

This may seem like a lot. Come to think of it, it *is* a lot. But you don't need to do all of it, or even read all of it. I just hope some of it is useful to you.

Best wishes,
Joshua

1) Sing

Sing wherever you can, whenever you can; sing, sing, sing.
Sing in the shower, sing in your car, sing in an open field.
Sing in church, join a choir, sing during the 7th inning stretch.
Just don't sing for people who don't like the way you sing. It does nothing for them, and their disapproval undermines your confidence.

Do warm-ups -- breathing, panting, vocalizing, making up sounds and noises, note matching, chord matching, rhyming, making up limericks and other poems.

"Laughter is contagious and it's also advantageous, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-hahhh."

Sing along with your favorite songs.

Sing your favorite songs, but make up new lyrics (à la Weird Al Yankovic).

Sing the original words to your favorite songs, but make up new harmonies and counter-melodies.

Sing along with music with which you are less familiar -- you might start with radio stations that play "easy listening" instrumental music or jazz. As you grow more proficient, try tackling more difficult music -- classical or world music or the stuff they play on the college stations at the left end of the radio dial. You will amaze yourself that you can sing along, and recognize the rules that [most western] music follows.

Go to a karaoke bar and request a song you've never heard of, and ignore the lyrics on the video monitor.

2) Listen

Listen to music critically. This doesn't mean crinkling up your face in a grimace and going "Ewww; this sucks." It means identifying -- to the best of your ability and your vocabulary -- what is going on in the music you hear. This will be different for everyone, but here are some things you might want to try to listen for:

Does the song make you happy or sad or some other emotion? How does it do this? Is it just the subject matter of the lyrics, or is there something in the music? Maybe there aren't any lyrics at all; how does instrumental music affect your emotions? Is it the tempo or the instrumentation or the notes that are played?

What is the instrumentation? Is it just a soloist, or are there other instruments? Is there more than one singer? (If that's too easy, see if you can identify whether the instruments are real or synthesized, and if the vocalists are different people or one person over-dubbed.)

Here are some structural elements to listen for:

Repetition

Are there entire blocks of lyrics that are repeated? These are often called "**choruses**" or "**refrains**".

Are there shorter phrases that are repeated? These are sometimes called "**hooks**", or sometimes the title of the song is the phrase that is repeated.

If a section of music is repeated with different words, that is often called a **verse**.

An **intro** happens only once at the beginning of a song, and is never heard again. Sometimes it's in a different tempo from the rest of the song -- this is a useful thing to remember if an accompanist starts a song in one tempo and you want to move to another: you can catch the accompanist's eye as you wind the intro to a close and kick off the main part of the song in the new tempo.

A **bridge** might happen once or twice in the middle of a song: it will have music different from the verses and choruses, and the lyrics might literally "bridge" the earlier verses with the later ones.

Here's the structure of a typical "Tin Pan Alley" or "standard" song:

INTRO

VERSE 1 ("I used to be this way" or "This used to happen")

VERSE 2 ("Let me give you another example of the way things were")

BRIDGE ("But then this happened" or "But then you came along")

VERSE 3 ("And now everything's different")

[Note: Just to confuse things, in the terminology used by old-school songwriters -- say 1920s-1940s -- the INTRO above would be called the verse and the rest of it (VERSE1+2 / BRIDGE / VERSE 3) would be called the chorus or the refrain.]

Here's a structure you might see in more recent pop music:

VERSE 1

CHORUS

VERSE 2

CHORUS

BRIDGE

VERSE 3

CHORUS

CHORUS

Sometimes an instrumental solo (over the music that goes with a verse) and a reprise of the bridge and verse 3 might go between those last two choruses.

But all kinds of things can be repeated, on both the macro- and the micro- level. Sometimes it's just a word, as in the song "Maria" from "West Side Story". Sometimes it's nonsense syllables, as in the second half of "Hey, Jude". Sometimes it's an entire melody; sometimes just one note is repeated two or three times in a row (or more: in "Night And Day" the intro -- "Like the beat-beat-beat of the tom-tom when the jungle shadows fall" -- is almost all on one note). Sometimes the *contour* of the melody (where it goes up, where it goes down, and by how much) is repeated, starting on different pitches; think of "Doe, A Deer" from "The Sound of Music".

Becoming aware of repetition in the music you listen to will relieve some of your self-consciousness when you use it yourself in an improvised song: it's not cheating, it's good songcraft. And when you're repeating something (rather than making it up from scratch) you can sort of do it on auto-pilot, which buys you time to think of the next thing you're going to make up.

Listen for silence, or rather pauses in the vocal while the instruments continue. How much is the singer really singing? You don't have to churn out constant non-stop lyrics; let the accompanist do some of the work, and this also buys you thinking time.

What are various ways the song can end? (A common way on recordings is "repeat and fade" and while you can do that in live performance, it's not as effective as stronger, more deliberate endings.) Some of the techniques we talked about include stopping singing (as the instruments continue on until the end), slowing down, singing louder and/or higher in pitch, cuing or conducting the accompanist, and repeating the last line.

How do the lyrics "sit" on the music? Start with identifying where the strongest beat is, the "1" if you were to count along with the music. (How high would you count before you start over from 1? That's a clue as to what kind of *meter* the song is in.) Where does the text start in relation to the 1? It usually comes in right on the 1, but often comes in a little before (a "pick-up" or "anticipation") or after. How long does the text continue over the music? How long does the music go on without the vocal, before the vocalist comes back in for the next line? Does each line follow this same pattern? Is each line unique? Or are there groups of lines that follow a pattern, and then maybe one or two lines that are exceptions to the rule? Do the lines in the verse follow the same rule as the lines in the chorus?

Is the meter constant? That means: Can you count along from beginning to end repeatedly counting up to the same number, like 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, etc. Or are there times when the meter changes (the middle "operatic" section of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" for example) or the tempo speeds up or slows down (same number of beats per measure, but they come faster -- like in "Hava Nagila" -- or slower).

What's the rhyme scheme? Is it constant throughout the song, or does it change? Are there any lines that don't seem to rhyme with any others? (This sometimes happens with the last line of each verse -- often that's the title of the song.) Are all the rhymes perfect ("moon/june") or are some near rhymes ("line/mime") or awful rhymes ("dog/cat"). If you hadn't been paying this close attention, would you have even noticed the awful rhymes?

What is the song about? Does it tell a story? Some do, but most songs are about a single thing (rather than a sequence of things), and that single thing is usually an emotion, and that emotion is usually love. Or the single thing might be a person about whom the singer has an emotion, or the love might be bitterly missed or achingly yearned for. But that's just the vast majority of songs; there is still a sizable minority (especially in the last 30 or 40 years) that's about a very wide range of other subjects.

Do you believe the singer? Do you feel -- even if you know better, when you stop and think about it -- that the singer is feeling the feelings he or she is singing about? Does that make a difference

to your enjoyment of the song? (Some people are deeply moved by the over-the-top emotion shown by opera singers or torch singers like Judy Garland and Celine Dion; others are turned off, or even find it laughable.) Are there things you can use in the way the singer accomplishes this (or, conversely, things to avoid in the way the singer fails at this) in your own work?

Do you like a song more because it employs better -- or more fastidious -- songcraft? Are there songs you like that are technically not that great, but speak to you or move you in a way that other songs don't? Why do they move you? How do they accomplish that?

And also think about songs and music you *don't* like. Why don't you like it? Is there something you can think of that, if it were different in the song, would allow you to like it more, or is it just a lost cause? Are there other songs -- or even just one song -- in the same genre that you do like, or is it the whole genre you can't stand? Can you imagine doing the song in a different genre; would that allow you to like it more? What do you think it is about the genre that other people respond to, even if you don't care for it? If you're feeling really adventurous, try immersing yourself in that genre for a little while, and see if it all leaves you cold or if there are some exceptions.

Here's an exercise I gave my seventh-graders that may be useful to you (you can submit it to me or just do it for your own amusement):

Choose a song that you like and know well. (Extra credit if it's a song that your classmates are unlikely to know, one that isn't currently or recently popular.) Describe it as exhaustively as you can, using the above criteria and whatever else you can think of. One way to look at this exercise is: If you were to try to instruct someone how to improvise a song very much like the one you're thinking of, what would you say?

Please provide a recording of the song (preferably on CD, although more than one student can put his or her song on the same CD) and a typed paper. No specific length limits, but please look up the word "exhaustively".

3) There are technical terms that musicians find useful in communicating about music, such as **major** and **minor** to describe different tonalities (and **tonalities**, come to think of it); **andante**, **allegro**, and all the other tempi (and **tempo**); and on and on. But it's not necessary for you to learn that lingo; what is important is for you to learn to make distinctions as best you can, rather than letting music just be a big undifferentiated hodgepodge. The more you apply yourself to this practice, the finer distinctions you will be able to make.

Some people have perfect pitch, which allows them to identify what note a particular instrument or voice is producing -- someone with very fine pitch sense might even be able to tell whether the A they are hearing is sharp or flat (*i.e.* a little bit higher or lower than the American standard of A440). Others have a sense of relative pitch -- they can't tell you what a particular note is, but they can tell you the relationship (or interval) between that note and another, say a perfect fifth

away, or the distance from **do** to **sol**. Others haven't developed that much refinement, but they can still say whether a melody is going up or down. There are very, very few cases of complete organic tone-deafness, and for everyone except those few cases, practice makes better.

One thing that I think contributes to people singing out of tune is the perpetrators are aware of the contour of the melody they are trying to sing -- where it goes up and where it goes down -- but when they reach the limits of their vocal range (or, often, just what they think or fear is the limits of their vocal range) they adjust all the notes accordingly so that they fit within what feels like a comfortable range. This results in fewer notes outside that comfort range -- which the singer fears would sound bad -- but a whole lot of notes that are in a different key from where the song started.

Here's an example using numbers to represent the notes of a scale:

Say you're trying to sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat". The melody is:

1 1 1 2 3
Row, row, row your boat

3 2 3 4 5
Gent- ly down the stream

8 8 8 5 5 5 3 3 3 1 1 1
Mer- ri- ly, mer- ri- ly, mer- ri- ly, mer- ri- ly

5 4 3 2 1
Life is but a dream.

If the singer feels that the highest note (the 8 on the first "merrily") is too high to sing well, he or she might shift the whole second half of the song down enough that that highest note is comfortable, resulting in something like

6 6 6 3 3 3 1 1 1 6* 6* 6*
Mer- ri- ly, mer- ri- ly, mer- ri- ly, mer- ri- ly

3 2 1 7* 6*
Life is but a dream.

*When you go "below 1" you're just descending down into the next octave, so the 1 functions as the 8 of that lower octave -- remember "which will bring us back to do" in *Sound of Music*? -- and the next note down is a 7 an octave down, and so on.

This could make for pleasing -- or at least interesting -- harmony, but only if sung (you guessed it) with confidence and commitment. Sadly, what usually happens is the person who has departed from the traditional melody doesn't realize that is what he (oh, what the heck, let's call him "he") has done, but is vaguely aware that the new notes he is singing aren't the same as the ones everyone else is (or the notes aren't "going with" the accompaniment*) and loses confidence, and starts singing notes at random trying desperately to find one that doesn't "feel funny". It is that

panic-stricken scramble to find a "good" note that the outside listener perceives as unpleasant, much more than any of the particular notes that are found.

*I don't want to get lost in a morass of footnotes and foot-footnotes, but I can't impress on you enough how important those quotation marks are around the "going with": I am not saying that the new notes are *wrong*, just that the way they fit with the accompaniment is unexpected to the errant singer, and it is that surprise that is frequently taken as a sign that a mistake has been made. It is my opinion that the mistake is thinking the notes are wrong, not the notes themselves.