

MUSICAL THEATRE STYLE BREAKDOWNS

Based on Information from "Acting in Musical Theatre"

Below is a breakdown of the different vocal and acting techniques used across the different styles of musical theatre. The examples listed are all shows that feature songs included in the current musical theatre event lists. If you would like more information about each individual style, please refer to the cast albums for each of these productions listed. When searching, look for the original cast or OBC / OLC versions – those will typically be the most accurate to match the sheet music featured in the event list.

Operetta

1850's – 1914 (Defining line of WW1 Although performances continued into 1930's)
Close descendent of opera and most performances are based off the voice rather than story or acting.

Vocal Techniques:

Pure Bel Canto in the Opera Tradition with strong use of vibrato throughout Typically performed with a "Mid Atlantic" or Modified British Accent

Examples:

The Mikado, HMS Pinafore, Pirates of Penzance

Jazz Age / Early Musical Theatre Comedy

Early 1900's – 1940's

Characterized by roaring 20's and the Jazz Age with strong themes of young love and towards the end of the 1930's sexualized innuendos.

Vocal Techniques:

Bright and Brassy forward placement using forward resonators and twang Belting is shouted and with a brash forceful quality

Vibrato is still used but more in the "crooner" style – vibrato after a period of straight tone

Strong focus on diction as witty lyrics are very common and those words must be understood. Most performances are preferred with a "New York" style accent and delivery unless otherwise noted in the character's story.

Phrasing concepts of back and front phrases start to be introduced to accent for emphasis of syncopation which is now more prevalent.

Examples:

Kismet, The Boys from Syracuse, Street Scene, Babes in Arms, Showboat, A Star is Born

Golden Age Musicals

1940's – Early 1960's

Oscar Hammerstein and similar lyricists drive the idea that lyrics and songs should further the plot line of the production. Productions tend to place a moral struggle as the central conflict of the story.

Songs are now used as extensions of the character rather than stand-alone hits and makes the songs the primary element of action.

Vocal Techniques:

While Operetta favors open vowels and beautiful sound and Jazz Age musicals favor consonants and clarity of the words, Golden Age Musical favor both.

A speech like quality that matches the spoken voice is absolutely necessary. There is a slightly covered sound created by a raised soft palette creating a “darker” quality. While performers must never have classical sound, they must have classic technique as support.

Vibrato is still used throughout and is constant throughout dramatic songs and ballads.

Dialect has shifted away from “European” and “New York” and more to a “Standard American” accent unless otherwise required by the character.

Phrasing is all about logical delivery which is crafted by many of the great composers of the era. While looser phrasing is more common, it is clean and by no means square or metered as in earlier styles. Phrasing should never be over indulgent or emotionally showy.

Examples:

All Rodgers and Hammerstein (*Oklahoma, Allegro, The King and I, Cinderella*), All Lerner and Loewe (*Camelot, My Fair Lady, Brigadoon*), All Frank Loesser (*Guys and Dolls, How to Succeed...*), *The Music Man, The Pajama Game, West Side Story, On the Town, Wonderful Town, Kiss Me Kate, Fiorello!, Roberta*

Classic Musicals

1960's – 1970's

As the country entered into the Vietnam era and the shift in musical stylings known as the “British Invasion” appeared in pop music, Musical Theatre changed as well.

A defining moment in Musical Theatre History is the “Hello Dolly” line (1964) – one of the first times musicals used body microphones for the sound amplification of the singer’s voice. This moment is important because the great beltress Ethel Merman used one in the production in 1971. Singers no longer need to rely on resonance and projection to be heard, thus changing the qualities of sounds heard on the Broadway stage.

This era also starts to see lighter themes appearing on stage with brighter “catchier” songs being used with numerous reprises – creating musical themes for characters (something Jerry Herman is specifically known for.)

Vocal Techniques:

A slight return to the brighter and brassier sound of the Jazz Age as vowels tend to spread more in this style. While underneath there is still a solid classical foundation, mouth shapes tend to be more conversational and tones tend to be brighter. Sound starts moving more towards pop / rock sounds of the

era – depending on the exact show and its writing style (as in shows like *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Super Star*, *Joseph and the...*)

Vibrato is still involved but with a very late onset and usually reserved for long sustained notes or phrases.

As in Golden Age, dialect continues as “Standard American” accent unless otherwise required by the character.

Phrasing again, is all about logical delivery which is crafted by many of the great composers of the era. While looser phrasing is more common than Golden Age, but it still continues to be clean and by no means square or metered as in earlier styles. Phrasing should never be over indulgent or emotionally showy.

Examples:

Annie, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *She Loves Me*, *On a Clear Day...*, *Pippin*, *Hello Dolly*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Chicago*, *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Once Upon a Mattress*, *Oliver!*, *A Chorus Line*, *Funny Girl*

Pop / Rock Operas (Poperetta)

1970's – Present (Primarily 1980's to 1990's)

This style combines the epic nature of opera with the contemporary pop / rock style orchestrations to create very dense and emotionally driven works that are often times considered over indulgent in their performance style. Performances tend to be rooted in honesty but heightened due to the nature of the material.

Vocal Techniques:

This style still favors traditional classical vowels but allows for modification in areas of belting. The tone is a balance between more forward placement of pop / rock and the darker more soft palette placement of Golden Age and Opera. While often sung by opera and classically trained performers, these songs should NEVER be sung in the opera style. They are intended to be acted first and sung second.

Vibrato still follows in the style of Golden Age and Classic eras. The vibrato has a delayed onset but is very present and rich once it has started.

Dialect tends to favor more standard British vowels but with American consonants. Many of the works in this genre originated with either British writing teams or did their original productions on the West End. This leads to a tradition of these piece being sung with an even blend between pop stylings and classical techniques.

Phrasing – Back Phrasing and Front Phrasing are not only used, they are expected and many moments of this type of phrasing have become the traditions of how the songs are performed. Cast Albums now become the standard for expectation of performance rather than true score notation due to these techniques.

Examples:

Les Misérables, *Miss Saigon*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, *Jesus Christ Super Star*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Secret Garden Rent*, *Ragtime*, *Into the Woods*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Light in the Piazza*, *Floyd Collins*, *Chess*, *Martin Guerre*

Contemporary

1990's – Present

This is a very large and broad category that the industry is still trying to figure out how to define. Current trends in pop music as well as work in TV & Film have made big changes to how musical theatre is sung and performed. Emphasis on subtlety and nuance have taken hold in the acting techniques as well as a more prominent emphasis on vocal techniques related to the mix voice.

Vocal Techniques:

This style also sees a tendency away from head voice for women (making Mezzo / Belters more prominent than true Sopranos) and a higher range for men (making the Baritone and Bass almost nonexistent.) The male trend favors high belting and lots of falsetto work whereas the female trend tends more towards a very mixed belt and chest voice work.

Vowels are very nuanced in this style as they are less about technique and more about the character. Vowels are frequently modified to meet the needs of the singer and often times true "pure" vowels are

frowned upon as the pop / rock and indie pop traditions are taking hold. There is a tendency towards brighter vowels and very little focus on the darker and more "classical" vowels.

The use of vibrato is also very nuanced. There is a very strong push towards straight toning in this style, although older characters and characters appearing in more period style pieces do tend to feature the vibrato in a style similar to that of the Pop / Rock Opera style. True contemporary pieces will put more focus on straight toning as the use of auto tuning in pop music and thus in musical theatre is becoming more common. This is at times referred to as the "Glee Effect" by some musical theatre professionals.

Phrasing continues to feature frequent back phrasing and front phrasing with a true focus on conversational delivery. Very wordy texts are often "simulated" rhythmically on paper but are expected to be delivered in a realistic manner rather than the purity of what is written. Performing these pieces as written tends to lead to a very stilted or stiff performance that rarely is honest and genuine because the composers were approximating rhythms rather than writing literal expectations. Again, Cast Albums continue to be the definitive line when it comes to how a piece is traditionally performed.

Examples:

Wicked, Songs for a New World, Hairspray, The Addams Family, Bring it On, Next to Normal, If / Then, Big Fish, Once on this Island, Sister Act, Kinky Boots, 13 the Musical, Footloose, Spider Man, Memphis, Summer of '42

Juke Box Musicals

2001 – Present

(NOTE: These are not included in the WSMA Solo & Ensemble list, but the information is featured here for your general knowledge.)

Juke Box Musicals follow a tradition set forth back in the days of Porter, Berlin, and the Gershwins – taking songs that were already written and crafting a story around them. The first true Juke Box Musical to become a critical and financial success was *Mamma Mia!* which opened in London in 1999 with a US premiere shortly after 9/11/2001.

Vocal Techniques:

Juke Box Musicals vary in their techniques because they are usually either focusing around a particular style of music or in many cases a particular artist. In some instances – especially in the instances where the production is a bio – musical which tells the life story of a particular artist – using the original performer's techniques is very important. In any case, staying true to the style of the music performed is of utmost importance when performing a jukebox musical. It is strongly suggested to always use the original performer's sound as a frame of reference and research when performing in this style.

Examples:

Mamma Mia!, *Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story*, *Always Patsy Kline*, *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, *Lennon*, *Jersey Boys*, *Beautiful*, *All Shook Up*, *Movin' Out*, *Boy from Oz*, *Rock of Ages*, *Ring of Fire*, *Disaster!*, *Motown*, *On Your Feet!*, *Donna*, *The Cher Show*, *Jagged Little Pill*

Disney (ish)

1994 - Present

This style is broader than most people think. While yes, Disney's "take over" of Broadway does offer many beautiful pieces to explore, we must think rather about the shows that Disney's appearance on the theatre scene has allowed to be included in the Broadway canon. This category also includes show that tend to be very family friendly and have a brighter, more earnest and energetic feel to them. When in doubt, it is okay to think Disney = Theatre for Youth when it comes to Broadway Musicals.

Vocal Techniques:

This is another broad category as the sounds tend to vary as Disney's music changes depending on the era in which the film was created. Disney has always had a tradition of hiring Broadway performers to sing in their films – especially since the "Disney Renaissance" of the early 1990's – 2000's.

Phrasing and Vibrato tend to match that of the movie as that is the point of reference for most audiences. They are expected to see and hear their favorite movie or characters appearing on stage. The goal of these productions is to always give the audience what they expect, but to make it even more "epic."

So, our general rule of thumb is to listen to the original movie version of the song and then "make it more epic."

What does that mean? It means make it showy. This rule is primarily for the leading man / leading woman of a production. Songs are often put in new keys for the stage productions so that extra modulations can be added or so that more power moments can be created for the performer.

In simpler songs, there is a tendency towards character voices and extremely bright placement. This happens most commonly in the songs written for the supporting characters – often times the roles played by "character actors." The use of CCM's "Twang" is very common among Disney and TYA character performers in an effort to create a slightly cartoony sound.

Phrasing and Vibrato tend to match that of the movie as that is the point of reference for most audiences. They are expected to see and hear their favorite movie or characters appearing on stage. The goal of these productions is to always give the audience what they expect, but to make it even more "epic."

Examples:

Disney's Beauty & the Beast, *Disney's The Lion King*, *Disney's Newsies*, *Disney's Aladdin*, *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown*, *Shrek*