

## Their Voice, Their Story, Their Song

### Guiding Singers to Select Musical Theater Repertoire that Resonates

By Jessica Fielder

**H**elping a singer find the right musical theatre audition piece — one that truly showcases their skills, identity, and authenticity — can seem almost mystical. But in reality, it comes down to thoughtful work, dedicated time, and a strong grasp of the ever-evolving catalogue of musical theatre repertoire. It's not enough to fall back on the songs we've performed ourselves or the ones we've seen bring down the house. We need a deep familiarity with the shows, songs, composers, lyricists — and most importantly, the individual singers in our studios.

One of my favorite moments as a teacher is when a student brings in a song they've discovered and truly love — one I might never have chosen for them. That's when I know they're taking ownership of their artistry. That's when the real magic begins.

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If your studio is anything like mine, many new high school students arrive eager to tackle the latest "belt-your-face-off" musical theatre hit. They're often convinced that because a friend wowed everyone with a powerhouse performance, they need to do the same to be taken seriously. That's where my work begins. I need to get to know this student — not just their voice, but who they are at their core. And I say "the work begins" intentionally, because this kind of discovery doesn't happen in a single lesson, or even in the first month or two. It takes time.

Every lesson in my studio starts with a simple, "Hey! What's new?" Before long, students are excited to share something about their week, and I'll do the same. We might talk about what music we're listening to, new musicals that have caught our attention, a show or movie that moved us, or even a big moment from their day. Sometimes it's casual conversation;



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other times, it's deeply meaningful for both of us. But whatever is discussed during those few minutes becomes part of a shared understanding of the singer's world — and it helps lay the foundation for building their repertoire book.

Do they listen to rap, pop, or country? Are they drawn to drama or comedy? What stories resonate with their own experiences? What roles can they see themselves play? The questions — and insights — are endless. And ultimately, I'm reminded that guiding a student to repertoire that fits like a glove revolves around their understanding of their lived experience, culture and skills as a singer

and actor.

With all of this in mind, we can begin making more intentional connections between the student and their repertoire. Maybe I'll ask if they've seen or heard of a musical that relates to a conversation we've had. Perhaps a rhythm from a favorite pop song sparks an idea for a piece from a classic show.

Or maybe a tough day at school calls for a contemporary ballad that reminds them of their resilience and worth. I'm just brainstorming here — but ideally, we're finding songs that feel like a natural extension of who they are.

As students grow and evolve, so should their repertoire — expanding to meet new vocal challenges, explore deeper character work, and reflect their broadening artistic identity. This journey starts in the studio, but it doesn't end there. It continues through each singer's personal exploration, research, and lived experience. And ultimately, it leads to something powerful: a confident, well-rounded performer with a strong understanding of the musical theatre repertoire that best aligns with their voice, personality, and potential.

I'd be completely remiss if I didn't address vocal range, style, and ability. For most voice teachers, this is a top priority — and rightly so. So let's take a moment to break it down. Understanding a singer's vocal range is essential. But when it comes to musical theatre auditions, flexibility is key — literally. Traditional vocal ranges do not necessarily apply here. It's generally acceptable to adjust the key of a

song to best suit the singer's voice (unless, of course, they're auditioning for a specific role in a production, in which case the original key is often required. While special permission to alter a key in a production is occasionally granted, it's rare and costly.) That said, if you and your student have found the perfect audition piece, but singing it a step higher or lower is the difference between a good audition and a great one — go ahead and change the key. There's no shame in that. The goal is to showcase the singer at their very best.

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Vocal styles — now this is a big one in musical theatre. Is your student a classic-style singer/crooner with a smooth, even vibrato? There's a wealth of repertoire to explore with them: think Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Cole Porter and Leonard Bernstein. Or maybe your student is a full-on rock god/goddess, strutting into the studio each week with powerhouse energy and a killer belt. There's incredible material out there for them too — start with jukebox musicals, and dig into shows like *Lizzie*, *Six*, *Alice by Heart*, and *Hands on a Hardbody*. You'll also find great rock and pop-infused scores from composers like Andrew Lloyd Webber, Elton John, Green Day, and a wave of newer composers reshaping the genre.

You've got a rapper in house? Yes! There are full on rap musicals as well as single songs from amazing shows like *Bring it On*, *Suffs*, *Hamilton*, *Mean Girls*, *The Connector*, *Bare*, *In The Heights* and so many more.

And let's not forget the beautifully subtle folk-rock singers. These artists might be quieter in the room, but their storytelling runs deep. Shows like *Dogfight*, *Giant*, *Once*, and *Spring Awakening* offer emotional depth and stylistic nuance that can truly light up a student's artistry.

Here's the kicker: it's not just about recognizing the style a student naturally brings in — it's also about helping them stretch beyond it. Expanding their stylistic range is part of nurturing a well-rounded performer. Of course, that can feel daunting if you haven't had much training in certain genres yourself. But you're not alone in that.



Many of us have strengthened our own teaching by seeking out professional development opportunities and collaborating with colleagues who specialize in rock, pop, and contemporary commercial styles. So don't hesitate to reach out. Partner with these experts. Learn from them. Your students — and your teaching — will be all the better for it.

But what about the singer who's new to training but already eager to step into the audition room? Friends, there is music for everyone. And sometimes — honestly — simple is best. There's absolutely nothing wrong with choosing a song that sits right in the singer's sweet spot, exactly where their voice lives in that moment. Maybe the range isn't huge, and that's okay. Maybe their superpower is how they act the song — how they connect emotionally in a way that's undeniable. That kind of authenticity can leave a lasting impression.

Sure, a particular vocal tone might strike some as unconventional. But to others, it's exactly the quality that makes a character come alive. Embrace that uniqueness. Help your student shape it into something original — something no one else will bring into the room.

Everyone has to start somewhere. So let them go out and do the thing. Then, back in the studio, keep building. Keep stretching. Keep refining. That's the journey.

As you may have noticed throughout this article, I keep coming back to roles, character, and acting the song. And I'll go out on a limb here: this might just be the defining feature that sets musical theatre apart from every other vocal genre.

We've all seen it — “doll hands,” eyes glued to the floor, stiff posture, and a beautiful voice with zero connection to the lyrics. Or, on the other extreme, a student who mimics every move from a video, down to the exact eyebrow lift, with no personal ownership of the performance.

That's why it's so important to dig into the acting of the song with our singers. Once they've internalized the notes and rhythms, giving them the freedom to explore how the piece feels in their body can be transformative. They start to embody the story — not just sing it. And in that space, free from the interruptions of technique and registration concerns, something glorious happens: they connect.

It's not about perfection. It's about being human. Humans move, gesture, notice, react, and respond. Let them feel it. Let them find what's authentic. And once that connection is made, there's time to go back and shape the movement with intention and nuance. Helping students develop that mind-body flow gives them true ownership of their performance — and that's when their artistry really begins to shine.

I'd also like to take a moment to talk about song selection for specific musicals and roles. This process can feel overwhelming — especially for high school singers preparing for auditions at their own school. These auditions often feel incredibly high-stakes; they're happening in front of peers, faculty, and directors they admire. For many students, this is the most important audition they'll face outside of a college audition for a competitive musical theatre/BFA program.

In moments like this, it's no surprise that many students immediately turn to the internet and search for “the best audition song for the role of...” While that approach isn't inherently wrong, it rarely takes into account the individual singer's strengths, style, or unique voice. It also misses the opportunity to surprise the panel with a song that's been carefully chosen — and deeply personalized — for the audition.

Instead, we can recommend a more strategic and creative approach. Start by exploring other musicals by the same composer and lyricist. Then branch out into shows with similar vocal styles or storytelling tones. After that, look for musicals that share the same vibe as the show they're auditioning for. For example, if the school is producing *The Addams Family*, it's a blast to dig into repertoire with a quirky, creepy edge — think Tom Lehrer's classic “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park” or songs from *The Toxic Avenger*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Zombie Prom*, etc. It's not just useful — it's fun!

Sometimes, students may even ask if they can step outside the traditional musical theatre canon altogether. In certain

cases, especially when the show draws heavily from a specific musical era — *Bandstand*, for example — this can be a smart and stylistically appropriate choice. A World War II-era standard could beautifully match the tone and context of the show while demonstrating a deeper understanding of its world.

That said, this kind of choice is ultimately at the discretion of the director. It's important that the student checks in and gets approval before going in that direction. A well-informed, collaborative approach not only shows professionalism — it can also help the student stand out for all the right reasons.

Whew — it is a lot! But the good news is, there are plenty of resources out there to support both teachers and students. From streaming platforms and cast recordings to educational websites, social media accounts, and online masterclasses, high-quality material is more accessible than ever. With a thoughtful, curious approach, we can guide our singers toward smart, personalized repertoire choices — and help them grow into confident, expressive artists along the way.

### A Few of My Favorite Resources

There's no shortage of tools out there to support thoughtful repertoire selection and stylistic development. Here are a few of my go-to resources for both teachers and singers:

**Musical Theatre Resources:** Curated and managed by NATS member Kevin Michael Jones since 2013, this free site is a goldmine of repertoire suggestions, audition tips, and educational content. It's comprehensive, regularly updated, and incredibly user-friendly.

**Theatre Trip – Best Audition Songs:** This site offers a multitude of audition song and monologue suggestions organized by show and voice type. It also features a helpful “Find a Musical” tab that gives background info on hundreds of shows — style, voice types, character breakdowns, and more. It's a one-stop shop for early research.

**Spotify:** Almost every cast album ever made lives here! Beyond that, Spotify also hosts countless curated song lists focused on voice type, musical style, and era.

Some of my favorite Spotify accounts and playlists:

- **NATS member Sheri Sanders:** Playlists organized by rock history eras, musical styles, and individual shows. A must-have resource for anyone diving into pop/rock MT styles.
- **Performerstuffofficial:** Offers audition song suggestions for specific shows, styles, vibes, and voice types — including golden age, contemporary, and 16-bar cuts.

- **NATS member Phyllis Horridge:** Extensive Spotify playlists tailored to various needs, including one specifically for teen performers. Her catalogue now includes hundreds of thoughtfully selected songs, organized by voice type, style, and character fit. See also, Horridge's TikTok series called "Musicals A to Z": Horridge started the series as a personal project in 2022 with a goal to listen to one cast recording or soundtrack per day, alphabetically, using the Wikipedia list of musicals as her guide. "While my schedule no longer permits daily listening, the series continues, currently approaching the end of the letter "H," and has become an ongoing exploration of the vast and diverse world of musical theatre."

**Podcasts:** Podcasts galore about all the ins and outs of musical theatre. Take your pick!

- [HeatherStatham.com](https://www.heatherstatham.com) – **Rock Out Your Rep:** Still stuck? Heather Statham offers an amazing service called Rock Out Your Rep. After a 75-minute consultation, she creates a long, customized playlist tailored to the singer's style, voice, and artistic goals. I've done this myself — it was priceless.

- [newmusicaltheatre.com](https://newmusicaltheatre.com): This is your one stop shop for new trending musical theatre sheet music for purchase.
- [Musicnotes.com](https://musicnotes.com): Digital and print sheet music for purchase.
- [SheetMusicDirect.com](https://sheetmusicdirect.com): Digital and print Sheet individual music for purchase or an unlimited PASS subscription with over two million songs and arrangements available for streaming.

***Jessica Fielder** is the owner and instructor of FielderStudio located in Farmington Hills, Michigan. She specializes in college audition preparation for musical theatre performers. Her students and alumni perform on stages around the globe. A respected adjudicator and vocal clinician, Fielder regularly works with organizations such as the Michigan School Vocal Music Association, the Sutton Foster Awards, the Michigan Educational Theatre Association, and the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS). In addition to her independent studio work, she serves as the vocal music director at University Liggett School in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. She has also held leadership roles as president of NATS Michigan, The Livonia Piano Teachers Forum, and Camarata.*

## 2026 Van L. Lawrence Fellowship

Application Deadline: Nov. 15, 2025

The **Van L. Lawrence Fellowship** was created to honor Van L. Lawrence, M.D. for his outstanding contribution to voice, and particularly to recognize the importance of the interdisciplinary education he fostered among laryngologists and singing teachers. The Fellowship is a joint award from the Voice Foundation and the Foundation Heritage Fund of the NATS Endowment.

### Candidates for the Van L. Lawrence Fellowship shall be:

1. A member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing who is actively engaged in teaching.
2. The Fellowship shall be awarded to candidates who have demonstrated excellence in their professions as singing teachers, and who have shown interest in and knowledge of voice science.

**Members of NATS wishing to apply for the fellowship should write a letter of intent to The Voice Foundation along with your CV — combined into one PDF. Include the area and methods of your proposed study plan.** E-mail: [office@voicefoundation.org](mailto:office@voicefoundation.org)

- a. Current application of scientific knowledge in the studio;
- b. The area of intended study and/or research project and the study plan and methods;
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