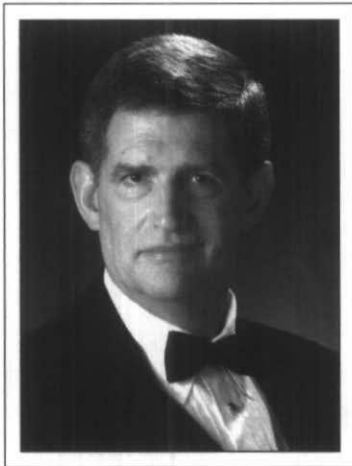


A Broader Broadway



Robert Edwin

Some six years after the rock musical *Rent* opened on Broadway, its “birth parent” *La Bohème* followed it to the Great White Way. With the December 2002 opening of Baz Luhrmann’s 1957 period realization of Puccini’s classic opera, Broadway, like our universe, continues to expand. This author finds it amusing that, after eighteen years of encouraging NATS members to explore the non-classical vocal techniques, styles, and repertoire that traditionally constitute the Broadway musical, Broadway now invites classically trained opera singers to “come as you are” to an audition for at least one show. Therefore, for all who, by default, are now teachers of Broadway-style singing as well as for those who have been teaching it for a while, a review

of the musicals and vocal styles currently on Broadway may be helpful.

As of this writing, twenty-one musicals occupy Broadway houses. By the time this is published, however, at least two of the shows (*Into the Woods* and *Les Misérables*) will not be current. For the sake of all the employed singers, actors, dancers, and musicians, as well as for the readers, I hope the following list is still reasonably valid.

Of the aforementioned twenty-one musicals, seven have graced Broadway stages before. The revivals are *42nd Street*, *Cabaret*, *Chicago*, *Flower Drum Song*, *Into the Woods*, *Man of La Mancha*, and *Oklahoma!* Broadway’s fourteen “new” musicals are *Aida*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Dance of the Vampires*, *Hairspray*, *La Bohème*, *Les Misérables*, *The Lion King*, *Mamma Mia*, *Movin’ Out*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Producers*, *Rent*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and *Urinetown The Musical*.

Broadway, therefore, in the 2002–2003 season can claim vocal styles that span from classical to rock, with *La Bohème* and *Rent* serving, appropriately, as musical bookends. We can put all the musicals into four basic vocal categories: traditional legit, contemporary legit, traditional belt, and contemporary belt.

Legit is Broadway shorthand for “legitimate,” which refers to singing in a classical-like style. Among other things, the vocal tone will have *chiaroscuro* fullness, the vowels and consonants will have clarity of sound

that is more sung than spoken, and the vibrato will be active throughout the phrases. For women, legit implies head voice dominant singing; for men, legit means a more formal use of chest and head registers as befitting a classically trained singer.

Legit can be further divided into traditional legit and contemporary legit. Traditional legit favors a sound that is decidedly classical in nature and is heard in many of the pre-1960s musicals. Contemporary legit, on the other hand, is less formal and more speech-like in sound. It can maintain some of the classical requirements such as vibrato from onset to release, *chiaroscuro*, and *sostenuto*, but can also include pop and rock-influenced sounds.

Sometimes when an older legit show is revived, the contemporary legit will be favored over the traditional legit to accommodate Broadway’s less classically appreciative audiences. Current shows, besides *La Bohème*, that include traditional and contemporary legit vocal styles include *Phantom of the Opera*, *Into the Woods*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Oklahoma!*, *Flower Drum Song*, *Chicago*, *Cabaret*, and *Les Misérables*.

“Belt” or “belt-mix,” in contrast, refers to an informal, *chiaro* (treble) intensified, speech-level style of singing that, for a woman, requires the use of a more chest voice dominant tone. A man’s “belt” or “mix” is a narrowing and a brightening of the classical sound, again with the emphasis on more informal, speech-like phrasing,

but still utilizing the same register(s) used for classical repertoire.

Belt, like legit, also can be divided into traditional and contemporary styles. Traditional belt predates rock and roll and often parallels contemporary legit in as much as the phrases are sung with a fuller tone quality and use few vocal ornaments. The shows that utilize the more traditional Broadway belt style include *42nd Street*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Chicago*, *Cabaret*, *Flower Drum Song*, *Into the Woods*, *Les Miserables*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Oklahoma!*, *The Producers*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and *Urinetown The Musical*.

Contemporary belt, on the other hand, makes full use of the melismatic runs, slides, slurs, growls, shrieks, screams, and assorted noises that inform and define much of rock, pop, rhythm and blues, jazz, and gospel. Voice qualities can be breathy, raspy, whiny, and nasal, and belt ranges for both men and women can soar to well above C₅. Contemporary belt shows include *Aida*, *Dance of the Vampires*, *Hairspray*, *Les Miserables*, *The Lion King*, *Mamma Mia*, *Movin' Out*, and *Rent*.

The reader will notice that some shows overlap categories. It is not uncommon in the course of many Broadway musicals to hear a multitude of vocal styles and sounds. *Les Miserables* with both traditional and contemporary legit and belt may have the most vocal diversity, while *La Bohème* sung in Italian by traditional opera singers would certainly have the least.

Although many of the “new” musicals are relatively recent additions to Broadway and have pop and rock-

based scores, chronology alone does not determine musical style. Take, for example, *The Producers*, which debuted on Broadway in 2001. Librettist, lyricist, and composer Mel Brooks describes his 1940s-style show as “an old-fashioned, traditional musical comedy.” *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, which opened in April of 2002, is an adaptation of a 1967 movie musical based on 1920s jazz music. *La Bohème* is, of course, much older than all of the aforementioned shows, bowing originally in 1896.

Speaking of operas, *Aida* made its Broadway bow in 2000. However, those who may be celebrating not one but two “classical” operas on the Great White Way need to be reminded that Verdi’s 1871 epic is still waiting for its Broadway debut. Pop-rock legends Tim Rice and Elton John are the lyricist and composer respectively of the musical rewrite of this classic love triangle. The story is basically the same; the music is not.

For the teachers of singing who have Broadway-type singers in their studios, the challenge is to identify and understand the various vocal styles used in musicals and then provide the vocal technique, performance skills, and repertoire necessary to develop those styles that the singers wish to sing and/or are capable of singing. To cite my colleague Jeannette LoVetri, voice teachers who, “believe classical voice technique is ‘one size fits all’ vocal training,” may not be successful in helping singers become more diverse. It is imperative that we acknowledge the physiological and stylistic differences between classical and nonclassical singing, and adjust our pedagogy accordingly.

As Broadway continues to broaden in musical scope, voice teachers will be called upon to supply The Great White Way with singers who can handle the vocal technique and the repertoire of both the shows it has produced and the shows it will produce in the future.

Robert Edwin, baritone, has sung Bach cantatas in cathedrals and rock songs in Greenwich Village coffeehouses. He has performed in New York City’s Carnegie Hall and Town Hall, toured throughout the USA and abroad, recorded for Avant Garde and Fortress Records, and published as an ASCAP lyricist and composer.

His diverse performing career is paralleled by an equally diverse teaching career. A leading authority on nonclassical and child voice pedagogy, he practices what he preaches at his private studio in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. He was Adjunct Professor of Music at the University of Michigan for the 2002–03 school year, and continues to serve on the adjunct voice faculties of NJ’s Burlington and Camden County Colleges. He is a frequent faculty member of the Voice Foundation’s Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice. From 1996 to 1999, he served as Contributing Editor for the choral teacher’s magazine, VocalEase. A member of the prestigious American Academy of Teachers of Singing, he has led master classes and workshops in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

In addition to writing “The Bach to Rock Connection” column for the Journal of Singing from 1985 to 2002, Robert Edwin has served NATS as NJ Chapter President, and as a presenter/clinician at national conventions, summer workshops, regional and chapter events. His present NATS responsibilities include national Secretary/Treasurer as well as Associate Editor of the Journal of Singing.