GUIDELINES FOR THE CLASSICAL SINGER OF NON-CLASSICAL AMERICAN SONG

by

JONATHAN WAYNE PILKINGTON

(Under the Direction of Gregory Broughton)

ABSTRACT

This document addresses the issues of performance of non-classical songs by classically trained singers and provides performance practice guidelines for the classical singer when singing non-classical repertoire, specifically American folk songs, African American spirituals, and American standards. Although many non-classical genres (Contemporary Commercial Music) require changes of vocal technique, the genres discussed in this document were specially selected because they require little to no alteration of classical singing technique in order to sing them. Instead, the performance practice guidelines discussed involve changes in style. The intent of this document is to serve the needs of the classically trained singer who needs to occasionally sing non-classical songs, whether in recital, for a cabaret performance, or for various other settings. When appropriate repertoire is chosen and certain stylistic elements are applied, a more pleasing and authentic performance may be given.

INDEX WORDS: American folk song, African American spiritual, American standard, Vocal pedagogy, Singing style
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by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014
GUIDELINES FOR THE CLASSICAL SINGER OF NON-CLASSICAL AMERICAN SONG

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May 2014
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Gregory Broughton for helping to guide me towards greater vocal artistry and for his support and encouragement during my three years at the University of Georgia. I would also like to thank Dr. Dorothea Link and Dr. Stephanie Tingler for serving as my committee members, as well as for their guidance in completing this document.

I am very grateful for the love, support, and encouragement of all of my friends and family. The patience and support of the faculty, staff, and students at Piedmont College have also been extremely valuable and are greatly appreciated.

Finally, I am thankful to my parents for exposing me to music since birth, for always loving and supporting me, and for instilling in me the belief that I can do anything if I set my mind to it.
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to address the issues of performance of non-classical songs by classically trained singers. Many articles have been written and numerous workshops exist for the purpose of teaching new vocal technique for singing different genres and styles of music, such as musical theatre. While these articles, books, and workshops are valuable, they do not necessarily serve the needs of the classically trained singer who occasionally needs to sing non-classical songs, whether in recital, for a cabaret performance, or for a church setting. In each case, singers would likely prefer to choose repertoire that may be sung in such a way that does not require using an entirely different technique. When appropriate repertoire is chosen and certain stylistic elements are applied, a pleasing and more authentic performance may be given. This study will examine the selection of appropriate repertoire and will focus on the stylistic elements that will enhance the performance of the repertoire.

For the purposes of this document, the term “non-classical” will be used instead of the currently accepted term “Contemporary Commercial Music” (CCM) to describe folksongs, spirituals, and American standards. Although the genres discussed in the document are included under the umbrella of CCM, folksongs and spirituals are neither contemporary nor commercial, and American standards are typically not contemporary. If other CCM styles, such as rock, pop, and contemporary musical theatre, were being discussed, then it would be more appropriate to use the term CCM.
Songs from the non-classical American genres of folk songs, African-American spirituals, and American standards (the “Great American Songbook”), receive a certain amount of respect and attention from “classical” voice teachers. They deserve more respect and attention because of their usefulness in teaching, the ease with which some students emotionally connect with them in communicating their text, and the fact that they are superb songs. These songs are often used as songs for teaching beginning students, and sometimes a set will be included on a college-level junior or senior recital. Occasionally, they are sung by a voice teacher in a recital setting, or the teacher may need to sing a selection for a special event. Additionally, several famous opera singers have recorded albums of non-classical repertoire. In each situation, the performances range in quality from excellent to embarrassing. Regarding vocal technique and quality, the singing may be beautiful, but the performances often lack an authenticity of style that is needed for a great performance. Some singers naturally embrace different styles, while others need either encouragement or instruction. If a singer chooses to sing Mozart or Handel, the educated listener has certain stylistic expectations. Likewise, the educated listener has certain stylistic expectations when listening to performances of non-classical songs. One does not sing Handel in the same style as Wagner, and one should not sing Gershwin in the same style as Mozart. A classically trained singer should be able to effectively perform certain non-classical songs in the recital setting or at other events, but the singer must choose appropriate repertoire and prepare it with the same diligence and respect given to classical repertoire, specifically with regards to stylistic considerations. Ignoring the style that is unique to each genre would be disrespectful of the genre, and the performance would not be as good as possible.
In some college music departments, most voice students are studying to be music educators rather than performers, and the students will be well served by traditional classical training and singing art songs and arias. However, if the students have little interest in singing in recitals or being cast in operas after college, their education will serve them better if the repertoire and styles studied in college is more diverse. If the students learn how to sing in different styles while using a classical technique, they will be better equipped to teach a high-school choir to sing inspired and authentic performances of spirituals, folk songs, and possibly musical theatre, while simultaneously instructing the choir in the basics of vocal technique.

Finally, the private voice teacher will often teach students who want to learn a healthy, “classical” technique but have little to no interest in singing classical music outside of their voice lessons. It makes good business sense for the voice teacher to have some knowledge of different styles and repertoire in order to assist the students in transitioning from singing in lessons to singing the music that they will realistically sing outside of lessons.

This performance-practice study will focus specifically on performing songs from non-classical American genres that may be sung well with what is traditionally known as a classical singing technique. The selected genres will be limited to American folk songs, African-American spirituals, and American standards (the “Great American Songbook”). The three genres were selected because the repertoire may be sung in such a way that classical singing technique will not hinder the performance of it, and its performance does not require the singer to abandon classical technique. For these reasons, discussion of vocal technique is not the primary focus and will be kept to a minimum. The subject of belting, or music that would require belting, is not within the scope of this document. Many articles have been written about musical theater.
technique (or Contemporary Commercial Music technique), but their intended audience is nearly always the singer who wants to make a career as a performer in a non-classical genre.

The focus of this document is to provide information for singers, voice teachers, or voice students in the selection of repertoire from the specified genres, as well as an in-depth discussion of stylistic elements that may inform, and hopefully improve, the singer’s performance of music from the specified genres.

The document will be divided into six chapters preceded by an introduction. The first chapter will provide an overview of the repertoire that will be discussed, which includes American folk songs, African-American spirituals, and American standards (the “Great American Songbook”). In addition to discussing the criteria for selecting each genre, a discussion of the various sources (scores, anthologies, and other collections) for acquiring the repertoire will be included.

The second chapter will include a definition and description of classical technique and its importance to the singer, as well as a broad definition of style as it relates to singing. It is important to understand the differences between technique and style in order to discuss them separately and ultimately teach or judge them separately.

The third through fifth chapters will define and discuss the genres of American folk songs, African-American spirituals, and American standards (the “Great American Songbook”), respectively. Each chapter will include a definition of the genre and descriptions of the stylistic elements that should be taken into consideration when studying and performing songs from the selected genres. Examples of stylistic considerations are use of vibrato, diction, use of dialect, and possibilities for improvisation in the songs. Other topics for discussion include instruments
used for accompaniment and the importance of researching background information for every
song. For each chapter, a song will be chosen to use as a case study in order to illustrate the
stylistic topics that are covered. Excerpts from musical scores will be provided, and references
will be made to recordings and other sources.

The sixth chapter will be the Conclusion, which will summarize the main
recommendations made in the document and emphasize the need for classical singers to study
and perform American folk songs, African-American spirituals, and American standards.
CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF REPERTOIRE

The American Folk Song

The American folk song is a surprisingly overlooked body of repertoire in the world of classical singing. American folk songs are included in this study because they can be sung by singers of all levels of training, and because they are an important part of the nation’s history that should be researched and performed. Voice teachers often assign folk songs (either American or English) to beginning students, and Aaron Copland’s “Old American Songs” are likely the most well-known arrangements. Several volumes of folk songs are available as collected and published by John and Alan Lomax, as well as other collectors. Some of these only contain notated melodies, while others include accompaniment. The intent of collectors, such as the Lomaxes, was to record the songs in their “pure” form. Collections of folk song arrangements, which are specifically intended for the classical singer, are available in varying degrees of difficulty. Some of the arrangements are simple and provide a basic accompaniment to support the melody, while others contain more elaborate accompaniments and demand more advanced singing. Outside of collections of arrangements, one may also find individual arrangements within other song anthologies. Any of these could prove to be useful sources for the teacher or performer.

Table 1 lists selected collections of folk song arrangements, and Table 2 lists selected compilations of folk songs that are not arrangements. The folk song arrangements are typically
intended for the recital setting. The collections listed in Table 2 sometimes contain a variety of scores—some with piano or guitar accompaniment and some with only notation of the melody of the song. Many other compilations of folk songs from specific states or regions may be found in libraries or from music retailers, and they are not listed here.

Table 1. Folk Song Arrangements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arranger</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher &amp; Date</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jay Althouse</td>
<td>American Folk Songs for Solo Singers</td>
<td>Alfred Music, 2011</td>
<td>13 arrangements intended for voice students. Available for medium high or medium low voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Copland</td>
<td>Old American Songs: Complete</td>
<td>Hal Leonard, 2009</td>
<td>Copland’s 10 folk song arrangements in one volume. Available for high, medium, or low voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celius Dougherty</td>
<td>Folksongs and Chanties</td>
<td>Hal Leonard, 2004</td>
<td>Most of the 18 songs arranged are American. Available for high or low voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Hayes</td>
<td>10 Folk Songs for Solo Voice</td>
<td>Alfred Music, 2002</td>
<td>Most of the songs are American. Available for medium high or medium low voice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Collected Folk Songs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editor</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher &amp; Date</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen Hartness Flanders</td>
<td>Ancient Ballads Traditionally Sung in New England</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961</td>
<td>Contains unaccompanied melodies with texts. Songs are preceded by descriptions of their origins.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The African American Spiritual

As a body of repertoire, spirituals are arguably the most American of American folk songs since they were created only after the slaves arrived in America. They are treated separately in this study because of their distinct origin and the fact that they are sung quite differently than other folk songs. Slaves were brought to America from Africa in the early days of the nation’s history, and they originally were not Christian, nor did they speak English. During their time in America, they had to learn English in order to survive, and many converted to the Christian faith. In the midst of the adversity of their varying living conditions, the slaves found hope and escape by singing. They created new songs born out of their early American
experience, which originated from their African heritage. Whether sung in church by an untrained singer or in a recital by a trained opera singer, spirituals are sung best with a resonant, supported tone and with dramatic intensity. Because of this, they are well suited to the classically trained singer who is willing and able to capture and share the essence of the spiritual in a sincere performance that has been informed by research.

The folk song collections of John and Alan Lomax, as well as others, include the African American (or Negro) spiritual in their contents, so one should refer to the sources in Table 1 for melodies and texts of spirituals that are not arranged. Harry T. Burleigh began the tradition of arranging spirituals for solo voice and piano in the early twentieth century, and numerous composers have followed with collections of arrangements. A list of selected arrangements of African American spirituals is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Arrangements of African American Spirituals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arranger</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher &amp; Date</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Bonds</td>
<td>In His Hand: Seven Spirituals</td>
<td>Theodore Presser, 2010</td>
<td>A new compilation of Bonds’ arrangements of spirituals for voice and piano.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
American Standards

Although they are the popular songs of the early twentieth century, American standards have their roots in classical music, and with their unique and occasionally complex melodies and harmonies, some singers would include them as part of American art song repertoire. The singers who made them popular came from a variety of backgrounds; some were trained singers, and some were not trained. Their singing is largely enjoyed and admired by classically trained singers, possibly because it often shares some important qualities with classical singing, such as excellent diction and a clear tone (with the exception of a few singers). The nature of the songs and the quality of the voices that made them popular helps to explain why some tradition exists for including American standards on classical voice recitals. Some current classical singers do not perform these songs because of a lack of comfort with the style.

Since American standards have the mass appeal of popular music, they are available in countless collections and anthologies. A list of selected anthologies is below. Table 4 contains a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arranger</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher &amp; Date</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hall Johnson</td>
<td>30 Spirituals</td>
<td>G. Schirmer, 2007</td>
<td>30 arrangements for voice and piano. Available for high or low voice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

American Standards

Although they are the popular songs of the early twentieth century, American standards have their roots in classical music, and with their unique and occasionally complex melodies and harmonies, some singers would include them as part of American art song repertoire. The singers who made them popular came from a variety of backgrounds; some were trained singers, and some were not trained. Their singing is largely enjoyed and admired by classically trained singers, possibly because it often shares some important qualities with classical singing, such as excellent diction and a clear tone (with the exception of a few singers). The nature of the songs and the quality of the voices that made them popular helps to explain why some tradition exists for including American standards on classical voice recitals. Some current classical singers do not perform these songs because of a lack of comfort with the style.

Since American standards have the mass appeal of popular music, they are available in countless collections and anthologies. A list of selected anthologies is below. Table 4 contains a
list of publications that contain the songs of a single composer, Table 5 contains a list of anthologies that are collections of songs sung by a particular singer, and Table 6 contains a list of selected anthologies or collections of arrangements of American standards.

Table 4. Collections of American Standards by a Single Composer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher &amp; Date</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harold Arlen</td>
<td>The Harold Arlen Songbook</td>
<td>Hal Leonard, 1985</td>
<td>Includes a listing of Arlen’s complete works, and information on the origin of each song in the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irving Berlin</td>
<td>Irving Berlin Anthology</td>
<td>Hal Leonard, 1994</td>
<td>61 songs for voice and piano. Background information provided for each song.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George &amp; Ira Gershwin</td>
<td>The Songs of George &amp; Ira Gershwin: A Centennial Celebration</td>
<td>Warner Brothers, 1998</td>
<td>2 volumes containing every song that George and Ira Gershwin wrote together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerome Kern</td>
<td>Jerome Kern Collection</td>
<td>Hal Leonard, 2010</td>
<td>49 of Kern’s songs organized by the musical or movie from which they originated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Collections of American Standards by Singer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singer</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher &amp; Date</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singer</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Publisher &amp; Date</td>
<td>Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audra McDonald</td>
<td>How Glory Goes</td>
<td>Hal Leonard, 2003</td>
<td>Contains the 14 songs sung by Audra McDonald on her album of the same title.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Sinatra</td>
<td>Frank Sinatra Songbook</td>
<td>Warner Bros. Publications, 1989</td>
<td>Contains many of Sinatra’s most well known songs, along with information about the origin of the songs or when he first sang them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Anthologies & Arrangements of American Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arranger</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher &amp; Date</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cabaret Songbook</td>
<td>Hal Leonard, 1991</td>
<td>Anthology of 54 American standards. Organized by categories such as openers, ballads, grabbers, essence songs, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Giant Book of Standards</td>
<td>Alfred Publishing, 2013</td>
<td>Anthology of 75 of the most famous American standards by various composer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Hayes</td>
<td>Seven by Gershwin</td>
<td>Alfred Publishing, 2007</td>
<td>7 of George Gershwin’s famous songs arranged for voice and piano. Available for medium high or medium low voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Hayes</td>
<td>Seven by Mercer</td>
<td>Alfred Publishing, 2009</td>
<td>7 of Johnny Mercer’s famous songs arranged for voice and piano. Available for medium high or medium low voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranger</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Publisher &amp; Date</td>
<td>Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Hayes</td>
<td>Seven by Porter</td>
<td>Alfred</td>
<td>7 of Cole Porter’s famous songs arranged for voice and piano. Available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publishing, 2008</td>
<td>for medium high or medium low voice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 2

TECHNIQUE VERSUS STYLE

In the world of classical music, technique is a highly-regarded, discussed, and debated topic, and any serious student of classical music spends years learning technique for his or her chosen instrument. Even the professional musician, after countless hours of practice, will continue to perfect technique for a lifetime. Technique is defined as “a way of carrying out a particular task, especially the execution or performance of an artistic work or a scientific procedure.”¹ A common phrase used by voice teachers is “your body is your instrument.” The fact that one cannot see or touch the voice makes the task of learning vocal technique particularly challenging and time consuming. As a result, classical singers are notoriously married to their vocal technique and may avoid singing music from genres outside of the traditional classical repertoire due to a fear of changing technique or simply not sounding good. However, if a singer chooses appropriate repertoire and sings the repertoire with stylistic considerations informed by research, a great performance may be given.

Style is defined as “a way of painting, writing, composing, building, etc., characteristic of a particular period, place, person, or movement,”² and this definition may also be applied to singing. Within the classical canon, there are several different stylistic periods, and both singers

and instrumentalists should be familiar with performance practices for each style. Likewise, if a
singer chooses to sing songs from outside of the standard classical repertoire, the singer should
seek out resources that will help to inform the performance practice for genres of the songs being
gung. Technique and style may have a close connection, but they should be treated separately.
Singing in a different style does not necessarily mean that a different technique is required. The
versatile singer will know the difference between technique and style and learn how to sing in
different styles while honoring their learned technique.

Although teaching methods vary greatly, as do aesthetic preferences, there are a few
generally accepted ideals of classical singing technique. According to James C. McKinney, “the
act of producing vocal sound is made up of four physical processes: respiration, phonation,
resonation, and articulation.” It is the perfecting of these processes that classical singers spend
hours and years developing into their technique.

Beginning with respiration, most singers learn that a low inhalation, involving expansion
around the midsection, is the best inhalation for singing. During exhalation, phonation occurs as
the vocal folds vibrate, and the tone is “supported” by the breath, which is a topic of varying
opinions. During phonation, a balanced onset and release are expected, and the phonation should
be balanced as well—neither pressed or aspirate. Due to the fact that classical singers are trained
to sing without electronic amplification, resonation is a very important topic. While some singers
have very bright voices and others have very dark voices, chiaroscuro, the balance of light and
dark, is generally the accepted aesthetic for resonance in classical singing. Singers typically train

\[\text{3 James C. McKinney, The Diagnosis & Correction of Vocal Faults (Nashville: Genevox}
\text{Music Group, 1994), 27.}\]
to sing throughout the vocal range with an evenness of timbre and without obvious register changes. Regarding articulation, the classical singer typically attempts to pronounce words correctly in any language and to make the words clear to the audience, and much emphasis is placed upon choosing optimal vowels and sustaining them. Consonants are typically relatively short and crisp. Much emphasis is usually placed on accomplishing all of the above ideals with good body alignment and with minimal tension.

As stated before, music history is divided into different style periods, and each period has its own performance practice. Singers who are interested in historically informed performance practice are concerned with singing in the manner that the composer intended, and they make stylistic choices with the hope of accomplishing a more authentic performance. For the classical singer, an initial consideration is vibrato. Although classical singers are known for singing with vibrato, there is some variance in its use throughout stylistic periods. Consistent and even vibrato is almost always expected from a classical singer, and it is linked with the legato melodic lines that the classical singer usually wishes to achieve. However, some singers choose to sing with a straight-tone when singing certain repertoire, such as Baroque music or music from earlier periods, and that is a stylistic choice.

In Baroque vocal music, the use of trills and other ornamentation is common. Learning how to sing a trill is a technical issue, but the choice to use a trill is a stylistic choice. When singing music from the Classical period, the singer almost always uses the most consistent and even vibrato possible and sings the melodic lines as legato as possible. This is also true in the Romantic period.
One stylistic choice that is often heard in music from the Romantic period but not earlier periods is the use of *portamento* ("a slide from one note to another…"). In music after the Romantic period, stylistic expectations may vary greatly from composer to composer, and the singer should make an effort to be informed of the expectations.

Since the main focus of this document is singing music of non-classical styles, the above discussion of technique and style is not meant to be exhaustive. The intent is to define style and technique, to delineate the differences between them, and to illustrate that the fact that classical singers often make stylistic choices within the realm of classical music. Stylistic choices, whether in classical music or non-classical music, do not necessarily require alteration of technique. With appropriate repertoire choices and knowledge of performance practice for the particular repertoire, the classical singer of non-classical song may accomplish a performance that is both pleasing and artistic without sacrificing the classical technique.

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CHAPTER 3

THE AMERICAN FOLK SONG

The definition of folk music or folk song is rather complex, considering the many different types and origins of folk music. In *Grove Music Online*, Norm Cohen distills the International Folk Music Council’s definition into the following: “Essential ideas…are that folk music, whatever its origin, has evolved at the hands of the unsophisticated community in some unselfconscious manner; that with the possible exception of its creation, it exists in oral, not written, media and that it is characterized by variation (so there is no “correct” version).” In Cohen’s article, he discusses the definition of folk song from many different perspectives. He states that a definition that works well in America is “that folk music is music which survives outside or independent of commercial media,” meaning that although the music may now exist on a recording or in a written form, its origins are in the oral tradition.\(^1\) It is at the discretion of the individual singer to decide what repertoire is most appropriate for a specific performance opportunity, whether the repertoire is Appalachian folk songs, New England folk songs, or songs that originated in another country and became part of American folk culture.

When one begins to research performance practice for American folk song, it becomes obvious that the topic is largely ignored by song arrangers and by authors of articles in scholarly journals, such as *Journal of Singing*. Upon searching the *Journal of Singing* database on the

subject of “folk song,” the most recent article, “How Should We Sing a Folksong” by Rogie Clark, was published in 1966. Furthermore, the number of American folk songs that are well known pales in comparison to the number of folk songs collected and published by the likes of John and Alan Lomax. Perhaps articles are not written because there is a belief by classical singers that no research is necessary to perform a folk song and that you simply sing the song. This may be true to some extent, but most twenty-first century Americans are so far removed from folk culture that research is necessary in order to perform folk songs with a higher degree of authenticity. In fact, even when the Lomaxes were collecting folk songs in the 1930s, they feared “that this traditional music was being overwhelmed by commercialism,” so they “sought traditional folk music in the ‘eddies of human society,’ self-contained homogeneous communities cut off from the corrupting influences of popular culture.” Fortunately, the Lomaxes and other folklorists collected American folk songs in the early twentieth century, and those collections are readily available today. Aaron Copland’s Old American Songs are a wonderful part of the American song repertoire, and it is unfortunate that he only chose to arrange ten songs. Hopefully America will one day produce a composer who champions the American folk song to a similar extent that a number of European composers have done for the folk songs of their respective countries.

In this chapter, the American folk song “Shenandoah” will be used as a case study. For each stylistic element, examples will be given to illustrate how the stylistic considerations may be applied to this song.

Dramatic Considerations

“Folk songs express a people’s ideas, joys, griefs, aspirations. They are straight from the heart of the people.” It is necessary for the singer to explore the expressive intent of each song and make specific dramatic decisions, just as they would when singing an art song; however, the dramatic decisions should typically remain simple and not theatrical. Ruth Crawford Seeger, in the preface to John and Alan Lomax’s *Our Singing Country*, states, “Do not sing ‘with expression,’ or make an effort to dramatize.” This advice may be a bit extreme, but it emphasizes the importance of singing folk songs with simplicity, delivering the text clearly and sincerely.

Within the genre of folk song, origins of the songs vary greatly. The geographical origin should be considered, as well as the situation in which the song would have originally been sung. In the preface to his collection of folk song arrangements, Richard Walters writes:

The folksongs of any culture reflect its passions, humor, values, ideals, struggles, tragedies, extraordinary events and legendary characters. The depth of expression in the songs goes beyond mere entertainment, largely representing the casually epic parade of individual stories of ordinary men and women, the nameless millions who are not found in history books.

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As with any song, the singer should study the text as a guide for dramatic interpretation of the song. However, further research should usually be carried out in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the song and inform all aspects of the performance.

Some arrangers of folk songs provide background information, but if they do not, the volumes of songs collected by John and Alan Lomax are organized in the table of contents by such headings as Religious Songs, Social Songs, Men at Work, Outlaws, Hollers and Blues, and Negro Gang Songs. Under each heading are several subheadings, and within the collections, many of the songs are accompanied by a description of the origin of the song.

The same is true for compilations of folk songs by other collectors. Norm Cohen’s *American Folk Songs: A Regional Encyclopedia* is a two-volume collection of folk song texts and background information, which could prove very useful. These clues can help the singer to imagine the original circumstances and conditions under which each song was sung so that all aspects of the performance, from use of vocal colors and dynamics to diction and accompaniment choices, might have greater depth and authenticity.

For the song, “Shenandoah,” at least two different versions of the text exist. The most common version that is found in arrangements of the song is the following:

O Shenandoah, I long to hear you,
Away, you rolling river.
O Shenandoah I long to hear you.
Away, I’m bound away,
‘Cross the wide Missouri.

O Shenandoah, I’m bound to leave you.
Away, you rolling river.

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O Shenandoah I’ll not deceive you.
    Away, I’m bound away,
    ‘Cross the wide Missouri

For seven years I’ve been a rover
    Away, you rolling river.
But I’ll return to be your lover
    Away, I’m bound away
    ‘Cross the wide Missouri.

The version found in Alan Lomax’s *The Folk Songs of North America* is nearly the same, but in the first verse, the following lines are found: “O Shenandoah, I love your daughter…For her I’ve crossed the rolling water.” The second verse is “The trader loved this Indian maiden…With presents his canoe was laden.” Perhaps the change is made for the common arrangements in order to make the song more suitable for either male or female singers or for reasons of political correctness.

It is suggested that “Shenandoah” is a chanty that originated with American seamen on rivers west of the Mississippi and that the title refers to the Native American tribe for whom the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia is named. It then became “a favorite song of the regular cavalry who sometimes fought the Indians out west, but also fell in love with and married Indian women.” Another version of the song contains the line “For seven long years I courted Sally,” and it is theorized that Sally is the daughter of the Indian chief “Shenandoah,” who was courted by a Missouri river trader.

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9 Ibid., 37.
The research into the origins of the song, and the knowledge of the alternate versions of the text, provides the singer with valuable information to inform the dramatic implications of a performance of the song. If a singer sings the version of the text that is commonly found in arrangements, then he or she may choose how the song will be approached. Even if the words are not used that clearly imply that “Shenandoah” is a love song, the singer can approach it as a love song. On the other hand, if the singer prefers, he or she may embody the character of a person who is longing for their beloved home near the Shenandoah River. Although this approach interprets that text at face value, it could still allow for an effective performance, particularly if the singer more easily relates to the idea of longing for home.

Vocal Characteristics

First and foremost, folk songs tell a story. This is true for virtually any genre of song, but in folk song there is a certain simplicity balanced with depth of emotion, which requires the singer to give communication precedence over vocal power. This does not mean that the singer should not sing beautifully and with legato phrasing. Clark states that “too large a tone and too intense a treatment is to be avoided” but that “a full, clear, round tone should be used.”¹¹ This may sound contradictory, but it seems that what he means is that the tone should be supported, balanced, and beautiful while not being overly operatic. At the core of folk song is simplicity. The folk song goes “directly to the heart of its message and [states] it without apology or great

elaboration.” Therefore, the tone should be direct and honest, and the singing should be free of self-indulgence from the singer.

If one listens to folk singers, the timbre of the voices ranges from light and airy to raspy, heavy, or “twangy,” depending on the singer or their region. There is no need for the classical singer to imitate or manufacture a different timbre. While folk singers practice their singing, there is less emphasis on perfecting a perfectly balanced tone. Rather, the singing voice grows out of the speaking voice, and the sound that results is generally acceptable as long as the delivery of the message is sincere. A perfectly trained classical voice is certainly not the norm in folk singing, but a simple and lovely tone would not be shunned by folk singers. “A beautiful voice does not take away from the folksy footing…In fact, a pleasant voice with a wide range is an asset capable of varied color.”

Regarding vibrato, folk singers are typically not opposed to the use of some vibrato; however, there is no effort to sing with vibrato on every note. Ann Whitley, Director of the Georgia Pick & Bow Traditional Music School, states that if one sings with vibrato, she prefers a “tight” vibrato, or one that is not too wide. This is good advice for the classical singer, considering that a very wide vibrato is not considered healthy, and it can distract from any style of singing. What this might mean for the classical singer is a use of a light vibrato that is limited but not in such a way as to cause tension, and this vibrato may only occur on sustained pitches—not necessarily on faster, syllabic passages.

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13 Clark, “How Should We Sing A Folk Song,” 31.
Shenandoah is a slow ballad with a flowing, legato melody, which probably attributes to that fact that it is one of the more well known American folk songs that is sung by classical singers. The melody lends itself to the legato singing that classical singers are trained to do, and it can effectively be used as repertoire for training young singers. Thomas Hampson has recorded different arrangements of “Shenandoah,” which may be heard on Song of America Project website or on his CD Song of America. In either case, Hampson sings with a full, resonant tone that is not unlike what one would hear from his opera or art song recordings. However, he generally uses straight-tone on the eighth notes and reserves vibrato use for the longer notes (Example 1). Pete Seeger also recorded the song and sings it with a brighter tone that would be typical of a folk singer. In Seeger’s recording, he accompanies himself sparsely on banjo and is more free with the rhythm, clearly using the text as his guide, rather than the printed notes. The eighth notes are sung quickly, with speech-like inflection and no vibrato, and lead to the longer notes, where he does allow for some vibrato.

The classical singer should sing with a comfortably resonant and clear tone. While the sound should not be operatic, there is no need to imitate the brighter sound of Pete Seeger.

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Example 1. “Shenandoah,” mm. 1-4

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16 Hampson, Thomas, Song of America: Music From the Library of Congress, Angel, 2005, CD.
17 Pete Seeger, American Favorite Ballads, vol. 1, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2009, CD.
Vibrato is certainly acceptable on longer notes, but an attempt to maintain a constant vibrato on the eighth notes would take away from the authenticity of the performance.

**Diction**

Since communication and story telling are at the top of the list of priorities for singing folk song, diction is a very important issue to be considered. Depending on the collector or the arranger of a particular song, the text may be written in a dialect or in standard English. Typically, the singer should sing the words as they are printed with the music, and for some singers, pronouncing the words may require some study. For example, a singer who has little experience with the rural south might be just as uncomfortable with that dialect as with another language altogether. Singing in a dialect can add an extra element of charm and authenticity to the performance of a folk song, but it should only be used if the singer is able to reach a level of comfort with the dialect, as if the dialect were native to the singer. Books and essays are available to assist with learning a new dialect, and online resources exist, which include explanations with International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols, as well as recorded samples. The website, IDEA: International Dialects of English Archive, is a very well researched website which provides recorded examples of people from each state reading a passage, some of which are transcribed phonetically.¹⁸ The Dialect Resource is a website that sells dialect CDs and books that include exercises and IPA notation, which are intended to help actors in learning different

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dialects. Other highly useful resources would be either a coaching by a native speaker of the dialect or listening to recordings by native singers.

If a singer does not feel that it is possible to accomplish an acceptable performance of the dialect of a song, one must remember that although diction must be understood clearly, words typically need to be sung with simpler and less formal diction than when singing art song or other classical repertoire. Depending on the context, it may not be necessary to pronounce the ending consonants of every word. The ending “t” in the words “ain’t” or “won’t” should likely be softened. If a word ending with a consonant is followed by a word beginning with a similar consonant, in most cases, only one should be pronounced. One habit typical among folk singers that a classical singer likely would not choose to emulate is the sustaining of consonants such as “l” or “r.”

Another element of the text that the singer should consider is rhyme. According to Kurath, “Rhymes, though often impure, give some indication of regional folk pronunciations.” Words such as “John” and “worn,” “horn” and “gone,” and “cure” and “here” are listed as rhymes that are probably pure. Also, since ending consonants are often not pronounced, such words as “pine” and “behind” and “kneel” and “field” rhyme.

Considering the uncertain origins of “Shenandoah,” other than the fact that it is an American chanty, it would be difficult to identify a regional dialect, and most of the words lend themselves to standard American pronunciation. However, the singer will need to decide how to pronounce the words “Shenandoah” and “Missouri.” “Shenandoah” can be pronounced with

either three or four syllables ([ʃɛn.ən.doːə] or [ʃɛn.ən.doːə]). If an arrangement of the song is being sung, the composer will probably indicate his or her preference by setting “doah” to either one or two notes. However, the pronunciation of “Missouri” can be either [mɪ.zu.ri]\(^1\) or [mɪ.zu.ri],\(^2\) and this pronunciation must be decided by the singer. Regarding ending consonants, in the second verse of “Shenandoah,” the phrases “I’m bound to leave you” and “I’ll not deceive you” occur. It would sound too formal to pronounce the ending “d” of “bound” or the ending “t” of “not.”

**Arrangements and Accompaniment**

Although numerous very good collections of folk song arrangements exist for voice with piano accompaniment, singers should not be limited by those choices. The canon of American folk song repertoire is much broader than what has been arranged, although what typically exists in compilations is simply a notation of the melody as collected by a folklorist. This could lead to an interesting and exciting project for a singer to add to the body of repertoire by composing or commissioning new arrangements with piano accompaniment or other instruments. If it is appropriate performance practice to sing Baroque music with basso continuo, why not sing folk songs with traditional instruments, such as guitar, banjo, or mandolin? In Ruth Crawford Seeger’s “Music Preface” to John and Alan Lomax’s *Our Singing Country: Folk Songs and Ballads*, she provides sixteen very useful suggestions for singing the songs in the book. For example, “Do not hesitate to sing without accompaniment” and “When accompaniment is

\(^1\) Hampson, *Song of America*.

\(^2\) Seeger, *American Favorite Ballads*. 
desired, a guitar or banjo is to be preferred.” She also mentions that “the voice should rest occasionally between stanzas to allow for instrumental interludes.” Since “the folk song is a living organism, subject to perpetual growth and change,” many possibilities exist, but they must all be informed by research and guided by respect and a sincere desire to interpret the folk song in a manner that honors the tradition.

If one chooses to sing an existing arrangement of a folk song, then the key has already been chosen by the arranger. If the arranger composes well for the voice and is well-informed about folk song tradition, then ideally the arranger set the song in a key that is neither so low as to be uncomfortable for the singer, nor so high as to cause the singer to approach a range that sounds operatic. Since folk singing is an outgrowth of speech, folk singers typically sing in the range of their speaking voice. Ann Whitley mentioned that among folk singers the practice is “if you have to go into head voice, it’s too high,” and upon further discussion of the topic, she clarified that she believes this is due to the fact that most female folk singers do not have a developed head voice. The register shift from chest voice to head voice is probably often very obvious in a female folk singer since hours of instruction and practice were not spent to blend the registers.

Some folk singers, like some classical singers, naturally speak and sing in a mixed or blended middle register. It is unlikely that most classical singers, especially higher voices, will choose to sing in the lowest register of the voice, and since the melodies of most folk songs lie within a limited range, they may easily be sung without approaching the upper range of any

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23 Seeger, preface to *Our Singing Country*, xxxii.
24 Clark, “How Should We Sing A Folk Song,” 30.
singer. Robert B. Wells states that “Every technical flaw or fault in a voice is mercilessly revealed, and there is little opportunity to cover up with the operatic yell, or some other histrionic subterfuge.” In the Preface to *American Folksongs*, which is a collection intended for classically trained singers, Richard Walters states that his arrangements contain optional high notes that should be sung softly, and that “if the singer is struggling to sing the higher note softly, then she or he should choose to softly sing the more manageable, lower note.” This, along with the advice from Ann Whitley of Georgia Pick & Bow Traditional Music School, is helpful advice that can guide the singer or arranger in decisions regarding range. The classical singer should be able to find a balance of the two worlds.

Several arrangements of “Shenandoah” exist for voice and piano, and they are typically available for either high or low voice. One of the most well known arrangements is by Celius Dougherty, and it is well suited for most classical singers, utilizes the text that is most commonly heard, and beautifully captures the spirit of the song. Alan Lomax notated the melody with chords in *The Folksongs of North America* and indicated that it should be accompanied by either guitar or banjo. Singing the version notated by Lomax would have different dramatic implications since the text is clearly a love song. It would also allow for much more flexibility with rhythm and accompaniment, and the singer could choose the most comfortable key for his or her vocal range. To accompany oneself on guitar or banjo, if possible, would allow for the

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most authentic performance, but it would also be effective in recital to be accompanied by another musician on either instrument.

Embellishments and Improvisation

Arrangements of folk songs typically do not call for any embellishment. The arranger of the song has already arranged the melody and accompaniment as they interpreted it, so any embellishment has already been written in the score. Some arrangers specify that they do not approve of singers making alterations to the melody since their work is copyrighted property. Richard Walters states, “I would like to gently point out that these concert arrangements are copyrighted works. I have occasionally been deflated by singers who have felt that the word ‘arrangement’ on my many published such works is a signal to fiddle with the note content in whatever way they like.”

Folk singers typically do not add embellishments to the melody of song, other than occasional scoops or slurs. “Some singers ornament the melody with devices such as vibrato, scooping (slurring up to a note), sliding down to a note, and feathering (adding a hook to a note by use of a glottal stop).” Performances of songs may have variety by varying the accompaniment, adding an instrumental interlude, or occasionally adding voices or harmony. The overriding rule of singing folk songs is simplicity and clearly singing the words, so there is not much room for embellishment or improvisation, unless the singer feels that tasteful use of scooping or slurring would be appropriate.

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30 Walters, preface to American Folksongs.
When singing “Shenandoah,” there are a few opportunities for scoops or portamentos. In Example 2, the slur markings over “I long,” “hear you,” “away,” and “rolling” indicate possible places where a portamento might be used. To slide between each of these words or syllables would not be the most tasteful choice, so the singer must decide which words should be highlighted by using the portamento as a stylistic and expressive device.

Rhythms may be altered slightly, and grace notes may be added, particularly if the singer is performing the song with guitar or banjo accompaniment, rather than singing an arrangement for piano and voice. Example 3 shows some possibilities for altering the rhythm. In Pete Seeger’s performance, he sings a grace note on the word “rolling” each time it occurs.

Example 2. “Shenandoah,” mm. 1-4 with slur markings

Example 3. “Shenandoah,” mm. 3-4 with altered rhythm

Conclusion

Singing with simplicity should always govern the mind of a classical singer when singing folk songs. This ideal, along with research, will inform every aspect of performance, including use of one’s voice, choices of arrangements or instrumental accompaniment, and dramatic considerations. Although folk songs should by no means be operatic, either aurally or
dramatically, they should be sung with a beautiful, lyric tone that uses a variety of colors to express the text. A quote by Ruth Crawford Seeger is worthy of note: “Do not ‘sing down’ to the songs. Theirs are old traditions, dignified by hundreds of thousands of singers over long periods of time.”

Finally, Alan Lomax encourages singers to listen to the authentic recordings that are available, and he states, “Style is half of folk song, as it is of all music, and it can be acquired as art is acquired, first by imitation, second by absorption, and finally by understanding.” This is wonderful advice for any style, which may come easily for some singers, and it may take time for others. It is a noble endeavor, though, considering the rich heritage of American folk songs that exists. Folk songs are an important part of a country’s history, and they should be sung by great singers. Furthermore, there is much to be learned by singing folk songs: about culture, human expression, the relationship between speech and melody, and sincere singing in any genre.

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33 Alan Lomax, introduction to The Folk Songs of North America in the English Language, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), xxix.
CHAPTER 4
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

The African American spiritual has a special place in America’s history, which is both beautiful and horrific. Because of some aspects of the spiritual’s history, there is a certain level of discomfort among singers, both black and white, which either prevents them from singing spirituals with stylistic freedom or prevents them from singing spirituals altogether. White singers may choose not to sing spirituals because they fear that their performance may offend listeners, or they may not be familiar or comfortable with the style. Black singers may choose not to sing spirituals because they do not want to be stereotyped, and they also may not be familiar or comfortable with the style. A number of articles have been written on the topic of singing spirituals, and the author of each article encourages all singers to sing spirituals. Lourin Plant writes, “spirituals illuminate the singing soul at the center of the incomprehensibly stressful lives [of slaves]. Tied to that soul is the surprisingly hopeful optimism that transcended the wretchedness of the slave experience. This is central to why all solo singers in America should sing spirituals.”¹

Spirituals were first introduced to classical audiences in the late 1800s by the Fisk Jubilee Singers. They performed concerts of spirituals and classical repertoire in order to raise funds for Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and their success inspired other black institutions to do

the same. Harry T. Burleigh published a collection of spirituals in 1916, which he arranged for solo voice and piano. His arrangements of spirituals were set in the style of art songs, and black singers of the day began the tradition of ending recitals with a set of spirituals. According to Lourin Plant, it was also more common for white singers to end recitals with spirituals than it is today. “Whether due to pressure, discomfort, guilt, deference, or artistic conscientiousness, fewer white classical artists after midcentury chose to perform them.” Although our nation still struggles with issues of race, the racial climate is much different now than it was in the mid-twentieth century. Any singer, regardless of race, who chooses to sing spirituals should perform them with great respect and with style informed by research.

In this chapter, the African-American spiritual “Deep River” will be used as a case study, and for each stylistic element, the song will be examined in order to explore the possibilities for applying stylistic considerations that would allow for a more authentic performance. Examples will be given to illustrate how the stylistic considerations may be applied to this song.

Dramatic Considerations

The very nature and origin of the African American spiritual is dramatic. However, the beauty that arose from the lives of slaves is a priceless contribution to the greater canon of song repertoire. The subject matter of spirituals ranges from sorrowful to joyful, but the overall mood is hopeful. While spirituals are typically known as sacred songs that reflect the faith of the slaves, many of them are also thought to have double meanings that served as a means of

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communication for slaves traveling the Underground Railroad. In either case, the origins of the songs are full of rich emotion from which the singer can draw inspiration for performance.

Singers should read and study the text of a spiritual as they would for any other song, and background information about each text should be researched in order to fully understand and appreciate it. The fact that spirituals are typically sacred, in the Christian tradition, can add another layer of possibilities for interpretation and emotion for the singer. A singer who is a believer in the Christian faith will likely have a different interpretation from a singer from a different background. However many singers will relate to the message of hope within the songs, as well as the historical significance of them.

Unlike other folk songs, spirituals are known to have originally been group songs that were sung in harmony. There has been some debate over whether spirituals should be sung by concert singers, and especially by white singers. James Weldon Johnson states that concert singers “can sing spirituals—if they feel them. But to feel them it is necessary to know the truth about their origin and history, to get in touch with the association of ideas that surround them, and to realize something of what they have meant in the experiences of the people who created them.”

Johnson’s perspective is from the early twentieth century, but renowned soprano, Indra Thomas, who released the album Great Day in 2012, gives much the same advice about singing spirituals: “This repertoire, in my opinion, comes from a place of emotion. A lot of this music

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wasn’t composed from an analytical point of view but from a place of emotion. I feel the drama of the piece will be even more exposed and enhanced when prepared in this manner.”\textsuperscript{5} Such advice should always be in the mind of any singer as they prepare to sing spirituals, and this approach is somewhat different than that of singing other American folk songs.

While Ruth Crawford Seeger warned against dramatizing folk songs, it would be unheard-of to sing spirituals without drama or deep emotion. The majority of sources, including CD liner notes, stress the importance of emotion in spirituals. Rosephayne Dunn-Powell states, “It is imperative for the singer to practice using gestures and facial expressions that complement and convey the ‘heart’ of the specific spiritual.”\textsuperscript{6}

As stated before, singing spirituals can be a tool to help heal the racial divide in the United States, which began with slavery and continues today—fortunately to a much lesser degree. Most American singers have studied slavery and the Civil Rights Movement in history classes, but they should have a more comprehensive understanding of the nation’s racial history, including the way in which African Americans have been portrayed on stage. Many singers are not aware of the nineteenth century practice of blackface minstrelsy, a performing tradition that should not be repeated, so it is vital to have an understanding of the topic. Minstrel shows had lasting effects on the entertainment industry, and on the nation as a whole, long after the shows were no longer performed. In Lourin Plant’s article, “Singing African-American Spirituals: A Reflection on Racial Barriers in Classical Vocal Music,” he gives a detailed description of minstrel shows and the importance of the singer being well informed about them. In short,

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Indra Thomas, e-mail message to author, January 29, 2014.
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Dunn-Powell, “The African-American Spiritual,” 471.
\end{itemize}
blackface minstrel shows were very popular theatrical productions throughout the United States in the nineteenth century, in which white men painted their faces black and portrayed black characters. The characters longed for the days of life on the plantation and sang, danced, and acted in a way that was advertised as a glimpse into real plantation life, although the performances were actually racist parodies of the creators’ views of African Americans. Not only did the performances present a disrespectful caricature of African Americans, but they also created and helped to spread the existence of stereotypes that are degrading to African-Americans, as well as other ethnic groups.7

While the singer must interpret spirituals dramatically, one must always remember that spirituals are noble songs of dignity and must be treated with respect. Whether the singer approaches the performance of a spiritual as the portrayal of a character or as a personal expression, the audience must perceive the emotions to be sincerely felt and delivered so that they will never question whether the performance is a parody.

The text of “Deep River” can probably be interpreted numerous ways, but two interpretations are most likely. The version of the text that was used by Harry T. Burleigh follows:

Deep river, my home is over Jordan.
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.
O, don’t you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promised land, where all is peace?8

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In *Negro Spirituals: from Bible to Folksong*, Dixon states, “The deep river is a constant, difficult barrier between our desert pilgrimage here and the fulfillment of all desires in the ‘promised land.’ ‘Promised land’…usually it meant heaven, but when used in a code song it meant freedom in the North.” She also mentions that the “campground” likely refers to camp meeting, which would have been a church revival that was held annually after harvest, and that attending the camp meeting would have been one of the most beautiful and uplifting experiences known by the slaves. The “gospel feast” would have been the the meal associated with the camp meeting. Since “the slaves had been allowed to take part in these ‘picnics,’ and had enjoyed the sharing and singing so much,…they could envision heaven as a super ‘gospel feast’ in the ‘campground’ across Jordan, the heavenly ‘promised land’.”

The individual singer’s approach to this song should be very personal. Some singers may choose to sing it as an expression of faith and a longing for a heavenly existence. However, it is likely that any singer, regardless of religious beliefs, could relate the song to a personal experience that they would like to overcome. Either approach could allow for an effectively dramatic performance of the song.

**Vocal Characteristics**

As with any other song, effective delivery of the text should have a very high priority. The singing should be direct, unpretentious, and generous, and the singer’s intent should be to share the message with the audience and to avoid self-indulgence. Research, coupled with the

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spirit of giving, may guide the singer to make choices that will be fulfilling and inspiring for the 
audience. A superb performance of spirituals may be given without sacrificing classical 
technique. Indra Thomas states, “one must start from a place of emotion to set the mood of the 
.piece and then use their technical training to accomplish that result.”

The melodies of spirituals are often comprised of long, arched phrases that lend 
themselves to the legato singing that classical singers are trained to do. Combined with the 
dramatic implications, the flowing vocal lines are well suited for the classically trained singer. 
Perhaps this helps to explain why arrangements of spirituals for classical singers and recordings 
of spirituals by classical singers are more numerous than arrangements and recordings of other 
folk songs. Unlike other folk songs, singing certain spirituals provides the singer with a vocal 
experience much like singing a Mozart aria, and using the voice in this manner when singing a 
spiritual is not inappropriate. This is evident after listening to recordings by great singers such as 
Marian Anderson, Mahalia Jackson, Paul Robeson, and others. When listening to such singers, 
one hears warm, colorful voices that beautifully and effectively carry the drama of each song.

The great singers of spirituals sing them in a way that is full of emotion and expresses the 
message within the songs, whether the message is joyful or sorrowful. Whether singers are 
trained opera singers or “untrained” gospel singers, they generally sing with vibrato. While the 
vibrato may not be on every note, as singers are encouraged to do in classical singing, there is 
typically no obvious restraint of vibrato, unless an occasional tone is sung straight for an 
expressive reason. Although vibrato is generally present, it should simply be an element of free 
vocal production, and it should never distract from the text. Quickly moving syllabic passages

10 Thomas, e-mail message to author, January 29, 2014.
may be frequently sung without vibrato, because it would likely sound too effortful to allow
vibrato on each note. One example of when a singer might choose to eliminate vibrato on a
sustained note is when the pitch creates a dissonance with the accompaniment, especially if it
helps to express the text. This is one stylistic option for the singer, but it is not vital.

Spirituals often have a rather wide range, which is perhaps another reason why they can
be sung well by a classically trained singer. For example, “Deep River” typically spans one and a
half octaves. Example 4 shows the first four measures of “Deep River,” which spans the interval

Example 4. “Deep River,” mm. 1-4

of a tenth. Most arrangements will span an additional third higher later in the song, and this
range could be a challenge for many untrained singers or for most young voice students. The
singer should select songs that are in a comfortable range in which it is possible to sing freely
and expressively, or a comfortable key should be chosen which allows for accessibility to the
entire range of the song. If the song is to be sung without accompaniment, choosing the best key
is accomplished easily since the tunes are considered public domain, and no instrumentalist
would factor into the consideration.

Dynamic range can also vary greatly and can be a very important element in singing a
spiritual expressively. If dynamics are not written in the score, the singer should consider varying
the dynamics within a song in the interest of musical variety and textual expression. Whether the
singing is loud or soft, it should always be full of energy and intensity.
Upon listening to recordings of “Deep River” by Marian Anderson, Indra Thomas, and Barbara Hendricks, one hears that each singer uses vibrato on nearly every note, and the vocal quality is full and resonant, with use of a wide range of dynamics. As previously stated, singing spirituals requires the singer to use the voice in a manner quite similar to singing classical repertoire. The text should guide the singer’s use of dynamics and tempo. For example, “Oh, don’t you want to go to that gospel feast, that promised land where all is peace” lends itself to extremes of dynamics (Example 5). As the emotion builds to “promised land,” a rather large crescendo should occur, as well as a possible accelerando. Likewise, a rather large diminuendo should occur at the end of the phrase, when “where all is peace” is sung, along with a ritardando and ample time to breathe before continuing with the next phrase.


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Diction

Diction is a major topic for consideration and debate in the performance of African American spirituals. First and foremost, the words must be understood so that the message of the song is clearly communicated to the audience. The element of diction that concerns some singers

is the pronunciation of words that is meant to imitate the dialect of African American slaves.

“Slave dialect,” as several authors refer to it, was a result of the acquisition of a new language by the African slaves. Just as many twenty-first century Americans have difficulty pronouncing certain sounds that are foreign to the English language, the slaves had difficulty pronouncing some of the sounds as they were learning English. When the spirituals were written down, the collectors or arrangers of the songs wrote the words as they heard them. For example, “the Jordan River” might have been written down as “de Jerdin Ribbah.” This does not indicate any lack of intelligence on the part of the original singer, and it does not indicate any disrespect on the part of the person who transcribed the song. It should be viewed as merely an effort to record the original, authentic character of the song.

Due to the racial history of the United States, particularly the blackface minstrelsy of the nineteenth century, singers may be uncomfortable using the slave dialect in performances of spirituals. White singers may fear that their performance might be viewed as a mockery or a caricature, and black singers may fear that their performance will place them in a stereotype that they would rather avoid. Either fear is legitimate, and each singer should decide how much, if any, of the slave dialect they are comfortable using. On the other hand, just as the informed audience can detect a sincere performance of an art song, they can also likely detect a sincere performance of a spiritual when a singer is truly attempting to capture the essence of the song.

The amount of slave dialect used in arrangements of spirituals varies. Some arrangers choose to change the words to standard American English, while others choose to fully use the slave dialect. Referring to the sources used for this document, the authors agree that if the arrangement that a singer is using has the text written with slave dialect, then it should be sung
with slave dialect. Dunn-Powell states, “It is appropriate for nonblack singers to sing slave dialect when singing spirituals, especially when the dialect is included by the arranger.” Referring to a quote by Hall Johnson, she also writes that singers should take time to study the language and the diction just as they would for any other unfamiliar language.\textsuperscript{14}

In Dunn-Powell’s article, she provides a thorough pronunciation guide, which includes the word, the way it is sometimes written, and suggested pronunciation transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet. In the foreword to his collection \textit{10 Spirituals for Solo Voice}, Mark Hayes states that he chose to use standard English in his arrangements, and he refers the reader to \textit{The Spirituals of H. T. Burleigh} if they prefer to use the original diction.\textsuperscript{15} Roland Hayes, who both arranged and performed spirituals, encourages singers to sing the slave dialect only if they have mastered it. Hayes refers to great singers of folk song as “singing poets in dialect,” and he eloquently states:

> These high priests of folk song utterance are very discriminating in their taste, choice and use of dialect. They are those who have developed an extraordinary skill at making dialect word forms coalesce with the thought to be expressed. The actual sound as well as the blending of the words as used by them is quite different from the feeling conveyed by the same words seen in cold print.\textsuperscript{16}

Finally, if a singer is not comfortable singing in the slave dialect, that should not prevent him or her from singing spirituals. As discussed regarding American folk songs, the words must be clearly understood, but they should not necessarily be pronounced with same diction one

\textsuperscript{14} Dunn-Powell, “The African-American Spiritual,” 471.


would use when singing an art song. It would be advisable to listen to recordings to obtain an understanding of what is appropriate. For example, some ending “t”s and “d”s might be softened, eliminated, or “stopped.” On the other hand, some “t”s and “d”s might be very strong in order to emphasize a word. In “Deep River,” the final consonant in the word “Lord” could be pronounced either softly or very strongly depending on the singer’s emotional intent. Similarly, in the phrase “to that Promised Land, where all is peace,” the final consonant of “that” could be either eliminated, or it could be emphasized in order to highlight the words “that Promised Land.” The singer might choose to pronounce certain vowels differently, such as “i” or “o”, which could be pronounced in a manner like that of a southern dialect. The word “my” may be pronounced [mɑ] instead of [mɑː]. Words ending in “ing” often will be sung without the ending “g”. As with other aspects of the performance practice, this will require time and research on the part of the performer, but employing certain alterations to diction can lead to a more authentic and pleasing performance.

Diction is somewhat straightforward in “Deep River,” and the words are usually printed in standard English. However, decisions should be made regarding the pronunciation of some words. The [oːtʃ] diphthong in the words “home” and “over” should definitely be pronounced. “Jordan” is sometimes heard as either [dʒɔn] or [dʒʊn]. “Lord” should be pronounced [lɔd] or [lɔːd], and the words “don’t you” could be pronounced either [dɔn.tju] or [dɔn.tʃə]. These are some options for the singer that can assist in creating a more authentic performance, and listening to recordings will provide a more exact representation of diction than can be transcribed in IPA.
Arrangements and Accompaniment

Numerous collections of arrangements of African American spirituals for solo voice and piano are published and readily available. Some arrangers of spirituals composed simple arrangements that simply provide a piano accompaniment to the existing melody, while other arrangers composed arrangements that are more challenging and complex and show off the abilities of the classically trained singer with high notes and varying dynamics. Each singer should look at multiple arrangements and choose the most appropriate one based on needs and abilities.

As with other folk songs, possibilities exist for alternate arrangements and accompaniment. The simplest option would be to sing a spiritual without accompaniment. This can be very effective and moving for the audience. Considering the origins of spirituals, they were typically sung in groups, in harmony, and unaccompanied, except for possibly percussion in the form of hand claps or drums. This could spark the creativity of some singers. The fact that spirituals were originally sung in groups does not necessarily indicate that a choir, or even a quartet, is necessary.

Since it is customary to feature a guest artist to sing an operatic duet on a recital, it could be a nice addition to a recital for the soloist to be joined by one or two additional singers, if it is appropriate for the setting. Obviously, this would provide the opportunity for harmony, but it could also allow the singer to perform “call and response” spirituals, in which the lead singer sings different “calls” alternating with a recurring “response” by the other singer or group. For example, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is commonly sung as a solo, but it is actually a call and response song. The line “comin’ for to carry me home” is the response that could be sung by one
or more guest singers in unison or harmony, which alternates with different lines that would be sung by the soloist. One might find inspiration by listening to recordings such as Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman’s album *Spirituals in Concert*.\(^{17}\)

One other option for creating new arrangements, other than composing them or commissioning them, is to have a pianist improvise accompaniment. This option requires a pianist who is very comfortable improvising in a gospel or blues style, but it could be very effective in the right setting while honoring the tradition of how spirituals are sometimes sung in African American churches. Many other creative possibilities surely exist for singing spirituals. As with all aspects of performing these songs, the singer must research to determine what is the most effective and appropriate way for the singer to present spirituals to the intended audience.

Most collections of arrangements of spirituals contain an arrangement of “Deep River,” so many versions exist. Perhaps the most well known arrangement is Harry T. Burleigh’s, which is recorded by both Indra Thomas and Marian Anderson. The accompaniments on Barbara Hendricks’ recording are improvised by her pianist, Dmitri Alexeev, and they provide a wonderful example of the possibility of improvised accompaniments.\(^{18}\) “Deep River” is such a beautiful melody with an intimate mood that an unaccompanied performance could be quite poignant. Ultimately, the singer should decide which arrangement of the song will suit his or her needs and be most appropriate for the performance venue.

\(^{17}\) Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman, *Spirituals in Concert*, Deutsche Grammophon, 1991, CD.

\(^{18}\) Barbara Hendricks, Liner notes to *Negro Spirituals*, France: EMI, 1983, CD.
Embellishments and Improvisation

When done tastefully and in a way that honors the style and highlights the text, there is room for embellishment and improvisation when singing African American spirituals. If the singer is not comfortable with embellishing a spiritual, it is not vital, but certain types of embellishment are more accessible for the less experienced singer of the style. Although the embellishments would be quite different, a classically trained singer might approach a spiritual in a similar way as a da capo aria: sing the melody as written on the first statement, and embellish it on repeated statements. Embellishments may be improvised by a singer who is very comfortable with the style, but most singers probably should plan in advance. If singing an arrangement of a spiritual, the singer should consult the preface of the collection to find out if the arranger made any statement about his or her desires. If the singer chooses to sing unaccompanied, then embellishments may be done freely.

Listening to many recordings of singers of spirituals will help the singer to understand the embellishments that are appropriate to the style. Numerous types of embellishment exist, but a few are common. They should always be used to highlight the text, although the word being highlighted may not always be the word that should be embellished. It may sometimes be more effective to embellish the word that precedes the important word.

Slides and portamentos are common and are likely already used occasionally by the classically trained singer, either in vocalizing or in performance. One might slide or portamento between two words or between the syllables of a single word. For example, in “Deep River,” a portamento between the syllables of “river” might be appropriate and help to illustrate the
deepness of the river. “Blue” notes (that is, slightly flatted) are also very common and would likely be used for words that are expressing sadness or sorrow.

Passing tones and neighboring tones are also used frequently and should already be familiar to the classically trained singer. In Barbara Steinhaus-Jordan’s analysis of William Warfield’s recordings, she described his embellishments as “slide approaches, slide fall-offs, the straight-tone glide (a descending interval between two tied notes sung on the same vowel), and flatted tones…”19 In addition to the straight-tone glide that she mentioned, straight tone and vibrato may also be used as embellishments. A straight tone might be another means of expressing a word, or it might be used when singing a dissonant pitch that is leading to a resolution.

As always, the singer should begin by researching and listening to recordings of the style in order to determine what is part of the performance practice. For a singer who is new to the style, it would be wise to consult a more experienced singer for advice or coaching. Just as ornaments in Baroque music can add life and excitement to a performance, embellishments can do the same to performance of spirituals.

Some arrangements of “Deep River” are quite simple and do not include embellishments added by the arranger, such as Burleigh’s arrangement. However, it is common for singers to create their own embellishments, usually after the first verse. On the other hand, Moses Hogan’s arrangement contains very specific embellishments, and the singer should adhere to what is written. Example 6 illustrates some possible embellishments that may be added to the melody if

the arranger did not already compose them. These embellishments should be sung very legato, and the slur markings indicate occasions where the singer might choose to slide between pitches. The singer might also choose to sing some of the embellished pitches with a straight tone, particularly the eighth notes. Use of rubato can also enhance the performance. One might sustain the first note of the word “deep” longer than written, and “my home is” might be sung a bit faster. Barbara Hendricks’ recording of “Deep River” is an example of a liberal but beautiful use of embellishments on the second statement of the melody, and Indra Thomas sings an unwritten high note at the end of the last verse on the word “promised,” which is a wonderful and emotional climax for the song.

Conclusion

Understanding the history and feeling the emotion of spirituals are the first steps for a singer who chooses to sing them, and this can guide all aspects in the preparation of a spiritual for performance. Classical technique may be used to its full extent in order to sing the wide range of some spirituals and to make use of the expressive capabilities of the voice in singing the dynamics and embellishments that can help to bring a spiritual to life. The singer must consider his or her personal level of comfort with regards to diction and certain embellishments, and all

\footnote{Hendricks, *Negro Spirituals*.}
\footnote{Thomas, *Great Day!*.}
singers must respect the heritage of spirituals and sing them with grace and dignity. A superb performance of a spiritual can not only be an emotionally moving experience for the audience; it also showcases an important part of the nation’s history—a product of beauty from people who were living in oppressed and often horrific conditions.
CHAPTER 5

AMERICAN STANDARDS

“American standards,” “The Great American Songbook,” and “jazz standards” are virtually interchangeable terms for the genre of songs discussed in this chapter. Regardless of the nomenclature, each name describes a different aspect of the songs, and they are grouped together because of their similar stylistic qualities. Standard is defined as “a tune or song of established popularity.”¹ The term “jazz standard” refers to the fact that many of them have been sung by jazz singers in performances that possess all of the qualities of jazz, with regards to instrumentation, harmony, and improvisation, although not all of the songs originated as jazz songs.

They are the body of repertoire composed by American songwriters in the first half of the twentieth century, such as Irving Berlin (1888-1989), George Gershwin (1898-1937), Cole Porter (1891-1964), Harold Arlen (1905-1986), and several others. Some of the songs were composed for musical theatre or movies, and some were composed as individual songs. Among the singers who famously sang and recorded them are Frank Sinatra (1915-1998), Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996), Judy Garland (1922-1969), Bing Crosby (1903-1977), and Mel Tormé.

(1925-1999), and many others. Their important place in American culture, and an explanation for why they are known as “standards,” is summed up in the following quote: “This timeless music offered hope of better days during the Great Depression, built morale during two world wars, helped build social bridges within our culture, and whistled beside us during economic growth.”

Like American folk songs and African American spirituals, American standards may be sung well by a classically trained singer if some stylistic guidelines are followed. American soprano, Sylvia McNair, who teaches at Indiana University, has had a very successful career in classical music, and is currently enjoying a career singing American standards and other similar repertoire said, “I believe we should be ‘recital-ing’ the Great American Songbook rep just like we ‘recital' everything else.” Her recording of Jerome Kern songs is quite successful and would serve as a good model for a classical singer wishing to explore this repertoire. Recitalists often feel that it is necessary to educate an audience by exclusively singing serious, and even obscure, art song repertoire. While this may be important, particularly in academic settings, one might also find that it is important and satisfying to sing repertoire that is more easily accessible by the average audience member, such as American standards.

For this chapter, George Gershwin’s song “Do It Again” will be used as a case study. For each stylistic element, examples will be given to illustrate how the stylistic considerations may

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3 Ibid.
4 Sylvia McNair, e-mail message to author, January 28, 2014.
be applied to this song. It is a lesser known song among the repertoire of American standards, but it has all of the stylistic characteristics of a standard and is one of the few standards available in public domain.  

Dramatic Considerations

The dramatic considerations for American standards will vary slightly depending on the origin of the individual song or the approach that the singer chooses to take in interpreting the song. Songs that originated in a Broadway musical or in a movie were originally sung by a character and expressed the emotions of that character. Other songs were composed as original songs, exclusive of a musical or movie, and like an art song, they express the thoughts and emotions of the lyricist, poet, or songwriter. Regardless of the origins of the songs, the fact that they are considered standards attests to the fact that they stand alone, outside of a movie or musical. The texts or plots of the songs are relatively simple and often speak of timeless emotions and situations that are easily relatable, which is perhaps a reason why young singers, and most other singers, should sing them. Singing American standards can help to teach young singers skills in characterization and communication that could easily transfer into more effective interpretation of classical repertoire.

Undoubtedly, many singers sing American standards without researching each song’s background and rely entirely upon performing the song based on personally interpreting and relating to the text. Some singers perform songs quite successfully this way, but greater depth

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could be added to any singer’s performance with quality research. Interpretation of American standards should begin with a clear understanding of the text, and with any song, it is best to know as much background information as possible before performing it.

If a song originated in a movie or a musical, the singer should know when, why, and to whom the character originally sang it. If the song was not part of a movie or musical, the singer should research to learn why it was composed, what inspired the text, and who originally sang it. Even in this case, the singer might imagine a scene in which the song might be sung, as well as the character who would sing it. This is much like the research many singers undertake when preparing an aria or art song for performance, and regardless of the genre, “when the singer fully occupies that imaginary place, interpretive issues fall into place rather quickly and the audience is invited into the inner world that the singer has created.”

George Gershwin’s song “Do It Again” was not originally composed to be part of a show. The lyricist, Buddy DeSylva, approached Gershwin at his publisher’s office and said, “George, let’s write a hit,” so Gershwin agreed and proceeded to improvise the song at the piano. Gershwin had previously composed music for the show, The French Doll, which was already running on Broadway, and when Irene Bordoni, the show’s star, heard the song, she insisted that it must be for her. The song was added to the show, and it became a hit. The song’s text is quite sensual and playful, and performances by the likes of Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland made full use of the suggestive nature of the lyrics:

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8 Howard Pollack, George Gershwin: His Life and Work, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 263-264
Tell me, tell me, what did you do to me?
I just got a thrill that was new to me,
When your two lips were pressed to mine.
When you held me, I wasn’t snuggling,
You should know I really was struggling.
I’ve only met you, and I shouldn’t let you, but

Refrain:
Oh, do it again,
I may say “no, no, no, no, no,”
But do it again.

My lips just ache to have you take
The kiss that’s waiting for you.
You know if I do,
You won’t regret it, come and get it.

Oh, no one is near,
I may cry “oh, oh, oh, oh, oh,”
But no one will hear.

Mama may scold me because she told me
It is naughty, but then,
Oh, do it again,
Please do it again!

Upon reading the lyrics, the nature of the song is evident. “DeSylva and Gershwin clearly had more ironic intentions in mind, but the lyric, with its string of ‘no’s’ and ‘oh’s,’ and the melody, with its sensuous curves, could easily be made to suggest sexual intercourse.”

Example 7 shows

Example 7. “Do It Again,” mm. 19-24

Pollack, George Gershwin: His Life and Work, 264.
an excerpt from the refrain, in which the curve of the melody may be seen in measures 22-24, as well as the repetition of “no.”

Although the song was originally sung by women, it is possible that a man could sing it and create quite a humorous performance. Whether the performer is male or female, the singer must decide which interpretation of the text is most appropriate for a particular performance of the song, and in most recital circumstances, a more innocent approach is probably best. The leading character who sang the song in *The French Doll* was a French coquette, and a female singer might choose to take on that persona, perhaps even singing with a French accent. The singer could be creative and sing the song as an innocent Southern belle, for example. It may also be sung without any particular accent, and other stylistic choices, such as tempo, arrangements, and vocal characteristics will work together to portray the dramatic intent.

**Vocal Characteristics**

The singers who recorded American standards and made them popular, such as Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra, generally sang with a clear, resonant tone. When listening to them perform, or especially when watching videos of them, one notices an ease of vocal production and a lack of tension, which was part of their signature style. Fortunately, YouTube videos are readily available, such as one of Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald singing a medley of “How High the Moon” and several other songs.¹⁰ Part style for the original singers of American standards involved using a microphone, which allowed them to use their voices in an intimate

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and conversational way. The microphone also helped to prevent the singers from straining or “pushing” their voices. In an intimate recital setting, and in a performance space with good acoustics, the classically trained singer should be able to vocally adapt to the style with little problem and without using a microphone.

Because of the variety of singers who originally sang American standards, the singer has the opportunity to make use of a wide variety of vocal colors for expressing the text and the emotions behind it. In rehearsing a song, the singer may begin by singing with a supported and clear, but never operatic, tone, allowing for vibrato and legato line, in order to learn the song and discover how it fits into the voice. Informed by research and an understanding of the text, the singer may then explore expressive and stylistic possibilities. This might begin by approaching “the song in a conversational manner while singing it,”11 which would likely lead to a somewhat limited use of vibrato and a musical line that is less legato.

Unlike singing an art song or aria, when singing an American standard, the tone may vary slightly from one note, phrase, or word to the next. Some words or phrases might be breathy, and although this is a sound generally abhorred by the classically trained singer, it could be a very effective expressive technique when used sparingly. In some cases, in order to accomplish a more conversational quality, the singer might explore the possibility of a slightly brighter tone rather than a perfect balance of chiaroscuro, which is usually the desire of the classically trained singer. On the other hand, the very bright sound that is typical of contemporary musical theatre is probably not the best choice for singing American standards. For example, singing Cole Porter’s

11 Cooper, “Once More with Feeling,” 156.
“Night and Day” with the same vocal characteristics as is typically heard in a contemporary musical, such as *The Book of Mormon*, would not showcase the song in the best possible way.\(^\text{12}\)

If a singer sings American standards with a vibrato that is too wide or too consistent, the style will likely sound too classical and distract from the overall style and authenticity of the performance. It is not necessary for vibrato to be present on every pitch, particularly if the rhythm is fast. In a slow ballad, a reasonable amount of vibrato is acceptable. Regardless of the tempo, some pitches may be sung without vibrato if a straight tone helps to express the text. Another place where use of straight tone is common is at the ends of some phrases or the ends of some songs. In these cases, the singer may sustain the beginning of the note with a straight tone and then incorporate vibrato near the end of the note. Effective use of straight tone in contrast to vibrato can help to heighten the drama and create musical tension. Listening to masters of the style, such as Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra, will help greatly in understanding the use of vibrato when singing American standards.

In certain instances, some singers may choose to use a character voice, which is usually a bright, nasal quality, such as the voice typically heard in a performance of “Adelaide’s Lament” from *Guys and Dolls* (e.g., Vivian Blaine’s performance in the 1955 movie).\(^\text{13}\) While a song that requires a character voice throughout might not be the best repertoire choice, it might be used sparingly in certain songs to express certain words or phrases. This may be done in a way that is

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not harmful to the voice and is not unlike how many choose to sing the scene in Mozart’s *Cosi fan tutte* when Despina appears disguised as a doctor.

Some American standards have a rather wide range and may require more use of the lower register than some singers are accustomed. For example, the range of Cole Porter’s “From This Moment On” is from C₄ to E-flat₅. The first eight measures of the song, which lie between C₄ and G₄, might pose a problem for some singers, but for others, it might be an enjoyable opportunity to utilize their lower register in a way that their classical repertoire does not usually require. Terminology differs among singers, but some women might explore either the use of chest voice higher than usual or a more chest-dominant mix. However, this is certainly at the discretion of the individual singer and not within the scope of this paper. Selection of keys, which can be very important in successful performance of this repertoire, will be discussed in a later section.

When preparing to sing “Do It Again,” it would be beneficial to listen to several recordings in order to gain insight and obtain ideas for performance. Jane Russell’s performance is available on “The Essential George Gershwin,” and a brief analysis of her recording will be used as an example.¹⁴ When she sings the beginning of the melody (Example 8), her tone and

Example 8. “Do It Again,” mm. 3-11
inflection are very conversational and intimate. A very light vibrato is heard only on the words “when” in measure 7 and “lips” in measure 8. She also sustains the word “lips” longer than written, which is effective in highlighting that word. During the refrain (Example 9), she sings with a slightly breathy quality on the words, “come and get it,” in measure 34, and again on the words, “but no one will hear,” in measure 40. She begins each statement of “oh” in measure 39 with a slight glottal onset, which, coupled with the breathiness, suggests her sensual interpretation of the song. In contrast, Marilyn Monroe’s performance, as one would expect, is overtly sensual, and she uses a great deal of breathiness throughout. She also uses some vocal fry when repeating the words “no” and “oh,” which is effective for her performance but probably would not be advisable for the classical singer.\footnote{\textit{“Let’s Do It Again—Marilyn Monroe,”} video clip, uploaded by Oldiesfan1968, October 18, 2012, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaDPPTD-708 (accessed April 20, 2014).}

\textbf{Diction}
High on the list of priorities of the classical singer of American standards should be the audience’s understanding of the words. This can be facilitated by selecting a key that is not too high in order to maintain the overall conversational quality of the voice. While the words must be very clear and understood, the diction used for American standards can be quite different from diction used in classical repertoire. Listening to many recordings by the masters of the style will help a singer to gain a better understanding of the way diction is employed in American standards. It would be impossible to list rules for diction in this repertoire since each singer has his or her own style, but it is important to remember that diction in American standards should typically sound much like spoken American English without any particular accent. Singers should avoid any influence of British English or Italian, such as rounded or “pure” vowels, which is often heard in classical singing. “We are not Italian. We speak and sing in English. American English in its natural state is not pure.”

Regarding diphthongs, classical singers are typically trained to sustain the first vowel sound of a diphthong and sing the second vowel sound at the very end of the syllable. Some singers will even eliminate diphthongs in classical repertoire. In listening to recordings of American standards, one will often hear a very different way of singing diphthongs. For example, when listening to Frank Sinatra’s recording of “Night and Day,” on the word “day,” one will usually hear the first vowel [ɛ] sung very briefly and the second vowel [i] sustained much longer. Similarly, consonants may be sustained at times, which is also in opposition to typical classical training. For example, an “m” or an “n” might be hummed at the end of a word instead.

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of sustaining the vowel. Sustaining pure vowels for their maximum length is a very obvious element of classical singing style and should be avoided. Relaxing the language from the heightened pronunciation typical of classical singing, to pronunciation that is more like spoken American English, is absolutely necessary. This will require listening and practice and should be a priority in the preparation of songs.

Once again using Jane Russell’s recording as an example, the words are pronounced as though she were having an intimate, casual conversation, especially in the opening verse. For example, in the line “Tell me, tell me, what did you do to me? I just got a thrill that was new to me,” the words “you” and “to” are pronounced [jə] and [tə] instead of [ju] and [tu]. She also lightly hums the final consonant on the words “mine,” “struggling,” and “again,” which all occur on sustained pitches. Her pronunciation of the word “again” is [ə.gɪn] instead of a more formal [a.gɛn]. These are just a few examples of diction that the classical singer might consider, and listening to a number of recordings will provide a variety of options from which to choose.

Arrangements and Accompaniment

Piano-vocal scores for American standards are readily available. Unless an arranger is specified, the available editions are typically published in original keys with the melody and accompaniment printed as the composer intended. A list of anthologies is included in Chapter 1.

Careful attention should be paid to the range of a song when selecting repertoire to be performed. Since a conversational quality is desired in the singing of American standards, the upper register should be avoided by most singers, since classically trained singers often would

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sound too operatic in the upper range. If the published key of a desired song is in a range that
would not work well for the singer, then it might be a good option to transpose the song to a
lower key. “It is not unusual to hear a soprano sing a classic music theater song or an American
songbook jazz piece in a key that is simply too high. Not for her voice, not for her comfort, but
for the song.” One must select the key that will best represent the song and that fits comfortably
within the singer’s range, rather than selecting the key that will showcase the singer’s vocal
power. A key that best represents the song will allow for the singer to clearly communicate the
text while maintaining a conversational vocal quality.

Performing American standards with only piano for accompaniment is perfectly
acceptable and can lead to a beautiful, intimate performance. The use of the piano depends upon
the collaborative pianist’s comfort with the genre. If the pianist is strictly a classical musician,
then he or she is likely only comfortable playing the printed accompaniment. This can work well,
particularly in a recital setting, but the pianist must be aware that the music must be a bit more
flexible than most classical music. A singer and pianist who work well together should enjoy this
type of collaboration, since it possibly requires even more listening and non-verbal
communication that performing Lieder. If the pianist is comfortable with the jazz style, he or she
might choose either to play from a lead sheet and improvise the accompaniment or to improvise
from standard sheet music.

If a singer has the opportunity to sing in a jazz setting, then a jazz ensemble will likely
provide the accompaniment. This could include piano, percussion, upright bass, and possibly

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19 Jeannette LoVetri, “Registration, Keys and Style,” Somatic Voicework Teachers
2014).
other instruments, such as brass and woodwinds. In a recital setting, one might consider inviting some other instruments to join for a set of American standards. After listening to recordings and studying the scores, the singer and pianist should decide what would be most appropriate for the songs they will be performing. The addition of an upright bass might be the simplest possibility, and it would add an element of authenticity to the performance similar to performing Baroque music with basso continuo.

Other possibilities for arrangements of songs include experimenting with different repeats, tempos, or rhythms. The singer might choose to repeat a section or verse of a song that is not typically repeated. Some improvisation may occur during the repeated section. One might also choose to alter the rhythmic style of a song or section of a song by “swinging” it or performing it with a bossa nova rhythm, for example.20 Another option is to perform a song or part of a song at a faster or slower tempo than is typically heard. An example of a song that is often sung at different tempos is “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” from Showboat. It can be performed effectively either as a rhythmic, upbeat song, as in the 1994 Broadway revival,21 or as a slow ballad, as recorded by Billie Holiday.22 Utilizing one of these options, or a combination of them, would require a certain level of comfort on the part of the singer and any accompanying instrumentalists, but they are worthy of exploration when looking for a variety of ways to enhance a performance.

20 Cooper, “Once More with Feeling,” 156.
Most recordings of “Do It Again” are accompanied by a jazz ensemble using woodwind and muted brass instruments, which would be a wonderful option if a jazz ensemble is available. However, Jane Russell’s recording begins with guitar accompaniment, which would be an interesting option for the classical singer, particularly in a recital setting. The volume of an acoustic guitar would pair nicely with a non-amplified voice in a venue with good acoustics. The score that is available in public domain is for voice and piano, which would also work very well.

Regarding different arrangements and key selection, most of the recordings, except for the Jane Russell recording, begin with the refrain (e.g. Marilyn Monroe’s recording).\textsuperscript{23} “Do It Again” was originally composed in F major, with a range from D\textsubscript{4} to E\textsubscript{5}, which is probably comfortable for most female classical singers. A mezzo-soprano with a comfortable low range might prefer to sing the song in a lower key, which might aid in creating a different mood for the song.

**Embellishments and Improvisation**

When one thinks of improvisation, jazz is probably the first genre to come to mind. Since American standards are closely related to jazz, there are many opportunities for improvisation and embellishment when singing them. The singer should first learn the song as written and then explore possibilities for improvisation, alteration, or embellishment. Leslie Holmes, in an interview with Michael Feinstein, states, “Having done a lot of research on the Great American Song Book composers, I know that many of them really wanted you to play what was on the

\textsuperscript{23} “Let’s Do It Again—Marilyn Monroe,” video clip, uploaded by Oldiesfan1968, October 18, 2012, YouTube.
page. Maybe, if you went through it the second time, you could fool with the melody.”  

This practice is not unlike singing a *da capo* aria and adding ornamentation to the repeat of the A section; however, the types of embellishment are quite different, and upon listening to recordings, one will hear that alterations and embellishments can vary greatly from one singer to the next.

Back-phrasing is one very common rhythmic variation that would be observed by listening to jazz singers and singers of American standards. Michael Feinstein states, “Simply put, to back-phrase is to sing behind the beat. …Back-phrasing is not only being behind the beat, but also being more conversational with the lyric, which is very essential in interpreting a pop song versus a classical song or opera.”

Back-phrasing does not necessarily mean that the singer is constantly behind the beat, but the singer will often sing behind the beat in order to emphasize certain words. Slight alterations to the rhythm will draw attention to the words. The accompaniment typically remains constant, but the singer’s rhythm is altered slightly from the printed page. Listening to singers who back-phrase (Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Mel Tormé, etc.) and then practicing it would be important first steps for a singer to sing American standards in the correct style.

For improvisation in popular song, such as American standards, Anne Peckham suggests that singers vocalize using major and minor pentatonic scales, as well as blues scales. When a singer is comfortable with the scales, he or she should begin improvising patterns over one sustained pitch and then learn to improvise with a chord progression. She states that “Once

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singers ‘own’ a number of patterns…they can draw further on this vocabulary to improvise and embellish melodies.” Although practicing the exercises suggested by Peckham, in addition to listening to numerous recordings, would be beneficial, it may be necessary to have the guidance of another singer or vocal coach who is comfortable with jazz improvisation, depending on the level of improvisation that is desired. For example, learning to scat would probably require much practice for most classically trained singers.

Simple melodic embellishments would probably be the best place for most singers to begin, and these embellishments could be planned ahead of time instead of improvised. Gloria Cooper mentions four common options for melodic embellishment:

“The pitch of a note in the melody can be changed either up or down, while respecting the underlying harmony. The note can become more than one note (repeated notes, arpeggios, ornaments, and the like). The note can be started either early or later in the phrase. The duration of a note can be lengthened or shortened.”

Using Cooper’s suggestions would be a good starting point for the classical singer, and as the singer gains comfort and confidence with the style, he or she might become comfortable exploring other options or improvising some embellishments instead of planning them all.

Improvisation and embellishment may be learned gradually and should be performed tastefully. In the interview of Feinstein by Holmes, they discuss the issue of honoring the composer’s wishes but not singing exactly what is printed on the page and sounding stilted. Feinstein states that “the trick with these songs [is] to be faithful to the writer’s intentions and, yet, to be able to take liberties.” Holmes, a singer with a classical background, states that she will

usually “sing most songs, the first time pretty much as they’re written. …On the repeat, I’m apt to play around with it some.”28 Their views are good advice to keep in mind when preparing American standards for performance.

In the Jane Russell recording of “Do It Again,” she uses a great deal of back-phrasing, and very few of the rhythms are sung exactly as written. It is as if the written rhythm is just a suggestion, particularly in the opening verse of the song (Example 8), which is sung almost like a recitative. In the refrain (Example 7), the rhythm also varies greatly from what is written. For example the rhythm she actually sings in measures 19-21 is approximately notated in Example 9.

Example 10. “Do It Again,” mm. 19-21 as sung by Jane Russell

The rhythm is sung freely throughout the recording, with some notes lengthened, while others are shortened, all in the interest of expressing the text. In comparison, in Mary Martin’s recording of the song, she sings the rhythm almost exactly as written, with only minor alterations when the refrain is repeated.29

Rhythmic changes, as mentioned above, are the most common embellishments heard in recordings of “Do It Again.” In Nancy Wilson’s recording, slight melodic variations are heard, such as a slight flattaing of the pitch as the word is sustained “oh” in measure 19. In measures 20 and 21 (Example 11), she creates a suspension on the second syllable of the word “again” and

Example 11. “Do It Again,” mm. 20-21 as sung by Nancy Wilson
slides down a step to the resolution of the suspension.\textsuperscript{30} Wilson’s recording is full of embellishments such as these, and upon repeating the refrain, she alters the melody even more. Listening to and practicing the back-phrasing or other rhythmic or melodic alterations that are made by any of the recorded singers would be beneficial in informing a performance of “Do it Again” by a classical singer.

**Conclusion**

American standards typically began as the popular songs of the early twentieth century, whether from movies or musical theatre. However, on the continuum from classical opera or art song to today’s popular music or contemporary musical theatre, their roots are more on the classical end, with influences from jazz. This allows for easier access to this repertoire by the classically trained singer.

In researching performance practice for American standards, a term that appeared many times is “conversational,” and the conversational quality should be the primary consideration for the singer when approaching this repertoire. When one considers the conversational quality, it will affect nearly all aspects of the way one sings a song, including diction, the use of the voice, and any improvisation or embellishment. Sylvia McNair’s pithy advice is useful: “I think it's important not to over-sing, over-enunciate and over-blow popular song. It needs to be lighter, maybe softer, approached a little more gently than a piece of classical music and I also believe most of this repertoire is words-driven.”\textsuperscript{31}


\textsuperscript{31} Sylvia McNair, e-mail message to author, January 28, 2014.
The singer, having listened to many recordings and carried out other research, might choose to be accompanied by piano or to add additional instruments, depending on the circumstances of the performance. Informed decisions about accompaniment, arrangements, and selection of keys, in addition to the stylistic considerations when singing a song, will help lead to a pleasurable and more authentic performance of American standards.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this document is to provide performance practice guidelines for the classical singer when singing non-classical repertoire, specifically American folk songs, African American spirituals, and American standards. When singers choose to sing most repertoire that is included as part of Contemporary Commercial Music, it is necessary to make alterations to the vocal technique in order to give an effective performance. The genres discussed in this document were specially selected because they require little to no alteration of classical technique in order to sing them. The changes that the singer must make in order to give an effective performance are changes in style.

Each genre covered in this document has its own distinct style, but some elements of the styles are consistent. Communicating the text should always be a priority for the singer in any genre. However, for some classical singers, the voice often takes precedence over the text, especially when singing operatic arias. In American folk songs, African-American Spirituals, and American Standards, communication of the text is equally, if not more important to the voice. Depending on the genre, this is accomplished by different methods, from the way one uses the voice, to the way one pronounces the text. Any of this repertoire can be performed with piano accompaniment, and arrangements are available in each genre for voice and piano; however, singers may choose to explore original sources of the songs and create original arrangements and use different instrumentation.
With all genres, it is important for the singer to research each song that will be performed. In this research, the singer should study the text, learn about the composer and/or lyricist, explore the background of the song, and listen to recordings. It is helpful to listen to many different recordings of each song in order to learn the stylistic possibilities. One should listen to recordings of both classical and non-classical singers performing the songs in order to learn how to apply the style to classical singing technique. It would also be advisable for the singer to seek the advice or guidance of someone who has experience and success in the style. If the singer is unsure whether or not they are grasping the style, it would be of great value to also have an expert listen to a rehearsal of the repertoire before performing it.

By concerning ourselves with performance practice, we are on a quest for truth—the most authentic way to perform music. While there is no one right way to sing any song, if a singer chooses to sing a song, then the singer assumes a responsibility to seek out the truth in the song, through research, listening, and practice. As in classical music, the composer’s wishes should be honored by respecting performance practice. In these non-classical genres, we should strive to honor the wishes of either the composer or the creator of the songs, as well as the tradition of the singers who sang them before us.
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