

Musical Traditions

MAKE THE SONG YOUR OWN

By Stewart Hendrickson

I am mystified when I read a musician's general information on MySpace or a similar site, and see the words "Sounds like [some well-known artist]..." Why would a performer want to sound like someone else? If you sing like *someone else*, it might be better to listen to that *someone else*. How can we believe you if you don't believe in yourself? You should make the song your own.

Likewise, just reading the words to a melody doesn't connect with your audience. Performing a song is a form of acting. It involves both audio and visual effects – vocal inflections, dynamics, phrasing, body movement, eye contact and more. Memorization is an essential part of it!

Learning a song is more than just learning the words and melody. The beginning of making a song your own starts with choosing the right song, understanding where the song came from and what it means, learning the melody, phrasing the song lyrically and musically, memorization, practice, practice, practice, and performance.

Choosing a song is something we don't usually give much consideration; it's more an emotional thing. You might really like a song, but if it doesn't fit your style, or vocal range, it may not be worth learning. It should of course be about something you're interested in, but also something others might find interesting.

The next step is researching the song. What is it about? When was it written? By whom? What was its context? Who sang it? Learning as much as you can about the song is critical to your interpretation of the song and the way you will sing it. In addition, it may be embarrassing if someone asks you about a particular word or event mentioned in the song, or other aspect of the song, and you have to admit that you don't have a clue. Besides, it's just interesting to know as much about a song as you can. It's your song, and you should know.

Start with the melody. Play the melody line on an instrument if you can. Then sing it using "ah" and "lah" until you have the melody in your head. Then you are ready to start with the words.

Recite the lyrics first as you would poetry. Then put them to the melody, but without any accompaniment. Let the words flow naturally, without any strict adherence to rhythm at first. Pay attention to the rhyme and emphasis of certain words. Let the words lead the melody and rhythm, and see where it goes. Then you can add accompaniment and start to shape the song. Experiment with different phrasing and see how that affects your interpretation of the song.

If the song has been recorded by other artists, it is best not to listen to them. Don't let them influence the way you sing the song. After all, this is going to be your song. You may be pleasantly surprised with the way it turns out, and how it is different from their versions.

Now begins a long process of repetition and memorization. Start singing the song over and over until you are thoroughly comfortable with it, not necessarily concerned with memorization at this point. You may find subtle or not-so-subtle changes happen as you become more comfortable with the words and melody. You are still shaping the song.

When you start to remember a line or two, or a group of words, then you are ready to start memorization. Start with a single verse or chorus and sing it over and over until you are able to close your eyes for a line or two or perhaps the whole verse. If you stumble over a word or the beginning of a line, that is what you should concentrate on until you can do it with your eyes closed.

But if you keep repeating the same mistake, stop! The more you repeat that mistake, the more you reinforce it. Sing it over again looking at the words, without any mistakes, and then leave it until the next day. Overnight, something happens in your unconscious mind. The next day you may be surprised that you can do it much more easily.

Some songs are easier to memorize than others. Story songs are easier than songs where there is no obvious order to the verses. It may help to visualize the song – create a mental video of the song, which you can follow. You also have to create a structure or road map of the song – what follows what and how do the pieces fit together.

And don't give up! No song is impossible to memorize, some just take longer than others. Memorization is essential to performance. The audience is paying, with money and/or attendance, for your attention. When something comes between you and your audience, they are not getting their money's worth and you are letting them down. Even just occasionally glancing at some words on paper is breaking that line of communication between you and your audience.

Once a song is memorized, it still needs some time to settle in. Don't rush it to the stage too soon. Sing it for some friends or at a jam for their reaction. And don't be afraid of making mistakes, that's the way we learn.

Then there's the whole process of performance, a subject worthy of a whole other article. Such things as good diction, vocal production, singing at the right tempo, focus, connection with your audience, stage fright, etc.

One of the best compliments one singer can give another is to say, "I think this is a song for you to sing. It fits your voice and style much better than anything I can do." It is then *your song*. The way you sing it is unique, no one else sings it the same way.

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