

AI 235 SONGSHOP – the Art of Song Interpretation: a course in vocal performance and song analysis – Winter 2006

Thursday, 6:30 to 9:30 pm

Course description:

This hands-on course for performers, accompanists and auditors, gives students the opportunity to strengthen analytic and interpretative abilities in song. We ask each performing student to select and prepare songs. Together, we'll explore the sense of place, character, poetry, and examine the specific moments and changes within each song, and in the process make the song your own. We work with singers at various levels of performance experience.

This course is not limited to performers with “great” voices. We're aiming to strengthen conviction and communication along with basic musicality for **anyone** wanting to sing—for our purposes, these are far more important aims than the quality or range of voice. Although we apply “cabaret” techniques of “intimate singing”, the songs to be worked on can be in any genre as long as there is a story to tell (opera, folk, rock, jazz, musical theatre, etc.). This course is not a vocal technique class, but the acting approach to singing often clears up diction and physical problems that stem from lack of specific intention in the interpretation.

Auditors play an important role as well because without audience there is no performance. Auditors are also used as “foils” and may be “on stage” to serve as the object of affection or derision, the sympathetic ear. This is a class of discovery and process—not only about songs but also about us.

Students will be assessed by their participation as singers or auditors, attendance at class and live performances, use of journals and responsiveness.

Competencies for this course

A-1-A Can interpret works of art and relate them to one's own experience.

A-1-C Can analyze artistic or textual works in terms of form, content, and style.

A-1-D Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.

A-2-B Can perform proficiently in an art form and analyze the elements that contribute to proficiency.

Claudia Hommel, singer and actor specializing in French *chansons* and international art songs, tours from Paris to California and is on the ArtsTour and Arts-in-Education rosters of the Illinois Arts Council. An active member of the actors' unions, she is a founder of the Chicago Cabaret Professionals. She conducts “songshops” also for the DePaul Community Music School. www.cabaret-paree.com.

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COMPETENCIES

A-1-A: Can interpret works of art and relate them to one's own experience.

Singing students will select, prepare and sing several songs during the course. All participants will analyze the expression of meaning, values and experience, and will be asked to relate the interpretations to themselves and others. Students demonstrate this competence by choosing songs to study, perform and discuss. In reflecting upon their appreciation of the work, students will make explicit links to their own life experience.

A-1-C: Can analyze artistic or textual works in terms of form, content, and style.

Whether performing or auditing, each student will be expected to learn and apply a vocabulary of form, content and style to analyze the performance of songs. Students demonstrate this competence by showing that they understand and can discuss the songs performed in class, can remark on the observed changes in interpretation, and compare them to other professional live or recorded performances.

A-1-D: Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.

Whether performing or auditing, each student will be asked to relate the songs to the larger picture of shared human experience. The success of an interpretation will be measured by both its unique connection to the individual singer AND its universality to a broader audience. And is it true that all good songs are about love or sex or both? We'll find out! Students demonstrate this competence by articulating how the choice of song and its performance inform

and enrich our understanding of human experience (for example, friendship, parenting, suffering, love, work, leisure, racism, sexuality, class, etc).

A-2-B: Can perform proficiently in an art form and analyze the elements that contribute to proficiency. Performing students will prepare and sing several songs in class. A range of musical and theatrical directions and exercises will be applied, and through the process of exploration, new interpretations will emerge. Students demonstrate this competence by performing songs with assurance, allowing the evolution of interpretation, and critically assessing the source of changes.

A-2-X: Written by student/faculty.

Preparation for the singing students:

- For each session, the singers should prepare two songs to which they feel personally connected. Choose one to present to the class. The second is a “back-up” in case the first song is so spectacular there’s nothing to critique, the singer is not connecting to the song, or we have time to work with both songs.
- Each student will have learned the music and lyrics before bringing a song to class. It need not be memorized (a music stand will be provided for the class) but we’ll find through the work that songs are easier to memorize as a result of our explorations.

Selecting the songs:

- Songs for our class can be of any genre (opera, folk, art song, rock, jazz, musical theatre, rap).
- The essence of most singing is story-telling. Not all songs are narrative, as in “I was lonely, we met, we fought, we loved, happy ending” and not all songs “move the plot along” but we will discover that most songs are about something that changes from beginning to end; an emotional discovery; or a music-and-word-painting of a scene or character in which a story is implied.
- We are usually drawn to a song by the way it “speaks” to us emotionally. Often times it is the melody that draws us in at first. Let’s make sure the words are equally attractive. For that reason, we’ll forego songs whose main purpose is to get people up and dancing. That’s a whole other story.
- The chosen song can be well known; but it’s always the mark of creativity to exploit a relatively unknown song or to make a well-known song distinctly our own.
- We’ll be looking for the humanity and humor in every song, even serious ones.
- The songs can be in any language as long as the student can explain it word by word.
- Students are welcome to communicate with Claudia before class to review their song selections and to garner some suggestions.

Process:

- Students should provide the pianist with a clearly marked copy of the song in the right key. A copy for Claudia is appreciated. If the music is pianistically challenging, you are encouraged to provide the pianist with a copy a week in advance. Also, bring 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.
- Our approach is theatrical. The performer can think ahead “in character” for each song: What is the set-up for this story? Where am I; to whom am I speaking; what happened before this moment to get me here? How do I feel at the beginning; what is changing to make me feel differently at the end? Claudia uses a variety of theatre tools to draw out the singer’s own specific choices—including John Barton’s text work from “Playing Shakespeare”, Sanford Meisner’s “in the moment” emotional work, Michael Shurtleff’s audition guideposts for character work, and the physical work of Alexander Technique.

Preparation and process for the “accompanist” students:

- If you play piano or guitar and would like to accompany singers in this class, we will match you up and ask that you rehearse together before class. For an accompanist to serve well the singer and the song, you will be asked to analyze the song and your role as a character in the song. When does the music enhance, mimic, contradict the lyrics; to what extent does the music paint the scenery, create the mood, the dramatic tension? Are you “breathing” with the singer?

Preparation and process for the “auditor” students:

- While all students will be encouraged to try their hand at singing at least once in the term, some may prefer to serve as auditors. That doesn't mean you won't get time “on stage” so be prepared to be brought to the front to serve as the “foil” for a singer: as object of their affection, derision, sympathy or plea. In addition, you will be asked to read at least one book on performance techniques (the titles mentioned in the syllabus or other titles you find) and to report on its relevance to the work you observe.

All in the Timing:

In each three-hour session we will be able to work with a maximum of 9 songs and singers (about 20 minutes for each singer). Over the course of ten-weeks we will be able to return to a song over time, to recognize and then challenge the “easy” patterns we fall into in our work, and to bring to our work more awareness of the changing times, from inside and outside the classroom.

Cabaret project:

Depending on the chemistry of our class, our schedule may allow us to convert the song preparation process into a finished product where the students put on their own cabaret. Regardless of musical genre, everyone can get into the act. Because intimacy is the hallmark of cabaret, the cabaret performance can take place in any space that allows direct contact between audience and performer. Everyone in the class will be engaged in bringing our cabaret to life – as publicity crew, designers, tech crew, ushers, researchers for program notes, etc.

Assignments for all students:

- A personal questionnaire to be brought to the first class answers the following questions in a sentence or two for each (auditors may not be able to answer the first four):
 - Why do you sing?
 - What do you physically feel when you sing?
 - What do you feel emotionally when you sing?
 - What do you like to sing?
 - What keeps you from singing (more)?
 - Who are some singers you especially enjoy?
 - What kinds of performance turn you off?
 - What songs do you especially enjoy?
 - What songs do you avoid (listening to, singing)?
- Keeping a journal. A weekly record of your response to our work will provide you with a cumulative reference to the processes, tools, hints, tips, scenarios, and links made for each song. You'll record also your response and observations of the evolution taking place for yourself and your fellow students in your appreciation and interpretation of song, singing and singers.
- Attending live performances. You will be expected to hear live 3 performances of vocal music (in at least two different genres) and to report through your journal and possibly in class on your response to each. We may attend one of these performances together as a class.
- A final self-evaluation will be required of all students (auditors will have made progress in their understanding of songs, singers and the singing process, too).

Schedule:

- First session: an overview of process including different tools and techniques to be used; discuss each student's role in this class (who will sing, accompany, audit). Discuss journalling assignment. Several singers will sing this first day as well.
- Second session and all future sessions will be devoted primarily to work on individual songs. Over the course of ten sessions we will address questions of physicality of singing, rhythm, tempo, character, movement, meaning, structure of live performances, language, “patter” before songs, etc. as they are raised by the specific songs and singers we are hearing.
- Third session, bring in your first set of journal pages for teacher's review.
- Fourth session: we will decide whether to create our own cabaret show. Everyone will have seen at least one live performance and prepared a brief written response to the experience.
- Fifth session: bring in a second set of journal pages, including your response to a reading (from the attached reference list or others recommended during the course or found on your own).
- Sixth session: report on a second live performance.
- Eighth session: if the cabaret project is going forth, final selections of songs will be made.
- Ninth session: report on a third live performance.

- Tenth session: if the cabaret project is on, this session will serve as dress rehearsal and review of all crew assignments. Bring in your journal pages.
- The class cabaret performance will be held during the 11th week.

Reference materials:

- Handbooks on performing will be useful references and several will be put on library reserve. For example, Michael Shurtleff's *Audition* gives some shorthand cues to finding importance and specificity within a scene or 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*, Agnes de Mille's *To a Young Dancer* on preparing for performance and choreography, Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama, Vocal Wisdom* collected by William Earl Brown, all these and many other books can inspire, raise questions, open doors, make connections.
- Your choice of recorded vocal performances.
- Optionally, check out the biography of a singer and make note of the historical and social context of their life and performances.
- Handouts supplied by Claudia may include some articles and music reviews.

Course assessment:

Grade factors will include active and involved attendance at all classes, attendance at 3 live performances, completion of the weekly course journal, first-class questionnaire and final self-evaluation.

In turn, the instructor assures the students that her response to their work and their person will always be based on empathy, clarity, flexibility and integrity.

I like very much what Charles DiCola has to say in his syllabus for the course on American Popular Music. Much of this will apply to our work, but from "the inside out".

"Like short stories, these songs reveal more of themselves every time they are experienced. You will doubtless care for some songs more than others, but a sizable cross-section of material will give you a broader foundation on which to form your own preferences.

"Your participation in class is critical to your appreciation of the music as well as to your grade. Opinions will be actively sought; nobody will be criticized on account of taste. It will be interesting to gauge the variety of reactions the songs are bound to provoke.

"Technical concerns need not intimidate you. Although we will become conversant with terms like rhythm, harmony, meter, chorus, and verse, this is not a course in music theory."

And finally, the work in class will "help us understand the inspiration and perspiration that are part of the creative process." Thank you, Charles!