

Café des Voix Online Workshops

How to Personalize a Song and how to introduce it.

Choose a song for “your voice”

1. What does this actually mean?
 - a. Songs that fit into your vocal range well?
 - b. Songs that represent the way you feel about a certain subject?

Answer: Both. You want to find a song that you can sing without trying too hard. But remember that you can adjust a song to be easier to sing. Working with your accompanist can help – but you can also do a lot of work yourself by listening to as many different versions of your song as possible. You will hear how some singers adjust the melody and phrasing to make it easier for them to sing it. One of my favorite examples of that is a duet with Jimmy Durante and Ella Fitzgerald. Ella who can sing anything – and Durante who can't. But those two styles are each beautiful.

<https://youtu.be/qeZQeU2ileA?si=nSfkif18rVNSqDkV&t=381>

Listen to the way Mable Mercer bends one of our beloved Joni Mitchel favorites. Or listen to Louis Armstrong sing an old classic. He completely changes things to suit his voice. Both of these people are legendary singers who vocalists of all kinds study year after year after year. And both of these singers had very limited range and technique.

<https://youtu.be/Xv6G9Z5-SD8?si=wy6KexIFHM3xDke7>

You can “bend” things to fit your individual version of a song. “Roses” can mean a lot of different things to different people. So can the meaning of songs.

You can manipulate the mood/meaning of song a song to fit your objective in performing a song. A great example of this is Nellie McKay – who performed an old Rogers and Hart classic “Ten Cents A Dance” – a song written about the old days of women who took jobs dancing with lonely men for Ten Cents a Dance. . Nellie takes the same song – and not altering very many words at all – turns it into a song about “Lobbying” as a statement about how our Politicians can be bought and paid for – “Ten Cents a Dance”.

<https://youtu.be/FVdp9dL-DWo?si=7yZZume9vNS5jy9X>

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Assignment One: Take one of your songs – read the lyrics as stories (no singing) – and then decide what they mean to you. Write a story about that song and those lyrics. Write it down and burn it later if you want – or just spend time writing the song in your imagination. Try to enjoy the journey the song is taking you on.

Note: Many songs take us down deeply personal journeys – and the details – your details – don't need to be shared. BUT – the feelings that those very personal journeys take can be shared safely in the interpretation of a song by bending the lyrics, melody, chords and mood of the song.

Write down how this exercise has influenced the way you want to do the song in the future.

Now based on the story you just wrote down about the song – figure out an introduction:

1. Decide what you would like to say when introducing the song at your next performance. You don't have to say anything if you choose not to – “let the song speak for itself”. That was Billie Holiday's preferred method.
2. Sometimes a few words that put the audience in the same space you are in is important. If you can find a few words to do that, for instance, “This song is dedicated to the blueness of February.” Or some such thing. It's all that's needed to pull the audience into your mood.
3. Sometimes a story about the song and what it means to you is important. It's important to work out what you want to say – and then figure out a way to say that in your own voice – like you are talking to a group of friends at a restaurant.

Use all three of these methods. Try to find a balance between talking and singing. Only talk if it's needed and try to keep it concise and personal. Funny is good – so is serious.