

“A Few Basics” by Roy Sander

A singer in Australia who is preparing to do her first solo cabaret show sent me an e-mail asking a few basic questions. I answered her directly—but it occurred to me that the issues she raised might be of more general interest, so I thought I’d address them in this column, somewhat more expansively than in my e-mail response.

How Long Should the Evening Be?

The answer depends on a few factors; key among them are local convention and venue constraints. Cabaret shows in Berlin, for example, typically go on for two to three hours, whereas in New York, they generally run an hour, give or take. If it's less than 50 minutes, the audience might feel cheated. (They made an effort to get to the club, forewent other things they might have done that evening, they’re probably being made to order two drinks, then they have to pay the tab. If it's over before they know it, the experience might be unsatisfying.)

On the other hand, if it's much longer than an hour, you risk overstaying your welcome. It’s tough to sustain audience interest for, say, 75 minutes. (Lord knows it’s hard enough to do it for an hour.) Does the content of your show warrant all that time? You may have twenty songs you’re dying to sing; don’t presume that the audience will want to hear them all. Even if they’re all fine songs, do they cover different territory, or do several of them make the same point, but merely with different words and notes? Or to be very frank, are *your* artistic skills sufficient to demand so much time of the audience? Performing at a club in Philadelphia some time back, Julie Wilson arrived prepared to do two different sets, but found that the club had scheduled only one show that evening. As the first set was drawing to a close, she told the audience what had happened and asked whether anyone would mind if she simply segued into the second planned set. Of course, no one did, and we all sat entertained and enthralled for two hours. There aren’t many people who could do that—or whom I would want to see attempt it. Note also that if your show runs over an hour, you may have to pay the tech person an additional fee; depending on the club’s terms.

If your show runs long you face another problem: people’s bladders. I need to rant for a minute. Has evolution taken its toll on the size of people’s bladders over the past couple of decades, or are we increasingly incapable of enduring even the mildest discomfort? Have you noticed the dismaying frequency with which people blithely leave their seats to go to the toilet during shows nowadays? They don’t do this nearly so much at the theatre, so why do they think it’s acceptable behavior at clubs? It isn’t; what it is is rude to the performer and the other audience members. For Christ’s sake, cross your legs and wait a few minutes. Or pee before the show starts. I think that just about covers the valid options.

Next there are the club's preferences or constraints. For example, the clubs in Berlin expect performers to structure their shows as two acts, so the establishment can sell drinks and food during the interval. Venues elsewhere might also impose an intermission requirement. Pizza on the Park in London expected the artist to have two completely different one-hour sets. Most

audience members stayed for the entire evening, though it was possible to book for only the second set for a reduced admission charge.

Should I Have a Trio or Just Piano Accompaniment?

Again, there is no single correct answer. One factor is your budget: Can you afford to pay the two (or three or four) additional musicians for rehearsal and performance time? Do you have arrangements for multiple instruments, or will you have to pay your musical director to write charts?

What type of music will your program contain? If you have Latin or other highly rhythmic material, you should seriously consider having a bass and drums and/or other percussion. Ditto if your vocal style is jazz—and of course you needn't stop with bass and percussion. I have heard a straight-ahead legit approach enhanced by the addition of, say, a cello or a violin. Mind you, I have also witnessed many exemplary performances that had only piano accompaniment. Consult with your musical director. Note that one factor is the type of accompaniment your pianist provides. Some are so spare in their playing that solo piano leaves the singer practically unsupported, whereas other pianists deliver robust accompaniment, mitigating the need for additional instruments.

Does the Show Have to Have a Theme?

The short answer is a loud, emphatic "no". Mabel Mercer used to sit in a chair and sing a dozen or more songs one after another, with a minimum of patter and, as far as I recall, no theme whatsoever. Each rendition was so strong, so rich, that it stood on its own, was its own justification. That should be your cardinal aim: individually compelling interpretations. (For more on this, see my third column, *On Directors*.)

However, there are reasons you might want a theme. One is that it can help focus your search for material. To cite obvious examples, if you chose to do a tribute to a singer, instead of having to select from oh, say, 20,000 songs, your field would immediately be narrowed down to only material performed by that singer. Or if you opted to sing of the joys and sorrows of youth, you could immediately eliminate "September Song," "I'm Still Here" and "My Way"—among countless others. Actually, you wouldn't have to have a theme to eliminate "My Way."

Another reason is that a theme can help attract an audience, especially if your name is not yet well known or if you do not have a large fan base. While *you* might not be of interest to the general public, your subject matter might be. (Of course, here I use *general public* only as a relative term, in contrast with the three Fs, family, friends and fans.) Further, an arresting theme might entice members of the press to list and/or cover your show. (If you have a theme, be sure it is clearly reflected in the title of your show or otherwise indicated on your flyer; this will distinguish the show from your prior offerings and tell your Fs that they haven't already seen this one.)

How Do I Place Highs and Lows?

There is no definitive formula for doing this--though some people might try to tell you there is. Common sense is as good a guide as any rules one might come up with. Certainly you've sat in the audience at cabaret shows--think about what you find pleasing and not.

Speaking generally, I would caution against opening too big, or with too sophisticated a ballad. I recall a show in which the singer's first number was "Two for the Road," which was a mistake; the audience was not yet ready to be taken on that nuanced a journey. Perhaps start with something either moderately up, or warmly inviting. Let the audience become comfortable with you, get to know and like you as a result of that first number. (Interestingly, the same does not hold true for recordings. Feel free to open your CD with a wow-'em number. I suspect the reason is that wherever the listener is when he plays your CD, he is probably already comfortable, already in a receptive mood.) Say hello either after the first song, or possibly after the second--but generally not later than that.

Conventional wisdom says you must not have many ballads one after another. I don't agree. It depends on the nature of those ballads. I remember a show several years ago that consisted of nothing but love songs. The problem with that evening was not that there were no up numbers; rather, it was that all of the ballads were downers, all expressed the pain of love. It was a very dreary experience. Ballads come in many emotions and colors. A tapestry of well chosen, varied ballads can be as rewarding to the audience as a more traditional mix of ballads and up-tunes. I remember also another singer who did an evening of rather serious songs. However, though all of her material was serious, it was endlessly interesting and her interpretations were penetrating; the result was splendid.

Further, if a singer is not especially good at up- or comic numbers, he and the audience are better off if he sticks to ballads. There are few things so painful as an unfunny novelty number or a leaden up-tune. And remember that with a comic number, it's not sufficient for the song to be funny; the singer must also be. How many perfectly good singers have I seen die on stage because they or their directors accepted the mistaken notion that every show must have a few comedy numbers! Know what your strengths are and play to them.