

The Singers Guide to the Musical Theatre Audition

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INTRODUCTION

This workshop was designed specifically with the musical theatre singer in mind. After being an auditioner myself, and then sitting on the other side of the table for over twenty-five years, this session is merely me sharing with you my personal perspectives and those shared by my professional and academic colleagues on what we would like to see and hear in an audition.

First, you have to realize that the audition is nothing more than a job interview where the people in the room are (believe or not) hoping that you will succeed and be the right fit for their production or program. They really have no interest in watching you fail. Although your craft and talent are very personal to you, the audition process, for the most part, is not about personal feelings. It is a matter of: Do you sing, act, dance, and look the way the directors, music directors, choreographers, producers, etc. specially need for this production. If you do - Great! If you don't - Oh well, it wasn't meant to be this time. It is NOT PERSONAL.

All you can do is be prepared, polite, personable, and share your talent with us. Then, let the chips fall where they may. Trust me, there will ALWAYS be another audition and another opportunity!

I. Dissecting the Audition Notice

- A. What do they want to hear? How many songs? Cut length?
- B. What is the style of the show?
- C. Can I sing something from the show?
- D. It's a rock show. Do they want to hear a song from a musical? Can or should I sing a rock song?
- E. Where do I find the appropriate material?

II. Selecting Your Songs

- A. Make sure you select songs that work for you as a vocalist and an actor.
- B. Select songs that fit your type and age. No one wants to watch an 18-year-old sing about the long life he has experienced and the dreams that never came true.
- C. Only have songs in your Audition Book that you can confidently sing in the style of the show it came from and the vocal expectations that come with the song. (See Expectations)

- D. Select Vocal Cuts that include complete thoughts, musical phrases, and clear beginnings and endings. If you need an intro, include it in the cut. If you are fine starting on a bell tone, then practice hearing the bell tone and beginning confidently on the dead start.
- E. Make sure your song choice fits the parameters in the audition notice. If there aren't specifics, try to select a song in the style of the show you are auditioning for.
- F. Select songs and cuts with playable accompaniments. Just because you can sing it does not mean an audition accompanist can sightread it.
- G. "Contrasting" does not only refer to an era or style period, but also vocal and dramatic characteristics of a selection (i.e., belt, legit, power ballad, character-driven, comedic, serious/dramatic).
- H. Cuttings: Make sure your cuts are marked clearly and are the appropriate length for what they have asked for.
- I. Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM): This is a "catch all" term meaning Pop, Rock, Country, Hip Hop, Rap, etc. This is the new vernacular of the contemporary musical. Even if you are a "legit" vocalist, you need to start to familiarize and get some training with these styles of music. You don't have to become a rapper or death metal singer, but you should experiment with some popular genres to see which fit with your voice.
- J. IMPORTANT: Make sure you are not appropriating a song. What I am saying, if you are a white performer, don't sing a song that is sung by a character of color. An example would be "Waiting for Life" from *Once on This Island* or "I'd Give My Life for You" from *Miss Saigon*. With the thousands of songs in the musical theatre repertoire, find something else.
- K. Depending on your gender identity, you can sing a song by a character of either gender. Just make sure that it is in a key that is appropriate for your voice range.

III. **Knowing and Understanding the Expectations of the Song**

- A. When auditioning for a musical, it is of the greatest importance that you keep the following points in mind when selecting a song:
 - 1. Know the style of the music in the show. It helps to know the general style of the composer, but in many cases a composer may alter their style to match the time period and location in which the show is set. In most cases, the musical style will reflect that. For example, Ahrens and Flaherty's *Ragtime* captures many of the musical styles of that turn-of-the-century era, but their music from *Seussical* or *Once on This Island* sound nothing like that show.
 - 2. When an audition notice asks for a "pop" or "rock" song, you still must make sure your piece is in the same vein or era of popular music that is in the show. For example, a song by Elvis or Buddy Holly may work for a show like *Million Dollar Quartet* or *All Shook Up* because they feature rock and rockabilly from the

1950's, but a Diana Ross/Motown song or a hard rock/heavy metal song by Van Halen or Metalica probably will not.

3. **MOST IMPORTANT:** When you select a song, especially one that is popular, make sure you have the vocal ability to sing the song the way we expect to hear it. In other words, if the original artist of the song “belts” the song, everyone who performs it afterwards will be expected to belt it or use vocal techniques that sound like a belt. If you sing “Not for the Life of Me,” we are expecting a chest dominant sound or at least a full mix on the money notes. If you sing, “I Could Have Danced All Night,” we are expecting and want to hear fully supported, vibrato-filled soprano high notes at the end. Unless you are directed otherwise by the audition notice or creative team, the expectation is to sing your selected song in the vocal style and characteristics of which it was originated.
4. You can be bold and bring a whole new vocal take on a song, but this is a risky move to do in an audition. You might want to save these types of vocal and artistic choices for your cabaret, showcase or one-person show.
5. **Cuts & Full Songs:** Even though they may be asking for “cuts” of songs, the expectation is that you can sing the entire song. Don't take a cut from an earlier part of the song and expect them to not notice that you avoided singing the big money note at the end. You need to bring a cut of the song and the entire piece to the audition.

IV. Knowing Your Voice and the Musical Theatre Lingo

A. Understanding the Terminology in Musical Theatre

1. Head Voice vs Falsetto
2. Chest Voice vs Belt
3. Types of Belt
4. What is “Mix”?

B. Use of Music Terminology

1. If you are a trained musician and know the meaning of terms like Adagio, Allegro and Colla Voce, it is alright to use them. If you don't really know what these terms mean, it's OK! Just explain and mark what you need in the most straight-forward way that you can. Example: “When we get to measure 26, I would like to slow down.”
2. Don't be pretentious! Again, use of Italian musical terms is fine. Just make sure you aren't using them to show off how much training you have or how much you know. Nobody likes a “know-it-all.”

V. Your Book & Being a Student of Your Craft

- A. The “Book” will act as your most important tool during your career. It will be an ever-changing work in progress, so to speak. As you mature as a performer, so

will your book. As you gain more skill as a vocalist, the repertoire in your book will grow to reflect the material you are able to sing successfully. In a way, the book is a record of your development as an artist. Some songs (and monologues) will remain in your book for years, while others will have a very short stay.

B. How many songs should be in your Book?

1. Opinions vary on this. Personally, I think 8-10 is a good number. Songs should be separated by style and period/era.
2. Too many songs means one HEAVY book. Remember, you are going to have to carry this book around in your bag or backpack along with all your other stuff. Be sensible. Save your back and shoulder.
3. A couple of contrasting ballads, a couple of contrasting up tempo numbers, three to four contemporary commercial songs (rock, pop, rap, etc.), and a couple of specialty or novelty songs should cover almost any audition situation. So long as you have material that falls in line with the audition notice and you have your trusted “I sing the hell out of this” selections, you should be good.
4. Remember, your Book is an ever-evolving entity. You will take songs out and put songs in daily. Just make sure to double check what is in there before you run off to your audition. Nothing is worse than showing up at a call only to find out that a song is missing because you took it out to sing at last night’s open mic.
5. Make sure to keep your headshot and resume in your Book. This way it is a complete package ready for the audition.
6. Make sure all your songs have their proper cuts, but you also have the full song in the book. (See “Expectations”)
7. Don’t leave songs in your Book that you are learning or haven’t perfected. Music Directors and Directors often ask what other songs are in your book to see what else they may want to hear or get an idea of the type of singer you are. You don’t want to run the risk that they are going to ask for material that you don’t know or can’t sing well yet.

C. Knowing the Style Periods

1. In order for one to select music appropriate for an audition, they must be familiar with the evolution and style periods of musical theatre.
 - a. Musical theatre is an art form that has been around well over 100 years. As to its actual origination date, this can be (and has been) debated for hours, if not days, on end. There are so many books and articles covering the topic that to even list them would take a considerable amount of time. To be safe, we will just begin in the 1890’s. Taking this decade as our departure point, here is a partial list of the types of songs that you may encounter in musical theatre and some of the composers that you should be familiar with:

- i. 1880's-1920's: Vaudeville, Opera, Operetta, Vaudevillian Ballads & Character/Novelty Songs, Ragtime Songs (Irving Berlin), Harlem Jazz Era (Duke Ellington, Fats Waller), Black Musicals (Eubie Blake)
- ii. Tin Pan Alley Era 1920's-early 1930's: Vaudeville, Rise of the Revue/Follies Show, Advent of Radio, The Musical Comedy, and The Birth of the Book Musical (*Showboat* 1927), Follies & Revue Songs, Radio Songs, Musical Comedies of Cole Porter, The Gershwins and Rodgers & Hart.
- iii. The Golden Age of Broadway (Late 1930's-1950's): New Book musicals of Rodgers & Hammerstein, Era of some of Broadway's most important composers & lyricists including Lerner & Loewe, Kurt Weill, Frank Loesser, Meredith Willson, Leonard Bernstein, Comden & Green, Dorothy Fields, Adler & Ross, and Harnick & Bock.
- iv. The Rise of the Rock/Pop infused Musical & Rock Opera of the 1970's such as *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*, as well as the "concept" musicals-*A Chorus Line*, *Pippin*, *Company*, *Cabaret*, *Chicago*.
- v. The British Invasion & Musical on a "Large Scale" & American Integrity Musicals of 1980's & 90's including Andrew Lloyd Webber & Tim Rice, Don Black (*Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*), Boublil & Schoenberg (*Les Miserables*, *Miss Saigon*), Stephen Sondheim, Cy Coleman, Ahrens & Flaherty.
- vi. Walt Disney Theatricals
- vii. The Next Millennium 2000-Present: Dominance of Commercial Music (CCM) in musicals; Everything Old is New Again (Revivals); Juke Box Musicals; Movies on Broadway; Exciting new works and composers (*Hamilton*, *Hadestown*, *Come From Away*, etc./Lin Manuel-Miranda, Tom Kitt, Anais Mitchell, Sarah Bareilles, Kerrigan & Lowdermilk, Jason Robert Brown, Joe Iconis)

VI. Thoughts on the "Do Not Sing List"

- A. You will find numerous "Do Not Sing" lists on the internet telling you all the songs that you definitely should not sing at a musical theatre audition. These lists can be overwhelming when you add up all the songs that you "should not sing" to the point that it may be difficult to find a song that you "should" sing.
- B. These lists are guides for you. If they come from a college or university for which you are auditioning, you should pay attention to their guidelines. Otherwise, realize that these lists are usually of songs that get done over and over. Before selecting one of these tunes, think about why you want to sing that particular song,

and possibly think about singing another song that shows the same things vocally and dramatically.

- C. By singing an “overdone” song, you run the risk of comparison to the original artist who first recorded the song, multiple recordings on the song on social media, and/or the several other people at your audition who may be singing that very song.
- D. If you feel that this song really captures everything about you as a vocalist and performer, and you can perform it to the expectations that your auditors would expect the song to be performed, then DO IT! It’s your audition.

VII. RECAP & “Did I forget anything?”

- A. Showcase your strengths. If you belt, yodel, have whistle tones, have a nice falsetto etc. make sure that you are displaying them in the pieces you choose.
- B. Many people tell you that you need six to fifteen songs in your Book, but in my experience you will only need three or four selections that you will sing repeatedly.
- C. Make sure there is a complete copy of each song and then your cut copies.
- D. Make sure all music is copied front-to-back. No loose pages! It is acceptable by most accompanists for music to be prepared with the music either copied this way or taped back-to-back. Some accompanists would rather not have your music in plastic protectors because of the glare that can occur in certain lighting situations.
- E. Put your selections in sections in your book with labeled dividers or some kind of organizational manner: Ballads, Uptempo, CCM, Contemporary, Novelty, etc. This will just save you headaches down the road.
- F. If you have additional songs or monologues that you really do well, but don’t quite fit the criteria or possibly weren’t your first choice, you should keep them in your Book. In many cases, they may ask you what is in your book to hear you sing something else or what repertoire you sing.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Rock The Audition – Sheri Sanders <https://www.rock-the-audition.com/>

Music Notes – Rock The Audition Music Cuts. <https://tinyurl.com/3jvbtqkz>

Music Notes for Sheet Music <https://www.musicnotes.com/>

Dr. Matt Edwards Voice-Contemporary Commercial Music <https://www.edwardsvoice.com/>

Natalie Weiss <https://www.youtube.com/c/NatalieWeissOfficial>

Musical Theatre Singer’s Anthology-Hal Leonard Publishing <https://www.halleonard.com/>

New Musical Theatre- <https://newmusicaltheatre.com/>

Contemporary Musical Theatre- <https://www.contemporarymusicaltheatre.com/>

Spotify, YouTube, Sirius Radio-Any resource that you can listen and see musical theatre

APPENDIX

The Audition Book for a College Student in Musical Theatre

(The following criteria is a wonderful guideline for a very practical audition book. I would like to credit the late Jack Allison, former Head of Musical Theatre at Point Park University and internationally respected stage director, for this outline.)

- 1) Generic Ballad: Displays sustained, clear musical line and strong acting values. It should give people a good sense of who you are. Look for Rodger and Hammerstein Rodgers and Hart, Jerome Kern, Lerner and Loewe, etc.
- 2) Generic Up-tempo: Displays variation in character, vocal range and tempo. This piece is an opportunity to physically react to tempos and rhythm as well display precision and stamina.
- 3) Contemporary/ Pop/ Rock: This genre can be broken down into eras (50's, 60's, 70's, 80's, etc). These will be necessary for "juke box" musicals and shows like *Jesus Christ Super Star*, *Hair*, *Pippin* etc. While there is any variety of choices to choose from it might be best to examine the Top 40 songs from each era as most pop/rock shows stick to the style of individual eras in music. Country is also growing more and more in demand. It is important to understand and showcase acting value as well as style.
- 4) Contemporary Narrative Song: Jason Robert Brown, Scott Allen, Pasek and Paul etc.
Language is less heightened and comes from a more natural space. Content is pretty down to earth and reveals personal truth. Be careful when choosing a piece to avoid over done material.
- 5) Novelty/ Specialty Song: Perhaps a comic twist to a well know song and a little risky or dangerous. Be creative and keep in mind that this can and should showcase any special skills you possess such as high soprano, high belt, yodel, scat etc.
- 6) Generic Legit: Shows range, strength, and a sustained vocal line. May come from any period of musical theatre. However, choosing from an operetta or classical musical theatre repertoire may be the most useful and accurate choice.
- 7) Sondheim: Tests technique, precision, musicianship, diction and the understanding of phrasing. Choose from Sondheim's repertoire expect perhaps *A Funny Thing Happened...* because it strays from the style of the rest of his body of work.
- 8) Disney: Alan Menken , Howard Ashman, Stephen Schwartz, the

Sherman Brothers, Elton John, etc. Any well known song from a Disney movie or musical that displays your strengths as a singer. Usually playful and straight forward.

* Again, showcase your strengths. If you belt, yodel, have whistle tones, have a nice falsetto etc. make sure that you are displaying them in the pieces you choose.

*Many people tell you that you need six to eight songs, but in our experience, you will only need three or four selections for any audition situation.

*All of these selections should include a 16 and 32 bar cut. However, you should always be prepared to sing the whole piece.

*It is good to have two songs per category. It doesn't mean they all have to live in your book, but it is always good to have choices.

The Audition Book for the Professional Musical Theatre Performer

This is the most difficult section to write because the musical theatre world is an ever-growing organism. With contemporary commercial music the current taste by most contemporary composers, you still get a lot of shows that are throwbacks to past eras with music to reflect it. When summer stock companies putting four to six shows on their seasons in all different styles, it is harder than ever for today's performer to be prepared for what the market wants. The best advice we can give is simply be prepared for as much as possible and really know yourself as a performer. What we mean is, if you are not a heavy metal singer, don't try to convince us you are. Audition for as much as possible, but when you see shows or seasons that match your skill set go after them with the material that displays you at your best.

Generic Legit: Shows range, strength, and a sustained vocal line. May come from any period of musical theatre. However, choosing from an operetta or classical musical theatre repertoire may be the most useful and accurate choice.

Generic Ballad: Displays sustained, clear musical line and strong acting values. It should give people a good sense of who you are. Look for Rodgers and Hammerstein Rodgers and Hart, Jerome Kern, Lerner and Loewe, etc.

Generic Up-tempo: Displays variation in character, vocal range and tempo. This piece is an opportunity to physically react to tempos and rhythm as well display precision and stamina.

Disney: Alan Menken, Stephen Schwartz, the Sherman Brothers etc. Any well-known song from a Disney movie or musical that displays

your strengths as a singer. Usually playful and straight forward. This will be needed for more commercial jobs like cruise lines or theme park auditions.

Contemporary Commercial Music:

This genre can be broken down into eras (50's, 60's, 70's, 80's, etc.). These will be necessary for "juke box" musicals and shows like *Jesus Christ Super Star*, *Hair*, *Pippin* etc. While there is any variety of choices to choose from, it might be best to examine the Top 40 songs from each era as most pop/rock shows stick to the style of individual eras in music. Country, Rap, and Hip Hop are also growing more and more in demand.

This is one of the most important categories to work on for today's performer. It is also one of the most difficult to find material because of the amount of material of popular music you must go through. Make sure your song is comfortable for you to sing, shows some range and character disposition, and please make sure it is not too repetitive.

Novelty/ Specialty Song:

Perhaps a comic twist to a well know song and a little risky or dangerous. Be creative and keep in mind that this can and should showcase any special skills you may possess, such as extreme vocal range, high belt, yodel, scat, rap, etc.

OVERUSED SONGS

Prepared by the late Neal Richardson of Webster University in the 1990's. A lot of these songs are still very overdone.

Here is a list of overused songs. Overused songs come and go. What is fashionable one season may be okay in 4 or 5 years.

Adelaide's Lament, Luck Be a Lady	<i>Guys and Dolls</i>
All That Jazz, Funny Honey	<i>Chicago</i>
Anthem	<i>Chess</i>
Astonishing	<i>Little Women</i>
Big Spender	<i>Sweet Charity</i>
Broadway Baby	<i>Follies</i>
Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man	<i>Show Boat</i>
Castle on a Cloud, I Dreamed a Dream, On My Own,	
Bring Him Home, Empty Chairs, Stars	<i>Les Miserables</i>
Still Hurting, Climbing Up Hill, Moving Too Fast	<i>The Last Five Years</i>
Corner of the Sky	<i>Pippin</i>
Defying Gravity, Popular, The Wizard & I	<i>Wicked</i>
Don't Cry For Me Argentina	<i>Evita</i>
Good Morning Baltimore, I Can Hear the Bells	<i>Hairspray</i>

Gorgeous
I Don't Know How to Love Him
I Enjoy Being a Girl
I Know Things Now, Giants in the Sky
I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair
I'm Holding Out for a Hero
In My Own Little Corner
Little Girls, Tomorrow, Maybe, NYC
Memory
Music of the Night, Think of Me,
Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again,
My New Philosophy
Not for the Life of Me
Over the Rainbow
Part of Your World
Seasons of Love, Take Me or Leave Me,
One Song Glory
Send in the Clowns, The Millers Son
Shy
Someone Like You, This is the Moment
Somewhere That's Green
Summertime
There Are Worse Things I Could Do
What I Did for Love?

The Apple Tree
Jesus Christ Superstar
Flower Drum Song
Into the Woods
South Pacific
Footloose
Cinderella
Annie
Cats

Phantom of the Opera
You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown
Thoroughly Modern Millie
The Wizard of Oz
The Little Mermaid

Rent
A Little Night Music
Once Upon a Mattress
Jekyll and Hyde
Little Shop of Horrors
Porgy and Bess
Grease
A Chorus Line

ADDENDUM from Michael McKelvey.....

- Avoid singing anything from a currently running musical on Broadway or that is out on tour. This also applies to singing a contemporary song which is currently on the charts.
- You should also stay away from songs from current movies or movie musicals.
- New millennial contemporary shows to try be weary of are:

Hamilton, Waitress, Mean Girls. Heathers, The Addams Family, Hadestown, Dear Evan Hansen, Be More Chill, The Mad Ones, Natasha Pierre and the Great Comet, and Six.