

sing wise

An Information-Based Resource For Singers By Vocal Technique Instructor, Karyn O'Connor

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Selecting the Right Songs for Your Voice

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Anyone who follows the American Idol competition each year will have heard the importance of song choice repeatedly emphasized by the judges. Those contestants who choose songs that do not flatter their voices are met not only with criticism from the panel of judges, (whose ability to judge from a technical, educated standpoint is always in question), but also with the unwelcome fate of being voted off the show by the viewing audience.

Likewise, those who wow the television world with flawless vocal performances and songs that suit them - who make wise choices when showcasing their talent - are rewarded with high praise and an invitation to return the following week.

The major flaw of the competition - namely the voting audience's tendency to confuse true singing talent with good looks, charm and marketability - notwithstanding, the three judges do make a very valid point. Song choice, whether for a competition, audition, performance or recording, will either make or break you. A song with a weak melody, a song that is in a bad key for you, a song that is too difficult for you to sing at this stage in your vocal development or a song whose theme doesn't resonate with others on either an emotional or intellectual level can quickly end your career, or at least prevent it from moving forward.

Seldom will a poorly-written or sloppily-performed song be met with genuine and enthusiastic applause by a sober audience with any discernment for good music or voices.

In the singing world, there will, of course, always be those exceptions who, despite defying the laws of true talent and good taste, come to know success and fame as singers. (I could name many, but I dare not offend or disillusion their adoring fans with fact.) They may win their fans by flaunting their sex appeal or by having some quirky gimmick. They may get a record deal simply because they were in the right place at the right time, or knew stardom and had achieved name recognition first by another means, thus not earning it by way of singing abilities or talent. However, for the purposes of

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- Will I develop a dependence upon my vocal teacher?
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- There are so many options for singing teachers. How do I choose?
- Do I need to find an instructor of the same

this article, I am referring to the average person out there who desires to develop his or her skills and achieve success via his or her talent; singers who opt for excellence and longevity in their careers over becoming a short-lived fad.

Whether you are entered in a nationally televised singing competition, is a member of a professional band that writes original songs, records, and gigs regularly, the same universal rules of song selection apply. Below is a list of things to consider and mistakes to avoid when making song choices.

The Basic Elements of a Good Song Choice

Although the analysis of a song can't necessarily be charted or put on a rating scale in order to determine whether or not it is a good one – "good" is always somewhat subjective and dependent on the listener's expectations and preferences, and a song may strike someone differently than it may strike another person, or may affect the same person differently from one season of life to the next – it is safe to say that there are some objective standards.

Songs are composed of several basic elements; primarily lyrics, music (which includes melody and chord structures, arrangements, and the actual performance by the musicians), and lead vocals.

The Lyric

While many people, especially young listeners, will argue vehemently that they do not pay any attention to a song's lyric, they are not telling the truth. In fact, they can sing along to the radio without missing a word. Of course, they may never have taken the time to analyze the song's meaning or its composition. They may never have noticed that the song lyric is strong on clichés and weak on original metaphor that gets a listener thinking about the subject in a new light. They may never have realized that the rhyming patterns resemble those of a first grade poem, or that the same word is repeated a dozen times in a single chorus. They also may not care about these things.

Wonderful melodies can usually hide cheesy lyrics, but don't assume that the listening audience will focus exclusively on the melody and vocal performance of a song. Some music lovers, like myself, actually take the time to read liner notes and think about the words that we're listening to or singing. While listeners don't always have high standards when it comes to defining "good" songs – I point to the overwhelming and inexplicable popularity of certain musical genres and artists today whose songs lack lyrical depth, intelligent artistry and originality - a singer mustn't assume that his or her fans are so lacking in intelligence and discerning taste that they would appreciate any old cliché so long as the melody is distracting enough or the beat can be danced to.

Of course, teenagers often believe that the use of blatant profanity makes a song more "real", and the elderly are generally offended by sexually explicit lyrics. A lyric can be well written without resorting to either of these tactics.

The Music

Many singers do not have a strong musical background and can't analyze a song from a musical standpoint. (For simplicity's sake, I have removed melody from this section, even though it is generally included in the broader category of music.) This is a little tough to do because there is merit in simple chord progressions and also in complex

gender?

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guitar riffs and solos, so long as they add to the overall feel of the song. A good producer is particularly effective at critiquing a song and providing direction to the musicians in order to improve a song.

Song arrangements are also difficult to critique, because some listeners enjoy simple arrangements while others prefer the complicated musical chairs game of several busy instruments and background vocals fighting for attention.

It would not be wise for a lead singer to believe that his or her exceptional vocals can or will redeem the overall performance of a band that plays sloppily or doesn't provide it's singer with solid background support or expertly composed music. If the band's musicianship is flawless, however, the audience can then listen to a singer's performance without distraction, and the lead singer can also focus entirely on his or her job rather than concentrate on everyone else's contribution to the performance.

The Melody

Melody, on the other hand, is fairly easy to label as either effective or not. Many independent songwriters, who reject mainstream music because it is too commercial and overly produced in the studio, opt for musicality and personal "flair" over singability, failing to recognize the value of mainstream, popular music for its catchy, memorable melodies, if not for anything else. It may be easy to be self-indulgent, writing songs that reflect your personality or push your political agenda, but can an audience sing along to them? The majority of songs reach popularity on the basis of their singable melodies. Before a singer can recite the lyric of a song, he or she can likely hum the tune. A song should inspire the audience's emotions to spring to life. The melody should lift them to intense emotional states, or drop them to thoughtful, reflective, sad ones.

When making song choices, many singers fail to select songs that have consistently catchy melodies. Sometimes, a chorus is the only redeeming part of a song, and I suggest not trying the patience of one's audience by forcing it to endure a monotone or redundant verse melody while waiting for those choruses to come. Other songs employ awkward vocal phrasing – the timing of the words feels unnatural, parts of words are left dangling until the next melody line begins, the tempo of the song makes it difficult to sing all the words, let alone enunciate them, etc..

The most important reason for selecting melodic songs, though, is that they will highlight the best parts of your singing voice. A good melody is like a flattering dress or tuxedo. Nearly everyone, even those of us with plain features and less than perfect figures, can look fantastic when elegantly attired and made up. As a singer, you need to consider the effects of melody on the audience's perception of your talent. A very monotone song will tend to make your voice sound lifeless and flat, whereas a melody that carries your voice through the various sections of your range will add drama and intensity to it. This is a principle that applies to everyone, regardless of the style in which you choose to sing.



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Don't just be a "good" act... be a "GREAT" act

Here's how to get ahead of the curve and stand out from the rest

Have you ever wondered why when some singers perform they seem to have the audience in raptures, while other singers barely manage to connect with their audience at all?

Getting an audience "eating out of the palm of your hand" isn't just down to your stagewear, presence, personality and the quality of your voice - it's not even down to the "X Factor" that so many people talk about. In fact many plainly dressed vocalists, with less than average talent and little or no stage presence or personality at all can amazingly move an audience far better than many of their so called "super-professional" counterparts...and it's all done by choosing the right songs to suit the audience.

What NOT to do

I'm a keyboard player and I have been providing "live" backing for cabaret singers for 30 years now and the majority of cabaret singers *always* make the same mistake. They turn up at the venue, sing a pre-chosen set-list, and keep their fingers crossed that the audience will like their show. I often hear singers get together and talk about the venues they have worked, and compare notes with each other about the venue, the band and the audience. I laugh, especially when I hear two cabaret singers discuss the same venue and one says he/she "went down a storm" while the other says he/she "died" at that same venue. It's clear to me that in every case, the singer who faired best at that venue was *singing songs to suit the audience* whereas the other singer just stuck to his/her pre-chosen set-list.

What you SHOULD do

So, how do you decide what songs to sing when you arrive at a venue, especially if you've never sung there before? Well, choosing a set-list is not an exact science but there are some excellent tips and tricks you can use.

Firstly, you need to have a very broad repertoire of songs (this is what seperates the amateurs from the real professionals). A repertoire of 50 or 60 songs just isn't going to cut the mustard I'm afraid! You really need to have hundreds of songs that you can sing (a couple of thousand is even better). Modern MP3 players can hold thousands of songs so having hundreds or thousands of backing tracks at your fingers should never be a problem. Secondly, you should choose the songs you are going to sing *shortly before you go onstage* and never make your set-list totally rigid - always be in a position to change it at a moments notice if, for example, audience members ask for requests etc. Always be flexible enough to accomodate them.

The songs you choose should depend entirely on your audience. It's pretty obvious that when you are in a jazz club you will be expected to sing jazz songs or if you're in a country music venue you will be expected to sing country songs but most clubs you sing in won't offer this clear indication of what music to play...

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So this is where you have to get clever and "read" your audience...

How to "read" an audience

Firstly, look around your audience and determine their average age. *This is the most important thing you will do so take some time and try to get this right!* Once you have worked out the audiences average age, you can then roughly determine when their music "era" was (ie the time in their life when they were most interested in music). Most people tend to get interested in music when they are around 15 years old and stay highly interested in it until they are about 25 (before 15, they are usually interested in playing and other things and not so much in music, and after 25 they are usually married with kids, a mortgage, a job etc and pay less attention to music). So this gives you a 10 year "window" of music that your audience will most probably recognise and enjoy most. All you need to do now is a little bit of mathematics!

For example, if your average audience age is 60 years old, then that means the average audience member was born around 1947. So, they would have been aged 15 - 25 years old around 1962 and 1972. If you want to play music that this audience will enjoy, then give 'em loads of sixties and early seventies songs - they'll love it (and they'll love you)! Our sister website has our backing track catalogue already conveniently split up in to "years" and is well worth a look (www.probackingtrax.com).

Other additions to your set-list

As I said, this is not an exact science so there are a couple of other things you should factor in to the equation when choosing a set-list. **Brand new songs that are in the charts** are always popular with audiences, no matter their age group (audiences like to hear songs that they've heard recently on the radio and TV) so make sure you keep up to date with the pop charts and throw in a couple of modern songs in to your set-list. Choose modern songs that will suit the audience though - Eminem songs will *not* go down well with older audiences, even if his record is number 1 in the charts(!) but tuneful songs like Westlife and The Scissor Sisters will.

The other songs you should factor in to your set-list are your "core of best songs". Every singer has a small core of about half a dozen songs that they are *particularly* good at singing and which show off their skill as a singer and/or performer (I'm sure if you are a singer reading this, you'll know exactly what I'm talking about). They are most probably a mixture of songs from different eras or genres, but that doesn't matter...you are absolutely superb at singing these songs so make sure you include them in your set.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, you should now be prepared to turn up to a gig with a small selection of new chart songs, a small selection of your core best songs, and a heap load of sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties songs.

When you arrive at the gig, have a look at the audience, make your "average age" calculation, and then decide what you're going to sing on stage.

If your first spot is, say, an hour, then you'll need about 15 - 18 songs picked out. I suggest that you make 2 of them "new chart songs", 2 of them your "core best songs", and the other dozen songs (ie the majority of songs you sing) from the decade you have calculated that your audience remember best.

Oh, and don't forget...performing live is dynamic and is never set in stone, so feel free and be prepared to interact with your audience and throw in some other different songs if they ask for them or you feel for any reason that the repertoire you have chosen isn't working or you're not going down too well.

Even the best singers in the world have "bad gigs" so don't let a disinterested audience ever discourage you!

Good luck!

Kenny

Article Written by Kenny Campbell

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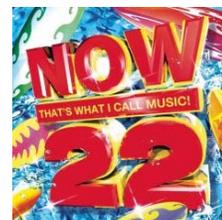
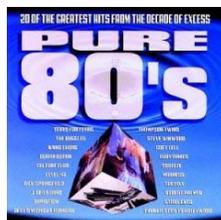
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Starting Out?



There are many reasons why people choose to sing to an audience. Allowing others to share in something you really enjoy can be one of the most worthwhile experiences. We hope the next few paragraphs make useful reading, and perhaps help in your new singing career or experience.

Choosing the right song



An important factor commonly overlooked is choosing which songs are best suited to you and your vocal range. We all have our personal favourite's, and like to sing them. However, sometimes the songs we like to sing are not best suited to our vocal range. We can have a song changed to a specific key, however depending on how far this needs to be changed from the original, the subtle nuances and instruments that were specifically intended for the song can have an unfavorable result on the overall effect. Singing along to our favourite track on the radio can have quite a different effect, once it is performed minus the original vocals. I'm sure many of us have experienced the karaoke disasters performed by those who thought they could sing a particular song? The major difference here is that karaoke is usually for fun, and there is a lot of entertainment that can be had from listening to an off-key singer. In reality, auditions or fee-paying gigs are not as forgiving. Try to have a good mix, including many of the older 'classics'. Music has a much faster turnaround today, therefore many of the chart tracks in recent years have less potential to be recognised by a mixed age audience.

An important tip...make sure the song is right for you. Ask family and friends to be honest in their opinion about the songs you choose. These are typical members of your future audience.

Repertoire

Try to have a good mix to your repertoire. Performances are usually 2 x 45 minutes or 3 x 30 minutes. Within this time you should attempt to provide a mixture of material covering a number of eras and tempos. If you have enough material, try to be selective to suit your audience rather than using a general running order. Sometimes even the most stubborn crowds can become compassionate once they hear a few familiar tunes.

Singing and dancing



Singing and dancing to up-tempo tracks is generally considered as one of the most difficult things to achieve to perfection on stage. Due to vocal techniques and breathing requirements, it is important to realise that there is usually a tradeoff between the two. You may want to be the complete entertainer but there are very few vocalists who can sustain the quality of singing to their desired level whilst dancing.

It is great when you can show the audience that you are multitalented, however it is essential that you understand when one aspect is detracting from the other. Try to find a compromise between the two and you won't go far wrong.

Microphone and technique

One of the most important pieces of equipment you will purchase, the microphone, basically comes in two varieties. Corded (with lead) and radio-microphone (cordless). Generally, you will achieve far better quality from a corded microphone than from a radio microphone of equivalent price. Radio microphones are great for those who dislike a wire trailing around the stage, and for those who wish to involve audience participation, however if vocal quality and price is paramount, the corded microphone is usually the better buy. Microphones are the link between you and your audience (although we mustn't forget the speakers).

The choice of songs performed during your performance should dictate the way in which to use the microphone. There is an old tried and trusted method of leaving the microphone in its' stand for the 'ballad' or sentimental numbers. This seems to add subtlety and sincerity to a performance. This technique has been used successfully for many years, therefore there's no reason to suspect that it should not be used today.

The microphone should be held gently between your fingers, with the fingers slightly spread apart. Try not to 'cup' the microphone, as this can significantly increase the likelihood of feedback through the speakers. Take the microphone away from your mouth when you reach loud high notes to avoid the vocals sounding too overpowering. By varying the distance of the microphone from your mouth, you will find this an extremely useful way of keeping even volume levels between the very soft/very loud passages. Try to avoid singing over the top of the microphone, unless intended, as a portion of the vocal sound will be lost when relayed

through the speakers.

Criticism - how should it affect you?



Music is an industry in which many people voice their opinions - and, to use sports people or actors as a comparison, we all have our personal favourite's What one person likes another can loathe. This can be good or bad depending on how criticism is viewed. How many times have we had discussions with friends or colleagues about the quality of a singer or song? Sometimes it is about the type of music that we do not like, other times it can be the vocalist or band. These are factors within the entertainment industry based on human preference - which is why we all choose different houses, cars, partners and so on.

The important thing is to learn when criticism is useful, and when it is merely an opinion. There may be times when you are singing at an audition, competition, pub or club, and nobody seems to take notice. When a person wants to be entertained their expectations can be entirely different than those people sat on the next table to them. It is essential that you learn to accept these experiences without feeling that you have underachieved. If you have performed elsewhere and the crowd have been pleased or you have received a re booking, you must be doing something right! Even the world's top vocalists have an army of people that would rather be elsewhere than spend a night at one of their concerts.

Stage Presentation



An important part of your performance whether for audition or occupation is the ability to communicate effectively and comfortably with the audience. This may involve a simple introduction before the your first number. There is no hard and fast rule regarding what you should say, however you should find with experience that you soon develop your own rapport which makes you and your audience feel a little more comfortable.

If possible, try to avoid routinely introducing each track with the artist name and song title - add a little more normal conversation and this should help the audience to feel at ease. The sooner that the audience recognise that you are at ease with the situation, the more comfortable they will feel.

Depending on your venue, there are certain dress codes and presentation which are deemed acceptable. Many public houses are quite happy for you to perform without a change of outfit for the complete performance, however most cabaret clubs expect a change of outfit per set (or spot). Although your performance may be suited to a more modern era, and perhaps looks quite suitable for performance in jeans and T-shirt, there is still a number of customers, concert secretaries and committee members that would deem this dress code inappropriate for a cabaret performance. This is not to say that they are right or wrong, however, as we mentioned earlier acceptance within the music industry is often based on people's expectations and preferences.

A re booking can hinge as much on presentation as vocal talent. An important thing to remember is that when you receive a booking you are undertaking a form of employment, and may at times be expected to dress in a way which you do not feel most comfortable. This is quite a similar situation to a male office worker who is required to wear a shirt and tie. If in doubt, always contact the venue first. This not only raises the chance of a re booking, it also shows a willingness to please.

We hope this brief information has been of some use, and will soon be featuring more articles concerning equipment purchase and other relevant features. Good luck with your future performances, and most of all...enjoy.

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