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# Preparing an emotionally expressive vocal performance

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## Abstract

This paper explores the processes, strategies, and methods used when preparing an expressive vocal performance from the point-of-view of the artist. The study tracked the development and performance preparation of 13 university students studying classical voice performance or music education. Participants were asked to choose one unfamiliar piece from their repertoire and complete three surveys administered at the beginning, middle, and end of their study term. Each survey was geared toward the participants' level of preparation and pertained to their approaches for learning new repertoire, the application of constructive criticism from peers and instructors, and experiences during and after their initial performance. Unlike studies focussed performance preparations of instrumentalists, this study focussed on singers, and take into account needs specific to singers, i.e. developing skills in emotional connection to text, character development, and emotional communication through body language and facial expression. The results support a three-phase model of skill acquisition marked by a period of introduction and deliberate practice, a middle associative phase marked by drawing personal connections, and an autonomous phase marked by performance readiness.

Keywords: singing, emotional expressivity, vocal performance, performance preparation

# Preparing an emotionally expressive vocal performance

Shawn Michael Condon<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Often expressivity in musical performance is studied from the perspective of the listener. Listeners rely on the performer's skillful balance of clear communicative intentions and emotional engagement to measure the success of a performance, though the subjectivity of such judgments are influenced by the individual's enculturation and personal preferences (Schubert & Fabian, 2014). In this exploratory study, I present the preparation of an emotionally expressive performance from the point-of-view of the artist. Earlier studies of this nature have focused on instrumentalists (Miklaszewski, 1989; Woody, 2006; Van Zijl & Sloboda, 2011; Van Zijl, Toiviainen, Lartillot, & Luck, 2014). However, this study examines the development of an expressive vocal performance through the detailed accounts of 13 university students studying classical voice performance or music education. This study aims to answer the following questions: #1 - *What methods and strategies do singers use when discovering and learning a new piece of music?* and #2 - *When, and what strategies, methods, and expressive techniques do singers employ during their performance preparations?*

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One of the most highly skillful activities that we can engage in is giving an expressive performance (Rodger, O'Modhrain, & Craig, 2013). A singer preparing an expressive performance is engaged in a complex process involving discovery, learning, listening, reflection, and making connections with previous life experiences. For the singer, giving a highly expressive performance is the result of years of training and refining their technical and artistic skills, careful planning, and a realization of their perceptual goals for the performance (Ericsson, 1997; Lamont, 2012; Rodger et al., 2013). As expressivity is a fundamental part of singing (Sundberg, Iwarsson, & Hagegård, 1994), it is something that performers strive to communicate to their audience (Woody, 2000). Unlike instrumental performances, singers face the additional factors of text, characterization, and non-verbal communication, both facial expression and body language.

Expressive performances contain many of the same acoustical properties associated with human vocal expression and the communication of emotions (Juslin & Laukka, 2003; Oltețeanu, 2010; Sundberg et al., 1994). Accordingly, expressivity has its root in many of the same elements that in speech, lend to clearer meaning, nuance, and purpose. Due to these similarities, researchers have suggested that music has the ability to convey and elicit emotions, and as an art form, music can be used to communicate a range of emotions (Eerola & Vuoskoski, 2010; Juslin, 2003; Lindström et al., 2003; Livingstone, Thompson, & Russo, 2009; Roesler, 2014).

Others are hesitant to espouse the notion that music, as an inanimate object, has any propensity to express or cause an emotional response. Fabian, Timmers, & Schubert (2014) carefully outlined the difference between the ideas of 'expressing something' from 'being expressive' in order to separate expressiveness from emotion. The need for this delineation is supported by the fact that when talking about performances, we tend to recount our experiences using metaphors, which more easily describe emotional states or affect (Fabian, et al., 2014). Reimer (1989)

described this difference in language used when discussing expressivity as ‘descriptive’ rather than ‘interpretive,’ which focuses the listeners’ attention toward musical events that elicit feelings.

The current study ascribes to the latter view, that music itself is not expressive of any emotion, but rather exists as a vehicle for a performer to express emotion. Moreover, listeners regard the execution of expressive elements in performance as more important than the technical skills of the performer (Geringer & Sasanfar, 2013). Langer (1957) colorfully illustrated this dichotomy using a screaming child as an example of emotional expressivity. She went on to describe the screaming baby as far more expressive than any musician in performance, noting their expressivity requires no skill.

## Emotional expressivity in performance

Emotional expression is comprised of the behavioral changes that accompany emotion, including body language, facial movements, and vocal timbre (Bryant & Barrett, 2008; Gross & John, 1995). In performance, expressivity is a combination of deliberate actions and conscious awareness, not mere intuitive spontaneity (Van Zijl & Sloboda, 2011). Brenner and Strand (2013) broadened this definition by suggesting that expressivity should also include technical skills, creativity, interpretation, and spontaneity. Both definitions require a performer’s interpretation to deviate from the musical score, which Bhatara, Tirovolas, Duan, Levy, and Levitin (2011) cited as creating a positive aesthetic experience for the listener. Typically, expressive interpretation follows accepted norms of stylistic convention (Brenner & Strand, 2013; Higuchi, Fornari, Del Ben, Graeff, & Leite, 2011; Karlsson, 2008; Seashore, 1938; Sloboda, 1996; Van Zijl & Sloboda, 2011). Musical genres like jazz, avant-garde and folk music, often afford performers the opportunity to elaborate, ornament, and contribute their own realizations in performance (Elliot, 1995). However, expressive

choices that are not commonsensical or do not follow musical conventions attributed to the particular genre of a musical work may be perceived as mistakes, rather than explicit expressive gestures (Chaffin, Lemieux, & Chen, 2006; Van Zijl & Sloboda, 2011).

Musicians also employ body movements and acoustical manipulations to communicate a range of emotions in performance (Vines, Krumhansl, Wanderley, Dalca, & Levitin, 2005; Vuoskoski, Thompson, Clarke, & Spence, 2014). These movements combine physical and facial gestures that possess a naturally musical and rhythmic quality which coincide with the performer's expressive intentions. These gestures can also convey the idea of a shared experience between the performer and their audience, increasing the communication of musical ideas and expression (Rodger, et al., 2013; Thompson & Luck, 2011). The successful use of these techniques in performance depends largely on the listeners' connection to the music and their ability to perceive expressive intentions based on the performer's use of body language, facial expression, and vocal timbre.

## Teaching expressivity

When discussing pedagogy, its parameters must be clearly defined and its meaning not obfuscated by theories or teaching styles. Pedagogy, as defined in this research, "seeks to make explicit the values and ideas that inform what a teacher does, in order to make sense of observable practice," (Garnett, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, sound pedagogy must allow for the development of technical skills required in performance as well as skills in emotional perception and cognition. Music educators understand the importance of emotional expressivity in performance; however, their pedagogy is typically focused on more objective skills (i.e. note reading and performance techniques (Broomhead, 2001)). This is due to a lack of teaching resources and the inherent difficulty of making the knowledge of expressive skills musicians and

teachers have learned through experience accessible to students (Lindström et al., 2003). Despite the recognized significance of emotional expressivity in musical performance, it often does not receive the attention it merits in pedagogical settings (Laukka, 2004).

As the perception of expressivity in performance is held in higher regard than technical ability, pedagogy focused exclusively on technique should not supplant or obstruct teaching expressivity (Reimer, 1989). Allowing performers to remain creative artists rather than artisans or engaged in ‘mimetic art’ (Alperson, 1991, p. 217), it ensures an authentic performance, and recognizes the creative role of the performer in realizing the composer’s intentions (Davies, 2003). Reimer (1989) clarified this idea by depicting the performer as an artist working on already created material; adding a second dimension by exploring and discovering the expressive potential in the musical work. This brings us to the root of a philosophy of music education: to help students identify the musical elements that elicit experiences of feeling, the improvement of sensibility (Alperson, 1991) and “responsiveness to the intrinsically expressive qualities of sound,” (Reimer, 1989, p.53).

A long-term goal of the findings of this study is to inform philosophical and pedagogical approaches for teaching expressivity. Garnett (2012) reminds us that teaching styles are specifically individual and derived from many theories that do not necessarily coincide with one another. Furthermore, pedagogies borne out of practical circumstances are often contradictory, but enable teachers more flexibility to address their circumstances and meet the needs of their students (Garnett, 2012).

## Method

Participants in this study completed a three-part survey during the academic semester regarding the methods they use when learning new solo repertoire for performance. Part 1 was distributed at the start of the semester and was centered on their initial



encounter with the unfamiliar repertoire. Part 2 was distributed roughly halfway through their study term and pertained primarily to how the participants used constructive feedback from their peers and their instructor. Part 3 was distributed after the participants gave their first juried performance of their chosen repertoire. In all three parts, participants were asked to comment on their experiences in the practice room and during their private tuition.

## Participants

The 13 participants in this study were enrolled in undergraduate music performance or music education programs with an emphasis on classical music training. The participant sample included 11 female participants aged 19 – 22 years, one male participant aged 31 years, and one older female participant aged 65 years. Convenience sampling and a network of personal connections were used to select participants from four countries representing different cultures and languages, though following the tradition of Western music. This was done in order to control the effects of one institution's pedagogical influence on the participants and to limit the likeliness of participants knowing one another. Table 1 shows the participants' sex, ages (19 – 65 years; median 21 years), years of studying music at the undergraduate level ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .93$ ), and their musical stimuli. Thirteen participants completed Part 1. From the original 13 participants, nine completed Part 2, and eight completed all three parts of the study (seven females and one male).

## Musical Stimuli

Participants were asked to choose one unfamiliar piece that was either self-selected or assigned by their instructor / professor (Table 1), though all participants indicated their piece was self-selected. Throughout the duration of the study, participants were asked to report on only their experiences regarding this piece. Repertoire choices

were limited to classical art songs, Lied, or operatic arias. Works for music theatre, pop, and jazz music were not included in this study to limit the musical stimuli to one genre and singing style.

## Materials

Each of part of the three-part survey was completed online through SurveyMonkey (an online survey development software). Each survey part was designed to address the stage of development in the preparation process: at the beginning, in the middle after peer and instructor feedback, and at the end after an initial performance. Survey items consisted of both multiple choice and open-ended questions and were administered over a period of four months. The online format of this study offered participants the flexibility to complete the surveys at the most convenient and appropriate time according to their own preparations. Participants were provided instructions to answer the questions based on their experience with only their selected piece from their repertoire and were assured their responses would be handled confidentially, as it could contain personal information.

**Table 1**

Participant demographics and musical stimuli

Participant	Sex	Age	University Study	Composition
A <sub>1*, 2, 3</sub>	F	21	4 years	Debussy – <i>Nuit d'Etoiles</i>
B <sub>1, 2, 3</sub>	F	21	4 years	Dougherty – <i>The K'e</i>
C <sub>1</sub>	F	20	3 years	Massenet – <i>Ivre d'amour</i>
D <sub>1, 2, 3</sub>	F	21	4 years	Hasse – <i>Morte col fiero aspetto</i>
E <sub>1, 2</sub>	F	22	4 years	Bellini – <i>Vaga luna che inargenti</i>
F <sub>1</sub>	F	65	5+ years	Ibrahim – <i>Damascus Breeze</i>
G <sub>1, 2, 3</sub>	F	19	2 years	Fauré – <i>Au bord de l'eau</i>
H <sub>1</sub>	F	20	3 years	Rossini – <i>Cruda sorte!</i>
I <sub>1</sub>	F	20	3 years	Debussy – <i>Les cloches</i>

J <sub>1, 2, 3</sub>	F	19	2 years	Quilter – <i>O Mistress Mine</i>
K <sub>1, 2, 3</sub>	F	20	3 years	Debussy – <i>Noël des enfants (...)</i>
L <sub>1, 2, 3</sub>	M	31	3 years	Bach – ‘ <i>Quia fecit mihi magna</i> ’ – Magnificat
M <sub>1, 2, 3</sub>	F	21	2 years	Fauré – <i>Le Secret</i>

\* *Subscripts indicate completed survey parts.*

## Procedure

The first survey (Part 1) was distributed at the beginning of the academic semester and asked demographic information and background questions about the participants’ musical studies. To better understand how the learning process begins, participants were asked to describe the ways they generally familiarize themselves with a new piece of music and what factors contributed to their repertoire choice. Participants were then asked to describe an “expressive performance,” “emotional singing,” and to tell what strategies they employ when creating an “expressive performance.” Participants were asked to explain the differences, in their opinion, between *musical interpretation* and *music expressivity*, and to explain how extra-musical life experiences affect their ability to perform expressively. Many of the questions shared overlapping themes to give the researcher additional insight into the thought processes and mindset of the participants, as well as tracking consistency or developments in their responses (Rea & Parker, 2014). Lastly, participants answered multiple-choice questions regarding time spent in rehearsals focused on technical skills versus expressivity, preferred learning / teaching techniques, and musical factors they feel are important in their own performances and in the performances of others.

The second survey (Part 2) was distributed after the participants performed in a master class<sup>2</sup> or in some other setting where they received critical peer and instructor

2 A master class is an interactive session typically for students of music and drama developing their performance skills. Unlike a private tutelage or a lecture, students perform a piece from their repertoire for their peers and instructor (or an expert in the

feedback. Participants were asked to self-assess their performance and compare their peers' comments to their own perception of their performance. They were also asked to reflect on musical successes and difficulties they experienced during their preparations. Participants were again asked to tell what strategies they employed when creating an "expressive performance," to see whether their individual methods had changed, or their focus on expressivity had changed due to their participation in this study. Finally, participants answered multiple-choice questions regarding allocation of time, teaching techniques, and musical factors they felt were important in their performances and in the performances of others.

The third survey (Part 3) was distributed after the participants gave an initial performance of the piece with an audience or sang for a faculty jury. They were asked to reflect on their successes and difficulties throughout the entire preparation process. Participants were asked to define emotional expressivity, an "expressive performance," and share their thoughts concerning emotional expressivity and expressive musical performances. Participants answered the same question as in Part 1 regarding the effects of extra-musical life experiences. As in Part 2, they were asked to identify what strategies they employ when creating an "expressive performance." Lastly, participants were asked the same questions as in Parts 1 and 2 about their use of time in rehearsals focused on technical skills versus expressivity, preferred teaching techniques, and musical factors they felt were most important in their performances and in the performances of others.

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discipline) and receive critical feedback on their performance. The student performer may request feedback on a particular element (technique, style, stage presence, etc.) of their performance or receive general comments. The student is then expected to perform the piece wholly, or an excerpt, applying the advice or comments they received earlier. Taylor (2010) regarded the master class as a motivational 'psychological space' promoting musical development, through preparation, reflection, and further learning.

## Analysis

The data were analyzed systematically following a method for open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and qualitative thematic analysis (see Owen, 1984) at the end of each part of the study. The data from all three parts were then organized using ATLAS.ti (data analysis software) and initially coded based on prevailing themes in the participants' responses including, background research, building a character, empathy, interpretational analysis, outward appearance, performance readiness, personal experience, visualization, and vocal technique. The initial coding of all three parts was deductively based on the aims of the research. After the initial coding, data was further analyzed for central themes common among the three parts of the survey and a coding frame was developed (Schrier, 2012). Lastly, it was decided the remaining overarching themes in the data were the inter-related themes of preparing an expressive performance. Organizing these existing codes into the five inter-related themes was completed based on recurring ideas and word repetition (Tonkiss, 2004).

## Results

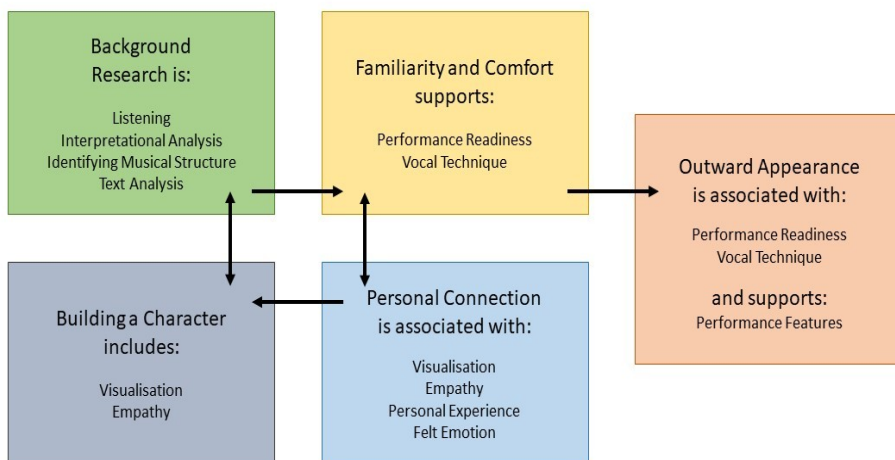
The open-ended items from Parts 1 – 3 generated a large amount of data. From these responses five themes emerged, which reflect the steps of building an expressive performance: background research, building a character, familiarity and comfort, personal connection, and outward appearance (see Figure 1). The reported methods used in preparing a performance were consistent across all respondents. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the participants indicated the use of multiple methods simultaneously, suggesting no one method is necessarily more effective or preferred. However, the usage and efficacy of a particular method or methods remained a matter of participant preference. The data in this study shows there is a transition in the performance preparation where the singer moves from a

period of learning, familiarization, and reliance on technical skills, to a period, albeit shorter, of performance readiness.

The five themes of methods and strategies reflected on in the data were derived from 16 codes related to different aspects of building a performance. Listening, interpretation analysis, textual analysis, and identifying musical structures were determined to be all methods used in Background Research. Personal experience, felt emotion, empathy, and visualization were determined to be associated with Personal Connection. Performance readiness, vocal technique, and performance features are all part of and associated with the Outward Appearance. The methods and strategies used in both Background Research and Personal Connection together support Building a Character. Similarly, the methods related to Background Research and Personal Connection support Familiarization and Comfort. The five following themes represent three phases in skill acquisition, including cognition, association, and autonomy.

**Figure 1**

Thematic map for initial coding



## Background Research

Background research represents the cognitive phase of skill acquisition, is associated with building a character and contributes to a singer's familiarization and comfort of an unfamiliar piece. Background research occurs earliest in the process of preparing an expressive performance and employs strategies associated with discovering a new work. Methods and strategies for completing background research include elements of musical structural analysis, textual analysis, listening, and interpretational analysis. During this phase, participants developed an understanding of the relationship between themselves and the music, the composer, the plotline, and of the physical attributes the character may possess. This process requires the participants to look inward, consider their own personal experiences, and how those experiences help shape their emotional and empathetic responses in different situations.

In Part 1 participants were asked how they familiarize themselves with a new piece of music. Almost all participants cited listening as a primary method of familiarization and to hear different musical interpretations. Participant M said she typically "listens to as many recordings as possible – listening for breathing places and how the singer highlights the dynamics of the music." Participant F reported using the strategies of "listening to a recording and playing through and analyzing the basic structure of the piece." Another common method among participants was to find a translation of the text and literary criticism. Participants also reported seeking out historical information about the composer, the piece, and the time period. In addition to finding translations of the text, participants consistently reported completing a textual analysis using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to facilitate accurate pronunciation. This method uses phonetic symbols to represent sounds or sequences of sounds not represented by the Roman alphabet, through a process called transcription (Handbook of the International Phonetic Association: A guide to the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet, 1999).

## Building a Character

Building a character is supported by background research and personal connection as well as empathy and visualization. This phase, along with personal connection, marks the associative phase of skills acquisition and does not occur independently. Rather, it draws on knowledge gained during background research and associations made when forming personal connections. Building a character uses plot elements to inform the performance and help performers project emotions by exploring situational elements surrounding the character. In Part 1, participants were asked to describe the way they typically familiarize themselves with a new piece of music. Participant M commented, “I try to put myself in the character’s shoes and imagine what they would be thinking.” In Part 2, participants were asked to tell what they have done in their rehearsals to increase musicality and expressivity in their performance. Participant E said,

I put myself in the mindset of the character / role that I am taking on while singing the piece. I have also sung it and in the process tried to make it as personal as possible, sifting through moments in my life that caused the feelings that the aria invokes.

In all three parts, participants were asked what strategies they employ when creating a musically expressive performance. Participant D remarked on the benefits of character building in Part 1, saying that “...the more I invest myself in the character and emotion of the piece, the less tendency I have to over think the mechanics of my sound production and my technique.” In Part 3, the same participant mentioned that in creating a

musically expressive performance, I am [she is] thinking about the emotion of a character in the piece. I’m [she’s] attempting to be as authentic as possible when applying those emotions to my [her] own understanding of how to



portray them based on how I [she] personally relate[s] to what the character is feeling.

## Personal Connections

Personal connections draw associations between the performers' life experiences and what possible experiences the character may have had. Like building a character, developing personal connections represents the associative phase of skill acquisition and does not occur independently. Rather, discoveries made while completing background research serve as a foundation as it simultaneously supports the performer in building a character. Personal connections are linked to building a character and familiarization and comfort and are also comprised of factors relating to personal experience, felt emotion, empathy, and visualization. Similarly, as in *building a character*, establishing personal connections draws associations between the life experiences of the performer and the protagonist or character in the musical work. Participants were asked to respond candidly about their own life experiences and how they have affected their performance abilities. Participants remarked upon a noticeable deepening of their ability to empathize as they age. In Part 1 and Part 3 participants were asked how extra-musical life experiences have affected their ability to perform expressively. Participant H commented,

the older I get, the more I realize how having or not having a certain life experience (or set of experiences) is applied to, and manifests itself in musical performance. Having previously never been in love, I never even had a glimpse into the scope of feelings expressed in song.

In answering the same question, Participant L responded, "if you're singing some Lieder much about a love who is far away and you've experienced the same in your own life, then sure you take what you felt then, and use it now when performing."

Participant K summed up the use of life experiences when making an emotional connection stating that,

... making music is all about expressive truths of the human experience. In order to effectively communicate a feeling or circumstance, I think someone should have some understanding of the emotions behind that experience. For instance, I sang love songs relatively convincingly before I fell in love, but now I have both fallen in love and had my heart broken, I can sing certain characters with much more depth and reality. I don't think that one must have necessarily had a specific experience to communicate an emotion, but the more we can relate to it, the more expressive it [the performance] will be.

Asking participants to think critically about the process of developing an expressive performance required they remove themselves from the whole experience and examine more closely how they manage each step of their development.

## **Familiarity and Comfort**

Familiarity and comfort are related to how well the performer is prepared and not necessarily how easily they establish an emotional connection to the piece or communicate emotions in performance. Familiarity and comfort are associated with background research and personal connections, and affect the performers' outward appearance, including performance readiness and use of vocal technique. Methodical learning throughout the preparation process enhances familiarity and comfort. This point in performance preparation represents the end of the associative phase and marks the start of the autonomous phase in skill acquisition and a transition in the preparation process from learning to performance readiness. In this stage participants reported using varied techniques to support a secure performance including; approaching the melody and text separately, count singing (a method in which the melody is sung with lyrics outlining the metrical structure), playing the

melody alone, speaking the text according to the melodic rhythm, and lastly combining melody and text.

In Part 3, participants were asked to explain the relationship between familiarity with the music and their own ability to give an expressive performance. Participants were also asked to describe the role of felt emotions in their performance and to consider how those roles had changed throughout the period of the study. Participant D reflected on the role felt emotions played in developing familiarity and comfort. She said,

due to the rigor of this piece, my original focus was primarily on pitches and rhythms. In early performances of the piece, I felt I could not fully devote myself to the emotion of the piece because I was still thinking about the music, technique, as well as expression. As my time with the aria progressed, I grew more comfortable and therefore felt much more free [sic] to use my energy toward emotional expression within each performance. Now that it's the end of the semester, performing this piece has become an occasion for me to really let go and live in the emotion that the music evokes in me. Each time I get up to sing it or take it into the practice room, I relive the emotional journey that this piece takes me on from start to finish. I have repeatedly rehearsed the piece in order to maximize my comfort level with the music and ultimately allow myself to use my energy toward expression. Additionally, I attempted to sing this piece while imagining and enacting the subtext I created for the character. I sang in different places around the room, while moving, while standing still, to different people, etc., to experiment how to best deliver the emotion of the character.

A comment by Participant G reinforced the importance of a sound preparation both emotionally and technically in giving a secure performance. She stated,

the more comfortable I am with a piece, the more expressive my performance is. I felt comfortable and familiar with the piece in the practice room, but I

think I was too nervous when it came time to perform my piece, (I was) so nervous that I was thinking more about the words and had a memory slip and forgot about being expressive.

In this instance, the participant's comments support the need for purposeful training of vocal technique, interpretation, expressivity, and stage presence in creating an expressive performance.

## Outward Appearance

In this study, participants commented on the awareness of their own outward appearance and how they addressed it in their performance preparation. Attending to outward appearance represents the autonomous phase in the performer's skill acquisition and is likely the final step in their performance preparation. Participants recalled that early on in their preparations their attention was more focused on technical issues and learning the music. It was also noted that increased familiarity and comfort allowed the participants to devote more time to considering their outward appearance.

Outward appearance is closely related to body language and affects how the performer and their audience perceive communicated emotional expressivity. Body language and other ancillary gestures manifested in singers organically must either be controlled to remove extraneous and unclear expressive intentions or combined with rehearsed gestures to increase expressivity. These gestures help us better understand the inferred emotions of others.

Participant K described how she develops her idea of outward appearance. "I often perform in front of a mirror and think about the text to see what I can do to better highlight what the message of the piece is." In Parts 1 and 3 participants were asked to describe "emotional singing" and a "musically expressive performance." In describing what is a "musically expressive performance," Participant G mentioned

key elements of outward appearance, including the “expression of meaning behind a piece, not only in a performer’s facial expression, but also in their tone, articulation, and presence during the performance.” Participants reported the importance of being aware of outward appearance, especially with facial gestures that are related to the vocal technique issues, but could potentially have a negative impact on the audience’s perception of emotional expressivity. Participant L noted, “I have a habit of pulling ugly faces at high / difficult parts of the piece and I’m trying to hide that with a more neutral appearance.” Participant A described the difference between singing emotionally and emotional singing. “Physically, I am grounded. I make sure my breaths are not emotionally driven because that potentially effects [sic] / distracts the listener.”

Well-prepared performers exhibit a balance of organic and planned physical gestures and facial expressions. However, as previously mentioned, performers must account for the effects of extraneous physical and aural features on the intended expressivity of their performance. Participant L suggested that non-verbal gestures ought to be minimized. “I think a blind person should be able to get just as much out of the performance as a seeing person, so I try to keep it (expressivity) to just the sound.” Participant A supported Participant L’s comments saying, “I always feel that less is more. I think that most non-verbal should be done with the eyes, and then hand / arm / body movement should be used when appropriate.” Participant K also mentioned the importance of considering use of the stage. She said, “depending on the character, I may use my performance space a little differently as well.”

## Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the methods and strategies employed by singers when preparing a vocal performance. The findings of this study confirm there is a clear structure to the musical learning process and support the findings of

Chaffin, Lisboa, Logan, and Begosh (2009), Ginsborg (2002), and Miklaszewski (1989). Unlike earlier studies involving instrumentalists, these findings also take into consideration the additional factors related to the steps needed to address matters of text, emotional connection to the text, character development, and the emotions communicated through body language and facial expressions.

The survey items in this study were designed to encourage the participants to thoroughly consider all aspects of performance preparation. The present data begins to shed light on a process in which vocalists prepare an expressive performance by revealing five thematic methods and strategies related to performance preparation.

These five themes of methods and strategies are not unlike the three stages of a cellist learning a new work as described by Chaffin et al. (2009), in which the participant engaged in familiarization techniques, structural analysis, and interpretation during the learning and memorization process. The overall process of preparing an expressive performance follows Fitts and Posner's three-phase model of skill acquisition as presented in Papageorgi, Creech, Haddon, Morton, de Bezenac, Himonides, Potter, Duffy, Whyton, & Welch (2009). This three-phase model includes a cognitive phase marked by a period of introduction and deliberate practice (background *research* and *familiarity* and *comfort*), an associative phase marked by the development of the performer's identity as a musician and personal style (*personal connection, building a character, outward appearance*), and a third autonomous phase, in which the musician is established and performing at a high level of expertise. Furthermore, the results from this study support the stages of learning identified by Miklaszewski (1989), where the musician's intentions are to create a solid understanding of the work piece by piece and move quickly to, in the case of pianists, actually playing the piece, and then engaging in self-evaluation and revision.

The process of preparing an expressive performance cannot be conceptualized formulaically. Naturally, the path of this process is determined by an almost endless list of external factors, not necessarily limited to the singers' technical abilities, emotional development, or vocal limitations. The data in this study shows the transition, or a focus of attention during the performance preparation in which the singer moves from a period of learning, familiarization, and reliance on technical skills, to a shorter period, of performance readiness.

From the outset of their preparation, the performer is engaged in making artistic decisions and planning a path forward using what Reimer (1989) called, 'their craftsmanship, sensitivity, and imagination. It is clear from the data that singers employed background research and building a character at the beginning of their preparations and considered outward appearance toward the end of the process; the latter being highly influenced by peer feedback given following Part 2. This two-stage structure supports work of Noice and Noice (1997), in which they found actors also engage in a two-stage process of performance preparations, involving an analytical stage and a second performance readiness stage they termed, "active experiencing."

Personal connections to the music were used earlier in the preparation process, whereas familiarity and comfort were developed and expanded throughout the duration of the study. Van Zijl and Sloboda (2011) found expressiveness became a primary concern toward the end of the preparation process for instrumentalists. The findings of the current study support Van Zijl and Sloboda (2011), but suggest singers begin to focus on expressivity earlier in the preparation process.

Participants in this study reported a variety of factors that contribute to their ease or difficulty in the process of preparing an expressive performance, which Sloboda (1996) termed 'expressive generativity.' That is, the ease or difficulty individuals experience making connections that are linked with prior opportunities they may

have had. Building a character and personal connections are steps that occur early in the preparation process and provide a structural base for the performance. The work completed during these steps serve as a touchstone for singers further on in their preparations, specifically in the period of performance readiness and when considering outward appearance.

Many of the strategies identified as initial steps in fostering familiarity in this study support findings in Ginsborg's (2002) observational study of memorization and learning strategies used by singers. Familiarity and comfort also contribute to a singer's stage presence and support the growing body of research validating the effects of thorough, methodical practice on the improvement of technical skills, expert performance (Noice & Noice, 2002), and the importance of developing effective practice strategies (Rainero, 2012). Therefore, a technically flawless performance may not always be indicative of an expressive performance.

In managing outward appearance, participants reported the habitual use of particular gestures at certain times in performance. This is consistent with the findings of Davidson (2007) in which pianists returned to the same gestures when performing the same piece at two different times. These gestures, such as holding the arms in front of the stomach or unwanted facial expressions, are sometimes born of poor habits in technique, are unexpressive of any emotion, and must be unlearned during performance preparation. Furthermore, the participants' comments regarding performance space suggest that the performance venue must also be considered during performance preparations. Issues of proximity to the audience, size of the performance area or stage, and acoustical concerns can affect communicated and perceived expressivity.



## Limitations and Future Research

This study was useful in terms of collecting data that was largely corroborated from a group of singers in training. The primary limitation of this study was sampling. The sample population was comprised of nearly all females; future studies on emotional expressivity in performance could benefit from more sexual equality in sampling. This could expose variations in the methods males use, versus females, in preparing an emotionally expressive performance, from both a physiological and psychological perspective.

Second, participant attrition and the longitudinal nature of the study contributed to the small sample size and limited generalizability of the findings. The longitudinal study was an appropriate choice for studying the process of preparing an expressive performance but made maintaining and tracking participants difficult over a period of four months. Though participants were easily accessible via e-mail, personal complications precluded many participants from continuing for the duration of the study.

Third, findings from this study can only be applied to performance preparation within the Western musical tradition. Participants in this study were all enrolled in undergraduate classical voice studies programs in the Western classical style of musical training. This is an intriguing discussion point, as participants were from four countries with different cultures, but still studying in one tradition. It is important to take into account the effect one's culture has on emotional expressivity and perception in performance. As the participants in this study were university students, the length of time spent in formal training is fairly limited. This also means participants are likely to have less personal life experience to draw upon when preparing a performance, in comparison to older more experienced performers. Following this logic, it could be likely that older, more experienced singers approach

performance preparation differently. However, it could be argued that the most seminal training for performers occurs at a younger age, likely affecting the methods and strategies they may employ in the future. Future studies in expressivity in performance could compare how more experienced performers approach performance preparation compared to less experienced ones.

The method used for data collection was a three-part online survey. In contrast to in-depth interviews where the researcher can ask further questions of the participants, online or paper surveys with semi-structured and or open-ended items by nature may not gather all the information desired by the researcher. Survey items must be carefully worded as to keep the participants on task and prevent inadvertent leading by the researcher. In doing so, it is possible participants may not have answered questions as thoroughly.

Ultimately, the methods one employs when preparing an expressive vocal performance will vary from individual to individual, though the general framework remains the same. When engaging in performance preparations, the performer works in two distinct stages. The learning stage is characterized by employing methods for building connections and familiarization. The performance readiness stage is characterized by greater attention to outward appearance, emotional engagement, and communicative expressivity.

Both performers and listeners understand the importance of expressivity in performance, but the methods for teaching expressivity are often overlooked due to their subjective and intangible nature. Future studies in this area may seek to include ensemble learning environments as well as developing practical and theoretical frameworks for approaching expressivity more concretely.

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