

3 WEIRD WAYS TO PRACTICE

FROM AN OPERA SINGERS BRAIN



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INTRODUCTION

I have often seen opera singers and musicians offer free resources or products online.

Whilst I admire their entrepreneurial spirit, because it takes real courage to put something out into the world, I have often come away feeling deflated when I click through. The resources feel so basic. A two-page PDF that tells me things I already knew in my first year of music college.

Maybe you have felt the same. Maybe you have searched for something that would resonate, but it turned out to be vague and uninspiring.

When I decided to create a free resource of my own, I wrestled with the decision. How do I make time for it? What do I say? How do I make sure it has real value and meaning?

At first, I thought about doing what others have done. I thought about ticking the boxes that seem to please people. But when I stripped that away, I started to think about what really matters. Not just to me, but to people like us.



People who are creative and have brains that are wired differently from the majority.

One thing that kept coming up was how people react when they see my scores. They often say they have never seen markings like mine. That made me realise something.

We all have our own ways of making sense of music. What works for one person might seem odd to another. But those personal ways of working are often where the gold lies.

As a student at music college, I often felt like I had been dropped into a completely different world.

In my language classes, for example, I was surrounded by native speakers, second-language speakers, and students who had studied other languages at school. And then there was me - stuttering, sweating, sitting there in complete confusion. I had no idea what was going on.

Not through a lack of effort. I just hadn't yet worked out how I learn best or how to reshape instructions in a way that worked for me.

That felt overwhelming at first. I often thought I was the least capable person in the room. But over time, I learned how to work in ways that suited me. I learned how to turn what felt like weaknesses into tools that could help me move forward.

And that is really what this book is about. Finding your own way. Using your quirks, your ideas, your ways of thinking that might not match the crowd, but help you grow.

If you are someone who sometimes feels you do not fit the mould, or you have ways of working that might seem unusual but serve you well, then I invite you to join me.

Together let's share ideas. Some might not help at all. But if even one gives you something you can use, I will see that as a success.

Please use this resource as a chance to experiment. Try new things. Throw mud at the wall. Fail. Pivot. Develop. Creativity does not end at music college. It is what we are called to do, and it is something we should not be afraid of as we grow in our careers.

Let's get started.

1. PICTURES

ADDING PICTURES TO YOUR SCORE

When I open up my score, you'll find hundreds of small pictures scattered across the pages. Sometimes I add them by hand, sometimes digitally. And yes, it takes time. But this is the thing that has had the greatest impact on how I learn and remember music.

I first tried this when I was preparing the role of Nemorino in *The Elixir of Love*. I can't tell you exactly where the idea came from. It was just an instinct. I had this sense that the "sanitised" method I'd been taught at music college wasn't going to work for me. I wanted to trust my gut, even if it felt odd.



WHY PICTURES?

Pictures help me in two key ways:

- They help me remember the music more deeply.
- They help me build a personal narrative connection with the piece.

The pictures can sometimes feel sporadic or look abstract to anyone else, but each one ties back to something meaningful for me - a character, a phrase, a mood, or a memory.

Sometimes the image is simple, like a clock, reminding me of the urgency of time. Other times it's more personal, like a picture of a sea that I grew up nearby, which helps capture a sense of longing or freedom that I want to bring to a particular phrase.

Sometimes the more abstract, the better. A picture could reflect a family joke, a scene from a favourite film, or something that triggers a specific feeling or memory.

The key is that it means something to you. That's what makes the connection strong.

HOW PICTURES BUILD MEMORY & STORY

For example, I might stick an image of Dr Dulcamara that reminds me of Doc Brown from Back to the Future - mad, unpredictable, larger than life.

And if I turn up on day one of rehearsal and find the production set in the year 2099, that's fine!



The production might change, but the personal work I've done stays with me. If I want to change a picture, I can. But the memory, the connection I've built, that remains.

Even months later, I can still see the images in my mind. I can sing Nemorino's phrases and tell you exactly which picture I paired with them. That's the power of this approach: it helps you internalise the music in a deep, lasting way.

HANDLING JUDGEMENT

When other people see this method, they're often curious. It can be a great conversation starter at rehearsals. But because it's unusual, it can also invite judgement. A colleague once asked me, rather critically, "What happens if your picture is wrong?"

The answer is simple. The picture can't really be wrong. It's there to help you interpret the music, to connect with it emotionally, or to spark a memory that supports your performance.

And if it stops working for you, you just change it. Pull it out, find another image that works, and re-practise with that in mind.

MEMORISATION

It's tempting to rush towards memorising the piece, but I've found it's better to keep practising with the score in front of you. Let the pictures do their work.

Let them build those brain pathways, so that when the time comes, you really know the music.

If you're preparing a role you'll sing many times, it's worth the effort to build something that lasts.

Yes, adding all those pictures takes time, but for a role of a lifetime, it can be invaluable.

If it's a one-off concert or a piece you're learning quickly, you might want to take a lighter approach - maybe choose just a few key images that help you most.

The method is flexible, and it's there to serve you.

2. COLOURS

MUSICAL SIMPLICITY

If you are anything like me, paying attention to every detail in music can be difficult to manage.

The rehearsal room is a classic example of this juggling act.

The conductor is asking for one thing, the language coach is watching you closely because you missed a double consonant, the repetiteur is giving silent cues, and the director is assessing your facial expressions to see “if this guy doesn’t just sing, but can act too”.

Everyone is asking for something different, and you might feel pulled in many directions at once.

That is where the technique of using colour can be really helpful. It allows you to focus on one core phrase and associating it with a colour.

For example, if the conductor asks for a staccato phrase, you might imagine that phrase as a bright yellow or a harsh red. That simple mental image can make it easier to respond to the conductor's request while still managing the language and other details.

Sometimes your choice of colour can even be inspired by the colours around you on stage or in the auditorium. This technique invites you to have fun with your practice.

Each phrase can have a different colour, and you can change shades or brightness each time you sing it.

It is important to know there might be some resistance to visualizing colours.

Some people might call it childish or too simplistic. But this is a creative approach, and as musicians, creativity is our strength.

In the singing world especially, there can be a divide between those who prefer scientific, fact-based techniques and those who use more imaginative or abstract ideas.

I once called my image-based approach the “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” method, inspired by the scene where Augustus Gloop falls into the chocolate river and gets sucked up a large transparent tube.

I imagined that column of rising pressure as a visual for the freedom of my voice. It might sound crazy, but there’s no shame in using whatever helps you connect. Sometimes the most unlikely images unlock the most powerful results.

If you are someone who prefers factual methods, embrace that fully. But don’t let anyone else decide how you should learn.

Your process is your own, and using colour can be a powerful tool to simplify the many demands of rehearsals and help you focus on what really matters in the moment.

Indeed, sometimes the simplicity of a mental imaging can yield a better result, and may even end up satisfying the conductor, director, rep, assistant director, audience, and anyone else involved in the process.

3. LEARNING

THE ART OF “SPEED LEARNING”

Every musician faces the challenge of learning a new score. Sometimes you have the luxury of a month or more, and other times you're sight-reading under pressure. The topic of speed learning comes up often, and it's easy to fall into traps no matter where your strengths lie.

I've seen excellent sight-readers rely on that talent alone, only for the finer details to lack preparation. I've also seen perfectionists waste precious time, thinking they have plenty of it, only to find themselves scrambling as deadlines approach.

As your career develops, the temptation to speed-learn grows stronger. If you don't have the sight-reading talent of others, you might rush to give the impression you do. But that's where mistakes creep in.

As I said when writing about adding pictures to scores - it's about investing in the process, not just the result. The same goes for learning music.

The natural instinct with speed learning is often to repeat, repeat, repeat. We think that if we go over the music or text enough times, it'll sink in faster. But I've found that to be a mistake.

What's far more effective is to go deeper: look under the bonnet of the music, understand what's really going on, and figure out how to shift the material from short-term memory into long-term memory in a meaningful way.

WHEN REPETITION BECOMES A DANGER

Repetition can be dangerous for a number of reasons. Not only is it often an ineffective way of learning things as quickly as possible - at least in my experience, but it can chip away at your musical soul.

You repeat something so many times that when it finally lands in your long-term memory, the result can feel jaded and frustrated. The freshness is gone.

How much better it would be to prepare from a varied, creative space, so that you come to the music with spontaneity.

That's better for everyone. Your colleagues, the production team, and most of all, the audience.

How can you spot when repetition is no longer helping?

Ask yourself: Am I sat down in one place, repeating the same thing over and over, static for long periods?

I've found that when I sit still, under pressure, with a looming deadline, my brain shuts down. But if I'm on the move and I'm repeating a phrase whilst walking, or even while cleaning the bathroom floor - the task feels softer on the brain and the material seems to stick better.

When you do practice isolated elements like rhythm: think of these as palate cleansers for your musical soul.

You might feel tempted to skip this kind of work because you're against the clock, but in fact it can refresh your mind and reset your focus for the next stage of learning.

HORROR STORY

I have vivid memories of places where I sat at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, or backstage at the Bavarian State Opera - endlessly repeating passages, feeling like I was getting nowhere.

That kind of isolated grind didn't help. It wasn't collaborative. Compare that to the energy you get when someone else is in the room: you bounce ideas off each other, you get feedback, you feel inspired. But of course, there are financial realities and we can't always afford to have someone else there.

So, recreate that energy for yourself. Change your environment. If you always sit in the same chair at home to work, try something different.

Move around. Go out for a walk, say your lines in the street, or memorise lyrics while cleaning. Be as creative in how you learn, as you are on stage.

BUILD IN SMALL WINS

When under time pressure, it helps to prioritise smartly. I like to borrow from the debt snowball method (a financial strategy).

The idea is simple: instead of attacking your biggest challenge first (which can feel overwhelming), tackle the smallest, most manageable task and build momentum.

In learning a new score, this might mean highlighting your score, mastering the first scene, or securing one tricky phrase. Those quick wins give you confidence, and soon what felt like an Everest starts to feel climbable.

STRATEGIES FOR PRESSURE LEARNING

Speed learning often comes with high-pressure situations, so it's vital to test different approaches in low-pressure environments first.

When stress hits, you'll naturally want to fall back on what you know - often repetition - so you need practice in trusting other methods. T

The goal is to build a track record that shows your brain it can join the dots, even without endless repetition.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT AI

Don't overlook what modern tools can offer. We're in an era where artificial intelligence gives us new ways to brainstorm and prepare.

You can use AI to simulate conversations with your character, explore scenarios beyond what's written, or create a virtual rehearsal partner.

Let your imagination run wild, even with its mistakes.

AN INVITATION TO EXPLORE

So there you have it, folks. I have tried my best to share three simple things I do that might seem a little unusual, but have genuinely helped me in my career as an opera singer. These approaches are tested on stages around the world and have played a real part in helping me become a better performer.

Do not expect everyone to understand these ideas, and that is perfectly fine. It may even be wise to keep some of these thoughts to yourself. I have done that for a long time. I have rarely felt the need to speak about these techniques, except perhaps with a trusted teacher or coach.

But these are the tools I have relied on to reach the standard I need in order to do my very best and to help the audience relax and enjoy the performance.

Music is a creative art. How sad it would be if we did not bring that same creativity to the way we practise.

I encourage you to explore what works for you. Be bold enough to experiment, to question the usual ways, and to find the methods that make you feel connected, confident and in this career for the right reasons.

Thank you for taking the time to read this book.

As a fellow creative, I know how challenging our world can be which is why I have poured even more time and care into other books that tackle some of the biggest often overlooked hurdles musicians and creative professionals face such as managing your money and navigating illness and much more.

The musicians who truly flourish are those who dare to be imperfect who lean into learning and who surround themselves with supportive communities.

Investing a little time in these resources is a small step a tiny but powerful nudge toward building the career and life you want.

If this book has helped you in any way sharing it with a musician friend who might also benefit would mean the world to me.

I am just one person doing my best to share what I have learned and your recommendation makes all the difference.

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