



LEARN THE SONG

by Stewart Hendrickson

A few years ago I wrote a piece entitled “[Not In The Book](#)” in which I said that [Rise Up Singing](#) “is really a fine collection of songs to sing in groups, but not to be used in group singing... Only when a song is memorized does it come alive. Only then do you understand what the song is about and it becomes your song.”

In solo performance it is even more important to have your material memorized. That applies to both songs and instrumental pieces. But it’s often easier said than done. When you’re young it’s easy, but it gets harder as you get older (at least for me). Sometimes we think it’s not possible and give up without even trying. It is possible, it just takes longer. And it’s quite satisfying. Here I’d like to explore some ideas about memorization.

People think I know hundreds of songs by memory, but it’s really only a trick. One needs to know only three songs by memory at any one time. The trick is that each time you sing, it’s a different set of songs. So don’t repeat any of your songs and people will think you know hundreds. Sometimes I can learn a song in just a week or two, other times it takes many weeks. I wish I could give a sure-fire method to do this, but I can’t. Others may have better methods, but this is sort of

how I go about it.

First of all, I try to pick songs that are good for me. There's no use trying to learn a song that doesn't really fit. Sometimes I realize that after I start, and then move on to another song. It has to fit your vocal range, style and temperament, and of course be something you enjoy singing.

Once I have the song, I start singing it over, and over, and over again until I am sick and tired of it. Well, not really. First I work on the melody. I might use an instrument or do it unaccompanied. I also play a recording of the song over and over again so that it gets into my head.

At first I prefer singing unaccompanied so I can work on the phrasing and tempo, unencumbered by any instrument. Sometimes I try closing my eyes to the words to see how I'm doing. And sometimes it seems hopeless. But I keep telling myself it's always possible, it might just take a bit longer than usual.

And then I find myself picking up a few words, a line or two, or maybe even a whole verse. But then the next time I try it, it's not there yet. This is the most frustrating stage in my memorization. Of course some songs are harder than others. Story songs are easier than songs without any particular order to the lines or verses. Often it helps to visualize the story or what is happening in the song. I create a mental video and simply follow it along with the words. I also need to get mental picture of how the songs is constructed – how many verses, what each verse is about, the order of verses, etc.

I like to carry a small card with the words in my pocket. At times such as taking a walk, waiting at the bus stop, or taking a long car drive, I go through the words in my mind, When I come to a loss of words I can quickly pull the card out of my pocket and refresh my memory.

Sometimes a certain word becomes a stumbling point – it's not a word that easily rolls off my tongue; but after singing it umpteen times it finally becomes familiar. At some point I should really throw away the printed words and force myself to stumble through it even if I have to stop and think about the words. That's a hard thing to do.

It's much easier to have the words there if only to glance at when you need them. But that then becomes a crutch and you can never really learn those critical parts if the words are there. It also helps to go through the words in my mind when I have nothing else to think about or when I am trying to get to sleep or wake up in the middle of the night.

Then there comes a time when I know all the words, but might not be able to recall them fast enough. When I practice, I try to sing the song through perfectly the last time. Then overnight something happens, it must be going through my subconscious mind, and the next morning I find it's suddenly much better.

Finally there's a certain point when the song really sets in and I am comfortable singing it. I recently learned a new song but continued to stumble so I could only sing it perfectly maybe one out of five times – not good enough for performance. Then after a while, not singing it that much, something happened, and it was not possible to make a mistake. I think it was still working through my subconscious mind.

In performance I still have to concentrate 100 percent on the song, I cannot let my mind wander. It's like an actor staying in character. But then it really becomes my song as I communicate it to my audience.

I am reminded of a story I heard of a folk club in England. A young lady got up to sing a ballad and taped the words on a long sheet to the microphone stand. As she plowed through umpteen verses of a seemingly unending ballad she had already lost her audience. But then a gentleman in the front row pulled out his lighter and set the bottom of the song sheet on fire. The audience was quickly relieved of its agony.

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