

HOW TO REALLY LEARN A SONG

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The universal steps to learning a song, I know you've all got them down. You can read music, count rhythms, learn language, and tell stories. A lot of the music I work with involves a pianist and singer, and duetting is all about communication. In the process of "learning your part," it's easy to forget to look up (or down) at some of the other musical lines happening in tandem with your own. Pianists are often guilty of getting micro-focused on what they're playing, forgetting to read the singers' words. Conversely, singers often learn their songs without fully taking advantage of the information in the piano part. Here are a few ways to do that, and improve your song-learning system.

KNOW YOUR RHYTHM, KNOW EVERYONE'S RHYTHM

Of course, it's important to be rhythmically accurate for both the singer and pianist; ultimately, they're responsible for their respective parts. Just as singers practice coloratura slowly so that they learn it correctly before committing the pitches to memory, the same goes for the collective rhythm of a song, both in the piano and the voice. For singers, it's about taking their rhythms, and cross-referencing them with those of the piano, giving them clearer context.

This part of the learning process is one to start with. A singer learning this Hugo Wolf song has a way better chance of coming in correctly if he or she knows the piano's low notes are downbeats:

Leicht und zart. (♩ = 80.)

SINGSTIMME.

Klavier.

(mit Verschiebung, ohne Pedal.)

1 pp

Ein Ständ - chen Euch zu brin - gen

kam ich her, wenn es dem Herrn vom Haus nicht

In the second system, the rhythmic change in the pianist's right hand should help the singer count and make music while on that long note above "kam ich her."

A singer needs to know the piano's rhythm when it comes to tempo adjustment. In the Bellini example below, the *rallentando* marked above "Come riedi tu nel..." should take into account the piano's eighth notes versus the singer's quarters.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and piano duet. The vocal line is in the upper staff, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower staff. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The tempo markings are *rall.* (rallentando) and *a tempo*. The lyrics are: "do-ra, a chi l'a-do-ra, Co-me rie-di tu nel se-no Del-le". The piano part features a prominent eighth-note pattern in the right hand during the *rall.* section, which changes to a more rhythmic pattern in the *a tempo* section. The *col canto* marking is present in the piano part during the *rall.* section.

The pianist is instructed to follow the singer in this bar, but there's no reason the singer can't subdivide in order to slow down gradually, in the full sense of the word.

KNOW WHO HAS THE MELODY

Spoiler: it's not always the singer. Great songs trade tunes back and forth between the voice and piano. Great songs, like Strauss' *Morgen*, over which pianists collectively salivate.

Langsam sehr getragen

p

sehr ruhig

Und morgen wird die Sonne wie - der schei - nen und auf dem

The whole opening of this song is a song in itself, and I think it ends/starts again while the singer says the word, "scheinen." This should tell the singer that when they come in, they're joining an ongoing song, like a descant added to a second verse. The piano continues its sustained tune, and the singer, I think, should find flexibility and expression within it. *Morgen* continues:

We - ge, den ich ge - hen wer - de, wird uns, die Glück - li - chen, sie wie - der ei -

The tempo shouldn't get jiggled around, and everything the singer does should make rhythmic sense with the pianist's continued tune in their right hand.

Singers should also know when they actually take over a tune (or at least join in). In this Debussy excerpt, look at the last bar of the first system:

22

Ap - pa - ru - e Et j'ai cru .

voir la fée - Au chapeau de clar - té

The piano part has a triplet in beat one, and the singer holds a quarter note. We've heard this tune before in this song, and it's the version with the triplets. This means that while that singer is holding the word "et," they should mentally fill in the stretch and expression of the moving part. It sounds subtle, but it changes what a singer would do with that bar, compared to looking solely at the voice part.

KNOW WHO STARTS THE PHRASE

In this section from Mahler's stunning *Rückert Lieder*, the voice and piano start and end each phrase together.

The image shows a musical score for a section of Mahler's *Rückert Lieder*. It consists of two staves: a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are in German and English. The vocal line starts with a quarter note, followed by a triplet of eighth notes, and then continues with a series of eighth and quarter notes. The piano part features a triplet in the first measure, followed by a series of chords and moving lines. The score includes dynamic markings such as *(p)*, *(p) dolce*, and *pp*. The lyrics are: "Lie - be, o ja, mich lie - be! Lie - be mich im - mer, dich lieb' ich im - love's sake, then e - ver love me! Love me for e - ver, I'll love thee e -".

The first "Liebe" ends with a diminuendo and a comma, and then both singer and pianist move on in tandem. I think this tells the singer that there's room between "Liebe" and "o ja," and that they can take the time to finish one idea and start another. There's nothing rhythmic or harmonic that changes in the rest, and it's a beautiful opportunity for intuitive ensemble.

Conversely, the piano in the Wolf excerpt below has a series of small phrases, which they initiate. The voice part comes in after the downbeat, in a reactive way.

Wenn ich aus der Fer - ne schmächte und be-trach - te dei-ne Schö - ne,

p poco a poco cresc.

sie - he wie ich beb', und stöhne, dass ich kaum es ber - - gen kann!

f p f p dim. p

The singer should be humming this tune in his or her head while adding their part. The piano part asks that the voice anticipates those syncopated entries in the third and fourth bars; if there's a lag from the singer, the pianist's phrasing is compromised.

KNOW YOUR HARMONIC CONTEXT

While a singer is holding a long note, a good composer will make something happen underneath it. It's more in the singer's mind than in the voice, but there's a huge difference between a held note and a developing note. Here's a perfect example, at the end of Liszt's "Oh! quand je dors:"

The musical score for Liszt's "Oh! quand je dors" is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line (treble clef) and piano accompaniment (grand staff). The vocal line has a long note on "Oh" with lyrics "O komm! wie Laura einst Pe-trark erschien zur". The piano accompaniment features a major chord under "Laura" and a minor chord under "Oh". The second system shows the vocal line with a long note on "Nacht!" and the piano accompaniment with a series of chords. The piano accompaniment is marked with *ppp* and *riten.* The score is labeled F.L. VII 65.

Oh komm! wie Laura einst Pe-trark erschien zur
Oh viens! comme à Pé-trar-que ap-pa-rai-sait Lau-
Nacht!
ra!

F.L. VII 65.

Under "Laura," the piano has a major chord, then a minor chord. It's tiny-yet-huge difference, and if the singer knows it's there, there's a noticeable difference in sound and meaning. Here's a more subtle example, again from the *Rückert Lieder*:

The musical score for a Rückert Lied is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line (treble clef) and piano accompaniment (grand staff). The vocal line has a long note on "Ich bin der Welt" with lyrics "Ich bin der Welt ab-han-den ge-kom-men, O gar-ish world, long since thou hast lost me,". The piano accompaniment features a major chord under "Ich" and a minor chord under "Welt". The second system shows the vocal line with a long note on "Nacht!" and the piano accompaniment with a series of chords. The piano accompaniment is marked with *ppp* and *riten.* The score is labeled F.L. VII 65.

Ich bin der Welt ab-han-den ge-kom-men,
O gar-ish world, long since thou hast lost me,

The harmony clears out slightly between the second and third bars, under the word "Welt." I think there's huge tension in that tied note at the end of the word, and it coincides with the change in chord. Like with the Liszt example, you can hear when a singer knows about that moment of tension.

LEAVE TIME FOR EVERYONE TO MAKE MUSIC

This last one seems obvious, but it's a detail that I find singers wait too long to notice. Most of the time, pianists are listening to a singer's sound, how it vibrates and spins; they give you space to breathe and add a *portamento*. In the spirit of giving back (not to mention being fully informed), singers should take stock of potentially time-consuming moments in the piano part.



The image shows a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. The vocal line is written on a single staff with a treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is on two staves (treble and bass clefs). The lyrics are in French: "Et donnez-moi un bon ma-ri qui ne soit pas trop i-vro-gne". The score is in 4/4 time. The piano part features a complex harmonic structure with many accidentals and a prominent grace note in the left hand in the third measure. The vocal line has a melodic contour that follows the rhythm of the lyrics.

This is a line from Poulenc's *5 Poèmes de Max Jacob*. In the third measure, there's a tiny grace note in the pianist's left hand. It's a decent distance to span, and although the pianist may play it early so as not to upset the tempo, a singer should know that extra note is there. The bigger red flag is in the next bar, that broken chord in the bass. The singer is on the word "ivrogne," which has plenty of opportunity for stretch; this will compensate for the time this piano figure takes, while still making it work for the text.

Rolled chords can dictate tempo, too:

37

pp sehr ruhig. (♩=44.)

Wie gold.ne Fä - - den, die der Wind be - wegt —

più p *pp* (sehr weich und zart)

In this Wolf excerpt, the time spent on each of those rolled chords should indicate a slower pace, with lots of room for the left hand sixteenth notes. This is a case where the piano part simply has more information in it than the voice alone. It's not a good use of time for a singer to practice at a "wrong" tempo, considering all the information available to them on the page.



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