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# **Recording as a self-analyzing tool in vocal practice**

The documentation also includes the following recording: **Before and after: "I'm  
not afraid of anything"**

# Abstract

Recording as a self-analyzing tool is something that has been researched and appraised within the musical field. This study will examine how one-take recordings at the end of personal vocal practice sessions can be utilized as an implement for self-analyzation which then will serve as basis for planning personal practices and future goalsetting. Two vocal teachers were interviewed for further insights and ideas, which then also birthed the idea to create a practice sheet where each part of the project was documented. The practice sheet includes three sections: *recording analysis*, *planning and goalsetting* and *practice journal*. A four-week practice period was planned where each practice would end with one-take recordings of the two songs that were chosen to be rehearsed, thoughts and experiences were immediately recorded in a practice journal. Recordings were analyzed and based on the analysis, a plan and new goal settings for the coming practice were formed. This way of structuring practice may help to work and practice independently as a singer and performer.

Keywords: Recording, self-analyzation, planning, goalsetting, vocal practice.

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# 1 Introduction and purpose

Throughout my vocal musical education, it has become apparent that I was previously never properly taught how to practice or plan goals for myself musically. Although I saw how my peers in folk high school<sup>1</sup> and college progressed through determined and focused practice, I personally felt I lacked confidence in my ability to practice in a progressive and developing manner. When I have auditions, gigs, and lessons, I discovered I feel more motivated to work on my progress and weaknesses. Goals are crucial for me to approach my personal practice and they give me something to focus on, rather than aimlessly singing in a practice room for hours on end.

I learned even more about this during my time as a student teacher at the Viktor Rydberg gymnasium in Jarlapan, Stockholm. Covid-19 abruptly hit schools around the world and demanded changes in the way of teaching. While it was certainly an obstacle for teachers and students, I was able to have the experience of teaching my vocal students through video chat—a very unique opportunity. Our private lesson structures had to be revised from traditional ways, and because of this drastic change in teaching style I was able to experience a new way of instructing and giving constructive feedback to students. We established that the students would make audio/video recordings of their practice during the week in addition to their normal lessons. Subsequently, I was able to give my students clearer goals and written feedback to their recordings that they could then utilize for their future practicing before coming to our next lesson. Together we learned this helped students know how to more effectively practice, better prepare for their lessons, and focus on the goals we set.

This experience with my students led me to also improve my own practice and discover different ways to set and achieve my own goals. I decided to use methods of practice, self-analyzation, and improvement that I had never used before. I started to record my practice sessions and realized this was an effective way to decide and set goals. I could hear what needed to be improved, but most of all I could also hear my strengths and analyze what needed to be worked on most. Through observation and reflection of my own practice, I was able to start hearing and understanding techniques that I had never been able to grasp before. My experiences in teaching others in this manner and also improving my own practice birthed the idea of this project.

The purpose of this project and essay is to explore how self-analyzation of recordings and detailed planning can help me practice in a more efficient and motivating way now and in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> In Swedish so called *folkhögskola*. Folk high school is an education that is available for all adults who wants to gain competence and points to get into a university program, develop talents, also vocational training.

Questions at issue:

- How does recording and self-analyzation contribute and affect my personal growth and development as a singer and performer?
- How can I use planning and goal setting as a tool to motivate my practice?
- How can I use these practice techniques moving forward in my future personal practice?

## 2 Background

In this chapter, the background and basis to this project will be discussed further. Matters such as, vocal practice, recording as a self-analyzing tool, planning and goalsetting and motivation will be presented.

### 2.1 Vocal practice

The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) define practice as, “the act of doing something regularly or repeatedly to improve your skills at doing it”. The art of practicing is something you have to learn by constantly trying different approaches and methods in order to understand what better suits your own way of learning. Kolb (1984) explains how there are four stages to learning through experience which goes through a cycle; a new *experience* will lead to *reflection*, which then in itself generates *new ideas* and alterations that can then be *tested*. A general idea for practicing is to start with things that are easy, because usually things that are easy are also one’s biggest strengths and assets. Thereafter, little by little, you can start taking on bigger challenges as you become increasingly comfortable practicing (Zangger-Borch, 2012).

Vocal practice usually consists of two bigger sections—vocal technique and studying a piece or song (Arder, 2000). Vocal technique usually includes a stretch for the whole body and then vocal warmup through different exercises for the voice. This preparatory stage is important to be able to practice in a safe way when continuing on to the second step which is studying a song. Having quality practice, shorter yet more focused practices, is also an important factor to be able to practice in a more sustainable and healthy way in comparison to volume-based practice (Arder, 2000). During practice, there are three parts that you constantly come back to; taking care of, technique and interpretation (Zangger-Borch, 2012). These three parts go together and are explained further (my translation from Swedish):

In order to create a free interpretation, you should have good technique, and to be able to practice your technique, you must be able to take care of your voice (Zangger-Borch, 2012, p. 12).

During lessons with professional vocal teachers, the student will receive tips and tricks that will help them evolve and progress. But when you are in a practice room all by yourself and without a teacher within close range, you are on your own. For an unexperienced or maybe unmotivated student having to plan and execute their own practice can seem and be very demanding. Pettersson's research (2017) focused on how vocal teachers help their students in the individual practice. In this study, the vocal teachers expressed that individual practice can seem "abstract" and in a way hard to define and teach students how to practice. The teachers explained, almost in unison, how lessons with a teacher and individual practice are both dependent on each other. During the students' personal practice, they are supposed to work on feedback and homework from previous lessons. The following lesson, the teacher will evaluate the progress the students have made throughout the week. However, on the students' personal time, they are on their own and hopefully they have been given the right tools to use throughout their practice since they have to become their own teachers. Sometimes that is quite a lot to ask of a student, especially if the student is new at practicing.

## 2.2 Self-analyzation and recording

To record oneself while practicing music is not a new method and is often used to learn more about one's singing or playing through self-analyzation. People often struggle to recognize their own voice when listening to a recording of others and themselves (Sundberg, 2001). Through recording, you get to know your own voice and learn what you sound like outwards, since the internal sound differs. According to Bjørndal (2005) there are also two other main benefits of recording oneself. First, recordings will help to preserve moments that might be forgotten if not documented. The author expresses that since we have limited memory, it is important for the observer to be able to go back and listen and observe an untampered recording. Secondly, it is also a benefit to observe certain learning moment multiple times since it is very likely that you will learn something new every time you do. Through watching and listening to a recording more than once, you will see different things if you change the focus of the observation (Bjørndal, 2005).

In a study of recording and self-reflection, Andersson (2015) had five students in the ages of 13 to 16 years old record themselves singing and then assess their recordings. The students were asked to reflect on the matters of rhythm, pitch, dynamics and also pronunciation since they would be singing in English. As a result of the study, the students better learned what they sound like and also started to put into basic terminology what they had heard. Eventually, they also started to give suggestions of how they could proceed in their vocal practice. Löfberg (2018) did a similar study on two electric bass students where he would record them while they were playing. The students were encouraged to analyze their own playing through their own words and the researcher found that they progressed throughout this experiment. The students were quicker to understand what they heard and to come up with solutions to overcome obstacles. Both expressed that this method is a great way to get a better insight in how you can progress and evolve as a musician.

As an addition to self-reflection through recordings, a practice journal is also a tool that will be used in this project as a resource for self-evaluation and analyzation. There are multiple benefits of writing in a journal – you get a better and deeper understanding of what has happened during practice, and by writing down reflections and thoughts, it is also easier to come up with solutions to problems. Through journaling, we learn how to talk and listen to ourselves which also contributes to a better self-knowledge (Bjørndal, 2005).

## 2.3 Planning and goal setting

Planning is an important part of every practice in order to reach the set goals and to also have a direction. A way of planning is to set long-term and short-term goals for yourself and your practice. The long-term goals can vary depending on the situation; a school semester, a year of practice or maybe a shorter project. The goals should include what you want to have achieved at the end (Arder, 2007). Short-term goals might include things that you want to accomplish within a day, a week, or during a practice session for example. With these goals in mind, it is easier to work more consciously and mindfully, which then in return will contribute to more satisfying results (Arder, 2007).

When teaching in music there has to be a balance between the planned curriculum and being able to improvise. When there is a plan it is much easier to improvise if the opportunity requires it (Schenck, 2000). In agreeance with the previous thought, Arder (2007) also expresses that spontaneity will enrich the learning experience and that when the practice or lesson is well thought out and planned you have a chance of evaluating what requires more attention in the moment. When students feel like lessons are well prepared and planned, they will feel an increase of motivation (Arder, 2007). The theory also goes well with an individual's practice. When you have a plan, it might be easier to start practicing because you know what the session will include and what the set goals are, and within that frame of reference you can improvise.

At the end of a lesson or a practice session, Green and Gallwey (2015) suggests that you write down in a journal what you learned and what you will continue to work on for the next session, this is a good example for setting short-term goals. Arder (2007) also explains that you should sum up what you have learned, and also suggests to only focus on two or three main points that will be practiced throughout the week. If you set the bar to high, it might feel unachievable and unattainable, which then might lead to discouragement.

## 2.4 Practice motivation

Motivation to practice is not something you can take for granted and it does not always come free. Arder (2007) explains inner motivation and external motivation. Inner motivation is based on the individual's desire and willingness to learn. As the author expresses, "one must want to learn in order to learn" (Arder, 2007, p. 64, in my translation from Norwegian).

Motivation is usually based in the student's personal interests, but a lack thereof can instead extinguish that motivational fire within. External motivation can be exemplified in giving and receiving rewards. Rewards can be positive reinforcements that supports what the student has achieved to encourage further progression. A positive environment in the classroom or practice room is crucial to be able to inspire and motivate students in their learning (Arder, 2007).

When you increase the level of entertainment and fun in your practice, you will reach better results and that in itself will lead to you having more fun because of the successes you are making (Schenck, 2000). Many people want to feel the joy of practicing and not the demands that can come with it. Sometimes you have to let go of the regular practice routine to find other ways that can help you forward. Children seemingly learn better in an environment where there is laughter and fun:

When the students are having a good time while they are learning, they not only learn more – but perform better (Green & Gallwey, 2015, p. 186).

In an experiment with eight music teachers, they found that the teachers with a humorous and light-hearted attitude had better results with their students, than the teachers that were stricter in their way of teaching and lecturing (Green & Gallwey, 2015). Not only this, but in the experiment, the importance of learning how to handle making mistakes also became apparent. A teacher made himself silly and played the wrong notes as an obvious mistake and the children would then point this out. They all laughed together and then the teacher encouraged them to do the same. He understood that through this method, the children learned how to embrace making mistakes and how to be able to laugh and have fun with it. The students made quicker progress with less effort.

Sometimes what can prevent or delay us from reaching success is the fear of failing. Lundeberg (1998, p. 66) expressed that we all “have a right to fail”, and explained further that when you let go of the fear of making a mistake or even worse, failing, you are liberated and free from negative thoughts that take away focus from the actual matter. When a person accepts the risks of failure, opportunities to succeed will increase, which in itself can make all the difference to be motivated to keep trying.

### **3 Methods and overall design**

In this following chapter an in-depth description of the methods that were chosen to be utilized during the four-week project will be presented and explained further. First of all, I interviewed two vocal teachers and then transcribed and analyzed the interviews. Due to the time limit of the project, two songs were chosen to be sung and practiced and at the end of each practice session I audio- and videorecorded the song I had practiced with one-take



recording<sup>2</sup>. A practice sheet was created (see Annex 2) where I would document in writing the different parts of the practice process. The practice sheet (see section 3.7) includes three sections which will be explained further on in this chapter; *recording analysis*, *planning and goal setting*, and *practice journal*.

### 3.1 Selection of informants

When constructing this project, I wanted to partake from the firsthand professionalism that only an experienced singer and vocal teacher can communicate and share. Because of the time restrictions, I chose to have two informants. According to Trost (2010) when conducting qualitative interviews, it is important that there is a variance between the people being interviewed. In contrary to previous thought, both of the informants are female; however, this was more of a coincidence rather than a conscious decision and does not make a bigger difference to the result since they come from different backgrounds. The first informant, whom I only had heard of but never met, comes from the United States. I thought it would be interesting to get opinions and thoughts from a vocal teacher from a different country than the one I reside in. Whereas the second informant, I had the privilege of meeting during an internship a few years prior to this project. Trost (2010, p. 140) would call this a *convenience sample*, where people are selected because they are more accessible and easier to come in contact with.

Informant 1 is a vocal teacher situated in the United States. She started studying with a vocal teacher in her adolescence and was later accepted into a music and dance bachelor's program at university. Once she finished her studies, she then started working with students at the same university because of the lack of teachers. In the comforts of her own home, she started teaching students and not long after that was officially inquired by the university to teach students with only a bachelor's degree. Years later, she went back to school to get a master's degree in classical singing. The informant has been teaching over twenty years.

Informant 2 is a music teacher who teaches in vocals and musical theatre at a music and art gymnasium in Sweden. Her interest in musical theater started in her adolescence. She graduated from a theater program at a gymnasium and then chose to study three years at a folk high school where she attended both a musical theater and music program. She started a higher music education at a university to major as a music teacher. At the same time, she also took classes in stage performance and then continued to her vocal pedagogy degree. The twelve years that followed, the informant worked as a show artist fifty percent of her time and the remaining fifty as a teacher at the high school she now teaches fulltime at. In total, the informant has been teaching for nineteen years.

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<sup>2</sup> Meaning to only have one chance to sing through the song while recording.

## 3.2 Ethical consideration

According to Vetenskapsrådet (n.d.) there are four main rules when interviewing, it includes; information, consent, confidentiality, and utilization requirement. The informants were informed what the interview was about and how the information would be used and implemented in the project. The informants were notified that they would be able to terminate their participation at any time. Previous to the individual interviews, they were also informed and asked if they wanted to remain anonymous and both informants approved to have their names in the text. However, after further consideration according to the confidentiality requirement I chose to have their names omitted in the essay for their own privacy and safety since the information will not be essential for the results. They were also informed that the information that was obtained throughout the interviews would be dealt with carefully and respectfully only for the purpose of the project.

## 3.3 Interview structure

Since I had sought for qualitative interviews, they were then conducted in a so called semistructured way. Brinkmann and Kvale (2009) define it as a conversation with a purpose and direction, without following a questionnaire survey. This form of interview allows one to add follow-up questions or make changes during the interview, without following a questionnaire. The goal is to better understand the informant's point of view. This allowed me to use the interview form (see Annex 1) I had created prior to the actual interview but also to have the option to make changes during the interview. As a result, the conversation flowed more freely and also led to discussions which helped me to obtain a deeper understanding of the project and research I had in front of me.

The interview with Informant 1 was held and recorded online through Zoom<sup>3</sup>, the interview with Informant 2 was held in person and recorded through GarageBand. The planned time for the interviews were around 30 minutes but both lasted between 50 to 60 minutes because of the natural flow of the conversations. Later the interviews were transcribed into separate Word-documents and analyzed for the purpose of using their ideas and insights for the project. The interviews were recorded before this project was planned and constructed but since, the plan and structure of the project has been revised and refocused. Therefore, only selected parts of the interview are applicable in this regard. The informants were once again contacted and informed of this change, and therefore also asked if they accepted still being a part of the project.

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<sup>3</sup> An online audio and video communication program

### 3.4 Summary of interviews

The informants' expertise was helpful for the process of learning how to take on this project. The provided information was used as a guideline throughout the project, however, not as a basis for the overall design. The informants' answers were in coherence with each other and will therefore be presented partially as a summary.

Both of the informants were particular about planning and creating a structure and schedule for one's practice, especially if you have a performance to prepare for. Each practice session should be planned out and executed with planned long- and short-term goals in mind. Informant 1 told of her own experience where she months before her master's recital started planning each day and practice session leading up to the performance. The benefits she saw from this experience was that she was very well-prepared for the recital and more confident in her own abilities and talents.

Both informants touched on the subject of treating your voice and body like an athlete would. Just like an athlete, you also have to build stamina when singing and only you are responsible for not getting tired in advance. Informant 1 compared vocal practice with going to exercise at a gym. When working out at a gym, it is a common practice to work on a couple of muscle groups at a time. You do certain exercises a certain amount of times and have to set limits in order to be able to strengthen the right muscles. Going past your limit might result in overexertion and self-harm, which will lead to a longer, tedious recovery time. This is the same when it comes to vocal practice.

According to the informants, it is crucial for the mind and body to take breaks throughout one's practice. Informant 2 suggested about fifteen to twenty minutes of practice followed by a short break. When singing, you are working with tiny muscles that need time to adjust to new techniques, and therefore, it is important to take plenty of breaks that can help the muscles to recover. Not only are breaks important for the muscles, but also for your brain and mental energy. The brain can only manage about five to fifteen minutes of learning new sets of skills and will soon thereafter disconnect, and old habits will take over. For that reason, breaks are important to be able to regain focus and motivation throughout your practice. Through experience, both informants had come to the realization that you learn better, quicker and deeper when you section out the practice throughout the day. They advised to instead of practicing for many hours straight, with breaks included, to have three shorter practice sessions instead.

Since I will be working without an instructor during the project the informants were asked if they had any suggestions for good exercises concerning specifically; breathing exercises that will help alleviate nerves and contribute a deeper breathing, and exercises for interpretation<sup>4</sup>. Both informants were able to provide different exercises that I will be using during the

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<sup>4</sup> The act of trying to find ways to represent the meaning or significance of a song

project. However, I will not go into further details since it will not affect the overall result of the project.

Informant 1 shared a theory that she has been using and that has been proving to be very useful in her personal practice. She mentioned that the cycle of practicing and learning a new song goes through three different stages; learned, memorized and polished. A description of each stage follows in her own words that were transcribed from the interview:

- Learned: "...you know the notes and the rhythms well, so that if you're looking at the music, you can sing through the whole song accurately."
- Memorized: "...you can sing the song without looking at your music, or if it is a very difficult song, meaning there is a lot of tempo changes or meter changes or maybe some chromatic, melodic structure, or just a lot of words.... you might need to just occasionally glance at the music."
- Polished: "...you can be in that stage forever... I mean, there's never an end to the polishing phase. But polished means that so you have now chosen how you're going to act and present the song."
- In the end, she meant that you are supposed to "...be able to do it in the dark, standing on your head, with one arm tied behind your back under water, like that you can just drop the song, anywhere, anytime."

Not only this, but Informant 1 also helped me to understand how to utilize this theory. She meant that you start off by choosing your songs and setting an end goal – maybe it is an audition or recital, or in my case, a final one-take recording of the songs I had practiced at the end of the four weeks. She meant that each stage of the practice has to be planned out. The learning stage should take about three hours for each song, if the song is new and unfamiliar this stage might need some additional time. The memorizing stage should take around three hours, depending on the song. The final stage, polished, should be around two to three hours per song. To summarize, the informant suggested that at least eight hours per song is supposed to be planned and executed through practice to have enough time to feel comfortable enough to perform the end result.

### 3.5 Song selection

On the subject of song selection, both informants were adamant about the quantity of songs that was going to be practiced during the four-week practice. Because of the project's time limit, I decided after some consideration to only practice two songs, when previously considered taking on four full-length songs. The songs that were chosen are as following; "Quiet" by Jonathan Reid Gealt, and "I'm Not Afraid of Anything" by Jason Robert Brown from the musical "Songs for a New World". Both songs are in the style of musical theatre and have certain levels of challenges such as, lyric processing, interpretation, storytelling, as an

addition to advanced vocal technique usage. I was previously acquainted with the songs through listening to them, however, I had never sung them prior to the project.

### 3.6 One-take recording and recording programs

Recordings are a good way to get to know your own voice and manners that you might not be very aware of. A one-take recording, however, is a recording where you only have one chance to record the song. You cannot start over from the beginning or redo if you are not happy with the result, you instead have to settle. I chose to end each practice session with this method because I often get very nervous when performing singing and/or speaking in front of an audience, and even when I am recording vocals for my own use. This method could help practice how to get used to and learn how to cope with feelings of nervousness and stage-fright. The project will also end with a final one-take recording at the end of the four-week mark as a result of the practice and work that has been put into this project.

I wanted the project to be performed in an everyday manner that it can easily be transferred from this project form into an everyday practice. Therefore, I chose to record the one-take recordings in a free program on my Mac computer called Photobooth and in the program I was able to record both audio and video. However, after the first week I chose to switch over to recording on my phone's camera because of the poor quality of the computer program. When choosing this method for recording I knew that the quality of the sound and video would be unfavorable, but since I do not own proper recording equipment this was the best I could do for the time being. However, I did not see this as an obstacle rather an opportunity to be able to have this method as an easy and accessible practice module for future practice even after this project.

### 3.7 Practice sheet

Based on what the informants had informed me on being prepared and to plan out every practice before a performance, I wanted to create something that helped me visually with just that. Regretfully, I did not ask the informants to specify how they would arrange their own practice or advice their students how to structure their practice into more details. After evaluating how I learn best, the decision was made to create a practice sheet where I could follow my progress throughout the project (a blank worksheet can be found in Annex 2).

The practice sheet was created in a way that was supposed to motivate me to plan and evaluate my practice more consistently. I constructed and organized it in a way that would fit my own way of processing things. However, this way of documenting practice might not suit the needs of everyone and would need to be revised to fulfill each individual's needs and preferences. The practice sheet is a gathered document where I compile the recording analysis, plans and goal settings for coming practices, and also a practice journal.

### 3.7.1 Recording analysis

At the end of each practice session, I recorded myself and then later on I analyzed what I was hearing and seeing. Since this project was conducted independently and without the support of an outer party, such as a vocal teacher, I had to become my own. At a vocal lesson you are often given feedback on what you can improve on and these advices can help you along the way during your personal practice. The same rules will apply in this project. The questions I have chosen to answer when analyzing the recordings are the following:

- *What do I hear that is good? What can I improve on?*
- *How can I proceed for further development?*

The questions are repeated twice in order to separate the analysis between the two songs that were chosen for this project. This way of documenting is called a synthesis journal (Bjørndal, 2005). In a synthesis journal, you analyze what has happened and how to proceed in the future. The questions for the analysis were created in an open and unspecified wording because I wanted to keep the analyzing process objective. It was important for me to be able to analyze the recordings in a broader sense without having to “check boxes” of what I was doing “right or wrong”.

There are of course general things that was evaluated such as; healthy or unhealthy vocal technique usage, breath support, jaw position, body posture and body language, interpretation and expression, word phrasing, etc. The second question served as a way to contemplate and formulate ways to proceed in future practices based on the analysis. There are risks that are probable to follow as it is very easy to become self-critical. Not having an analysis system may also result in inconsistency and might make the process of concretizing the final results more difficult. However, as a previously experienced singer and vocal teacher, I thought that these questions would serve as a sufficient basis for self-reflection. By the end of the four-week project, my long-term goals that I wanted to achieve was: to be more comfortable in front of the camera and having learned and memorized both songs. The last recording and performance should feel natural and believable through my expression and interpretation of the songs while utilizing a healthy vocal technique in order to not get fatigued or wearing out my voice in the process.

### 3.7.2 Planning and goalsetting

In the practice sheet, a planning section was included where I could follow my progression each week. Planning and goalsetting prior to each practice session gives you a frame of reference when you are working which then also can help prevent feeling overwhelmed when stepping into a practice session. The recording analysis of one-take recordings worked as a basis for planning and setting goals for the coming practices. Following is a short explanation of the structure and how it was intended to be used.

- *Plan of the day*: A quick sketch of the practice session, for example: 10 minutes of meditation, 10 minutes to stretch, 20 minutes of vocal warm up, 5-minute break, 20 minutes to practice song, 10-minute break, and so on.
- *Breathing/meditation*: Planned breathing and meditation exercises were documented and planned to start off each practice session.
- *Warmup*: Exercises to warm up the body and vocal instrument, and to practice and certain vocal techniques.
- *“Quiet” – Things to work on*: Based on the recording analysis (see section 3.7.1), plans and goal were set and documented in this section for each coming practice. Things that needed more focus during practice would be documented and would also include exercises that could help solve different matters.
- *“I’m not afraid of anything” – Things to work on*: Explanation as the previous bullet point.

### 3.7.3 Practice journal

For this project I chose to include a practice journal that I was to answer right after each practice session, as an addition to the recording analysis. For practical and efficiency reasons the answers were recorded through an audio recording program on my phone and then transcribe thoughts into bullet points in the practice sheet. I focused on two questions:

- *How did today’s practice go?*
- *Was I able to use the material I had prepared for today?*

This way of writing a practice journal is called a process journal where you document observations and reflections from the information you have been able to gather (Bjørndal, 2005). The reason why I choose to keep a practice journal was that I wanted to document my unvarnished thoughts after each practice session, in order to be able to go back to see how my thoughts and reflections evolved over time. It also provides a way to document thoughts that might appear during the practice that I want to remember and use in the coming practices.

## 4 Results

In this chapter I will present the empiric that I have been able to gather during this project. First of all, a presentation of how I was able to grow and mature as a singer and performer through constant self-analyzation of recordings. This will be followed by a section of how

planning each practice and setting goals worked and also transformed during the project. Lastly, I will present general thoughts and reflections concerning keeping a practice journal, taking breaks, and other factors that motivated my practice.

## 4.1 Recording and self-analyzing

The one-take recordings became the most integral part of the experiment. The recordings proved to be more revealing than what I had previously suspected since I was able to see some unexpected weaknesses and strengths more clearly. I was able to improve in many more aspects and techniques than originally planned which gave me new and different perspectives!

In the beginning of the project, when recording at the end of each practice I noticed that I would get nervous and anxious to get everything that I had practiced just right. Not having the chance of starting over really made it feel like a performance or a “make it or break it” deal. It became clear to me that the want and need to get everything right and the fear of failing became an obstacle I had to overcome. The practice of standing in front of a camera after the practice sessions was helpful in order to learn and understand how my nerves act when I get nervous. The breathing exercises I had received from the informants prior to the project were helpful since they helped me to focus before the recording and let my breathing become deeper and more stable. However, towards the end of the project I was more comfortable and less nervous singing and performing while recording. Not only was it a challenge to record myself without feeling anxious, but I also realized that it was caused by knowing I would have to listen and analyze myself which at times felt intimidating. But with the routine of constantly listening and getting used to what I sound and look like while singing and performing, that uncomfortable awkward feeling disappeared.

In the early stages of the project, it was very hard to stay objective and not let my personal feelings towards myself take over when listening and watching recordings. However, exposing myself through the one-take recordings, many things that I have overlooked or neglected through the years came into light through this experience. Just to name a few; I have a slight little lisp while singing, an overuse of hand gestures, at times too shallow or not enough breath support, I am good at storytelling, showing emotions through facial expression and body language etc. The open and unspecified wording of the analysis questions (see section 3.7.1) worked great and I had much to say about the recordings the majority of times. When analyzing myself, I would also come up with new ideas and approaches for the next practice. However, days where I had had unsuccessful practices, I sometimes would feel overwhelmed having to analyze myself without a stricter frame of reference. At those times, I would give myself the assignment of listening for two specific things I wanted to work on and two things that I liked about the recording. This method helped me to get something out of the recording even on a bad day in order to have something as a basis for the next practice’s planning.



Halfway through the project I went from writing in 1<sup>st</sup> person, *I*, to writing in 2<sup>nd</sup> person, *you*, when analyzing the one-take recordings. I was not aware how this little shift would change the way I would self-assess and view myself. When writing in 1<sup>st</sup> person, I realized that I was judging myself a little harsher than when the focus was flipped around. To write about myself as if I was my own student helped me to get better perspective and some self-distance which helped me to feel that the feedback was not as personal and helped me to be more objective and less negative.

## 4.2 Planning and goalsetting based on analysis of recordings

Planning can be beneficial and can work as a motivating tool in one's practice because it gives you a purpose, goal, and direction. The one-take recordings helped me to understand what goals I had to work on and towards, and where I was in the process, and I could use this information to plan the coming practice. However, I found that even though planning was very helpful, it was also time consuming to plan and set goals for each and every practice session.

The first week of the project I spent approximately 30 minutes at the end of every practice day planning each and every step of my coming practice. It was important to me to have a plan going into each session in order to be more efficient and to stay motivated. This method was very helpful as a starting off point, however, having planned every step, it also caused me to become a little rigid in the way I executed my practice. At times, I did not feel comfortable stepping outside of my planning structure when I realized that other things needed more attention. For this reason, I started to become more lenient during the second week and spent less time planning. Already at that point I started to feel more comfortable and confident in my ability to practice independently. Therefore, the following week and throughout the remainder of the project, the planning and goalsetting section turned into something even more lax.

Since the recording analysis became an opportunity to concretize what I needed to work on and setting new short-term goals every day, I found that I did not need to plan each step of the practice, with the exception of the physical and vocal warm up. When the planning became more of an outline, I realized that I felt that I had more freedom to do what felt right in the moment while practicing within a frame of reference. Toward the end of the project, I realized that the less time spent on planning, I was more excited to practice. But like I previously mentioned this method worked as a great doorway to learn and to get motivated to start practicing and helped to keep a focus on reaching and achieving one's long-term goals.

The method Informant 1 presented (learned, memorized and polished) helped me to understand where I was going and to reflect throughout the project how I was progressing within the set time frame that she helped me decide before starting the project (see section 3.4). However, it was hard to strictly stay within the planned number of hours for each of the

stages. I found that I stayed in learning stage much longer than planned and soon also realized that the learning and memorizing stages intertwined and it was hard separating the two. While working on learning the songs thoroughly, I would go over difficult technical parts over and over again which then also helped me to memorize the songs subconsciously. From having learned and memorized the songs, it naturally led to the polishing stage. Even though I may not have counted how many hours were spent on each stage, in the end having these three categories helped me to stay more focused when practicing. The method also helped me during the project to understand where in the process I was and how many hours of practice I would have to put in in order to be ready for the final recording.

### 4.3 Utilizing a practice journal

In the beginning of the project I chose to write in the practice sheet under the category “practice journal” (found in Annex 2), but as the project progressed, I started to audio-record my thoughts and reflections from previous practices. Since writing is not my strong suit and formulating my thoughts into words always takes time, I decided that it was much easier to record instead. The journal was always recorded straight after each practice session for the purpose of documenting unedited reflections about what had happened during the practice. It was then transcribed into written bullet points in the practice sheet. Even though this process was time consuming, going back to listen to my reflections and then writing them down was very beneficial also for the analyzing portion of the project. Things and matters that I might have missed when listening to and analyzing one-take recordings were sometimes mentioned and covered in the practice journal, and vice versa. Hence, the two separate journals complemented each other in my opinion.

Even though keeping a practice journal can take an extensive amount of time, it became an important part of the project which I really enjoyed. The journal became a deceleration after each practice which also provided me a chance to gather and express my thoughts and feelings and to put into words how the overall practice had gone. It also allowed me to document quick observations from the practice that I did not want to forget, process certain aspects of the practice that had or had not gone according to plan and reflect on how to proceed from there in the coming practices.

### 4.4 Song number one: “Quiet”

When choosing this song, I knew that there were certain vocal difficulties and challenges I was taking on. First of all, the dynamics builds throughout the song – as does the use of different and difficult vocal techniques, and it also contains of many quick runs, or so-called ornamentations. For this to be feasible, you have to build up stamina to have the energy and physic to be able to sing through the whole song without getting tired in advance. The song and lyrics are based on different emotions that changes throughout the song that at first

seemed like a big challenge. However, the interpretation part of this song was the easiest part to get through compared to the vocal technique.

Through listening to the song over and over, I was able to learn it by ear. The first practice session during this project was the first time I looked at the sheet music of the song which I had bought as an online PDF to my computer. While practicing, I was keeping an eye on the sheet music to make sure I was singing the right notes and lyrics, but by the second practice session I was able to let go of the papers. Everything I decided from then on concerning the song had to be memorized. This was not a decision that I made for any particular reason other than I did not want to become too dependent on having the sheet music in front of me.

Though in retrospect, it did serve a greater purpose because I understood that as a visual learner, I need to write down details or specifications of what I want to do in the sheet music and then memorize in order for me to remember and learn quicker.

During the second week of the project, I started to feel overwhelmed by taking on this song. Even though I still had been very diligent at planning every part of each practice session during the first week and beginning of the second, I still felt like I was in over my head. Being my own teacher felt like a burden because I didn't know how to overcome obstacles on my own and without the guidance of vocal teacher. During these overwhelming times, I would take a break and leave what was bothering me for another day. This proved to be very helpful because coming back to the problem area later on, I felt that when I had practiced other parts the difficulties had in some miraculous way tend to work themselves out. Through this experience I realized that sometimes you have to step away and not stress about things in advance. Often things will fall into place once your body have adjusted to learning these new techniques.

The first recording of this song was a proof that I had taken on a real challenge. I made it through the first verse without too many mistakes or mishaps. Since I had not sung the song before, my instrument was unfamiliar with the fast ornamentations that are placed throughout the song and would stumble on these phrases. The climax of the song worked really well for being the first time. I sang the whole song at a very high volume which made me really tired vocally and when I reached the end, I barely had any voice left. Even though the song was hard, there were many things that worked in my favor – since I knew the song quite well, I was not fully dependent at looking at the sheet music which helped me to, even at this point, try to get into the emotions of the song.

The last recording was a very big contrast to the first one. Throughout these four weeks I had been able to work up my stamina to be able to sing this song more or less from the beginning to the end without getting too tired. It did not seem like I was struggling to the same extent as I was in the first recording and I was able to sing through the majority of the runs more effortlessly without stumbling. In the last recording there was a sense of maturity to the performance compared to the first, not only does it help knowing all the word and musical phrases, but also because I had worked hard on to understanding the meaning of the song and

what it meant to me. I looked more comfortable in front of the camera and not as timid as I had in the beginning.

However, even through hard and assiduous work, some things were still hard and did not turn out as I had hoped. The ending of the song is the most difficult part – at the climax you go from a full belt and then abruptly have to reverse the dynamics into almost a whisper. In the last recording I was not too successful at this maneuver. However, compared to the first recording, I was able to go through and handle the technical challenges better and was able to stay more or less focused and did not get tired throughout the song. Therefore, I was happy with the overall results because I could see and hear growth in my performance. This helped me see past the mistakes that I made during the last recording.

## 4.5 Song number two: “I’m not afraid of anything”

Unlike learning the first song, I went into learning the second song more or less through sight reading<sup>5</sup>. However, this song was not completely new to me, but I was not as acquainted with it like I was with the first song. This song has many different parts which go through different emotional states which you have to learn how to travel through. Another challenge is that within each different part, there are a lot of words that needed to be memorized and you also need to learn how to keep up with its high tempo. You also have to be able to use proper vocal technique for sustainability since it is a long and extensive song. The verses are very comfortable for me to sing since they are in a good range for my voice, however, because of the comfort, it was hard to make these parts stand out – interpretation and trying to make the verses stand out was a fun and new challenge for me. The bridge is a fast and wordy part, and it was easy to mix up the words. Not only that, but in this specific part the tessitura<sup>6</sup> it was written and composed past my comfort which made it hard to practice because I would get tired really fast when practicing this part over and over again.

Like with the first song, I soon realized that this song was also a real challenge and got nervous that I would not be able to finish the project in the manner I had hoped. At this point, doubts were not helpful and made me very unmotivated to continue. However, the following week after a couple of days break, I finally made a breakthrough and felt like I was making progress. The recordings at the end of each practice help me to reflect on what I was doing right and wrong and heard things I was not able to understand during practice. Through listening to the recordings, I was also able to understand how to move forward from the doubts I had.

In the first recording I work really hard to get all the notes and words right. At this point, I held the sheet music in my hands and tried to look at the papers as little as I could. Since I did not know the song, I was not vocally prepared or able to do everything that I had intended, but

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<sup>5</sup>Singing and/or playing music by reading the sheet music and notes at first glance.

<sup>6</sup> A melody’s general range or pitch.

I kept trying without stopping at any point. In the middle of the song, I got more comfortable and tried to get into character, but soon remember that I did not know the next phrase and then forgot the next passage completely. The song is long and have many different parts with different emotions and vocally technical difficulties which also proved to be a challenge, but I continued even though my face revealed that I was not comfortable.

In comparison to the first and the last recording there is a great difference. There is an immediate difference in the beginning of the song, where I in the last recording get into character right as the music starts and pretty much stay in it until the music ends. However, even though I thought that four weeks would be enough to memorize the lyrics and I thought I knew the song perfectly, I forgot the lyrics in the first chorus and replaced it with other words instead. The difference from the first recording is that I did not let it show. Because I had been watching myself, I learned how my body reacts to when I make mistakes and by being aware of that trait, I was able to work on it. In the recording, there was a greater sense that I actually understood the lyrics and plot behind this song which made my interpretation and performance of the song better. As I also mentioned in the results of the last recording of “Quiet”, in this recording I was also much more comfortable in front of the camera even though I knew that I would not have a second or third chance past that recording. I had come to terms with the fact you can only do your best and that has to be enough which was noticeable. I learned from this experience how to better handle my nervousness that would appear when recording.

## 4.6 Taking breaks

As the informants told me, breaks are an important part of any practice in order to not lose focus and harm yourself. This indeed became my most valued suggestion. The breaks during practice provided time to relax and find new focus. Half-way through the project I reflected in the practice journal on the subject of breaks:

It's great to take quick breaks every now and then – I get tired mentally and physically very easily and taking breaks helps me to catch-up and I am better prepared and motivated to continue.

After a week or so into the project, I also noticed the way I would spend my breaks would affect how the next part of the practice would go. A few times I made the decision to completely let go of the focus I had had during practice and would instead go for walk or spend time on social media. However, when doing so I would have a hard time finding my way back to that same sense of attention that I had had previously. This led me to rethink the way I would take breaks and evaluate what works best for me. The breaks almost transformed into something new and rather than letting go of the focus, I would instead redirect it for a few minutes to then return to practicing vocals. I realized that having and doing something fun during my breaks for example, playing the piano, practicing sight reading or doing something creative was a good and helpful way to remain focused, yet have time to recover.

The breaks also provided a chance for my vocal instrument to rest and recover during practice. When coming back from the breaks, I would often experience how parts in the songs that had been difficult had had time to be processed in mind and muscles and I was therefore more successful when returning to my practice. Not only did the breaks help me to work in a more focused and healthy way but it also helped me be kinder to myself and hindered self-doubt to come into play which I would experience when forgetting to take break and when I was getting tired.

## 4.7 Motivation and practicality

According to the informants' suggestions, I was expecting and planning to practice at least 16 hours (about 8 hours of practice on each song) throughout these four weeks. However, I tried not to be too strict with the time limits, but instead saw it as an approximate time-guideline. Even though I was suggested to spread out my practice throughout the day, I found that it worked better with my schedule to practice two or three hours combined. My motivation also increased when I had one longer session in front of me. In some way it helped me to feel calmer and less stressed because it provided consistent time to accomplish my goals. When I tried having multiple sessions throughout the day, I had a hard time motivating myself to do the following practice sessions.

When starting the project, I had planned to go to a church nearby where I was allowed to practice uninterrupted. However, I ended up practicing in my apartment after figuring out that going to a different practice space did not contribute to an increase of motivation, but rather the opposite. It took some time to get there and practicing in a new space made me also less focused because of new impressions etc. My motivation to practice is very fleeting and I noticed that when the external conditions are not up to par, my motivation goes with it.

## 4.8 Short summary

In short, a one-take recording at the end of each practice was a great benefit in order to understand what needs to be improved. The self-analyzation helped to plan and set goals for the next coming practice. Planning and setting goals in the beginning and along the way is important to keep a clear direction of one's practice. However, planning into detail is not as important as it is having an overall idea of what one wants to achieve during a practice session. Documenting immediately after practice in an audio practice journal is a great way to save thoughts and reflection from the practice that might also be of importance for future planning and goalsetting. Taking breaks to refocus and recharge during practice is essential for being able to stay motivated and focused and to not risk harming oneself.

## 5 Discussion

Experience should be at the center of learning (Kolb, 1984). When it comes to practice, there is no right or wrong way of doing it, you just have to try and try again in order to find methods that works and will benefit you. Through this experience I have been forced to try, experience, think and reflect on what kind of learning environment I thrive in, how to organize my practice, and become more comfortable planning and setting goals through analyzing recordings of myself. Because I found a new way to practice that works for me, I also learned how to practice independently in a more motivating way.

Initially, having to sing and perform in front of a recording camera was, in my opinion, just as nerve-wracking as it is standing in front of a crowd. The thought of documenting moments where I might fail and then having to listen to it scared me in the beginning of the project. However, since a routine was formed by recording myself at the end of each and every practice, I got accustomed to it and learned how to cope with my nerves through continuous practice and experience. By the end of the project, I was still nervous yet more comfortable because I was able to redirect the nervousness into constructive energy. I realized that this provided a way for me to be more focused and I was able to perform even better.

Analyzation of recordings leads to a greater awareness and understanding of how one sound, move and act while practicing and/or performing. However, for this method to work there has to be a willingness and desire to learn (Arder, 2007). This newfound awareness through this project led me to become more motivated to start learning how I can continue to work and progress even further. Not only did I grow as a singer but also as a teacher. Through listening and watching one-take recordings more intently, I started understanding and being able to put into words what my strengths are and what I need to work on. The recordings also allowed me to start seeing and treating myself as if I was my own student, especially after I started to refer myself in the recording analysis as *you*. In return this helped me to be kinder, less harsh and critical than I would in a regular practice setting. I became be less afraid and more willing to face and accept my flaws and give myself constructive feedback and long-awaited credit.

In similar projects, students have been able to find ways to progress in their own singing and playing through analyzing recordings of themselves. Both Andersson (2015) and Löfberg (2018) decided to not have an assessment criterion or a system of which the students had to evaluate their recordings. Both researches wanted the students to be able to describe and assess their playing in their own simple, yet suitable descriptions, without them interfering. Andersson found that in the beginning his students were confused hearing their own voices and would claim that the recordings sounded bad compared to how their voices sounded internally. There was a matter of getting to know their own voices from the outside (Sundberg, 2001). Once the chock had subsided, Andersson understood that the recordings provided a method for his students to better know *what* they had to do in order to progress even though it did not provide an answer of *how* to do it. Löfberg also found when

interviewing his students that they were able to hear what they wanted to improve, and they would also give suggestions. In both studies, they saw improvements through the students' self-reflections.

These studies and also my project proved that recordings can help you to become your own teacher. There are certain benefits of being your own vocal teacher, such as, the privilege of knowing what the phonation and singing feels like and having the front-row-seat to your own thoughts and feelings. These are things that another person can never truly understand. When analyzing recordings, I knew how certain things felt and could remember what was running through my mind during certain moments. However, there are also some aspects that also can hinder one from being fully independent. When encountering new problem that one might not know how to handle, it can be easy to get discouraged. Therefore, I do believe that independent practice does not exclude or replace the need for a vocal teacher. A second party, such as a vocal teacher, can provide objective advice and feedback to things one might overlook or not know how to tackle (Pettersson, 2017).

Additionally, planning and goalsetting are great tools to motivate and provide direction in one's practice. However, throughout the project, I noticed that when I had too many things planned and problems that I needed fix, I would easily get overwhelmed. Arder (2007) suggested that a teacher should only give a student two or three things to work on during their personal practice. Sadly, I did not apply this rule to myself, and in hindsight I realized that is often easier to put extra pressure on oneself than you would on others. To set a lower number of goals that are achievable might be better than to set higher expectations that one might not be able to achieve in a short period of time. That is why it is important to also reevaluate and revise one's plans and goals since things will be changing and evolving along the way.

Through this project I have learned to not let my imperfections and mistakes recordings get me down. One is more likely to succeed when letting go of the fears of making mistakes and by accepting the mistakes that we (might) make (Lundeberg, 1998). Holding on to moments of weakness will only hinder you from reaching progression. During practice or when listening to one-take recordings, I tried to laugh and learn at times when things do not go as planned and tried to proceed with a more motivated and focused mind without letting the doubts fester. Practice is now a more lighthearted and less serious and strenuous task and instead an opportunity to learn while having fun (Green & Gallwey, 2015). Through this way of thinking, I have learned that by making mistakes and letting go of the pursuit for perfection will not only help myself but will also allow others around me to feel enabled and free to make mistakes without fearing judgement.

In conclusion, even though these methods proved to be very beneficial for me personally, I think that this way of structuring one's practice might not suit every individual and may need to be revised for this purpose. However, this project provided a way for me to reflect on how I learn best and find different ways to practice by using different tools and methods. By utilizing these new practice approaches through recording, self-analyzation, planning and



goalsetting, I now understand what practice can look and feel like apart from what I had experienced before. There is a saying that goes, “practice what you preach” – which means that you cannot fully teach something until you have experienced or tested it for yourself. Through this experience and as a vocal teacher, I now have more knowledge and is better equipped to teach future students how they can structure their personal practice better than I could prior to this project.

## 5.1 Further research

Since this project and research was implemented on a personal basis, it would be interesting to see how these methods could translate into other singers’ practices. Not only that, but it would also be interesting to see how and if younger and less experienced musicians would take these methods to heart and would be able to benefit from it.

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# Annex 1: Interview guide

## Preface

This essay was previously planned with a different focus than what it eventually transformed into. The interviews were also executed when the previous plan and project was ongoing, and therefore, not all questions and answers were applicable to the new format.

### The project's purpose:

- How to structure one's practice in an efficient way.
- How immerse oneself into a character and performance.
- How to prepare for an audition beforehand, nerves and what to expect.

### Background

- Can you please tell me a little about yourself and your musical background?

### Practice

- Is it important to have a certain structure to one's practice? Weekly schedule and daily schedule?
- How would you structure your practice? And/or how do you teach your students to structure their practice?
- Is it important to record oneself and one's practice? Journal and/or recording (audio/video)

### Getting into character

- How do you get into character? Are there steps for getting into a certain character?
- Is there a difference when preparing for a character that is real life based opposed to a more fictional character?
- Could you describe what mapping a song means?
- Why is mapping important and what should be included?
- When should you apply mapping to your practice?
- How do you approach adding an accent while singing?
- Is it different from adding an accent while speaking opposed to singing?

### Audition

- What are a few keys elements for a successful audition?
- Do you train and prepare your students for auditions? If yes, how so?
- How do you make this audition practice as real as possible?
- Are there certain do's and don'ts during an audition?
- How can you prepare to manage nervousness before and during an audition or performance?

### **Closure question**

- Is there anything you would like to add?

## Annex 2: Practice sheet

[illegible]