

How do you learn your music?

Lindley Gram / 2017

Everyone's brain works differently, so my methods may not be relevant for others, but here's what works for me when I embark on learning a set of songs for Brigade.

I used to start by listening to part-predominant tracks in the car, and singing along with them. I stopped doing this because I no longer have the occasion to drive daily for a sufficient time. Once I stopped the in-car method, I realized that it had usually caused me to learn errors that took a lot of effort to correct afterwards. Why? I think we don't always hear our own part correctly on the track. We may get words wrong, notes wrong, timing wrong, without realizing it.

Singing with the computer

Now I do most of my learning using multitrack software on my computer. I have each voice part as a separate track, and I can listen to any combination of voices. I can make my own voice part more predominant, less predominant, or muted completely. Mostly I used a practice track where I record myself singing along with the other track parts. When I listen back, I can hear where I'm wrong, and why (with headphones, I listen to my own voice in one ear, and the pre-recorded track in the other ear) (I listen to my voice against the three other voices to hear chords, tuning and timing, and then I listen to my voice against Tim singing my voice part to hear note accuracy, tuning, vowels etc). You can of course achieve the same effect using an app on your phone (such as Anytune for iPhone or Maple for Android phones).

My Method

I work first on learning how to sing through the notes correctly. Holding the music, I alternate singing with the track of my voice part on its own, and the track of my voice part omitted. Sometimes I use software to slow down a difficult passage. I make pencil marks on the music at places that I tend to sing incorrectly, and I loop the track to re-sing these passages five or ten times in a row. Depending on the song, I may work in sections, just trying to master one or two pages at a time. Once I can sing through the song (still holding the music) I go on to another song so that on the new song I'm still figuring out how to sing the notes and on others I'm singing through, trying to commit them to memory.

At the stage when I'm able to sing the notes, I often copy out the lyrics by hand (and sometimes look for memory tricks to remind me of the sequence of words). Getting the lyrics on paper (without the notes) is a useful exercise, and for me, writing them out by hand is helpful to absorbing and memorizing them. I add breathing points (especially where a big breath is called for), and sometimes timing and other memory aids to the lyrics-only sheet, and use these to sing along with the part-omitted track once I've (mostly) mastered the notes. Here again, I mark my note errors or hesitations, and go back and exercise these passages by looping the recording.

Once I have advanced in my learning of a song, I take care to sing through each song as a **duet** with each other voice part a time or two. Sometimes I discover that another voice part and I are doubling on a note, or that we share a pick-up or some other element. Sometimes I discover a tuning 'opportunity' or an unusual chord structure that I hadn't been aware of. These are valuable to understand BEFORE getting into a live quartet.

Sequence the songs

I go through all the songs, and pick out the ones that will be the most difficult and make sure to start early on these, as well as any that I don't particularly like. There's no problem to begin working on favorites too, but it's a bad idea to leave the hardest ones for last.

As I get to the end, I continue to record myself against the part-omitted tracks on songs I think I've learned, and I try to tick off my pencil marks on the sheet music to make sure that my early errors are not creeping back in (and often they ARE creeping back in!). I try to keep notes of the things I still need to work on, but try to alternate between singing through songs I now know and enjoy and songs that still need work.

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