

SYLLABUS for SONGSHOP

© Claudia Hommel, Chicago, January 2022

The goal of our work is to connect to the truth of our songs and, borrowing a phrase from voice teacher Stephen Smith, “to pour ourselves out” to our audience.

In SongShop, I offer you a tool kit that begins with an actor’s approach to the craft of singing, using a palette of theatrical techniques in interpretation and performance. These include physical, physiological and psychological tools. We also tune into the dynamic world of musical sound and the aural experience of language (how language sounds in our mouth, in our ear). We are mindful of how the musical elements of rhythm, timbre, melody, harmony and dynamics give our storytelling powerful and emotional wings.

At any one time, certain tools are more useful than others; some need to be used first before getting into fancier equipment. Because everyone enters SongShop at different levels of experience, in a single session we are likely to work with both the most basic tools and more “precision instruments”. Regardless of our years of experience and stagecraft, the fundamentals remain just that, and it’s always useful to come back to them.

For this next term, what are your SongShop goals? The more you can articulate and share them with me, the more I can look in that tool chest for what may help you attain them. See the FEEDBACK sheet at the end of this Syllabus.

WHY WORK IN A GROUP?

There’s nothing more concentrated than working one-on-one with a voice teacher for an hour. I highly recommend the process. However, working in a group brings the work to the test. The group is your audience, your mirror, your confidants, and darn, if someone else shows by example the very challenge you face (but hadn’t faced) or the ah-ha moment of self-recognition in someone else’s triumph. We serve as each other’s measuring stick for the progress we make. And with a shared concert, we get to celebrate the growth and improvements, the finesse and heightened craftsmanship together. The art comes out in the telling to each other.

I’ve thought about the question of creating SongShop 201 to follow SongShop 101, but I find that the work keeps circling back to the foundation. Perhaps your next level is digging more into the musicality and vocal strength in your singing. Other levels may be measured in your readiness to perform a mini-set, to create a one-hour solo show, to put together a duo or trio. At whatever level and with each performance, enjoy the ride, have fun, congratulate yourself for giving it your 110% commitment.

Then, when you’re ready, it’s back to exploring new songs or working an old song with fresh insights. The point is that with a strong foundation, you can build fancy or plain. And, to keep up the metaphor, as you walk around your building, you’ll find new doors in and new vistas surrounding it.

WHAT to PREPARE and BRING to SONGSHOP

- Bring two songs, one to present to the workshop and a second one in case, a) the first song is so spectacular there's nothing to add, b) it's so uninteresting there's no way to save it as a piece of theatre or c) we have enough time to work with both songs.
- Claudia likes to have a hand-written copy of the text of each song (with name of composer/lyricist, publication date if known and its source if movie, musical, opera, song cycle). This seemingly simple piece of homework helps start the process. (More on that below.)
- Provide the pianist and Claudia each with a clearly marked copy of the song in the right key. (One of those copies can be a digital PDF sent to Claudia a day in advance.)
But what if I don't know my key? Since that's quite possible, we'll address that together in the session. Meanwhile, bring some version of the song, preferably a piano-vocal score, but at minimum a lead sheet that includes the melody line and lyrics.
But what if my arranger only gave me a chart of chords without melody? Find at the library a copy of the same song, even if it's in a different key than your own. Let your toolkit grow!
- As the term progresses, you'll want to put together a binder of your SongShop repertoire. The pianist will thank you for having the songs in a 3-ring binder or pages taped in series.
- Bring a notebook to write, remember and reflect on the process.
- Dressing for the part helps, too. Wear what you would to an audition or open mic.
- Know the music and lyrics before bringing a song to class. The song need not be memorized. In fact, you'll find it easier to memorize as a result of exploring it from inside out, learning it "by Heart".
I don't read music so is it okay that I learn it from a recording? Yes and no! We're usually inspired to learn a song because we heard it sung live or in recording. But if you rely on another singer's interpretation to learn the words and melody, you'll learn all their mistakes and idiosyncratic inventions, not to mention how much harder it is to adapt to someone else's feelings. One way to shake it up is to listen to lots of different performances.
As we start the work that follows in *Song as Scene* below, put all of those performances aside. The most "neutral" way to learn a song is to read it on the page. Read the words, write the words, speak the words. And I encourage you to take a Musicianship 101 course to learn how to read musical notation so you can follow the composer's melody and rhythm. Then, allow your internal ear to hear your own sound, and bring your own energy and truth to the song.

EXERCISE & BIBLIOGRAPHY:

It takes guts to sing in public. Confidence doesn't come easy. It takes practice like every other good thing we do in life. I especially like *The Art of Possibility* by Benjamin and Rosamund Zander for giving us in advance the "A" we will have earned by the end of the term. Just write a letter dated at the end of May later this school year and tell yourself (and me, if you'd like) what you did to deserve that A. It's amazing what affirmation does for disentangling our soul from the mesh of would-be-failure.

SONG AS SCENE

Write the lyrics of your song in long hand. Write them to someone: Dear Diary, Dear Dad, dearest lover, or Dear Mrs. Worthington. As you continue to explore the meaning of your song, who that person is will become clearer to you. This seemingly simple piece of homework start the process of finding yourself in the song.

Let's explore the story and character of your song. What is the setting and setup for your story?

1. Paraphrase the song... retell it in your own words.
2. Where am I?
3. To whom am I speaking? Tell us about this very important person.
4. What do I feel about him/her/them?
5. What do I want from them right now? All theatre (and this is theatre) is driven by "I want it now!"
6. What happened just before this scene that makes me have to blurt out these words? Why is it so important to speak now?

IMPORTANCE, COMPULSION. Something big is always at stake. Life & death. Love lost or found.

7. How do I feel at the beginning?
8. What happens to make me feel differently at the end?
9. What tactics am I using to get what I want from the others in my story?
10. Where are the changes that take place in the course of the song: the clues are in the musical phrasing, tonalities, tempo, dynamics, the empty spaces and rests; as well as in the lyrics.
11. What details can you add to the back story?
12. Relate some aspect of this story to something or someone in your life.
13. Who is the audience to me in this story (confidant, jury, witness, guardian angel, the invisible walls of my solitude)

EXERCISES to explore:

Arbitrarily changing the meter, the dynamics, and the feel—even if inappropriate or absurd—will reveal new layers to the song (humor or pathos emerges where you didn't see it before, new emotions and images come into play):

- Speak the song while being accompanied by the music.
- Listen to the language of the song. Within each line of text, what consonant and vowel sounds are being repeated, that give punch to telling of your story. (In the opening phrase of Billy Strayhorn's *Lush Life*, all the letter Ls linger and stick to the roof of the mouth like someone who can't move: "I used to visit all the very gay places, Those come what may places, Where one relaxes on the axis of the wheell of life, To get the feell of life, From jazz and cocktails.")

- Sing the song 50% faster, 50% slower.
- Sing the song a cappella as a contemplation, as a tirade, as a plea, as a celebration.
- Sing the song with a different feel: waltz, two-step, tango, rap, gospel-like. Vary the dynamics arbitrarily. Take the phrases in and out of tempo, from a conversational rubato to a steady metronome.
- Sing the song to someone very young, very old, sad, happy, on the phone, behind you at the mirror, far ahead, very close, in bed with you, on their deathbed, on your deathbed, at a campfire, in the kitchen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Handbooks on acting are useful references for singers. Shurtleff's *Audition* gives shorthand cues to finding importance and specificity within a monologue. Shirlee Emmons and Stanley Sonntag's book *The Art of the Song Recital* includes "The Unique Needs of the Young Artist" and "The Singing Actor". Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* is a gold mine of insights into character. There are many classic texts and lots of new ones to launch your discovery process. John Barton's text work from "Playing Shakespeare", Sanford Meisner's "in the moment" emotional work, and more.

II. THE PHYSICAL LIFE OF A SONG – UNENCUMBERED AND EXPRESSIVE.

How do you prepare your body for singing? Our attention is physical, mental and spiritual. On some level, we have to become aware of our physical habits in order to change them. And often, we have as much to unlearn, as to learn anew. I love how the Alexander Technique teaches us the sense of extension, rising tall from the earth, balanced and fluid in motion. The Michael Chekhov Technique provides a rich vocabulary for relating motion to emotion. The pelvic area is associated with doing and willing, the torso with heart and feeling, the head with thinking. We move forward or repel back differently depending on which center is leading the way.

Healthy Vocal Production

Elements include a free and rising spine, relaxed and open shoulders, open sternum, a relaxed jaw that opens easily, independent articulation by tongue and lips, a dynamic abdomen that is freely expanded.

The tongue serves as an articulator of consonants and vowels but does not do the heavy lifting of support and resonance. It stays "out of the way" by disentangling from the larynx.

Projection, the ability to be heard at the back of the balcony, is based on focused airflow, not on pushing, not on "shouting". So let's explore making sounds louder and softer, but with intensity that projects.

Physical Life of My Body

What should I do with my hands? Follow the impulse fully and when done, let it fade gently to neutral. Gesture comes from feeling. Externalize your feeling with a full gesture. Be mindful of how it feels internally. In stillness, feel the same gesture "internally".

UNIVERSAL GESTURES

PULL	PUSH	LIFT	SMASH	GATHER	WRING	EMBRACE
TURN	THROW	PENETRATE	TEAR	OPEN	CLOSE	REACH

EXERCISES:

Sing your song while cleaning house, moving furniture, making the bed, vacuuming, washing dishes, folding clothes. Sing your song while walking in the woods, striding down the sidewalk. Do the same while seated on a chair or stool (yes, you can express with your shoulders, your chest, your arms, the way you turn your legs while seated).

Pick a large psychological gesture that you can associate with your song. Repeat and vary it from every direction and dimension (from your torso up, down, behind, below) and at different speed of motion and intensity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Kate DeVore's *The Voice Book* for healthy vocal production. Stephen Smith's *The Naked Voice* for a foundational approach to disentangling the voice. Michael Chekhov's physical theatre theories will have you moving. Tim Mooney's *Acting at the Speed of Life* will encourage you to be bold in expression.

III. THE SONG TELLS ITS STORY MUSICALLY.

Music, the song without words, makes its own conversation. Sometimes it's the same conversation as the words and sometimes it goes its own way. Any piece that repeats lyrics over and over again (think of the Hallelujah chorus from the *Messiah*) relies on the music to build where the words don't. Music is cumulative. The pulses pile up on each other until we feel like dancing or bursting out of our skin or melting. So while individual musical phrases often match individual thoughts, there are overarching ideas and internal shifts of melody, harmony or rhythm that take place within and without the measure, the phrase, the section of music.

When you sing your song without words, what do you notice about the ride? The musical changes can be taken as road signs on a map, and the best of the composers and lyricists will give you plenty to work with.

Where are the accented beats relative to the downbeat of each measure; where are the swells relative to each group of 4 bars or 8 (for example)?

Where are the rests? What role are they playing in the "breathlessness" of the conversation, the relative serenity or pressure or panic or zeal of a song. Often times your inhalation—its quality and its timing—brings as much to the expression of your thought as the tones you exhale. How you end a phrase is also telling. Should you hold onto the last note for dear life or let it go to make room for the next note?

If the song allows for changing the rhythmic drive and instrumentation (as all “standards” do, by definition) what feel & timbre complements your story, your “Want it now” of the song.

Is a rough-and-ready voice, is brass more in keeping with your story than being languorous or light. Does the accompaniment require a thicker wall of sound to match the big persona of your character? Do you want the consonants to roll softly off your lips or spit off your tongue?

What range and tonality best suits your voice and your vision of the song? Sometimes the difference of a half-step or whole-step up or down is enough to make a song feel not only more comfortable vocally but tell the story with more specific character. Are you seducing with low notes or being the sea-maiden siren with high notes?

DYNAMICS: EXPLORING INTENSITY VARIATION (borrowed liberally from Corky Siegel’s *Let Your Music Soar*)

Rather than thinking of musical dynamics (pianissimo to fortissimo) as a matter of volume, let’s approach these as variations in **physical and emotional intensity, from extremely delicate to outrageously forceful**. Qualities of each are rich in feelings:

pp or *ppp* (very delicate to extremely delicate) can be murmur, hint, trace, secret, concealed, seductive, private, secluded, feeble, motionless, fragrant, subtle, fragile, careful, supple, submissive, meek, shy, cautious, sly, removed, distant, unapproachable, introverted, still, susceptible

p (Delicate): gentle, light, kind, sensitive, polite, patient, soothing, agreeable, sweet, soft, malleable, yielding, amiable, courteous, fair, peaceful, agreeable, tame, considerate

mp (Mild): moderate, calm, temperate, modest, cool, reasonable, mellow, willing

mf (Full): ready, solid, unfolding, open, present, healthy

f (Strong): hardy, robust, vigorous, energetic, convincing, effective, heavy, reverberant, big, hearty, enthusiastic, zealous, direct, assertive, confident, deliberate

ff or *fff* (Forceful) Powerful, mighty, healthy, intense, tremendous, resounding, thunderous, aggressive, massive, uninhibited, rambunctious, stormy, huge, exciting, thrilling, rousing, exhilarating, untamed, ferocious, unrestrained, wild crazy!

Dynamic phrasing applies to large blocks of music as well as micro-dynamics on a single note. From flow to “wiggle” as Corky calls it.

In addition, consider Corky’s “Ten Factors in a Musical Moment”:

1. **Intention: the energy behind emotion—whether from inner expression or by applying different levels of intensity (*ppp* to *fff*).**
2. **Motion of Preparation (taking a breath)**
3. **Motion of Follow Through (forming the words, articulating before producing a sound)**
4. **Pressure (engaging the muscles that create the air flow and set the voice in motion)**
5. *Kinesthetic Experience (the electrical flow between muscle and brain)*
6. *Touch experience (for singers, the touch of our lips and tongue)*
7. *Physical Vibration Experience (felt within our body, and therefore greatly evident for singers)*

8. *Vibrating Air (in the space around us)*
9. *Hearing/Listening (our perception of that sound)*
10. *Reverberation (the extra soundwaves created by reflection off of other surfaces)*

We can only control the first four factors. The next three are the results of our intention and action. The last three factors are passive, happening after our emotional and physical input.

AN EXERCISE in awareness of the first four factors for singers is the equivalent of “air guitar”. Pretend you’re singing but don’t make a sound. “Put all your emotional intention into this silent performance, all the physical motions. ...All the emotion and excitement, without the sound. ...To illustrate the degree to which sound is NOT the most important aspect for experiencing emotion in your own performance.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Let Your Music Soar: the Emotional Connection by Corky Siegel & Peter Krammer. I’m also fond of Robert Jourdain’s book *Music, the Brain and Ecstasy* for elucidating the physics, physical and emotional power of music.

IV. WHAT HAPPENS in a SONGSHOP SESSION

All in the Timing

Each singer takes a turn to sing their song. We generally spend 15 to 25 minutes per person so that in a three hour session we can work with a maximum of 9 singers. There are sessions where more time might be spent with one singer and lesser amounts with others but in the long run, things even out. What is key is that we’re all tuned into the singer in front of us and their work serves as “demonstration model” to everyone else.

Participating in sessions for 4 weeks or more at a time offers you the opportunity to fine-tune, deepen and apply more aspects of the performance process to a single song or group of songs. Working with songs over time, coming back to a song the next week or in the next term, gives you a chance to recognize and challenge the “easy” patterns we fall into. The changing times outside our studio (whether personal or social) also bring new significance to our songs.

Most importantly, we thrive in an environment of respect, and have created a place to nurture confidence and risk-taking.

Other Participants

Auditors are always welcome. Every performer needs an audience. An audience of one’s peers can be the toughest crowd to win over. So whether you are attending in order to sing or just to watch, you come with an open mind, to embrace the effort, applaud the new discoveries, be on the lookout for the process and not just the end result. While auditing, keep your own songs in mind. Take notes. Finally, all of us get to “foils” and are asked to serve as the object of affection or derision, the sympathetic ear, the person on whom the singer is especially focused.

Singers may be accompanied by fellow musicians (on piano, guitar, accordion, etc.). Visiting accompanists will be fair game as well. They can learn a lot about how to hold their end of the story and how to breathe and enunciate with the singer.

Cabaret Project:

Our ongoing schedule allows us to convert the song preparation process into a finished product where participants put on their own cabaret concert. Regardless of musical genre, everyone gets into the act. Because intimacy is the hallmark of cabaret, we seek venues that allow direct contact between audience and performer, whether the DePaul Recital Hall, PianoForte's recital hall, Cyrano's cabaret room, the Venue at Daystar, the Jazz Showcase, or house concert.

IV. PUTTING IT TOGETHER (as the Sondheim song says...)

When is a song ready to be performed? When you've sung it for an audience several times. This is the proverbial chicken-and-egg quandary. You must hatch the song before it's ready, in order for it to learn how to fly.

Whether you're already working as a professional singer or trying this out for the first time, fortunately Chicago offers many opportunities to hatch a song. Hand your song to George, Beckie or Johnny at Davenport's, head out to Mark's open mic, or take the plunge at Monday nights at Petterino's. If you're singing art songs, sign up at the Liederstube at the Fine Arts building (liederstube.org). Join the Chicago Cabaret Professionals if you haven't already (easy to do at chicagocabaret.org).

And when several songs have been applauded and nerves shaken and you go "this is working!" you're ready to put together a mini-set, join a house concert, pull together your first show, or re-define the concerts you've already been touring.

What do you want to sing about? What interests you most in life, in love, in the world at large? Find it writ in song and take it on the road. We can talk about themes and creating a narrative arc for a show at some other time. This is all for the exploring. Sing strong!

SONGSHOPLIVE.COM

Our website is there to inform you of related activities, remind you how to RSVP for each session, review the process, keep an archives of our performances. If there is a story you want to post, a picture you want to add to the gallery, a profile you want to publish, it is there for your use.

Related Activities

In addition to our ongoing workshop, I encourage SongShop members to expand their network of teachers and mentors. We've organized workshops on: Vocal Health & Vocal Production with Kate DeVore, Louise Cloutier and David Edelfelt; Thinking Outside the Box with Beckie Menzie, Spider Saloff and Bobby Schiff to consider arrangements and jazz treatments; offered master classes with Stephen Smith and Keri Chryst, collaborated with the Moving Dock Theatre Company's Dawn Arnold to introduce ourselves to the Michael Chekhov Technique; and taken a bunch of our singers to Paris to inaugurate the first Jazz Tour & Singers Workshop in Paris.

CLAUDIA HOMMEL

Performance and Academic Background:

Claudia Hommel brings to student and adult singers more than three decades of stage and song career. She approaches each student and each song with insights and energy that come from her own studies with international singer Martha Schlamme, actor/director Alvin Epstein, music director Steve Blier, voice teacher Roberta Vatske, various Shakespeare workshops, Art Song sessions led by Dalton Baldwin, Meisner technique studio work, and dance.



Claudia specializes in cabaret shows and recitals of French chansons, art songs, and American songbook standards—touring to performing arts centers, museums, universities and high schools from coast to coast, from Paris to Peoria. She is on faculty at the Community Music Division of DePaul University in Chicago.

Born in Paris, France and raised in Detroit, Claudia acquired a Masters in Library Science and worked as an archivist before going on to New York City to pursue a career in theatre and music. Calling Chicago home since 1990, she is a founding member of the Chicago Cabaret Professionals and is a member of the actors unions: Actors Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA. The Illinois Arts Council has selected her as an ArtsTour Roster artist since 1998 and as Arts-in-Education artist since 1999. She has presented clinic sessions for Illinois Music Educators Association. In 2014, she formed a tri-country collaboration with Keri Chryst of Paris and Maja Savic of Zagreb to create the Singers Jazz Workshop and the International Singers Jazz & Cabaret Conference in Chicago. Her “Cabaret-Paree” recordings and the Jazz Fauré Project are available on the Maison Clobert label through her website at www.cabaret-paree.com.

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ELEMENTS & EXPECTATIONS for MY SONGSHOP PROGRESS

Use the following prompts or write your own summary of goals and expectations for the coming term. Copy them, mull them over, then send your response to me alone, to be held confidentially.

GOALS... as they apply to your current situation:

- 1 -- I want get back to singing but am not sure what to do with it.
- 2 -- I want to explore the art of singing, to see how it feels, find myself in a song, but have no specific performance goal
- 3 -- Singing makes me feel _____.
- 4 -- The kind of songs that I love best to sing are (genre, composers, etc.)_____.
- 5 -- I want to be part of a group show.
- 6 -- I want to put together a mini-set of songs to perform in public.
- 7 -- I am itching to perform and have the following performance plans now through the next year.

WORKING IN CONCERT:

- 8 -- I appreciate SongShop for the camaraderie and support
- 9 -- I like to hear others sing and perform
- 10 -- I want a great variety of learning and performance experiences: different workshops, coaches, and master classes. (Where else/what else are you studying?)
- 11 -- I currently engage in creative activities besides solo singing, including _____.
- 12 -- I prefer to perform with a group.
- 13 -- I'm concentrating on solo performance.

ATTENDANCE:

- 14 -- I like to drop in on SongShop to refresh or work on new songs, as need be.
- 15 -- I commit to attending ____ SongShop sessions from (date) _____ to (date)_____.

OBSTACLE and CHALLENGES:

- 16 -- I would do more with my singing if I had more/less _____.
- 17 -- I wish SongShop could or would _____