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Taming the Text

By Randel Wagner

How valuable would it be to you as a teacher/performer to:

1. Never again feel panic when you step in front of an audience because of words
2. Never again experience the terror of being 'blank' just before the next phrase
3. Always experience the excitement of discovery every time you perform

Imagine that you are examining a piece of fabric. As you look closely at the material, you notice numerous fibers organized in criss-cross fashion. In the case of some fabrics the fibers are of different size, texture, and color.

Fabric supports our life from the beds we sleep on to the clothes we wear.

The process of working with text can be likened to creating a fabric. It is a weaving together of many threads into a material of varying strength, flexibility, and appearance. While practicing or learning words is an activity that everyone engages in, not all practice achieves desired results.

Each person has the opportunity and responsibility to create a unique fabric in the practice process. The next time you work with words try weaving in some of the following 'threads' if you are not already doing so.

Nine Text Threads:

1. ***Read the text for overview and general understanding***
2. ***Read the text again for unfamiliar words***
 - Look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary
 - If the word is in a foreign language
 - use IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) or phonetic notation of some kind to clarify pronunciation of all words
 - find native speaker of the particular language (record them speaking the text)
 - listen to recordings of other performances of the same song
 - travel to the country of origin
 - rent foreign films and listen to speech flow, style, and accents
3. ***Identify parts of speech*** - (verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs)
 - Find several synonyms for each word

- When you are confronted with a choice, choose the most ‘active’ word (synonym) - one that elicits the clearest, strongest emotion, image, taste, or sound.

4. Ask questions

Try the following activity (it is the most useful in a group setting) - Take a word or phrase of text. Start by saying the phrase (in this case we will use the phrase “green tree”). All are to ask as many questions as possible. **NO ONE IS TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS** - just notice what pops into your head. Here are some sample questions: What shade of green? What kind of tree? How tall? Evergreen or deciduous? How did the tree originate (planted, wind-blown seed, animal dropping, etc.)? Age? Health? Time of year? Location? What happens in the wind? Home to animals? What color do the leaves turn in fall? Fruit? Smooth or rough bark? Is it a flowering tree? What kind of sounds does this tree make? By practicing this exercise a wealth of images, sensations, and ideas become the property of the group (like an orchard with varieties of fruit). With the potential mass of ‘options’ of interpretation available, the actual performance can be like picking fruit from the orchard—”Let’s see...tonight I think I will pick this one...or that one”. On occasion, a totally new variety may appear.

5. Speak the text out of song rhythm as a poem or monologue.

Text that is learned only in the context of the music requires the musical context to retrieve it. An example of this is when someone is asked the words of a song and they start out well only to find that they have to run the song in their minds to recall all of the words.

6. Speak the text in song rhythm.

7. Speak the text and combine phrase endings with phrase beginnings

(“...at the twilight’s last gleaming whose broad stripes...”). Practice this linking by speaking the first words of the next phrase as if it were a continuation of the present phrase. This process becomes more helpful when there is a dramatic change of text content, when the text is strophic, and when there is a complex interlude or difficult entrance that requires singers to focus primarily on the music.

8. Write out the words.

Speak the words while writing them out. By following this process one combines the three pathways of learning—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

9. *Try memorizing the text before learning a single note of the music.*

This suggestion requires discipline. I find it particularly useful in that it follows the path of the composer. Most composers work from text to music. By learning the text first the singers retrace the composer's creative pathway.

If you have not tried learning the text first, I suggest experimenting with this approach. Take two similar pieces and teach them side by side in two different ways. My experience is that the time it takes to learn a piece can be shortened by learning the text first. It does take discipline, however.

Practice is probably the most important aspect of becoming a successful musician. The preceding ideas will make a difference in your practice by connecting you to your own unique creativity and will bring out the uniqueness of an ensemble.

When planning the next rehearsal, consider the composition of fabric. Each piece of information and/or activity constitutes a thread. Clarity of thought translates to strength of fiber—the clearer the thinking the stronger the fabric.

A strong fabric will bear much weight without tearing. If you take the time and make the effort to go through these steps, the result can be a very solid, comfortable, and intimate knowledge of the text. Increased knowledge engenders confidence and when singers are confident there is no fear.

If you have additional ideas to share about working with text, please e-mail me at rwagner@mail.ewu.edu.