

## The \$50 Week: Watch Your Language

by Olivia Giovetti

*An important part of a singer's education—both while in school and after—is proficiency in the basic operatic languages. Olivia Giovetti shows singers how to economically continue their study of languages at any age and stage of life.*



Almost as bad as a missed note, a missed accent can deter from a singer's performance. "My mom says, 'Whenever we go to Russian operas, you can always tell who the Russian singers are,'" says linguist and author of *Language is Music*, Susanna Zaraysky. "If you're a native speaker of the language, [poor diction] almost ruins the opera." Perhaps, as Zaraysky's parents would have noticed, it's a Russian "r" that hits too soft. Or it could be a French "ou" that doesn't hit with the full poutiness of the mouth. Many singers spend just as much time agonizing over the language of a text as they do the language of the accompanying music.

The good news is that most singers are natural polyglots, music in and of itself being a language. However, training and education in foreign languages—especially Italian, French, German, and Russian—is still an essential component of a singer's education. You may have been fortunate enough to ace AP French in high school or study German in college. Either way, you don't have to keep up with tuition prices to stay schooled.

### Scout Out Some Bonnes Amies

If you work out of a conservatory or in a Young Artist Program, chances are there will be at least one European who

will be willing to offer you some help in their native language. In fact, they may be in the practice room right next to yours. For diction, this can be incredibly helpful. "It may be a bizarre question to ask a near-stranger, but don't be afraid to say, 'Hey, can you pronounce this sound for me? Where do you feel the sound coming from in your body?'" says Zaraysky.

Find a conversation partner, as Zaraysky stresses in her book, and you can gain

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as valuable an insight into language as you would from a private tutor—and all it could cost you is the occasional coffee or help in your own language. Bulletin boards in your local universities, especially in foreign/exchange student

centers, are a great place to see who's looking for help in English. You can also e-mail your information to exchange program coordinators and ask if there are any students from, say, the Czech Republic or Italy who would be interested in a language buddy. They'd appreciate the help with English just as much as you would with their native tongue.

### Discover What the Expats Call "Ma Vlast"

Walking into New York's Brighton Beach neighborhood, the signs jump from the familiar Latin alphabet to the more foreign Cyrillic. In San Francisco's North Beach, restaurateurs of places like Café Puccini and Figaro speak their native Italian. Scouting out local immigrant and expatriate enclaves is an effective way to "travel" to a country without having to shell out for airfare and the killer exchange rates—and when you're going for the language, all you need is a cluster of natives. Whether they're in Chicago or Moscow is irrelevant.

If you're looking to practice your conversation and pronunciation, try doing your grocery shopping in one of the local markets. Meet your conversation partner for coffee at one of their favorite expat spots. Browse local music and movie stores. But, most importantly,

remember to actively listen to the conversations going on around you. You may recognize only a few words (if that) at first, but the more time you spend in a certain neighborhood, the more it will begin to click.

### Harness the Power of the Kino-Apparatom

“College [language study] was all about days of the week and counting,” says bass-baritone Damien Pass. “On TV, you get a real sense of the pace and subtlety of the language and how to joke around and get to know people.” Pass routinely watches the DVDs currently in his collection—such as seasons of “Friends” and “Sex and the City”—that offer dubbed tracks in languages such as French, a language Pass needed to master for upcoming engagements with the Opéra Bastille.

“I could watch episodes I was familiar with in French and hear how real French people would interact. . . . My French improved dramatically.”

Non-dubbed foreign films are also helpful—not just to *hear* how people speak, but to *see* how they speak. By analyzing an actor like Gérard Depardieu or Marcello Mastroianni, you will notice their patterns when pronouncing certain vowels or syllables. For the price of a monthly Netflix subscription (as low as

\$5) or a library card (free), you can have a near-limitless library.

### Remember . . . Prima la Musica!

It seems sort of obvious for musicians who routinely perform in foreign tongues, but music can be responsible for a great chunk of a singer’s language education.

“When I moved to Bosnia,” says Zaraysky, “A native friend had me listen to some pop songs from the former Yugoslavia, and I learned a lot of the language by listening to the music. I didn’t have a TV when I lived there, so I listened to the radio all the time. I picked up on a lot of the language.”

Listening to foreign music (besides opera and classical) can be just as valuable as a \$600 Rosetta Stone set of CDs. Popular music—even pop music from 50 years ago—gives you the sense of a “normal” song and shows how words are pronounced when sung. The themes of most of these songs are also simple enough that they’ll begin to click easily.

“You don’t have to be consciously listening all the time,” assures Zaraysky, “but you can have it on in the background, say, while you’re doing things around the house. And eventually it’ll seep into the frequency that you have.”

And while we’re on the topic of music, iTunes has become a huge resource

for free language instruction podcasts. Choose from a bevy to find one that fits your needs and learning style.


### Seek Out Eine Kleine Financial Aid

While the previous tips are great for mastering diction and picking up a language already in most singers’ frequencies, there is still no substitution for a classroom—be it a classroom of two (you and the instructor), a classroom of many, or a virtual classroom. However, this does not mean that you have to shell out \$900 for a 10-week course at your local university. The benefit of living in a metropolitan area is that there are smaller institutes devoted to language studies priced to fit your budget.

If you have a couple of extra hours each week, see if one of your local language institutions will offer free instruction in exchange for some light administrative work or ESL assistance. Or check out a school like ABC Language Exchange (which has trained the likes of Uma Thurman, Willem Dafoe, and Chinese opera star Qian Yi). With locations in New York, San Francisco, Washington D.C., and San José, ABC has recently instituted a scholarship program.

“We do it on a case-by-case basis,” explains CEO and founder Elizabeth Lunney. “If someone wants to tell us their story, we can give them a need-based scholarship. We’ve also done work-study programs with some of our long-term private lessons.”

ABC also offers virtual one-on-one courses with one of their New York teachers. “It’s a really great program for singers,” says Lunney. “You can dictate what you need, whether it’s conversation or work on an aria.”

Classical Singer’s “\$50 Week” maven *Olivia Giovetti* has also written for *Time Out New York*, *the Washington Post*, and *Arthur Frommer’s Budget Travel*. Visit *Olivia on the Web* at [www.olivia-giovetti.com](http://www.olivia-giovetti.com) or at [oliviagiovetti.wordpress.com](http://oliviagiovetti.wordpress.com). 

## Language Link-Ups

Zaraysky’s book, *Language is Music*, has an abundance of links for engaging and inexpensive foreign learning tools. Here are a few to get you started:

- FrenchPod.com and ItalianPod.com: Five bucks a month gets you podcasts, transcripts, and access to the dictionaries and grammar examples on these websites (ChinesePod.com and SpanishPod.com are also available).
- ConversationExchange.com:

A solid resource for finding a conversation partner, sortable by language.

- [Google.com/Top/Arts/Music/Styles/R/Regional\\_and\\_Ethnic](http://Google.com/Top/Arts/Music/Styles/R/Regional_and_Ethnic): Google’s directory of radio stations will help you find foreign frequencies in your area.

- [Embassyworld.com](http://Embassyworld.com): This global directory will put you in contact with nearby embassies which, in turn, can put you in touch with local cultural centers and language resources.