

The Storyteller's Mindset

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Focus of the class:

The class looks at the structure of a story and the art of storytelling. It describes the musical tools at your disposal, and asks you to see the connections between oral and musical storytelling. Using these new understandings can help you retain the attention of your audience, and increase your fun during the performance.

Target audience: Singers who enjoy telling stories. The students don't have to be fabulous at story telling, but they have to be comfortable enough that they engage in the act from time to time (even if only to a very small and intimate audience), as opposed to those who are paralyzed by fear.

Do you have to be a master storyteller, to be in this class? No. Have you ever told a story – at work, in the bar, at a family gathering? If yes, you're good to go.

Intent and structure of the class.

Intent: spotlight the parallels between storytelling in words and in song. Bring additional concepts and tools to your musical storytelling, to increase audience enjoyment. Make the transfer between these worlds – oral and singing storytelling.

Structure:

- Look at structure of stories and story telling.
- Compare this structure to the structure of songs.
- Discuss tools that are available in each form.
- Increase your tool supply.
- Apply the knowledge and tools to your situation.

Caveat: Not every song is a story.

Note the parts of a joke – intro, repetition, punchline. Connect these to their counterparts in a song: intro, body, repetitions, and emotional climax of a song.

Discuss what makes a good story, and what undermines the success of a story.

On the nature of a story –

Andrew Stanton was one of the creators of *Toy Story*, and *Finding Nemo*. This quote is from his TED talk, on Clues to a Great Story.

Story telling is joke telling. It's knowing your punchline – your ending. It's knowing that everything you're saying – from the first sentence to the last – is leading to a singular goal, and ideally, leads us to some truth that deepens our understanding of who we are as human beings.

We all love stories. We're born for them. Stories affirm who we are. We all want affirmation that our lives have meaning. And nothing has a greater affirmation than when we connect through stories.

The greatest story commandment is, "Make me care."

A story should promise you that this will be worth your time.

Other benefits to approaching the song as a story

Benefits for the audience member:

- makes the content of the song more believable
- audience *retains* more of the content
- audience is more inclined to stay with you all the way through the song
- listening is more fun, because listening is now closer to play than to work
- The experience of listening to a musical story is much more satisfying and entertaining than listening to a bunch of chords and words.
- People *enjoy* an *emotional* experience – a good laugh; having their heartstrings tugged; or maybe even a good cry.
- Look again at Andrew Stanton's quote: *to gain some truth that deepens our understanding of who we are as human beings. Stories affirm who we are. We all want affirmation that our lives have meaning.*

Benefits for the performer:

- Learn your music faster [*notes and words have a receptacle to reside; Tin Man Approach – the structure is there, you are providing the heart*]
- Song makes more sense – to you, and to your audience; it is “of a whole”
- You will more quickly crack the code used by the arrangers and composer – you can more readily see and use the tools that they gave you.
- More fun for you. Telling a story through a song – as opposed to delivering a long string of notes and words – and seeing the audience stay with you is much more fun for you as the performer

Story telling is a tool used by leaders, to teach lessons, provide clarity and comfort, create ahas . We use stories so much, because they *work!*

Limitations of storytelling

Musical tools for storytelling

As singers, we have so many MORE tools available to us, and these can get us past many of the limitations of strictly oral story telling.

The extra tools that the composer and arranger give you, in addition to words. These are the tools for your act of interpreting.

Tools that help us deliver the song like a story:

Theme – purpose, mood/story, unity and contrast, flow/peak

Construction and Form – overall concept/contour, added material, transitions/medley

Lyrics – quality, phrasing, energy, inflection, word delivery

Tempo, Rhythm, Meter – forward motion, rubato/ad lib, swing/steady

Embellishment – stylistic, appropriate, degree. (These add layers of meaning.)

Harmony – bbs7ths, major/minor triads, voicings/ voice-leading, progressions, balance

Things that can work against the story telling:

Melody – is it distinguishable? Is there a tonal center?

Alteration of melody (from what the audience already knows)

Suitability to Performer – song choice, difficulty

Here is a list of words used by the master practitioners of barbershop. Notice how many of them are a part of storytelling:

Energy, Poise and Command, Characterization, Audience Rapport/Engagement
Unity, Interaction
Entrance/Exit/Segues, Flow, Pacing
Costume, MakeUp/Grooming, Choreography, Posture
Commitment, Authenticity, Finesse
Rich, Open, Freely-produced, Resonant, Ringing
Resonance, Tone Flow, Dynamic Flexibility, Blend
In tune, Quality, Expansion, Expressive, Energized Vocal Line

Go look at the actual BHS/SAI scoresheets, with your storyteller's lenses on, and see how many times they nudge you to story telling.

Barbershop Harmony Society Scoresheets

<http://themusicalfirm.org/ScoresheetsBarbershopHarmonySociety>

Sweet Adelines Scoresheets

<http://themusicalfirm.org/ScoresheetsSweetAdelines.pdf>

A caution and a relief: Mastering every tool on this list is probably three years of serious work. You don't have to master or even use every one of these cues and language and tools that the arrangers have used that speak to you. However, I'd urge you to *at least* use the ones that work for you.

So, what are we striving for as musical storytellers?

Having the **audience totally engrossed** is the *Ideal*.

Other insights

Cautionary note:

Beware the trap of focusing totally on tuning [or some other basic skill] to the exclusion of putting your humanity in the telling.

Artistry is a movement of soft skills and technical skills as one. Not yin and yang, with two parts, that are in opposition. It really is a unification. Example: Real Time.

Different example: There are some incredible technicians, but they don't retain the attention of their audience, because the music is soulless.

Differences in delivery – even for the same story or song – can be ok. The key is “Does it work?” Did the audience understand, and were they entertained?

Wrap Up:

What were the particular Ah Hah's for you?

What is the call to action? [Finding the nuggets:](#)

Remembering the Scheherazade comments – If total engrossment is the ideal, then the next step is finding the nuggets in the song and arrangement.

The Music Skills Approach

[Become aware.]

Go back to the list of tools, in the handout. Go through the score, and look for examples of these tools that arrangers use.

[Apply]

Use at least some of the tools that resonate with you.

The Visceral Approach (music skills not needed)

Listen – or watch – again a performance you really liked. Pay special attention to those items you loved. (Jotting them down is helpful.) Then reflect on why you liked it. What were the nuggets that were in there that the performers used and took advantage of?

For a song that you are working on in your chorus or quartet, get the learning tapes for each part, and the full mix. Listen intently to what each part is doing – and especially what they are doing with another part.

In essence, you are reverse engineering the nuggets.

One more benefit of finding the nuggets. Better storytelling skills not only provide a benefit for the audience member. For the performer, when you use your storytelling skills, you might be able to learn your music, and to learn it more quickly – because you can recognize the material that the composer and arranger gave you. It is far easier for you to crack their code.

Final goal/ final gate:

Exit the course with a new understanding of what an audience wants, and what we can bring to them as performers, *if* we have a sensitivity to story telling, and *if* we use the tools that the arranger gave us.

Other tools, to become better grounded as you tell the story:

Start by printing out the lyrics. Read them like a story, or a poem. Do some “oral interp” using the lyrics. Start to understand the story – its start, its flow, its ending.

Then use the four questions from Tom Metzger’s *Owning the Stage*

- Who is singing / speaking?
- Who are they singing *to*?
- What does he/ she want?
- Do they get what they want, or not, or is it unknowable?

When you can identify the answers to these questions, you will have dramatically increased your understanding of the song as a story. NOW start pairing up the words to the music.