

MOTIVATING YOUNG SINGERS

“Motivating young singers”: it’s a big topic and I don’t have all the answers. but I thought I would just share some of the things that seem to work in my studio.

I find choice of repertoire to be crucial to many students, so most of this paper will address this area. Also available is a list of suggestions for less familiar repertoire which might interest you for your studios, with sources for getting the music. I haven’t included anything found in the current RCM Resonance Songbooks. I’ve also included a small sampling of concert group suggestions.

In my studio I deal with classical vocal repertoire. Some of my students also do some musical theatre, but the greater part of our time together is spent on classical rep. Now, while the definition of this is necessarily a grey area, I’m assuming that those reading this have a pretty good idea of what I mean by this. Unfortunately, I think we do have to acknowledge that it is no longer always mainstream for many people, and certainly not for young people. The ones that show up for voice lessons fortunately have at least a passing interest or are willing to be led down our path! Choosing repertoire they will love to engage with is one of the most important things we can give them in their time with us.

I’m going to come back to the whole subject of repertoire in more detail, but these are some other things I have found over time work well to keep young singers engaged and enthused:

- Keeping them busy – I can always dial back the work if I sense the student is getting overwhelmed, but boring them with too little can be fatal to motivation. I keep introducing new repertoire, even before the existing stuff is perfected. New is always stimulating. In the case of kids who shy away from new things, I introduce a new piece very briefly over several lessons and don’t dwell on it. In a few weeks’ time the piece is not new any more and there is nothing to be feared.
- Variety and choice – obviously, lesson time is limited and it’s not possible to spend limitless time on making choices. But I do think that choice is important for even very young singers as they can feel some ownership in what they are doing, and I believe it helps them to form their taste in music. At a later stage, when they’re in their teens, I send them links and recordings ahead of lesson time so that they can take the time to think about what they might like to choose. This can get extremely time-consuming if you have a very discriminating student (and

I do always have some of those!), but I always find it worthwhile in the end because the student remains enthused and non-oppositional.

- I try to facilitate lots of performance – many singers are hesitant about performing in the first stages, but if it becomes a regular thing nerves tend to lose their potency. In addition, if students perform often they will often recognise and become comfortable with their fellow singers at recitals, festival, etc., and feel a kinship with them. This sense of being part of a community of singers is very powerful and a great motivator in the long run. I try to look for opportunities also beyond recitals, exams and festival, if possible. These will vary from community to community.
- I suggest some listening when I feel the time is right – we have so many (free) opportunities and resources now that didn't exist before. You all know them – Youtube, etc. Not all performances out there are exactly models, of course! Listening to a bad performance is pretty unmotivating, especially if you're trying to sell a particular item of repertoire, so I do try to send links for particular ones. As kids get older and acquire greater exposure to classical music, they are often developing very accomplished musicianship and appreciation skills, so I find quite often that guiding some listening is very rewarding with teenagers and can help to broaden their view of what classical singing offers. I recall with fondness one student who revealed after a while that she listened every Saturday afternoon to the Met radio broadcasts and another who I discovered to my astonishment was a secret (and very knowledgeable) opera fan! And this was not twenty years ago but quite recently. I think it's a matter of cultivating and fostering curiosity.
- Feedback from the student: generally speaking after every recital I discuss not only how they felt about their own performance but whether they heard any music that appealed to them. Quite often they can't remember! But sometimes something stuck out for them, and that can be a great guide to making suggestions for them in the future.
- Doing it together: I think another powerful motivator for some students can be collaboration. The endless round of solo practice and solo performances can be spiced up by various collaborative activities. Many of my students do duets, if I can find the right fit at the right time. Sometimes the partnership "clicks" really well and remains together for several years. Sometimes not – and then I may try to find an alternate partnership at another time. Ensemble singing is a lot of hard work for the students, the parents who drive, and the teacher, but it's often hugely rewarding in terms of building musicianship skills and in terms of audience

reaction – and if the audience loves it, the students usually feel pretty good too. Trios are even more work but also build great experiences which can make taking voice lessons memorable and rewarding for everyone. Another opportunity can be voice/piano student partnerships. Generally speaking I've aimed towards the Lieder classes of various levels in the festival syllabus, and once again several fruitful partnerships and much learning has been accomplished. The folksong classes in festival can offer another form of collaboration, between a singer and a solo instrumentalist, e.g. a flautist or violinist.

- Finally, I try to allow students to take themselves seriously as singers. As I noted earlier, this singing thing is not always regarded as mainstream, but many students have great aptitude for it and great love for it. Obviously there is some repertoire which is definitely not appropriate at a very early stage, and this will apply to some extent through the teen years as well, but I do find that there often comes a point when the music itself will assert itself powerfully in the student's mind, so generally if a student feel passionately about something I try to go with the flow unless I feel there would be something potentially damaging in them attempting it.

So now to what I think is the “big one” - choosing repertoire.

I think there are a couple of viewpoints to take into account when choosing repertoire: the teacher's and the student's. So first I will admit that I personally am a bit of a repertoire geek, always hunting, always collecting, and this is partly just my own curiosity. But it is a bit of an occupational hazard that we teachers end up (for excellent reasons) teaching the same rep many times, and it's hard not to get restless. From the student's angle this is less of a problem – after all they only learn a piece once and then move on to something else. However, I have fairly often had a student turn down a piece because they too have heard it several times in recitals or festival, and I think sometimes students may see themselves as part of a “singer machine”, so to speak. So I think it's desirable not only to treat every student as entirely individual and find the best possible match of every student to every piece, but also to avert teacher-fatigue and keep expanding the possibilities. And despite the fact that finding and choosing repertoire is very time-consuming, I find it one of the most enjoyable parts of my job.

Of course, much of the choosing of repertoire is dictated by what a student needs for festival classes, for exams, etc, but when I stare at the empty page before the beginning of the season what I ask myself is what will challenge a student to the next level, what kind of music they've already shown an interest in, what fits their voice now or might strengthen something which needs addressing. Sometimes I may feel a student could try something they may feel is a bit outside their comfort zone, like a story song or

a comic song. Sometimes a student will have an affinity for slow, soulful songs and so a suggestion of something to address agility may be in order for contrast and versatility. The list which accompanies this paper contains a variety of pieces suitable for a variety of ages, in various categories. I've tried to avoid including pieces which everybody teaches all the time and look a little further afield. Some of the pieces may be on exam lists but not so often used, and some are not on exam lists at all. I've sorted them into categories to give some structure to searching for whatever it is you may be looking for, but you will see that many of these piece would fit in several categories. I'm hoping to give you some ideas for repertoire that may interest and stimulate you and your students if you are not familiar with them. What follows here is a list of the pieces which were demonstrated by students of various studios at the convention on October 15:

The first category is **living and recent Canadian composers**. We have several in the province, and the rest of Canada has many more. I have found young singers to be very excited by the idea of performing pieces by the composers of their own time. In Regina we are very attached to our own David McIntyre and Robert Ursan. Jeff Smallman is an Ontario composer very much connected with Western University in London, Ontario.

1. **A birthday** by Robert Ursan, This piece has been and remains a test piece in the SMFA syllabus. Rob is quite a prolific composer. He has a very fine melodic gift and his piano parts reflect his own expertise as a pianist. His pieces range from quite simple and approachable by youngsters to advanced and quite sophisticated. He self-publishes but his compositions are available at Cobb Swanson Music.

2. **My Lagan love** arranged by me for voice and violin. I wrote this arrangement specifically for two friends, a singer and a violinist, because they wanted to do something together musically. Note that the folksong classes in festival can now be accompanied by any solo acoustic instrument, so they may be another opportunity for students to collaborate if you can find folksong arrangements with flute, violin, etc.

3. **Nuit d'étoiles** by Jeff Smallman. Many of you will be familiar with the Debussy setting of this poem, but it's nice to have an alternative available. Jeff Smallman is quite prolific and is published by Lighthouse Music Publications.

TRANSLATION: Night of stars, beneath your veils, beneath your breeze and your fragrance, sad lyre which sighs, I dream of past loves. The serene melancholy now blooms in the depths of my heart, and I hear the soul of my love quiver in the dreaming

woods. I see again at our fountain your eyes as blue as the sky; this rose, it is your breath, and these stars are your eyes.

4. **Lost by David McIntyre.** This is not an easy piece to learn, but it is a perennial favourite in my studio. It would fit in the “story and comic songs” category as well. David self-publishes, but his compositions can also be found at Cobb Swanson Music. In my studio I start on **foreign language repertoire** quite early and find that most students are very interested and enjoy the challenge. The exam lists do contain lots of possibilities, but here are a few that might not be so familiar:

5. **Auf dem Meere** by Robert Franz. Again, not an easy piece to learn, but quite short and full of drama and colour. Good for budding mezzos.

TRANSLATION: At the boarded ship's wall where my dreaming head lies broke the waves, the wild waves. They rushed and murmured secretly in my ear: Bewitched lad! Your arm is short, and the heaven is so wide, and the stars above are firmly forged with golden nails. Vain longing, vain sighs, it would be best if you went to sleep.

6. **Les matelots** by Gabriel Fauré This may be of interest if you're looking for rep for boys, and it's available from schubertline which means it is available in any key – helpful for changing voices.

TRANSLATION: On the deep blue water we go voyaging, circling the world with a silver wake, from the Sunda Islands, from India with the burning sky, as far as the frozen pole. We think of the land that we are always fleeing, of our old mother, of our young loves. But the light wave with its soft refrain lulls our grief to sleep. Sublime existence, rocked by our nest, we live on the abyss, on the breast of the infinite, of the waves skimming the peak. In the great blue desert we walk with God!

7. **Geheimniss** by Engelbert Humperdinck. Humperdinck is familiar to most of us from his opera Hansel and Gretel, so I was charmed to find something else by him which is quite singable by young singers.

TRANSLATION: The clear stream ripples through the grove; why does it murmur all day so softly? The little bird on the high branch, why does it always sing without cease in such a lovely way? What sign does the moon send, so strangely pale in its magical glow, from its empire in the arc of the stars? Whoever understands this certainly knows what the secret meaning of all existence is. He has read it in the sound of the little stream, in the bright moon, in the song of little birds alike: in radiance and music and sounds Love's light and soaring song have ever been.

8. **Non ti fidar** from Muzio Scevola by Handel. It's challenging, as you would expect from a Handel da capo aria, but a good challenge, and it could be useful if you have a young singer dying to enter, say, an intermediate opera class in festival.

TRANSLATION: Do not trust yourself, because desire flatters, it's true, but then often Love is false and Time deceives. Whoever wants to enjoy life, I have heard it said, fixes his thought on present happiness; because the future has in its hand a destiny that is blind and tyrannical.

The next category is **women composers**. Many research projects have addressed the truly regrettable neglect of some very fine composers in past times. Suffice it to say here that I believe riches await the teacher who delves into this body of work, and also that in our own time women composers have been much better received and acknowledged. So it's not now difficult to find pieces by contemporary women composers for quite young singers. There's enough out there, for example, to be able to hold a themed student recital featuring only the work of women composers.

9. **Dead men and gold** by Lin Marsh. Lin Marsh is a British composer with a couple of collections out there for youngsters, often very ingeniously written. There are a couple of her things in the RCM lists, but this one isn't.

10. **Madrigal** by Cécile Chaminade. This piece is listed in RCM Grade 7, but I don't hear it being done very often, possibly since it can be a little tricky to get the printed music (try Classical Vocal Reprints). It's a parlour piece but graceful and charming and worth running by a singer with nice high notes.

TRANSLATION: Your sweet kisses are birds that flutter madly on my lips, there they pour feverish oblivion. Your sweet kisses are birds as light as reeds trodden by the white feet of goats. Like frivolous birds with silver wings and sentimental beaks, just as if upon some shrubs they come to sing upon my lips as though sculpted by goldsmiths with magic chisels. Sweet birds, your kisses utter their love song upon my lips.
Thank you, Emily and Sandra.

11. **Dimanche d'avril** by Poldowski. This composer, variously known as Régine Wieniawska, Irène Wieniawska, Lady Dean Paul and others, was the daughter of Polish violinist and composer Henryk Wieniawski. Like Debussy, whose influence in her music is strong, she made many settings of poetry by Verlaine.

TRANSLATION: The hedgerows stretch out frothing into the distance, a clear sea in the clear mist which smells good of young berries. Trees and windmills are light on the delicate green where agile colts come to frolic and stretch out. On this dreamy Sunday there are also some large ewes playing, as soft as their white wool. Just now the wave broke, curling scroll-like, of flute-like bells in the milk-white sky.

Since singing in foreign languages can be challenging, I carry a subscription to the website ipasource.com and work with my students on IPA in lessons. I also sometimes send diction recordings for my students to work with at home.

One category I like to have a good stock of is what I'd call **story songs and also comic songs**. These can be especially useful to give permission to otherwise shy students to let go and lose themselves in the tale. Less shy students, of course, need no permission!

12. **You'd better ask me** by Hermann Löhr. Many of us are familiar with another piece by this composer – The Little Irish Girl – and indeed this one too is in the RCM syllabus (Grade 4). It's easily available, in Daffodils, Violets and Snowflakes; I have found it most useful in the low voice edition in D major. It's really a girls only song.

13. **When big Profundo sang low "C"** by George Botsford. Now this is for sure a boy's song and needs a solid low register, although it's worth noting that although there is an opportunity for a ossia low C the song is actually in F and need only go that low.

14. **The leather-winged bat** by Jake Heggie. The entries in this song are challenging, but a little analysis of what's going on in the piano helps to map the way. Though its text and melody are folklike, because of the piano sonorities it could also appear in the "striking or modern musical language category".

By contrast, in my experience, many students readily take on songs with **strong plotlines**, including profoundly sad and even gruesome plots, for the chance to tell a compelling story, and they often grow in their connection to their audience through doing this.

15. **My bonny, bonny boy** arranged by Cecil Sharp In this folk song, the story could be interpreted in various ways: mine is that the girl who got between the lovers was murdered.

I have found over the years that some students are strongly attracted to **modern, striking musical language**, and that this attraction manifests itself very early on. Their connection to the language and poetry usually sees them through the difficulties of actually learning the song. I love to indulge their preferences if I can!

16. Haiku by American composer Thomas Pasatieri. The poetry is very dense and open to some interpretation, but is clearly tragic involving the loss of a child. I emailed the poet to know more about his view, and he said he didn't remember the poem but thought the ending spoke of some consolation or hope. This could also be listed in the "strong plots" category.

And then there are songs which don't fit in any particular category, but which I have found are popular with students just because they are attractive, melodious and likeable, and sometimes in English!

17. Moonlight by Roger Quilter. This is part of a set of Three Songs Op. 1, all equally attractive, which have sometimes been used as a concert group by my students.

18. The child by Bob Chilcott. Bob Chilcott is known principally as a choral composer and his music is invariably melodious with a slightly contemporary flavour.

19. This heart that flutters by Ben Moore. American composer Ben Moore's songs are always melodically attractive, usually somewhat contemporary in flavour and occasionally quite tricky rhythmically.

And then we come to **ensemble singing**, one of my favourite things to do in the studio, and over the years one of the most popular with my students.

20. Black cat by Lin Marsh. It's from a collection of Marsh's songs called Spooky Songs, mostly solos, and they are all Hallowe'en-themed.

21. Wynken, Blynken and Nod by Donna Gartman Schultz. This composer is also well-known for choral music, and if you're looking for good ensemble material, choral music in various voicings is a good body of material to take a look at. This is a setting of a fantasy bed-time story about three children sailing and fishing amongst the stars from a boat which is a wooden shoe. The little fishermen symbolize a sleepy child's blinking eyes and nodding head.

22. **Roadside flowers** by Martha Hill Duncan. Where voices are pretty equal in range, material can sometimes be rather tricky to track down. This Ontario composer has written it with a mind to showing off both voices equally, which makes it very rewarding for both performers.

One of the biggest repertoire-related tasks in my teaching year is choosing **concert groups**. I am a huge fan of these classes in festival, as early as the student can take it on technically. In my experience, doing a concert group plumbs depths in singers they often didn't know they had, in terms of their understanding of music and poetry as well as in terms of their performing style. It can ignite passions a teacher didn't expect. It can calm nerves in a way never experienced before. It can showcase the personality and versatility of the singer in a way their usual audience didn't expect. It can shed light on repertoire in ways which wouldn't be obvious without the group. It can begin to show what recital programming can be about. It's a lot of hard work for the student and his or her pianist. Finding a good group of songs can be incredibly time-consuming. But it's all worth it. It's probably the subject of a whole session on its own. I know it's a bit of a niche topic right now, but I am such a fan I thought I would just taste a corner of it in the hope that more may join the bandwagon! I have included some suggestions for concert groups on the repertoire list which accompanies this, but here are just a few thoughts about putting them together:

- Check out the student's existing repertoire and see if a group can be constructed with some already-learned songs by adding, say, one new one (less work, less daunting, especially if it's the student's first time at doing a concert group).
- Groups can be by all the same composer, or by groups of composers, e.g. French *mélodie* composers, or all American composers of the 20th century.
- They may be all different composers but settings of the same poet or poetic movement, for example the Symbolist movement.
- They can be extracted judiciously from actual song cycles, for example Schumann's *Frauenliebe und -Leben*.
- They can follow a story, either one which actually exists as the basis of a song cycle, or one imagined by the singer on the basis of the texts chosen.

- They can follow a theme through different periods and languages.
- Whatever the links between the songs, contrast is also important. You have to watch out for certain themes – if you choose, for example, grief as a theme it may be pretty difficult to find enough contrast of pace between the various songs.
- If the links are a little complex, sometimes it can help the audience's (or the adjudicator's!) comprehension and enjoyment to give the group a compact title – this is permitted in the SMFA's festival regulations.

One big issue with expanding our teaching repertoire is access to it. So I thought I would say a few words about this topic. It is a complex and thorny area which all teachers grapple with, and there aren't any simple solutions. But a few ideas may help.

First of all, we are still lucky enough to have real-life not virtual music stores here in the province, and Regina's are fortunate to have Cobb Swanson Music (who by the way do serve customers way beyond the city boundaries by mail). A music store is an incredible resource, with all kinds of knowledge of the highways and byways of the music publishing industry and the way it works. Relationships with individuals in these stores bring great benefits. Worth noting, too, that for music theatre repertoire a music store can access individual pieces online which they will print together with the permission to use it.

A lot of standard repertoire is of course available these days **online**, which means it is accessible without having to buy a \$40 book for one piece, and this means we can access a wider range of music. There are many websites out there, some easier to use than others, some offering transposition and some not. I personally avoid free music websites because using the copies gets you into the whole copyright "is it or isn't it legal?" area. It's important when downloading online to get and retain a receipt so that questions do not arise at awkward times like festival and exams.

I'm not going to try to give a complete list of online sources today, but I would highlight one I use very often which is schubertline.com, now under the umbrella of scoreexchange.com. This collection is mostly of fairly standard repertoire, mostly dead composers, but it also contains less standard repertoire by the composers we all know and love. Their copyright situation seems to me to be pretty tight and reliable, and the cost per copy is modest. It is also possible to request additions to the collection, though there is usually a long backlog so this is not an option if you're in a hurry. Subscriptions giving unlimited use of their offerings used to be available but aren't now, but if you

sign up for an account all your purchases are listed and once you buy a piece you can print it again, so it's a reasonable compromise. Print quality is excellent, but you have to watch out for editorial errors – there's pretty much always at least one in the voice or piano part or even text, so you sometimes need to check another edition if in doubt. A huge upside of schubertline is the transposition function, especially for those occasions when you are teaching a changing voice. As of October 2016, when you google schubertline the schubertline logo will display briefly and then you will be taken automatically to the schubertline listing on Score Exchange.

Abebooks.com sells used music and books from sellers around the world. Finds can be surprising! You have to watch the mailing charges, though, if the seller is from the southern hemisphere, for example.

In Arkansas there exists a treasure trove for singers. Classical Vocal Reprints deals mostly with standard rep and not-so-standard rep of past times, and they deal with actual print copies as well as downloadable music. Be aware that there are two separate websites: classicalvocalreprints.com is for downloads only, and classicalvocalrep.com is for printed music. It is a huge resource, and the cost is moderate. Print quality varies with the source. Its owner, Glendower Jones, is deeply knowledgeable and passionate about his business and it is well worthwhile to make his acquaintance. He often has repertoire hidden away that is not listed on the website, and can be willing to dig it out and produce printed copies on request. Besides the older stuff, he has also quite a body of recent and commissioned work on offer, probably principally American.

Another useful source for standard repertoire (or less standard repertoire by well-known composers) is the CDSheetMusic series. These are discs containing large collections of music you can print off – the logo on the print-off is your permission to use it, but the discs also contain a “festival” letter outlining your rights. There's quite a variety of discs available: the ones I have used most, perhaps, are the early/mid/late Romantic German Lieder ones, the Bach complete church cantatas, and the French art song pair of discs, but there are also ones for opera in various voicings, Schubert, etc. It makes it possible to look at, say, Robert Franz in a fresh light when you have pretty much his complete opus available to peruse. The downside is that the quality of the original printing is sometimes very poor. Also, transposition is not possible, though sometimes the discs include a piece in more than one voicing.

Just a word about IMSLP: such an enormous resource for singers. I would just note here that although there is a trend towards acceptance of this material by festivals, it was clear from the conference I attended in Chicago this summer that this site is viewed

with great suspicion and disfavour south of the border. I notice that it is now possible to purchase a subscription to the site, which may be why acceptance has been increasing. Moving to music of our own times, this too can be complex. Today's composers are often self-published, but they often have their own websites, and some (like Robert Ursan and David McIntyre) sell their music through regular music stores as well. Most often they are using computer programs in their composing, so sometimes transposition of existing scores is not a problem, though occasionally it will necessitate a recasting of the piece to some extent to adjust for altered sonorities.

However, there are a handful of publishing outfits worth a look. One is Alberta's Palliser Music, devoted to Canadian compositions. This is where you will also find much of the catalogue of Alberta Keys. Plangere Editions, founded by Toronto's Brian McDonagh, specialises in piano and vocal literature and composers writing now or recently. Especially notable is their Canadian Composers series, their Rediscovered Masters series, and The Conservatory series, which last is a collection of pieces chosen to parallel the structure of the RCM, Conservatory Canada and the BC Conservatory, including out of print and more unusual repertoire. Print quality is good, but cost is quite high.

Graphite Publishing is an online vocal music publisher of digital scores. They aim to publish quality composition "where excellence and accessibility meet", and they do publish living composers, mostly American with a scattering of Canadians including Christine Donkin and Martha Hill Duncan.

Lighthouse Music Publications out of Hensall, Ontario, features a range of living composers from four continents and includes a small handful of Canadians. Accessibility is a pillar of the operation. Downloads of the repertoire from Lighthouse can be obtained from <http://www.cadenzaone.com/> .

And of course, there is the Canadian Music Centre, still a fine resource for Canadian works. You can borrow some scores or purchase them, and some are available to download.

Much music published in England is also distributed through North American companies, but if you draw a blank with them, a useful website is prestoclassical.co.uk/sm/. Shipping prices are fairly competitive but remember that taxes can be levied before you get the goods!

Sometimes approaching new works can be daunting. Apart from YouTube, etc., one other website which may be helpful is artsongsofcanada.ca (though it is still under

construction at this time – proofreading is a work in progress). You can listen to performances of works by McIntyre, Ursan and others, sung by a variety of students and professional singers. Much of this material was recorded right here in Regina, funded by a donation to Regina branch, with the cooperation of both David and Rob who did masterclasses with students prior to the recording sessions. The recording engineer was a member of SRMTA Regina Branch, Devin Oxman.

Day-to-day repertoire resources tend, for many teachers, to be the RCM and Conservatory Canada syllabi. These are both very valuable, of course. However, it's because they only change infrequently that we become sentenced to teaching the same things many times over. The new RCM syllabus is now under consideration, so now is the time to make suggestions for repertoire to ensure that there is enough changeover to keep things fresh. I hope that this has been helpful, but more than that I hope that voice teachers province-wide may participate in influencing RCM's choice of repertoire. We teachers are also a valuable resource, and we can usefully have input into the exam board syllabi. To this end I have sent out an email to teachers across the province inviting them to submit their suggestions, and I will compile a list to send to RCM. If there are any teachers out there who haven't heard from me and would like to contribute, please email me about it. My email address is on the resources list at the end of the repertoire list, or you can find me on the SRMTA website, and I would be delighted to hear from you. I will aim to compile the list after December 1, so please regard this as the deadline.

As I said before, searching and acquiring repertoire can become a bit of a disease; I do hope I have infected you a little bit! I have acquired repertoire in music stores in several continents, both regular retail stores and used music outlets), at used music sales, online from not only North America and Europe but from South Africa and Australia, at conferences, through gifts (particularly from retiring teachers). Never have I regretted having the chance to find that perfect song for a particular student. Good luck with your repertoire hunting!

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