

HOW I LEARN AN OPERA

Brian DeMaris | www.briandemaris.com

FIRST STEP ALWAYS

First, I read the whole libretto, 2 or 3 times if time allows. I meditate on it each time.

Then, I read ABOUT the work, the composer and librettist, and the time period in which they lived, as well as the time period in which the plot takes place. **This research continues throughout the entire following process.**

After I've done the above work, my workload divides into two daily tasks:

DAILY TASK ONE: TEXT WORK

I put the translation into my score and memorize every word and phrase as I go, always speaking in character – slowly putting words into my tongue and building tempo and always inflecting. My knowledge of languages is strong enough that I don't have to look things up much or write everything into my music. I only write in particularly complicated phrases or unknown words. Sometimes I write in parentheses subtext or clarification of what dramatically or grammatically complicated lines may actually be meaning or to what or whom characters are referring to or speaking. My knowledge of diction rules is thorough enough that I don't need to write in the IPA except for exception words, or words I'm unfamiliar with. I often write in IPA for complicated French words and liaison, as French is my weakest language.

DAILY TASK TWO: EVERYTHING ELSE

Read act 1 libretto

Conduct act 1 at the table, singing parts in my head or out loud. Do this as many times as time allows.

If my preparation time is really limited, I'll start listening to recordings here, without the score in my hand. But if I have enough time, I don't listen to recordings until after I start to study the score. (See below ***)

Conduct act 1 while listening to a recording and singing along (vocal and orchestral parts). I usually only do this one to three times at most. This is the point at which I write important things from the orchestration (or certain traditions) that may not be in the published piano-vocal score.

Scan act 1 noticing themes and making connections. Scan the same act again and again going into greater detail each time. I may intersperse this with my act "run-throughs" above.

If unclear, I write brief synopses over what is happening in each scene, and which characters are involved. I always do this for secco recits so that later in rehearsal I know which recit is which.

Ideally this is where I will start listening to recordings. I put multiple recordings on one iPod playlist, as many as possible. This playlist becomes my life until rehearsals begin. I eat, sleep, drive, and fly with these recordings. I always have the playlist on shuffle so I don't listen to one whole recording of the opera in a row, and I hear different parts of the opera. It's like P90X for the brain. This way I don't get ideas into my head that aren't mine, but I hear ideas that will inform my final version and I get to know the score aurally (particularly the orchestration. (See above ***)

I repeat the entire process for other acts, one at a time. **I've found it is not beneficial to practice the opera from beginning to end. I shuffle acts around from day to day in order to avoid the pitfall of learning earlier acts and insufficiently preparing later acts.**

I repeat this entire process for individual characters or groups of characters in order to discover larger forms and arcs, and to continually be learning the score hierarchically (with a larger perspective, from the outside looking in) and to avoid only knowing the score linearly (from beginning to end).

THEN I LEARN THE NOTES

I practice all vocal parts mentally first, then actually singing – by act, scene, character. I do this regardless of whether I'm coaching/playing, or conducting the show.

If I'm going to be playing or coaching the show, I practice the piano part mentally first, then actually playing – by act, scene, character, etc.

If I'm going to be conducting the show, I do all of the above work FIRST (voice parts and piano part), but I also parse large phrases, indicate formal ideas, and note key harmonic ideas in the score as I go. I then air-play or sing through a large combination of individual parts or play them at the piano if I can't hear them in my head. I will also play groups of instruments (strings, winds, brass, etc). If I need to bow parts, I learn the strings parts first and bow them as I go – as this usually needs to be done well in advance.

FINALLY, I practice performing the opera

I do act 1 a couple times, then act 2 a couple times (followed by any further acts).

Then I'll work the acts out of order or backwards.

Eventually I'll set aside a large portion of a day to run through the entire opera. This can be either at the piano, singing the parts, or conducting in front of a mirror. Somewhere around here I may also start listening to entire recordings of the opera, but not until I've gone through the whole thing myself.

AT LONG LAST, the first musical coachings and staging rehearsals are ready to begin! If I want to go the extra mile for a particularly big gig or new opera, I will take a few lessons at this point with multiple coaches, conductors, or singers.

THINGS TO NOTE

This is how I learn a show. It's not how everyone works. It's what's worked best for me.

This process is what helps me learn a score inside and out, hierarchically AND linearly.

This process can take a year, spending minimal time each day on each step, or it can take a couple weeks, spending every hour of every day on each step. If you have less than a couple weeks to prepare you have the option of skipping steps, or being willing to enter the rehearsal process without having completed the preparation process. This is possible in certain situations but not ideal. You have to make decisions and make sacrifices.

90% of it requires only two things: your brain and your score. No practice room, no piano, no one else's help. The more thorough this "table work" is, the easier and quicker the practice room work is. You can learn 90% of an opera on the beach (which I've done!) or in a remote forest, or on a train or plane.

A highly advanced set of aural skills, languages, diction, and history allows me to do much of this without reference resources.

As with anything, the more often you have to learn a complete opera, the easier it gets.

It should be noted that singers have the additional task of adding thorough character research and physical work into this process. Still, with a highly advanced set of acting and movement skills, table-work will always account for the majority of the process assuming your technique is strong in all related areas.