

Accept Imitations: A Beginner's Guide to Impressions

Chapter Three: How To Practice

By Jim Meskimen

Unlike Ocarina players, most impressionists discover their own individual way to perfect their art and do not cleave to a certain, specific method.

Ocarina players are dogmatic and inflexible people who, like lemmings, are content only when they are treading on the exact same path as their robotic predecessors.

Jim Carrey, whose path to film superstardom began with his impressions of celebrities, famously practiced in front of a mirror for hours.

The great Rich Little, who was the most famous mimic in the 70's and became the benchmark icon of the art form, used a portable tape recorder to help him learn the subtleties of the celebs he presented in his act.

I can speak with confidence, having done the least possible amount of research in this subject, that no two impressionists practice in entirely the same way, because, among other things, no two impressionists will be found to be exactly the same height.

In my own case, I am not possessed of a specific technique of practice, other than I do like to try and A) "hear" the voice in my head, and B) feel where in my head and face that voice might best reside, which is to say, be manufactured.

Then I try and produce that sound and listen to myself. I usually can tell if it is going to be something that I can perform easily and consistently, which makes it reliable and of interest to me. If it is something very hard to perform, and perhaps not a sound that I can feel confident I can pull off at any time, then I either avoid it completely or, accepting the challenge, I endeavor to master it.

Mastering a voice that is challenging can be done in many ways, but like a person mastering scales on the lute or the oboe, (but NOT the ocarina) one has to be willing to put some time and concentrated effort into it. In other words, get ready to drill, drill, and drill so that when it comes to performing the voice on stage or on the Letterman show, you will not have to "take a moment to warm up and find it again", which is the mark of an amateur. When one has to "take a moment", one must recognize that one is in fact taking that moment FROM someone, in this case, the audience, and that is bad manners, just as is the voice that tells us, "Please stay on the line, your call is important to us..."

Important to who? A disembodied recording? Gimme a break.

Like other forms of exercise, the main enemy to accomplishment is boredom, or embarrassment should anyone see us. It's far more embarrassing to be caught talking to oneself in another voice than it is to be caught running laps or lifting barbells. So, one should pick the time and place very well, especially because of modern psychiatric commitment laws.

I tend to do a lot of my rehearsing in my car, on the way to somewhere else, where I can be assured of complete privacy. (If you drive a cab or a limousine, you may want to find a different solution.)

Another good idea is to take a voice that you are working on, and pick up a copy of a book and read aloud in that voice for some minutes. You will learn many things from this, among them what it feels like when the voice sounds, from your point of view, very like your subject. Perhaps when you read aloud, you will sound like the celebrity only thirty percent of the time, maybe less. If you keep at it, saying different sentences from the book, then you will isolate the aspects of the sound that, to you, sound most like the person, and be able to increase that percentage.

You can really learn a lot from this exercise.

In the car, I will often listen to the radio and, chiefly to practice certain accents or vocal qualities, repeat exactly what I am hearing come out of the speakers, but just a second or two later. It's interesting that one can do this, and then have the sensation that one is slowly closing the gap between the spoken words on the radio and one's own speech, to a point where it is occurring virtually simultaneously. At that point you should pull the car over and look at your driver's license to remind yourself you of your actual identity.

Repeating what you hear, duplicating it as exactly as you can, is something that you want to develop as a skill; it is in fact the main skill of an impressionist.

An impressionist is performing the record of a perception, after all, of something he or she knows his public will be familiar with too, having their own recorded perception of that character.

If EVERYONE could perform an accurate duplication of anything they had ever heard or perceived, then there would be no market for impressionists at all. So, we acknowledge that this skill, being rare or singular, is of some value in it's scarcity and novelty.

Right this second, someone somewhere is developing a App that will allow anybody to sound like any famous person, and that will be the end of the world.

But so far, we are still safe...

Practice then, should somehow work its way into your daily routine. However way that you gravitate toward practicing, that you feel comfortable with and which affords you familiarity and control of your “instrument”, in this case your face, tongue, lungs etc, is the right way for you.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you shouldn't find a way to practice because someone might think you are out of your mind; rest assured that the very people who would jump to such an unlikely conclusion already feel that way about you, and nothing you do will talk them out of it, anyway.

You might at some point feel brave enough to start using a recording device to see what your impression sounds like from the audience point of view. This will only really be of use to you if you have followed my earlier advice and desensitized your revulsion at the sound of your own voice.

By all means, record and compare. You can even become very ambitious and rig up a way to play your voice, and then your subject's voice back to back, so you can shift your attention from one to the other and make a very direct comparison.

But remember too that this is a technical point and at the end of the day is only as useful as any other bit of technique; the sound and it's exactitude is NOT the main thing that helps to sell the impression.

What IS the main thing? Well, in my opinion, the important thing is a little something called POINT OF VIEW. Point of view is key to character. And I think we had better take that up immediately in the next chapter.

The End