

Memorising the words

This is an issue that challenges all singers, but I believe it is essential to 'internalise' and memorise if you are serious about singing a song. Reading the words from a book or paper is a totally different, and less enjoyable experience, for both you and the audience.

It probably is true that some people find learning words easier than others, but we can all do it if we are willing to put some time and effort into it. I believe that those singers for whom it seems easy, have just put in the necessary work and determination. What follows is a list of things, some of which may help you to learn a song 'by heart'; you will then be able to sing with your heart and not with a book!

- Read the whole song though a few times, and really understand the meaning, before you start learning the first verse.
- Read the song out loud, giving emotional expression to the words and the things the characters say.
- Write out the song text longhand. Look at and say each whole line, remember it and then write it down. Do this 2 or 3 times.
- Sing the whole song through several times, not thinking about remembering the words. At this point, you are linking the song and the muscle movements you are making to form the sounds.
- Type the song onto the computer. Then you can print it out in large font and stick it on, for example, a kitchen cupboard. This will remind you to sing it through at least once a day.
- On your typed copy, use a pen or a highlighter to mark specific things.
- Keep your copy 'consistent' – i.e. looking the same. You will find that as you sing from memory, your 'inner eye' will know what part of the page you are on, and what verse comes next.
- Draw some relevant visual images e.g. animals, flowers on the page.
- Make notes in the margins of things that may be related, or anything that you think about it.
- Make some marks to indicate how you want the words to fit the tune. This often takes a bit of thinking about, and it is useful to ask someone else for their ideas before committing it to memory.
- Take time to very specifically imagine and visualise the scenes you are singing about. Imagine the people, the weather, the smells, the temperature, the clothes, the landscape, the feelings &c. Maybe imagine you are the song writer – why did you make this song?
- As you practice singing, make some signs or exaggerated movements e.g. cradling a baby or holding a letter, as if you are acting the song. You should not perform the song like this. Songs are usually more effective with minimal expressive hand and body movement, but your body will remember the sequence of movements and the words will be better fixed.
- Some songs are intrinsically more difficult to learn than others. Begin by choosing easier songs e.g. those which have a story line or an obvious sequence, and are not very long.
- If possible, it is wonderful to go 'footstepping' i.e. visiting places mentioned in the song, or the place your version was collected. You will then build up very firm memories about the whole experience.
- If the song is about a historical event, then do some reading and research around the subject, so you understand better what the song is about.
- Make sure you know the meaning of any obsolete or unusual words – what is a 'clew garnet', anyway?
- Most people can only concentrate on anything for about 45 minutes. It is better to have several shorter sessions at learning than try to learn it all in one long session.
- If it is a long song, divide it into 'chunks' and learn it chunk by chunk. It often helps both you and your audience if you pause slightly between the various chunks of action in a song.
- Before you go out to sing, always run through whatever you might be singing later, to reassure yourself that you do know it.
- If you are learning from a CD, write down the words as soon as you can, and once you have memorised the tune, try not to listen to the CD version. You may need to make a few changes to the words or tunes in order for you to sing it convincingly; also so you are not singing a copy of someone else's interpretation.
- You are much more likely to forget words if you are very nervous (there are physiological reasons for this). Make sure you have warmed up and prepared properly. (see Handling your nerves)
- Monitor the things that often make us forgetful, things like not getting enough sleep, too much alcohol, poor diet, stress.

We must accept that we will all, even the most expert professional singers, forget words at times. This is absolutely normal. (In fact, if we remembered everything, we would probably soon go mad.) It is a good idea to know what you are going to do when you forget, how you will react so the audience can maintain their enjoyment. It is also a good idea to have a song 'in reserve' that you can sing just in case your planned song disappears completely.

I believe that being able to sing a song by heart is an acknowledgement of how valuable a song is and what a tremendous privilege it is to be able to sing it.