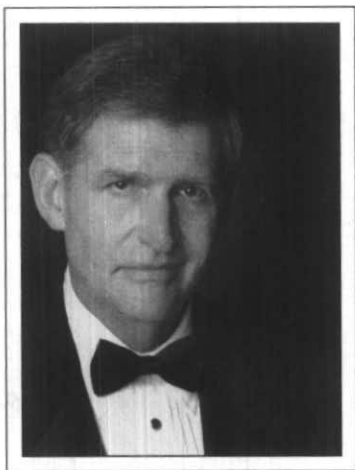


Audition Repertoire Choices: More Than Just Voice



Robert Edwin

When asked to describe what I do as a teacher of singing, my short answer is, "I develop a singer's technique and repertoire." Implied in that answer is the personalization of both the technique (*how* one sings) and the repertoire (*what* one sings) so that each singer will eventually maximize his or her strengths in voice, stature, and personality.

Work on technique and repertoire is ongoing, but there are times in the year when the emphasis is stronger on one more than the other. For my high school seniors, autumn signals the time to finalize repertoire choices for college auditions. Although they've been encouraged to try out a variety of repertoire that reflects different styles and emotions, they also have been

cautioned that "no one can do everything well." They now must make some hard decisions about what they want to sing and act. To make these choices effectively, my students must take an honest and highly critical personal inventory of how they look, how they sound, and how they act.

A glance in the studio mirror will remind them that they are a certain physical "type." Are they tall or short, thin or heavy, athletic or soft, beautiful or unattractive, handsome or homely, or somewhere in between?

A vocal warm up will reaffirm their *Fach* and working range. Do they have a high voice or a low voice, a big voice or a small voice, a pretty voice or a character voice, a flexible voice or a rigid voice, a legit voice or a belt voice, or a voice capable of a great variety of vocal choices and styles?

A careful self-evaluation will clarify for them what strong personality traits they possess and which of their many emotions are both accessible and comfortable. Are they friendly or cold, timid or bold, nervous or calm, sexy or prissy, vulnerable or defensive, happy or morose, funny or serious, clueless or wise, or a wonderful mix of many?

In this very competitive profession, bad repertoire choices are catastrophic. One never gets a second chance to make a first impression, so an ill-chosen song or monologue can be terminal. Therefore, preemptive work in the studio will diminish the chances of the student going out in public with material that does not highlight his

or her strengths. To personalize this process, allow me to track for you my 2005–06 high school senior class, shed some light on the students' repertoire choices, and offer some insight as to why and how they made their selections.

Let's start with Michaela, a beautiful and very talented young woman who came to my studio in her sophomore year as a classically trained singer. Although she had worked professionally in her late child years and wanted a music theater career, she was discouraged from using her belt voice and, as a result, had no technical foundation for that style of singing. Since the typical music theater college audition for women requires two contrasting songs, preferably one legit piece (head voice-dominant, classically based), and one belt piece (chest voice-dominant, speech-based), our first lesson saw us immediately working on her belt voice technique to complement her more advanced classical voice technique.

Ultimately, Michaela's choice for a college audition belt song was easy. She was nominated for a regional award for her portrayal of the funny, geeky, and insecure Gertrude in *Seussical, the Musical* (2000 Flaherty/Ahrens), so Gertrude's high belt song, "All For You" (key of G, range B₃ to D₅) was a "no brainer." Her fine comedic and belting skills were contrasted by the serious and intense *ingénue* ballad, "I Have to Tell You," from the 1954 musical, *Fanny*, by Harold Rome. This song features ringing high notes

and expresses a young woman's passionate love.

Allison's situation was the opposite of Michaela's, for she preferred her belt voice and initially exhibited a very small, choirish soprano. Also beautiful and fit, her rep choices depended on how fast and how far her voice would develop, and how fast and how far her then-fragile confidence would build to allow her to choose more competitive songs. After reviewing a slew of tunes, Allison decided she could play the character Guenevere from the 1960 musical, *Camelot* (Lerner/Loewe), and sing her lyric, legit ballad, "Before I Gaze at You Again" (key of F, range C₄ to E^b₅). Tender, sad, and very moving, the song requires vulnerability and sensitivity more than vocal gymnastics or power. To contrast that piece, Allison chose the pop-belt, up-tempo tune, "The Name of the Game," from *Mamma Mia!* (2001 Andersson/Anderson/Ulvaeus). In the key of F-sharp minor and with a range of F[#]₃ to B₄, it showcased Allison's newly discovered assertive attitude, and kept her comfortably in her low belt range.

Next, meet Michael, a tall young man with an impish face and a theatrical personality, who won the dubious studio award for most songs explored and rejected. In fact, three weeks before his first audition, he was still saying no to all of the ballad choices I came up with. Since I have a rule in the studio that states, "If someone allows you to pick your repertoire, pick songs you love *and* do well," Michael and I had to keep looking for the right song. No one should do a major audition with choices that are lukewarm, or teacher-suggested, but unloved by student. I may have loved the songs, but since he didn't, the songs were eliminated. Frankly, there is so much music avail-

able, one need never settle for second best. Drum roll, please: the winning ballad entry was, "I'd Rather Be Sailing" (key of F, range A₃ to G^b₄) from *A New Brain* (1999 Finn). The song allowed Michael to show his soft, vulnerable underbelly both emotionally and vocally.

Ironically, Michael's up-tempo song, "Out There" (key of C, range B^b₂ to E^b₄) from *Barnum* (1980 Coleman/Stewart), was discovered and programmed early in the fall. Michael is very comfortable with larger-than-life characters, having successfully played Pharaoh in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. P.T. Barnum, like Pharaoh, Conrad Birdie, Cat in the Hat, and George M. Cohan, is a character that requires high energy, a strong presence, and a willingness to "let it all hang out." He found out, however, that one of his college choices required a pre-1960 song, so a trip back to the rep files found "Wouldn't You Like To Be On Broadway" (key of G, range D₃ to F₄) from the 1947 Langston Hughes/Kurt Weill musical, *Street Scene*, and sung by the theatrical and manipulative character, Harry Easter. Michael loved it.

Miles, however, came into my studio with his up-tempo audition song already in place: "What Do I Need With Love?" (key of B^b/G, range for his 32-bar cut D₃ to E₄, avoiding the high G at the end of the song which, as of this writing, he's still working on), from the show, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002 Scanlan/Tesori). Miles, a medium height, low key, African-American, was initially reluctant to take advantage of his ethnicity. I showed him the ballad, "Feeling Good," from the 1965 Newley/Bricusse musical, *The Roar of the Greasepaint—The Smell of the Crowd*. In the key of F and with a range of A₂ to D₄, the song fit Miles's lush bari-

tone and limited vocal range. The character, simply called The Negro, was created on Broadway by Gilbert Price. I suggested to Miles that he needed to know all the obvious fits for him in musicals such as *Show Boat*, *Purlie*, *The Life*, *The Wiz*, and *Aida*, as well as the myriad shows where ethnic diversity is encouraged. Eventually, Miles embraced both the song and the concept of utilizing all of his resources, including his ethnicity. He applied for early decision at New York University, and was accepted in the highly competitive Tisch School CAP21 music theater program.

Amanda, on the other hand, came right on board with utilizing her Mexican-Polish heritage. She understood type casting and knew it was a major factor in theater. A sensitive and Latina-looking girl, she had just recently discovered a confidence that allowed her to make use of her sensuality and a "get-out-of-my-way" attitude that translated into the belt song, "Take Me Or Leave Me" (key of F, range C₄ to F₅) from *Rent* (1996 Larson), and the legit song, "I Feel Pretty" (key of F, range C₄ to G₅) from *West Side Story* (1957 Bernstein/Sondheim).

Instead of the two contrasting songs Amanda had to prepare, Lauren's college of choice asked for four songs in different styles: two classical and two music theater pieces. Fortunately, Lauren enjoyed working with a number of voice techniques and repertoire choices. As her skill and confidence grew, this perky and petite athlete/scholar/performer looked forward to showcasing "Star vicino" (key of G, range D₄ to G₅—Anonymous), "That's Life" (key of G, range G₄ to A₆—Sacco/Royle), "Johnny One Note" (key of E^b, range B^b₃ to B^b₄) from *Babes In Arms* (1937 Rodgers/Hart) and, "I'm Not That Girl" (key of A, range

E₄ to B₄ (the last note in the song is written as E₃, too low for many girls—E₄ works fine) from *Wicked* (2003 Schwartz).

Like Lauren, Miranda had to sing in several different styles using several different vocal techniques. So photogenic that a professional photographer used her headshot on her business card, Miranda's dark sensuality was put to good use in the 1930 blues song by Green/Heyman/Sour/Eyton, "Body and Soul" (key of C, range A₃ to D[#]₅). The hurts in her still short life were channeled into the song, "There's A Fine, Fine Line" (key of G, range G₃ to D₅) from the Tony Award-winning *Avenue Q—The Musical* (2003 Lopez/Marx), while her lighter and more classical side chose "Bel piacere" (key of G, range D₄ to G₅) from Handel's opera, *Agrippina*.

In general, I am reluctant to suggest overly popular songs, classical or otherwise, to my singers simply because, on a preprofessional or professional level, they suggest a limited background and immersion in the art form. That is not to say someone auditioning with "Think of Me" from *The Phantom of the Opera* and "On My Own" from *Les Misérables* wouldn't get into a quality music theater program. Nor can one believe that a school would turn down a fine, young classical singer who chose to audition with "Caro mio ben" and "The Daisies."

In fact, that dynamic came into play as Theresa lobbied for the song, "Popular" (key of C/F, range G₃ to C₅) from the aforementioned wildly popular musical, *Wicked*, by Stephen Schwartz. Theresa, already working in regional professional theater, had no shortage of repertoire. She just knew that her punk-rockish rendition of the song, which was radically different than the oft copied and very

cutesy Kristin Chenoweth version, made people (including this teacher) sit up, take notice, and laugh their sides off.

Theresa is one very talented and very strong willed young woman. Highly opinionated, stubborn, and firm in her beliefs, she was a natural for the song, "Waitin' For My Dearie," sung by the equally strong-willed character Fiona in the 1947 Lerner/Loewe musical, *Brigadoon*. Starting in the key of C with a range of C₄ to A₅, the song allowed Theresa to show off her legit chops and *ingénue* qualities.

Brian did not share Theresa's fire and individuality. In fact, my challenge was to take a very successful high school chorus bass baritone and turn him into a competitive music theater soloist. When a young singer spends five days a week blending in his local high school chorus and weekends blending in regional and All State choruses, the odds are against him breaking out of that pattern one day a week in a private voice lesson. To his credit, Brian beat the odds, although I often felt I was dragging him kicking and screaming into the world of solo singing. Most successful was an exercise setting up parallel vocalises done first by Brian, the chorus boy, then by Brian, the Broadway star. He learned he could have two distinct and separate mind sets that in turn, produced two distinct and separate sounds, one integrated as part of a group, and the other unique, individual, and able to exist on its own.

The tall, sensitive, and very good looking Brian chose for his college auditions the ballad, "Good Thing Going" (key of F, range C₃ to F₄) from the 1981 Sondheim musical, *Merrily We Roll Along*. For his up-tempo song, he picked "I Can See It" (key of C, range B₂ to E₄) from the longest run-

ning show in professional American music theater history, *The Fantasticks* (1960 Schmidt/Jones).

Whitney never had Brian's blending issue. A mature and intense individual from the start, she was one of the few singers I have had who continually needed to hear me say in both technique and repertoire, "do less" far more often than "do more." Months of work got her to a level of vocal and emotional efficiency. Initially, Whitney was sure she wanted a music theater career until midway through her senior year, when she clarified and redefined her own unique songwriting and singing skills. Her focus quickly turned to college pop and jazz programs, and as of this writing she has selected to audition with "Lascia ch'io pianga" (key of F, range F₄ to G₅) from Handel's opera, *Rinaldo*; the 1941 Ellington/Webster tune, "I Got It Bad And That Ain't Good" (key of D, range G[#]₃ to C[#]₅); and a yet to be determined original song of hers.

Unlike Whitney, Alicia knew from the start that jazz was to be her major focus. One of the best improvisational and scat singers I have ever worked with, "Sissy" claims every song she sings as her own. We put jazz standards, "Autumn Leaves," "Lullaby of Birdland," and "Body and Soul" in keys that allowed her to utilize her three octave vocal range (F₃ to F₆).

For Sarah, it's music theater all the way. A cute, vulnerable, and thoroughly loveable girl, this petite blond leaves no doubt about her doubts as she sings, "Will He Like Me?" (key of F, range A₃ to E₅) from the show, *She Loves Me* (1963 Bock/Harnick). Sweet little Sarah shows her claws and teeth in the song, "My New Philosophy" (key of G in the Hal Leonard *Singer's Musical Theatre Anthology*, Vol. 3 for

Belters, but sung in the key of A by Kristin Chenoweth on the revival recording) from *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown* (1965 Gesner). In 1998, Andrew Lipka wrote the song for the revival. Sally Brown's harangue takes Sarah from B₃ to D₅ showing a good, high belt as well as a manic and manic persona.

Finally, there is Matt who, like Brian, also battled a chorus mentality and sound. His was an over weighted voice designed more to anchor a chorus section than to ring out with a singer's formant. Matt and Brian prove that you don't have to quit chorus to be a successful soloist, but you better be working hard to keep the sounds separate and distinct. Matt is a medium height baritenor with a youthful, innocent face which enabled him to be cast as the child-like, mentally challenged Tobias in a local production of *Sweeney Todd* (1979 Sondheim). He decided Tobias would help him out in college music theater auditions with the moving ballad, "Not While I'm Around" (key of A^b, Range E^b₃ to A^b₄). With a nod toward today's pop-rock Broadway style, Matt also chose "Lost In The Wilderness" (key of G, range D₃ to G₄) from *Children of Eden* (1996 Schwartz).

So there you have my class of 2005–06 hopefuls. None of them are seeking a career in classical vocal music, even though some of them have to sing classical pieces for their auditions. Save for Miles, at the time of this writing, none know where they'll end up in the fall of 2006. By the time this piece is published, for better or worse, all will know.

Audition requirements for college music theater programs run the gamut from complete songs to sixteen-bar cuts. Most songs can survive editing down as long as the singer knows he

or she must present the cut as if it were a complete song with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The actor must dominate at all times. Talk to theater people and they'll tell you, "be an actor who sings fabulously, rather than just a singer with a good voice."

As for music theater repertoire sources, Hal Leonard recently issued *The 16 Bar Theatre Audition*, a series of four books (SATB) with 100 songs for each voice type. You and your students can sample lots of songs with these books and then focus in on the ones that work. I love these books! To find complete songs, the sixteen volumes—four for each voice type—of *The Singer's Musical Theatre Anthology* (Hal Leonard yet again) are invaluable.

Watch out for "gender benders"—boys singing girl songs and vice versa. Some music theater, as well as some classical music departments, frown on such practice. They also prefer age-appropriate songs and monologs. Yes, our students play older people in high school, but that's because there's no one over the age of eighteen to play those parts! Tell your Golda and your Teyve that they'll have to wait a few years to reprise their roles.

After thirty years of teaching, I am even more convinced that we do our career-minded students a great service, after substantial discovery and exploration, in channeling them toward their personal and artistic strengths. The world is too competitive a place for us to allow them continually to meander through repertoire that serves no end other than self-indulgence. The mirror, the tape recorder/CD, the honest self-evaluation, are critical components for their success. Sometimes it is a painful process if their self-evaluation is out of sync with the professional performing community's opinion. My experi-

ence has been, however, that most serious performers want and need our evaluation and direction even if it means pointing them toward different roles and even different goals.

Robert Edwin has gained international recognition as a singer, composer, teacher, and writer. He has sung Bach cantatas in church cathedrals and rock songs in Greenwich Village, New York coffeehouses, recorded for Avant Garde and Fortress Records, and toured extensively throughout the United States and abroad.

His diverse performing career is matched by an equally diverse teaching career. A leading authority on Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) and child voice pedagogy, Robert Edwin preaches what he practices at his large private studio in Cinnaminson, New Jersey, where classical singers interact with music theater performers; rock, pop, and jazz vocalists; child singers; and pageant contestants.

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