

**Dyslexia and music – a personal journey. Anna Devin**  
**Key points from the webinar given with the Incorporated Society**  
**of Musicians, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020**



Anna in the title role of Cavalli's *La Calisto* at the Teatro Real Madrid

This summary is entirely based on Anna's webinar (with her permission), with key points summarised and some given verbatim.

### **Anna's musical background**

Anna Devin is a Dublin-born, Irish soprano. She has lived in the UK for 13 years, and trained at both the Royal Irish Academy of Music, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the National Opera Studio and at Covent Garden in the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme. She left the Young Artists Programme in 2012, when her career 'proper' started. She has sung all over Europe and been to Australia and the States, at Carnegie Hall, La Scala Milan, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and the Royal Albert Hall. She went to see *The Marriage of Figaro* aged six and fell in love with it and has now done 45 performances in the role of Susanna!

### **Anna and dyslexia**

Anna was diagnosed with dyslexia when she was 6 years old. Her mother wondered why she was not understanding reading and writing

as well as her older sister, so investigated the situation and Anna was tested by the Irish Dyslexia Association – one of her earliest memories – and was diagnosed as severely dyslexic. Luckily, she got “an awful lot of help along the way”. She adored music and believes that this was “in a way one of [her] saviours”. She started the piano at about six, and learned to read music. She also played recorder, then clarinet and, at the age of nine, “really discovered that [she] could sing as well”.

Anna changed schools at the age of nine and this was “a real game-changer”. The main thing for her was the music. There was a choir and good singers could go and sing in the local *fleadh cheoil*, a music competition in Irish, which Anna did. When she performed to her grandparents, they had to go into another room, although she’s happy enough now to look at her audience! Another key feature of her junior school was that it was a Froebel school. All of a sudden everything “clicked into place” for her and made sense. “The Froebel method is about an all-encompassing way of teaching with arts and crafts and music and play.” This worked well for her because she is a visual learner. Moving on to secondary school, she was given extra support which really helped her to spell, for example: “one of my proudest moments was learning to spell Czechoslovakia”! Looking back Anna realises that she just “wanted to fit in” whereas it would have been better to “try and find a different method” of approaching things as a dyslexic. As an adult, she has “spent an awful lot of years learning how to learn, because of my job”.

Initially, she took a multi-media course at university but had to write lots of essays and thought “What on earth am I doing here in a library trying to read a book and write an essay when I spent my whole childhood struggling against these things... Why don’t I follow my dream to be an opera singer?” When she changed to a music degree, “all of a sudden, the reading and writing issues weren’t such a big deal.

I had other issues to deal with but the joy of a music performance degree is that 75% is performance.” Concentrating on the **practical** and ‘keeping away’ from reading and writing was life changing.

“It drives me crazy that it is still probably a problem that teachers and people who feel that people who are struggling are immediately ‘stupid’ when actually they are just not teaching using the right method for them. I don’t think I ever really felt stupid and I’m really grateful for that. I think it may be because my mother was such a great support to me... most dyslexics I know are definitely not stupid... really intelligent, diverse, creative and interesting people. The joy of being in music is that there are so many dyslexic people in music, but lots of musicians don’t necessarily want to talk about it. I don’t have any issues talking about it because fundamentally it’s part of who I am.”

### **Difficulties because of dyslexia**

Note that these difficulties go hand in hand with the strategies that are outlined from the next page.

### **Reading**

Like many dyslexics, Anna initially struggled to read – “trying to comprehend the information on the page and get it into my head” with the main issue being speed. Concentrating so hard on reading can cause tiredness and an inability to process the information.

Feelings of anxiety and stress dating from one’s years as a child in school struggling with reading and writing can remain into adulthood.

There are particular demands in reading for an opera singer, with foreign languages – Anna sings in Italian most of the time as well as German and French amongst others:

“When I first started out, I really struggled to read the music and the text at the same time. Once I could get the language away from the

written word and into my mouth and my brain it was easier for me, but it was a real uphill struggle. The way I coped at the beginning was that I would use the music and I would learn the language as musical syllables, which is not ideal because it was very hard then to learn what I was actually singing about... [But] I had an awful lot of understanding teachers... I did break down in class quite a few times, [for example] when someone asked me something very simple to do with... changing a sound – say instead of ‘eh’ it was ‘uh’. For me to change a sound in the context of a class, in front of people, was really difficult. I needed to go away and re-learn the sound on my own because I was learning it by syllables.”

## Writing

Again, like so many dyslexics, Anna has had, and still has, difficulties with writing: “trying to get my thoughts into a cohesive manner. For me the way I write is the way I speak. Being able to structure language in the written word is in some ways completely different to the way we speak, and I find that difficult to do, even after all these years. Luckily, I don’t have to do it very often, but we shouldn’t just avoid these things!”

**But** – there are **positive aspects of dyslexia**, which overlap with **key strategies**.

**Key points** are thinking outside the box; coming up with new ideas and hard work.

Don’t be phased or daunted by the fact that you will have challenges – overcome them!

Be determined.

Don’t accept no for an answer, particularly when it comes to work situations.

## Thinking outside the box

Dyslexic individuals often have the ability to 'think outside the box' and be creative. This is an advantage and a strategy.

- If you are told to "do something this way" and you can't, then figure out a way to do it.
- If you're struggling with something and somebody says 'No, you can't do it that way', respond with, 'Well, how can you do it – can you do it this way?'
- Don't think in straight lines – be creative.

### Hard work

If you are dyslexic you may have to work harder than a non-dyslexic, but it will be worth it in the end, because you'll find the right path for you. Hard work is "really essential as a singer", learning a lot of music including "Italian recitative, which is difficult and takes a long time to learn".

Dyslexics may learn their music more deeply because they know they can't 'wing' it.

When you have thoroughly prepared something, remind yourself that you **do have** the techniques and can cope with challenges. This will help you if you are anxious about new situations and methods.

### General strategies

- Now you are an adult, you can choose the path that you go on. You don't have to go from English class to French class not understanding what's going on! Find something that you love and that brings out your qualities. All of the struggles that you have will move into the background and you'll find a way forward.
- If you don't grasp something, don't immediately think it's because you're dyslexic – someone who isn't dyslexic may also not understand!
- Don't expect that people think you should be able to work miracles.
- Believe in yourself.

- Be inquisitive about your mind and make friends with it. Find the best methods that help you through difficult things that you struggle with – learn how your brain works.
- Work out how you learn best; what you're passionate about and have a natural flair for, and you'll enjoy what you're doing and the journey.
- Break things down into really small chunks so that the path becomes clear and you don't feel that you can't climb this mountain.
- Try new things and ideas even if you don't know that they're going to work. You might actually find a new method for yourself. "When I'm out working, and I see other singers trying to learn music or text, I go over and ask them what they are doing and how they are doing that, and they might have a different idea that's worth me trying."
- Never be afraid to say that you don't understand. "When I'm in rehearsal rooms sometimes, directors tend to be very well read... and use very big words to describe things. I ask questions, and I don't care any more if people think, 'Oh, she's stupid'. Nobody thinks you're stupid; you're just asking a question and it's really important to ask."
- Listen to the people around you, your parents and your mentors. They are inquisitive too, and they're really trying to understand what works best for you. Try to work with them.
- If you need more time to learn something, ask. People will generally be sympathetic.
- Because of the need perhaps for more time than your non-dyslexic colleague, **plan your work**: see how much time is going to be involved in (e.g.) learning a new score. Break down that work, perhaps do some work, then come back to the score a few months later when your body may have absorbed much of the music.
- Don't necessarily start at the beginning of a score: it may work better to start in the middle at a really difficult patch.

- Use the visual (pictures, mind-maps, spider diagrams...), the aural, writing and movement to reinforce ideas: **be multi-sensory**.

### Dealing with stress

- Take a breath when you're feeling overwhelmed.
- Remind yourself that you **have** done the preparation and you know what you're doing.
- If you're struggling with something:
  - Stop, observe yourself and work out why you're finding it difficult.
  - Break it down, chunk it, create a realistic plan of how you can get to the end with a method that's best for you.
  - Don't just say to yourself that you can't, because you can do it – you just have to find the right way. It's not always the way that's in front of you – it could be to the side.
- Consider meditation.

### Sight-reading

- Use the harmonic structure beneath a single-line melody to help you to see where you're 'going'.
- Make the harmonic structure clear by using colours.
- Adding colour will break up the dense blackness of a score.
- Practice a lot!
- Break down the piece e.g. circle all the F sharps in a coloured pen or make triads really obvious.
- Break the music down into chunks.
- Possibly enlarge the music.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is legal to copy music for the purposes of making it easier for a dyslexic person, for example, to read. See The Music Publishers' Association Code of Fair Practice, item 11.

## Preparing a musical score

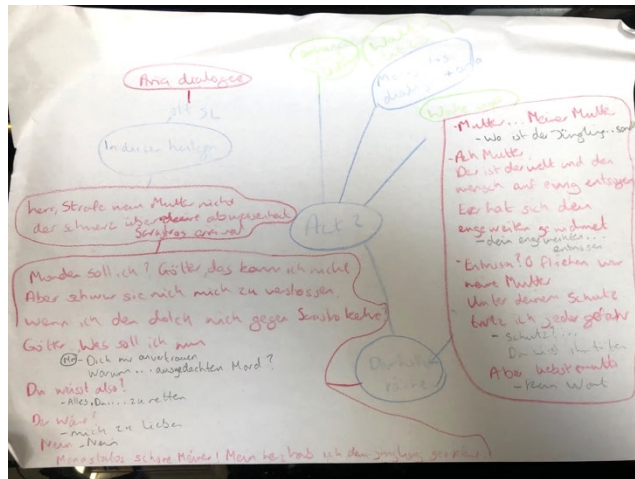
Many of these points can be adapted for an instrumentalist.

Anna makes the point that everyone has their own way but this is what works for her.

- Move away from the printed text.
- Find a way to make the text come alive.
- Use images, draw pictures, translate the text - think of it in pictures rather than words.
- Move around as part of the learning process – then words go into the brain.
- Write the words out and go for a walk; speak them to yourself: recite them over and over again.
- If you get to a bit and you can't remember what comes next, don't despair! It will probably be that there are just "a few holes". Later you fill in the holes (see the colour coding explained below).
- Allow kinaesthetic learning to take hold.
- Mark up a score: divide it into sections. [This can work for music with or without text], with opera e.g. have tags for recitatives in one colour, arias in another and quartets in another.
- Make the 'big thing' into as many small parts as possible so that it can be absorbed.
- Highlight your own part.
- Work in pencil.
- 'Note-bash': sit at the piano and sing through the music: get the 'musical journey' going.
- Try to see where the musical line goes.
- Get to grips with the musical shape.
- Sing it through with a pianist.
- Feel the harmony.
- Never mind if (at this stage) the language is far from perfect.
- **Then** come to the text.
- Break it down.



- Hand-write the text. The act of drawing it off the page, through the eyes and into the hand and writing it in one's own words, means that one can begin to feel how the text feels.
- Create a spider diagram or a mind map of how the story works – perhaps just one aria & recitative. Though these are words, they work like a picture.



An example of Anna's spider diagrams

- Break the text into little chunks.
- Write with different colours, e.g. blue for bits that are known and red for ones that aren't. Learn the red bits and join everything up. Limit the number of colours you use.
- Create links between bits that are known and bits that aren't – e.g. there might be an 's' in the blue bit that you know, and then there's an 's' in the other bit; create these little images and link them up with circles, so you have a way of linking the 'holes', (the bits that aren't known), together.
- Handwritten notes don't look as stark or dense as a musical score and it's in one's own text so it's easier for an individual to understand.

## Co-ordination

Both dyslexic individuals and those with Developmental Co-ordination Disorder/dyspraxia, may have problems with co-ordination.

“Because I’m an opera singer, [the main co-ordination problems are] through dancing. Some staging is very specifically choreographed, even if it’s not a dance. I have to use my brain and work out a way.”

- It may be best to copy a move from **behind** a person, rather than mirroring them which can be very confusing.
- Break the moves down slowly.
- When you learn something thoroughly muscle memory will kick in.

### **The importance of the kinaesthetic**

“The thing that I do struggle with still is learning everybody else’s lines before we start rehearsal. So, I know what they’re going to talk about but I cannot remember all of their lines and all of my lines.

I forget the plots of operas until I go into the rehearsal room!... [then] movement comes into play. I have these people around me. There’ll be somebody over there so I’ll move my head to the right and suddenly I’ll remember their line, and I know this person’s on the left and I’ll remember that line...

Set up your own play in your house. Move from room to room. Have a flashcard in one room with one colour and a flashcard in another room with another colour and see if you can find a way of creating your own play. That can help you learn the music, because you’re moving your body and not just sat at the piano or playing the clarinet or just trying to sing in one spot.”

**Most importantly make a friend of your dyslexia and over the course of your lifetime you’ll work out how your brain works and become friends with your neuro-diverse brain.**

**The actual webinar** can be accessed at

<https://www.ism.org/professional-development/webinars/dyslexia-webinar>