

THE SINGER'S GUIDE TO BUILDING A CHARACTER
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Musical Theatre and Opera express the height of intense human experience and feeling that can find full expression only through the medium of music. Obviously, such expression does not reflect a "slice of life," as our concept of contemporary Realism does. Nevertheless, it relies upon a belief in the characters' situations and motivations that propel them through a series of dramatic actions expressed through song.

The demands placed upon the singing actor are strenuous and varied. In addition to the obvious physical and musical demands of singing, often with a large orchestra in a big hall, the performer must clarify for the audience the events of the opera or musical, so the *drama of the music* can be appreciated.

Knowledge of the basic tools of acting is essential in the singing actor's quest toward building an interesting, moving, and believable characterization. When the dramatic intentions and needs of a character are explored only superficially, the performance lacks depth and specificity; and the drama inherent in the music lacks the support necessary to fully move the audience.

The following guide attempts to define common acting terminology and describe the fundamental steps towards building a character. It is intended specifically for the singing actor.

WORKING TERMINOLOGY

Given Circumstances - Refers to any information provided by the librettist that describes the character and the world in which he/she lives. These include such things as the period in which the action of the opera takes place; social, political, religious factors that influence the characters; physical characteristics of the character, such as age, gender, etc. (See CHARACTER AUTOBIOGRAPHY for an in-depth description of given circumstances.)

Singers are advised to explore musical elements that reveal information about characters, such as, the rhythmic structure of an aria, musical character motifs, etc. What do these musical elements say about your character? How does what happens musically before you sing or enter the stage affect your character's emotional state of being?

Inner Object/Visualization – Those most salient visual images the performer "sees" in the mind's eye while singing, that evoke a strong, specific connection

between the performer and the musical text. A generalized emotion or attitude about a song is not sufficient to sustain an audience's emotional involvement.

Previous Action - The event(s) that took place immediately before the action now occurring onstage. This event obviously causes the dramatic action to evolve into the present event.

State of Being, or Condition - How your character feels, physically or emotionally, at any given time.

Objective - What you, the character, want. Think of your objective in terms of "I want," "I need," or "I must..." An objective should also be positive, active and succinct. You can only play one objective at a time.

*I want you to say you love me.
I need that money back!
I must get you on my side.*

Action - How you, the character, will go about achieving your objective. Action in this context refers to dramatic action, not usually physical action. Examples of good, playable actions are:

*to cajole
to harangue
to plead
to pry
to drag down*

Most often in opera and musical theatre, the music reflects dramatic changes. The performer must live up to those musical changes by motivating and justifying them dramatically. In opera, the music and the drama are inextricably linked. They serve each other, and the performer must facilitate this.

Obstacle - Whatever is preventing you from reaching your objective. An obstacle can be internal (like fear, self-doubt) or external, (like another character's opposing objective).

State of Being - How your character feels, emotionally and/or physically.

Beat - A segment of dramatic action throughout which things (objectives, actions) stay the same. Anything that causes change of any kind, creates a "beat break." For example, when a character enters or exits; if a character tries a new action; if a character reaches or changes their objective.

Script Score

Think of your acting score as your workbook. It's where you'll record your specific acting choices, in pencil, as they change and develop throughout rehearsals. It helps prepare you for rehearsals, so you will have a basic notion of what you wish to pursue, while remaining open to new ideas that arise during rehearsals.

The Format:

1. In pencil, divide your script into where you think the beats are, and number each one. Remember, they may ...probably will...change as you grow in the piece.
2. In the left-hand margin, or on a separate sheet of paper, briefly describe the previous action.
3. In the left-hand margin, or on a separate sheet of paper, briefly fill in the following *for each beat*. For example:

State of being: I'm frantic that Joe will leave me when he finds out what I did!

Objective: I must get his signature on this contract before he leaves, or I'll lose my inheritance.

Action: to flatter (him into joining my side, and signing the contract.)

Obstacle: Joe's slow nature and desire to take a nap before he does another thing.

Throughout the rehearsal process you will discover many new and different possibilities for interpreting your role. Keep track of them in your score, IN PENCIL. Feel free to change them, however, in response to the input you get from rehearsals and coachings.

Character Autobiography

The Character Autobiography is an element of the actor's homework intended to help you begin feeling, thinking and behaving like your character. Approach it as a means of building your character into a three-dimensional, interesting person with clear, specific, strong desires, a point of view, and a life history.

Jot down your autobiographical notes after you've read the entire play/opera/musical.

Ask yourself the following questions, as they are relevant to your piece. Be honest and unrelenting with yourself. The more questions you ask, the more choices you make available to yourself:

Understanding the Play/Musical/Opera:

- What is the event of this scene/song?
- What time period does the action of the piece take place; and how does that influence me, the character?
- What time of year, day is it?
- What are the weather conditions?
- How does that influence my physical/emotional condition?
- Where do I live?
- Where does the action of this scene/song take place and what physical elements do I need to imagine?
- What social/political/ideological characteristics of the culture and time period influence my character and how?
- How does the previous action of this scene/song influence the choices I make?

Physical Characteristics

- How old am I?
- What is my physical silhouette, and what does that reveal about me?

- What gesture(s) do I use as extensions of my psycho-physical make-up?
- What is my character's movement dynamic in general, and does it change at any point in the piece? Why? (for example, staccato, languid, direct, indirect, earth bound, ethereal, etc.)
- If my character were a non-human creature or abstract expression (animal, color, music, insect, element of nature...), what would I be?

Emotional/Psychological/Moral Make-up:

- Where am I from and how have I been influenced by my upbringing?
- What is my level of education?
- What do I say, in the piece, about myself? Do I always reveal the truth about myself?
- What do other characters say about me?
- What are my relationships with the other characters in this piece?
- What is my point of view/feeling about each character in the piece?
- What are my beliefs, values, hopes, dreams, goals?
- How does my character change during the course of the scene and why?
- What are the stakes involved in my going for what I want?
- What is my socio-economic standing?
- What are my favorite activities, foods, music, performers, writers, etc.?
- What do I, the character, like to do when I'm alone?

Personal Connection:

- What experiences can I draw on from my own life to help me better empathize with my character?
- What tool(s) can I use to help me gain a sense of the urgency of my character's needs? Sense memory? Emotional recall?