

# Learning a New Piece in a Foreign Language

1. **Always** start by translating word for word; write the text on a separate piece of paper for steps 1-4.
2. Learn how to pronounce/practice pronouncing foreign language. (Younger students may need teacher for this.)
3. Speak the foreign language & English together (alternating) to fully connect to the meaning of the text.  
Ex. "Caro mio ben. Dear my beloved. Credimi almen. Believe me at least. Senza di te. Without you. Languisce il cor. Languishes the heart."
4. **Memorize the foreign language as a monologue**, then memorize an English version (either your translation or a version that you find online at [lieder.net](http://lieder.net) or [aria database](http://aria database)) as a monologue. **Literally fully memorized before you even play a note.** [Memorizer.me](http://Memorizer.me) is a resource that I find intriguing – some of my students have created [Quizlets](http://Quizlets) for lyrics as well.
5. Plunk your pitches on the piano (no singing whatsoever allowed!). Use whatever means necessary to get an idea of the shape of the melody, but don't sing it. If possible, learn to play the pitches fluidly in rhythm. No recordings at this stage.
6. If you have piano skills, at this point in the process I would learn as much of the accompaniment as I could. If you don't play at all, just have a look at the piano part – note any times that the right hand plays your exact notes, or perhaps see where it looks like it might clash and make your part a little trickier to sing.
7. Start singing the pitches \*without the rhythms or words of the song\* – just on your favorite vowel, one that feels comfortable. Sing with buoyant and confident energy (not heavy, confused, trying-to-find-the-next-note energy).
8. Clap the rhythms of the song; do this until you are confident you can clap perfectly two times in a row.
9. Transfer your translation to sheet music (above lyrics) & speak the foreign language using the rhythms of the song.
10. Sing the notes on words, but do not sing in rhythm. Simply sing evenly and slowly, focusing on exact pronunciations and using amazing, 100% sound on every syllable equally. Work out technique issues that might arise here.
11. Finally, sing on words using the rhythm of the song. If this doesn't go well, fix the prep step that wasn't perfect.
12. Double check memorization of words; incorporate memorizing rhythms, notes, rests, and the accompaniment.

Try to not listen to a recording of the song until you have accomplished step 12 fairly well. A recording of someone else singing the song can tempt you to mimic their interpretation, their tone quality, even their mistakes sometimes!

However after you've really fully gone through all 12 steps and have learned the piece by your own work, listen to as many professional recordings as you can. This will give you an idea of the range of tempo, and perhaps other common things that professional singers do on this song that may not be marked in the music (for instance, a place where professional singers never breathe – if it's uncommon to breathe in one spot, you should try to not breathe!). Only in rare cases would I continue to listen to the same recording over and over – *you may end up just copying the artist rather than becoming one yourself.*

Now let's address things to do that will refine your learned song. Steps 1-12 could be considered step 1 – learn and memorize the song!

13. Listen to recordings of your song sung by native speakers of the foreign language. Pay careful attention to the diction subtleties of vowels and consonants – anything you may be missing in your own pronunciation. If you're on YouTube, consider sometimes choosing a slower playback speed to magnify diction details.
14. Step 4 had you memorize an English version of your text, but now move on to trying to speak the poetry in your own every-day language. How would you express this emotion if you had written the words? Actually speak it that way, out loud!  
Ex. "Caro mio ben. Dear my beloved, Believe me at least, Without you, Languishes the heart." Then... "I really like you a lot, but I just wonder if you actually believe me. I'm not trying to lie to you. I like you so much I want you to be around all the time; when you're not here, I always feel like crap."
15. Speak the poem both in the original language and in translation using a mirror/selfie camera. Watch your facial expressions to become aware of exactly what your face is communicating. Experiment; don't get stuck in a rut!
16. Research the composer of your piece, and the poet who wrote the lyrics. Where did they live? What was their life like? Listen to other pieces by the composer, translate and read other poems by the poet.

If you can truly move through this entire sheet for every single word and pitch you sing in public, you will have a depth of understanding and artistry that is uncommon. This will help your singing be about real emotional connection, not just tone quality and right notes. Audiences respond to emotion much more than to beautiful and boring sounds!