

On writing for the voice...

Firstly, remember **every voice is different** — I would counsel against making any assumptions about a voice, or a voice type, since they really do vary quite a bit in range, timbre, size (volume), dexterity and flexibility.

Second, **use your voice** — you have one! Even if you can't do everything a trained singer can, you can probably get some idea of what an average breath length is or what causes fatigue. Work out what voice type you think you are and use your range to test what you write.

- Range

ALWAYS check the range of your singer(s). Ask about their voice. They can't summon up notes their body doesn't have.

- Tessitura

Tessitura means the most comfortable/effective area within the full range, i.e. not the extremities. It's very important to understand that where a note lies in the voice is not neutral. A voice's range is not quite the same as an instrument's: there is more physicality in the voice, so that one can hear the thrill of the 'stretch' of the high notes or of the 'looseness' of the low notes. Much of the drama of the higher register is because, as a listener, we sense this physical stretch that is at play in the vocal apparatus. As a result, the high notes sound higher and the low notes sound lower, meaning that the 'extremities' needn't be so extreme. A helpful image may be to think of a singer as like a dancer: the voice needs stretch and release, motion and flow. Asking a singer to deliver sustained high pitches for pages and pages is like asking a dancer to balance on tip-toes with arms stretched above their head for several minutes — it's fatiguing.

- Passaggio

The voice has different registers and transition 'passages' between them. These will lie in slightly different places in the range for each body but they are generally the same for each soprano/each tenor etc. They have to be handled with a bit of care. Ask for advice. And read about it.

- Breath

We do actually need to breathe! Every now and then a proper 're-set' (time to swallow, time to completely replenish the air in the lungs) is beneficial. Also, when calculating breath length, note that this varies from singer to singer, plus the air pressure required differs quite a bit depending on register, text, tone quality, dynamic (so testing a phrase length whilst humming to yourself in a nice easy register may not prove useful if the performer is expected to deliver it an octave higher and *ff!*).

- Fatigue

A general point here (specific fatiguing techniques are discussed below): the voice is in a body, which can tire. Unlike broken strings or hairs on a violin bow, I cannot restring my vocal chords and carry on — fatigue (or damage) takes a very long time to heal. Please do think about that, especially in terms of broader programming. You are likely to be programmed alongside other repertoire — I cannot sacrifice myself for your piece if I have to go on to sing another piece afterwards (or even the next day).

- Pitch

Most singers don't have perfect pitch, so you must help us with cues and with chromatic spelling. Also, please remember that it takes a moment to hear a sound, breathe, and then sing it, so just giving us a pitch cue e.g. a semi-quaver before we sing is not much use.

- Text (1)

Text is never neutral. Even if you fragment a text to 'remove' its meaning, syllables are full of suggestion; like palimpsests, they hint at covered meaning. An audience too will

struggle to dissociate from even nonsense text. I think this has to be acknowledged, but of course one can strive to push beyond it.

- Text (2)

Text cannot be delivered with the same clarity in all parts of the voice. Think about the physical set-up: to sing extremely high you need to open your mouth and you need a lot of space within the mouth. For this reason, if you want your text to be audible, you should follow the sensible convention of favouring open vowels (ah/oh, not ee/oo/ü) and avoiding bundles of consonants; even better, use a melisma so that no syllables change up high!

- Languages

Most singers are confident singing in English, Latin, German, French and Italian. That is not to say that they understand every word, however, but that they are schooled in how to pronounce each language (i.e. sightread a text). Some languages are nicer to sing than others: Italian (and Latin) is lovely because it has consistent, bright vowels and a forward, rolled R; languages with lots of guttural scraping or airy consonants are not particularly beloved by classical singers, but of course we find a way!

- Translations

It is always worth putting a translation *that you like* of any foreign text in the score. Any language other than the ones I've just listed is probably somewhat out of the ordinary and so comes with some barriers. Never assume that the pronunciation of e.g. Sanskrit is self-evident — don't leave anything to chance!

- Vibrato

Ah. The V word. All I want to say here is that vibrato is a natural by-product of healthy singing. Nearly every voice, whether trained or not, has some vibrato: what varies is the speed and the width. The early music soprano Emma Kirkby, for example, actually has quite a distinct vibrato, but her voice is small and the vibrato is fast and narrow so people think she's singing with a straight tone. Generally, the heavier the voice, the more evident the vibrato. But the important thing to understand is that vibrato is natural and healthy, and therefore asking a singer (especially a classically trained one) to sing *senza vibrato* is asking them to sing with an unnatural tension in the voice. To use the dance metaphor again, it's like asking someone to dance without bending their limbs: it's a strain on the body. Forcing a singer to straighten the tone impacts upon tone quality and on breath control and is generally fatiguing. Talk to your performer about what they can/can't do. If you want to write a Wandelweiser-style piece with no volume and no vibrato, find a singer who can do that, or trust your singer to use their body and their musicianship wisely.

A quick guide to common notational pitfalls

Please don't reinvent the wheel! There are more-or-less established ways of notating most vocal effects with which an experienced new music performer will be familiar.

- Text goes below the staff; dynamics go above.
- It is crucial that your text is set correctly — there should be no ambiguities. Remember to split words into syllables, and to split them correctly:
Re-mem-ber to split words in-to syl-la-bles, and to split them cor-rect-ly.
Don't just make it up yourself! There are worthwhile conventions. (Also, it's a really good plan to give the text in full at the front of the score. Consider giving a translation too, if it's in a language foreign to you/the performer.)
- One thing I'm seeing a lot at the moment is people splitting a single syllable word (e.g. 'done') into two parts, thinking that they need to specify where the final consonant comes ('n'). You do not. I will automatically put the final consonant at the end of the note/phrase. However, if you want an unnaturally elongated consonant, then, of course, you do need to specify (e.g. 'done' to show the word then 'n' to indicate where I sustain the n).

- Differentiate between hyphens (within a word) and word extension underlines (at the end of a word). Personally, I dislike underlines — they clutter up the score and they are a largely obsolete hangover from the 19th century.
- Phrase marks — again, these are largely a 19th-century remnant, and where they're useful in instrumental music they're really not so useful in vocal music because of having a text. In general, melismas are implicit according to the underlay, but occasional phrase marks can be used to clarify any ambiguities.

A few points about extended vocal techniques

I actually hate this term, being of the opinion that largely these techniques are pretty integrated into our vocabulary now, and they were never that 'extended' in the first place (the human voice has always whispered, crooned, shouted and stuttered — only our notion of what Western classical music might be has been extended; the voice has not).

I shan't get into the details of all the most common extended vocal techniques but I do want to make the point that there are fairly established notational conventions for e.g. speaking, whispering, breathy tone, in-breath etc., so, again, please don't reinvent the wheel! Do talk to a performer about their preferred systems.

Here a few specific pointers in response to repeated issues I encounter:

- Please know that putting a lot of air through the vocal chords (e.g. whispering or singing breathily) is extremely tiring and has an immediate negative effect on the singing voice. Also, it doesn't project well, and simply asking the performer to whisper *fff* is not the solution!
- As a general rule, a cross note-head implies speech (there are various points along that spectrum, as we know from *sprechgesang* and *sprechstimme*).
- I advocate open note-heads for airy sounds, or a little circle on the beam if you're asking for a breathy sung tone (which is, by the way, horrid to do and not possible throughout the full range).
- Remember that a singer has extremely fast, automatic responses to the notated pitch of a note. Our bodies are trained to make the rapid set-up for a pitch when we look at it, through a combination of muscle memory and the inner ear. Therefore, where you put a note-head on the staff affects the physical set-up — if you're using unvoiced sounds, you still need to think about the implication of where these are placed on the staff.
- It is crucial that you understand the difference between voiced sounds and unvoiced sounds. The first causes the vocal chords to vibrate, and thus has a pitch; the second simply moves air through the apparatus. For example, speech is voiced; a whisper is unvoiced. An 'z' is voiced; an 's' is unvoiced. A 'b' is voiced; a 'p' is unvoiced. I spend so much time battling with inconsistencies on this front, and it's actually quite simple, so do please take the time to understand this.
- Humming up high is hard. Different people find humming more or less easy, but just remember that essentially it's something that the voice enjoys doing in an easy, low register.
- *al niente* — no thanks! Or only very occasionally. At a certain point a sung sound does start or stop, so think about the psychological implications of this instruction, and the impact of that on the body. A nice diminuendo to *pp* or *ppp* is generally much more effective.
- IPA — International Phonetic Alphabet exists to standardise pronunciation. In general, however, I suggest you only use it if the text is far-removed from comprehensible words. Sometimes a combination, for clarity's sake, can work, but I often see it used unnecessarily. Though most new music singers will know the basics of IPA, very few are completely 'fluent' in it, so if you go down the route of using only IPA you should be aware a) that it's making a statement (not a new one,

- I should add), and b) that it's going to require a huge amount of time from the performer to 'translate' your notational system into something they recognise.
- If dealing with microtonal tuning systems, research the different notational 'schools': standard quarter-tones, inflection arrows, cents, or the 'Extended Helmholtz-Ellis Just Intonation Pitch Notation'. Do not use a combination!
 - If using standard quarter-tones, give a lot of thought to spelling. Most singers, even if confident with quarter-tones, relate the tuning back to chromatic harmony. We have to hear the pitch in our inner ear before we can produce it — it is not like pressing the right combination of keys on a clarinet. Also, bear in mind that rapid inflections in *different* directions are extremely difficult to execute. It's much easier to bend a series of notes in one direction (i.e. all sharps of one degree or another).
 - I have found, too, that microtones in the voice often need to be widened in order to register in the ear. I think this is to do with the natural vibrato and fluctuation in the singing voice (as compared to a sine tone), but it's worth bearing in mind before you disappear down the intellectual rabbit hole of sixteenth-tones... I encounter so many pieces with complex tuning systems that have been made with midi mock-ups, and then the composer is disappointed when it doesn't sound the same.

Final hot tips

Use the great wealth of the vocal canon, not just music written in the past 50 years. You can take or leave their aesthetics but learn from how some of the great masters understood and treated the voice. I would highly recommend Monteverdi (then Gesualdo if you want to see the rules broken), Handel, Mozart, Schubert, Schoenberg and Britten.

In terms of contemporary composers, I would recommend looking at vocal scores by Michael Finnissy, Enno Poppe, James Weeks and Rebecca Saunders. Plenty of this material is quite complex in one way or another, but these composers really understand the voice and their notation is solid. In another category are the composers whose vocal writing excites me hugely but whose notation drives me mad: I highly recommend exploring the vocal music of Berio, Sciarrino and Aperghis, but please be careful about appropriating some of their notational habits!

There's also a huge body of vocal music available on recording to hear how the voice sounds when it does different things (remember most recordings are by world-class technicians, so if you're working with a student performer, don't expect them to have 20 years of technical mastery!)

Breaking the rules — I have a lot of time for composers that break the rules or that invent a new sort of wheel, but you do have to know the rules to break them. The problem with people creating their own notation when an established system already exists is that it takes me a huge amount of unnecessary time frustratedly trying to read *past* the score. The problem with people writing without due consideration for how the voice works is that I, as a performer, and potentially you, as a composer, will probably be disappointed by the results. If you decide you DO want to break the rules, make sure your defence is solid!

Finally, this document is work in progress. It's my work, and therefore please ask before sharing it with others. (I generally just say "yes"!)

Juliet Fraser, October 2017
[updated December 2023]