

Gregory Harrell: Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music

Memorization Tips

Let's say you are trying to memorize "Caro mio ben"

1. Write out the words of the song in a way that shows their rhyme scheme

Sometimes I use all the words, including repeats, sometimes not, depending what I think will help most.

2. Most of the time if we can remember the first word of a line we can get to the end of it. Then we have trouble connecting to the next line. Rewrite the words, connecting the last word of a line with the first word(s) of the next line. Then try to think of any connection

Caro mio

Ben Credimi B word followed by c word

(Al)men Sen(za) men and sen rhyme

di te languisce languishes for you

il cor il tuo Parallel construction

fedel sospira the faithful one sighs

3. Make index cards of the words of your song, based on both of the above. So one card says "Caro mio ben" on one side and "credimi almen" on the back. Another card will say "Ben Credimi" on one side and "almen senza" on the back. I also add the translations to the back side of the card. So the front might say "caro mio ben" and the back would say "My dear beloved—credimi almen—believe me at least. (This way others can help me with the flash cards. They can get the translations if not the originals.) I also include grave accent marks to indicate open vowels in Italian. Time yourself going through all your flash cards. Constantly try to reduce your total time.

4. As I get better with my index cards, I start pulling out the ones I do easily, leaving only the problem cards. When I can do the cards from several songs easily, I mix all the cards from an entire group of songs together and start the winnowing process again. Finally I put all the songs from an entire role or recital together. So sometimes I have a card in Russian followed by a card in Italian. It is a real brain-twister.

5. This is a good one. Play "Be Your Own Prompter." Play a recording of your song, and, from memory, "cue" the singer before he sings the next line. So as the singer is finishing "caro mio ben" you are yelling out "credimi almen"

6. Look for any connections you can. I noticed the first three verses of "It aint necessarily so: David, Jonah, Moses....alphabetical order. Each verse of "Some Enchanted Evening uses words from a different learning mode. Verse 1: Visual: See (a stranger), see (her again). Verse 2 Auditory: Hear (her laughing), Sound (of her laughter) sing (in your dreams) Verse 3 Kinesthetic: find (your true love), feel (her call you), fly (to her side), make (her your own).

Gregory Harrell: Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music

7. Practice singing your song, and writing out by hand the first letter of each word as you sing. So for “caro mio ben,” you would write “cmb cma sdt lic.” You write about one letter in the time it takes to sing a word. I noticed this when I was directing scenes like the letter duet from Figaro or Baby Doe’s letter aria.

8. Turn the poems (without the music) into acting exercises, including all the repeats. You have to find a reason for and make sense of all the repeats. That will help you remember how many there are.

9. For opera roles, I type out all my cues and my lines, and sometimes I include the extra beats I have to count out. I put them in parentheses if I am still holding a note but counting. So an excerpt the Lucia sextet:

1 Il mio sangue, l’ho (2) tradita 3 1 io l’ho tradita. AH(2 3) si ,si 3

There are other ways to do this. Sometimes I put the silent beats in parentheses and use dashes for the extended notes.

10. I go through each song or aria backwards memorizing it. So I memorize the LAST line first, then look at the line before continuing by memory through the line(s) I have already learned. I move backwards through the piece to the beginning.

11. I use a metronome, singing the song slowly and gradually build up speed way past the real tempo.

12. I work out a reasonable (or necessary) amount of time to learn and memorize each day. So one day I am memorizing Papageno’s opening song, speeding up the tempos of “Ein Mädchen,” and writing out the words and translations for the suicide scene. Sort of like an assembly line approach.

13. With strophic songs, I generally recopy the song so that there is only one verse of each song to look at at any one time. I use white out tape and then rexerox.

14. When I am learning a song, I try to work out an action plan (for the character), with emotional subtext that follows the progression of the song. Often I use a verb plus an adverb for each line of text or interlude: Caro mio ben (lovingly engaging her) Credimi almen (request passionately) senza di te languisce il cor (state sincerely) etc. Sometimes it helps to do a bit of staging as I try to memorize.

15. Most important. Don’t cancel any rehearsals, coachings or any chances to work on this because you feel ill prepared. Go unprepared if you have to. Schedule as many as you will need to get the piece learned, and if you are not prepared, go anyway. Otherwise you will just compound the problem.