

# The Singer's Library:

## The Vocal Coach Approach

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



Susan Shiplett Ashbaker offers singers advice designed to “coach up” their performances.

Successful athletes know how important it is to have good coaching. Part-time technicians, strategists, and cheerleaders—coaches often wear many hats but can make a tremendous difference when it comes to winning and losing.

Singers benefit from good coaching as well, although the role of a “vocal coach” is more specifically defined in music than it is in athletics. As Susan Shiplett Ashbaker, director of Westminster Opera Theatre for Westminster Choir College, describes, “Singers have a team of people to help them achieve their goals . . . It is a voice teacher’s job to teach technique, not a coach. But as a vocal coach, I’ll happily work on all the elements that aren’t technique.”

A vast collection of these elements are presented in Ashbaker’s new book, *The Vocal Coach Approach: When Practice Makes Perfect* (Inside View Press, 2022). In the interview below, she describes how voice teachers and vocal coaches work together, how singers can build positive practice habits, and how learning to love practicing can lead to “meaningful music making.”

**In Part One of *The Vocal Coach Approach*, you write about how voice teachers and vocal coaches have different roles, yet you also emphasize how important it is that they work together to help students reach their goals. What do you see as the most significant distinction in those roles and the most crucial ways they can collaborate to benefit singers?**

A voice teacher is responsible for all technical (and physical) aspects of a singer’s training. They are building

the voice. Almost everything is done in the voice lesson through the lens of technique, including vocal warm-ups and exercises as well as work on repertoire. A voice teacher needs in-depth information on vocal technique as well as a communication style that the singer understands.

A vocal coach deals with style, language and diction, interpretation, musicianship, phrasing, drama, and things like that. The coach can become a mirror for the singer to see if what they are attempting to do is successful. A vocal coach provides tools to add to the technique for performance.

It is so important that the teacher and coach are in alignment for the good of the singer, in my opinion. Conversations between teacher and coach are important. It can be as simple as that. Talking to each other—over the phone, over coffee, in the studio—keeping each other informed, alerting each other of any difficulties encountered, supporting the singer together, discussing repertoire. Singing can be difficult and many things can be confusing. It is important that the teacher and coach are rowing in the same direction for maximum benefit for the singer.

**A number of times in the book, you advocate using “tapas-sized practice bites.” In Part 1.6, you go so far as to say, “As in all exercises in this book, don’t overdo the idea!!!” The three exclamation points seem to indicate you feel strongly about this! What does it mean to “overdo the idea,” and how can singers avoid falling into that trap?**

In general, anything in excess is likely not the best idea. For practicing, breaking things down into smaller detail for practice can [help singers] focus on one thing at a time. However, practice needs to be a balance of activities.

If a singer is working on the language aspects, they also need to find time to sing the vocal line on a vowel to see how the language and the musical line work together. If the language aspect includes singing in rhythm on one pitch, that can be fatiguing if done for too long a stretch. If a singer is working on the 12 16th notes at the top of their range, a break is needed so that the singer does not overdo to the point of harm. It is really about combining multiple elements and multiple tools for the benefit of the overall piece and goal.

**In Part Three, you present detailed deep dives into specific operatic arias. For each selection, you offer your own observations on the music, the text, and the characters as well as practice strategies for difficult passages. But you also ask leading questions designed for introspection, such as “What feels best for you?” “What makes sense for you?” and “What feels possible for you to do?” Does it ever surprise students that, given your extensive experience and expertise, you spend so much time soliciting their input? How do you coach students who may believe they are there for you to teach them the “correct” way to perform these arias?**



Susan Shiplett Ashbaker

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## Review

# The Vocal Coach Approach

When Practice Makes Perfect

A guide to help singers of all levels  
learn to practice - and love it!



By Susan Shiplett Ashbaker

*The Vocal Coach Approach* is divided into three primary sections. Part One is titled “Daily Musical Tools to Optimize Your Singing” and begins with “Everyday Tools for Musical Technique,” such as scales, arpeggios, trills, and *messa di voce* exercises.

Some particularly useful advice is found in the section in this part titled “Fixing Places that Were Learned Wrong.” Here, Ashbaker explains that in order to break a bad habit, singers have to form a new habit by practicing a replacement behavior. She writes, “The more you do something, the more easily it becomes a habit.... Your body and voice don’t know what is right and wrong technically or musically, just what you tell [them] to do most often. So, make sure you are fully alert and that you serve the technique you’ve worked so hard to achieve.”

Part Two is called “Daily Non-Musical Tools” and carries the subheading “When You’re Too Tired to Sing.” This section includes chapters on working with language, marking music (with highlighters and colored pencils), storytelling, and other “non-singing activities” that are necessary elements of practice.

Part Three is titled “Application of Practice Tools,” with the subheading “Time to Play!” In the bulk of this section, Ashbaker presents interpretive guides on specific arias, which she divides by voice type: soprano, mezzo, tenor, baritone, and bass-baritone. The chapters in this section are provided as examples of how an aria can be deconstructed and analyzed and how that information may be used to inform a singer’s performance.

Singers who are actively working on the repertoire she discusses will find brilliant perspectives and probing questions that will clarify and enhance their own work on these arias. Given Ashbaker’s 40+ years of experience (with organizations like New York City Opera, Israeli Vocal Arts Institute, International Vocal Arts Institute in Montreal, and Theater am Goetheplatz in Bremen, Germany) and thorough knowledge of the repertoire, an entire book of similar analyses would be a welcome follow-up volume to *The Vocal Coach Approach*, should she consider such a project.

The complete title listed on the book’s cover is a mouthful: *The Vocal Coach Approach: When Practice Makes Perfect: A guide to help singers of all levels learn to practice—and love it!* Related to the first subtitle (*When Practice Makes Perfect*), Ashbaker admits in the text that “perfect” can be different for everyone, given the subjective nature of the arts. As such, she cautions readers not to let the word “perfect” stifle artistic vision or creativity.

Related to the second subtitle (*A guide to help singers of all levels learn to practice—and love it!*), it seems certain that singers who love to practice will find endless ways to build both their artistic vision and creativity as well as their vocal technique. For singers seeking these benefits, Ashbaker’s approach will serve as an exceptional guide.



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Brian Manternach

Sometimes it can be surprising to the younger student. But the final performance, after all, is a reflection of their interpretation through the lens of history, ability, drama, vocal ability, etc. I like to think of the coaching session as a wonderful collaboration. I like to empower the singer to explore their own creativity. I'll share the many ways something is traditionally done. The

singer will try them and find the one that works best for them. Or we'll explore and find a new way.

More seasoned singers come for much the same reasons. Even though they usually understand the framework for sculpting the opera, aria, or song, they come to expand their understanding, knowledge, and musical options for the selection. Individual interpretation is what makes these masterpieces come alive for the listener.

**You end the book with the statement that “We are lucky to be musicians. You are lucky to be singers. I wish you years of enjoyable practicing and meaningful music making.” Do you think that finding a way to make practicing enjoyable is key to success, longevity and, as you say, “meaningful music making”?**

Yes! Practice has to be enjoyed. All musicians spend more time in the practice room than on the stage in performance, so it is important to enjoy the process as well as the final product. I think that loving to practice is something that some people need to learn.

Practice should prompt curiosity, creativity, and cultivation of one’s artistic voice in addition to technical and musical work. As Rumi states, “Let the beauty we love be what we do.” There is beauty in performance, for sure, but there is also much beauty in the process, in practice.

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