

The SAVI Singing Actor

Your Guide to Peak Performance on the Musical Stage

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CHAPTER 7

What is Behavior?

An ounce of behavior is worth a pound of words.

–Sanford Meisner

Axiom 1, the primary principle of the SAVI System, tells you that your job as a singing actor is to “create behavior.” So, let’s dig more deeply into the notion of behavior: the types of behavior, how behavior communicates thoughts and feelings, and what you can do in class or in the studio to enhance your ability to create it.

The term **behavior** describes the various ways a person responds to a particular stimulus or situation. Stimuli can be internal or external, conscious or subconscious, and the person’s response to it either voluntary or involuntary. In the following chapters, we’ll explore the three main categories of behavior:

- Facial behavior, including facial expressions and eye movement;
- Vocal behavior, the ways your sound can change depending on what you’re expressing or responding to;
- Physical behavior, including gestures and body language, as well as movement from one place to another.

How do we learn to create behavior? Much of our behavior is innate and instinctual. If we hurt ourselves, we don’t need to be

taught to cry out, and no one has to be taught to laugh when they are tickled. Many other behaviors, however, are learned; we learn to create (and, equally important, to suppress) behavior by imitating what we see in the world around us. We learn behavior like a language, and quickly come to understand what it means when someone winks or speaks with a growling tone or brandishes their middle finger. Gestures and behaviors can have different meanings in different cultures, and cultural norms will determine whether behavior is appropriate, excessive, or even offensive.

Behavior makes what is happening inside of you apparent on the outside. No one can see your thoughts or feelings, but your behavior provides tangible evidence of your otherwise intangible inner life. Your ability to express yourself behaviorally contributes to the quality commonly referred to as "stage presence," and you can cultivate both stage presence and behavioral expressiveness through deliberate practice.

Projective Modes of Behavior

There are three distinct ways in which the behavior of the singing actor is evident to audiences: the **voice**, **face**, and **body**. These are sometimes referred to as the three **projective modes**, and each of these independent channels is capable of conveying information to the audience in a manner that can either complement or contradicts the other two.

Every actor has a distinctive set of strengths and weaknesses when it comes to creating behavior. This is the result of our physical, psychological, temperamental and cultural differences, as well as our differences in training and experience. When you train for the musical stage, you must develop an extensive vocabulary of vocal, facial and physical behaviors, and learn to minimize unwanted entanglements or interference among them.

The term **vocal behavior** is an invitation to consider the idea of vocal expression more comprehensively. When you sing onstage, your voice must be capable of conveying a wide range of emotions, characterizations, and styles through choices of breath,

support, placement, resonance, timbre and diction. Many singers and singing actors consider classical “bel canto” technique a valuable foundation, especially for roles written to feature the power, range, beauty and agility of the so-called “legit” voice. Labeling one style of singing as “legitimate,” however, has the potential to reinforce an old-fashioned mindset in which non-classical styles are seen as somehow less “legitimate,” less worthy and perhaps even dangerous. Modern-day singing-acting requires an open-minded, inclusive approach to vocal behavior, with access to a wide range of “unusual but useful” vocal sounds.

The types of behavior associated with vocal production can be usefully grouped into several subcategories that include breath choices, vowel resonance, diction choices, non-verbal vocal behaviors and musical choices. Breath involves the coordination of voice and body, while diction involves the coordination of voice and face (the muscles of articulation). Non-verbal behaviors include all sorts of sighs, grunts, laughs, growls and cries that convey meaning and emotion. Musical behaviors such as dynamics, articulation, and phrasing are sometimes included in the composer’s notation, but are often created by the performer working in collaboration with a conductor, coach, and/or accompanist.

Facial behavior can be a touchy subject in performance training. We all know from personal experience that the face and eyes convey vast amounts of information about feelings and thoughts when we sing or speak, and even when we are silent. Opinions vary, however, about when the conscious use of the face and eyes devolves into “mugging,” a pejorative term that refers to making silly, exaggerated faces. The idea that you might need to *deliberately* create facial behavior seems to run contrary to some acting teachers’ notions of truth and authenticity. My experience, however, is that you’ll need access to a wide range of expressive behaviors in both the face and the eyes to be an effective singing actor. There are ways to stretch, strengthen and activate those muscles so that your face will optimally express your inner thoughts and feelings without mugging.

Body behavior includes gesture, posture and body language as well as movement through space. As with the other two projective modes, your goal should be the development of an extensive vocabulary of behaviors, ranging from the most “natural” to the most “stylized.” You should also cultivate the ability to change quickly and easily from one behavior to another as the dramatic moment dictates and to maintain a strong link between movement and the emotional life it expresses.

EXERCISE: Analyzing Behavior in YouTube Videos

Want a vivid illustration of the concept of behavior? Pick any song and watch three different performances of that song on YouTube. (Having begun my teaching career in the pre-Internet era, I have found YouTube to be a game-changer when it comes to studying the art of singing-acting.) In each video, the song is the same, so what’s different? You might ask yourself:

- What different facial expressions does the singer use?
- When is there evidence of expressiveness in the eyes, or “eye language”?
- What kind of gestures does the singer use? What evidence of “body language” do I see?
- When does the singer alter or adjust their stance or location?
- What kind of vocal colors does the singer add? How do they breathe? Do they enunciate particular words or phrases in a way that adds meaning?
- What musical choices (tempo, dynamics, key) are evident in the performance?
- Are there any particular moments where a change in behavior seems particularly conspicuous?

Try this with your eyes closed (to focus on your sense of hearing) or with the sound off (to focus on what you see), and see if what you notice changes. As you take in the continuous “stream” of information that the performer uses to communicate, try to look for individual details (a shrug, a gesture, a flash of the eyes or

a growl in the voice) that have particular impact. Notice how the singer's choices correlate to specific phrases and moments in the song.

Or do they? Maybe the video you're watching features behavior that's general, meaning that it's pretty much the same at every moment in the song. How effective are the performer's behavioral choices? Check the comments that have been posted and see what others think. They may corroborate your findings or give you reason to reconsider your judgments.

As you itemize and analyze the choices made by different performers singing the same song, you'll quickly discover the extent of each performer's creative contribution, and discern the opportunities for creative choice-making that any song presents. Your job as a singing actor is not to imitate YouTube's latest darling but to create your own unique performance. A song is a map that suggests a number of possible routes, and deciding which path you to take on your "journey of the song" will require energy and ingenuity.

"Psycho-Physicality" and Behavior

How much of the behavior you saw in the videos you analyzed do you think was spontaneous? How much was predetermined or "set?" How much was the sole creation of the performer, and how much was shaped or determined by a director, choreographer, or coach? It's hard to tell, of course, because when behavior is properly executed, it all seems to be a natural expression of the moment.

At any given moment in a singing actor's performance, behavior can be either externally or internally determined. **Externally determined behavior** is behavior that is "set" in advance; it can take the form of blocking, choreography, business,²⁰ or other behavior set by the director, choreographer, or conductor, or

²⁰ "Business" is a theatrical term that refers to the handling of props and other incidental onstage activity that doesn't fit into the categories of blocking or choreography. My graduate directing teacher, Larry Carra, had an elegant name for it in his book *Fundamentals of Stage Directing*: he called it "pantomimic dramatization." Now *there's* a fancy bit of MFA jargon.

The SAVI Singing Actor

behavior that the actor himself has chosen and planned prior to the performance. In contrast, **internally determined behavior** is unplanned, occurring in reaction to some stimulus or change in the world of the play or thanks to an intuitive process on the part of the actor. If you detect some overlap between externally and internally determined behavior, go to the head of the class! The choices you discover spontaneously during the rehearsal process usually get “set,” with the expectation that you’ll repeat them consistently over multiple performances.

Making choices in the theater is a complicated business. Acting is an intensely collaborative art form, which means the rehearsal room and the stage are full of loud, bossy people with lots of opinions. The writers (whether present or absent, living or dead) have set down a fairly specific notion of the dramatic event through the particular words, notes and phrases they have chosen. The conductor, the director, the choreographer and an army of assistants and other ancillary personnel are also bursting with ideas about what your choices should be.

But that shouldn’t mean you don’t get some say in the matter. In the moment of performance, it’s your ass up there (as one might say in the colorful parlance of showbiz), not the writer’s or the conductor’s or any else’s, and that means the choosing must include you as well. When you sing, you must always be choosing, and the foundation for determining the most interesting, creative, useful choices is a rock-solid understanding of the dramatic event: What’s happening now? Who’s doing what to whom, and why is it important?

What comes first, the behavior or the thought or feeling it expresses? It’s a chicken-and-egg dilemma that Stanislavski resolves by formulating a notion he calls “psycho-physicality,” a way of thinking about behavior as both internal and external, a manifestation of an inner state as well as a means of entering into that state. Years of experience have validated my belief in a “psycho-physical” approach to singing-acting, one that recognizes that choices can legitimately originate either in the inner life or on

the outer surface, as long as the connection between those two worlds is scrupulously honored and maintained. The distinction between “inside-out” and “outside-in” that’s been argued by generations of actors and their teachers is, in my view, a false duality: the relationship between your inner state and the external behavior by which it is manifested is *duplex*, a two-way street.

Creating behavior and organizing it into a performance means making changes sometimes, but at other times, it means *not* making changes. The singing actor must know when to make a change in his behavior and when to sustain behavior without changing. Doing too much in between dings can muddy the water, confuse your spectator and distract from your otherwise good work. When you’re in between dings, keep it simple and focus on sustaining, maintaining and developing your choices.

Mastering both choosing and changing will give you the ability to create work that is articulate and intelligently structured. Choosing without changing results in static, one-dimensional behavior, while changing without choosing results in random, chaotic behavior that is equally unsatisfactory. Study the script, the score, the given circumstances and the behavior of your onstage partners for clues about when to sustain a choice and when to make a change.

Why is Behavior Often Absent from a Performance?

The absence of behavior, in life or onstage, can create a sense of mystery or of information withheld, but more frequently it is interpreted as lifelessness, a “woodenness” more suited to statues than to humans who aspire to believable expression.

Why is behavior so often absent from the performances of singing actors? Why is it that so many singers exhibit behavior that conveys the general effort of singing rather than the specific behavior of a real person living truthfully under imaginary circumstances?

Well, first and foremost, fear and its insidious companion, tension, are to blame. When we are afraid, we suppress our

The SAVI Singing Actor

impulses for fear of being (or appearing to be) wrong. Timidity and shyness are usually byproducts of fear.

Second, lack of behavior may come from the ineffective management of the effort of singing. Great singing is indeed hard work, especially when it comes to vocal extremes (high notes, loud notes, long notes), but part of the art of singing is expressing oneself with ease, even when the work is challenging.

Finally, lack of behavior may come from lack of adequate preparation. This may mean that you have failed to explore the possibilities thoughtfully or to rehearse sufficiently to ensure that your behavior is expressive and truthful even under the stressful circumstances of performance.

Happily, all three of these problems can be addressed through training. Having embraced Axiom 1 of the SAVI System, the singing actor clearly understands the work he or she is undertaking: "When I sing, I will create behavior that communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase."

With all that in mind, let's turn our attention to some of the most valuable exercises in the SAVI System, ones designed to help you practice creating behavior while singing. Fasten your seat-belts, kids; I've got quite a few of them!

EXERCISE: Lip Sync

"Lip sync" is short for "lip synchronization," a kind of mimed performance synchronized to a recording in which you invent silent behavior to create the illusion you are actually singing the song. But then you knew that already, didn't you? Not only that, but you probably don't need me to explain that lip-syncing involves more than just your lips, right? Just checking.

I had a personal experience with lip-syncing in one of my rare forays into the world of professional performance, when I appeared in the *Sweeney Todd* scene of Kevin Smith's 2004 film *Jersey Girl*. The music track for that scene, including all the vocals, was pre-recorded and then played back during the shoot. While

filming, the cast sang along with the track, and knowing that my vocal performance was already “in the can,” I felt wonderfully free to craft the physical and facial components of my performance without having to fret about my singing.

It is fascinating to see how non-singing behaviors (facial expression, eye language, body movement, and gesture) blossom once the singer is liberated from the fear and tension that so often accompany the effort to sing well. The new ideas you discover through the lip-sync process can then be integrated into your singing performance.

Lip-syncing is great to do on your own or in a classroom setting. The procedures described below are easily adapted for a group class. In a group setting, I find that students are inspired and excited by one another’s work and that the discussions that follow are invariably productive.

Level 1. Pick a recording of a song and “lip-sync” it—that is, devise a performance intended to create the illusion that you are actually singing the song. It doesn’t have to be a musical theater song, or even a song sung by someone of the same gender as you! Lip-syncing different sorts of songs invites you to explore new and unfamiliar sorts of behavior. Take advantage of the temporary freedom that lip-syncing affords you; without the demands of actually having to sing, you can devote your full attention and creativity to the challenge of generating behavior in the face, eyes and body. This can be a remarkably productive means of exploring the behavioral possibilities of a song you intend to perform. Use a video camera to record yourself, and play back your performance. Does your work seem freer, more inventive and expressive in the lip-synched version? Make a note of the discoveries you’d like to incorporate when you sing.

Level 2. Make an audio recording of yourself singing a piece that you are working on, and use it as the soundtrack for a lip-synched performance. Make a video recording of yourself lip-syncing to your pre-recorded voice, and then one where you actually sing the song. Examine the videos and see what this tells

you about the creation of behavior and its role in the communication of the song. Use the lip-sync recording to discover new choices to incorporate into your sung performance.

EXERCISE: Gibberish

Gibberish is one of my favorite tools for exploring and strengthening your ability to create behavior. The word “gibberish” means “nonsense” or “meaningless noise,” but when you use gibberish as a performance training tool, your sounds will become full of meaning. Gibberish is communication without intelligible language, which forces you to use behavior to express yourself. Use the following activities to work on your gibberish skills.

1. Spoken Gibberish with SAVI Cards. Choose a SAVI Card to serve as a catalyst for your improvised gibberish. Start out with action verbs, such as “to plead” or “to explain,” and adjectives (“calm,” “urgent”) and use these catalysts to inform and inspire your exploration of gibberish sounds. Try combining verbs and adjectives (How is “to plead” + “calm” different from “to plead” + “urgent?”).

Next, try a Face Card as a catalyst. Make your face look like the picture on the card, and see what gibberish sounds come out when you “inhabit” that face. Or imagine yourself speaking to the person whose face is pictured on the card. Make a sequence of several cards, and explore what happens as you transition from one card to the next. This simulates the phrase-by-phrase approach you use when singing a song.

2. Sung Gibberish with SAVI Cards. All of the activities in Step 1 can be sung, using either freely improvised music or phrases or patterns from songs or vocal exercises you know. When you’re ready, use music catalyst cards (“louder,” “higher,” “more beautiful”) to deliberately shape your musical choices. If you’re working alone in the practice room, you’ll be singing a *cappella*, but with a little bit of luck, you’ll hook up with an accompanist or coach who’s willing to jam with you.

When you start to sing gibberish, does it feel different? Explore moving back and forth between spoken and sung gibberish. In what ways do they feel different? Can you remain as behaviorally free when you sing as you are when you speak?

3. Gibberish Soliloquy (Spoken or Sung). Take a song or aria you're working on, and use its dramatic event and imaginary circumstances as the basis for an improvised soliloquy (either spoken or sung). Record your work on video and study the behavior you created. Incorporate those ideas into your performance of that song.

4. Gibberish Translation. Work on a piece of repertoire you are singing, but substitute gibberish sounds for the words of the song. Record on video, and compare what's different when you sing the regular words versus the gibberish sounds.

Working in the classroom or with a group expands the number of possible gibberish activities you can use to strengthen your ability to create behavior.

1. Gibberish Call-and-Response. Working in a circle, speak or sing a gibberish phrase, then have the group echo that phrase. Give SAVI Cards to your fellow students to provoke ideas about the content or quality of the phrase.

2. Gibberish Conversation (Spoken). Pick another student, and improvise a conversation in a made-up language. Decide on a set of imaginary circumstances to establish a dramatic event for your conversation.

3. Gibberish Arias and Duets (Sung). Improvised singing frightens many singing actors, who feel much more comfortable executing a pre-existing score than they do making stuff up. If you fall into that category, let me reassure you that it's not only productive but fun as well! My experience is that working with gibberish and improvised singing quickly becomes a playful, joyful experience. This activity can be done with or without accompaniment (of course, it helps to have an intrepid, creative pianist), and can also incorporate a conductor, SAVI Cards, or gesture shopping

(p. 165). This is a great way to generate new musical material in a collaboratively creative, devised-theater setting!

EXERCISE: Speak and Sing

I've observed that singers treat language very differently when they speak and when they sing. For this reason, I recommend making time in your conditioning session to work on exploring what happens when you speak and sing the same text. Here's a good procedure to use:

- Choose a SAVI Phrase Card from the deck. Take a moment to imagine a dramatic circumstance under which you might speak that phrase. Use the Fundamental Questions to guide you in developing that dramatic circumstance (see below, p. 188?)
- Speak the text on your card aloud. Repeat it, trying some different line readings. Add behavior, using the face and body as well as the voice, until you feel like you're communicating the drama of the text in a way that is both Specific and Authentic.
- As you continue to repeat the text, elongate its vowel sounds and start to "nudge" your line reading in the direction of a sung sound. See if you can make more specific choices about pitch and melody as you craft a tune for the text you're speaking.
- Notice what happens as you move from speaking to singing. Can you keep the same feeling of Specificity and Authenticity you had when you were speaking? Once you've found a "melody" in your line reading, try shifting the pitch of the whole melody up or down on subsequent repetitions.
- As an option, use other SAVI Cards (one at a time) to modify your behavioral choices when you speak and sing the phrase.
- If you're working on a piece of text from a song, sing it out fully, with your best voice-lesson voice, then

start to modify your sound to make it slightly more speechlike with each repetition until you're not singing at all.

Study the results of this experiment by video-recording yourself and comparing what happens when you sing with what happens when you speak. Do any of the changes you make when you sing affect your other behavioral modes (face, eyes, body language) in a way that diminishes your believability? Repeat this experiment, practicing over and over and treating the "middle ground" between a fully spoken text and a fully sung text as a spectrum of possibilities to be explored.

EXERCISE: Content-Neutral Songs

Songs that don't have specific meaning or dramatic content are good for working on the technical aspects of singing-acting, especially your ability to make adjustments in your behavior in coordination with the dings.

"The Five-Note Phrase" is a simple étude that can help you practice the skill of choosing and changing behavior over the course of a song. Use SAVI Cards to prompt you to make a wide range of choices, including in the realms of tone, timbre, gesture and facial expression. As you do, you'll also develop your ability to transition effectively between choices in coordination with the musical score. Sheet music for accompaniment to "The Five-Note Phrase" can be found in this book's Additional Resources section, along with information about recorded karaoke versions available on www.SAVISingingActor.com. If an accompanist or a recorded version is not available for your current practice session, please note that the étude works well as an *a cappella* exercise, too. In fact, it can be done at different tempos and with different styles of vocal production.

The SAVI Singing Actor

Moderato $\text{♩} = 100$

Sing a five note phrase As the mu-sic plays. How it will a-maze

5 Sung in dif-frent ways. Mo-di-fy your gaze. That will earn you praise.

8 Prac-tice al-ways pays With this five note phrase.

This version of the music, in a six-four time signature, is a good place to start when you're new to this exercise. The melody, as you can see, is based on an ascending and descending major scale. The printed lyric is just one of several options you can use to sing it. It's also quite useful to use solfège syllables (do-re-mi and so on) when you sing this etude. The mental effort of recalling the proper syllables and singing them in the correct order may tie your brain in knots, but it's a great workout for using multiple regions of the brain simultaneously.

The music is marked with ding symbols(Δ) at the end of every two measures. These dings are placed based on the meaning of the words in the lyric I've provided, but if you're singing vowel sounds or solfège syllables, you can place the dings on the last beat of any or every measure, as you prefer. In a group class, the teacher or a designated assistant can make a sound (using a desk bell, tone bar or triangle, or even saying "ding!") where the dings occur. If you're working alone, try making a sound like a hand clap, finger snap or thigh slap at each ding to give yourself a disruptive signal at the moments where change occurs. Remember, each ding is a moment to breathe in as you make the transition to a new phrase, a new idea and a new choice.

Once you've got the hang of singing and dinging this particular étude, throw some behavioral choices into the mix. Choose a few SAVI Cards from the same category (two Action Cards, for

instance), and sing the song while making behavioral choices, switching from one card to the next at each ding. You can either hold the cards in your hand while you sing, or lay them all out on a music stand or flat surface so that you can see your next choice at a glance without having to involve your hands. As in all SAVI Card exercises, make an effort to truly *inhabit* the behavior you create. In other words, try to find an organic link between your external behavior and your emotional and dramatic inner life.

Depending on the key you start with and the number of times you **modulate** (raising the key in half-steps), you can cover a substantial vocal range in this exercise. You'll be surprised by the amount of vocal energy the exercise releases, and you should remind yourself to breathe and support your singing, since you may otherwise find yourself yelling without meaning to.

The six-four version of the étude gives you an opportunity to sustain the final note of each phrase for a few beats and not feel rushed by the arrival of the "ding." Try out different cards, different keys and different tempos in order to calmly and methodically "settle in" to the pattern of choosing and changing. When you're ready, try introducing more cards. You can use as many as eight if you're not using the printed lyric.

A Five Note Phrase (solo version)

SAVI System etude

Charles Gilbert

Moderato ♩ = 100

The musical score is written in treble clef with a common time signature (C). It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and contains three phrases, each ending with a triangle symbol (Δ). The second staff starts at measure 5 and contains three phrases, also ending with triangle symbols. The third staff starts at measure 8 and contains two phrases, with the second ending in a double bar line and a triangle symbol. The lyrics are printed below the notes, with some words underlined to indicate phrasing.

Sing a five-note phrase As the mu-sic plays How it will a-maze
 Do re mi fa sol Sol la ti do re Re do ti la sol
 Ah _____

5
 Sung in dif-frent ways. Mo-di-fy your gaze. That will earn you praise
 Sol fa mi re do

8
 Prac-tice-al-ways pays With this five note phrase. _____

The SAVI Singing Actor

This version of the music has four beats in each bar. It leaves you with less time to sustain the fifth note in each phrase and instead forces you to hurry along your transition to the next phrase, which should feel slightly more challenging. (If you're feeling clever, you can adjust the music and sing it in 3/4 or even 5/8 meter for an even greater challenge!)

EXERCISE: The Mirror Canon

You'll get enormous benefits from working on the Five-Note Phrase étude on your own. When it's done with a partner, though, it takes your learning to a whole new level by introducing elements of interpersonal communication and behavioral give-and-take. In this section, I explain how to adapt the Five-Note Phrase into a group exercise called the Mirror Canon.

Charles Gilbert

Moderato ♩ = 100

Sing a five note phrase As the mu-sic plays.

How it will a - maze Sung in dif - frent ways.

Mo - di - fy your gaze. That will earn you praise.

Prac - tice al - ways pays With this five note phrase.

Stand facing your partner and decide who'll sing first (the Leader) and who'll sing second (the Follower). If there are more than two of you in the rehearsal space, I recommend organizing the group into two lines facing one another, with the Leaders on one side and the Followers on the other. With an odd number of participants, have one student stand apart and observe the exercise.

Once you've mastered the music of the exercise, the Leaders will add behavior to each phrase of the canon, and the Followers will "mirror" that behavior when it's their turn to sing. When the

The SAVI Singing Actor

verse is complete, the music modulates up a half-step and the Follower(s) now become the Leader(s). After a few repetitions, it is often useful to have a student from the end of one line move to the other end of the line, so that each student in that line will shift to a new partner on the opposite line.

As with the solo version of this exercise, the canon is first presented in a version that has six beats to each bar (a 6/4 time signature). It may take a few tries for the students to keep their “dings” appropriately synchronized with their respective vocal lines. Initially, the music should be sung and played at a moderate tempo, though eventually the tempo and style can vary. When you’re ready, you can also introduce the 4/4 version of the exercise (again, see sheet music in the appendix).

First “Mirror Canon” Variation: Vowel Sounds

Have the Leader randomly choose a different vowel sound for each five-note phrase, and the Follower copy those vowel sounds. Once the music has completed, switch roles and repeat. The 12 options for vowel sounds are the ones featured in the “Aught of Art” song introduced in the Chapter 5 voice warm-up and reprised in Chapter 9.

Second “Mirror Canon” Variation: Facial Expression

The Leader randomly chooses a different facial expression to accompany each vowel sound, and the Follower mimics or mirrors those faces. This can be done mechanically (i.e., facial gymnastics), but it’s better to “inhabit” each facial expression—that is, to create an inner state that in some way matches or supports what the face is doing. Again, once the music has completed, switch roles and repeat.

As you begin to activate your face while singing, your first impulse may be to thrust your face toward your partner, which results in an uncomfortable, unhealthy, and unflattering forward translation of the head beyond its balance point at the top of the spine. Try to allow your head to remain balanced atop the

spine even when your face is highly energized. Explore all your facial muscles in this exercise: the forehead, the eyebrows, the muscles around the eyes, the cheeks, the lips, the nose, the jaw, and so on. Use different sectors of the face alone and in combination. Explore both big and small choices, “truthful” and “phony” choices, beautiful and ugly choices. Using dialectical pairs of qualities like these can help you explore a full range of possibilities. You may notice your changing facial expressions produce a corresponding change in your sounds. That’s a good thing!

Third “Mirror Canon” Variation: Body Language

The Leader makes a physical choice—a gesture or statement in body language—to accompany each phrase, and the Follower mimics each choice. This can (and should) be done both separately from the face and together with the face.

If you’re a teacher leading this exercise from the sidelines, here are some common issues you should watch out for and ways you can coach your students productively:

(1) As with the previous round, you must commit strongly to your choices and inhabit each one fully. This is a psycho-physical exercise, and the participants should be invited to explore the reciprocal “duplex” relationship that exists between outward behavior and inner emotional life.

(2) Encourage participants to use a wide variety of choices. Are there certain choices they “default” to? Would some SAVI Cards help you mix things up? The cards can be introduced as catalysts in any variation of the exercise.

(3) The Follower can be instructed to exaggerate the Leader’s behavior, much like a magnifying mirror or something you’d find in a carnival funhouse.

If it hasn’t come up already, encourage the student participants to create one, and only one, choice per phrase. This will reinforce the habit of committing strongly and impulsively to a choice at the beginning of each phrase, and then sustaining and inhabiting that choice for the duration of the musical phrase. If the

participants in this exercise are constantly in motion, then they're not doing it right; there should be a swift and strong initiation of behavior at the beginning of the phrase, after which the choice should be efficiently sustained—with only the amount of effort needed, no excess tension—for the duration of the phrase. The singer need not “freeze” in each pose, but should not introduce any new choices in the middle of a phrase either.

Fourth “Mirror Canon” Variation: Imitation and Interaction

While maintaining the musical score of the exercise, begin to explore what happens when the Follower chooses behavior that is not a mirror or imitation of the “Leader, but rather an impulsive response to the Leader’s choice.

In this case, the exercise begins to acquire more of the give-and-take quality of a conversation, at least at the behavioral level. For instance, in the first five-note phrase, the Leader might create vocal and physical behavior that is harsh and aggressive; in response, the Follower might be intimidated by that behavior and respond meekly and submissively. The Leader, in turn, might respond to the Follower’s meekness with a new choice, creating behavior that is apologetic. Explore what happens when imitative choices and interactive choices become mingled. Say to your fellow participants, “You have the choice of either imitating your partner or responding impulsively with a different choice that is a reaction to their choice.” You can also present them with a structured sequence, such as four imitations followed by four interactions, or pairs of imitations and interactions.

Fifth “Mirror Canon” Variation: Structure

There are many cases in which singing actors are called upon to execute pre-planned behavior choices along with spontaneous choices in a way that seems authentic. This variation makes it possible to explore that challenge in the creative context of an exercise. Use SAVI Cards for the pre-planned choices if that feels useful to your group.

Have the Leaders decide on two specific gesture/face/voice combinations. Have them practice these both individually and in alternation. In the exercise, have them use Combination #1 on the first and third phrases and Combination #2 on the second and fourth phrases. Each time Combination #1 or #2 occurs, side-coach the participants to ensure that it is as specific and truthful as possible, and to maximize the contrast between the two combinations.

As a variation, have the Leaders decide on one specific gesture/face/voice combination, and use it in alternation with a random selection of other choices. In other words, they will follow the pattern of Combination #1 (first phrase)/Random choice (second phrase)/Combination #1 (third phrase)/Another random choice (fourth phrase), and so on.

Sixth “Mirror Canon” Variation: Choices from Repertoire

Many days you will come to class with prepared repertoire to present. Warm up using the Mirror Canon to choose sounds, facial expressions, and physical choices like the ones you will use in the song you’re going to present.

I’ve had great results with all of the variations of the Mirror Canon when I use them as part of the warm-up or as conditioning work in my class. Initially, you may find it exciting because of its novelty, but it’s important to treat this not as a quirky one-and-done experience, but as an exercise to be done repeatedly. Just like calisthenics, yoga asanas or work at the ballet barre, the Mirror Canon is an exercise that requires discipline, attention to correct form, and mindfulness of its goals. These goals are:

- To acquire the habit of creating expressive behavior while singing;
- To acquire the habit of making choices, inhabiting those choices, and then making new and different choices in coordination with a musical event;

The SAVI Singing Actor

- To expand your “behavioral vocabulary”—that is, the range of choices you can confidently and truthfully inhabit and employ in performance;
- To acquire good habits of use while singing and acting, including maintaining a balanced position of the head atop the spine while creating strong facial, physical and emotional choices, learning to initiate a variety of new choices impulsively without inhibitory tension, and learning to sustain choices for the duration of a phrase without excessive effort.

Behavior When You’re NOT Singing

Meisner’s axiom, “An ounce of behavior is worth a pound of words,” is especially relevant in moment of silence. This includes those times when no one on stage is speaking, and also when someone else is speaking and your job as an actor is to remain present in the scene with no lines to speak or sing.

The first heartbeat. One of the most important moments in which you must create behavior is the instrumental introduction to a song, when you’re preparing to sing your first words. Make it your habit to create behavior to fill this “first heartbeat” based both on your relationship with your partner and your understanding of the imaginary circumstances at the moment the song starts. To help you clarify your choices, you can write a line or two of inner monologue to say to yourself during the first heartbeat, and then use that to prompt your behavioral choices.

It is helpful to think about “stirring the soup” during the introduction to a song or, for that matter, whenever a significant transitional moment such as an interlude occurs in your song. When you “stir the soup,” you deliberately disrupt whatever your previous state was by initiating some new behavior. The behavior itself can be fairly insignificant: a bit of facial flex, moving the muscles of the eyes to look around, changing your stance or focus. It’s helpful to introduce new behavioral energy into a song at critical moments, like a cook might use a spoon to get the bits that may

have settled to the bottom of the pan suspended in a soup's broth again. Sometimes all it takes is the simplest of choices to break the "logjam" of inertia and bring the song back to life.

Creating behavior when it's not your turn to sing. When you sing a duet, do you "check out" and stop acting when you're not singing? This is one of the most common mistakes I see singing actors make. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that what you do when you're *not* singing is every bit as important as what you do when you *are*. In this regard, Axiom 1 gets it a little bit wrong; to be completely accurate, it should read, "When you sing **and even when you're not singing**, your job is to create behavior that communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase."

It is especially important when you're singing alone on the stage, soliloquy-style, that your moments of silence include "an ounce of behavior." What you do during the introduction, the interludes, the transitional moments and the moments of listening to a real or imaginary partner are crucial to achieving specificity, authenticity and variety in your performance. When you get hyper-focused on your vocal delivery, as some soloists do, you can lose sight of the fact that what you do when you're not singing is every bit as important to the act of communication. There's more to say on this topic in Chapter 11, when we talk about Input and Output.

EXERCISE: Active Listening

In the practice room, put on a recording of a song or a speech, and imagine you're the one being sung or spoken to. (Of course, you can do this in the classroom with a live partner, but doing this in the practice room can also help you get the hang of it.) As the actor in the recording comes to the end of each phrase, make yourself say out loud the last few words of the phrase you just heard, or the two or three words that seemed most important to you. If you need to, change the pronouns from first person to second person ("I" to "you") or the other way around. Then add a few

The SAVI Singing Actor

words of your own to make your point of view about what you've just heard clear.

This exercise is designed to help you build the important habits of:

- actively listening for the content of the phrase being sung;
- deciding on a point of view about what's being sung and how it's been sung;
- and then expressing that point of view in the words you choose to repeat and the behavior that accompanies those words.

Having practiced verbalizing your responses, now play the recording again. This time, don't say your responses out loud, just say them in your head instead. Make sure your point of view and your behavior are just as clear as before; just don't speak out loud. "Inner monologue" is the technical term that describes what you're doing. You're taking the flow of thoughts and feelings that goes through your head and trying to make it specific and concrete by choosing particular external behaviors to embody and express it.

When you do this with a recording, you'll be speaking over the recording, and the recorded performance will continue regardless of what you say or how you say it. If you do this as an exercise with a live singing partner, your interjections will interrupt the flow of the song, which may or may not be useful. We'll explore this option more fully in Part V, when we discuss partner work and its role in achieving Maximum Authenticity.

Summary

This chapter was intended to be a comprehensive exploration of the concept of behavior, and as with previous chapters, we've covered a lot of ground. I introduced three principal types of projective behavior, the three "channels" we use to "broadcast" our thoughts and feelings: face (including eyes), voice and body. Each of these will get carefully examined in the next three chapters.

Charles Gilbert

We discussed ways you can examine the behavior of other singing actors on video, a skill that will come in handy when it comes time to assess your own work via video playback. I introduced the concept of “psycho-physicality,” another way of approaching the duplex relationship of outer behavior and inner life. And I presented you with a number of exercises you can use to practice creating behavior while singing and coordinating it with a musical score: the number-one skill every singing actor needs to master! Now, off to the practice room!