

**Music Theater Selections for Young Singer
High School Solo Singers Workshop
Nebraska Wesleyan University**



“Many people say that too much study kills spontaneity in music, but although study may kill a small talent, it is a must to develop a big one.”—George Gershwin

Looking for a musical theater song? When you are young, you need to select a song not only for maximum impact, but also for the protection of your voice. The following guidelines will help you make a good selection:¹

1. The song should be within a narrow range (an octave to a 9th) in a comfortable middle octave.
2. The song should have relatively short phrases until breath management skills are mastered.
3. The song should move at a slow to moderate pace; this allows a beginning singer to take a released and balanced inhalation at the beginning of every phrase, which “sets up” the phrase to be sung.
4. The song should contain few high notes. When high notes are found they are not sustained for long and are found early in the phrase, when a young singer has the breath support necessary to stabilize the note.
5. The song should match your acting abilities and yet allow you the opportunity to explore character and presentation. Going further, there should be an attempt to match the age of the singer with the age of the character. This is not a rule that is “written in stone,” but it can be extremely helpful to avoid some basic mistakes. For example, the classic ballad “Send in the Clowns” from *A Little Night Music* is sung by a 40-ish-year old woman, who has a 13-year old daughter and who is reflecting back upon her life as an actress (thus explaining the line “losing my timing this late in my career.”)
6. Can the song be performed in an upper register sound (“head voice”) or a light “mix?” If not, and if you are still young or a beginning singer, the song may prove to be harmful to your voice. You should develop basic upper register and mixing skills, and have a good handle on breath management in all registers, before you attempt songs in sustained “belt” voice.
7. Is the Broadway or pop song you are looking at associated with a major song “stylist” such as Bette Midler, Mariah Carey, Barbra Streisand, Liza Minnelli, Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra, or others? If so, it may be difficult for you to make the song “your own.” This guideline may apply to hit songs from musicals such as *Cats* or *Les*

¹David Alt and Novie Greene, *Teaching Musical Theatre Songs: A Graded Repertoire List*, *Journal of Singing* Vol. 52 (Jan. 1996), 25-26.

Miserables—popular numbers from hit shows that you may unconsciously imitate. As with any song, within the limits of healthy technique, you should communicate your own interpretation of a song, not mimic the performance of a famous singer.

Songs of moderate difficulty expand on the basics listed above. They typically have longer phrases, higher ranges and more sustained high notes, and may contain vocal “patter” (speech-like singing). They exhibit a greater degree of rhythmic and melodic complexity. They may require more production in higher, even opera-like registers, or more use of the “belt” voice. Musical theater songs that are categorized as difficult can be extremely long, thus requiring more stamina; for example, “Memory” from *Cats*. They may present significant rhythmic challenges, including syncopated rhythms found in rock musicals. Difficult songs also require more sophisticated acting skills and intense emotional levels. Difficult songs may include extended high passages or even be required to be sung entirely in “belt” voice. Difficult songs may also require singing at extremely loud volumes, such as songs from rock musicals that would ask for projection over electric guitars and drums.

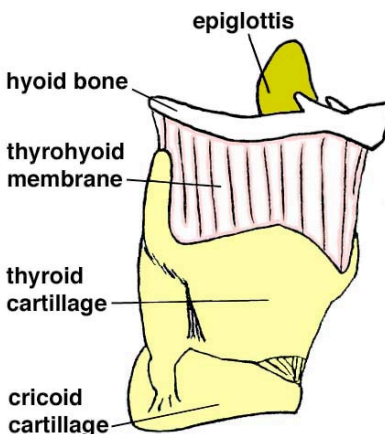
What Skills Do I Need to Sing Musical Theatre?

According to a recent survey, recognized Broadway, summer stock, and cruise ship musical directors, conductors, composers, and casting directors recommend the following:

1. Quality voice training, including skills in:
 - (a) stamina (the industry standard for Broadway singers is eight shows per week. The majority of respondents to the survey felt that young professionals did not understand their vocal technique well enough to sustain eight performances per week.
 - (b) the ability to sing in a variety of pop and music theater styles,
 - (c) development of sound throughout the full vocal range, and
 - (d) the ability to smoothly transition from “head voice” to “belt voice.”
2. Quality training in the area of musicianship, including:
 - (a) sight reading,
 - (b) rhythm reading and the basic understanding of the principle of subdivision,
 - (c) the ability to analyze and self-correct musical errors,
 - (d) the ability to read a voice part in a traditional SATB setting, and
 - (e) the ability to retain a voice part in a traditional SATB setting.²

²David Alt, “Triple Threat Training Program’s Weakest Area—Reading Music: Reinforcing Sight Reading in the Voice Studio for Singer/Actors,” *Journal of Singing* Vol. 60, No. 4 (March/April 2004), 389-390.

Why Is It So Important to Protect My Voice? Why is “Healthy Singing” So Critical?



The thyroid, cricoid, and the greater part of the arytenoid cartilages (the 3 principal cartilages of the larynx) are of the hyaline type, which ossifies (hardens to a bone-like consistency) as the individual matures. The thyroid, and then the cricoid cartilages, start to ossify in the early twenties, while the arytenoids delay this until the late thirties. These structures are completely ossified around the age of sixty-five.

What does this mean for the singer? In order to achieve the full vocal volume of the adult singer, it would appear that we need the strength available from the ossified cricoid cartilage and the stability of a firm thyroid cartilage for the vocal folds to firmly adduct (close) when the subglottal breath pressure (the pressure on the vocal folds and larynx from the lungs, which lie underneath the larynx) reaches the amount necessary for loud singing. It is no wonder that most professional singers do not achieve prominence until their mid-to-late thirties. It would seem that training of the vocal mechanism takes this long, based on the length of time for maturation of the structures, to say nothing of the time required to achieve complete coordination of the muscles, nerves, and so forth, for fine, artistic singing.

Singers need to be aware of the stages of vocal maturity and not be in a rush to push themselves beyond what their physical structures are capable of at the time of study.³

“Everyone always wants to skip to the end result.”—Richard Miller

Musical Theater Anthologies Suitable for Young Singer

First Book of Broadway Solos (Hal Leonard, available in soprano, mezzo-soprano/alto, tenor, and baritone/bass editions)

³Jean Westerman Gregg, “Voice Teaching and Laryngeal Maturation,” *Journal of Singing* Vol. 56, No. 3 (Jan./Feb. 2000), 67-69.

Great Songs from Musicals for Teens (Hal Leonard, young women's and young men's editions available)

Musical Theatre for Teens (Hal Leonard, young women's and young men's editions available)

Teen's Musical Theatre Collection (Hal Leonard, young women's and young men's editions available)

Musical Theater Anthology (Hal Leonard, soprano, mezzo-soprano/belter, tenor, and bass-baritone editions available)

Where Can I Buy Music?

Music Teachers Supply

Omaha, NE

(402) 345-3435

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Dietze's Music House

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Lincoln, NE

(402) 476-6644

T.I.S.

<http://www.tismusic.com/>

1-800-421-8132

J.W. Pepper & Son, Inc.

<http://www.jwpepper.com/>

1-800-345-6296

Classical Vocal Repertoire/Glendower Jones

<http://www.classicalvocalrep.com/>

1-800-298-7474