

The Art of Vocal Coaching

Course information			
Course number	M9567y	Term	Fall and Winter
Instructor	Simone Luti	Email	sluti@uwo.ca
Class time	Tuesday 1:30-3:00pm	Location	MB254
Office hours	by appointment	Course site	OWL Brightspace

Course description

The Art of Vocal Coaching examines the musical, linguistic, technical, and collaborative work of the vocal coach. Through the study and performance of significant operas, oratorios, and orchestral art songs, students learn to move fluently among vocal line, text, piano reduction, orchestral source, style, and rehearsal process. The course treats coaching as an active form of musicianship: listening, breathing, singing, playing, conducting, questioning, and shaping interpretation in partnership with singers.

Weekly work combines score study, comparative listening, text preparation, keyboard practice, singing while playing, and live coaching. Repertoire will be assigned no later than 2 weeks before each presentation. The specific works may change according to student needs and available collaborators, while the course's technical and interpretive sequence remains consistent.

Course learning outcomes

By the end of this course, successful students will be able to:

1. Analyze vocal repertoire through the integrated study of text, vocal line, piano reduction, orchestral writing, style, and dramatic context.
2. Prepare and perform demanding coaching materials, including orchestral reductions, continuo realizations, recitatives, ornaments, cadenzas, and passages that require simultaneous singing and playing.
3. Coordinate breath, gesture, keyboard, voice, and basic conducting technique in ways that clarify ensemble, phrasing, pulse, and dramatic intention.
4. Formulate and communicate text-responsive interpretive choices, using language, articulation, colour, timing, and musical rhetoric to support a singer's expressive agency.
5. Plan, lead, and critically reflect on an effective collaborative vocal coaching session by diagnosing priorities, offering precise and adaptable feedback, evaluating musical results, and transferring relevant insights to research and pedagogical practice.

How learning will take place

The seminar is organized as a performance laboratory. Students arrive with assigned repertoire already learned and use class time to test interpretive decisions, coach colleagues, receive feedback, and refine practical strategies. The emphasis is not only on the correctness of preparation, but also on the coach's ability to hear relationships, respond in real time, and help a singer discover a more compelling and sustainable performance.

Core areas of study

- Breathing with singers: phrase, support, timing, and the physical logic of the vocal line
- Singing and playing simultaneously as a tool for preparation, cueing, and musical communication
- Recitative secco and accompagnato: language, rhetoric, pacing, harmony, ensemble, and gesture
- Continuo realization and stylistically informed harmonic support
- Ornamentation, cadenzas, embellishment, and the relationship between freedom and style
- Reading and comparing orchestral reductions at the piano
- The correlation between text and music, including diction, translation, subtext, and structure
- Expressive use of timing, colour, articulation, balance, and gesture to illuminate language and text
- Basic conducting elements for entries, pulse, breath, tempo, transitions, and ensemble coordination
- The coach's professional role: preparation, collaboration, communication, adaptability, and artistic responsibility

Weekly preparation cycle

For every assigned work or excerpt, students are expected to complete the following preparation before class:

1. Listen critically to at least three or four contrasting audio and/or video recordings. Record concise observations about tempo, language, phrasing, orchestral colour, dramatic pacing, and interpretive differences.
2. Translate and understand the complete assigned text. Identify the speaker, situation, syntax, key words, subtext, and any pronunciation or diction questions.
3. Study the piano part extensively until it can support a singer with rhythmic security, stylistic clarity, appropriate balance, and orchestral imagination.
4. Compare the piano reduction with the orchestral score or another reliable orchestral source. Mark instrumentation, doublings, articulations, colours, cues, and places where the reduction requires adaptation.
5. Learn to sing the vocal part while playing the piano part. This is a preparation and diagnostic practice; vocal beauty is not the criteria.
6. Prepare a coaching plan: identify the work's principal challenges, decide what should be addressed first, and formulate questions or strategies that invite collaboration.

Repertoire notice. Specific repertoire will normally be assigned at least two weeks before the student's presentation. The instructor may adjust scope when the repertoire presents exceptional linguistic, orchestral, or technical demands.

Suggested evaluation criteria

- Depth and accuracy of musical, linguistic, stylistic, and contextual preparation
- Technical command, reliability, and orchestral awareness at the piano
- Ability to sing, breathe, cue, conduct, and play in an integrated manner
- Clarity and persuasiveness of text-led interpretive decisions
- Quality of listening, diagnosis, prioritization, and real-time adaptation
- Precision, respect, curiosity, and effectiveness in communication with singers and colleagues
- Responsiveness to feedback and evidence of artistic growth over time

Methods of evaluation

Student achievement will be evaluated through the following two components:

Component	Weight	Basis of evaluation
In-class presentations	80%	Prepared performance and coaching of assigned repertoire. Each presentation is graded out of 100 using the weekly preparation requirements and evaluation criteria above.
In-class participation	20%	Consistent preparation, engagement in studio work, collaboration with singers and colleagues, constructive feedback, and responsiveness throughout the year.

The final presentation grade will be the average of the presentation grades accumulated during the year. Each assignment will receive a mark out of 100 based on the preparation expectations and evaluation criteria stated in this outline.

Course plan

Fall semester

Week	Focus	Principal work
1	Introduction: the collaborative pianist and vocal coach	Overview of the musical, linguistic, technical, interpersonal, and professional tools required for collaborative work.
2	Sing and play I	Arias from the standard repertoire; internalizing the vocal line while maintaining a supportive and stylistically alert piano part.
3	Sing and play II	Further coordination of voice and keyboard, with attention to breath, cueing, balance, rhythm, and expressive timing.
4	Work with singers I	Applying preparation strategies in live coaching; listening, breathing, balance, cueing, and communication.
5	Work with singers II	Continued studio practice, diagnosis, prioritization, and adaptation in real time.
6	Mozart's Italian operas I	Recitative secco and accompagnato: language, rhetoric, harmonic pacing, ensemble, and continuo practice.
7	Mozart's Italian operas II	Arias and ensembles; coaching, playing, transitions, cueing, and basic conducting.

Week	Focus	Principal work
8	Work with singers III	Applying Mozart style, text, recitative, aria, ensemble, and rehearsal strategies in live coaching.
9	Work with singers IV	Further integrated studio work, with emphasis on communication, stylistic choices, and responsiveness.
10	The age of bel canto I	Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi: orchestral reduction, style, vocal line, and collaborative pacing.
11	The age of bel canto II	Cadenzas, ornamentation, arias, ensembles, and the negotiation of stylistic and vocal choices.
12	The age of bel canto III	Integrated coaching and performance of bel canto repertoire, with reflection on style, technique, and rehearsal process.

Winter semester

Week	Focus	Principal work
1	The pianist as conductor I	Conducting practice: patterns, preparatory gesture, breath, pulse, entries, releases, and tempo.
2	The pianist as conductor II	Continued conducting practice; coordinating gesture, voice, keyboard, singer, and ensemble.
3	Orchestral reduction I	Reading the orchestral score at the piano: texture, instrumentation, doublings, cues, and structural priorities.
4	Orchestral reduction II	Colour, articulation, balance, redistribution, technical adaptation, and orchestral imagination at the piano.
5	Post-Romantic opera	The evolution of recitative and continuous musical discourse in Puccini, Debussy, Stravinsky, and related repertoire.
6	Work with singers V	Live coaching integrating conducting, orchestral awareness, text, breath, and collaborative communication.
7	Work with singers VI	Continued studio practice, with diagnosis, prioritization, adaptation, and evaluation of musical results.
8	Purcell, Bach, and Handel I	Recitative, continuo, rhetoric, ornamentation, cadenzas, and stylistically informed support.
9	Purcell, Bach, and Handel II	Continued work on aria, recitative, sacred and dramatic context, and collaborative interpretation.
10	Work with singers VII	Integrated coaching using conducting, reduction, continuo, stylistic knowledge, and communication skills.
11	Modern opera I	Berg, Britten, Argento, and related repertoire: rhythm, language, orchestral texture, and modern dramatic pacing.
12	Modern opera II	Continued modern repertoire, culminating coaching, synthesis, reflection, and individual next steps.

Materials and resources

- Assigned piano-vocal scores and orchestral score in reliable editions are available in the Music library and on IMSLP (<https://imslp.org/>)
- Language and diction resources appropriate to the repertoire are available online and in Music library
- Access to multiple professional audio and/or video recordings are available online and in Music Library

Attendance and participation

Attendance is mandatory because the course depends on live performance, work with singers, and collaborative problem-solving. Unexcused absences will be reflected in the participation grade. Students should consult the official course policies, once added, for the procedures governing excused absences and academic consideration.

Online Learning Resources

For the 2025–26 academic year, the WUSO teaching team will maintain a Brightspace site for communications, music distribution, file sharing, and access to VoiceThread and other virtual resources. Email remains the primary form of communication. Students are expected to check their UWO email regularly. If you are not receiving communications from the teaching team, notify us immediately.

Enrolment Restrictions

Enrolment in this course is restricted to graduate students in Music, as well as any student who has obtained special permission from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student's home program.

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously, and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_offences.pdf

Statement on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts on the Wellness and Wellbeing website:

<https://www.uwo.ca/health/gbsv/index.html>

To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca

Health and Wellness Services

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health Support for a complete list of options about how to obtain help: <https://www.uwo.ca/health/mental-health/index.html>.

Accessible Education (AE)

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program

Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education (AE), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AE and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

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