

The VMC Masterclass Reflection Workbook Program

Is it worth it?

Instructors sometimes wonder if embarking on such a masterclass reflection program will be “worth it” for their students.

Will it really impact their learning, or is this just an exercise in busy work that is stealing 30 minutes of important practice time?

To help answer this critical question, we thought it might be helpful to hear from the students themselves...students who are actually doing the weekly viewing and reflecting.

On the following pages, we have assembled 114 actual, unedited reflection quotes by students participating in the weekly masterclass reflection program.

I encourage you to take some time to scan through their comments and then begin imagining how your own students will respond should you simply ask them in their lesson or at studio class, “What did you learn this week from your masterclass viewing?”

Here is how they might respond....and then picture a steady stream of such reflections week-after-week!

Masterclass Reflection Student Quotes

1. I liked how she told her not to be so rigid in her breath. I need to make sure that I let the breath just flow from me and I do not restrain it.
2. In my pieces, I need to remember that it is not just the higher and louder parts that need to have good breath support, but it should also be on the softer parts as well. If anything, my breath support should be better and more supportive on the softer parts than on the louder.
3. The first note of a song predicts the rest of the piece. When singing piano, the sound still needs to be focused. It's easy to have the sound strong and focused when singing loudly, but it's so much harder singing piano and having it be just as focused.
4. ANTICIPATE diction. In fast pieces, words can sneak up on you. Prepare for them and enunciate each of them.
5. Emotion needs to come out in the purity of the tone. Spin the air and let the air support the sound and the emotion. Sing *espressivo* all the way to the end of a phrase. Don't let it die off.
6. When approaching a high note, put energy into the phrase. Doing this and aiming energy toward the end of the phrase will make the top note come out naturally because then it is not the focus of your attention.
7. Keep the resonance in the face, buzzing, not falling back into the throat.
8. Push the phrase a little bit forward, not quite giving an *accelerando*, but giving the feel of moving forward.

9. Never plan a breath that is "just enough" in a relaxed setting. In a concert setting, with more pressure in the form of an orchestra, keep focused, and more energy will go toward other physical and mental functions, and the breath must be prepared to account for this.
10. The Body should always be rooted and grounded. Long notes tend to make us "rise up" in our body, probably because we are thinking about suspension.
11. Vampire fangs need to come out on the bright vowels, meaning show the teeth. This is to brighten the tone. It will also cut off the nasality of the tone and lifts the soft palette.
12. Know beforehand what you want the sections to sound like.
13. "Bible banger" - there's a new one... but to know why the character says every word and phrase is important to how you portray them.
14. "Engineering" of the song –means to analyze every influence behind a single phrase (the influence of the character, their history, the influence of the composer, etc.) Whoever the character is, they must be heard. Something about their story demands that it be told. That's our job.
15. Having a lovely voice and being a singer are two different things.
16. Keep the feeling of inhalation, no matter what you do.
17. Make sure to engage the nasal passages. Apparently, American singers don't do that enough.
18. Keep energy up between the phrases. Don't lose intensity or focus when not singing. Feed off the energy of the music. It's right there, so use it.

19. Allow each note to "open up," and blossom. Let each note grow out of the note before it. Like a taffy pull, the notes are connected to each other, not separated with space between them.
20. Purity of vowels - especially in recitative and on short notes, sing the vowel more and make it clearer. That's what people came to hear.
21. "V" sound exercise - done on a passage to feel the steady stream of air. Helps to equalize the support from bottom to top.
22. Don't let the breath support collapse when coming down in a passage. It should actually be the opposite. Support should get stronger on descending phrase.
23. Sing vowels longer. Consonants come at the very last moment. Singing the vowels more really brought his voice out, connected the tone on the octave jump.
24. "They don't pass out careers." PREACH
25. When doing the fast phrase, practice on "ah" and renew the "ah" every few notes, finding new qualities.
26. "Space for days." My new life motto.
27. Shaping the note, or doing stuff to it to find that perfect sound, isn't necessary if it is sung with that easy, high, and free sound.
28. Energy can be misconstrued in performance as having to be really "revved up" and active, but it means having intensity and intentionality in phrases.
29. Hiss through the phrase, getting a relaxed breath. Remember the hissing, and the constant flow of air, when singing.

- 30. Have a "Cushion of air around the sound" - image of a dome where the note is spinning. The space above it is necessary to enhance overtones.**
- 31. Pursue the idea of the sound being equalized from bottom to top, as if in a cylinder. The sound is the same all the way up, and has the same structure, expansion, and space.**
- 32. Determine what you're good at and make sure you do it in audition.**
- 33. You must be in shape, meaning physically fit and healthy. Operas are broadcast, meaning close ups, and they require physicality around a performance space.**
- 34. Figure out a way to deal with rejections, because there will be a lot of them.**
- 35. Be open. Have an open throat, open heart, and open mind. This means be open to anything, and be willing to try anything once.**
- 36. Opera is ultimately about passion. You're here because you love it and want to do it.**
- 37. You perform for the purpose of connecting with the people in the audience, not for your own indulgence.**
- 38. You can do a lot of vocal work without even using your voice. You can exercise muscle groups mentally and it will have the same reaction.**
- 39. The performance won't be the same every night, because it won't be the same audience. It has to be a different performance to connect with the lives of the people who came to the theater that night. Everyone will take something that they need at that point in their life.**

40. The performance is not about you. We are interpreters, which we can't do if we think about ourselves. The composer is the creator and we must think about them and their music.
41. Your expression is yours, there is nothing else like it.
42. The music industry is not set up for us to win. You have to know what your art is and the audience will come.
43. You have to decide to accept nerves. If you make a mistake, it happens.
44. The music is about the story and the conversation within the song and between the singers, band, and audience. Music is about communication.
45. "The devil is always in the details."
46. Nervousness never goes away, and is a healthy thing for a singer. It heightens the senses.
47. You cannot go out hoping to gain approval from an audience. They come to participate in this created world, not approve of our technique.
48. At auditions, within the first two pages, show off the possibilities of your voice.
49. The biggest change between opera and musical theater is the placement. Opera is meant to cut through an orchestra when not amplified. Musical theater is meant to be more conversational.
50. The most important feature of communication is your point of view of what you're saying - what is your, the singer's, perspective of the text? It adds another level to the vowels. Beautiful sound is one level, artistic communication is another.

51. **Speak the text at the speed you will sing it, as if against an adversary, as if frightened.**
52. **The essence of communicative singing - being able to change the attitude without changing the text.**
53. **Adding a level of character, asking yourself what you have become, adds to the presentation of the song.**
54. **"You cannot (sing) for an outcome, an effect, because it will land hollow and superficial every time." Wow. I needed that. "Color is EVERYTHING!"**
55. **Have a REASON to sing. SEE what you are singing about.**
56. **Derive energy from your surroundings. What is around you? What feelings can you channel from those?**
57. **Find your inner physical energy, a physical pulse. Energize the line using the consonants. "Vowels are the bloodstream, but consonants are the pulse." Use the consonants to take your audience where you need.**
58. **Sing INTO the harmonies. Watch for chord structures that you as the singer can exploit to your advantage. "Don't just sing the vocal line."**
59. **CONTEXT is everything! When singing an opera aria, really look at the role itself. What has happened to the character before and after the aria? Is the obvious emotion what the aria is supposed to be, or is there another level to it?**
60. **The pitch comes from the BREATH. DO NOT try to manufacture it somewhere else. If you execute the turn and relax the tension-causers, the breath will be able to carry you to new heights.**

61. Deep breaths unlock our support. The deep breath charges the battery, suddenly every phrase is supported and has more energy. Go deep and low, take the low breath. The deep breath moves the diaphragm low and unlocks the support. The breath is our energy. The low breath grounds us; it gives us roots on the floor.
62. Don't forget the connected feeling. Identify the key elements of who you are and what you are saying before you even start singing a piece. Make it real, make it part of "us."
63. Don't sight-read a piece at first. The first memory of sightreading takes a long time to undo. Learn the meaning first.
64. The "bedrock" or foundation must be engaged and practice is needed in order to train muscles to do what they should do. We must train our muscles to do what they need to do. The rib cage is the "bedrock." Breathing must be a part of our singing and connection to the "character." WOW.
65. Singing is a long "scream" and the sound can never stop "spinning." "Every note is a continuation of the note before." Sing with your whole heart and conviction. Support is everything, everything!
66. Use the inner scream, flow, and freedom, with each note growing from and connecting every note to the last and to the breath.
67. Create energy in terms of intensity - energy, not excitement.
68. The note needs to spin with height to create "overtones." This makes the singing more effortless and easier.
69. Practice octave jumps in an attempt to equalize high and low range. Scoop and slide in octave jumps, feeling all the notes in between. Work for a more homogeneous sound with the top notes growing from the bottom.

- 70. Don't kill your voice midway into a performance by forcing the sound. Pace the piece physically with your breath. Make sure you know exactly where you are going to breathe and how much time you're going to take on held out notes.**
- 71. Make the character come to life physically by taking the posture and body language that would be assumed by the character. Things such as the wideness of stance, positioning of fingers and hands, and facial expression all communicate the message and disposition of the character.**
- 72. The first thing that I would take away from this performance is how important posture is. The singer was pushing her head forward, which shut down her sound and did not make the tone flow as well.**
- 73. He makes a shape with his hands, like she is sending her sound down a tunnel (sounds familiar). Open the mouth and drink in the air.**
- 74. Don't sing TO people. Sing FOR people. Let them enter YOUR world.**
- 75. Know what your surroundings are. Once you know that, you can derive energy from it and use it to communicate further. Communicate the circumstance as well as your thought process.**
- 76. Take time to think about the different sections of the piece you are singing. How is the material of the piece set up? What is the climax? How do we get from the beginning, to the climax, to the end? What does that path look like? Ask these questions...the answers are important and informing.**
- 77. "Singers are athletes." The pelvic floor muscles need to come into play. Then, a sense of a low center comes into play, not just the lungs, voice etc., but rather a whole body concept that is more efficient and produces a more beautiful sound.**

- 78. SING QUIETLY YET powerfully. Be AUTHORATIVE and sing on the breath.**
- 79. Make sure that repeated words, as are common in arias and oratorios, are phrased well and with clear purpose. It is easy to lose concentration.**
- 80. She had the vocalist sit down and slouch. That was a really interesting technique and she had to move around to figure out how to lose the tension that she had. This made me think about how I need to really get my foundation established because many of the same 'problems' continuously arise in my singing.**
- 81. The singer kept pulling her chin down to her neck when trying to hit high notes. I relate to this because I often bring my head forward when I sing and I am beginning to hear a difference when I sing with my head in the correct position and when it is in a forward position.**
- 82. She has her vocalize and sing phrases through a straw. She then moves her to humming, working to build a high and focused tone with space in the vocal track. She also had her stick her tongue out to get it out of the way. Tongue tension. That's big too. Great class to watch!**
- 83. Try to find deeper meaning in dynamic/tempo markings. Does "piano" simply mean "softly?" Does allegro just mean "quickly?" Or is there more to what it says on the page? Very likely, there is MUCH.**
- 84. She has her lean against the piano, so that she can connect her breath more. I'm going to try this in the practice room tomorrow. I did not feel like my breath was very connected today, so hopefully this technique will help.**

85. I learned so much about the accompaniment, what it means, what it is trying to express, etc. I had some things wrong or at least there were things I did not understand. Speaking to the accompanist: "Keep your power dry," if you're shooting with gun powder, don't use it too early. Save it for when you need it. It helps the singer enormously and launches the singer into the top.
86. I learned to watch for keys from the composer regarding interpretation. He gave the accompanist almost as much instruction as the singer.
87. The singer is "acting" too much. "Use your voice and support. Use clear diction." "Pronounce and pronounce well. Find power in your support. This is the key to everything."
88. "Too much importance in certain phrases, too little in others." Know the story, and live in the story. When we focus too much on technique and too little on the story, we fall short in our expression.
89. On stage you must always be noble, never cute. It can't be overdone. Expression must come from within or it will be over or underdone. It must always come from inside.
90. If we don't convey the emotion we wish to employ properly then why are we singing? He wants us to know every moment of our piece. If we repeat a line, who is it directed to? What is the scene we have set up in our mind as to what we are singing about? How much can you extrapolate about that scene? We need to focus on connecting with the audience as much as possible. That can come down to something as minute as making sure the direction of the whites in our eyes and the white of our teeth are directed toward a specific member of the audience and not disengaged. That is a fascinating idea.

91. What is the mood like and is that consistent between the accompaniment and vocals? There needs to be pure emotion in the performance, and in a foreign language, the emotion needs to be clear in inflection. Saying the text in our own words can help us find the emotion appropriate for the piece.
92. It is interesting how much more emotion and power can come from the voice when the performer is actually in the character that (s)he is portraying. I think that I am beginning to understand that having a successful performance is about communicating with your audience- sure you have to have really good technique and know all the words, but there needs to be meaning behind the words and a sense of importance for the audience to maintain their attention.
93. "Fortune favors the prepared mind." I had heard, "Fortune favors the Brave" before, and it is the version of the saying with which I was most familiar. However, this new version struck me as being even more true, especially for me. If success is to be had, we each need to prepare ourselves to receive it.
94. "We are not here to entertain ourselves, to indulge ourselves. We are here to move and make contact with the people sitting out there in the auditorium." That hit me hard, because I can easily forget that I am ultimately doing a service to the audience members, not entertaining myself. When I am the center of my attention, my performance suffers. My focus has to be about communicating text, character, musical elements, etc. to the listeners.
95. "Find what you do well, and exploit it." This made sense to me on so many levels. Over the course of my vocal study, I have come to learn what my strengths and weaknesses are. In any audition, my first goal should be to show off my specific strengths. That is how to present the best "me" possible.

96. "Be willing to try anything...ONCE." In my humble opinion, this is excellent advice. Sometimes a director is going to ask you do something you think is stupid, crazy, or ineffective. But you need to have an open mind. Sometimes that crazy thing will work. Other times it won't, but at least you tried it!
97. "Don't sing pitches, sing phrases."
98. "Don't power it out...it causes tension."
99. Use closed vowels and sirens to practice forward placement.
100. She really stressed keeping the tempo aligned the whole time so as to provide ease for the orchestra in following you. As far as phrasing, she emphasized the way to approach and perform decrescendos. She explained it in terms of a crescendo. The air should always be moving forward, even as we are quieting the sound. Keeping a full yet quiet sound is one thing I desperately need to improve on, and will come with time as long as I continue to focus on it.
101. Imagine the sound billowing forth from a centralized or core spot in our bodies, and rolling forward like a wave going through nasal passages and resonating through the mask rather than just resonating in the oral cavity and being relegated to that spot. It should be a full sound that seems to resonate from us.
102. "How you act on a small gig can determine if you get that big gig call" - be respectful and do your job no matter how "small" your part is or who around you has influence, and someone will notice.
103. Don't think about the top notes - they just happen within the phrase, given as much emphasis as every other note.
104. Let the breath drive the phrase, making it more elegant. The idea is to not sound like you're running out of breath.

105. Vibrate through the air for a sobbing quality.
106. Think of spin and vibrato through an entire cadenza. The breath should never ever be held. It will have direction, energy, and intensity. A cadenza is all about the first note, not the last note or the highest note, starting on the right vowel, open and not heavy. Trust the breath!
107. "Control is an illusion." That speaks exactly towards what I am working on right now in finding freedom, specifically regarding tongue, throat tension, and flexibility. The first exercise he had the performer do was by breathing with the lowest possible area of expansion from his lower back. I practiced this exercise and felt a difference immediately. Use the "girdle of strength." Control is not the issue, but rather consistency. The singing mechanism works in the "x-axis," not the "y-axis." Don't think about the music notationally/geographically, but more through inertia.
108. How do we engage with the sound physically? Clarity and intention of diction and the physicality that is found within the body through body language is one of the easiest ways of doing this. He discusses the fear of losing the attention of a judge or the audience. How we interact with the contour of the diction and melody (in dynamics, rhythmic velocity, and range) and our relationship to accompaniment is another part of this consideration.
109. Singing on the gesture of the breath and vowels will bring the piece to life. The hard "H" gives the piece a faux legato, but when forming the vowels properly the sound is so much more vibrant and forward.
110. The character needs to inform the direction of the piece (dynamic contrasts, etc), inhabiting the piece from the very start. Step into the piece before the piano even starts. Let the dynamics be a byproduct of the emotion - not the other way around.

- 111. Don't let the audience ever feel like they can sit back in contentment after a line, feeling like the end has arrived prematurely. Make the ending exquisitely clear. Take authority of all the text, and if there is any external or alternate lines that can impact the story, set the scene with confidence.**
- 112. Be aware of the solar plexus, which is where the nerve endings of the sympathetic system of the body converge into a complex. It can be considered the emotional control center. So, yes use the diaphragm, but dig deeper than that. Sing to derive the meaning and emotion from the solar plexus. This is more than an anatomical exercise.**
- 113. She started by having her speak through the text dramatically and break out of the rhyming scheme. Details are what move the story. Too much movement and acting can be detrimental to the dramatic aspects of the song. Breathe in the text and music as if it is brand new text- coming to you on the spot. "See the world" before you start singing about it.**
- 114. There is something to be learned from everyone who has made a successful career in opera. – Jenny Drivala**