Style and the Musical Theater Pianist

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE, RHYTHMIC FLUENCY, AND THE ART OF BEING THE BAND

Jamie Schmidt and Alison d'Amato



Jamie Schmidt



Alison d'Amato

Journal of Singing, March/April 2026
Volume 82, No. 4, pp. 491–497
https://doi.org/10.53830/sing.00210
Copyright © 2026
National Association of Teachers of Singing

The field of vocal collaboration for pianists contains a broad spectrum of styles and activities. There are pathways for pianists in the musical theater genre that profit from skills and predilections that all vocal collaborators may share; the immediate connection to singers and storytelling drives the work, with a unique role given to rhythm and metric frameworks. This article will explore the broad foundation required for pianists in the musical theater genre and recommend ways of developing this skill through historical knowledge, practical technique, and deep listening.

On the subway platform, the doors open and you step into the car. Next stop: Times Square, New York City. You head toward a rehearsal studio in midtown, gearing up to play auditions: eight hours of singer ECCs.[1] You walk into the room, say hello to "the creatives" behind the desk, and head to your seat at the piano.[2] Take a breath and embrace your task—no, your epic journey—for the next eight hours. Dozens (or is it hundreds?) of aspiring actor-singers have been preparing for this moment: singing their 16-bar cut of a song in front of the creative team. They've paid for voice lessons and coachings, taken studio courses in acting the song, perhaps majored in theater at a university, and you've never played with them before. Every minute or two, a new singer enters the room, hands you their music, gives you a tempo and a quick road map, and then you make music together. First rehearsal, dress rehearsal, and opening night all rolled into one twenty-five-second performance. Perhaps you have seen this song before (perhaps in a different key), perhaps not.

Your singer is ready, and you start playing the introduction. They sing the opening verse and you are in motion, synthesizing so much information all at once: their breaths and pace; the key change you had not seen; the sudden and loud ambulance blaring outside on the street; when they enter one measure early and you seamlessly jump to meet them; the accompaniment that is slashes instead of notes.[3] This must be similar to the dopamine rush when driving a race car on the track: A quick pit stop to get the information, and then you race off, barreling toward the finish line. Hopefully, you and the singer are in the same car!

The song is over. The singer leaves the room, hopefully smiling, and says goodbye to the people behind the tables. Total time of the singer walking across the room to you with their music, giving you instructions, and starting the song: thirty seconds. Total time of the actual audition: sometimes less than one minute.

Take another breath. And do it all over again.

* * * * *

The adrenaline-fueled reality of an audition room is the proving ground for the musical theater pianist's essential skill: style recognition and execution. Whereas this column has previously covered topics related to pianists and coaches in the evolving world of operatic and music theater projects, there are pathways for pianists in the musical theater genre that profit from certain skills and predilections that all vocal collaborators may share. The immediate connection to singers and storytelling drives the work, with a unique role given to rhythm and metric frameworks. This article will explore the broad foundation required for pianists in musical theater and recommend ways of developing this skill through historical knowledge, practical technique, and deep listening.

The question, "What is style?" is the same question as "What is culture?" or "What is fashion?" or "What is ethics?" All these aspects of society are rules, ideas, ways, guidelines, and guardrails that are passed down from generation to generation. They are mores we generally accept and live by. Pianists learn style by listening to and absorbing the music around them, passed on to them by parents, mentors, and communities. Pianists practice styles at the piano, absorbing the historical contexts and traits. They continue to learn all styles simply by doing, by being curious. Style is to the musician as culture is to the traveler. As the traveler seeks out the unique cuisine, language, music, dance, and religion of a people, the musician seeks out the unique rhythm, articulation, colors, and feel of a style.

Musical theater has a particular history and evolution. As a genre, it grew out of European theatrical traditions and practices such as operetta and cabaret. In addition to these roots, the music and rhythms of Africa course through the veins of American musical traditions. Forged in the darkest stages of American history, African rhythms and structures were appropriated into popular storytelling frameworks: from ragtime to Tin Pan Alley, from the roots of rock and roll to the grooves of rhythm and blues. It is this alchemy of wildly different traditions coming together that birthed the uniquely American musical. Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operettas established the basic musical theater structure and are considered "the grandfathers of American musical theater."[4] Scott Joplin published "Maple Leaf Rag" in 1900, with over half a million copies sold within the decade. It eventually made its way from juke joints and brothels to the stage, where it helped transform and evolve popular culture along with the musical theater form. George M. Cohan is an early synthesizer of styles—European operetta, ragtime, vaudeville, and Black musical traditions—as a producer, writer, composer and performer, earning his "reputation as the founding father of the American musical."[5] Irving Berlin took Joplin's ragtime and amplified it, legitimizing it in popular culture and society with songs such as "Alexander's Ragtime Band."[6] Like Cohan, he amalgamated different styles, forms, and traditions into a distinctly American music.

The history of musical theater is also far shorter than the history of classical music; one hundred years as opposed to over five hundred. As an art form, it has always reflected the popular music of its time. In fact, it has often *become* the popular music of its time, encompassing the aforementioned genres from ragtime, operetta, blues, and swing to bebop, rock and roll, hip hop, and rap. And the musical theater pianist is expected to be proficient in all these styles.

STYLE AT THE KEYBOARD

Style in musical theater is the intersection of musical vocabulary, historical context, and performance practice. It governs not only what is played, but *how* and *why* it's played a certain way. Classical pianists comfortably play in the various eras of classical music: baroque, classical, romantic, modern, neoclassical, serial, impressionist, etc. They understand the evolution, through lines, and historical connections of composers, threads that spin out over decades and centuries.

In musical theater, because of its shorter evolutionary timeline, the idea of era is replaced with style. The musical theater pianist must perceive the spectrum of techniques and influences that so quickly built the Broadway canon, along with the ever-expanding ways in which musicals are being made and remade in theaters and communities around the world. A musical theater pianist should be able to play (or figure out quickly) a Gershwin song, anything by Rodgers and Hammerstein, Sondheim, and living composers like Adam Guettel, Jeanine Tesori, David Yazbek, and Lin-Manuel Miranda.

The style lens can be narrowed even further by considering the many musical styles within a single composer. Consider two contemporary examples:

- Stephen Flaherty, who (with lyricist Lynn Ahrens) captures the rhythms of calypso in *Once on This Island*, channels the soul of Scott Joplin in *Ragtime*, and dances Irish jigs in *A Man of No Importance*.
- David Yazbek, who utilizes sophisticated jazz in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, transports us to the Middle East in *The Band's Visit,* and crisscrosses America in the rockabilly, folk, and country of *Dead Outlaw*.

An outline of important periods is given at the end of this column, and the reader is encouraged to delve into suggested shows and composers/lyricists that made their mark in the genre.

An actor prepares for a role by studying every detail about a character: Her spoken dialect, the arch of her eyebrow, the way she may slightly favor her left foot while walking, or her tendency to finish every spoken line upward, like a question. This is how a pianist should approach learning the style of a song or a show. Notice every detail! The obvious printed aspects are the tempo, the key, and the composer. Keep digging: Is the notation straight or swung? What is the character—buttoned down, landing a square one and three? Or, is there a sassy backbeat? Perhaps four-on-the-floor, barreling ahead?[7]

The pianist must immediately locate the song's musical DNA—its era, its feel, its function—and play it truthfully, remembering this essential point: Everything a pianist does is ultimately in service of the singer's character and storytelling. The true measure of a musical theater pianist's mastery is not just in conveying the feel, but in the collaborative act of weaving that style into the singer's interpretive choices. The rhythm, the groove, the harmony—it all becomes the floor on which the singer walks, or the cloud upon which they float.

TIME AND GROOVE: THE MUSICAL THEATER PIANIST AS RHYTHMIC ENGINE

The focus of classically trained pianists tends to be weighted toward the right hand much of the time. Understandable, as it is in the right hand where the melody lies, where the sparkly sixteenth-note run occurs. The left hand's very nature is to provide the foundation, the harmonic bottom. Equally important to the harmonic foundation is the rhythmic foundation. Playing with singers generally demands more attention to the left hand, more focus on that foundation. A crucial difference between classical and musical theater is the drum set. Musical theater is a multiplicity of styles, but it most often incorporates and is driven by a rhythm section. It has time. Time is pulse on a grid. Time is pulse subdivided. Time is more regular, less flexible than pulse. Time is also groove.

As with anything worth studying, simple awareness is the first step in learning about time. Think about it, listen to it, feel where it is sitting. Always be curious: Are the backbeats driving forward or sitting back? Is it straight or swinging? What is the bass drum's pattern? Are the toms involved? What is their pattern? How are they interlacing with the hi-hat or ride cymbal? Once you start keying into the inner grid of a band's groove, it seeps into the marrow of your musical bones and becomes a part of how you hear and feel and play music.

The musical theater pianist's left hand yearns to be in lockstep with the bass. Everyone in the band is taking their rhythmic information and cues from the rhythm section: the piano, bass, and drums (often guitar). The solo pianist in the audition or rehearsal room invokes and supplies the information of the drums and the rhythm section. Gospel piano, funk grooves, Motown, and hip-hop are all part of the musical vocabulary of shows at this point in the evolution of the form.

If there is no time (i.e., no drums or rhythm section in a song), this awareness is simply not needed, and the pianist's attention can be directed elsewhere. But when there is time—as there is in most musical theater repertoire—the pianist clocks it and clicks in. They create, build, and continually shape this tool because it is most necessary for navigating this musical world.

Fortunately, there is an inherent learning structure to this world. Music assistant, rehearsal pianist, music copyist, assistant conductor, associate conductor. . . . Each of these positions offers the opportunity to learn from, listen to, and absorb style from other members of the music team. Assuming that the "Peter principle" is not in play, more experienced music directors and orchestrators will, themselves, have learned and incorporated lessons of style, rhythm, and feel from their

teachers.[8] Apprentice pianists absorb everything they possibly can from every rehearsal, lesson, and coaching.

Elements and Examples of Style in Performance at the Piano

- Feel the underlying shuffle of the drums, as you ghost the accompaniment of "Take Me or Leave Me" from *Rent*. This rhythm is not indicated in the score, and the pianist needs to fill in the invisible groove.[9]
- In "The Lioness Chant" from *The Lion King* musical, the rehearsal pianist exists in parallel rhythms of South African music: the sublime tension between the four and the six. Often stated "two against three," this is more specific, with the drive of the straight-ahead four existing alongside the buoyancy of the six, anchored by the two. The pianist can choose to bounce into and out of the different rhythmic dimensions, playing with time and feel.
- In the intro for "Times Are Hard for Dreamers" (*Amélie*), the eighth notes are gently swung, providing a lilting, tumbling bed for the singer. This song is an especially good exercise for left-hand focus; it is the rhythmic foundation while also mirroring the vocal melody.
- In "Gettin' Ready Rag" (*Ragtime*), there is no shuffle, no lilt; the subdivision is straight eighths. But when the hemiolas and syncopation of the right hand meet the uncompromising stride of the left hand, the result is far lighter than the sum of its parts—it is bouncing in the air!
- In most vocal selections of songs from shows, the right hand is arranged to double the singer's melody. The savvy pianist will instead fill in the harmonies or play a countermelody to the vocal; anything else that does not waste one of the two hands available.

It is important to mention that pianists in the world of musical theater will likely play keyboard in the band for a show. This is most likely a keyboard or synthesizer that has been programmed with many different sounds to add such effects as a harp glissando and additional fortification for the show's orchestration. There will be a patch change pedal for the right foot that advances the computer to the next programmed sound. With the integrated programming, the pianist can double a xylophone or string part in their right hand while layering a tuba or bass line in their left hand, often at the same time. A volume pedal is another component of the keyboard; the touch that pianists have so diligently cultivated is no longer in their fingers, but in their left foot.

PARTING THOUGHTS FOR THE ASPIRING MUSICAL THEATER PIANIST

Like all collaborative pianists, musical theater pianists do not merely accompany. We translate eras, evoke characters, and propel stories. They are unique artists whose skillset demands not only a solid fundamental technique, but also the instantaneous synthesizing of style, history, and dramatic context. Style is their compass, their groove, and their heartbeat. It leads down the right path—in the right rhythm—with confidence. Style will continue to evolve, and it is the authors' hope that this article will be part of the dialogue, deepening our understanding and ability to perform.

How can one pianist possibly learn and understand and be able to play so many different styles of music? To start, choose one song from each of these composers: Joplin, Gilbert and Sullivan, Berlin, Kern, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Bernstein, and Sondheim. Then choose a song from two living composers. Get the sheet music, stream clips from the Broadway production(s), listen to the original cast (and subsequent) soundtracks, and start practicing. Listen, watch, practice, and digest. Know the articulation. Feel the specific pulse and time. Go to shows. Notice everything. Listen and *play*!

A GENERIC GENERAL TIMELINE OF NAMES AND NOTABLE SHOWS IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE MUSICAL

There are many books that chronicle the evolution of musical theater, and the ambitious pianist will seek out these resources as they practice at the keyboard.[10] The timeline below is provided as a point of departure for the pianist's curiosity and study.

Operetta/Early Ragtime (late 1800s and early 1900s)

During this time, conventional European operetta meets African American rhythm and musical traditions, fusing

syncopated and complex rhythms with Western form. A distinctly American sound emerges.

- *Pirates of Penzance* and *H.M.S. Pinafore* by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan
- Piano rags and *Treemonisha* by Scott Joplin
- *Hello, Broadway* and other revues by George M. Cohan[11]

Roaring Twenties/Jazz Age (1920s–1930s)

During the 1920s and 1930s, complex harmonies and swing rhythms were introduced. Musical theater in this era was essentially driven by great songwriters writing songs that transcended the stage to become what we now consider "The American Songbook." A small sampling of names who first made their appearances in the Jazz Age include: George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein II, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, and Jerome Kern.

- The *Ziegfeld Follies* (1907–1931). The *Follies* were the most prominent example of a new American art form, the revue, defined as "an evening of songs, comic sketches, dance, variety acts, and choruses of beautiful girls wearing costumes that displayed their beauty to maximum effect."[12]
- The "Princess" musicals (1913–1918). These productions advanced the form by telling more substantial stories while integrating music more intricately with the plot. The name comes from the 299-seat Princess Theatre in which they played. Principal creators were Jerome Kern, Guy Bolton, and P. G. Wodehouse.
- *Shuffle Along* (1920) by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake.
- *Show Boat* (1927) by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II.[13]
- *Porgy and Bess* (1935) by George Gershwin.

The Golden Age (1940s–1950s)

The musicals of the "Golden Age" sought to fully integrate music and songs into the drama. The 1940s were driven by dramatists, where the songs become popular music but first and foremost function dramatically. With nods to *Cabin in the Sky*, *Pal Joey*, and *Lady in the Dark* (all produced in 1940 and 1941), the show that shifted the musical theater paradigm is *Oklahoma!* (1942). In this musical, Rodgers and Hammerstein established structural norms that revolutionized the art form: lyrics written before the music; all elements integrated in the telling of the story; scene structure of dialogue building into song; overall play structure. *Oklahoma!* is also the first Broadway musical to record an original cast album. The "Golden Age" of musical theater is two decades of confidence, an art form that reached maturity in its storytelling.

- *On the Town* (1944), *Wonderful Town*, (1953), and *West Side Story* (1957) by Leonard Bernstein
- *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) by Irving Berlin
- *Brigadoon* (1947), *My Fair Lady* (1956), and *Camelot* (1960) by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe
- *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), and *The Sound of Music* (1959) by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II
- *Guys and Dolls* (1950) by Frank Loesser
- *The Music Man* (1957) by Meredith Wilson
- *Gypsy* (1959) by Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim
- *The Fantasticks* (1960) by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt[14]

Expansion: The Concept/Rock Age (1960s–1970s)

During the 1960s, concept musicals began to emerge. With rock and roll-influenced musicals came amplification, which shifted the paradigm of the artform itself.

- *Bye, Bye Birdie* (1960) by Charles Strouse and Lee Adams
- *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick
- *Man of La Mancha* (1965) by Mitch Leigh, Dale Wasserman, and Joe Darion
- *Cabaret* (1966) by John Kander and Fred Ebb
- *Promises, Promises* (1968) by Burt Bachrach[15]
- *Hair* (1968) by Galt McDermot, Gerome Ragni, and James Rado
- *Company* (1970) by Stephen Sondheim
- *Godspell* (1971) by Stephen Schwartz
- *Grease* (1972) by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey
- *A Chorus Line* (1975) by Marvin Hamlisch and Michael Bennett
- *Sweeney Todd* (1979) by Stephen Sondheim

The Contemporary Era (1980s–current)

From pop rock to hip-hop to South African rhythms and songs, the musical theater language of the last forty-five years is global in style. Here are a few examples illustrative of this variety.

- *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988) by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Charles Hart
- *Rent* (1996) by Jonathan Larson
- *The Lion King* (1997) by Elton John, Tim Rice, Mark Mancina, and Lebo M
- *Caroline, or Change* (2004) by Jeanine Tesori and Tony Kushner
- *Hamilton* (2015) by Lin-Manuel Miranda
- *Dear Evan Hansen* (2016) by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul
- *Buena Vista Social Club* (2025) by Buena Vista Social Club, Marco Ramirez and various artists

CONCLUSION

To the insatiably curious reader and pianist who has made it to the end—who has followed this verbal baseball from the pitcher's mitt to the crack of the bat to over the center field wall for a homerun—here is your next assignment:

From each of the five eras listed in the timeline above, choose one show. And from this show, choose two contrasting songs sung by different characters. Listen to the recordings, read the plot, and get to know these characters. Learn their songs at the piano; know the reason they are singing at this point in the story; sing their melodies. These songs will be your portals into the storytelling tradition of musical theater.

NOTES

1. An Equity Chorus Call (ECC) is an audition for ensemble members in professional theater productions under an Actors' Equity Association (AEA) contract. AEA requires every Broadway musical currently running (in New York City or touring) to hold separate auditions for singers and dancers every six months. This is an opportunity for AEA members to be seen by casting agents and creative teams (directors, music directors, choreographers). AEA members are guaranteed a slot if they sign up in time, and nonunion singers and dancers are seen if there are remaining slots.
2. "Creatives" is a term used in the musical theater industry to denote a show's director, designers, music director, choreographer, and casting director (as well as their associates). Some combination of these people will always be in the audition room.
3. Slashes—also referred to as a lead sheet, or a pop chart, or guitar chords—give the pianist chord symbols to play; they are the basis for improvising an accompaniment in the right style.
4. Nathan Hurwitz, *A History of the American Musical Theatre: No Business like It* (Routledge, 2014).
5. Dorling Kindersley Publishing Staff, *Musicals: The Definitive Illustrated Story* (Dorling Kindersley, 2015).
6. "Alexander's Ragtime Band" was written in 1911 and became the song that made Berlin famous all over the world.
7. A driving rhythmic pattern in 4/4 time, with the drummer's right foot hitting all four beats.
8. The "Peter principle" is a concept in management developed by Canadian Laurence J. Peter. The principle states that in a hierarchical organization, employees tend to be promoted based on their success in previous jobs until they reach a position at which they are no longer competent; in other words, they "rise to the level of their incompetence."
9. "Ghosting" is adding notes or chords at the keyboard, indicating the drums, or filling out the rhythm.
10. A recently published book is Andrew Gerle and Joseph Zellnik, *The Periodic Table of Broadway Musicals: An Illustrated Guide to 118 Essential Shows* (Union Square & Co., 2025). This volume is whimsical and entertaining, organizing the musical theater canon in a surprising way. Additionally, several excellent resources have been published by Oxford University Press, including the concise *American Musical Theater* by James Leve (2016), the more substantial *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, 3rd ed., by Gerald Bordman (1986), and the many nonfiction books by Ethan Mordden that include a decade-by-decade history of musicals.
11. The 1968 musical *George M!* chronicles Cohan's life, using Cohan's original songs and music.
12. Hurwitz, *History of the American Musical Theatre*, 82.
13. Jerome Kern wrote songs and music that served the story, developed the plot, and revealed character; in many ways, he was the first great musical dramatist.
14. Although this show played off Broadway, it holds a significant place in musical theater history.
15. Bacharach's score included produced electronic sound and amplification, which paved the way for future musical prospects.

Currently the associate conductor of *Aladdin* on Broadway, **Jamie Schmidt** has conducted and played for over a dozen shows in his twenty-year career in New York City. Most recently, he was invited by composer Adam Guettel to play for his new productions of *Days of Wine and Roses* and *Floyd Collins.* He was music director for the latest workshop of the revival of Elton John's *Aida,* as well as Liza Minnelli's conductor for her final symphonic concerts, leading the Dallas, San Diego, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Atlanta symphony orchestras. Prior to *Aladdin*, Schmidt was conductor and music director of the national tour of *The Lion King*. As a pianist, he has performed in cities from Amsterdam to Banff, Canada, to to New York City to Pyongyang, North Korea. He is also a coauthor of a chapter in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Voice Pedagogy*, partnering with *Journal of Singing* associate editors Alison d'Amato and Elvia Puccinelli. While on tour with *The Lion King*, Schmidt met and married Nina and has two children with her: Ethan (now 13) and Remi (now 11). He notes that touring the country with a show is an unexpectedly wonderful way to raise young children.

Pianist **Alison d'Amato** (she/they) is associate professor of vocal coaching at Eastman School of Music. She has been working in vocal and instrumental genres for more than twenty-five years as a collaborative pianist, teacher, and music director. Known as a trailblazer in the field of art song, she directs her passion for song's rich history towards generating new music and merging its past with its present. d'Amato's breadth of artistic experience has made her a valued partner in creative projects and an effective leader in several organizations. In 2003, she became artistic codirector of Florestan Recital Project, one of the earliest organizations to champion art song performances, recordings, and mentoring. She is the program codirector of (art) Song Lab, which brings together writers, composers, and performers to create new art songs. In 2022, she assumed the role of artistic director for Artsbridge Summer ArtSong. d'Amato has enjoyed devising interdisciplinary recitals, as well as residency projects that feature student collaborations in semistaged song works. In all her activities, d'Amato is dedicated to energizing relationships in music and bringing student's love for their art to the forefront of their projects. https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9891-1933

