

# Memorable Mnemonics for Singers



Suzanne Galer

“All knowledge is but remembrance”  
Plato

“Songs are like your friends, if you spend time with them you know them well.” I frequently share this observation with my vocal students, and of course it’s something I tell myself. As teachers of singing, we’ve all had times, however, when quality practice time has been minimal and we’ve had to come up with some quick memorization strategies for our students. The following are some techniques that have worked well.

## INITIAL LEARNING AS A KEY TO LONG-TERM MEMORY

We remember songs most when they have meaning to us. Consequently, the initial quality of learning the notes, rhythms, diction, and literal translation of the song, as well as work with an outstanding teacher or coach is essential. Uta Hagen also

suggests in her book *Respect for Acting* that we answer critical questions about the character we are portraying, including:

1. Who am I?  
Example: I’m the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s *Magic Flute*.
2. What do I want? (Character motive in the plot)  
Example: I would like to control the entire kingdom including Sarastro’s temple.
3. What do I want in this particular aria/song?  
Example: I want my daughter Pamina to kill the high priest, Sarastro.
4. What obstacle is in my way?  
Example: Pamina is in love with Tamino who is one of the initiates into the temple.
5. What do I do to get what I want?  
Example: Threaten to disown Pamina and give her a dagger.
6. What is the relationship of my character to the other characters in the song / scene?  
Example: I represent evil, darkness. I am manipulative and other characters fear me.

Answering these questions gives the singer a firm grasp of the character so that memorization of words becomes a very natural living out of the character. The singer actually BECOMES the character and memorization emerges as a matter of enthusiasm and living the words. Another text that talks about actually BEING your character is *Creative Visualization* by Shakti Gawain (1978).

## GETTING AWAY FROM THE MUSICAL SCORE WITH LITERAL TRANSLATIONS AND PICTURES

Now that you know your notes, music, and character, it’s time to break away from the printed score. First, write out the words to your song with a literal word-by-word translation. The meaning of each word should be directly below its foreign word. Be certain to leave enough room for drawing pictures. What? Drawing pictures? Yes, memory experts Barry and Tony Buzan remind us in their work *The Mind Map Book* (1994) that our first experiences as babies involved the use of ALL of our senses including taste, sight, touch, smell, and hearing. We need to return to the freshness and agility with which we first learned as children. With that in mind, one need not be a professional artist to draw songs: simple images will do. In a chapter titled “Visual Thinking” in her book *Notebooks of the Mind* (1992), Vera John-Steiner also notes that evidence of a life-long pattern of visual pictures was found among Einstein’s papers at Princeton. Knowing this, and that pictures play a vital part in our daily lives through road maps, computer icons, and various international sign symbols, draw a simple picture for each noun. Use bright markers and exaggerate your pictures in a way that you will remember (see Figure 1)<sup>1</sup>

Also, try to relate several pictures to one another to form a whole concept (see Figure 2). The transla-

"A Cupidon" from *Chansons de Ronsard* by Milhaud

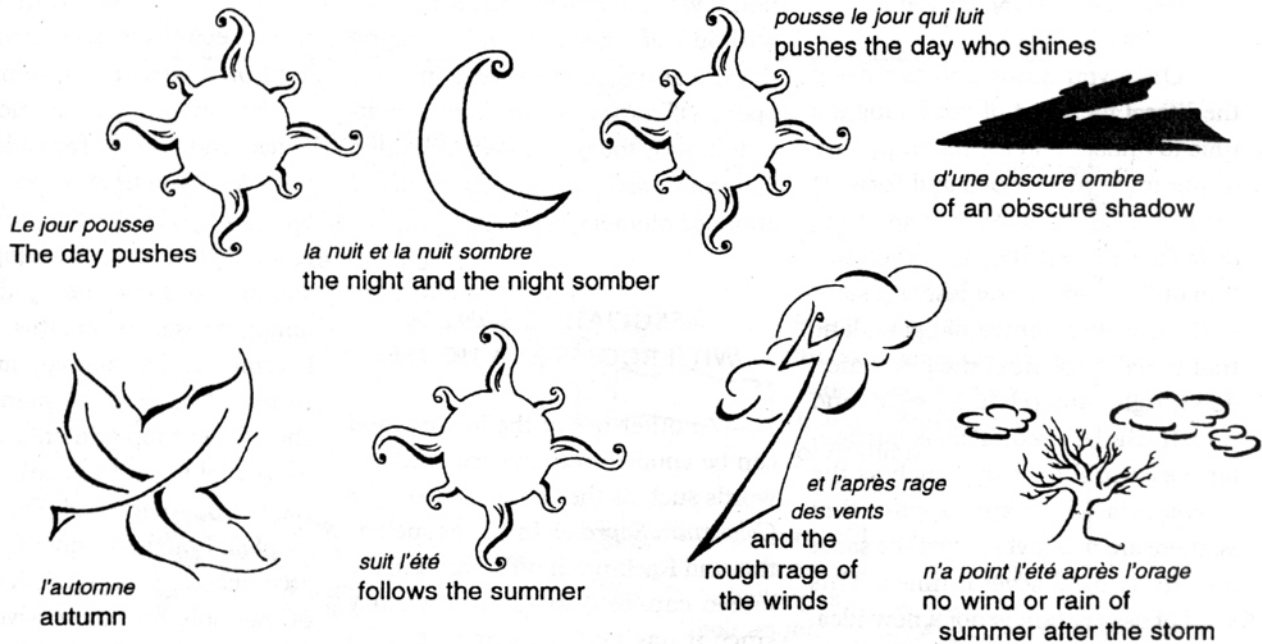


Figure 1. Drawing a Literal Translation

"An Die Nacht" from *Brentano Lieder* by Strauss

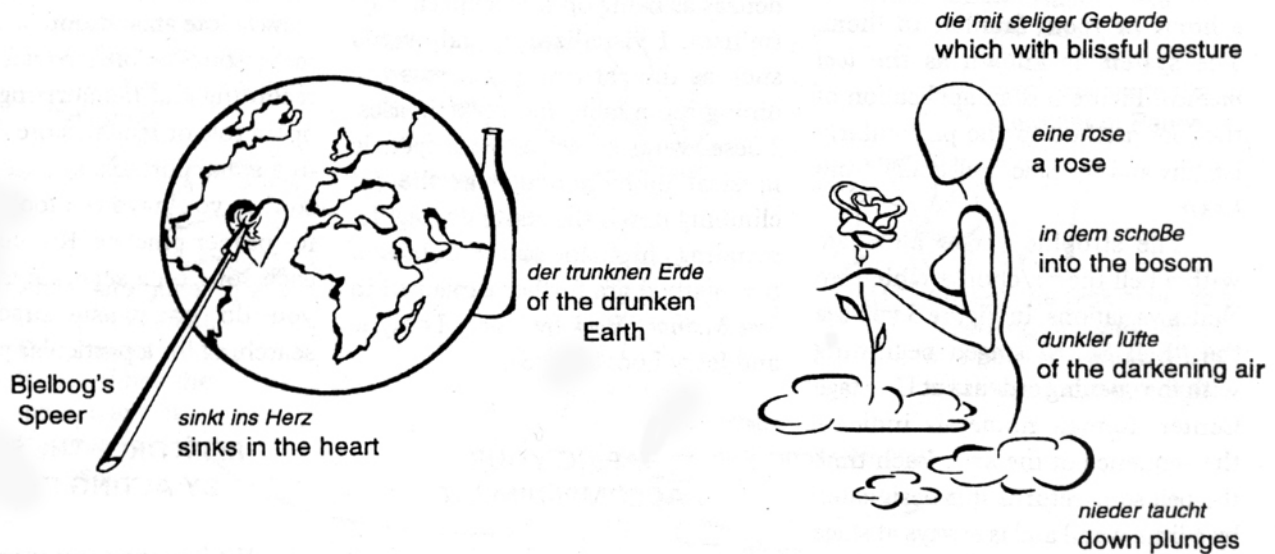


Figure 2. Relating Literal Translation Drawings to Form Entire Concepts

tion of the section depicting the world is "Bjelbog's spear sinks into the heart of the drunken earth." No-

tice that the spear is sinking into a heart which is a part of the earth and that there is a suggestion of a wine

bottle behind the earth. In this way an entire sentence is depicted and memorized.

## MEMORIZING YOUR ARIA BY STAGING IT: THE LOCATION METHOD

Once you know and can draw the literal meaning of your song it's time to understand the bigger picture of the musical sections and form of the piece. One method is to associate or make a mental staging of each section of the song or aria just as a stage director would during an opera. The traditional stage areas such as center, down right, down left, up right, and up left can be used. This is particularly essential for songs such as the *Lakmé* aria which are strophic, that is, there are many verses yet the same melody is used several times. This kind of association is not a new idea. It originated with the methods of the ancient Greeks such as Aristotle and the bard Simonides. Greek orators would frequently draw their speeches or associate them with location in a home or room familiar to them. The system is known as the *loci method*. Figure 3 is an application of the loci method to the particularly lengthy and strophic "Bell Song" from *Lakmé*.

The strophic verses alternate with a bell theme/chorus which includes variations. In Figure 3 you see the "Bell Song" staged beginning with the opening cadenza at Up Stage Center. Roman numerals indicate the sequence of the aria. Each time the bell song returns it is designated by a little wand and is always at stage center. The literal translation is again depicted with simple pictures. In this way, the aria is visualized in a logical sequence and yet certain stage areas are used to remind the singer of what part of the story comes next. When singing the aria, each particular sec-

tion is always sung with a mental and perhaps even a physical inclination toward that particular stage area without, of course, actually staging the aria as would be the case in a real opera. Of course, the trend in operatic auditions today is toward a limited amount of staging and this too could enhance memory.

## ASSOCIATING SONGS WITH ROOMS IN A HOUSE

Another use of the loci method can be applied to a concerto without words such as the Glière *Concerto for Coloratura Soprano*. In pieces such as this and Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*, the music can be turned into a story since it has no words or plot of its own. In the Glière I turned the music into a tale of a dog chasing a cat into the various rooms of my parent's two story home. I visualized very high cadenzas as being on top of curtains or trellises. I visualized actual events such as the cat running across the dining room table and up staircases. These events coincided with specific musical moments such as the cat climbing down the stairs during descending chromatic scales. Details of this method are further explained in *The Memory Book* by Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas (1975).

## TAPING YOUR ACCOMPANIMENT

Some singers use commercial recordings of others as a way to memorize notes and rhythms. Most teachers do not recommend this because mistakes of other singers are often imported this way; furthermore, singing with the words of another

singer does not ensure that you yourself know the words. One helpful method is to have your pianist or coach record the accompaniment by itself on a tape or CD, being sensitive to the tempi, introductions, interludes, and pauses for cadenzas that the two of you have agreed upon. Better yet, if you have the piano skills to record your own accompaniment, you are your own best judge of your tempi, pauses for breaths, and possible small verbal cues you may wish to record. Commercial piano and orchestral accompaniment tracks are also available in publications such as *Classical Singer* and *The Journal of Singing*. Practice frequently with your accompaniment tape, eliminating waste of valuable and expensive coaching time on matters of rote memory. Knowing the accompaniment is a major part of a singer's responsibility. Save all accompaniment tapes for future reference, whether a quick aria review before an audition or a review of many songs before a recital. If you are recording and memorizing an entire opera role or recital, store these tapes in a small portable storage container so that you have the tools you need for proper practice. Record and label each song on a separate tape so that you do not waste practice time searching for a particular piece.

## REINFORCE THE SONG BY ACTING IT OUT

While acting out your song, use a small portable tape recorder. Use props that you may have around the house to make the song as realistic as possible. Use your staging picture (see Figure 3) to actually travel to parts of the room in which you are

# "The Bell Song" from *Lakmé* by Delibes

DOWNSTAGE

STAGE LEFT

STAGE RIGHT

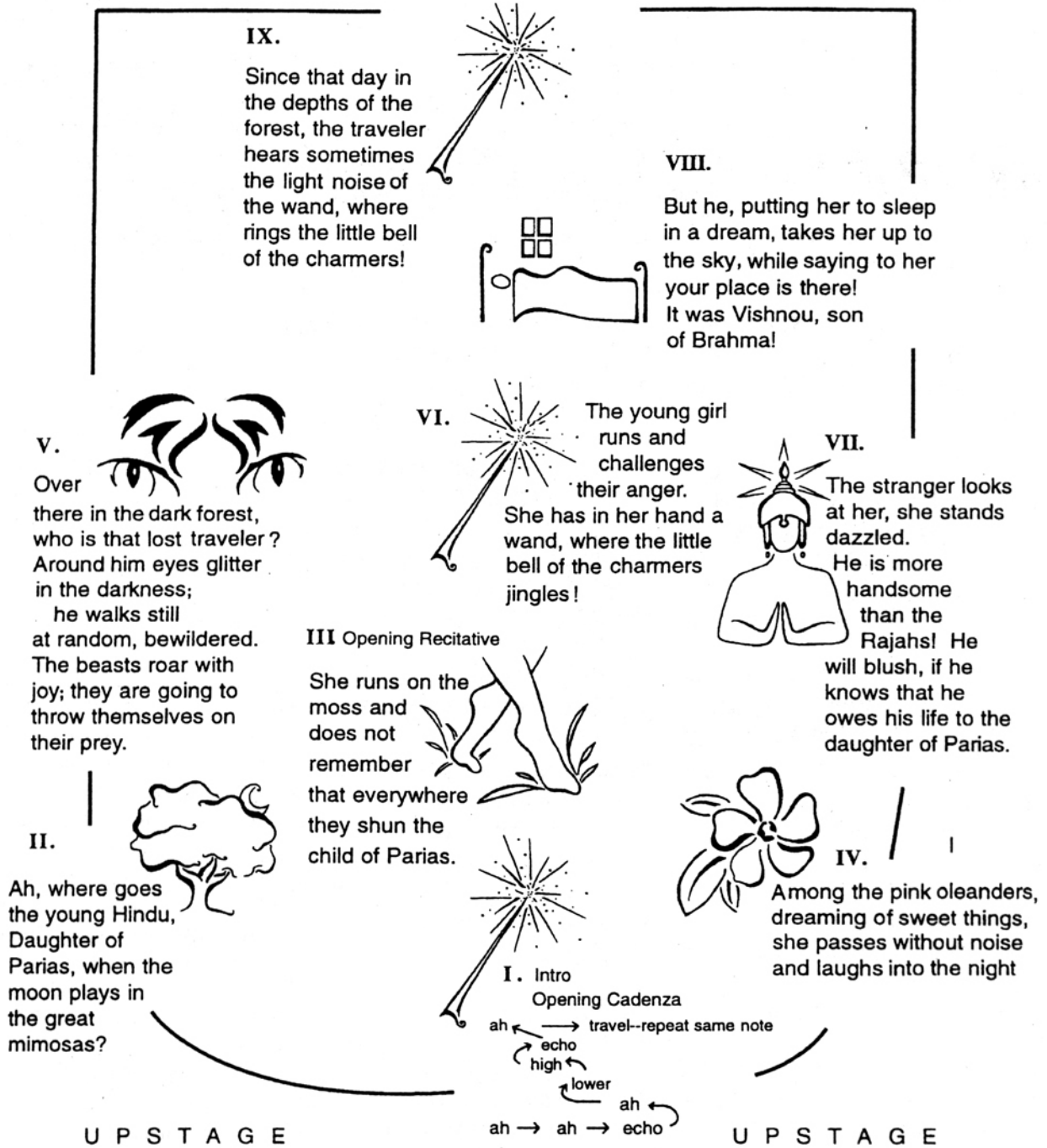


Figure 3. Staging Your Aria: The Location Method

practicing. Use your literal translation pictures (Figure 1) and tape them in the specific areas of the stage

or room in which you plan to associate them. Walk around on beats of rest and musical interludes so that

your body internalizes these facts. Imagine and plan specific staging events that take place during all sec-



Figure 4. Associating Songs With Rooms in Your House

tions of the song, even those sections when you do not sing. Make the song an experience of total involvement while practicing.

### SIMPLIFY MEMORIZATION OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY COUNTING

When memorizing sections of twentieth-century music containing difficult or inconsistent counting, separate the words from the music. In Britten's "The Tower" from *The Turn of the Screw* (see Figure 5), the first page would be separated as follows with the numbers indicating beats of rest before singing:

- (6) How beautiful it is
- (4) Each day it seems more beautiful to me
- (3) And my darling children

Physicalize the music by walking for the number of beats of rest prior to each line. For example, in Figure 5 the singer could walk six beats beginning on the downbeat of the flute solo, walk four more steps beginning with the oboe solo, and then take three steps before "And my darling children." These are only suggestions

for memorization of beats, of course and need not be a part of blocking during a production.

### THE FINAL MEMORIZED PERFORMANCE

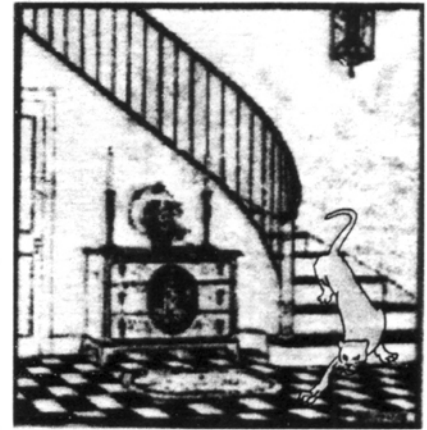
By the time you perform your song you will have interacted with the music and text in so many different ways that memory should no longer be an issue. Tape recorders, pictures, props, and acting motions won't be needed other than perhaps for an occasional review. The music, character, literal translation, staging, and your own personal experience of the song should be internalized. You are ready to share this gift with the audience. Congratulations!

### REFERENCES

Buzan, Barry and Buzan, Tony. 1994. *The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential*. London: Dutton.

Gawain, Shakti. 1978. *Creative Visualization*. Berkeley, CA: Whatever Pub.

Hagen, Uta. 1973. *Respect for Acting*. New York, NY: Macmillan.



John-Steiner, Vera. 1997. *Notebooks of the Mind*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Lorayne, Harry and Lucas, Jerry. 1975. *The Memory Book*. New York, NY: Ballantine.

### NOTES

1. Illustrations by Danielle Russell.

---

*First place winner of the New York Vocal Artists' competition, Suzanne Galer is a coloratura soprano who has played the role of the Queen of the Night in Mozart's Magic Flute with many companies including Whitewater Opera of Indiana, Sorg Opera of Ohio, Indiana Opera Theatre of Bloomington, The Lake Charles Symphony, and Italy's Rome Festival. While in New York, Galer made her CAMI and Weill Hall debuts and sang with numerous companies including the Long Island Lyric Opera, the Opera Company of the Hamptons, the New Rochelle Opera, the Rockland Opera, and the West End Chamber Society. Galer was a regional finalist in both the Metropolitan Opera and Chicago Lyric Opera Young Artist competitions. She holds the Doctor of Music and Master of Music degrees in vocal performance from The State University of New York at Stony Brook and the Bachelor of Arts degree from Hope*



SCENE IV. The Tower.  
Der Turm.

The lights fade in again on the house. The tower is now visible.  
It is evening. Sweet summer. Enter the Governess, strutting.  
Das Licht blendet auf und beleuchtet das Haus und den Turm, der  
nun sichtbar wird. Milder Sommerabend. Gouvernante spaziert  
herbei.

GOVERNNESS *P*  
How  
Wie

Gov. beau-ti-ful it is.  
wan-der-schön es ist.

Gov. *P*  
Each day it seems more beau-ti-ful... to me...  
Jede Tag ist wol-ler Wan-der hier.

Gov. 23 warm  
And my dar-ling ohil-dren...  
3 Mei-ne lie-ben Kin-der

*ppp*  
Harp

B. & H. 15043

Figure 5. "The Tower" from Benjamin Britten's *Turn of the Screw*

College in Holland, Michigan. She is the Director of Opera Workshop for Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana where she also teaches diction and voice. In the Midwest, Miss Galer has performed for the Saint Cecilia Society, The Grand Rapids Foundation, and the Cyril Barker Series all in her hometown, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Recently, she has performed

with the Marion Philharmonic (IN) and with the Cambridge Music Society (OH). Before going on to obtain her doctorate, Galer also was the Director of Opera for Sam Houston State University and directed the Camerata for Centenary College of Shreveport, Louisiana. During this period, Galer performed with the Shreveport Opera, the Midland-Odesa Symphony,

and the Florida Masterworks Chorale. Her operatic staging credits include Mozart's Magic Flute, Menotti's Hand of Bridge, Mollicone's Face on the Bar-Room Floor, Mozart's Impresario, Barab's Game of Chance, Gilbert and Sullivan's H.M.S. Pinafore, and Strauss's Die Fledermaus Act II.