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# Training the communicative recitalist: exercises inspired by Sanford Meisner's repetition exercise

Bryce Matthew Weber  
*University of Iowa*

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TRAINING THE COMMUNICATIVE RECITALIST: EXERCISES INSPIRED BY  
SANFORD MEISNER'S REPETITION EXERCISE

by

Bryce Matthew Weber

An essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical  
Arts degree in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

December 2012

Essay Supervisor: Professor John Muriello

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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D.M.A. ESSAY

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This is to certify that the D.M.A. essay of

Bryce Matthew Weber

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the essay requirement for the  
Doctor of Musical Arts degree at the December 2012 graduation.

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To Jennifer

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, a thank you to my voice teachers: Dr. Leslie Hale, Dr. William Shomos, Stephen Swanson, and Dr. John Muriello. You are all dear to my heart. Your collective guidance and wisdom is a deep well to draw from in my own teaching. Thank you for your patience. My acting teachers, both formal and informal, are too numerous to thank here individually. But a special thank you must be given to Carol MacVey who first inspired the direction of this essay by introducing me to the repetition exercise.

Thank you to my committee. Your guidance helped tremendously. Thank you to my friends and colleagues, your contributions to my growth as an artist and teacher are many. Special thanks go to my friend Allison Holmes-Bendixen for being the best study partner in the world. Without her good humor and consistent scheduling this essay would not exist.

Last but not least, my family. Thank you for exposing me to music, the stage, and the world of education early in life. Thank you for encouraging and financing my early study. Thank you to all the many scholarship donors at The University of Nebraska-Lincoln and The University of Iowa who made my education possible. Thank you to my extended family at the laboratory school in Cedar Falls, Iowa. The lab school was instrumental in shaping the educator I am today. While pedagogy can guide one's study, there is no replacement for growing up amongst great professional musicians, actors and educators. The lab school was a truly special place.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recital singers are, at once, both actors and musicians. However, a singer's training in collegiate vocal pedagogy is focused primarily on command of their musical instrument and its technical use. A singer's vocal technique is extremely important, but it is not the entirety of their art. A pedagogy that balances technical vocal training with technical acting training inside the voice studio is required.

In the fall of 2010 I was introduced to Sanford Meisner's technique and the repetition exercise. This project began shortly after that introduction as an investigation into teaching song interpretation through actor training exercises. I began this project for very selfish reasons, basically, the "flow" and ease I found performing in theater and opera did not find its way through to my recital work. However, as I read more about the technique and about Stanislavski's work from which it derived, I found portions of a basic artistic training that I felt were missing from a singer's basic pedagogy. Principally, the work on the "self."

I found that vocal pedagogy literature generally begins working on the "role" without preparation of the singer's external awareness and responsiveness. I found that vocal pedagogy literature and opera/musical theater books began their interpretation sections by teaching singers how to develop specific "characters" from the text and music and how to present these "characters" physically. This gap is something I felt Meisner's repetition exercise addressed beautifully. My goal was then to find ways to adapt the repetition exercise into modern collegiate voice pedagogy. Interpretation became too big a topic to address without first addressing this gap I observed in the literature.



During this project I kept returning to Meisner's repetition exercise due to its ability to train the placement of focus. I found that while much of a singer's traditional training places their focus inward, it is developing control over this placement of focus that is key to artistic communication. In addition to Meisner and Stanislavski, I explored the work of Viola Spolin and Jeffery Agrell. The exercises I present in this essay were inspired by Meisner's repetition exercise, but are my own adaptations from many sources. The exercises I have created benefit the development of each "instrument" singer's use in their craft (their imagination, their physicality, and their musicality) by training the singer's ability to focus externally through each of these instruments (awareness of their imaginary world, awareness of their physical space, and awareness of their musical world.) Working on individual components of a singer's artistry, these exercises improve a singer's ability to place and split their focus at will.

Where Meisner's repetition exercise starts with external, physical, observations I felt that singers would not be able to "go there" at the beginning of collegiate voice study. Especially when stepping into the space of voice studio, a space where self-critique and constant review and correction are commonplace. Instead, I start where the student is (in their head) by placing the imaginary object exercises first and gradually coaxing the singer "out" to make observations of the physical world. Limiting the singer's internal focus to a single imaginary object, which they imagine to be external, is a closer step from the singer's internal monologue than the physical world. I plan to carry out future research into the efficacy of the exercises I have created.

In chapter 1 I will introduce Sanford Meisner and provide a brief history of his pedagogy. A literature review specific to Meisner is included to provide a basic understanding of his work. The literature review will help define the concepts of: reality of doing, truthfulness, and point of view as they are central to the adapted exercises in chapter 3. In chapter 2 I will make the case for recitals as theatrical events, highlighting the problem areas that exist in the traditional singer pedagogy. As collegiate music curriculum is related to voice pedagogy a brief review of curricular issues will also be explored. A literature review will follow which demonstrates the gap in vocal pedagogy literature this essay seeks to address. Chapter 2 will conclude with a methodology section. Chapter 3 will present my adapted exercises through sample lessons. Meisner's work with partners is adapted to the voice studio by developing three "partnerships" for the solo recitalist. The concepts of reality of doing, truthfulness, and point of view are applied to each exercise and each partnership/object: the imaginary object, the physical partner, and the musical partner. Due to the scope of this essay there are many topics particular to vocal pedagogy that will not be specifically addressed. Chapter 4 draws attention to these areas and points to specific future research. The goal of this essay is to present newly adapted exercises voice teachers can use to begin to address the communicative divide between vocal recitalists and their audiences.

## CHAPTER I

### SANFORD MEISNER

Sanford Meisner (1905-1997) developed his technique over many years by continually refining his pedagogy. The technique itself appears simple, especially the mechanical repetition exercise, but that is only due to its directness and lack of pretentious language. The initial work centers around focusing on an external partner. The individual's ability to make physical and behavioral observations of his/her partner develops under strict observation of the teacher. The repetition exercises become more difficult through increased cognitive and "imaginative" load. Meisner's technique borrows the basic two-part structure of Stanislavski's 'system,' first working on developing the acting instrument, the "self," and then working on how to apply that instrument to characters, the "role." To frame this discussion a brief history of Stanislavski's 'system,' as it was first introduced to American actors, will be presented.

Much of the confusion in America about what constitutes Stanislavski's 'system' is rooted in the long period of time over which translations into English became available. Soviet/American relations also impacted scholarship in the field for a long period of time. Added to this confusion is the American idea of singularity and supremacy, heightened by the influence of capitalism and marketing. The marketing of pedagogy as a product has touched every influential technique for developing artistry in America.

Jean Benedetti supplies a thorough history of publication and translation issues of Stanislavski's work in the introduction to *Stanislavski and the Actor*.

Benedetti states that real work on new versions of Stanislavski's writings began in earnest in the early 1990's with the resolution of copyright issues surrounding Stanislavski's publications.<sup>1</sup> However, Benedetti mentions several problems that still exist in this area of scholarship: (1) Stanislavski was not a natural writer, yet "if, in the United States, Stanislavski had suffered from savage and often inept editing, in the USSR he suffered from no editing at all."<sup>2</sup> (2) The terminology Stanislavski used when teaching was not always the terminology he used in publications and drafts. (3) "Stanislavski's books are now historic documents."<sup>3</sup> Any modern translation must take into account the style of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (4) The texts are fragmentary and incomplete; only two made it to publication of the seven books planned for the complete sequence. The second book was split into two parts for technical reasons. The delayed English translation of the second half of that book allowed an 'ultra' natural impression of his work to develop in America.<sup>4,5</sup>

Benedetti's translations and editions of Stanislavski's work address each of the issues listed above. The translations and editions of Stanislavski's works by Elizabeth Hapgood were works of their own historic period (the 1930's) and subject to each of the issues listed above. As mentioned above, American understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor* (New York: Routledge, 1998), viii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>4</sup> "Natural" is used to describe actor training focused on personal feelings and emotions and responding truthfully from your own point of view. This was developed in the beginning stages of Stanislavski's 'system' but was the only volume of the larger work published in English translation for many years.

<sup>5</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor*, viii-xi.

Stanislavski's 'system' in the 1930's was highly natural due to an assumption that Hapgood's *An Actor Prepares* was the complete technique.

### **History of Meisner Technique**

Sanford Meisner grew up in Brooklyn, New York. Sydney Pollack's introduction to *Sanford Meisner on Acting* thoroughly chronicles Meisner's career and education, as well as his interactions with the Group Theatre, which led Meisner to the Neighborhood Playhouse.<sup>6</sup> Relative to the development of his pedagogy were his relationships with Harold Clurman (introduced through Aaron Copland) and Lee Strasberg and his invitation to join the Group Theatre created by Strasberg, Clurman and Cheryl Crawford in 1931 as a founding member.<sup>7</sup> The impact of the Group Theatre on American acting cannot be stressed enough. Stanislavski contributed to the Group Theatre's pedagogy indirectly through former students of his who were living and teaching in New York at the American Laboratory Theatre and whose students then became part of the Group Theatre. Stanislavski had a more direct impact on the Group in 1934 when he met with Group members Stella Adler and Harold Clurman in Paris to discuss clarifications of his pedagogy.<sup>8</sup>

The Group was a hotbed of pedagogical innovation and produced a veritable "who's who" of directors, actors, and teachers: Elia Kazan, Harry Morgan, Stella

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<sup>6</sup> Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), xiii-xvi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Wendy Smith, *Real-Life Drama: the Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940* (New York: Random House, 1990), 182.

Adler, Robert Lewis, Clifford Odets, and Lee Strasberg to name just a few.<sup>9</sup>

Adaptations of Stanislavski's 'system' came from this group: Strasberg, Adler and Meisner all developed different ways to apply concepts of Stanislavski's 'system.' Adler and Meisner both followed Stanislavski's lead by deemphasizing affective (emotional) memory as an important component of their pedagogies, where Strasberg embraced it. The Group Theatre's history and influence are detailed in Harold Clurman's *The Fervent Years: the Group Theatre and the Thirties* and Wendy Smith's *Real-Life Drama: the Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940*.

Meisner began as an actor and his pedagogy developed from his performance-based understanding; other teachers coming from the Group Theatre were primarily directors. Meisner studied piano in his youth and seems to have combined that understanding of instrumental pedagogy to his actor training. Meisner was also heavily influenced by his study of Freudian psychology. Meisner presented Freudian explanations for human behavior and stimulation in his classroom, but his focus on acting as a reproducible art saved his pedagogy from becoming an individual's discovery of their internal psychology.

Meisner taught acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York almost continuously from 1935 through the mid 1990's. Over this long period of time he was constantly refining his pedagogy, creating a technique for actors who primarily relied on their natural responses. His pedagogy exists today as applied by the students he trained to be teachers, as described in his book and the books for others, and as documented on video.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 30.

## Literature Review

Literature on the topic of communicative recitalists is so integrally linked to concert traditions that the singer is only described as an actor when participating in opera or musical theater. Kinesthetic aspects of a recital singer's communication are highly regulated by convention and are taught implicitly (if not explicitly) in vocal exercises inside the voice studio. Centuries worth of vocal pedagogy cannot be covered in the scope of this essay, but thankfully two guiding resources already exist that help marry the history of vocal pedagogy with kinesthetic aspects of communication in vocal recital. Sara Schneider's *Concert Song as Seen: Kinesthetic Aspects of Musical Interpretation* and Brent Monahan's *The Art of Singing: a Compendium of Thoughts on Singing Published Between 1777 and 1927* are fantastic resources which provide a focusing lens through which all categories of literature listed below have been screened.

Literature on this topic will be discussed in three categories: Literature specific to Meisner technique, Opera/musical theatre training, and finally vocal pedagogy. Four authors from each category have been selected and reviewed to provide balance given the varied amount of published literature between each category. The method of selection is described within each subheading. Literature relevant to Sanford Meisner is presented in this chapter. Literature relevant to the Recital/Acting Problem is presented in chapter 2.

### Meisner literature

The reviews of opera/musical theater and vocal pedagogy literature will be limited to four selections in order to balance them against the very small amount of

published literature on Meisner Technique. Nuance and differences in pedagogy are found by examining Meisner's book, the books of his students, and the books published by students of his students. Meisner's singular publication, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, provides only a brief glimpse into his work. In a conversation with Dr. John Cameron, advisor on this essay and a student of Meisner's in the 1990's, the technique became even more refined in the 1990's than published in the late 1980's.

The focus of the review of these specific publications is to extract themes and principles from Meisner's work that will apply to singers and their training for the recital stage. The literature in this section is evidence of the change that occurs inside a "technique" as it is passed from teacher to student. Through individual reviews of each book, this section presents a bird's eye view of how Meisner's exercises have been adapted for use by each author. William (Bill) Esper's work is closest to Meisner's own publication in format and has a stated goal to provide instruction on applying Meisner's work to "classical" works rather than works of American realism. For a better understanding of how Esper teaches Meisner technique a chapter by one of Esper's students, Victoria Hart, in *Training of the American Actor* will be included. The most prolific author on Meisner's approach is Larry Silverberg, author of a four volume series of workbooks titled *The Sanford Meisner Approach*.

After observing how Meisner's exercises have been adapted and changed by those close to him, and those not so close, we can draw conclusions for this essay on



how the principles of Meisner's pedagogy can be retained when applied to vocal recital training inside the voice studio.

Meisner, Sanford and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.

Esper, William and Damon DiMarco. *The Actor's Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique*. New York: Anchor Books, 2008.

Hart, Victoria. "Meisner Technique: Teaching the Work of Sanford Meisner." In *Training of the American Actor*. Edited by Arthur Bartow. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006.

Silverberg, Larry. *The Sanford Meisner Approach: An Actor's Workbook*. Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc., 1994.

### Meisner's *Sanford Meisner on Acting*

When does a recitalist sing and when do they pretend to sing? Meisner asks a similar question at the beginning of his book to bring his student's attention to the fact that many actors "act" their acting. At the beginning of his book Meisner asks his students to do mundane tasks such as counting light bulbs in the classroom or multiplying large numbers in their heads. After each task he asks them various questions: Did they do the action as themselves or as some character? Did they do the action or just pretend to do the action? Did they start doing the action and then stop or not even try at all?<sup>10</sup> These tasks and questions bring into relief for the reader, and the students in his class, the concept of "the reality of doing."<sup>11</sup>

I believe a parallel exists for the recitalist. The recitalist may momentarily engage with the musical components, their physical surroundings, or the fantasy

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<sup>10</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, 16-18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

world created by the text, but rarely are these actions sustained or occurring simultaneously. It is my opinion that the moments where the recitalist is engaged in the act of at least one of these actions is when the recitalist is acting. When the recitalist is not engaged in one of these actions they are pretending to sing.

Meisner's book is a pseudo-fictional diary of sorts where two years of study are condensed into a year of entries and real students exist as characters. The setting is Meisner's classroom in the Neighborhood Playhouse. Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell write out descriptions of the exercises in dialogue with ensuing class discussions to help distill the ideas and goals of the exercises. They present the exercises in sequential order as they existed at the time of publication.

After the students have identified the difference between pretending and doing Meisner asked them to pair up, having one partner observe the other. This is the beginning of the repetition game. Meisner's first step was physical observation, followed by strict repetition. Meisner stopped the repetition when students deviated by trying to create interest, what he called "readings." It takes a while for the group to understand what "readings" sound like. The instructor needs to stop the exercise when they occur and point out what the "reading" was and when it occurred until the students are able to notice it themselves. A "reading" occurs when focus is shifted. Instead of focusing on their partner they focus on the words or on the "theater" of the exercise or on themselves and how they think they should respond.

The repetition exercise has several goals. The primary goal is to develop the actor's focus on their partner; by focusing on their partner they do not review what

happened or plan what they are going to do. Another goal of this simple exercise is to develop point of view and truthfulness; when one student says, “you’ve got a big nose” the other student repeats, “I’ve got a big nose.” The point of view was switched as well as the truthfulness of the statement. If the student were to repeat exactly what the first student said, it would no longer be their point of view and it may not be truthful.<sup>12</sup> The truthfulness and point of view established in basic repetition lays the ground work for expansion into “the pinch and the ouch.”

Behavioral observations are developed through “the pinch and the ouch” exercise. Students comment on each other’s behavior starting from the repetition game allowing *instinct* to guide the changes, not “readings” that would involve thinking. Emotional response is not the goal, but rather a possible outcome of the focused attention. Each partner is tasked to repeat what he or she hears, but their instinct is freed to blurt out observations. This honesty is central to Meisner’s work. It is the start of improvisation. Below is an example of how initial experiences with “the pinch and the ouch” in Meisner’s classroom began:

“You dropped some coins?” Anna asks.

“I dropped some coins.”

“Yeah, you dropped some coins.”

“Yeah I dropped some coins.”

“Yeah, you dropped some coins.”

“All right, now listen to me,” Meisner says interrupting the repetition. “Vince, I maintain that by this time you should have realized that she has good ears and told her so. It would have been something you said because something she did *made* you do it. And you, Anna, had the right by this time to observe that because he dropped some coins he’s careless with his money.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> An expanded definition of “truthfulness” in this context is to remain as close to the initial impulse/response as possible, not filtering that response through a plan or convention.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

Meisner's chapter on "the pinch and the ouch" also explains common misunderstandings and mistakes in the repetition exercise; compounding the moments and overdoing the word repetition. Basically, rationalizing and not taking what your partner gives you. For clarity, Meisner describes "compounding the moments" in a discussion with Joseph and Anna in front of the class, "... If she said, 'You've got a cold,' you'd answer, 'Yes, I have a cold, I got wet.' That's two moments, one of which is an intellectual explanation of the first instead of simply repeating what you get from your partner."<sup>14</sup> Meisner also provides a description of overdoing the repetition in the same discussion:

"... You comment on something you notice about her but if you get no answer, you repeat it as if it were necessary for her to respond to what you say instead of using her silence. I'll show you what I mean."

He leans over to Anna, who is seated near his right hand, and whispers, "Don't answer me." Then, fixing her with his gaze and pointing to her necklace, he asks, "Is that a gold chain?"

Anna regards him without moving and in silence.

"Is that a gold chain?" Meisner repeats mechanically. He waits for her answer, which does not come. "You see, Joseph, that's what you did. You said the same thing twice. Now, I'll show you something."

Again he looks at Anna. "Is that a gold chain?" he asks. Again she regards him silently, but this time Meisner waits for her response until, out of exasperation, he shouts, "Don't look at me as if I'm crazy!"

Joseph nods, and Meisner continues. "You should use her silence for a new moment instead of repeating it."<sup>15</sup>

Meisner formalizes these common mistakes into two statements: "*Don't do anything unless something happens to make you do it*" and "*What you do doesn't*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

*depend on you; it depends on the other fellow.*"<sup>16</sup> As an example Meisner provides two alternate versions of a "pinch" in this chapter. He gives John the direction to follow the rules above and his line is "Mr. Meisner." He tells John to stand up and turn around, when all is quiet he pinches John hard on the back and John screeches his line "Mr. Meisner!" as he jumps away. The alternate "pinch" is to Rose Marie who is given the same directions and the same line, but instead of pinching her when she turns around Meisner reaches around her shoulder and slips his hand into her blouse. Her response is "*Mr. Meisner!*" as she giggles and draws away from the touch. Meisner's point is that each "pinch" justifies its "ouch." This exercise continues the development of spontaneity and truthfulness begun in the basic repetition. As the repetition develops into observations of behavior, the observations can "pinch" and if pinched the students have justification for their "ouch."<sup>17</sup>

The next exercise introduces "independent activity." Independent activity has two parts: it must be difficult (if not impossible) to actually do, and there has to be a compelling reason why it must be done. The activity should not be ridiculous, but something that could actually be attempted. It must also be hard enough to test the cognitive load<sup>18</sup> (i.e. writing a resignation letter after being humiliated at work rather than writing comedy material for a club on the moon after a zombie attack.) Once the students come up with their independent activity one partner actively tries to do their activity while the other starts the repetition exercise. Focus for the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 34 (italics in original).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 34-36.

<sup>18</sup> Where cognitive load is a term used in educational psychology to describe the amount of "working memory" an individual is able to devote to a task, "imaginative load" might describe the amount/extent/depth of daydreaming an individual is able to devote to a task.

partner with an activity is now split; they are tasked with continuing their difficult activity and working off their partner in the repetition exercise. Due to the load placed on the activity-bound partner there can be long moments of silence as they struggle to abide by the rules of the exercise. This affords the non-activity bound partner (who is singularly focused on her partner) many opportunities to continue responding. The moment may be observed as a tightening of his shoulders, or a furrowing of his brow, but each moment requires a response as it occurs. This identification of moments leads to “the knock at the door” exercise.

There are three moments to the beginning of this exercise: (1) The knock, (2) the opening of the door, and (3) a verbalized interpretation of the knock. According to Meisner, “The third moment is the meaning the knock has for you, verbalized by you as you open the door.”<sup>19</sup> One partner is inside the room doing their independent activity and the other partner is outside of the room standing by the door. The partner outside knocks on the door and the exercise follows the three moments outlined above. The partner behind the door discovers that a certain energy level is required to interrupt their partner’s independent activity if it is truly important and consuming. The need for energy prompts the next stage of the exercise, preparation.

For Meisner, “Preparation is that device which permits you to start your scene or play in a condition of emotional aliveness.”<sup>20</sup> He describes it as fantasy and daydreaming, but daydreaming powerful enough to transform your inner life.<sup>21</sup> It is

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<sup>19</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Meisner on Acting*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

not directed at first, just encouraged, and once it is “full” the exercise begins. The preparation does not have to have anything to do with the context of the exercise/scene/dialog to follow. It also ends when the exercise begins. The partner behind the door must prepare, through their imagination, so that they are as “full” as possible when they knock and enter. This use of imagination rather than “affective memory” opens up the actor to more than their limited experience. To highlight this idea he talks about imagining a night with Sophia Loren, “... your imagination is, in all likelihood, deeper and more persuasive than the real experience.”<sup>22</sup>

Much of Meisner’s discussion on preparation is based on Freudian concepts of ambition and sex, but his main thrust is that the preparation must be meaningful to the individual. Free association is brought forward as a tool for the students to explore what stimulates them, and to find that private source to fuel their inner-life. Due to the Freudian nature of preparation it was Meisner’s opinion that it shouldn’t be shared with the public.

Meisner’s book continues with further exploration and examples of preparation as applied to scenes. Once students are able to knock and enter and not be “empty” Meisner introduces Stanislavski’s “*Magic As If*” which is termed “particularization.”<sup>23</sup> Preparation is separated from particularization by application, but both are rooted in the imagination. Preparation can be simple or complex, change performance to performance, does not relate to the text, and is worked up prior to the actor’s entrance. Particularization is related to the text as its usage

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 136.

defines the character. It is worked out through the rehearsal process and once set, does not change for a production:

“Is the particularization then a permanent part of the performance?” Rose Marie asks. “If I’m doing my two hundredth performance of *Death of a Salesman* –”

“Oh, by that time you may have had fifty different preparations, but the particularizations – the *as ifs* which have been worked out in rehearsal and are now those elements what give form to your role – remain constant.”<sup>24</sup>

Meisner describes particularization as “... your personal example chosen from your experience or your imagination which emotionally clarifies the cold material of the text.”<sup>25</sup> At this point of the book the exercises have shifted to work with texts. The remaining three chapters focus on the role, a rather slim portion of the book for what would constitute a full half of the training. This demonstrates the importance Meisner placed on the fundamentals of his exercises. In the chapter “Making the Part Your Own” poems from Edgar Lee Masters’ *The Spoon River Anthology* are selected for their potent and concise depictions of character.

A related future research question is found in Meisner’s attitude toward “emotional queues” written in scripts:

You cross things like that out because they are anti-intuitive. Those little words in parentheses underneath the character’s name in the script, like ‘softly,’ ‘angrily,’ ‘entreatingly,’ or ‘with effort,’ are aids for *readers* of plays, not for *actors* of them. ... Because they dictate a kind of life which can only be there spontaneously.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 191.



The authors of opera/musical theater training books commonly treat musical components as “emotional content.” In light of Meisner’s view about anti-intuitive markings in scripts, are there such things as anti-intuitive markings in scores?

In summary, Meisner’s book provides the best depiction of the exercises he used at the time of its publication. It provides clarification of his goals as presented to students through written dialogue and offers an idea of how the exercises are sequenced. Reading the book is no replacement for actual acting study, but it is a very rich source for understanding Meisner’s thoughts on his exercises.

#### Esper and DiMarco’s *The Actor’s Art and Craft*

William Esper’s book is set up much like *Meisner on Acting*, condensing how he presents Meisner’s ideas to a class in a narrative format. The class is mythical, and the timeframe is not given, but the sequence of the class meetings is in order. Dialog is written to explain the issues that arise in “typical” lessons much like Meisner’s book.

A lot of people feel that they understand Sandy’s technique from reading his book or by studying with other teachers who call themselves Meisner experts. The truth is that they’re only getting a tiny snap-shot of the work Sandy developed over his sixty plus years of teaching.<sup>27</sup>

Differences between Meisner’s book and Esper’s book are apparent in the first three chapters. Esper states he will rebuild the actors in his class from the foundation up, Meisner does not (in his book) state this as his goal.<sup>28</sup> Where Esper

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<sup>27</sup> William Esper and Damon DiMarco, *The Actor’s Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 142.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

provides specific explanations, Meisner allows more ambiguity and complexity by having his students try to explain things. Esper uses the first three chapters to expound on the repetition exercise Meisner presents in only a few pages.

Esper's introduction of repetition immediately presents point of view and truthfulness, prior to the identification of "readings." Another interesting innovation is the capitalization of "Repetition" in Esper's book when used to denote the exercise. Capitalization of the word should be noticed as a departure from how Meisner presented it in his publication. It may have been an editorial addition, but in the history of acting techniques the capitalization and branding of techniques are influential.

Esper develops the repetition exercise into the independent activity in his fourth chapter, titled "developing concentration," where he introduces the idea of "a standard of perfection."<sup>29</sup> This idea allows the students to make any activity difficult. He also makes a point to separate actual circumstance from imaginary circumstances; a student who is fired up about their real landlord shouldn't use it to develop their independent activity.<sup>30</sup>

Meisner's "knock at the door" exercise follows. For Esper, "working at the door can be very difficult because it specifically gives the actor nothing to hold on to but the other person."<sup>31</sup> The concrete object used in the independent activity is momentarily replaced with the human being at the door, which increases the level

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 113.

of difficulty of the exercise. One of the goals of this exercise seems to be attaining a high level of vulnerability, giving away control.

From chapter 7 on, Esper departs somewhat from the organization of Meisner's book. "Objectives and expectations" are presented in the "knock at the door" exercise as a way to mediate the development of preparation. An exercise that does not exist in Meisner's book (an example of how Meisner's book is not the sum of his technique) is presented to help students develop "objectives and expectations." The exercise Esper presents is the Criminal Action Problem.

The students are tasked to enter with the expressed objective of committing a crime. The crimes must involve objects of value and the students have to create defined reasons that force them to commit their crimes. For the independent activity of the person inside the room, Esper suggests sleep. The exercise has no dialogue; silence and stealth are required instead. Elevating the circumstances to a life and death situation and simultaneously eliminating the ability to talk, forces the student to be aware of everything in the room.

Two chapters are then devoted to scene work and initial script analysis. Finally, preparation is formally introduced. Preparation is presented much earlier in Meisner's book, but that may be to facilitate the simplicity of his presentation rather than to provide a model of pedagogical application. The groundwork laid for preparation in Esper's book allows students to practice preparation prior to specifically identifying it.

When Esper starts working on "Emotional Preparation" he stops employing repetition. Rationalizing it this way, "the Repetition's reached a point where it's

become less and less truthful and more like a form that's done for form's sake. It was freeing in the beginning, now it's becoming restrictive."<sup>32</sup> Esper presents this thought in chapter 10 where he also presents Meisner's "Don't do anything unless something happens to make you do it"<sup>33</sup> idea.

There are many sections of these last few chapters that serve as explanations of situations presented in Meisner's book. Instead of "as if" Esper uses "because" when talking about fantasy and inner life. When talking about relationships, Esper modifies (or clarifies) the "in the harem of my head"<sup>34</sup> quote from Meisner:

"The writer invents things that are meaningful to *him*. The script might not give any reasons at all as to why you're so close to your brother, why you can't stand your mother, or why this particular woman in the script is the love of your life. That means *you* must fulfill the role by crafting something personal from the harem of your head..."<sup>35</sup>

As this relates to song preparation, that may be a subject for further study. A composer is not directly analogous to a playwright, but the idea of specificity in relationship is worth exploring.

In summary, Esper and DiMarco's book presents a narrative layout for the curriculum employed in Esper's acting class. Many sections exist as explanations and extensions of Meisner's own book. In this way, Esper provides the reader a glimpse into his understanding and application of the pedagogy.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>33</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Meisner on Acting*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>35</sup> Esper and DiMarco, *The Actor's Art and Craft*, 224.

### Hart's Meisner Technique

Victoria Hart's chapter on Meisner Technique is presented in *Training of the American Actor* alongside chapters on the techniques of Strasberg, Hagen, Michael Chekhov, Adler, and discussions of deconstructionist "viewpoints," and neo-classical training. Hart studied with Uta Hagen and taught at Rutgers with Esper. While at Rutgers she studied Meisner technique with Esper and developed undergraduate curriculum to prepare students for entry into the two-year Meisner program.

Hart describes the two-year program run by Esper in a sequential manner that provides a large-scale view of Esper's book, minus the narrative and fictional situations. The basic structure follows the Stanislavski formula where the first year is spent addressing the "basic issues of acting craft: the necessity for each actor to learn his own acting instrument, and how the actor functions in a theatrical reality as distinguished from his everyday use of himself."<sup>36</sup> In the second year the students begin study of "the play or its equivalent and the character (or role) he will be bringing to life, addressing the real work of the actor."<sup>37</sup>

Hart describes the first year as one exercise with various components, stating, "the content of each exercise is improvised, not rehearsed, and never repeated. What *is* drilled and rehearsed is the process, and the elements that define the exercise."<sup>38</sup> Hart breaks down the repetition exercise into component definitions as experienced in Esper's course. Each component helps guide the students to ever

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<sup>36</sup> Victoria Hart, "Meisner Technique: Teaching the Work of Sanford Meisner" in *Training of the American Actor*, ed. Arthur Bartow (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 52.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

more complex improvisations which serve as the curricular core of the technique. Since the basic terms and order have been discussed in the previous review, only definitions of the harder to grasp components will be shared here.

Hart defines subtext as, “the real meaning behind the words that surfaces in inflection and body language and the multiple nonverbal cues by which human beings communicate with each other.”<sup>39</sup> Where singers first encounter subtext through creating it cognitively for their own use, actors in Esper’s Meisner course first respond to it in their partners.

Meisner’s “river of impulses”<sup>40</sup> is defined by Hart as “... a current between the two actors that generates spontaneous and authentic impulses in both.”<sup>41</sup> The emphasis is placed on impulse as a reaction to what is felt, not what is thought. Creating acting instruments that can ride this exchange freely and truthfully is the goal of the first year’s training.

Several definitions are provided to understand the differences between a daydream and emotional memory, the daydream and a night dream, and daydreams as opposed to thinking or imagining. Daydreams involve imaginary scenarios and invented circumstances, but they are too personal to share. Where a night dream involves “... anxieties buried in our unconscious.”<sup>42</sup> As opposed to thinking or imagining, daydreams produce behavior. The body responds when daydreaming. Applied to the exercise, Hart makes it clear that preparation is for the very first

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>40</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Meisner on Acting*, 194.

<sup>41</sup> Hart, “Meisner Technique,” 55.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 65.

moment. The focus must be shifted from the daydream to the demands of the exercise once the exercise begins.

Hart defines confronting the circumstance when talking about relationships. “It is helpful in the beginning to find a potent, descriptive word or phrase that summons my full feelings about this situation. These feelings will not be polite or sophisticated ... they will be visceral and satisfying to my five-year-old psyche.”<sup>43</sup> Some young singers carry polite customs into the practice of their art. The instructor may need to give these students explicit permission to “let loose.” Personally, karaoke has been a freeing experiment in musical vulgarity shared in a public forum. Any exercise that encourages visceral musical play will be helpful. However, this is a subject for chapter 4 and future research.

The second year course of study goes beyond the scope of this essay, but a very valuable definition is given for “endowing the audience.” The usual phrase is to “endow the object,” when using a prop. In this case Hart is describing the actor in monologue, “(the actor) must activate his relationship to this partner as specifically as he would if she were physically present.”<sup>44</sup> This second-year goal is where we ask many beginning singers to start. I believe singers (and teachers) will find more success by adapting components of the first year’s work on the “self” before jumping into working on the “role.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>45</sup> Meisner’s technique borrows the basic two-part structure of Stanislavski’s ‘system.’ First working on developing the acting instrument, the “self,” and then working on how to apply that instrument to characters, the “role.”

In summary, Hart presents very clear definitions of components of the Meisner Technique as taught by Esper at Rutgers. As a companion to Esper's book it allows the reader to follow the curriculum as it is used rather than as it is presented fictionally. As a bibliographic source it includes everything published on Meisner or as identified by Meisner to be influential. Absent from this annotated "Recommended Reading List" are any publications by Larry Silverberg.

### Silverberg's *The Sanford Meisner Approach*

Larry Silverberg is an acting teacher and the most prolific author on Meisner technique with five Meisner publications in print: four individual workbooks and a separate text titled, "Meisner for Teens." This review focuses on workbook one, *An Actor's Workbook*. Silverberg graduated from the Neighborhood Playhouse where he worked with Meisner as an actor.

As a musician, an "outsider" to acting pedagogy, my research focuses on applications and adaptations of Meisner's repetition exercise. It is important to share, however, that in my research enough evidence has surfaced through bibliographic omissions and private conversations that many "versions" of Meisner's technique currently exist. Each version has its own proponents and detractors. Meisner himself changed his exercises and curriculum over the years. I mention this before delving into Silverberg's work only because what he presents differs from what is found in the previously reviewed sources.

Silverberg's workbook acts as a text for an acting class. Each meeting is guided through warm-ups and exercises. The workbook contains fifteen guided



sessions following a basic structure of warm-ups, exercises/definitions, and homework. Sessions 1-6 begin with a stated warm-up; from session 7 on there is no mention of warm-up activities. The warm-ups for sessions 2-6 are Meisner's mechanical repetition for specific durations of time. Many sessions include narrative descriptions and dialogue of fictional exchanges to help guide understanding of concepts.

Session 1 starts with a warm-up story-telling game. The class sits in a circle and one-by-one each person adds a word, creating a story. The tempo of word additions is maintained to prevent a student from preplanning what they are going to say. Silverberg includes directions for subsequent attempts at this game to limit the number of characters, for the students to close their eyes, and to get closer together. The goal is to force the students to pay attention to the story and focus on listening.

Silverberg presents mechanical repetition in session 1. He begins with a one-word physical observation exercise where two partners are joined by a third "observer" whose role is to keep the repetition going. Without any added emphasis one of his directions to the observer is to "*...yell something like, "DON'T STOP THE REPETITION!" And if it takes yelling to be heard, YELL! Make sure you are heard!"*<sup>46</sup> Each student has an opportunity to participate in the exercise as a partner and an observer.

The basics of truthfulness and point of view are practiced in sessions 2-5 with Silverberg's addition of the observer role. This practice prepares the students

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<sup>46</sup> Larry Silverberg, *The Sanford Meisner Approach: An Actor's Workbook* (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc., 1994), 15.

for the “three-moment game.” This game is used to mediate the introduction of the “pinch and the ouch” in session 6. The three moments are: (1) One student asks a pointed question of their partner, (2) the partner repeats the question, and (3) the student who asked the question reads their partner’s response and describes what they observed.

When Silverberg presents the “knock at the door” component it is titled “coming to the door.” It is presented as an imaginary circumstance. Rather than both students starting the repetition exercise standing in front of each other, one is inside the room and one is outside the room. The person who is knocking is told to imagine they do not know if anyone is home, they are knocking to find out. The person inside the room is told to imagine that they are not expecting a knock. Once the knock at the door occurs, the student inside the room answers the door and when the door opens the repetition exercise starts.

The exercise at the door is developed to include an independent activity and preparation in sessions 7-12. In session 13 Silverberg states that emotional preparation “... is something, I believe, I can only work on with you in person.”<sup>47</sup> The knock at the door is modified to begin with an open door and both students outside the room. One student has developed a specific, meaningful, urgent activity at home and brought it to the session. “The other person has a reason that is a little more important which brings him or her to the door.”<sup>48</sup> The only direction is to fantasize/daydream alone until the “... reason starts to ‘do something to you.’ When

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

it does, you know that you are ready to begin.”<sup>49</sup> Sessions 14 and 15 continue this version of the knock at the door component of relationship, but without direction in preparation.

Future academic study may wish to review (beyond published literature) the influence of Meisner and his legacy of students, teachers and programs. There may exist a difference in those who studied as actors and those who studied as teachers. However, that is not the point of this review. It has come to this author’s attention that issues may exist concerning the validity of all who market their actor training as “Meisner Technique.” Esper alludes to this in his book when referring to “... those so-called Meisner teachers who teach nothing but Repetition for years on end.”<sup>50</sup>

In summary, this workbook presents an incomplete curriculum when compared to the other three reviewed publications. The students using this workbook when it was published in 1994 had to wait three years for the second workbook to be published before beginning to work on preparation. There is no way to infer the large-scale curricular goals of the technique from this one workbook.

Silverberg’s workbook was written for actors to use, not for academics to disassemble for meaning. However, its shortcomings demonstrate why Meisner and Esper (following Meisner’s lead) wrote their texts in a narrative style presenting the entirety of the curriculum between the covers of a single book. Publishing a curriculum in multiple volumes lends itself to dangers in interpretation.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>50</sup> Esper and DiMarco, *The Actor’s Art and Craft*, 180.

## CHAPTER II

### THE RECITAL/ACTING PROBLEM

A song recital (a collegiate singer's capstone experience) showcases more than just vocal technique; the singer's training is adjudicated inside a *theatrical* framework. The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) handbook suggests curriculum that addresses actor training for singers, but it is not uniform across all vocal degrees. Voice teachers, either implicitly or explicitly, teach acting in their studio through modeling and through kinesthetic and attention-centering comments built into common vocal exercises.

Where vocal pedagogy literature is uniformly supportive of developing communicative recitalists, exercises in this literature are focused on developing the singer's musical instrument. Acting instruction in vocal pedagogy literature is generally addressed in terms of poetic understanding or kinesthetic gesturing. Opera and musical theater literature specifically addresses the combination of acting and singing, but the exercises presented are usually not suitable inside the private voice studio and do not relate to concert song literature. This essay will attempt to shed light on this gap in the literature by providing specific exercises adapted from Sanford Meisner's work to be used in the voice studio with the goal of developing technically solid vocal artists who are "...living truthfully under imaginary circumstances."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 15.

Sara Schneider, in *Concert Song as Seen*, provides a great deal of support for her claim that, “there is a strong resemblance between the physical performer-audience relationships in eighteenth-century acting and in the classical song recital.”<sup>52</sup> Actor training is deeply ingrained in vocal pedagogy and it has been for centuries.<sup>53</sup> Many directions in the voice studio can constitute acting instruction such as, when and how to breathe, how to stand, or what to think about during a phrase (either physically, linguistically or musically).

While modern actor training has moved away from emotional affectations rooted in Baroque ideals toward techniques that support the modern material, vocal pedagogy has not undergone any similar fundamental shift to support modern song. A voice student with good vocal technique and musical skill, but lacking physical and lyrical understanding, is no longer able to present a quality recital in this modern age.<sup>54</sup> Changes in musical composition have accelerated, as well as popular demands in the use of voice in art. A shift in vocal pedagogy in relation to modern acting techniques is long overdue.

Stanislavski, the towering acting pedagogue from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, warns us that “acting beside a piano is a most subtle and difficult thing to do. The reason is

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<sup>52</sup> Sara Schneider, *Concert Song as Seen: Kinesthetic Aspects of Musical Interpretation* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>53</sup> Brent Monahan, *The Art of Singing: a Compendium of Thoughts on Singing Published Between 1777 and 1927* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1978), 207.

<sup>54</sup> There is a relationship between Baroque gestural expressions and the inception of Alexander Technique (AT). As AT was developed by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century orator trying to balance these postural affectations with his vocal performance, it should not discount the benefits such study brings to musicians and performers of any order.

that all depends on fantasy, on yours as an artist, and ours as spectators.”<sup>55</sup> However, Stanislavski’s regard for the difficulty of recital singing is not universal. Recitals serve many functions in musical society. They often occur as barrier events, or are given by singers as fund-raising vehicles for their operatic studies and competitions. From this operatic point of view bad acting on the opera stage has been described as “... costumed recitals.”<sup>56</sup> When recitals are done appropriately, however, recital singing should be meaningful, theatrical, art. Our modern undergraduate vocal performance curriculum is built around this idea of separation.

The 2011-12 NASM handbook identifies distinct aptitude levels regarding a singer’s acting and language proficiencies between professional baccalaureate degrees in vocal performance. Where all NASM guidelines for undergraduate performance degrees require a level of synthesis “... to work on musical problems by combining, as appropriate to the issue, their capabilities in performance; aural, verbal, and visual analysis; composition/improvisation; and history and repertory”<sup>57</sup> there are differing requirements between vocal degrees in language and acting proficiencies. The components of language and acting are so integral to the singing performer that authentic synthesis at any level of acceptability is not possible without their discrete instruction and guidance in combination.

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<sup>55</sup> Constantin Stanislavski and Pavel Rumyantsev, *Stanislavski on Opera*, translated and edited by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1975), 34.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Helfgot and William O. Beeman, *The Third Line: Opera Performer as Interpreter* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), 2.

<sup>57</sup> National Association of Schools of Music, *The National Association of Schools of Music Handbook: 2011-2012* (Reston, Virginia: National Association of Schools of Music, 2012), Section VIII. B.5, “Synthesis.”

The disparities in language and acting proficiencies between vocal performance degrees, as laid out in the current NASM handbook, occur primarily due to time limitations inside an undergraduate degree program and the broad scope of the education that is required. However, there is also an institutionalized prejudice, one that defines “musical” communication as separate from the communication of text. The NASM guidelines are built for the majority of performance majors, the instrumentalists. For singers this separation of text from “music” leaves them straddling two worlds, never being accepted as a true musician or as a true actor. For most singers their idea of “musical communication” needs redefinition to include simultaneous lyrical and physical communication. Singers are musicians who communicate musical, lyrical, and physical ideas in unison.

Every singer’s art is theatrical by virtue of the connection the singer is expected to create between performer and audience.<sup>58</sup> Singers who are not interested in musical theater or operatic performance may not be required to take acting classes, and so only receive instruction in vocal technique during their undergraduate years. Even singers who do receive training in both vocal and acting techniques may not be able to combine or synthesize the disparate methods on their own. The voice studio is the place where this synthesis must occur for the modern vocalist, and the voice instructor is the facilitator of their combination. Voice teachers are not a substitute for trained acting teachers, but they should be able to incorporate the basics of good actor preparation into their lesson structure in the

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<sup>58</sup> This is regardless of stage: recital/concert, operatic, jazz, rap, or even karaoke. Theater occurs beyond the proscenium space. Performances that happen inside a community-established practice of reception are theatrical.

same way they build a student's musical understanding through inclusion of history and theory. To this end I will propose specific exercises to foster interest in continued acting instruction with qualified teachers, develop more powerful performances for artist and audience, and positively impact healthy vocal production.

One difference between actor training and vocal pedagogy is language. Singers encounter text in each and every song they sing.<sup>59</sup> From an early level of study singers are usually required to study and perform songs in languages they do not speak or understand. The NASM guidelines for voice majors are general in regards to which foreign languages are to be studied, but weigh their study equally with diction.<sup>60</sup> Most vocal performance degrees are geared toward the "Pre-Opera" focus by requiring study and performance of Italian, French, German and English songs in any senior recital.<sup>61</sup> Actors spend years developing skills to work in just *one* language. The skills actors develop to work in their native tongue goes beyond diction; can singers really be expected to develop their communicative art with, at best, a year's study of a foreign language, or in the worst-case scenarios, just an understanding of diction?

Another difference between the pedagogy of actors and singers lies in the fact that actors work on what happens between their lines, the time when they are not speaking. These moments are analogous to the especially troubling situations

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<sup>59</sup> Even in a wordless *vocalise*, students sing while processing text describing how it is to be sung.

<sup>60</sup> National Association of Schools of Music, *Handbook*, IX, A, 3b, "Essential Competencies, Experiences, and Opportunities," 103.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix I.B, A, 5, "Language Skills," 152.



for young singers who wonder what to do when they are silent, but the piano is still playing. Where an actor works for years with specific techniques to stay engaged with their partner during these moments a common cure-all handed out by some voice teachers to combat this situation is to “count” or to place “the characters whom he addresses in song somewhat to the side and over the heads of his audience.”<sup>62</sup>

Traditionally, vocal pedagogy focuses on planning ahead and then reviewing what happened, not on communication. Planning ahead and reviewing what happened can be important, but alone they do not help the student develop the ability to work inside the paradox of both fully planning ahead (knowing their text/music/instructor directions/physical blocking/dramatic context) and fully reacting spontaneously at the same moment.

Being fully prepared and at the same time fully present should be central to vocal pedagogy. If singers are trained to always think about what they are doing, they will always “be in their head” and not be capable of responding to what is happening around them. Stephen Smith in *The Naked Voice* makes a case for this, saying “Good technique is *not knowing* what is going to happen when we sing; rather, it is being very clear and sure about what we are *doing* and the parameters in which those actions occur.”<sup>63</sup> Sanford Meisner’s approach with actors addressed this particular dilemma. He developed a series of exercises derived from Stanislavski’s ‘system’ that required his students to pay full attention to their partners. Meisner

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<sup>62</sup> Schneider, *Concert Song as Seen*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen Smith with Michael Chipman, *The Naked Voice: A Wholistic Approach to Singing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23.

was focused on realism and enabling actors to access material written in this realistic style. My adaptation of Meisner's repetition exercise develops the singer's partner from imaginary objects to fellow musicians, the audience, and the music itself to meet the more fantastic demands of recital singing.

### **Recital as theater**

The vocal recital is theater. As concert singers moved from *da capo* arias to *Lied* their focus shifted from the musical phrase to the written word. Near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century memorization of these songs in recital became expected and freed the singer's hands and eyes from the page. Why did memorization become fashionable? Singers certainly wouldn't just forget to bring their music to the performance. It seems likely that memorization became fashionable because it allowed the singer to express their art more clearly and intimately with their audience. Singers who were able to memorize were more communicative and were therefore in greater demand. In Brent Monahan's *Compendium of Thoughts on Singing* he brings attention to Anfossi's comment about memorization, "... only one statement was uncovered before 1914 concerning memorization, and this that the singer should 'at least memorize the turn of the page' when singing publically."<sup>64</sup> After 1914 Monahan found 10 entries concerning memorization, primarily having to do with pedagogy rather than performance.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Brent Jeffrey Monahan, *The Art of Singing: a Compendium of Thoughts on Singing Published Between 1777 and 1927* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 214.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

With the emergence of film, modern acting techniques emerged to train young actors to be successful in this new medium. At the movies the public saw the reactions and inner-lives of the characters up-close. This newly educated audience carried these heightened expectations into the playhouse and opera house, changing how actors approached all forms of theater, except the vocal recital. Musicians have sheltered under the umbrella of “concert” when confronted with the idea of theater. However, when musicians perform in sight of an audience their performance is theatrical. It may not be “good” or “interesting” theater, but it is theater all the same. The costumes worn by the performers and ritual conventions followed throughout the performance by both the audience and performers alike (what to do when the performer is tuning, when to be quiet, when to applaud, how to acknowledge entrances/exits, how to demand encores, etc.) all point to theatrical operations, a shared language, understood by the audience and performer.

Performers of art music, like immigrants in a new country, have maintained their culture with little change over time through consolidation in academic centers and by placing an emphasis on tradition. Popular culture, however, kept developing the musical/theatrical connection toward the goal of entertainment.<sup>66</sup> The fruit of their process is varied, from jazz vocalists to pop singers. Language is a defining characteristic separating popular from classical vocal music. Classical vocal music, for the modern western listener, is that which cannot be understood due to its foreign language, archaic words, or poor diction. Many collegiate singers draw a line in the sand between their popular song experiences and their sounds in the voice

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<sup>66</sup> Daniel Helfgot and William O. Beeman, *The Third Line: Opera Performer as Interpreter* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), 3.

studio where certain skills developed in each area could be mutually beneficial. To highlight this difference, note how a jazz singer engages with their audience, their text, and their fellow musicians on stage. These interactions would benefit the theatricality of all classical recitalists.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, current vocal pedagogy is layered over a framework of 18<sup>th</sup> century ideals.<sup>67</sup> Vocal pedagogy has made many advances in the last 250 years, but these advances have not impacted the underlying construct of the pedagogy. Modern vocal training, guided by advances in voice science, is producing more singers than ever before with healthy, beautiful instruments. These modern, classically trained, singers give more importance to the composer's intent than their own impulse and instinct. The result is often boring, in terms of theater, unless the singer's own innate sense of communication has survived the introduction of vocal technique. Stanislavski shares a thought on this topic as it applies to his work with opera singers:

The opera singer has to deal with three arts simultaneously, i.e. vocal, musical and theatrical. Therein lie problems on the one hand and the supremacy of his creative work. ... If one art has an effect on an audience but the other two stand in its way, the result is unfavorable. One art will destroy what another creates.<sup>68</sup>

The song recital exists today as a stylistic affectation, an archaic theatrical venue through which both period and modern songs are presented. Fortunately there are modern performers working to make the recital relevant through modern

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<sup>67</sup> Sara Schneider, *Concert Song as Seen: Kinesthetic Aspects of Musical Interpretation* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>68</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, (Translated and edited by Jean Benedetti, New York: Routledge 2008), 330.

interpretation. These professionals appear, however, to have developed their skills through a process of natural ability married to an equal amount of luck and hard work. It is this area of “seeming” luck that needs replacement by grounded technique.

Thomas Quasthoff exemplifies skillful execution of dramatic concert performance in his live DVD recording of *Winterreise* with Daniel Barenboim.<sup>69</sup> His thoughts, shared in the ‘Rehearsal and Interviews’ portion of the DVD, point out his theatrical views of concert song; and are interesting to the discussion of Meisner through his use of the word “truthful”:

As an artist I stick first and foremost to what I see on the printed page and the way I understand it. No one in the audience will be able to understand what I mean if I say: ‘This is synonymous with Schubert’s life. This is a tragedy about a composer living on his own, unrecognized, suffering from syphilis and despairing in life.’ No one can understand this. I stick to what’s there: a young man loves a woman but can’t have her, and so he basically despairs – with an open ending, as it were. I think if you tell this story honestly and truthfully enough, you’ve got quite enough to do.<sup>70</sup>

Let’s try not to fool ourselves – I think that *Winterreise* is really a miniature opera. I think it’s entirely legitimate to sing such a cycle not just beautifully but to immerse oneself in the role and also to have the courage to sing a few notes that aren’t at all beautiful, because this reflects the expression at the moment that I feel it.<sup>71</sup>

How an artist develops the ability to “immerse oneself in the role”

however is the crux of the biscuit. Can this ability be trained? Does the

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<sup>69</sup> Franz Schubert, *Winterreise*, Thomas Quasthoff and Daniel Barenboim, performed March 22, 2005 (Berlin Philharmonie, Berlin, Germany: Deutsche Grammophon, 2005), DVD.

<sup>70</sup> Schubert, “Rehearsal and Interviews,” *Winterreise* (English subtitles at 5 min).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, (English subtitles at 15 min).

current Western curriculum benefit or detract from artistic growth? The following section will briefly explore these questions as well as the efficacy of adding exercises to a broad curriculum already short on time.

### **Curricular issues**

The ability to communicate artistically with an audience from the recital stage is often seen as a talent, rather than a skill. Where the quality of the artistry may lie in a deeper discussion of “talent” than the scope of this essay intends to explore, the steps an artist can take to develop their communicative *skill* can be isolated and practiced. The steps, stated simply, are: (1) Seeing the other person,<sup>72</sup> (2) communicating with intention toward achieving some specific goal, (3) perceiving the other person’s response and (4) continuing the exchange (changing tactics as necessary) until the goal is achieved. For the vocal recitalist each of these steps occurs inside set conventions, styles, and given circumstances.

Communication processes have been published for many mediums of communication, but for the performer it all comes down to achieving goals. For too many singers the goal is simply misplaced: to communicate without error. Such a goal might be perceived in the satisfied look of accomplishment on the face of their voice teacher in the audience. For the rest of the audience, however, this goal is hardly theatrical and only really interesting when the singer fails. The text, as well, likely does not indicate the voice teacher as the primary focus. Likewise, when the intention is only to “communicate” in some general way the performance is flat and uninteresting. Task-like goals are easy to achieve, generally have low stakes, and are

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<sup>72</sup> Here “seeing” is used to encompass the larger act of perceiving with all the senses.

uninteresting. Struggling recital singers need to redefine their goals and work out their technical proficiency in balancing their musical instrument and their behavioral instrument.

Undergraduate voice majors have typically studied voice privately before starting college. Their previous voice teachers have taught acting conventions for the recital stage, even if unintended: where to stand, how/when to gesture, and how/when not to gesture, as well as diction and musical coaching. At the beginning of college-level study a thorough assessment of the student must take place to determine where they are artistically and where they want to go.

Given the immaturity of their vocal instruments, they require extended periods of time devoted to developing its coordination and function. Exercises that consistently place a student's focus on internal sensations reinforce the idea that connecting with the outside world is not important. Internal sensations are important at the earliest levels of vocal study, but their awareness needs to be developed in a framework that maintains external connections.

Singing is the musical communication of text; whether it is in a dramatic context or on the concert/recital stage. Many collegiate singers explore this communicative process in their opera workshop programs, but not all singers wish to pursue the operatic stage and many singers matriculate without this instruction. In their defense, even actor-trained opera singers can shirk their obligation to communicate text when there is a lack of "dramatic context" and they are set the task of presenting poetry through song without the aid of scene, ensemble, and costuming. The collegiate-level opera singer traditionally has teachers from both the

music and theater worlds; where choral, recital or concert singers receive primarily musical instruction. These music-instruction-only singers are left to their own devices with regards to acting and perform with varied results. Many singers adopt caricatures to feel comfortable on stage, insulating themselves from a truly powerful performance on the recital or concert stage. Voice teachers need to guide these students' growth as actors in step with their growth as musicians by infusing the study of vocal literature and technique with acting exercises to develop their artistry.

A thorough study of the poetic text is paramount; if the text is in a foreign language extra effort is necessary when translating to go further than a direct word-for-word non-syntactic transcription. Everything is important, no detail is too small; time period, imagery, references to other pieces of literature, cultural/social allusions, technology and modes of travel, worldview, etc. The singer's level of literacy, not solely musical literacy, determines the depth of awareness she will bring to her song texts. This homework is essential, but needs to be left at home and not carried onto the stage. Many singers do not receive this part of the training and "show" their homework in performance rather than experiencing the art as it is created. While singers need to be trained to sing in foreign languages, doing so before they learn to communicate musically in their mother tongue is useless.

How does traditional vocal pedagogy prepare singers to deal with the number of characters presented in a recital, or to deal with the rapid transitions between those characters and situations? How are singers equipped to deal with poetry and musical forms that are from foreign countries and the distant past? The



answers to these questions go beyond the scope of this essay, but the answer isn't the goal. Starting with the right question is what this essay addresses. How are students prepared to set out on this journey? How do students train their focus?

The questions above are seemingly incongruous with the current state of vocal curricula, but as professors with direct control over our syllabi we can address these issues while keeping in line with NASM guidelines. The goal should be to produce the most effective artists we can, rather than machines of beautiful sound.

A few of the "acting" issues neglected by NASM are that singers who are focused on pre-opera pass without barriers on their acting growth, the only qualifiers placed on singers relate to their music literacy and sight-singing ability.<sup>73</sup> Non-operatic focused singers are allowed to neglect acting classes and opera workshops altogether. While taking acting classes does not necessarily lead to becoming a better actor, the singer's growth in this area is made even more unlikely by the NASM requirement to sing in foreign languages. When incoming freshmen can barely relate to poetry in their native tongue and they sing in a foreign language, the only outcome is generality. This continued practice reinforces the idea that singing is the communication of non-specifics, rather than revealing that the words have specific meanings married to specific musical components.

Time works against the voice teacher. Four years of undergraduate study is only that, four years of study. In this short time the curriculum needs to address both issues of vocal production, related to the young and maturing voice, as well as issues related to performance and musicality. To accommodate as much as they can,

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<sup>73</sup> Where voice teachers may not be the best adjudicators of acting skills, it may be beneficial to include acting teachers in curriculum creation and barrier adjudication.

voice teachers are generally teaching to the test. Correct diction is important, singing in tune is important, but so is the act of making art. However, when the student stands up to sing their capstone recital the voice teacher's value is also evaluated. The most recognizable aspects of singing (size of voice, pitch accuracy, diction, and tone quality) are how both the instructor and singer are often judged. Aspects of curricular design that downplay "teaching to the test" may be worth exploration.

There are many techniques available for singers to explore. Where some techniques focus on physical awareness, others focus on acoustic issues. There are even techniques for song study and analysis. While every technique is not of equal value to every student there are some techniques that seemingly have more to offer than others. For example, trained Alexander Technique (AT) practitioners help singers find physical release in motion. For singers, that motion is the act of singing. AT training and practice has a huge impact on both a singer's physical and acoustic awareness. Wesley Balk's exercises present another technique that can be very helpful in developing powerful performances, but is an example of a more specific technique than AT. Specific, well-defined techniques are most valuable to specific and well-defined applications, making them less effective to all singers.

Working on a single applied component of artistic development at a time is best, but each individual component can be developed through multiple techniques. The practice of AT is a long-term endeavor, and is more extensive than just end-gaining "to sing better." While all voice teachers do not need to be trained AT

practitioners, every collegiate voice teacher should be versed in the methodology and be aware of techniques of this magnitude.

A final curricular issue to consider is the young singer's ability to participate in small ensembles. While many instrumentalists participate in both large and small ensembles, singers are usually trained as ensemble musicians within large choral settings. The communication issue in large choral settings stem from the inaccuracy in transmission between source and receiver. Individual singers, as a sound source, transmit information through visual cues from the director. The director receives the aggregate transmission and responds physically, or ignores it and displays a visual cue for the next tonal idea. The singer receives no response to their signal. While singers may communicate musically with conductors in choral situations, the conductor does not communicate back in the same musical language. There are important choral singing skills young singers need to develop, but they are not skills that help develop their musical communication on the recital stage. Young singers need opportunity inside their degree programs to also work as small ensemble musicians.

## **Literature review**

### Opera/musical theater literature

Opera/musical theater training literature is a broad category. This body of literature focuses on the opera/musical performer, not the recitalist. However, it is the only vocal-oriented literature that addresses singers specifically as actors and not solely as musicians, which is why it is included in discussion of training the

communicative recitalist. Applying activities found in these opera/musical theater training texts into the private voice studio is often not possible, as they usually require multiple participants and would consume a disproportionate amount of lesson time. In addition to this, they are usually not complete actor training programs but rather collections of various techniques. Almost all of the literature in this area is additive, teaching acting as a separate activity done while singing. Acting is treated primarily as a physical activity in this literature and so a lot of attention is focused on the singer's physical tensions.

Due to the size of this body of literature extreme specificity in selection has been applied and only those publications that have a direct impact on this discussion will be included: a representative selection from the "opera singer as interpreter" group (Helfgot and Beeman), a selection which adapts a Meisner exercise to the vocalist (Moore and Bergman), the only publication found which adapts a specific acting technique to operatic training (Priebe), and finally literature which makes the case for recital as theater (Balk). Focus is given in these selections to areas of interpretation and pedagogy in line with the function of this essay.

Helfgot, Daniel, William O. Beeman. *The Third Line: The opera Performer as Interpreter*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1993.

Moore, Tracey and Allison Bergman. *Acting the Song: Performance Skills for the Musical Theatre*. New York: Allworth Press, 2008.

Priebe, Craig. "Balancing the Lopsided Singer: Applying Michael Chekhov's Physical Imagination Exercises Toward Training the Opera Singer." DMA Thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2000. ProQuest (9978981).

Balk, Wesley. *The Complete Singer-Actor*. Rev. ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Helfgot and Beeman's *The Third Line*

In this book the authors suggest that singers create an interpretive third line from the libretto and score, separate from the common expression of subtext. They demonstrate the need for a third line in opera, citing examples of “illiterate parrots”<sup>74</sup> on the opera stage, and point toward vocal instruction as a likely source of the singer’s misunderstanding:

Moreover, vocal instruction requires a good deal of mechanized learning. Scales and vocalizes are necessary for the physical training of the vocal musculature. When singers move on to practice interpretation through songs and arias, memorization is necessary. Oftentimes singers are learning vocal material in languages they neither read, speak, nor understand. Therefore much of the memorization becomes rote repetition. The result is that vocal interpretation is replaced by vocal mechanization.<sup>75</sup>

The authors discuss acting for singers. They state that operatic performers of their time did not value quality acting skills highly enough. In the discussion of “Preparing for Singing/Acting” the authors suggest that the singers enroll in “acting classes” with the caveat that “... the skills taught in these classes are somewhat different from those used on the opera stage.”<sup>76</sup> I am left a little confused, however, when the authors identify acting as a skill at characterization and having “personal knowledge about emotions.”<sup>77</sup> Having personal knowledge about emotions seems much less an acting technique, as it is a human condition.

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<sup>74</sup> Helfgot and Beeman, *The Third Line*, 11.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

The authors describe how to create an interpretative third line through the combination of music and text with a heavy contribution from Boris Goldovsky's *Bringing Opera to Life*. However, developing the singer's skill to finally present the third line is something this book does not address.

The authors mention recital singing from the point of view of an emergent operatic career, stressing entertainment and an opportunity to generate funds for competitions. I believe the authors also miss the collaborative aspect of recital singing, as they do when addressing operatic performance:

Finally, singers should remember that they are also actors when presenting their songs. Here they can make full use of third line analysis. Singers will not use the whole stage in a recital, and gestures will be much more limited than they would be in a full performance, but facial expressions should reflect the music in a deep and profound manner. Eye focus should paint a picture for the audience, and vocal coloring and shading should be every bit as rich and full as on the stage – perhaps even more so. The techniques developed in writing the third line in the score should be used fully in presenting recital material.<sup>78</sup>

In summary, this book is very close to Goldovsky's work, however it provides more guidance to begin the process. There is great value in developing the ability to make insightful interpretations of scores and librettos. The appendix "Resources for Opera" is a very comprehensive annotated bibliography for singer-actor literature. To be able to use this book fully, however, the skills of the performer as a well-rounded actor and singer need to be addressed. As such, this book is an example of the opera/musical theater literature as a whole in its assumption of what constitutes "good" acting.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 216.

Moore and Bergman's *Acting the Song*

This book was written to address musical theater education, but it addresses some aspects of expressive singing and living on stage relevant to the discussion of training the communicative recitalist. It is also worth inclusion in this review as it is a rare example from the literature that mentions a Meisner exercise.

Moore and Bergman's book is a manual to set up and run a musical theater course. Moore and Bergman's stated goal in their introduction is to guide one "... toward an authentic, truthful, personal performance that is based in the theatrical traditions of Stanislavski and grounded in the notions of conflict and want, stakes and tactics."<sup>79</sup> The chapters are organized into definitions of acting and musical terms, exercises, and worksheets. There are also selected additional reading suggestions at the end of each chapter.

The moment when an actor suddenly breaks into song on the musical theater stage is the primary concern of this text. Actors are provided help with the musical aspects of musical theater while singers are provided help with the theatrical aspects, hinging on the moment between dialog and song. Techniques and concepts provided by the authors are drawn from various sources in support of these goals. Text analysis is addressed through application of subtext; worksheets and figures show how a student should generalize the text of their song into objectives and tactics. And basic music theory lessons are provided to formalize structure for aid in song memorization.

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<sup>79</sup> Tracey Moore and Allison Bergman, *Acting the Song: Performance Skills for the Musical Theatre* (New York: Allworth Press, 2008), viii.

The authors mention Balk's OOPS and UBU spectrum<sup>80</sup> in the Expressive Singing section and mention the importance of being aware of others on stage in their Living on Stage section. The unfortunate aspect of this section is that it is placed at the very end of the book, and nothing prior to it directs the performer to notice the other actors on stage with them.

In the chapter on rehearsal the authors adapt a Meisner repetition exercise. Meisner exercises are tools for the studio and classroom, not the rehearsal hall. The authors set up the exercise with this statement, "There is a very useful Meisner exercise where one actor repeats what the other actor says before answering."<sup>81</sup> After the authors demonstrate how this exchange might work they follow it with another "exercise (that) asks the actor to listen to the cue and then to invent a response before checking the script to see what the actual line is."<sup>82</sup> In my study of Meisner-specific acting literature I have not come across this exercise. Moore and Bergman adapt Meisner's exercise to make singing-actors think. In contrast, my research found Meisner to hold a "brainless" attitude toward the mechanical word repetition exercise, further discussed in the review of his book.<sup>83</sup>

Improvisation is crucial in an actor's training, and it is equally important in the development of a singing actor. The performance of notated music requires

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<sup>80</sup> OOPS (One and Only Perfect Sound) and UBU (Unusual But Useful) is a continuum of sounds Balk uses. Some young singers believe that only "one" sound is allowable for Opera and only "one" sound is allowable in Musical Theater.

<sup>81</sup> Moore and Bergman, *Acting the Song*, 263.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 264 (parenthetical addition not original).

<sup>83</sup> Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 31.



some amount of musical improvisation to translate the notation into sound. Likewise, the singer as an instrument of behavior uses improvisation, to some extent, to relate the behavioral assumptions from the text and musical notation into embodied expression. On this very important component Moore and Bergman are silent. There is one small subsection on Risks and Spontaneity but improvisation is never mentioned, the exercises given in this subsection require students to improvise but do not give boundaries and rules to its application.

In summary, Moore and Bergman's book provides a serviceable outline toward the curriculum of a musical theater course, but might present misunderstandings related to Meisner's work.

Priebe's *Balancing the Lopsided Singer*

Dr. Craig Priebe, in his doctoral thesis, adapts Michael Chekhov's method of "exercis(ing) the varying aspects of a performer's body, psychology, and creative expression"<sup>84</sup> into an operatic workshop. Michael Chekhov was a nephew of playwright Anton Chekhov, who was so influential in Stanislavski's work. Priebe's application of an established "acting technique" to a singer's preparation and performance parallels this essay's adaptation of Meisner's work to vocal pedagogy. Anton Chekhov presented his pedagogy to the Group after moving to Connecticut in the late 1930's. This is an interesting crossing of paths as Meisner was in attendance. Meisner shares his memory of this encounter in his own book, "... (Michael Chekhov) made me realize that truth, as in naturalism, was far from the whole truth.

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<sup>84</sup> Craig Priebe, "Balancing the lopsided singer: Applying Michael Chekhov's Physical Imagination Exercises Toward Training the Opera Singer" (DMA Thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2000), 1.

In him I witnessed exciting theatrical form with no loss of inner content, and I knew that I wanted this too.”<sup>85</sup>

Priebe’s work is fascinating, based on a similar assumption of this essay that the training of function separate and prior to communication ends up limiting the performer.<sup>86</sup> Michael Chekhov’s exercises are founded in a spiritual practice associated with movement, but their focus on concentration and imagination are refreshing. Priebe applies Chekhov’s exercises in three phases: (1) Sensitizing the body to the psychological creative impulses, (2) enriching the psychology, and (3) developing obedience of both body and psychology to the actor.<sup>87</sup> Priebe derived the three phases of Chekhov’s method from Chekhov’s own published books on acting and presented each phase as a separate chapter with explanation first and exercises second.

The exercises given at the end of chapters 4, 5 and 6, place the singer entirely in their head as they explore “gesture” and “quality,” terms that are cognitive and reflective from the perspective of the singer. I found it interesting that no exercise presented in the thesis involves singing. The focus of Chekhov’s technique is thinking and moving, even when adapted for singers. Priebe adapted Chekhov’s method for an opera workshop format, and this is likely the reason that sound making is not included in the exercises. Further adaptation of the exercises to

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<sup>85</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, 10.

<sup>86</sup> Priebe, “Balancing the lopsided singer,” 14.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

include sound production would be required to make them beneficial inside the voice studio.

Balk's *The Complete Singer-Actor*

Balk's work is very broad and comprehensive. Balk developed many exercises to energize a singer's creative work while keeping an eye on efficiency and sound production. His work is primarily external, meaning that the emphasis is placed on the singer's conscious control over his external expression and body position, which then works inward to become an actual feeling. In short, a singer's imitated outward behavior becomes his real internal emotion. This process has been very beneficial for many performers, and many voice teachers who have studied the process are able to adapt certain exercises into their voice studios to release specific tensions and "entanglements." "Entanglement" is a term codified by Wesley Balk which Sara Schneider defines succinctly in *Concert Song as Seen* as "particular, persisting associations between specific vocal mannerisms and movement patterns which are unintended by the singer."<sup>88</sup>

Balk starts from the external and works inward as a stated rejection of Lee Strasberg's "Method."<sup>89</sup> In Balk's estimation a "method" actor started from the internal and moved outward, leading to entanglements specifically detrimental to a singer's art. Balk identifies the influence of Stanislavski's 'system' on modern

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<sup>88</sup> Schneider, *Concert Song as Seen*, 41.

<sup>89</sup> Wesley Balk, *The Complete Singer-Actor* (Rev. ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 26.

American actor training entirely from Hapgood's translations and editions. The reason for this misconception is addressed in chapter 2.

Balk identifies, separates and develops each "basic skill" to eliminate future entanglements. Balk's basic skills are: energizing, concentrating, structuring, stylizing, imagining, and coordinating. From this simple beginning Balk's work becomes much more complicated. By the time Balk publishes his third book, *The Radiant Performer: the spiral path to performing power*, many interrelationships exist between skills, tools, and attitudes. Each interrelationship has multiple entanglements. For the average reader it becomes difficult to keep things straight. This is typical of literature attempting to document the acting process in language. Acting is a complicated process, the training of which includes fluency in several component actions.

There are exercises in his books applicable to the private voice studio (gibberish, floppy release, etc.), but grasping why and how to include them in a way that supports Balk's aims might require study at the Wesley Balk Institute and not just a thorough review of his publications.

It is important to note in this selected literature that Balk's exercises do include sound making. There are many other portions of his work that are also well worth reading for the voice teacher. Balk's "Bill of Opposites"<sup>90</sup> demonstrates some modern disparities between singers and actors. Another passage worth reading for all voice teachers is Balk's subsection on spoken energies in chapter 9 of *The*

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 37.

*Complete Singer-Actor*, particularly his description of what language *can* involve and what it *must* involve.

Each of Balk's "4 special conventions of opera" can apply to the recital stage:

- (1) Musical alteration of time
- (2) Singer sustains action alone on stage for extended periods of time 'aria'
- (3) Simultaneous singing by two or more characters possibly with different texts
- (4) Singer remains on stage without singing during introductions, interludes, postludes, and spaces when the orchestra plays<sup>91</sup>

This implies that Balk's exercises can be equally applied to the recitalist as to the musical or operatic performer.

Balk's basic skill of concentration is analogous to Meisner's "independent activity," except that concentration for Balk goes both inward (soliloquizing) and outward (relating) where Meisner's independent activity is entirely focused outward on a task. This demonstrates a similarity between some components of Balk's work with modern American "Method" approaches, and a difference between Balk and Meisner.

In summary, Balk's work attempts to create a holistic pedagogy for creative performers. His view of actor training in America seems to have been heavily impacted by a rejection of "internal" highly emotional approaches, how Balk's work would have been influenced by current edition/translations of Stanislavski would be interesting to observe.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 9 (list created from text).

## Vocal pedagogy literature

The selection of vocal pedagogy literature is also severely narrow in focus. Primacy is given to publications that included information on developing and integrating interpretive elements into the voice studio. Brent Monahan's *The Art of Singing* was very helpful in organizing published thoughts on vocal pedagogy between the years of 1777 and 1927. His compendium is used in addition to the four chosen authors to provide historic balance and understanding. When the performer's body or facial expressions are mentioned in vocal pedagogy texts they are usually limited to comments attempting to separate excess physical tension from vocal production. The four chosen authors have made notable contributions to the field of vocal pedagogy spanning the last four decades. Due to the size of this body of literature, extreme specificity in selection has been applied and only those publications that have direct impact on this discussion will be included; a section on interpretation and expression which links vocal pedagogy with Wesley Balk (Ware), a publication by a distinguished vocal pedagogue and her accompanist specifically written for the vocal recital (Emmons and Sonntag), a chapter on balancing technique and communication (Miller), and finally literature which, again, attempts to unify the whole process (Smith). Focus is given in these selections to areas of interpretation and performance in line with the function of this essay.

Historically, the predominant exercise related to interpretation mentioned in vocal pedagogy literature is to have the student read the text away from the music.<sup>92</sup> This simple exercise is certainly helpful, but finding it printed in vocal pedagogy

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<sup>92</sup> Brent Monahan, *The Art of Singing: a Compendium of Thoughts on Singing Published Between 1777 and 1927* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1978), 211.

materials illuminates the problem that singers might, at least in one historical period, have developed a habit of approaching songs without first being aware of its text. It seems as incongruous as seeing a printed direction in vocal pedagogy materials directing the singer to look at the musical notation.

Ware, Clifton. *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy: The Foundations and Process of Singing*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 1998.

Emmons, Shirlee and Stanley Sonntag. *The Art of the Song Recital*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1979.

Miller, Richard. *The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1986.

Smith, Stephen. *The Naked Voice: a Wholistic Approach to Singing*. With Michael Chipman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

#### Ware's *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy*

This book by Clifton Ware is a popular textbook for undergraduate vocal pedagogy courses. It provides a very well rounded exposure to anatomy, educational psychology, and vocal exercises. The large bibliography demonstrates the breadth of ideas he incorporates and presents. Coffin, Reid, and Miller have multiple entries, but the bibliography presents almost every American vocal pedagogy book published after 1940.

The text presents a unified course of study for undergraduate singers; beginning with aesthetics, psychology, anatomy and physiology. Respiration, phonation, registration, resonance, articulation and coordination are presented in individual chapters with several exercises and guided review for study. The final three chapters discuss care for the voice, performance and teaching. These last two

are where the rest of this review will focus, primarily the subsection on interpretation and expression.

Ware states that a singer is also an actor. For Ware, an ideal singer would have: “(1) pleasant voice quality; (2) dependable vocal technique; (3) solid musicianship; (4) keen scholarship; (5) linguistic facility; (6) knowledge of literature; (7) dramatic skills; (8) pleasing appearance; and (9) positive personality.”<sup>93</sup> No indication of value is given to the order presented in the text, but it might be assumed that a pleasant voice quality and a dependable technique are more important than an ability to communicate dramatically in this vocal pedagogy text.

Very explicit definitions of technique, interpretation, expression and artistry follow. Ware makes a clear distinction between interpretation and expression to set up his argument that it is the “composer’s version of the text that must be communicated.”<sup>94</sup> Ware defines interpretation as the “... act of explaining or clarifying an art work’s meaning ... according to the artistic intentions of the composer, the textual source, and the performer, in that order.”<sup>95</sup> He defines expression as “... *how* well the intention of composer or poet is interpreted and communicated.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Clifton Ware, *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy: The Foundations and Process of Singing* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1998), 233.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* (Italics in the original).



Ware addresses the issue of impersonality and “flat” performances that can occur from this insistence on “correct” interpretation. He suggests that students who experience such “flat” performances might benefit from studying personal involvement from master singers through lessons, recordings, or watching them give live performances. He also presents an alternate option (citing Robert Edwin’s 1988 NATS article on emotion) for singers who are scared to open up. For these singers he suggests that a created reality might be less threatening and characterizations might be more comfortable.

Ware’s text is presented first in this section of literature review due to his explanation of Balk’s “interpretive skills.” Ware presents Balk’s six interpretive skills with his own definitions specific to vocal study and includes a separate section on how to develop the six skills. Ware’s presentation of these skills (and their development) provides clarity that is difficult to grasp at times from Balk’s publications.

The main thrust of Balk’s work was to shake up the traditional “set” performance practices and expose singers to alternatives. By forcing specific “attitudes” on a composition such as “lazily” or “sprightly” the singer might find something in the interpretation that speaks to them, but being able to impose a character on a song is not a skill that warrants extended study.

Ware provides one sentence to aid the reader’s understanding of ‘dealing with imagining.’ “What can I imagine (persons, places, things, actions) to help

energize focal points?"<sup>97</sup> While the rest of the chapters in Ware's book include explicit exercises and explanations, they are not provided in this section.

In summary, this text is a phenomenal choice for basic vocal pedagogy courses at the undergraduate level. Additional resources that help voice teachers develop the dramatic skills of their students in coordination with their vocal instruction might be needed. It is also a fine source to clarify some of Balk's ideas.

Emmons and Sonntag's *The Art of the Song Recital*

Emmons and Sonntag had performed together for over 20 years at the time this book was published. From their long collaboration they created a list skills a recitalist needed to be successful:

1. A well-trained and reasonably beautiful voice
2. Advanced musicianship
3. An attractive and vital personality
4. The ability to project and communicate
5. The ability to think and perform on many levels
6. The ability to go beyond what can be taught
7. Versatility of styles (for the American singer)
8. Musical and literary insight
9. Musical and literary imagination
10. Good health and the determination to keep it<sup>98</sup>

Emmons and Sonntag do not address vocal pedagogy through vocal exercises and technique. They address it through recital programming and by proposing large-scale revisions to the training of young singers as actor-singers. Focusing on the song recital, Emmons and Sonntag address curricular and societal issues facing the recitalist of the late 1970's. The authors make the case in support of dramatic

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>98</sup> Shirlee Emmons and Stanley Sonntag, *The Art of the Song Recital* (New York: Schirmer, 1979), 21.

instruction for singers based on testimony from performing artists and critics. The main thrust of their book is based on shaking up recital programming, but they also address the acting singer by pulling from Elizabeth Hapgood's English translations of Stanislavski. Now that new English translations of Stanislavski's work by Jean Benedetti are available it is important to revisit how this new scholarship impacts its adaptation by Emmons and Sonntag.

The authors make a very coherent argument for song recital as theater, with a clearly written historical perspective of the art form in America. They make a strong case for the singer's involvement in recital programming and the function of the recitalist and accompanist as co-dramaturges and playwrights when organizing song selections into a coherent whole. In chapter 2 they provide a very detailed outline (8 pages including notes) directing singers and accompanists on how to prepare a program. There are many sample programs in every chapter, discussing a program's merits and faults based on the focus of the specific chapter.

Chapter 5, titled "The Unique Needs of the Young Artist," provides our first Stanislavski quote. The authors bring up actor training for young singers to support their idea of program creation and its theatrical performance. Chapter 5 addresses some interesting issues of spontaneity and provides quotations (which are attributed but not sourced) from Walt Witcover and Leyna Gabriele on the subject of "becoming a singing actor."<sup>99</sup> Chapter 6, "The Singing Actor," presents the main thrust of their pedagogical aim by summarizing Stanislavski through the Hapgood editions of *My Life in Art* and *Stanislavski on Opera*, and Alexander Technique by way

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 86.

of ACAT (American Center for Alexander Technique). The views of each technique are adapted to discussions of “Eyes and face,” “Gestures,” and “The Body” with examples drawn from song literature. The chapter concludes with “Guidelines for Practice” with much of the content pulled from the introduction to *Stanislavski on Opera*.

Chapters 7-14 discuss the accompanist, the ensemble, and musical concerns relative to score reading and interpretive performance through many specific genres and time periods; chapter titles include “The Accompanist,” “Research,” “Methods of Study and Memorization,” and “The Song Cycle” to name a few. Within these chapters the subject of memorization is worth further scrutiny. Research and analysis are well taught to singers in theory and history courses at the collegiate level, but for the conservatory-trained singer these chapters may prove illuminating.

The final chapter, “The Future of the Song Recital,” summarizes the authors’ argument that recital programming needs revitalization and the artists need revised training to present these updated programs. They present specific “innovations” to stimulate audience attendance and revitalize the form, mainly having to do with recital programming. Discussion of song in English translation is given an even-handed treatment without a convincing argument either way being submitted by the authors. Emmons and Sonntag made this final statement, “we hope that in five or ten years some of the critical and pessimistic statements of this book will prove to be obsolete for that would indicate that a renaissance of the song recital had indeed been accomplished.”<sup>100</sup> Their timeline might not have been met, but there is

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 302.

evidence that the art form is slowly changing. “Traditional” recitals are still the norm, but innovative recitals do exist. The “one man show” the authors state has gone out of fashion has also seen a recent resurgence that was not the case in the late 1970’s.

In summary, the discussions of Stanislavski and actor training read more like Strasberg’s “Method,” as the guiding actor providing comment was Walt Witcover, a student of Strasberg. The quotations from Stanislavski were the best available at the time of publication and are used to support the ideas of internal rationalization for the performer. Emmons and Sonntag make a strong case for the study of acting with qualified teachers for the purpose of improved recital performance. They adapt role-preparation into their suggested pedagogy but not self-preparation. New translations and editions of Stanislavski have become available since their publication, as well as Meisner’s book, which provide clearer delineation between these two phases of study; self and role. The goal of this essay is in line with Emmons and Sonntag, but it asserts that “work on the self” will be preliminary to “work on the role” and program creation.

#### Miller’s *The Structure of Singing*

Richard Miller was a very prolific author of modern vocal pedagogy. His focus, especially in this book, is on the physical function of singing and it’s systematic training. His work was well grounded in the vocal science literature available at the times of his publications. His writing style is very distinct and authoritative; efforts to mirror his style in this review are not intentional. This publication was chosen

from his many books because it includes a chapter that distills his thoughts on communication as connected to vocal function.

His chapter titled, "Coordinating Technique and Communication," in *The Structure of Singing* relies heavily on function, and control of that function. Miller mentions the paradox of living in two worlds, creating the imaginary world for the audience while being aware of the vocal function and memorized music/text simultaneously. There is also a discussion of "visualization" but no discreet direction on how it is achieved. The most helpful section of the chapter lies in his direction to foster "creative thinking."<sup>101</sup> The difference between imagination and creative thinking for Miller is that creative thinking is more active and directed. The difficulties related to "trying" in improvisation may be an unintended byproduct, either unforeseen by Miller or not found to be detrimental.

Miller viewed the connection between acting and singing to be based on vocal function; "when we understand the function of the mechanism, we can train ourselves to associate emotional and creative experiences with sensation that results from specific kinds of physical coordination."<sup>102</sup> This view places vocal function before communication, and then once the vocal function is efficient and beautiful tries to "reattach" the emotional connections while preserving the physical coordination.

The training of physical function is important, even mandatory. However, the choice between training the human present in our studios to be more efficient, or

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<sup>101</sup> Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing* (New York: NY, Schirmer Books, 1986), 204.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

training the efficient sound-machine present in our studios to be more human should be an easy one. Miller draws a connection between control of the voluntary nervous system and “neurological factors on phonatory events”<sup>103</sup> to support the idea that we control our act of singing “from both the physiological and psychological standpoints.”<sup>104</sup>

Miller shares a few paragraphs on musicality and the development of a tonal palate capable of expressing multiple colors and dynamics, internalization of emotion and its detriments, and the use of physical gesture and facial expression.

Miller warns his readers though not to go too far:

On the other hand, the mugging that sometimes goes on under the guise of singing-acting, complete with musical comedy stock gestures or the physical clichés of the television review, is perhaps even more detrimental to actual artistic communication.<sup>105</sup>

Miller cites Hapgood’s translation of *Stanislavski on Opera* when addressing the issue of overcoming nervousness. Stanislavski’s idea of ‘public solitude’ is presented as extant in the Romyantsev introduction. A nervous singer at the piano is taught the difference between his creative excitement and panic and encouraged to subdue his panic by focusing on an object. This focus can lead to a state of ‘public solitude.’ The term ‘public solitude’ is used, but not defined.

Miller’s final statement of the chapter, “*Technique is of no value except as it makes communication possible*”<sup>106</sup> is very strong. But it is *how* Miller defines

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 204 (italics in the original).

communication, and what he feels might be worth communicating, that is worth questioning. Also, the specifics of how this communicative ability is trained are left undefined. Where the previous chapters include detailed exercises and instructions, this chapter does not provide such exercises.

In summary, Miller provides yet another text for very effective training of a singer's physical function. He has very strong opinions on how training should proceed with scientific and anatomical understanding and findings to support many of his claims. When dealing with communicative issues, however, less direct support is present. Miller stresses the importance of having a technique for artistic development. However, he does not provide one or point to techniques created by others.

### Smith's *The Naked Voice*

Stephen Smith sums up the intent of his book in his introduction, "*The Naked Voice: A Wholistic Approach to Singing* is a book about how to sing, but it is also about the pursuit of authenticity."<sup>107</sup> The nakedness he refers to in the title is a sense of truthfulness and honesty in the voice, the elimination of barriers placed between the singer and their audience by the singer or their instruction. Smith's explanation of his pedagogy as a philosophy with associated exercises or "inventions" merits its inclusion in discussion of vocal pedagogy literature. Smith's take on truthfulness and technique are also worth mentioning in light of the repetition exercise to be adapted in this essay.

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<sup>107</sup> Stephen Smith with Michael Chipman, *The Naked Voice: A Wholistic Approach to Singing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.



Smith's book is composed of multiple chapters in three parts: Part I (Basic Instincts) introduces his philosophy, Part II (Inventions) is where he demonstrates how his philosophies are carried through into exercises, and Part III (Where the Rubber Meets the Road) includes chapters on applying the exercises to repertoire and the singer's life. The book displays a clear "overhead view" of his pedagogy as applied to his studio teaching. Smith's structure of explaining the philosophy, philosophy to exercise, and exercise to application was instructive in the design of the third chapter of this essay.

Regarding technique, Smith's comments echo Meisner/Stanislavski sentiments:

Singers tend to think of technique as if it were a painting, as if all the creative work is done in the practice room alone. With this mentality, when a tenor "hits" a high C, he is not in the moment at all; he simply displays the painting of the high C that he worked out in the practice room. It is common for singers to "phone in" performances – not "being in the moment" of their performance or creating something fresh and new. Displaying the painting is contrary to the fundamental nature of the singing art. Because singing must be constantly created in the moment, we must have a technique for it that moves through time as well. Good technique is *not knowing* what is going to happen when we sing; rather, it is being very clear and sure about what we are *doing* and the parameters in which those actions occur.<sup>108</sup>

To reach this goal of "*not knowing*" Smith bases his basic instincts in part I on speaking and breathing in a "natural" state. Smith begins from an evolutionary point of view; sound making as a human instinct from birth.<sup>109</sup> Smith uses the vernacular speech of the student to begin their simple speaking of the song texts. Psychogenic

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>109</sup> Instinct and need play an important role for Meisner who based much of the second half of his pedagogy on Freudian concepts. An interesting exploration and revision of Freud's concepts on creativity by Anthony Storr in his 1972 book *The Dynamics of Creation* might aid further adaptation of acting and singing pedagogies.

voice disorders and less severe speech contaminants are mentioned, if not by name, in his “Environmental Contaminants of Speech” section. There is a basic awareness of voice science presented in part I, but with the goal of presenting a holistic technique perception trumps hard science in the section on breathing.

Smith’s “six inventions” demonstrate how he incorporates his philosophy of simple speech and released breath in the voice studio. The speech-based inventions lean toward the *chiaro* while the breath-based inventions lean toward the *oscuro*. He presents one *chiaro* and one *oscuro* invention and then combines them in a third.

In summary, Smith presents vocal exercises to promote a balanced sound that is produced *without* thought. Interpretation, communication, and “acting” are not addressed outright; Smith’s work is different from the standard vocal pedagogy literature by supporting acting growth in this tangential way. Smith’s exercises are simple to approach, and train the vocal instrument to be responsive, totally in line with the first phase of Meisner’s approach.

## **Methodology**

I formalized a basic understanding of Meisner’s work and how he applied his pedagogy after reading the materials reviewed in chapter 1 and watching the documentary film of Meisner’s teaching, *Sanford Meisner: the Theater’s Best Kept Secret*.<sup>110</sup> I directly experienced the mechanical repetition exercise in Carol MacVey’s *Acting for Singers* course at the University of Iowa in 2010.

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<sup>110</sup> Stephen Harvey and Nick Doob, *Sanford Meisner: The Theater’s Best Kept Secret* (Princeton, New Jersey: Films for the Humanities, 1985), VHS.

Meisner's work with actors is a good fit for collegiate-level singers due to the basic proficiency levels required for its application and the way Meisner's technique retrains ingrained performance habits experienced students generally present in the voice studio. Meisner technique does not shy away from the paradox of stage performance being both fully prepared and fully spontaneous at the same time. When applied to vocal pedagogy, Meisner's work has the possibility to reform the inner-structure of vocal pedagogy into a model that better supports the modern expectations of a vocalist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Repetition is something singers do everyday, but it is *how* singers repeat that makes all the difference. It all depends on what singers are thinking about prior to, during, and after the repetition. When a voice instructor models for a student and asks for repetition the student suppresses their response to what they perceived and tries to copy the modeled behavior exactly. Meisner's exercise of mechanical repetition starts from a truthful statement of observation and its direct repetition, without thinking. It is this spontaneous response which, when it appears on stage, is the seed of true art making.

The goal of the exercises in chapter 3 is to synthesize naturalistic components of the repetition exercise with vocal tasks and vocal technique. Each exercise will focus on developing the reality of doing, point of view, and truthfulness as identified in the above literature review. Before singing songs, and before adapting Meisner exercises, the student must first develop their creativity. This involves freeing physical tensions, which will impede such creativity. Once the student is physically and vocally creative the adaptation of Meisner's mechanical

repetition exercise can begin. It establishes point of view, and immediacy. The singer's point of view is all they really have.

In many cases singers try to present the point of view of the poet, composer, or even their voice teacher. The singer needs to develop the ability to present their natural response and point of view by developing their behavioral instrument through adaptation of the mechanical repetition exercise. This exercise will also address the problem of immediacy common to singers. The problem of immediacy occurs when performers think about what they just did or are about to do, rather than just doing what they are *doing* at that moment.

When Meisner said that, "the foundation of acting is the reality of doing"<sup>111</sup> he was talking about "realism" for modern American actors in modern American plays. For singers, our literature covers many genres and styles. Some of that literature is realistic, most is fantastic, but a large majority of the literature we sing involves rhyming texts and poetic structures that are far from "realistic," "natural," events. Balancing point of view and immediacy for the singer may take months of repetition. Singers deal with different temporal conventions than actors. Poetry can be more demanding on the imaginations of both performer and audience than dialog. Where some poems may provide no more 'action' for the singer than "remembering" or "describing" it is important to develop the skills to actually *do* those actions in the course of singing the song.

This essay begins the process of creating a more communicative recitalist through adaptation of the repetition exercise and incorporating certain aspects of

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<sup>111</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, 16.

Stanislavski and Spolin that help develop creativity and imagination. It does not attempt to provide a complete path, but rather begins the singer's work on the "self." Further adaptation, as identified in chapter 4, will guide future research.

## CHAPTER III

### REPETITION APPLIED TO THE VOICE STUDIO

This chapter presents adapted repetition exercises inside the voice studio. The Meisner-inspired adaptations below invite singers to become more responsive, more aware, more observant artists. The goal of each exercise is to synthesize naturalistic components of the original Meisner repetition exercise with vocal tasks and vocal technique. Each exercise develops the reality of doing, point of view, and truthfulness as presented in chapter 1. The goal is to develop the performer's instincts inside a framework of rules intended to eliminate *prepared* responses and develop *truthful* responses, balanced with vocal technique. These exercises are the first steps toward more training a more communicative recitalist.

In each exercise the singer works as a collaborator on many levels, but there is always an external focus. Imaginary or physical objects won't respond to observations made by the student, distinguishing them from "partners." However, the human, physical, partners are true partners. Even the musical partner, when shared between two collaborators, will operate as a partner. Each partner, or object, is identified below in separate sections.

The three partners/objects are, in order: The imaginary object (extant in the singer's fantasy), the physical partner/object (any person or object the singer can actually observe), and the musical partner (sound that affects the singer's response). As stated before, Meisner began with the physical partner and moved from physical observations to observations of that partner's behavior. The recitalist will begin with the imaginary object for reasons specified below.

The locale of each exercise presented in this essay is a “generic” voice lesson studio, or practice room, which includes a piano. There is enough room for both the voice teacher and student to move around freely. Private voice lessons allow the student to practice work away from audible or visual peer evaluation. Student and teacher comfort levels related to privacy issues are best dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

The sequence of exercises is intended for recitalists who cannot escape the confines of their vocal technique. Meisner’s sequence ends with monologue, where vocalists begin, generally, by singing songs early in their sequence of study.<sup>112</sup> Rather than upending voice pedagogy by not singing art song until the behavioral instrument is developed, the sequence presented below begins by addressing the hardest component first. The imaginary object exercises reach the student where they are, in their head. Most singers have been trained to constantly evaluate their technique, their tone, and their internal physical sensations in rehearsal and performance. Separating the student from their technique-focus begins by replacing that technique-focus with an imaginary object. The imaginary object is then externalized by developing multi-level focus and circles of attention.<sup>113,114</sup> Once the student is able to focus externally and maintain motor task efficiency they can begin work on the physical and musical partners.

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<sup>112</sup> Art song and monologue are similar in that the imaginary objects exist in the mind of the performer.

<sup>113</sup> Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 38-39.

<sup>114</sup> Multi-level focus is basically what we would call multi-tasking (i.e. listening to the radio while driving.) Circles of attention vary in size, from the very small to the very large, and might be thought of as the “area of focus” (i.e. being aware of your computer screen to the exclusion of the rest of the world, or being aware of the thunderstorm rolling in.)

In future research and adaptation, the large-scale structure of working on the “self” first and the “role” second will be maintained. Adaptation of the concepts discussed in chapter 1 is necessary to address the differences in pedagogy and performance genre. Stanislavski object exercises are referenced to adapt the repetition exercise to the imaginary partner exercises. Musical improvisation games are referenced to adapt the repetition exercise to the musical partner exercises.

The teacher’s skill at teaching is most important when applying these exercises in the voice studio. To that end each exercise will include a description of the teacher’s role in the exercise, what they should encourage as well as what they should discourage. Every teacher differs in bearing and character, but pedagogy does not depend on demeanor. Meisner was reportedly an authoritarian teacher, but this does not mean every teacher who wants to incorporate his ideas needs to adopt the same bearing to legitimize their teaching. It is entirely possible to be yourself when you teach, even when you adopt the ideas of others into your studio. Teachers who apply themselves fully to the art of teaching realize that they are constantly learning from their students, they revise their practices, and can focus intently on the needs of their students. To meaningfully apply the following exercises, this most dedicated type of teacher is required.

The exercises develop imaginary, physical and musical relationships while training basic vocal techniques for practical reasons. The value of a voice teacher is linked to their ability to produce functioning singers. The singer’s instrument is multi-dimensional, a tensegrity structure of sorts where the musical instrument requires tension on the behavioral instrument and vice versa. Isolation and



strengthening of individual components is important, but they must also be combined through guided instruction to ensure the student's artistic growth is balanced. These exercises attempt to combine them and so do not constitute the entirety of a singer's training or the complete usage of minutes in a voice lesson, the exercises are phased into commonly existing voice lesson structures. To eliminate as many obstacles as possible each exercise should be carried out in the native language of the student and teacher, or in a language in which both are fluent to a level of spontaneous, visceral response.

Meisner's mechanical repetition, at its basic level, starts with physical observation and direct repetition of that observation. The example below comes from the chapter 2 of Meisner's book when he first introduces this exercise to a new class.

"Now, you told me that you can hear and you told me that you can repeat, which means that, starting with something that exists in her, you should find what interests you and make a comment. Then, Rose Marie, you repeat exactly what he says, and you, John, repeat exactly what *she* says. Do this until I stop you."

"Your hair is shiny," John says.

"Your hair is shiny," Rose Marie repeats.

"Your hair is shiny."

"Your hair is shiny."

"Your *hair* is shiny."

"Your *hair* is shiny."

"Your *hair is* shiny."

"No," says Meisner stopping them, "you're making readings in order to create variety. Don't."<sup>115</sup>

From the directions given above it seems like a very simple exercise: find something that interests you in your partner, say it aloud, then repeat. This is kept

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<sup>115</sup> Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 21.

simple at first so that attention is given to the changes that occur. The students participating in the exercise may not be immediately aware that they are making readings. The instructor's immediate identification of the moment a reading, or change in focus, occurs is required until the participants gain that awareness. The goal is not repetition without change, but rather, repetition without change of *focus*. When one partner tries to change the repetition they have shifted their focus from their partner to the "theater" of the repetition or the sound/musical components of the spoken words. Future derivations of this exercise require the students to follow their instincts when choosing what interests them to begin the repetition. It also develops their truthful observations of their partner when starting the repetition. These goals are carried through the adaptations to imaginary, physical and musical partners below.

### **The imaginary object**

A singer's fantasy world is created from given circumstances in the musical and textual information. Any object in this fantasy world can become the focus of the singer's attention at which time it becomes the singer's imaginary object. The singer's skill at focusing on specific imaginary objects is what brings those objects to life for the audience. If it does not exist for the singer, the singer cannot share it with their audience.

At the beginning of these exercises with the imaginary object it is important to start with objects that could exist. Exaggerated and unrealistic objects may eventually be needed when working from poetic texts, but to begin it is enough to start imagining things that could exist. Imaginary objects that could exist give both

student and teacher a point of reference. It also allows greater connection between the singer and the imagined object. For example, if the object were a pink zombie dragon, the student would have to *think* about how they would react. If the imagined object were an angry wasp, the student would just react.

Real experiences feed our imagination, but our imagination can augment those experiences and create entirely new imagined experiences from them. For instance, the singer imagining the angry wasp does not require the experience of being chased by a wasp to be able to imagine it. Real experiences may also bring with them additional baggage, emotions tied up with the memories and additional information about objects and/or persons present at the experience which might detract from the exercise. If the imagined object has no direct experience in the life of the student, the student is able to imagine that object apart from entanglements.

Song recital audiences expect singers to imagine the situation presented in the score. Unfortunately, many recitalists only *pretend* to imagine their poetic situation. This may be to fit the directions given by their voice teacher,<sup>116</sup> or because the act of daydreaming or imagining seems too personal for public sharing. It may be uncomfortable for some singers to play imaginatively while singing. Singers fear wrong notes, wrong words, and teacher disapproval. These fears can be the source of a student's resistance to play. On the other hand, it is important for the voice teacher to not downplay the serious work that artistic growth takes. The work must be both enjoyable and serious at the same time.

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<sup>116</sup> For instance, a singer who makes an imaginative choice relative to the poetry in a voice lesson and is corrected due to a technical mistake in their vocal production may try to hide their future imaginative choices drawing connections between their imaginative choices and "incorrect" singing.

Each exercise below focuses on one of three goals to coordinate with vocal production: (1) Focusing on a *given* imaginary object, (2) the *creation* of an imaginary object, and (3) the specific description of the imaginary object.

Meisner's work, as presented in his book, begins with the assumption that actors have familiarity with pantomime and the transposition of real objects as placeholders for imagined objects. Many singers may have similar experiences in their history (i.e. imagined play as children) but rarely are the singer's experiences connected to their voice lessons or connected to the act of singing on the recital stage. The exercises require the singer to be engaged in the act of sound making at varied levels of difficulty while fulfilling each of the three previously stated goals. These exercises also explore focus and concentration per Jean Benedetti's explanation of Stanislavski's "Mental Action" portion of the 'system' in *Stanislavski and the Actor*.<sup>117</sup> Benedetti's use of the term "Object of Attention"<sup>118</sup> comes from Stanislavski's studio notes and refers to what we will call the "imaginary object" which strengthens the link to the repetition exercise by reinforcing the idea that the partner has an impact on the singer.

#### Exercise one

The student's objective in exercise one is to maintain focus on an imaginary object while vocalizing. A general imaginary object, like a ball, is suggested to begin. This exercise is implemented at the beginning of the lesson after the rules and expectations of the exercise have been shared with the student. The instructor

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<sup>117</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor*, 32.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

initiates a game of imaginary catch with the student while modeling a lip buzz, or similar non-vowel musical pattern.<sup>119</sup> The musical pattern, through guidance by the instructor, should be consistent and regular in tempo. The physical patterns involved in the game of catch will be inconsistent and irregular, as fits the truthfulness of the imaginary game. The instructor, through rate and velocity of their throws, varies the student's physical activity. The goal of the exercise is to not lose focus on the imaginary object. Students should share their thoughts through journaling after they've had time to process the exercise.

What the voice instructor should watch for and discourage:

- Physical action synchronized to musical exercise
- Change in ball weight, size, location, and physics incongruous with reality
- Student losing focus on the ball

What the voice instructor should watch for and encourage:

- Continuous focus on the imaginary object
- Vocal production free and separate from catching and throwing
- Improvised interaction with the imaginary object

After the objective of the exercise has been explained to the student (to maintain focus on the imaginary object) the student and the instructor should stand and face each other at a distance of five to ten feet. To begin the game of catch, the instructor tosses an imaginary ball to the student. After catching the ball the student tosses it back to the instructor. While continuing the game of catch the instructor will model a lip buzzing or other fricative/non-vowel exercise appropriate for the student. The vocal task should be unaccompanied. The game of catch continues at its

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<sup>119</sup> Sirens, trilled r's, or any bi-labial fricative on a simple scalar passage or glide can be chosen in place of lip buzzing to fit the needs and abilities of the student. Non-vowel tasks are suggested initially to reduce internal self-critique related to matching and imitation; which enables the student to more easily focus externally on the imaginary object. The warm-up, or first exercise of the lesson, was chosen to demonstrate the brevity of the exercise inside the structure of a voice lesson.

own tempo and can develop its own rhythm separate from the repetition of the vocal task, which should remain steady. Correction should be given as it applies to the student's focus on the imaginary object. If the student loses focus on the imaginary object it should be pointed out immediately. Corrections on vocal function are secondary to this goal for the duration of this exercise.

During exercise one the student is engaged in the reality of doing. They should really be playing a game of imaginary catch. The focus given to the imaginary object by each participant makes the ball real enough for two people to interact with it in a shared fantasy. The external focus of the exercise develops the student's point of view. The student makes judgments about the imaginary object without verbal direction from the instructor. Truthfulness is also practiced non-verbally. The physics of the ball flying through the air is either believable or not by all parties engaged in the exercise.

Adaptations of the throwing and catching game:

- Begin with a real ball to jog the imagination through realistic physics<sup>120</sup>
- Separate the throwing and catching game from the vocal task until the student can maintain focus on the imaginary object
- Modify the musical exercise to add or subtract complexity, challenging the student's focus on the imaginary ball

### Exercise two

The student's objective in exercise two is to maintain focus on an imaginary object while changing it, observing it being changed, and vocalizing. The student must master exercise one prior to beginning exercise two. In this exercise either

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<sup>120</sup> This adaptation is highly encouraged. A crumpled piece of paper will suffice. Students need to experience a real game of catch before they can imagine one, some students may have limited experiences playing catch. This step is included as an adaptation to avoid confusion with the sequencing of partners.

participant can change the weight, size, and shape of the imaginary object after catching it, and either participant can create the object to begin the exercise. These are the only changes in procedure from exercise one.

What the voice instructor should watch for and discourage:

- Glazed eyes and other visual cues denoting a change in focus, i.e. thinking rather than doing
- Physical action synchronized to musical exercise
- Student changing focus from the ball to the theater of the exercise

What the voice instructor should watch for and encourage:

- Student imagining only the ball; everything else in the room exists as it is
- Vocal production free and separate from catching and throwing
- Improvised interaction with the imaginary object

After the objectives of exercise two have been explained to the student the instructor creates an imaginary object and tosses it to the student. When the student tosses the imaginary object back, the instructor modifies the shape, weight, and/or structure of the imaginary object before continuing the game of catch. The instructor non-verbally indicates that the student can also modify the object before tossing it back. In subsequent sessions modification does not have to occur on each receipt of the imaginary object. The vocal task continues as in exercise one.

During exercise two the student is engaged in the reality of doing, just like in exercise one. The student's biggest hurdles in this exercise are avoiding pre-planning when the instructor is in control of the imaginary object and losing focus when they are changing the imaginary object. The student must at all times be fully engaged in the imaginary game of catch, not thinking about what they are going to do next with the imaginary object. Point of view and truthfulness are further explored in this exercise. The student's point of view is his or her reality. For example, the instructor may believe they are flattening the imaginary object into a

pancake, but the student's point of view is that the instructor is making a hamburger patty. The truthfulness of each participant's interaction with the imaginary object is dependent on his or her own point of view.

Adaptations of the changed object throw and catch game:

Separate the exercises of catch and lip buzzing until both are maintained individually, combine when the student can maintain focus

Modify the musical exercise to add or subtract complexity, changing the difficulty of maintaining focus on the imaginary ball

### Exercise three

The student's objective in exercise three is to either verbalize or vocalize descriptions of the imaginary object. This exercise builds upon mastery of the previous two exercises. Description of the imaginary object is made using each of the student's available senses; sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste beginning with one-word vocalizations. The one-word description is vocalized on a warm-up exercise with the imaginary object being held in the student's hands. The imaginary object can later be placed in different locations inside the studio to further develop wider circles of attention and greater description of the fantasy world inside of which the imaginary object exists.

When the imaginary object is in the student's hands and being described it is the "object of attention." When the imaginary object is on the piano and the student describes what else is on the piano they are describing a small circle of attention. This circle can be widened to include the studio, the building, the city block, or further. Small, medium, large and very large circles of attention exist in both reality and the singer's imagination at the same time. The improvisational component of



description will serve the student in further adaptations of repetition exercises and must be mastered before moving on to the physical partner.

What the voice instructor should watch for and discourage:

Glazed eyes and other visual cues denoting a change in focus, i.e.  
thinking rather than doing

Student changing focus from the object of attention to the theater of the exercise

What the voice instructor should watch for and encourage:

Intuition

Vocal production free and separate from internal critique

Changing external focus in line with changes in the circle of attention

The instructor explains the objectives of exercise three to the student. The instructor can maintain the tempo by leading the vocal task with fricative/non-vowel sounds as before with the student replacing the fricative/non-vowel sound with a one-word descriptor on the same musical phrase. Exercise three should be prepared by a few exchanges of exercise two where the student creates and manipulates their imaginary object, maintaining focus on it while vocalizing. Once exercise three begins the student holds onto the imaginary object throughout the exercise, and does not toss it back to the instructor. The musical regularity from the previous exercises is intended to keep the tempo of this exercise moving forward, promoting intuition and immediate response.

During exercise three the student is engaged in the reality of doing by really describing what they imagine to exist in his or her hands. The truthfulness of their descriptions will be entirely dependent on their point of view.

Adaptations of the changed object throw and catch game:

One-word descriptions developed into full sentences

Warm-up pattern (notes and rhythm) developed into improvisation

A group object, where each partner describes one facet of the object, allowing each statement to be true

Developing the circles of attention by placing the imaginary object  
down on the piano or elsewhere in the studio

Sample lesson - imaginary object

It is fall, the beginning of a new semester. George, new college freshman and music major, shows up to his voice lesson. George is a young baritone who has three years of voice study under his belt through his high school choir teacher. This is his first semester of academic voice lessons. George is a vocal performance major. George's music literacy is developing; his music theory placement test identified a lot of "room for growth." His sight-reading skills are poor, but in his audition he displayed a lot of musical sensitivity. He has a positive, affable, demeanor and has expressed a love of singing.

Initial assessments of literacy, range, and experience are taken. George has had high school theater experience as well as musical and competitive show choir experiences. You observe that George focuses internally during the range-finding exercises and offers excuses about tone and range, which he is not satisfied with, during the first lesson.

At the second lesson you begin with exercise one as described above, the simple throw and catch game connected to a warm-up exercise. Due to tongue tension a moving musical exercise on an "NG" [ŋ] is modeled which George repeats. George easily slips into the "throw and catch" game and is able to maintain focus on the imaginary object, but the musical exercise suffers. After about 30 seconds of this exercise it is obvious that George is fully invested in the imaginary play and not invested in the musical repetition. When George throws the ball back you keep it,

gently tossing it up and catching it in the same hand, as you model the [ŋ] musical portion of the exercise in tempo with non-verbal queues as to the corrections. When understanding and attempted correction is noticed you throw the imaginary ball back to George and continue the exercise. You notice that while you were tossing the “ball” in one hand George kept his eyes on it in a stance ready to catch it.

Further exercises to release tongue tension and move from the [ŋ] into vowels continue in common vocal pedagogy format, leaving the imaginary object aside. At the end of the lesson you ask George to journal about the lesson and keep his normal practice journal of observations.<sup>121</sup>

This first exercise begins each lesson for a few weeks. Once the multi-level focus between the imaginary object and musical exercise has been mastered the second exercise can begin. You flatten the imaginary object out on the piano lid, tearing off the excess. You then fold it into a paper airplane and float it to George. He grabs it clumsily out of the air, smashing it. Without thinking he finishes crumpling it up and tosses the crumpled ball back to you underhanded. At this point you know he will have no problem in the imaginative arena. You observed that George was shocked when you flattened the ball, and was enjoying the change in the exercise. He took pleasure in the destruction of your airplane, to the extent that the emotional components of the imaginary world impacted his musical exercise in tone, tempo, and quality of breath intake. George is not over thinking, but his vocal technique was modified by his emotional response.

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<sup>121</sup> Any journaling method will work. This hypothetical institution has electronic classrooms set up for each course. Students can log in and post their journal entries online to be viewed by the rest of the class, and can leave responses to each other as well.

Retaining George's intuitive responses while separating the response from his vocal apparatus requires an adaptation of the second exercise. After the exercise is over you ask George if he noticed any vocal changes related to the change in the exercise. He relates that he didn't feel like he had enough breath for the phrase. You ask George if he thinks the change in his breath support is related to the changes made to the imaginary object. You guide George to the realization that his intuitive response to the change of the imaginary object was correct, but that his reaction cannot impede efficient production of sound. This can be understood in a day, but the ability to do it takes George several weeks.

George indicates through his shared journaling that he is losing interest in the "throw and catch" game. The pressure of memorizing pieces for his first jury is his primary concern and is occupying the largest part of his recent journal entries. Two lessons before George's jury you know he is secure, his accompanist is attending this lesson and their musical ensemble is fairly solid, if immature, and his memory and diction are appropriate to his level. Throughout the lessons his music literacy has been developing nicely. You lean over the staff accompanist who is familiar with how you work with students and let them know what you are about to do. They begin George's first jury selection and you immediately begin exercise one. The accompanist continues to play the introduction and George misses his entrance. You stop and have them begin again, after making sure George has verbalized when and where he enters musically. You begin exercise one during the introduction, moving on to exercise two after he has entered correctly. After the piece is over, you hold onto and destroy the imaginary object. You address the musical and technical

issues that occurred and ask George what he noticed, physically, relative to the introduction of the exercise into his performance.

The goal of introducing exercise one into a near-performance situation is to allow George, however slowly, to realize that imaginary objects should exist in song and not just warm-ups. Some students have made this connection without direction, but George has been reluctant to change any aspect of this work with song in fear that it will negatively impact his vocal technique. By throwing George an imaginary ball during his performance inside the safety of the private studio you forced him to experience the idea that the exercise could be applied to performance.

You start exercise three in the second semester. You explain it to George as stated in the description of the exercise. After warming up with exercise one and two the game of toss and catch is ended. George's excess tongue tension has responded well to the [ŋ] repetition last semester, and at the first lesson of the second semester does not seem to have reappeared. As this exercise will involve text you decide to focus on clarity of tone and legato connection. The choice of a descending slide from "sol" to "do" will allow that aspect of vocal technique to be addressed, it also fits the length of many one-word descriptions.

George begins by holding onto the imaginary object with both hands, staring at it, and obviously thinking about which attribute he wants to verbalize. His imagination is running wild and it is clear that his focus is divided between the imaginary object in his hands and the responses he is deciding between. Stopping George before he begins will be detrimental. You allow him to take the time he needs to produce an observation. Once it is made you ask him if that was the first

thing he noticed. You encourage him to blurt out the first thing he notices about the object. This proves to be very difficult for him, and not something you expected given his facility with exercises one and two. You decide to start with descriptions of physical objects to enable easier shared observation, and non-mutable “creative” inventions.

Hiding what you are doing from George you pull out a red gala apple from your lunch and hide it beneath a scarf on the piano. You let George know that the object you want him to describe is under the scarf. You remove the scarf and George immediately sings the word “red” down the fifth. Continuing on this success you toss the apple to George who catches it and sings “light” down the fifth.

You stop the exercise and ask George to think about why these descriptions came out easier with the physical object. You then ask George to explain where his focus went when he sang “light.” George shares that when he sang “light” he was trying to describe the weight of the apple when he caught it, but as soon as he started singing the word he wasn’t sure that “light” was going to be understood as relating to weight. You ask George to think about which is more important; for his description to make sense to his audience or for the description to make sense to him? If the object were to only exist in his imagination, would the sense of his description be important? In this initial session you continue with the apple, guiding George to smell it, thump it with his finger, and taste it to promote truthful reactions. From the previous semester’s work with George you know he is highly visual, so you guide his exploration of the rest of his senses.

After a few weeks of working with physical objects during the warm-up portion of the lessons George is able to maintain focus on them while describing them. He blurts out descriptions quickly, which have become gradually more specific and thankfully not repetitive and predictable. You direct George back to imaginary objects for exercise three. He quickly finds success and starts using more than one-word descriptions. You adjust the musical exercise to fit George's technical needs based on the literature he is working on. By lengthening the musical exercise you not only address the needs of George's vocal technique but have also made it easier for George to make multi-word descriptions. You point out this opportunity and encourage George to make a full sentence inside exercise three. By the end of the semester George is able to maintain focus on the imaginary object when placed in various positions around the studio. He can describe imaginary objects existent in his song literature, and he has found success changing focus from one imaginary object to another. By the second semester jury George is adapting exercise three to a jury selection. Vocal technique and imagination are developing in tandem.

### **The physical partner**

Physical awareness in the voice studio is usually focused internally. Collegiate singers have, generally, spent a lot of time and practice developing awareness of their breathing, physical tensions, and the physical coordination involved in singing. Traditionally, a student's work has been to practice the target physical coordination and develop muscle memory as guided by his voice teacher. The target coordination requires thousands of accurate repetitions before it becomes second nature to the student. The way in which the coordination is

repeated has a large impact on the transferability of the coordination to performance circumstances.<sup>122</sup>

The frequency and quality of feedback can have an impact on a singer's skill retention.<sup>123</sup> While some results of Lynn Maxfield's most recent study were mixed he did find a significant trend regarding application of low frequency feedback to students of varied performance ability.

... subjects with higher levels of performance ability responded more positively to lower relative feedback frequency instruction conditions, while subjects with lower levels of performance appeared to respond negatively to lower relative feedback frequency instruction conditions.<sup>124</sup>

For voice teachers to develop their student's awareness of others, their student must have certain basic coordinations in their muscle memory. Singers never fully master the physical coordination of singing; as their bodies change and grow their coordinations must be continually relearned. Studies like Maxfield's, which address application of motor-learning theory in the voice studio, are very important. The faster and more accurately singers learn/relearn physical coordination, the faster they can move their attention from their own internal physical sensations to the physical world around them.

During a song recital, the singer usually has a physical partner at the piano. These exercises can be useful to open the singer up to engaging with that partner,

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<sup>122</sup> Richard Schmidt and Timothy Lee, *Motor Learning and Performance: From Principles to Practice* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books 1991), 178.

<sup>123</sup> Lynn Milo Maxfield, "Application of principles from motor-learning theory to the studio voice lesson: effects of feedback frequency on retention of classical singing technique" (PhD. diss., University of Iowa, 2011), 137, ProQuest 3461195.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.



and also encourages the accompanist to engage with the singer. The collaboration between singer and pianist is frequently unbalanced because one partner will be more perceptive than the other and will dominate the relationship. The exercises should be taken slowly to allow the less perceptive member of the collaboration to develop their skill.

Each exercise below focuses on a specific goal coordinated with vocal production: (1) Make spontaneous observations of a physical partner, and (2) allow the observations made by their physical partner to affect them. Exercise one details the physical partner exercise inside the voice seminar or group lesson format. Exercise two details the physical partner exercise inside the accompanied lesson.

#### Exercise one

The student's objective in exercise one is to spontaneously vocalize observations of an external physical partner through the act of singing. The coordination of singing is not static; this exercise is intended to allow those subtle changes in singing coordination to occur. The voice seminar or group lesson is the most appropriate place to first introduce this partnership, but a lower-stakes exercise can be adapted to the accompanied lesson to prepare shy students for work in the voice seminar or group setting. Student readiness for work with a physical partner includes evaluation of his or her temperament in addition to mastery of the imaginary object exercises. It is also important to evaluate the natural sensibilities of the accompanist. Some accompanists may not be used to the attention that will be described in exercise two.

What the voice instructor should watch for and discourage:

- Glazed eyes, indicating internal focus
- Readings as described at the beginning of this chapter
- Vocal readings apparent in seemingly cognitive tone-color choices

What the voice instructor should watch for and encourage:

- Truthful exchanges
- Vocal efficiency without cognitive control

This exercise is directed specifically at sophomores who have demonstrated mastery of the imaginary object, but it is introduced in the voice seminar or voice class where the entire studio meets. The instructor selects pairings of sophomores so they can practice throughout the week on their own. The seniors and juniors will already have been paired up from the previous semesters, leaving only the selection of pairing for sophomores and freshmen. The freshmen are paired up for exposure to the exercise in the seminar, but not for weekly practice. Groups of three are possible, with only two being active participants at a time. The freshmen will glimpse what their future holds next year, the sophomores will begin their study of these exercises, the juniors will refocus on the goals of the exercise, and the seniors can demonstrate the exercise.

Have one pairing of seniors face each other about three feet apart to demonstrate how the exercise works. Partner one sings a physical observation of partner two, who repeats that observation, also sung. The singing component adds an extra layer of complexity to the repetition exercise, but is necessary to make this exercise applicable to the students' activity. With this higher starting difficulty it should be explained to the singers that achieving one or two honest repetitions over the first few hours of work should be seen as a triumph.

Singing the observation adds a sense of theatricality that will require special attention. If students do not have the imaginative juice to come up with their own pitches try playing a descending minor third in a comfortable range from the keyboard to get the ball rolling. It is important not to direct the students toward theatricality at this stage; this will shift their focus from their partner to the quality of their response. Directions such as “sing it like recitative” or “croon it” also changes their focus from their partner to the quality of their singing. Instead, make sure their focus is on their partner and reinforce the idea that quality of sound is not the goal.

The instructor should watch out for things that deter the partners from focusing on each other and repeating exactly what each partner sings. Many students will copy previous examples, either by choosing the same observations, pitches, rhythms, or all three. The instructor should point out that this is just their reading of a previous occurrence and not a true observation of their partner.

Standardization of rhythm will happen as the students begin to think of the repetition as cycles, but changes in focus for the sake of variety need to be addressed immediately. Pitch matching is not necessary, although most students will match or displace at the octave when female/male pairs attempt the exercise. However, just like rhythm, changes in pitch for sake of variation should be noted as readings.

Each partner should have a few chances to begin the exercise and multiple pairs can work at once after everyone understands the basic rules. Before the end of the studio class the goals should be reviewed with the students so they know what

to work toward in their partnered practice through the week. It should also be shared that this is just one step in the process. Shared journaling or blogging about their work throughout the week can be an efficient way for the students to make note of successes and develop dialog about the activities, it can also be an efficient way for the instructor to note the pace at which individual students are progressing.

During this exercise students are engaged in the reality of doing when they are truly observing their partner and repeating what is sung. Students explore point of view by stating their observations of their partners. For example, if partner one observes that partner two has red hair that is partner one's point of view regardless of whether or not partner two believes their hair really is red. Truthfulness is related to point of view in this exercise. If partner two, to extend the previous example, has dark black hair partner one's observation would have been untrue. At the beginning it is hard enough to be truthful, so that should be the expectation.

Adaptations of the sung mechanical repetition exercise:

Begin with one-word *spoken* repetition<sup>125</sup>

Explore pairing combinations

Explore point of view and truthfulness further by adding "you have..." and "I have..." to the observations and repetitions

Explore truthfulness further by allowing negations of perceived untrue observations

### Exercise two

The student's objective in exercise two is to be affected by the observations made by their physical partner. This exercise transitions the student from the imaginary object to a physical partner. To allow transfer of motor learning tasks the transition should change as few components as possible in graduated difficulty. The

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<sup>125</sup> This adaptation is highly suggested.

transition begins with a physical object and ends with a physical partner. At the end of the transition it is advisable that the physical partner be the singer's musical collaborator, their accompanist.

Transition from an imaginary object to a physical object can begin simply by replacing the imagined object with its physical counterpart. The student continues exercise three from the imaginary object section above with the physical object. The objects, however, are replaced frequently and are dictated by the instructor. The first level of object is static and unchanging (i.e. a ball at rest, a painting, etc.) The intermediate level of object is alive or moving (i.e. a rabbit, a cloud, etc.) The final level is a real physical partner who affects, and is affected by, the student.

What the voice instructor should watch for and discourage:

- Thinking about their changes, the focus should always be on the object
- Changing focus
- Forced comedic descriptions

What the voice instructor should watch for and encourage:

- External focus
- Maintenance of motor tasks
- Accurate descriptions

This exercise follows the hybrid protocol of exercise three in the imaginary object section and exercise one of the physical partner. The differences are that the instructor (rather than the student) chooses the objects, and repetition is only feasible with partners and not objects. The objects are chosen based on their difficulty as observed to be appropriately challenging for the student. If the student is having difficulty with the motor task, the physical object should be chosen from the easier category of inanimate objects. Advanced students who have more than the basic physical vocal coordinations in place may be capable of moving directly

from the imaginary object to “working off” their accompanist, also known as their collaborator.

When the singer/pianist pair are working off each other this exercise bridges the gap between “physical partner – exercise one” and “musical partner – exercise one.” The pianist can sing their responses or play them as best fits the needs of those involved. When this exercise is employed in a singer/singer combination, for example in preparation for duet and small ensemble work, exercise two is a direct copy of exercise one. Exercise one is a better choice than exercise two when the goal is to prepare the singer for responsiveness to their audience.

During all levels of exercise two the student is engaged in the reality of doing when focus is maintained on the physical partner. In exercise two, the student’s point of view and truthfulness are explored in ways similar to exercise one.

Adaptations of the physical partner one-word description exercise:  
 One-word descriptions developed into full sentences  
 Warm-up pattern (notes and rhythm) developed into improvisation  
 Ramp up the difficulty of both components, complex motor tasks paired with physical and behavioral observations of the partner

#### Sample lesson – physical partner

It is Allison’s sophomore year of college, fall semester. She and George both started studying in your studio last year. George, now a sophomore, is still pursuing a vocal performance degree. Allison is pursuing music education with voice being her primary instrument. Allison took one year of private voice study prior to college. Last year she developed an understanding of support and was working toward clear, less breathy, tone. Allison, being a music education major, has one half-hour lesson

each week. Her accompanist comes only when specifically scheduled and paid for by the student.

Both George and Allison had similar experiences and successes with the imaginary object exercises in their freshman year, so you decide to pair them for partner work. Both Allison and George witnessed the introduction of these partnered exercises last year as freshmen, and attempted them in the seminar. The introduction to exercise one is given as described in its subsection above. Both Allison and George make use of the online space devoted to the studio class to share their observations with the rest of the class each week. Students are encouraged to comment privately and publically to each other on these posted journals.

Allison worked through the imaginary object exercises last year much more quickly than George. In Allison's private lessons you begin physical partner exercise two immediately. Transferring from an imaginary ball to a physical ball goes smoothly. Allison's vocal technique is not impeded by the introduction of the physical object. You have an external window in your studio through which Allison can see the outdoors; trees and clouds, and other objects that change. Allison's ability to describe non-responsive changing objects without negative impact on her vocal technique is as good as the previous level of non-responsive concrete objects. To test Allison's limits you ask her to schedule her accompanist for the next lesson. The same accompanist plays for both Allison and George and has worked through these exercises in your studio before. Early in the semester Allison is already able to vocalize descriptions of her accompanist whose reactions change her, but there is some negative impact on the execution of the vocal motor tasks involved.

While Allison's ability at spontaneous description and perception are high, her vocal motor skills are less developed. To facilitate improvement of these skills you reduce the difficulty of exercise two, shifting back to the first level of unchanging physical objects. A majority of Allison's lesson time is spent on internal focus and development of physical awareness to build the muscle memory of the required vocal motor tasks.

You decide that an appropriate lesson format for Allison is to work on motor skills first before concentrated development of exercise two continues. You encourage both Allison's private practice and dual practice sessions with George. Not only does this facilitate their practice of exercise one, they each have strength to the other's weakness. George will have a physical partner present who is highly capable at exercise two, and Allison will have outside eyes and ears to help direct attention to her vocal motor tasks.

This pairing works well through the year. Repetition exercises do not happen at each week's seminar, but occasionally you call for a random pair to work in front of the class. George and Allison, when observing, always have insightful comments to add to their peer's work, and when it is their turn George shows steady improvement in description and Allison shows steady improvement in consistent motor tasks separate from accurate description.

By the end of Allison's sophomore year the physical technique is developing nicely, and has not internalized her spontaneity. During the spring semester she developed enough of the mechanical muscle memory to begin to expand exercise two to descriptions of her accompanist. She sings Samuel Barber's "The Daisies" at



her spring jury and is able to create her imaginary “lover” in rich detail for the panel, and recognize the impact this description has on her imaginary “lover” as well as notice the impact her description has on the jury panel. Allison is now ready to explore the musical partner.

### **The musical partner**

Identification of the musical partner has been a focus of vocal pedagogy for generations, if not identified specifically as such. Many voice teachers attempt to develop their student’s musicality through exposure to varied musical literature and through coaching at the piano. My approach supplies one more avenue for exploring musical growth inside the voice studio. After mastering the exercises in the imaginary object and physical partner/object sections, pianists and singers can pair up to explore repetition in these musical partner exercises.

In these exercises the partner is the music, as it is shared between the two musicians. Where the objects and partners in the previous sections were external, so the music should also be imagined to be external. Aural perception and vocal or keyboard responsiveness are the goals. If the vocalist doesn’t develop the ability to respond to the sound in the air, they cannot go further in developing the role after this basic responsiveness is awakened.

Musical style is learned through a creative process. To this end the musical improvisation books by Jeffrey Agrell are worth mentioning.<sup>126,127</sup> Musical

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<sup>126</sup> Jeffrey Agrell, *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2008).

<sup>127</sup> Jeffrey Agrell, *Improv Games for One Player: A Very Concise Collection of Musical Games for One Classical Musician* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2010).

improvisation is too large a topic to discuss fully in the scope of adapting the repetition exercise to the voice studio, but improvisation is unavoidable in the repetition exercise. The spontaneity required in the previous exercises has laid the improvisational groundwork for musical improvisation in this final section.

Two exercises are presented in this section: A musical repetition exercise between two musicians (singer/pianist or singer/singer), and a musical repetition exercise for one musician.<sup>128</sup> The physical and imaginary object exercises have prepared the participants to maintain external focus alone and in collaborative systems. The musical partner exercises coordinate two goals with vocal production: (1) Group description of a musical partner, and (2) solo description of a musical partner.

#### Exercise one

The student's objective in exercise one is to focus on the musical partner in collaboration with their accompanist. The two-musician exercise builds on the external focus developed in the physical partner exercises. However, the external focus is moved from the physical partner to the aural event shared between them. Sequencing of this musical partner exercise occurs after the student is able to maintain motor-skill coordination at the highest level of physical partner exercise two.

What the voice instructor should watch for and discourage:

Musical apathy

A sense of correctness or propriety... balanced against

A neglect of the basic rules of the exercise

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<sup>128</sup> Separating the exercises between one player and two players follows Agrell's structure in his publications, and places the focus on the music as a separate partner both in collaboration and alone.

What the voice instructor should watch for and encourage:

Evidence of play outside the studio

Lively repetitions pushing the limits of the exercise... balanced against

Strict adherence to the set rules of the exercise

Description of the rules and expectations of the exercise should be shared with all participants prior to beginning. The musicians will begin as if it were a basic repetition exercise. However, rather than focusing on each other they focus on the aural event. Just like the basic repetition exercise change comes from natural occurrences and truthful description rather than conscious readings. Articulation, pitch, rhythm, tempo and words or consonant/vowel collections (if they are part of the exercise) are all repeated to best ability of each musician.

The musicians may benefit from closing their eyes if visual stimulus impedes their ability to focus on the musical partner. In singer/pianist combinations it may be beneficial to have the pianist first improvise the motif if they are unable to easily find the sung pitches of the singer. Singer/singer combinations will repeat vowel/consonant iterations after they have been created. The words or sounds that are chosen should describe the musical motif.

In exercise one the student is engaged in the reality of doing when focused on the ensemble task of accurately repeating the musical partner. Within the ensemble the student shares their truthful description of the musical partner, addressing truthfulness and point of view. Untruthful responses will sound hesitant, pre-planned, or apathetic.

Adaptations of the two-musician musical repetition exercise:

Technical modification of the motif – the individual musical components

that can be modified as defined by Agrell are, “mode change, ornamentation, transposition, sequence, subtraction, addition, augmentation, diminution, retrograde, inversion, or displacement.”<sup>129</sup> Motivic material in the repertoire can be excerpted and used as source material for the exercise

### Exercise two

The student’s objective in exercise two is to focus on the musical partner in a solo situation. The one-musician exercise builds on the external focus developed in the imaginary object exercises. The student focuses on repeating a musical phrase (a simple ostinato pattern is used as an example) as authentically as he can. In the imaginary object exercises, the partner existed in the student’s imagination but was endowed with space/weight/shape by the student’s external focus. The student endows the musical partner with properties that can then affect them.

Jeffrey Agrell’s “Glassy Arpeggios” game, in *Improv Games for One Player*, serves as a point of departure for this second musical partner exercise:

Minimalist composers such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich repeat arpeggio patterns (usually a string of eighth or sixteenth notes – this is easier on some instruments than others) over and over, occasionally introducing small changes in the pattern.

1. Invent an interesting arpeggio pattern and repeat it. And repeat it. And repeat it.
2. At some point – perhaps a minute or two or three later – change something (one note).
3. Keep going with the new pattern. Keep the tempo, keep your focus.
4. Continue in this manner until you are playing an entirely new arpeggio, or until it’s time for dinner, whichever comes first.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Agrell, *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians*, 50-52.

<sup>130</sup> Agrell, *Improv Games for One Player*, 17.

The basic outline of Agrell's exercise will remain, but the rules of the repetition exercise will be inserted. In the second step of Agrell's exercise, change must come from something that first exists in the musical partner, not something from the mind of the student. Step three does not require a specific focus on tempo; tempo could be the musical component that the student noticed as having changed in the musical partner. Step four remains as Agrell wrote it.

What the voice instructor should watch for and discourage:

Thinking about their changes, the focus should always be on the musical object

Forced comedic responses, related to thinking about the changes

Repetition of unproductive motor skills

What the voice instructor should watch for and encourage:

Evidence of play outside the studio

Authentic, unforced, instinctual responses

Exercise two begins with the creation of a musical pattern; an ostinato pattern will serve for an example. Transference of skills from the imaginary object to the musical partner should begin inside the voice studio, taking no more than 5 minutes of lesson time to have the student explore the repetition and assign it for private practice. The main difference between exercise one and exercise two is that during exercise one the musical partner exists when the student is not singing, during exercise two the student is focusing on the musical partner *while* they are singing.

In exercise two the student is engaged in the reality of doing and expressing their point of view truthfully in much the same way as in exercise one. The level of difficulty, however, is higher for each of these components. The difficulty comes from working alone. The student has to be honest about his own actions, but not

hypercritical. When the student is truly engaged in this exercise it presents as externally focused, musical, daydreaming.

Adaptations of the one-musician ostinato-based exercise:

Responding musically to recorded music

Use of text and extended techniques for the vocalist

Musical styles as defining parameters of the responses

Self recording and looping under further improvisations

Exploration of this exercise on a secondary instrument

#### Sample lesson – musical partner

It is the fall semester of Allison's senior year. She presented a degree half-recital last spring as a junior, and is planning on presenting a non-degree full-length recital this coming spring. Her vocal technique is developing alongside her ability to work off imaginary and physical partners. Allison's weakest area is sharing her vivid musical imagination. Allison had great success between her sophomore year and senior year working through the highest levels of the physical partner exercises. The removal of those filters will now just be transferred to her definitions of musical style and appropriateness.

Allison's music education degree program has introduced her to many ostinato patterns and call and response formatted games. In her accompanied individual lesson you describe the next step of the partnered exercises. Exercise one is introduced as a call and response game between her and her accompanist where each response acts as the "call" for the response the other provides, basically, no one is the leader after the repetition is begun. You choose two-bars of motivic material from Allison's junior recital. This forces Allison to reimagine material that may at first seem familiar, but in repetition begins to sound foreign. The direction to repeat

exactly what she hears endows the musical partner (the selected motivic material) with musical components not existing in Allison's past performance of that material. Allison's physical motor skills gradually change over the course of the repetitions; you keep an eye on these changes so that Allison doesn't develop unproductive motor skills.

Allison has been developing her musicality over the past three years, but it is apparent that she is scared of sharing all of her musical creativity due to the amount of correction required in the training of her vocal technique. You introduce exercise two as a respite from "classical vocal technique." This is not a method of introduction necessary for all students, but given Allison's proclivity for following rules this seems like the best tactic to help her embrace her innate musicality.

You introduce exercise two as an improvisation exercise using Agrell's book.<sup>131</sup> Allison's familiarity with the imaginary and physical partner exercises allows you to adapt Agrell's "Glassy Arpeggio" game along the lines of a repetition exercise. By initially freeing her sound making from the structure of "classical technique" Allison easily vocalizes a simple ostinato (î, ê, ô, ê, î, ê, ô, ê...) on scat syllables. Allison's issue is that she repeats an idealized ostinato rather than the ostinato she just sang. Whenever a change occurs she "corrects" it on the repetition by trying to align it back to the original concept of the ostinato. She was able to do exercise one very well and work off the musical changes when collaborating with her accompanist but is having trouble transferring her perceptive abilities to patterns she is responsible for creating and observing simultaneously. You discuss

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

this with Allison inside her private lesson and she verbalizes her understanding of the goals of exercise two, so you present her with an adaptation for her individual practice.

Allison has basic piano skills so you ask her to try this individual ostinato exercise in the practice room using the piano. This forced externalization allows her to focus on the musical nuances of each repetition. From this success, as shared in her practice journal, you ask her to add singing to the exercise. Playing the ostinato at the piano, singing its repetition, then playing the next repetition and continuing by alternating between playing and singing. From this intermediate step the move to singing each repetition is a small one.

In Allison's recital repertoire this exercise helps her lift the music from the page and make it feel improvisatory. Allison's musical sensitivity (and spontaneity) develops in ensemble with her accompanist and alone through application of these exercises.



## CHAPTER IV

### FUTURE RESEARCH

Adapting Meisner's repetition exercises to the voice studio is just the beginning. The repetition exercise is just a piece of the actor's work on the "self," a highly "natural" component of the technique and not the entirety of the technique.<sup>132</sup> There is even more to the work on the "self" than the repetition exercise addresses. Further research into "preparation" might reveal another component of Meisner's technique that would be beneficial to the recitalist. This is the point at which repertoire can be addressed. The second half of Meisner's technique, work on the "role," is already a large part of a musician's curriculum. The study of music history and theory are foundations for a singer's study of the "role" as applied to recital song literature. The primary question for further study will be finding which components of Meisner's work on the "role" are missing from the current curriculum and how to fill that gap if it exists.

#### **Continued adaptation of Meisner technique**

One interesting piece of future research will be exploring Meisner's view that editorial markings in scripts should be crossed out and how far that might relate to editorial markings in musical scores, if it is transferable at all. The composer's reading of the poetry is set compositionally in speed, duration, and pitch that combine to form musical structure, harmony, melody, etc. The composer's reading

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<sup>132</sup> Work on the "self" and work on the "role" are Stanislavski-based pedagogical terms identified in chapter 2. The first year of Meisner's work focused on the behavioral instrument of the student, the "self." The second year of Meisner's work focused on applying that instrument to scripts, working on the "role." In the world of the voice studio this work on the "self" will take longer than a year due to different curricular demands between music and theater.

of the poem is just one layer a singer must incorporate into his or her own point of view. Is a composer's intent still relevant in modern performance? Is a composer's intent reliant on editorial markings? Can harmonic and textural elements provide insight into preparation of the "role"?

There is also a place for further study on improvisation games in the voice studio as presented by Agrell. As long as focus on external partners is not lost in the equally important process of technical development. These games present an already existing bridge between the classical musician and theatrical improvisation. Agrell's publishers have promised more books in the series.

Another area of future study to further adapt Meisner's work into the voice studio would be looking at the suitability of "classical" texts in Meisner's technique.<sup>133</sup> As a majority of song texts are based on classical poetic forms any publication from the field of acting pedagogy relating to this area should be reviewed. The chapter from Meisner's book where he presents poems for study when working on the role will be very important for further study.

The subject of preparation will likely be the largest, and most interesting, area for future study. Vocal recitalists may sing 25 songs on a recital, each as a different character. The recitalist will likely stay on stage and only allow enough aesthetic space between songs as is appropriate to the musical set. Is there a way to adapt "knock at the door" exercises into the voice studio? Will they be helpful?

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<sup>133</sup> A suggested source to begin research in this area is Catherine Weate's, *Classical Voice: Working with Actors on Vocal Style* (London: Oberon Books), 2009. Further research into the work of William Esper is also suggested.

### Curricular issues revisited

Music literacy is certainly *the* starting point for collegiate singers. Technical instruction on their musical or behavioral instrument relies first on basic fluency in common musical language. After that, the student's imagination needs to take over both musically and poetically. Students without the instinct to work imaginatively need exposure to vocal artists engaged in play. Future research into the most efficient ensemble settings for the development of imaginative musicians and their growth through performance situations should be pursued.

If musical communication maps mimic existing communication transmission maps the transmission of a message can be impacted by the "noise" around the signal, a young singer's message will be swallowed up by the "noise" around their transmission. As a curricular device for voice training it may be helpful for young singers to focus on small ensembles (quartets, trios) coached, but not directed, by faculty.

Vocal pedagogy and a singer's collegiate curriculum may also benefit from further investigation of motor learning theory. Schmidt and Lee, in their textbook *Motor Learning and Performance*, mention a correlation between motor and cognitive tasks inside a discussion of task classification.

In highly cognitive skills (e.g., chess or coaching), high arousal levels are detrimental for performance, and probably for learning as well. With very motor skills (e.g., weight lifting), where the premium is on producing movement patterns with little decision making, higher arousal levels are tolerable, and very high levels may even be beneficial. In addition, in skills with strong cognitive elements, instruction focuses mainly on how to make the decisions, often with emphasis on minimizing errors and maximizing speed. With motor

skills, though, the emphasis is more on movement control and response production.<sup>134</sup>

Singer training involves both cognitive and motor task training, requiring both types of instruction mentioned in the quotation. Singing also blends the line between a serial task and a continuous task. Serial tasks can be "... thought of as a set of discrete actions hooked together to form a serial chain."<sup>135</sup> Continuous tasks "... involve a series of ongoing modifications for feedback and motor control."<sup>136</sup> Curriculum and pedagogy guided by motor learning theory may be able to more efficiently train each type of task. The impact of arousal on task training is rooted in differentiating cognitive tasks from motor tasks; I believe there is room for more research in this area relating to acting pedagogy inside the voice studio.

Singing in non-native languages is an important area for future research relative to this topic. Foreign language introduction determined by curricular design rather than student readiness is a problem. Diction has been the solution to this problem, and while important, it does not solve the deeper problem of the singer being unfamiliar with the content of the language. As an example, Italian songs (with Italian texts) are common pedagogical tools to teach basic vocal technique due to the limited number of vowel sounds. This early exposure to a foreign language for American singers reinforces the idea that the words don't matter, or that general content ideas such as "this song is about love" suffice. The debate over language

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<sup>134</sup> Richard Schmidt and Timothy Lee, *Motor Learning and Performance: From Principles to Practice* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books 1991), 268.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

fluency and diction is not new to vocal pedagogy, but in light of the ideas presented in this essay I believe there is still more to discover.

Structured courses in improvisation and a strong collaborative arts program would be great additions to support further adaptation of Meisner's technique in the voice studio. Singing pedagogy should identify each instrument used in communication, and the curriculum should be supportive. The musical instrument, the behavioral instrument and the physical instrument are currently intertwined in the curriculum. The exercises presented in this essay serve to begin freeing the behavioral instrument inside the current curricular framework. If the framework were to change, the component instruments could be addressed even more specifically and combined with greater care.

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