes and one of half note and half rest.
- c. Begin on C and move downward a half step to B on one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes and one of half note and half rest.
- d. Begin on C and move downward a whole step to B \flat on one measure of quarter notes, one of eighth notes and one of half note and half rest.

Figure 1: Half step, whole step exercises (vary the octave and starting pitch to fit your voice)

(♩ = 60)

Ex. 1 Half step up

Ex. 2 Whole step up

Ex. 3 Half step down

Ex. 4 Whole step down

2. Scales

- a. Begin on C and sing a five-note **major** scale up and down, paying particular attention to singing in the center of the pitch
- b. If you are able, begin on C and sing a nine-note **major** scale up and down (to D), again paying particular attention to singing in the center of the pitch
- c. Once you have sung the five or nine note **major** scale, begin moving along the scale in an improvisatory manner. No skips are allowed. Tempo variations are encouraged once you know where the center of the sound is.

- d. Begin on C and sing a five-note **minor** scale up and down, paying particular attention to singing in the center of the pitch. You can choose melodic or harmonic minor.
- e. If you are able, begin on C and sing a nine-note **minor** scale up and down (to D), again paying particular attention to singing in the center of the pitch. Again, you can choose melodic or harmonic minor.
- f. Once you have sung the five- or nine-note **minor** scale, begin moving along the scale in an improvisatory manner. No skips are allowed. Tempo variations are encouraged once you know where the center of the sound is.

Figure 2: Scales (practice from a variety of starting pitches)

Ex. 1 C Major (5 Note) C Major (9 Note)

Ex. 2 C Major Improvisation

Ex. 3 C Minor (5 Note) C Natural Minor (9 Note) + Melodic Minor Down

Ex. 4 C (Harmonic) Minor Improvisation

3. Arpeggio

- a. Begin on C and move forward on notes of equal value to E, G, C, G, E₄, C. (C-major arpeggio)
- b. Improvise on C, E, G throughout your range with skips of thirds, fifths, octaves, and even a fourth down from C₄. Be gutsy on your arpeggios.
- c. Begin on C and move forward on notes of equal value to E_b, G, C, G, E_b, C. (C-minor arpeggio)
- d. Improvise on C, E_b, G throughout your range with skips of thirds, fifths, octaves, even a fourth down from C. Be gutsy on your arpeggios.
- e. After several months, add the seventh (raised and lowered on separate occasions)

5. *Messa di voce*

- a. Sing C on /i/
- b. Using a metronome marking of ♩ = 60, begin *pianissimo*. Over the count of three beats crescendo to *fortissimo* and then decrescendo over three beats back to *pianissimo*.
- c. Gradually extend this exercise to four, five, and ultimately ten beats

Figure 5: *Messa di voce*

Ex. 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ (♩ = 60)

Ex. 2 $\frac{4}{4}$

Ex. 3 $\frac{5}{4}$

Ex. 4 $\frac{6}{4}$

Ex. 5 $\frac{7}{4}$

Ex. 6 $\frac{8}{4}$

Ex. 7 $\frac{9}{4}$

Ex. 8 $\frac{10}{4}$

Variation

Once you are comfortable with Exercises 1, 2 and 3 you can vary the rhythms to shake it up a bit and create fun ways to continue this lifelong series of exercises. Learn to be comfortable with improvisation in this way and it will feel much easier to ornament your *da capo* arias.

Application to repertoire

1. Half steps and whole steps appear in every song, aria, or ensemble that you sing. Inexact placement of the pitch can throw an entire line flat or sharp. Learn to listen and feel for what is right for your voice.
2. Scales appear, either in whole or in part, in most songs, arias, or ensembles. Especially when the scales are rapid sixteenth notes, it can be intimidating. And frequently, the scales do not begin on the tonic, or *do* (as in do-re-mi), but if you've practiced the scales in this exercise, you will have improvised a variety of twists and turns so they are more approachable when you get to them in your repertoire. Scales frequently get sloppy when at a *vivace* tempo. By working on them daily, you maximize your chance for clarity.
3. Arpeggios are everywhere, and it is easy to hear intonation issues in them even with undiscerning ears. Practicing jumping around on arpeggio pitches will allow you to feel secure when you find them in your repertoire.
4. Trills are often dreaded, but it can be a learned skill. I must give credit to William Warfield, known affectionately by those who had the privilege of working with him as "Uncle Bill," for this exercise. He had an amazing trill, and he taught it this way. Whether approached from above or below, a measured trill over several beats or trill as a whole note, trills are here to stay. Please make friends with them.
5. *Messa di voce*, the crescendo/decrescendo of a tone while maintaining the integrity of the pitch, tone and color is one of the more difficult exercises. It's a bit like the swell pedal on the organ, which controls volume without adding or subtracting the various stops to change the color of the timbre. Getting to a crescendo over ten beats and a decrescendo over ten beats in one breath is a lifelong pursuit and you'll likely never achieve this on your highest and lowest tones. However, instead of dreading the final note of your piece that is held for eight beats plus a fermata, you will have the skill sets already in place to approach it with confidence.

These exercises are helpful and become more helpful over time when you have integrated them fully into your daily practice when singing or learning your music. "Aha, that is just a scale on sixteenth notes beginning on the fourth tone of the scale." "This is a minor arpeggio that skips around and ends on the raised seventh." "This pitch is sustained for eight beats but is preceded by two beats on other pitches. No problem, that's ten beats, or a five-to-five *messa di voce* exercise. I have breath for that."

Examples

Here are some examples of repertoire that clearly show the need for and application of these exercises.

Scales

Figure 10: “Je veux vivre” from Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*

Voice



Ah! _____

Notice that the scale begins on the seventh, cueing a modulation to C major

Figure 11: “Mab” from Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*

Voice



Mab, la rei - ne des men - son - ges, Pré-side aux son - ges.

Figure 12: “Vous qui faites l’endormie” from Gounod’s *Faust*

Voice



Vous qui fai-tes l'en-dor - mi - e, N'en-ten - dez-vous pas, — N'en-ten-dez-vous pas,



Ô Ca - the - ri - ne, ma mi - e, N'en - ten - dez - vous pas, Ma voix et mes pas? —

Figure 13: “Ich baue ganz” from Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*

Voice



Ah _____