

# **The Singer's Toolkit:**

**Principles and Techniques** for bringing a song to life

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(This outline available for download: [davidingersonmusic.com/workshops](http://davidingersonmusic.com/workshops))

**Your job as a singer** (to the extent you choose to accept it) is:

- to honor the song and your audience (even if it is an audience of one) by using these (and other) techniques;
- to deepen the meaning of the words by the music and your vocal expression of it;
- to bring the song to life.

**Four fundamental practices** of good singing beyond the purview of this workshop:

- Foundation of good body support: belly breathing and core tension
- Critical in all songs: clear pronunciation; intentional vowels, articulated consonants (the words are one of the critical elements in the impulsion of a song; the audience must understand them to be touched by them.)
- Intentional and accurate pitch or intonation
- Intentional breathing; purposeful breaks, continuation of lines, phrases; breath control

**Three main principles** for applying the following techniques:

- The music is at the service of the words.** It becomes stronger the more effectively you use these techniques to amplify the meaning of the words. You honour the song by singing it in a way that realizes its fullest potential, so that its life is as rich as possible.
- Each melody has a direction, a potential life.** The melody has a line, an arc, a direction, an impulsion, a tension and a resolution. Increasing or delaying the tension increases the satisfaction of the resolution, of arriving home.
- Repetition leads to audience familiarity; variation to heightened interest.** Overuse the variation and it makes the effect much weaker.

**Four elements of music:**

- Pitch:** the "highness" or "lowness" of a tone (wave-length or frequency)  
melody, variations on the melody, ornaments, vibrato
- Timbre:** the quality of a tone; tone color (overtone series)  
Dark, bright; thin, full; clear, nasal; sharp, rounded; and all in between  
Noise: gravel; breathiness; breaks (sobs, yodels); whispers, spoken words
- Rhythm, timing, tempo:** the pattern of beats and notes in time  
The regular heart-beat of the music; or the more irregular word-beat of lyrics  
Speed of delivery: regularity or variation  
Matching musical rhythms to spoken rhythms  
Changing a rhythm (between verses) for meaningful effect  
Anticipation, delay, pause  
Legato, staccato, in between (intentional control of the length of a note)

--**Volume:** the intensity or loudness of a tone (amplitude)

Volume is one of the keys for shaping phrases.

Contrast is important: must have quiet times for the loud one to have an effect

Intentional volume (and changes in volume) for each note or word

Intentional silence (breathing, glottal stops, silences for dramatic effect)

Intentional attacks, releases of notes, phrases (accents, swells, fade-aways)

Make each technique you use add the the meaning or impact of the song. Don't just throw them in randomly or willy-nilly. Context is critically important.

Musical reasons for using some of these tools, textual reasons for using others, and stylistic reasons for yet others.

**Three methods or rules for applying these ideas to your singing:**

--**Rule #1: Practice**

Practice makes better

Every day (or at least most days)

Spaced practice is better than concentrated; concentrated better than none

For pleasure and joy; also at least occasionally with a critical attitude

--**Rule #2: Practice**

Not just singing, but listening; at least occasionally listening critically to masters

Experiment during practice, try new ways, have fun

Sing a song so many times you can sing it automatically, without thinking about it

Automaticity in practice can allow you to be more spontaneity in performance

--**Rule #3: Practice**

Practice in the larger sense of the word: not just drill but rather a lifestyle choice

Ten thousand hours? Many, many, many hours to mastery

The more expansive your practice, the better will be your judgment in using these principles and techniques.

Final Thoughts

--The overall effect of many subtle techniques and their combination makes for powerful, evocative, moving song renditions. Understated is better than overstated.

--Be subtle until you want to hit the audience over the head. Then be dramatic for only one phrase of line and then only once in a while.

--DON'T OVERDO IT! Your rendition then becomes obvious, banal, crass.

--It takes passion to bring life to a song but it can't be done effectively without well-practiced techniques.

From "Before the Beginning" by John O'Donohue

When the audience becomes still

And the soprano lets the silence deepen,

In that slowed holding, the whole aria

Hovers near, then alights

On the wings of breath

Poised to soar into song.