

## What parameters do singers need to consider within different types of Musical Theatre, and where does my voice fit within this.

In my performance experience I have sung music from a variety of styles and genres, a mixture of opera, more traditional musical theatre, and modern musical theatre. All have different requirements and expectations, both technically and in terms of characterization. All require different vocal timbres, production of sound and uses for the voice which in turn connect to creating the character within the style of the piece. I want to explore what style, if any, best suits my voice and whether this will help me feel more comfortable when connecting with a character. I will consider three contrasting songs to support my investigation, *Cherchez la femme* from 'Orpheus in the Underworld' a comic opera first performed in 1858 with music by Jacques Offenbach and words by Hector Crémieux and Ludovic Halévy; *Higher Than a Hawk* from 'Calamity Jane' the 1953 movie musical by Sammy Fain and Paul Francis Webster and *Waving Through a Window* from the 2016 musical 'Dear Evan Hansen' by Justin Paul and Benj Pasek based on the book by Steven Levenson. Through researching these songs and comparing them to my own vocal development and performances I will comment on my discoveries to determine where my voice lies and whether in fact the ability to sing across a wide variety of styles is more beneficial than only one.

The operatic style requires a specific vocal technique, focusing on the quality and production of sound, over the dramatic content. This has commonly been referred to as the Bel Canto technique<sup>1</sup>. "The Italian vocal technique of the 18th century, with its emphasis on beauty of sound and brilliancy of performance rather than dramatic expression or romantic emotion"<sup>2</sup>. This sound is achieved by singing with your larynx (vocal cords) in a low, loose, and open position. My teacher, baritone Daniel Broad, has worked with me to create a classical vocal sound by developing five key elements; the foundation is most important and predominantly includes good breathing, correct posture, and good placement. The other four steps are resonance, vowels, support/compression and finesse/articulation. I use these steps daily as they are vital to keep good vocal health and develop as a singer. A unique element to operatic singing is raising the soft palate to help create a larger oral cavity (vocal chamber) so that you can breathe in more air. The soft palate is "the roof of the mouth, consisting of an anterior bony portion (hard palate) and a posterior muscular portion (soft palate) that separate the oral cavity from the nasal cavity"<sup>3</sup>. It is also equally important to sing from the diaphragm within a classical style, as it prevents strain on your throat and vocal cords and supports the air from the lungs through to the voice. This has allowed me to create a fuller sound and have more control. Operatic baritone, James Cleverton<sup>4</sup>, helped me to anchor my sound and develop my intakes of breath to sustain the phrases and depth of sound. Asking me to "breathe from the tops of my thighs and lower back" to really make sure that I was engaging my abdomen, reinforced the need to not push my voice

<sup>1</sup> The Techniques of Bel Canto by G. B. LAMPERTI

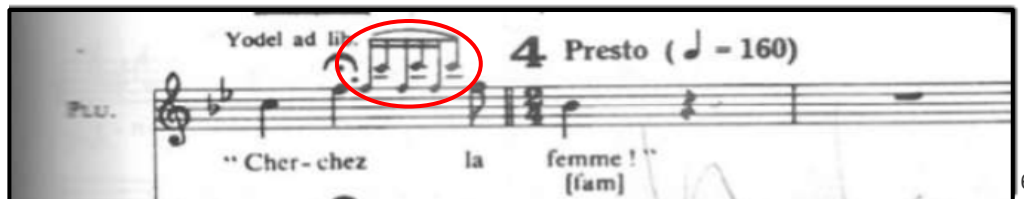
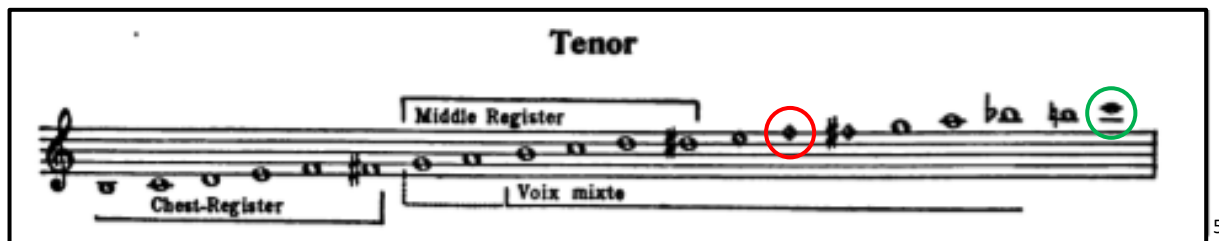
<sup>2</sup> Harvard Dictionary of Music: "*the Italian vocal technique of the 18th century, with its emphasis on beauty of sound and brilliancy of performance rather than dramatic expression or romantic emotion*".

<sup>3</sup> A definition of the 'Palate'

<sup>4</sup> A biography of operatic baritone James Cleverton.

from the throat. He also stressed the importance of allowing time and age to develop my full vocal capacity. You can train your voice, just like any other muscle, but it will always lie within a vocal range and with training you have the capacity to extend this by a few notes either side.

Cherchez la femme 'Look for the Woman' from Orpheus in the Underworld, I believe fully illustrates why the techniques described above are essential to this style of music. Pluto, a Servant called Styx, Jupiter and two of his children sing a song about women due to the feud between Jupiter and Pluto both wanting the love of Eurydice and all the gods come together to sing about their love for women. The role of Pluto would be played by a tenor with a high register. What makes this so difficult is the interval from the F to the C. It is not so much the jump, but more the C being in a different part of the voice and vocal register, that makes the transition to the note difficult. The comparison of the vocal range of a tenor and the point within the song that requires this virtuoso range of singing is demonstrated below.



This is incredibly impressive as it is not something that all tenors could achieve, therefore bringing an opportunity for a singer to stand out. This 'decoration' expresses how cheeky Pluto is as a character, it also shows more relevancy to his character within the situation, linking the virtuosity of his voice to the Godly character he represents, reaching heights that no human could. When I sang the role of Pluto in 2019, this phrase was the highlight to sing, and challenged my understanding and command of my vocal technique. However, being only 17 made it a very difficult phrase to sing. I floated into my head voice and sang the phrase in 'falsetto' to enable the virtuosic line to flow freely. In the industry, professionals would not use falsetto to sing a phrase like this, but this how I adapted to the challenge. Regardless of how I sang the phrase, this still felt like a moment where the audience were drawn by my highest notes and the quality of my sound over and above my characterization of the role. The enjoyment of opera is dominated by beautiful singing and one of the biggest examples of this is Luciano

<sup>5</sup> Score of Orpheus in the Underworld by Offenbach translated from French to English by Phil Park.

<sup>6</sup> The interval within the tenor range visualizing Pluto's high phrases.

Pavarotti singing ‘Nessun Dorma’<sup>7</sup> by Giacomo Puccini. He translates every action and every emotion into his voice; Bel Canto in its truest form. Just before the early stage of musical theatre, there were Opérette & Operettas. In the 1850s, the French (with the Germans, English and Americans not far behind) found a need for a new form of opera that was shorter and less serious. The vocal style of early musical theatre still had a classical technique and sound. The big songbook composers such as Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein and Irving Berlin contributed to the popular music of the day. Songs such as ‘Some Enchanted Evening’<sup>8</sup> from South Pacific leant towards the operatic style of singing, whilst signs of a more modern sound are echoed in songs like ‘I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair’<sup>9</sup>. Performing a song from Calamity Jane sung by Bill Hickock, called ‘Higher Than a Hawk’, was one of my favorites. I really enjoyed performing this song because of the way that it’s written structurally, lyrically, and musically. Sammy Fain uses the simple ABA structure allowing the listener to focus on a simple melody and then go to a contrasting one and back to the original idea, cementing the main theme. Lyrically the song reflects Bill’s true feelings of how he feels about Adelaide Adams, “My heart is higher than a hawk, my love is deeper than a well, I’m thinkin’ in a little while, my love and I’ll be doing very well.”<sup>10</sup> This simple structure allowed me to play with the character’s emotional development throughout the song, without losing the rich deep tone that this song needed. I used all my classical training to anchor my sound and was so drawn to this song because of the combination of text and music as equal companions, providing an easy transition from opera to early musical theatre.

“The words are the driving force in musicals, the text is at least as important as the music. In opera, it’s the music that people remember the most. For this reason, there are several musical theatre roles that priorities strong acting and comic timing over a great singing voice.”<sup>11</sup>

In most cases, modern musical theatre is on the other end of the spectrum to opera, but it has some key similarities. Over recent years audiences have come back to theatre to hear a specific performer’s voice in addition to watching the show. The recent ‘Les Misérables All Stars Concert’ involved some of the most loved actors returning to the show, demonstrating the mix and development of the voices in musical theatre across two decades. A review of the performer John Owen Jones reads how he “left the audience speechless...his vocals rang clear through all the songs and the emotion he portrayed was heart-breaking, I have never seen such a moving and pitch perfect performance in a musical. At the interval I overheard a few audience members saying how they thought John Owen Jones was better than Alfie Boe and I can’t really not agree with them.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A video of famous Tenor Luciano Pavarotti singing ‘Nessun Dorma’ (1994).

<sup>8</sup> The song ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ from The South Pacific film (1958).

<sup>9</sup> ‘I’m gonna wash that man right outta my hair’ (1959).

<sup>10</sup> Lyrics from the ‘Calamity Jane’ film (1962), lyrics by Paul Francis Webster.

<sup>11</sup> An article discussing the difference between an opera and a musical.

<sup>12</sup> A critic’s review of the recent Les Misérables All Stars Concert (2019)

There are key varying factors between the different voices required within theatre. The development of the voice will be influenced by a variety of outside sources, the current musical styles, the development of performance venues, recordings made for the popularity of filmed musicals and the development of technology for use in performance, most significantly microphones. This plays a large part in the changing production of vocal sound and possibly makes the opera singer crossing over into musical theatre a more likely and easier transition, and the opposite an unlikely challenge.

I can therefore conclude that vocal technique within opera has to have key differences to the vocal technique within musical theatre due to a range of different requirements of the performer. Within modern musical theatre your voice will be aided using a microphone. This helps singers to use their voices safely allowing them to perform seven shows a week. An opera singer, using none of the above, performs only three.

The microphone reduces a lot of the effort needed to create a strong reverberant sound and makes sustaining a light, floaty head voice much easier as well as maintaining intimacy. This requires a higher larynx position to create a lighter sound, and singing from your head voice rather than chest voice, “The terms 'head' and 'chest' are an attempt to explain the various sensations we feel when we sing... these also help you to access your different vocal registers to create a different sound...”<sup>13</sup>

The dominant use of microphones created one of the major differences between most modern musical theatre and early musical theatre. Over time, the style has changed as it is so closely influenced by popular music. This is most recognizable in Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*, “In fact ‘contemporary’ could cover the last 50 years in musical theatre as defined by its being influenced by popular music styles (and the number of revivals), ranging from Motown, Rock & Country (*The Wiz*, *Hair*, *Tommy*) to Pop, Bollywood & Jazz (*Rent*, *Aida*, *Bombay Dreams*).”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, I decided to investigate *Dear Evan Hansen* as an example of a modern storyline hitting current topics of social media and suicide backed by a contemporary score. ‘Waving Through a Window’ is a song that I connect with the most, as it is a song that conveys so much emotion and requires a musical theatre/popular song vocal technique aided by a microphone. “Evan Hansen is a character who is lonely, who is isolated, who wants to connect and put himself out there, but is also afraid about what might happen if he does. Evan is confronted with an opportunity to hide from himself and he takes it... leaving him with nothing but himself and chances he won’t take.”<sup>15</sup> What is so appealing to me about this song is the phrase ‘waving through a window’ both as a metaphor and how it was written musically. I understand waving through a window to be a metaphor for Evan trying to live his life but detached because nobody understands the true him. He is trapped in his own bubble. The phrase has some very high notes on a new open breath. I view this as a cry for help because the phrase is high and normally belted, “Belting is a more chest-voice driven, thyroarytenoid dominant, brassy style of singing.”<sup>16</sup> To me this

<sup>13</sup> An article describing head and chest voice and their differences

<sup>14</sup> An essay explaining how Popular Music Styles Influence on Musical Theatre

<sup>15</sup> The Story of a Song explained by writer’s: Waving Through A Window | DEAR EVAN HANSEN 0:00 - 0:16.

<sup>16</sup> Colleen Ann Jennings’s thesis – Belting is beautiful welcoming the musical theater singer into the classical voice studio

song is so impressive because of the sheer amount of emotion that you need to make this song believable. We as the audience need to see the struggle of Evan and his isolated life. A singer can take the range from a whisper to a full belt, including the audience in every emotion of the text. You still require the impassioned top belt notes but there is often an urgency to the sound. I worked with Maria Friedman<sup>17</sup> where she helped me develop 'It's Hard to Speak My Heart' from Jason Robert Brown's 'Parade.' It was a completely different experience to the workshop with James Cleverton, as in this workshop Maria helped me find the meaning within the words of the music and how to make it personal. She did this by making me relate to personal situations that have affected me. This workshop taught me to not worry about what I sound like, but to emote through words and actions. This is the opposite of operatic singing.

All three types of singing I have explored require the vocal techniques to be adjusted based on the requirements and parameters of the given genre. That is not to say that opera singers do not have a place within musical theatre. One of the biggest examples of this is Alfie Boe, most famous for playing Jean Valjean worldwide, however, he started out as an opera singer and still would be classed as one. This illustrates that 'Les Misérables' lends some character parts to a more classical style, with a through-composed structure and sections that are similar to recitatives in opera, and songs that could almost be arias. There are other musicals (or specific characters within a musical) that lend themselves to a more operatic sound and performers such as Bryn Terfel in Sondheim's 'Sweeney Todd' and Renee Fleming in Adam Guettel's 'The Light from the Piazza' are others who have started out in opera and now have careers in musical theatre as well. This never used to be a common thing, but over the past 60 years, since musical theatre became more popular, it has become more of a usual occurrence within the industry.

For myself as an 18-year-old singer posing the question "Where do I fit in?" is almost unanswerable as, according to Erickson Franco, (Voice Teacher & Opera Singer) "full vocal development occurs in your 30's"<sup>18</sup>. This essentially means I will not know my fully matured voice until another 12 or so years, which means it could change completely. I also must take in mind the young age and gruelling schedule of many musical theatre performers, comparatively to the older and vocally savvy operatic performers. My voice is currently suited to a higher larynx position due to the type of music that I have been singing over the past couple of years, but also due to my age and not having the full maturity to find my authentic operatic tone and sound. My natural tone quality is clean and smooth which means that I am suited to many of the lighter musical theatre or operetta songs. In terms of role preference, I really enjoy being able to relate to the character through song and I find this easier in the musical theatre genre as the characters are often more relatable.

In conclusion, it is possible to sing across a wide variety of different genres. I would like to develop my operatic technique, enabling me to master the high phrases, whilst as a performer focus on modern musical repertoire. Modern musical theatre features many

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<sup>17</sup> Maria Friedman biography

<sup>18</sup> A forum discussing when voices will be fully developed

roles for my age group, such as 'Everybody's Talking About Jamie' and 'Dear Evan Hansen' and would therefore be parts I would be able to connect to. This cannot be said about most operas, making them harder to relate to. Fundamentally, the body, the voice and creating good vocal habit is essential to the foundation of a singer, regardless of repertoire. The operatic technique is centered around this development and allows the time and devotion to retaining your sound and stop you from burning out, a common attribute of the intensity required by musical theatre singers. Essentially, once I have established a healthy vocal foundation, I can adjust to opening a larger variety of repertoire across a range of genres and as a singer that is my dream.

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