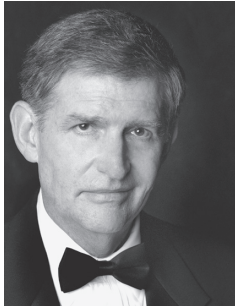


Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

What's Going On On Broadway?

Robert Edwin



Robert Edwin

AS I BEGIN WRITING THIS PIECE in April of 2009, one of my students is heading to New York City to do a callback audition for the soon-to-be Broadway show, *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*. What won her the callback was her rendition of Pat Benatar's "Heartbreaker" at the initial open call. She was then asked to prepare the classic Grace Slick/Jefferson Airplane song, "White Rabbit." Why is my student not singing a traditional legit song such as "If I Loved You" from *Carousel*, or even a more contemporary belt/mix song such as "On My Own" from *Les Miserables*? Why rock songs? Because *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* is featuring a score by rock artists Bono and The Edge.

What's going on on Broadway? Simply put, Broadway, like our universe, continues to expand. There are old shows from the "Big Bang" of the Great White Way in the nineteenth century, and in succeeding years, a ceaseless parade of new shows. Many of these new shows reflect the popular culture and music of the day. For teachers of singing with students involved in music theater at any level, a knowledge of both traditional and contemporary Broadway singing styles and the voice techniques needed to support those styles is absolutely necessary if their singers are to be castable in today's theater. Much like the dancer skilled in ballet, jazz, tap, and hip hop, the singer who has legit, mix, and belt vocal skills can show up to many more auditions than the singer fluent in only one style.

A visit to www.Playbill.com tells us what's presently on Broadway, what's on the way, and what's in the works. As we look over the list of shows, we shouldn't be surprised by the large number of rock and pop-based musicals. Rock 'n roll has been with us since the early 1950s, and this Baby Boomer singer/teacher/writer is part of the first generation to grow up with this music. Two examples of how long this kind of music has been around on Broadway are the present revival of *Hair* that resurrected a forty-year-old theater piece, and the upcoming revival of the early 1960s musical, *Bye, Bye, Birdie*, about an Elvis-like rock star named Conrad Birdie.

In the composing department, the aforementioned Bono and The Edge join an ever growing list of Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) writers who have lent their talents to musicals. They include Elton John (*Lion King*, *Aida*), Phil Collins (*Tarzan*), Abba (*Chess*, *Mamma Mia*), and more recently, Dolly Parton (*9 to 5*). At the same time, it is exciting to see other, more traditional shows and composers in revival as well. Bernstein's *West Side Story*, Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*, and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* offer

the theatergoer a chance to experience an even longer-standing tradition of the Broadway musical.

If you are unfamiliar with any of the nineteen musicals on Broadway at this writing, www.Youtube.com gives you access to all of them. You can hear styles, see performers, and get a good sense of what work needs to be done to get your singers ready for any given show.

Broadway singing styles divide into three basic categories: legit, belt, and mix.

Legit or legitimate singing comes from the Western European classical singing tradition. It is a cultured sound, a trained sound that is accessible to both males and females in either register. It is the character Maria's primary voice in *West Side Story*, Emile's voice in *South Pacific*, and Mary Sunshine's voice in *Chicago*, as a man dressed as a woman imitates a woman's classical-like sound.

Belt singing comes from less elegant and lofty origins, such as music halls, vaudeville, and ethnic folk traditions. It is a loud, often brassy, chest voice-dominant sound produced by both males and females. It is the character Anita's primary voice in *West Side Story*, Drew's voice in *Rock of Ages*, and Roxie's voice in *Chicago*.

Mix, and its kissing cousins belt-mix and head-mix, come from a blending of legit and belt. Call it "belt lite" or "legit lite"—it is a speech-like sound that is conversational in nature but can be declamatory as well. It is the character Mary Poppins' primary voice in the musical of the same name, Fiyero's voice in *Wicked*, and Ariel's voice in *The Little Mermaid*.

Remember, many characters in music theater use a variety of styles and sounds. For example, the role of Glinda in *Wicked* requires a legit, belt, and mix voice. Regardless of the style, a music theater singer needs voice techniques that support those styles. If you would like a more in depth look at Broadway voice definitions, pedagogy, repertoire, and strategies from this author, reference "The Bach to Rock Connection" and "Popular Song and Music Theater" columns: September 1997 ("Renting La Boheme"), September 98 ("Belting 101"), November 98 ("Belting 101, Part Two"), September 02 ("Belting: Bel Canto or Brutto Canto?"), May 03 ("A Broader Broadway"), January 04 ("Belt Yourself!"), January 05 ("Contemporary Music Theater: Louder Than Words"), November 08 ("Belt is Legit"). Also, The American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS) addressed the topic of voice tech-

niques for diverse singing styles in its paper, "In Support of Contemporary Commercial Music (nonclassical) Voice Pedagogy," available in the September 2008 issue of the *Journal of Singing*, or at the AATS website www.americanacademyofteachersofsinging.org.

Repertoire needs for the music theater singer can be as extensive as that singer has styles. It's not uncommon for a comprehensive MT performer to have everything from an operatic aria to a Miley Cyrus song in her audition book. If you're serious about teaching music theater, you should have the Hal Leonard series, *The Singer's Musical Theatre Anthology* which, at last count, was up to five volumes for each voice type (www.halleonard.com).

If you need a single song, www.sheetmusicdirect.com or www.musicnotes.com lets you print it out for immediate and legal use in any key you want. If you want backing tracks (karaoke), www.apple.com/iTunes.com has a rather substantial collection of songs.

Finally, it seems a good time to once again respond in this column to the oft-asked question, "Is the supply of singing teachers keeping up with the demand of the CCM vocal community?" Judging by conversations with my colleagues around the country, I believe the answer is still no. There are still far too many college and university voice faculties claiming to teach music theater with no one on staff who understands the various CCM styles and the voice techniques needed to support them. There are far too many teachers who believe Broadway vocal styles are still classically-based. There are far too many singers who say they get little or no help with CCM technique and repertoire from their private and independent teachers.

This lack of supply for demand will not dramatically change until voice pedagogy classes on the academic level address the myriad styles represented in CCM and provide the techniques necessary to support them. Until that time, teachers of singing will continue to come out of school ill-equipped to work with music that now, more than ever, represents and expresses popular culture. Their pedagogy classes may help them teach the legit, classical-like Maria in *West Side Story*, but the belter Anita in the same show needs a teacher as well. The same would hold true for the leads in *Guys and Dolls* and *South Pacific*, and countless other musicals. Then there are *Wicked*, *Avenue Q*, *Chicago*, *In the Heights*, *Billy Elliot*,

Jersey Boys, The Lion King, The Little Mermaid, Shrek, and Rock of Ages, and . . .

So, fellow pedagogues, let me remind you once again that there is no Broadway sound. That became quintessentially apparent in December 2002 when all of Broadway was bookended by the rock musical, *Rent* and its fully operatic parent, *La Bohème*. There are many, many, many Broadway sounds and our job is to help singers develop as many of those sounds as they are willing and able to do.

Robert Edwin has gained international recognition as a singer, composer, teacher, and writer. He has sung Bach cantatas in church cathedrals, rock songs in Greenwich Village coffeehouses, and has toured extensively throughout the United States and abroad. His new CDs of original songs—*Robert Edwin—Christian Songs*, and *More to Life—Robert Edwin Sings Songs by Crosby & Edwin*—are available at www.cdbaby.com.

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. He has served on the adjunct voice faculties of the University of Michigan, the New Jersey School of the Arts, and Burlington and Camden County Colleges (NJ). He is a frequent faculty member of the Voice Foundation's Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice, and is a member of the distinguished American Academy of Teachers of Singing. His new DVD on child voice training, *The Kid & the Singing Teacher*, with CCC-SLP Barbara Arboleda, is available at www.voicewise.com. Also available is a chapter on teaching children in the new book, *Pediatric Voice Disorders* (Plural Publishing).

Mr. Edwin has served NATS in many capacities: NJ Chapter President (1985–92); author of "The Bach to Rock Connection"—the first regular feature in the *Journal* dedicated to CCM (nonclassical) voice pedagogy (1985–2002); National Secretary/Treasurer (2002–06); first Master Teacher in the NATS Intern Program to represent the private studio sector (2005); JOS Associate Editor (2002–present). www.robertedwinstudio.com.

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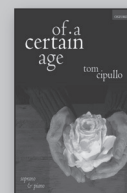
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