

## For the Serious Singer:

# Preparation for Performance, Recital and Concert

by William Hicks

## An Outline

Before you begin the preparation of any music, you must study with a good voice teacher, and find the sweet spot in the voice that is focused, in the center of the tone and perfectly in tune, or it will be hard to achieve the points I am going to outline for you. Your voice needs to resonate on pitch before we can receive your performance.

**I.** Understand what every word of your text means. If it is in a foreign language, translate it word for word, observing the word order of the original text to honor the intention of the composer.

Then answer the questions: Who am I? (Character, protagonist, narrator?) Where am I? What am I saying, both literally and in the intention (subtext).

Word Work:

Read each word of the text slowly and drink in the meaning of the word separately. Let it sink into your brain. Live with each word until you can feel it. Find the trigger words, those that resonate deeply with emotion. Physicalize each word with a gesture, like a bad actor. This helps you own the words.

**II.** Listen to the music — the accompaniment: notice the melody, rhythm, and harmony, so that you can be part of it. Be mindful of key changes and find out what they do to you.

**III.** Find an idiomatic recording, DVD or video and watch someone who is a master of the style. Understand the choices they are making in context. Do not try to imitate their vocal sound; the goal is to elicit your unique sound.

**IV.** Diction. Master the authentic sound of each syllable you are going to present.

Italian has 7 vocal sounds. French has 13, and English many more. Choose someone to be your coach who knows the language as it is sung, not spoken. You need to pronounce from an open throat, repeating the words until you master them, and the accent of the language.

**V.** Learn what the historical context of the poetry is, of your character, matters of code, etiquette, and dress. There are historical context coaches who specialize in these matters.

**VI.** Understand the rhythm that the composer has given you, so that your voice always arrives on time. Know how the conductor beats the measure, how you subdivide if necessary. Clap out the rhythm, including the inner rhythm to get it into your body. Understand the length of the phrase, and mentally remove the bar lines to understand the entire phrase, not its segments.

**VII.** Read the score. Be sure to find a good authentic edition for each style — Ricordi for Italian, Durand for French, etc. It is the map the composer has given you. Tempo?

Dynamics? Sections? Over which words are there dynamic markings? What meaning do they have for what you are saying?

**VIII.** Style: know the style of the period; for example, dissonance is very important in baroque music, verismo is declaimed. This is the province of your coach.

**IX.** Say the words on a comfortable pitch, and in rhythm to master the phrase in your body.

**X.** Look at the melody without the words, using only the vowels, perhaps on a comfortable vowel, then on the vowels of the words. Then put together the words, melody and rhythm.

**XI.** Address any technical concerns that arise with your voice teacher. It is important that every note you sing remain within your portrayal of the character.

**XII.** Find a good acting teacher; who can help you to make the character live in your own body. Remember your singing is always a presentation. Sing with your head up, with an open face, without frowning or looking down.

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**William Hicks — updated March 10, 2004**