

# So, Now You Have to Sing? – A workshop for the actor looking to let the singer inside .... OUT!

Dr. Michael E. McKelvey, Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre,  
Fort Lewis College, Durango, CO

<https://michael-mckelvey.com>

memckelvey@fortlewis.edu

- I. Are you the actor who: (1) doesn't like the sound of their own singing voice; (2) is afraid to sing because it will sound bad; (3) is nervous about singing because they have no training; (4) doesn't know how to read music; or (5) can't hold pitch in a bucket?
  - A. Most actors who are afraid to sing or don't like to sing either have no formal experience in singing or received some negative feedback about their voice, so they stopped trying.
  - B. With only a couple of exceptions, I rarely have met an actor who could not match pitch or sing a little bit.
  
- II. Why should actors learn or be able to sing?
  - A. It opens you up to so many more performance opportunities. Even if you don't want to do musical theatre, most of Shakespeare's plays have songs and a lot of contemporary plays are infused with songs.
  - B. Most musicals have a few roles for characters that sing a little bit or just need to sing with the chorus. So, before you say: "there is no place for me in musical theatre," think again.
  - C. Just a side note-playing a music instrument is also another way to get a leg up on the competition when it comes to getting cast in shows.
  
- III. What is Singing?
  - A. As Harold Hill said in *The Music Man*, "Singing is sustained speech (or talking)."
  - B. Take a page from the famous Italian voice teachers, "sing as you speak."

- C. Don't fear your voice. When you start, it might not sound great, but you must start somewhere.
  - D. Find the register or an area of your voice that you feel comfortable in and then build from there. The same goes for matching pitch. Sometimes, it's as much about feeling the voice as hearing it.
- IV. How does it all work? (Vocal Anatomy)
- A. What is a "vocal cord" anyway? The Vocal Folds (or "cords") are folds of tissue in the throat that are key in creating sounds through vocalization. The size of vocal cords affects the pitch of voice.
  - B. Vibration is the key.  
Example: Want to see what the vocal folds look like in action?  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aCyTWC3iqc>
  - C. Breathing
    - 1. Open mouth breath can be just as effective as the nose for many reasons.
    - 2. Where does the breath go? How does the respiratory system function?
    - 3. The mythology of the term "SUPPORT."
    - 4. "Sing with your diaphragm!" What the heck does that mean????
    - 5. Let the air take the voice on a ride. You don't need to push it there.
    - 6. Breath to open. Not – Breath, then open!
  - D. Mouth and Throat - Don't take them for granted!
    - 1. Resonators
      - a. Nose
      - b. Mouth
      - c. Throat
      - d. Ear Canal
  - E. Placement
    - 1. Feel the buzz - Lips are more important that most people realize.
    - 2. "Forward" placement can be a blessing and a curse.
      - a. "The nose is in the sound, but the sound is not in the nose."  
The late Thomas Hayward, noted teacher and leading tenor with the Metropolitan Opera.
  - F. It's called a "larynx," not a "lamyx."

1. What does it do? What's its function?
  - G. Set up the posture!
- V. Understanding Vocal Terminology
- A. Chest Voice
  - B. Chest vs "Belt"
  - C. What is a "Vocal Break" (aka Passaggio)
  - D. Belters: Head Voice is attainable! Don't sound like a seventh-grade girl anymore!
  - E. Men: Head Voice vs Falsetto
  - F. "Mix" - the new term to be misunderstood!
  - G. Trying to make it all ONE VOICE!
- VI. Having a little bit of Musical Knowledge can be a HUGE asset!
- A. Knowing one note from another can be a great asset.
  - B. Piano - You don't have to be Rachmaninoff. Plunking can save you money and give you freedom.
  - C. What is a "Vocal Range"?
    1. You should be able to identify how high and low you can sing.
    2. You should be able to identify your "breaks."
    3. You should be able to identify them all on a page.
- VII. The Dreaded Musical Theatre Audition
- A. Know your show. Know yourself.
    1. Just because you want to play the lead doesn't mean you should play the lead. Get to know the characters in the show and what their voice types are.
    2. If you have to select a song for the audition, find one that has the same style and range of the character for which you have aimed your sights.
    3. Be realistic! If you are a baritone and the lead is a high tenor, don't just say: "Well, I give it a shot." By auditioning poorly for a role that is out of your range, you never will let them hear what your range really is. This could take you out of contention for a role that is perfect for you.

4. Only sing something from the show if they have told you to or you have asked if they would mind or not. Never assume.
5. If they are auditioning everybody with something from the show, make sure you can sing it to the best of your ability without killing yourself. If it is too high, try your best, but nobody wants to hear you scream.
6. The purpose of the first round of auditions: Can you sing? What do you sound like? Are you right for a role or the chorus?
7. When learning the music with everyone and the music director, don't be afraid to ask questions or to request them to play something again if you didn't get it the first time. So long as you are paying attention and ask politely, why would they refuse you?

### VIII. Dangers of Picking "The Audition Song."

#### A. You must make sure the "key" is right for you.

1. Just because you have the sheet music, doesn't mean you have it in the right key.
2. They change keys for Broadway actors all the time. Don't trust the soundtrack. There is no guarantee that the music you have is in the same key as the soundtrack.
3. If you know what your range looks like on the musical staff, you can match it to the sheet music. It is not a full proof way to pick a song, but it's a good place to start.
4. Ask someone to play it for you. Before you spend too much time learning a song, sit down with a friend who plays the piano and try to at least sing through the melody.
5. Before you ever audition with the song, you have to hear what the accompaniment sounds like. You may be able to sing it with the cd, but a lot of times the accompaniment is no help to you. Don't be surprised at the audition!
  - a. There are lots of resources online (especially YouTube) to help you with this. Also, sometimes it's worth the investment to work with a professional voice coach or accompanist prior to the audition just to make sure your music is in the proper key

and that you are singing everything correctly. You can also call upon your friends who have more experience than you.

B. Where do I find a song?

1. There are lots of good musical theatre songbooks on the market. There are also many "Best of Broadway Songbooks," which may be of little use to you.
2. If you are going to invest in a book, make sure it has numerous songs in it that fit your range and voice type.
3. The "Singer's Musical Theatre Anthology" series from Hal Leonard Publications is a good place to start. This is not necessarily the only book I would recommend, but it is on definitely on my list.  
The SMTA are published for specific voice types (Soprano, Mezzo/Alto, Tenor, Baritone/Bass, Duets) in the actual keys used in the shows. They also now have four (5) volumes per voice type and accompaniment cds.

OTHER RESOURCES:

*Learn how vocal cords work for speech and singing*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLgAQTMgZ6g>

*How to Read Music in 15 Minutes*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyqthu9T2xc>

*How to Read Music (Beginner Piano Lesson)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3QwUaJai8c>

*5 Things I Wish I'd Known Before I Started Playing Piano (Beginner Piano Lesson)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9kc0OhiGVM>

*Fundamental Rhythm Explained for Beginners*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAK5-pUxSDE>

Musicnotes.com

<https://www.musicnotes.com>

PianoTrax.com

<http://pianotrax.com>

## **NOTES**