

RECITATIVE STUDY TECHNIQUES: THE LIBRETTO

STEP ONE: FIND THE LIBRETTO Whenever you have a recitative to learn, either as an excerpt or as part of an operatic role, the very first thing you must do is find the libretto presented in the form the librettist saw his work. To modern eyes, recitative may well look like prose – but think back to the ancient norms of story-telling as poetry.

Resources for finding the libretto in its original form include

- Libretti d'opera – modern-made versions of libretti in the historical form. For example, Google “la traviata librettidopera pdf” – Google will give you the PDF link without having to wade through a website entirely in Italian.
- Google Books – find one interior line of a recitative and search for it in quotes.

STEP TWO: FIND THE POETIC METER Now that you have the poetry of the recitative in its verse form (**versi sciolti**), it's time to find the poetic rhythm AND find your feet within that meter. Review the rules of **versi sciolti** if needed. Read through slowly, but theatrically. Remember that amplification was not in the librettist's mind. Remember that in Italian *recitare* means to act! Find the feet of the poetry. The lingual rhythm will hold your hand on this first trip through. Find the joy in how the words feel in your mouth. Support your speech as if you were speaking to a crowd. Remember to take time on your long syllables. Read through it again now – even if you don't speak Italian fluently, you will have some natural hunch of what words might be more important. The penultimate syllable of each line is the only one which requires a true accent. Find the rhyming couplet at the ends of sections as well.

STEP THREE: TRANSLATION

① Translate every word you think you know ② Use a dictionary and context clues to figure out all you can of the rest. Good, free, and user-friendly sources include WordReference, Wiktionary, Treccani. ③ Phone a friend. Only sometimes can this friend be Nico Castel! ④ Does it read as elegantly as you would like in your native language? ⑤ Review the poem. Where are the places where your stresses, word lengths, and pacing are now influenced by your increased familiarity with the text? ⑥ Examine the places in each sentence where the subject/object/verb comes. Armed with your translation, are you sure of the Italian syntax?

STEP FOUR: REFINING DICTION

Vowels: Which vowels are open and which are closed? Step one is remembering that every vowel is ‘closed until proven open’ – silly, I know, but don't be guilty of saying open vowels in little words like ‘per me.’ You can use the same references like WordReference or Wiktionary to look up certain words, but you might get stuck on certain verbs. This is where I like to use the DOP – www.dizionario.rai.it – é/ó = closed, è/ò = open

Consonants: are you really sure of all your single and double consonants? Where might there be phrasal doubling?

STEP FIVE: PACING AND DYNAMICS

Within theatrical speech we have the possibility to enrich our delivery through variety of speed and volume. Sometimes we get excited and speak faster. Sometimes we desire ultimately to be as presentational and declamatory as possible, and will speak more slowly. Sometimes the affect of the text leads us more inward, or makes us want to draw our audience further in to us with a supported piano dynamic. García speaks of the two types of recitative as sung or spoken, and according to his examples, these are what most of us would respectively call *accompagnato* or *secco*. Let me caution you against the idea that there is a recitative that is to be “spoken” in the modern idea of “off the voice” or fast. As re-enactors of these characters and their stories, we must embody their speech and transmit it through the theatrical medium. While I personally might call certain recitative more conversational and certain other more presentational, none of it is to be so rushed through or so unsung as to be robbed of its meaning. Choose where you want to break and punctuate and where you want to elide. Remember that commas don't necessitate stops in sound – you can use your imagination to elongate the syllables. Be playful. There has to be a part of us that plays with language like a kid in a sandbox. Whatever metaphorical sandcastle you build with your declamation has to be recreated every time! Be willing to take risks informed by your knowledge and see what works.

STEP SIX: MEMORIZE

Memorize your text of recitative before looking at the pitches if you can. If you're preparing an operatic role, before you go to step 3 and 4 of translation, make sure you DO open the score to make sure that the composer didn't alter the libretto. This happens every now and again, and it would defeat our purpose to memorize wrong text.