

Introduction

Do you like to practice? If your answer is no, this book is for you! If your answer is yes, this book is for you, too! In the life of a singer, no matter what level, practice is the most significant portion of what you will be doing for those phenomenal hours in rehearsal and that glorious moment of performance.

What do *you* do when you practice? Let's start first with what it means to practice. According to Merriam-Webster it is, "to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient, to train by repeated exercises, and systematic exercise of proficiency." So, practice includes repetition. But what happens if something goes wrong, and you repeatedly practice an error? That's right, you've practiced it perfectly wrong. Our repertoire is fraught with mistakes by the frequent practice of errors. That is why the idiom "practice makes perfect" is only possible if the practice is perfect¹; otherwise, it will be perfectly incorrect. You need to have the right tools in place for practice, and your practice should include many tapas-sized portions of work.

In my home, I have a modest toolbox. The contents include a hammer, nails, and hardware for hanging pictures, a tape measure, a flat screwdriver, a Phillips screwdriver, and a set of very small screwdrivers. That is sufficient for what I do around my home. Everything else requires the expertise, interest, and toolbox of someone more skilled than I, whether it is re-grouting, putting up crown molding, renovating a bathroom, or building a closet.

As a singer, you need a professional-size toolbox for your craft; this book is just that. It can be read, reread, and regularly referenced. You can use the tools that will be most effective for you first, and then, as you integrate the skillsets into your practice, you can add more tools to your practice. This book is a lifelong study and is useful every time you learn a new piece or revisit a piece that is an old friend. It doesn't matter whether you are a freshman in college, have completed several young artist programs or are several years into a successful career. It doesn't matter if your chosen career path is as an opera singer, a choral singer, a music teacher, or a hobby musician. The exercises and ideas in the following chapters will help you learn to be more detailed and efficient with your time and in your practice and will show you multiple ways to get to a result you are amazingly proud of.

This book is the result of over 40 years of coaching singers. It is the result of the many teachers and mentors who taught me. It is the result of learning from the fabulous singers I've had the privilege of working with. It is the result of my love for finding ways to clarify concepts, provide particulars and help all singers become the very best possible version of themselves.

Susan Shiplett Ashbaker

¹ "Perfect" is a curious word. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary online, the definitions include "being entirely without fault or defect, flawless, satisfying all requirements, accurate, corresponding to an ideal standard or abstract concept... expert, proficient." In the arts, there are so many subjective opinions that "perfect" can be different for everyone. In this case, what can be right (satisfying all requirements) are the pitches, rhythms, and words. So, please proceed with caution, and don't let the word "perfect" stifle your artistic vision or creativity!