

Trends in Musical Theater Voice: An Analysis of Audition Requirements for Singers

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Summary: Objectives. The American musical theater industry is a multibillion dollar business in which the requirements for singers are varied and complex. This study identifies the musical genres and voice requirements that are currently most requested at professional auditions to help voice teachers, pedagogues, and physicians who work with musical theater singers understand the demands of their clients' business.

Study Design. Frequency count.

Methods. One thousand two thirty-eight professional musical theater audition listings were gathered over a 6-month period, and information from each listing was categorized and entered into a spreadsheet for analysis.

Results. The results indicate that four main genres of music were requested over a wide variety of styles, with more than half of auditions requesting genre categories that may not be served by traditional or classical voice technique alone.

Conclusions. To adequately prepare young musical theater performers for the current job market and keep the performers healthily making the sounds required by the industry, new singing styles may need to be studied and integrated into voice training that only teaches classical styles.

Key Words: Musical theater–Vocal pedagogy–Auditions–Contemporary commercial music–Broadway–Casting.

INTRODUCTION

Musical theater is unique among other genres involving vocal performance in that it draws upon whatever musical styles suit its purpose, especially popular music.¹ When musical theater performers browse for auditions at one of the popular online job search engines, they may find requests for “gritty,” “gravelly,” or “smoky” voices. Other auditions might require a confusing variety of vocal approaches within one role, such as a “coloratura soprano to high C with mix belt.”² Based on these audition listings, it would appear that musical theater performers face the possibility of vocal demands far beyond the parameters of classical or even traditional musical theater training. The American Academy of Teachers of Singing asserts that “nonclassical” or Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) styles require their own pedagogical approach.³ However, without specific data regarding the prevalence of CCM genres in the musical theater industry, how can voice teachers determine the value of CCM pedagogy when training and maintaining the voice of the musical theater performer? How can medical professionals and researchers understand the terminology and the range of demands that the musical theater performer may encounter? In short, what are the most requested kinds of singing for professional auditions?

Terms such as “legit,” “traditional,” “belt,” and “pop,” found in actual audition postings, imply the use of specific vocal timbres and stylistic traits that are expected by the producers and casting directors in an musical theater audition. In her pedagogy lecture at the 2013 Voice Foundation Symposium, LoVetri stressed the importance of using industry-

recognized language to identify and discuss musical theater genres rather than creating new terms.⁴ Based on her assertion, this frequency count of current trends in musical theater casting has the following goals: to identify the standard terminology that the industry uses to define genres; verify the vocal attributes and qualities that the industry aligns with those genres; and quantify which genres are most requested for professional employment at various pay scales and levels of prestige.

METHODS

Audition listings are distributed by theater producers and casting directors to several print and online publications, including *Backstage*, *Playbill Jobs*, *Actors Equity Casting Call*, and *Stage Door Access*.⁵ To avoid duplications, the data pool for this study was limited to one source, Backstage.com, which has a robust online search engine and provides continuously updated daily postings that include both union and nonunion jobs. To limit the results to a manageable number, the study was designed to focus on jobs available to young performers entering the industry. This demographic was chosen because musical theater performers are generally expected to start professional careers in their late teens and early 20s⁴ and in consideration of the many undergraduate training programs that have become popular and respected institutions of musical theater education.⁵

A customized search was created on the *Backstage* website to return results for paying jobs for singers aged between 18 and 24 years. During the 6 months from October 2012 to April 2013, this search returned a total of 1238 job postings. Information from each posting was recorded in a spreadsheet and categorized according to show title, performance venue, casting director, contract type, pay scale, role, voice requirements, and audition repertoire to prepare.

When a listing requested audition repertoire from a specific genre (eg, “traditional musical theater,” “legit,” and “pop”), voice characteristics found within the posting were analyzed to identify markers that could help define the genre (eg, “belt,” “lyric soprano,” and “rock tenor with soaring

Accepted for publication October 11, 2013.

First presented at the Voice Foundation Symposium; June 2, 2013; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Journal of Voice, Vol. ■, No. ■, pp. 1-4

0892-1997/\$36.00

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2013.10.007>

false”)). If a specific genre of repertoire was not explicitly requested, these voice characteristics and other available information (eg, the composer, the year the show was written, and analysis of music samples) were used to place the role into an appropriate genre category.

LIMITATIONS

This study does not include “agent submissions,” which are private appointments directly requested by casting directors and are, therefore, unavailable to the public.⁵ Auditions for starring roles or immediate replacements for Broadway, tours, and larger regional theaters are rarely found in the public auditions of *Backstage*, which may skew these results toward lower paying jobs that do not require agent representation.

In addition, the study may be affected by its timing and short span. October through April was chosen because this represents the period that young musical theater performers might be seeking their first job: typically employment in a summer theater.⁵ However, continuing the study for a longer duration may yield more accurate results and reveal annual trends.

MT repertoire covers a wide spectrum of styles, ranging from classical to contemporary and everything in between. Best efforts were made to accurately categorize each audition listing using all available information, but there is possibility for error of judgment. Each category was reviewed by a professional MT performer and music director to minimize error.

RESULTS

The four most commonly requested genres were: Legit, Traditional musical theater, Contemporary musical theater, and Pop/Rock (see Figure 1). Although these were not the only terms found in the postings, other terms were generally variations on these four genres. By examining the voice requirements and the musicals identified, a broad description of each genre

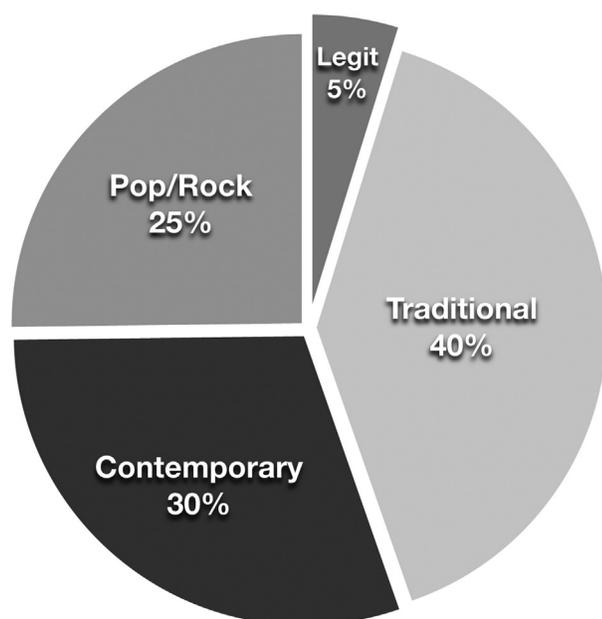


FIGURE 1. Total job postings by vocal genre.

was developed using direct quotes from *Backstage* and a review of pedagogical literature.

VOCAL GENRE CATEGORIES FROM BACKSTAGE

Legit

The term “legit” is the musical theater’s industry’s shorthand for the word “legitimate” and generally signifies a round resonant tone with consistent vibrato throughout the phrase.⁶ Although musical theater repertoire of this type may use a lower tessitura and more restricted range than that found in the operatic repertoire, the Legit vocal quality has a distinctly classical timbre.⁷ Legit audition postings were the only ones to reference the fach system (eg, “coloratura soprano” and “lyric baritone”). Listings in *Backstage* that requested this repertoire included roles in *The Light in the Piazza* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. The Legit category comprised 59 of 1238 total job postings (5%).

Traditional Musical Theater

Although Traditional musical theater repertoire still uses some legit production for romantic characters, the emphasis on the lyrics rather than the melody results in a more speech-like quality when compared with classical production.¹ Belting, the chest-dominant production associated with CCM singing, first appears in this genre. Audition postings from Traditional musical theater productions that require belt singing included Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*, Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*, and Velma Kelly in *Chicago*. Based on the requirements in *Backstage*, female roles in this genre generally concentrate their efforts on either a legit quality (appropriate for ingenue lead roles) or a belt quality (reserved for the comedic- or character-driven roles). For instance, in *Oklahoma!*, the comic character Ado Annie requires belt, whereas the romantic lead Laurie requests a head voice dominant soprano. The Traditional musical theater genre comprised 494 of 1238 job postings (40%).

Contemporary Musical Theater

If Traditional musical theater is the Broadway version of classical singing, then Contemporary musical theater is the Broadway version of pop and rock. Contemporary repertoire may require a higher belt than Traditional belt roles, using “mix” (neither pure chest nor head-dominant) production, and straight tone (no vibrato) or “speak-singing” of the text.⁸ Contemporary musical theater may also draw upon the vocal ornamentations and embellishments found in rock and pop music.⁶ Unlike Traditional repertoire, which allows performers to specialize in either legit or belt, audition postings in this category asked performers to “sing effortlessly in many styles and vocal registers,” including requests for a “legit singer with strong contemporary musical theater mix” or a “conversational belter with legit head voice effects.” The Contemporary musical theater category comprised 373 of the 1238 total job postings (30%).

Pop/Rock

The Pop/Rock category listed the most varied expectations of all the categories, covering a large range of vocal styles and timbres. This genre embraces intentional vocal distortions, such as growls, shrieks, and screams, which may obscure the meaning of the lyric in the interest of stylistic authenticity.¹ Pop/Rock auditions also required performers to demonstrate an extensive tessitura, for example, “indie rock and low G-high Eb;” “rock singer, great low range, and high belt to C#;” and “high belt, sparkling high notes, rich throaty alto register.” Many productions in this genre were based on material lifted directly from the commercial music industry, including *Jersey Boys* (the music of The Four Seasons), *Mamma Mia!* (ABBA), and *We Will Rock You* (Queen). Specific requests to imitate commercial artists also occur, such as asking for a “strong falsetto, think Boy George,” an “Elvis rock sound to G,” or a “young David Lee Roth to Freddy Mercury sound.” The Pop/Rock category comprised 312 of the 1238 total job postings (25%).

AUDITIONS BY JOB TYPE

The 1238 audition postings in this study represent a wide variety of jobs of all pay levels and geographical locations, and it can be difficult to tell the differences among them at a glance. To gain a clearer picture of the kinds of jobs advertised in *Backstage*, auditions were divided into categories based on similar levels of pay scale and prestige within the theatrical community. Categories were determined by the contract guidelines on the official Actors’ Equity Association Web site⁹ and the information contained in the business texts for professional actors by Flom.^{5,10} These categories are: (1) Broadway and National tours, (2) Equity Regional Theater, (3) Off-Broadway/Workshops, (4) Off-off-Broadway/Stock, (5) Theme Parks/Cruise Ships, and (6) Non-Equity jobs. Figure 2 shows the ratio of the four voice genres within each of these six job categories.

Overall, 80% of the jobs listed fell under the jurisdiction of Actors’ Equity Association (or “Equity”), which is the union for professional stage performers. The first five categories represent Equity opportunities listed in *Backstage*. Broadway and National Tours are the most prestigious and the highest paid jobs in musical theater (generally between \$1000 and

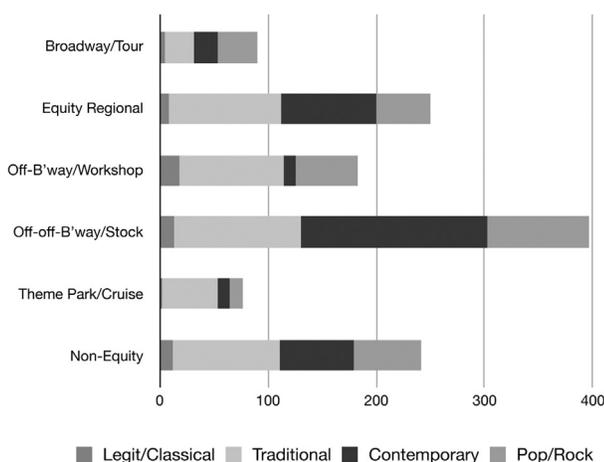


FIGURE 2. Audition listings by job category.

\$1700 weekly). In addition, Equity tours provide the actor a tax-exempt per diem to cover expenses while on the road.⁹ However, these jobs comprised only 7% of the total jobs advertised. The low audition count (90 jobs) reflects the scarcity of these jobs but could also indicate that a significant number of these roles are cast through agent submissions, which are not included in this study (as discussed above in the Limitations section). Pop/Rock audition notices represented the largest percentage of jobs posted at this level (36%).

Equity regional theaters pay between \$600 and \$1000 weekly and offer contracts at industry-recognized venues across the United States that may last for up to several months.⁹ This category contained the second largest pool of jobs (250 listings). The highest percentage of these auditions (41%) requested Traditional musical theater repertoire.

Off-Broadway and Workshop auditions were combined because both offer low pay but have other benefits, such as visibility by agents and directors. An off-Broadway production or the workshop of a new musical is an opportunity to participate in the creation of a show that may eventually move to larger venues.⁵ The pay scale for these jobs ranges from a small stipend to around \$500 weekly. Over half of these posts were for Traditional musical theater roles (52%).

The Stock/Off-off Broadway category represented the largest number of total auditions (396). Stock theaters are small venues found across the United States; Off-off-Broadway theaters are venues within New York City that seat less than 99 people. These two types of jobs were combined into a single category because they are both on the lower end of the pay scale, between \$50 and \$500 weekly, and generally have shorter runs of less than a month. The largest percentage of postings for this category requested Contemporary musical theater repertoire (44%).

The smallest pool of jobs belongs to the Theme Park and Cruise Ship category (77). These jobs may be lower in professional prestige and pay as little as minimum wage or as much as \$1000/wk, depending on the producer. However, they offer the potential of long-term employment and a reliable source of income over months or even years.⁵ This category posted the largest percentage of Traditional musical theater positions (68%).

Non-Equity auditions numbered 242 over this 6-month period or 20% of the total postings. Young performers may not yet be members of Actors’ Equity, so this category represents entry-level employment opportunities for most university graduates. Although it is not impossible to make a viable career as a non-Equity musical theater actor (especially in smaller cities or on non-Equity tours), these jobs have no union governing minimum salaries and hold no guarantees for health care, pension plans, or standards of working conditions.¹⁰ The largest genre found among this job category was Traditional musical theater at 41%. The combined total of the CCM-dominant “Contemporary” and “Pop/Rock” genres was 54%, which is in line with the rest of the industry.

DISCUSSION

Musical theater in the last 30 years has become a showcase for almost every popular music style on the market, as audiences

LEGIT	TRADITIONAL	CONTEMPORARY	POP/ROCK
The Phantom of the Opera	Annie	The Book of Mormon	Jersey Boys
	Chicago	First Date	Kinky Boots
	Cinderella	The Lion King	Mamma Mia!
		Matilda	Motown the Musical
		Newsies	Once
		Pippin	Rock of Ages
		Wicked	Soul Doctor
			Spider-Man

FIGURE 3. Current Broadway musicals by vocal genre (as of August 2013).

for commercial theater are drawn to the styles most familiar to their ear.¹¹ This study suggests that over half of the employment opportunities require vocal timbres, qualities, and stylistic traits that lie outside the domain of classical vocal training. Although classical technique can be used in two of the four categories (Legit and Traditional musical theater), it may not be useful for Contemporary musical theater and Pop/Rock, as the audition postings for these genres indicate the use of CCM sounds foreign to a classically trained voice. If we consider belt or speech-like technique, a CCM-specific vocal production, then nonclassical sounds are requested in three of the four categories (ie, Traditional musical theater, Contemporary musical theater, and Pop/Rock).

In summarizing the results of the 1238 postings, the largest percentage (40%) of the highest paying jobs (Broadway and Equity National Tours) belongs to the Pop/Rock category. Current Broadway productions are a potential predictor for the rest of the industry, as Broadway shows will likely be reproduced on tour and eventually in regional and stock theaters.¹¹ However, the 6-month period of our study did not include the auditions for all current Broadway shows, as several productions posted auditions outside the time frame. These audition postings were researched and categorized to further investigate trends. When the 19 musicals playing on Broadway in August 2013 were categorized by the four genres identified in this study (Figure 3), the results indicated an even stronger bias toward Pop/Rock; the highest number of productions (eight of 19) requested Pop/Rock repertoire at their auditions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, young musical theater performers need a versatile palette of vocal abilities to remain viable in today's market. If the vocal qualities requested at professional auditions during this 6-month period are typical, singers who use legit or classical voice techniques alone are inadequately prepared for over half of the available jobs in musical theater and especially those jobs at the highest levels of pay. Strategies specifically addressing the belt voice need to be a substantial part of musical theater voice training, as belting is requested in three of the four main genres of musical theater singing.

The predominance of Contemporary and Pop/Rock musicals currently on Broadway could predict the direction of the industry, indicating that if this study were expanded to include a longer period and wider age range, the results might be similar. If one considers that the nonclassical voice qualities being requested at a majority of current auditions are likely the same qualities that performers must replicate in live performance eight times a week, further study specific to the demands of the CCM singer seems to be vital for the treatment and care of these performers. Traditional voice training remains indisputably valuable as a skill for the musical theater singer. However, the authors conclude that voice teachers and specialists must address CCM styles of singing that currently dominate professional auditions in order to give musical theatre performers the best chance at success.

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