

Choosing Appropriate Repertoire for Students Studying Voice

Gabriel Rice

Faculty mentor: Dr. Kerry Ginger

Abstract

As a voice teacher, choosing repertoire for students is a vitally important task. **Assigning repertoire that is too easy will not allow a student to grow their musicianship, while assigning music that is too difficult can stunt development and discourage the singer from continuing lessons.** With this issue in mind it can be advantageous to have a system to quickly analyze the difficulty of a piece of music and determine whether to assign it or not, thus reducing the time spent picking repertoire and allowing one to gain an understanding of pieces a teacher might be unfamiliar with. **The purpose of this research was to create such a system utilizing a rubric to score the difficulty of a piece of music across a variety of parameters** including range and tessitura, rhythmic intricacy, harmonic complexity, linguistic demands, and the difficulty and melodic support of the accompaniment. **Drawing inspiration from established practices in the voice pedagogy literature, this project refines already effective metrics into a new rubric, offering a comprehensive and efficient tool for assessing difficulty, and allowing future voice teachers to make informed repertoire decisions.**

Scoring examples

4 songs analyzed from an anthology of 20th-century English composer, Gerald Finzi

- “Who is Silvia?”
 - Final score: 14/40
- “Overlooking the River”
 - Final score: 17/40
- “At Middle-Field Gate in February”
 - Final score: 19/40
- “Channel Firing”
 - Final score: 26/40

Title: “Who is Silvia?” Larger work (if applicable): *Let Us Garlands Bring*
 Composer: Gerald Finzi Language: English
 Fach/voice part(opera/MT): High/med/low key (art song): Low
 Range: from A2 to D4 Tessitura: from C3 to C4
 Additional notes: Shakespeare lyric from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*

Considerations	Guiding Questions	Scores (increasing difficulty)				
		1	2	3	4	5
Melody	How complex is the melody? Is it singable? Are there any large leaps, long phrases, or held out notes? Are lines mostly diatonic or very chromatic?	1	2	3	4	5
Rhythm	How complex are the rhythms or meters? Are there difficult meter or tempo shifts? Is the tempo very fast or slow?	1	2	3	4	5
Coloratura/melismas	Are there any difficult coloratura passages or melismatic moments?	1	2	3	4	5
Range/Tessitura	How does the song fit into a student's typical vocal range? Too high or low? Where does the tessitura of the piece lay within their range?	1	2	3	4	5
Accompaniment support	Does the accompaniment harmonically and rhythmically support or double the singer or is it independent?	1	2	3	4	5
Language/Diction	Does the language contain consonants/vowels unfamiliar to the student? How similar is the language of the piece to the students native language.	1	2	3	4	5
Text	Is the song particularly wordy or has lots of patter? How difficult will the text be to memorize?	1	2	3	4	5
Thematic material/acting	Does the poetry being played interact with difficult or mature themes? If acting, does the student have the dramatic capabilities to perform the character? Are the themes or characters relevant to the student?	1	2	3	4	5
Accompaniment playable/fakeable	Is the accompaniment playable by the teacher, or able to be simplified to a degree to accompany during lessons? NOT INCLUDED IN TOTAL (for teacher's use)	1	2	3	4	5
(8-12) Beginners (13-17) Early undergrad (18-22) Late undergrad (23-27) Master's (28+) Professional	SUMS	4	4	6	0	0
	TOTAL (higher is more difficult)	14/40				



Figure 1. Moment of rhythmic complexity from Finzi's "Who is Silvia?" Syncopated rhythm over a meter change from 2/4 to 3/8 and back to 2/4. mm.9-17

Practical application

Hypothetical student

High school senior, cisgender male. Based on his color and range, he seems to be leaning towards a baritone sound. This student is an advanced thinker whose voice is still catching up to his musical skills. He struggles with his modal voice (or chest-dominant mix) above middle C, and is hoping to expand his range upward. He has good access to his head tone, but some coordination challenges at the chest/head passaggio.

Assigned song: “Who is Silvia?” 14/40

- Diatonic, folk-song reminiscent melody with enough complexity to remain intriguing to a learning musician
- Rhythmically conventional most of the time with a few small moments of intricacy to develop musicianship
- Sits in a very comfortable tessitura for the student, and lets them explore a baritone quality on the lower notes in the range while not pressing high notes too early
- Active, but supportive and charming accompaniment
- Simple, pastoral text, but with interesting Shakespearean source

Overall, a great song for a clever, developing young voice that is easy enough for an advanced high school student or early college student, while still providing enough substance and challenge to push growth.

Literature cited

- Arneson, Christopher, and Lauren Athey-Janka. *Literature for Teaching: A Guide for Choosing Solo Vocal Repertoire from a Developmental Perspective*. 9-15, 47-50. Delaware, OH: Inside View Press, 2014.
- Finzi, Gerald. *Collected Songs*. New York, New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 2008.