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Toni Richardson

toni.richardson@pop.belmont.edu

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THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN MUSICAL DRAMA
AND ITS EFFECTS ON MODERN SOPRANO REPERTOIRE

By
TONI JEAN RICHARDSON

A RESEARCH PAPER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Music in Vocal Pedagogy
in the School of Music
of the College of Music and Performing Arts
Belmont University

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

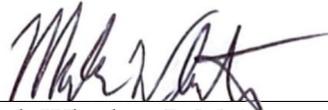
May 2022

Submitted by Toni Richardson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Vocal Pedagogy.

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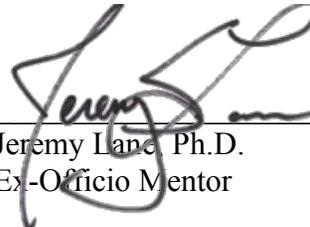
Mark Whatley, D.M.A.
Major Mentor



Nancy Allen, M.M.
Second Mentor

04/26/2022

Date



Jeremy Lane, Ph.D.
Ex-Officio Mentor

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Introduction

As an operatically trained soprano, my love for Broadway and musical theatre has caused frustration for many of my classical voice teachers in the past. These two styles of singing often present different—some might even say *opposite*—pedagogical techniques, but I have always believed that they can, and must, coexist if properly executed. In fact, the line between opera and musicals can be so vague that many early musicals could be mistaken for opera. Historically, Golden Age musical theatre and opera in the United States share many similarities in terms of vocal technique, themes, and even some composers. However, while they share many similarities, the differences between these genres must be treated with care on stage and in the voice studio. My goal with this project is to provide clarity regarding the differences between these genres, how they can coexist, and how they can be successfully performed in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1

The Genesis of American Opera

While studying the development of opera in Europe, one can clearly see the mirrored sequence of events that also occurred in the United States, which was a country founded by immigrants who had established a cultural basis of arts by importing music from Europe. These culturally diverse audiences craved the familiar artistic experiences of their homelands (Kenrick 2008, 49). Operetta was one of the many steppingstones from European opera to musical theatre.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the first opera was written in the United States. Many operas premiered around the same time in cities such as Philadelphia and New York (Sonneck 1905, 428). In 1755, the University of Pennsylvania was formed and became the first secular university in America. This was the birthplace of the earliest operas in the U.S. and provided the foundation for the development of two distinct types of opera. Elise Kirk describes these two types of opera as, “Harbingers of what was to come in the decades and centuries to follow, these works reflected the varied cultural moods of the nation—the one was lofty, spiritual, and heroic and the other, light, funny, and brashly American” (Kirk 2001, 24). The latter would eventually evolve into musical theatre as we know it today.

In distinguishing genre differences in early American musical drama, it is necessary to first discuss the earliest major shift from opera in Europe. The operetta first

began as “light opera” to diverge from the serious opera styles performed during the late eighteenth century. Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880) popularized the genre in France by using themes from Greek mythology to provide satirical comedy about life in Paris during the mid-nineteenth century (Traubner 2003, 68). In Vienna, Johann Strauss II (1825-1899) composed operettas in a manner that is said to have reconciled the differences between opera and operetta with a more gentle, romantic, and comedic approach to his works (Traubner 2003, 48). In England, dramatist W. S. Gilbert (1836-1911) and composer Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) were inspired by Offenbach to establish their own version of the genre which became a precursor to musical theatre (Traubner 2003, 153). All of these works feature the unique combination of an operatic score and an otherwise ineffable “lightness” which contrasted the operas at the Opéra-Comique in Paris but were more serious than vaudeville shows. Like many new genres, operetta was not clearly defined until many decades after this style change occurred. The term *operette* was coined in Vienna during the 1870s, while every other country still referred to this type of musical entertainment as simply “comic opera” (Traubner 2003, viii). *Le chalet* (1834) and *La poupée de Buremberg* (1852) by Adolphe Adam (1803-1856) are considered two of the earliest operettas. Offenbach’s *Pépito* and Victor Massé’s (1822-1884) *Les Noces de Jeannette* both premiered in 1853, and yet Offenbach was the only composer whose works became notably successful outside of France.

Although Jacques Offenbach was originally from Germany, he made significant contributions as a composer in France due to his early training at the Paris Conservatory and his experience with various orchestras, including an appointment at the Opéra-Comique. His opera *Les contes d’Hoffman* (1881) remains his most known contribution

to the musical canon, but Offenbach's most significant musical contributions are in the genre of operetta. As was true for all stage works, Offenbach's operettas became successful in large part due to his chosen librettists and performers of his work. His most frequent collaborators included librettist Ludovic Halévy (1834-1908), who was already established as one of France's most successful theatrical writers at the time, and soprano Hortense Schneider (1833-1920), who Offenbach is said to have discovered in August 1855 and subsequently hired for *Le violoneux* (1855) (Lamb 2001, 3). These storytellers were also responsible for the success of Offenbach's works as they each brought new life to his music and stories performed on stage (Lysack 2014, 6).

Aside from his librettos and performers, Offenbach's treatment of the subject matter greatly contributed to the success of his operettas. While other operetta composers satirized modern politics and societal topics, Offenbach focused his early works on satirizing familiar opera plots including myths, well-known French folktales, and Parisian salons (Lamb 2001, 5). Andrew Lamb discusses specific examples of Offenbach's use of satire with the following text:

The humour of the pieces was rarely very subtle in purely musical terms, in keeping with the requirements of his audiences. Effect was often achieved by quoting familiar music, the satire being not so much in the treatment of the themes themselves as by introducing the themes in incongruous surroundings. Examples of such quotations are the introduction of music from *Les Huguenots* in *Ba-ta-clan*, Gluck's "Che farò" in *Orphée aux enfers*, the patriotic trio from *Guillaume Tell* in *La belle Hélène*, and Donizetti's *La fille du régiment* in *La fille du tambour-major*. (Lamb 2001, 4)

In contrast to Offenbach's style of operetta, Johann Strauss II became known as the "Waltz King" for his unique contributions to dance music and operetta in Vienna. *Die Fledermaus*, his most well-known operetta, tells the tale of Dr. Falke's revenge on

Gabriel von Eisenstein for playing a practical joke on him including inebriation and a bat costume, hence the title of the work (which can be translated as “The Bat”). This plot is perhaps more juvenile than Offenbach’s works, considering that it was an outlandish scenario featuring characters who were only making fun of themselves and included little political commentary or satire of the operatic genre. However, Strauss’s works were in line with other operettas written at the time, featuring dance music and high coloratura passages for comedic effect.

Despite these minor differences, Offenbach’s operettas, as well as the operettas of Johann Strauss II, are often included in the same general category of opera. These early operettas include many of the same qualities as serious opera: language of origin, full orchestra, and the critical fact that the singing voice is more important than the character acting. To audiences of all kinds, these operettas are firmly opera-like in their performance practice and definitions. However, French and Viennese operettas included many elements that were later used in the evolving American musical drama such as strong libretto, satire, and the implementation of multiple acts in light comedic opera.

In the United States, Offenbach’s *opéra-bouffes* were especially popular with upper-class audiences in the late 1860s, all while Offenbach was being criticized in France for inappropriate political commentary before the Franco-Prussian War. Sophisticated audience members enjoyed English translations; however, the original French versions were also enjoyed by highly educated people in the U.S. (Traubner 2003, 339). This was likely the beginning of debates about “high art” versus “low art” in America. The idea of opera—and even foreign-language operettas—as high art still exists today.

Jeanette Meyers Thurber founded the first American Opera Company in 1886. Thurber was a very wealthy arts patron who studied at the Paris Conservatory and was a major advocate for federal funding for arts education. One year prior, she established the National Conservatory of Music of America where an unusually diverse class of students were accepted—she invited people of color, women, and disabled people into the Conservatory and often offered them full scholarships. Both the opera company and the conservatory were founded because of Thurber's belief that every nation should create its own unique music. Thurber also sponsored competitions to encourage American musicians to develop original American music (Rubin 1990, 296).

Despite Thurber's efforts, America struggled to find its own unique musical style. O.G. Sonneck defines early American opera as “English operas written during the eighteenth century by Americans, native or naturalized, in what are today the United States” (Sonneck 1905, 428). The earliest operatic productions in the U.S. were imitations of various European models: Italian *opera buffa*, German *singspiel*, French *opéra comique*, and the English ballad opera. This was likely due to the common belief that all art of culture originated in Western Europe (Sonneck 1905, 428). The English ballad opera is a direct influence due to its use of spoken dialogue to advance the plot. Tuneful, popular songs were interspersed throughout the ballad opera to satirize the Italian *opera seria*. This satire also became a significant element of operetta in England.

American composers made little effort to compose operas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the composers who did achieved minor success with their pseudo-European operas. Sonneck writes that, “They pinned their faith on their models and imitated them without the slightest effort to infuse new blood into their productions”

(Sonneck 1905, 429). Most of these composers were amateurs with no formal training, while in Europe, training remained an expectation for musicians. The number of professionally trained American composers grew during the nineteenth century, which led to the desire to find a specific American genre of musical performance. These pioneers of American opera also sought to prove that they were not “culturally inferior,” as Rachel Hutchins-Viroux states (Hutchins-Viroux 2004, 147). It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that the works of American opera composers began showing signs of a unique genre. Hutchins-Viroux continues:

It is generally acknowledged that the first two truly unique American operas were premiered in 1934: Virgil Thomson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* and George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. Both represented effective, new ways of setting text in English, and both incorporated uniquely American stylistic elements (hymn tunes for the former, and jazz for the latter), not to mention the local flavor given by the South Carolina setting of Gershwin’s opera. Despite their success, the genre had not taken off by the beginning of the second World War. Opera had neither captured the interest of the American public, nor was there a repertoire of works by American composers. Nevertheless, by war’s end, there was a feeling among critics and composers that the U.S. was poised for the creation of its operatic masterpieces, so they made a concerted effort to create the most favorable conditions possible. (Hutchins-Viroux 2004, 147)

American opera is a relatively recent development in music history. Unlike European genres, the first popular American operas were composed after World War I and the most popular American operas after World War II. It was not until the 1950s that a definitive and lasting American operatic genre was established in the repertoire through the works of American composers such as Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, and Douglas Moore, among many others (Hutchins-Viroux 2004, 146).

The most obvious difference in this new operatic genre is the American dialect of the English language, which is notoriously difficult to sing. This type of English consists

of consonant clusters as well as diphthongs and triphthongs, which are words containing two or three vowels in one syllable. For this style to be understood as well as comfortable to perform, vowel modifications must be made. The first vowel of any diphthong or triphthong must be elongated for a piece to be performed *legato* completely through. This is a common vocal technique employed regularly in Italian, German, and French opera. The voice remains the most important aspect of the performance, and high soprano notes are used for emphasis rather than comedic effect.

Chapter 2

The Genesis of Musical Theatre

To discuss musical theatre in America, one must begin with one of its closest predecessors, the English operetta. Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) and W. S. Gilbert (1836-1911) are responsible for the English genre of operetta through their fourteen major works, all of which transformed the reputation of English musical entertainment on an international scale. Their works were so popular that they encountered problems with people stealing their music and ideas when imported to the United States. They singlehandedly replaced the plethora of French operetta productions on the English stage and their works are still being performed today. Gilbert's catchy melodies and Sullivan's intelligent lyrics appealed to audiences of all levels of wealth and intellect, which is one aspect that composers in the United States sought to emulate (Traubner 2003, 177).

Before Gilbert and Sullivan, there were only imported operettas in England that were not easily accepted by audiences. Unlike in French theatres, Offenbach's works were met with anger in London in 1857. British audiences found his works so offensive there were often warnings or disclaimers written in programs for theatregoers, such the following statement that Henry J. Byron published for the English production of *La jolie Parfumeuse* by Offenbach in 1874 at the Alhambra:

The English version of *La jolie Parfumeuse* is not put forward as an exact translation or even close adaptation of the French libretto. The words of the songs, concerted pieces, choruses, etc., are simply freely rendered in English, but in the

treatment of the dialogue and general construction of the piece, I trust I may not be considered presumptuous in claiming the performance of a different task. The original libretto is remarkably clever, but is altogether inadmissible in an English theatre. I have had, therefore, to retain simply the “backbone” of the opera, providing dialogue which should still give a fair notion of the original, whilst avoiding anything that could give the slightest offence. I have, in fact, had to almost pull the old house to pieces and build another with the same materials. (Traubner 2003, 143)

For English audiences to enjoy imported operetta, works had to be extremely watered down and in some cases re-written entirely. In fact, many people refused to support any type of theatrical entertainment entirely due to the belief that the works were too immoral. During the Victorian era, sacred music such as oratorios and cantatas were often disguised as theatrical entertainment to give audiences a taste of the theatrical experience they craved (Traubner 2003, 144). However, minstrel shows were also deemed acceptable in England during this time, which Offenbach himself deemed inappropriate during his visit to the United States (Offenbach 1957, n.p.). Although it was considered offensive, Offenbach’s music was deeply beloved and his operettas remained popular in England. Due to the additional popularity of vaudeville and burlesque, English audiences developed a particular affection for lighthearted and good-natured musical performances. This is when Arthur and Sullivan united to create their own form of light music.

The popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan’s works can best be described by none other than Gilbert himself:

When Sullivan and I began to collaborate, English comic opera had practically ceased to exist. Such musical entertainments as held the stage were adaptations of the crapulous plots of the operas of Offenbach, Audran, and Lecocq. The plots had generally been bowdlerized out of intelligibility, and when they had not been subjected to this treatment they were frankly improper; whereas the ladies’

dresses suggested that the management had gone on the principle of doing a little and doing it well. We set out with determination to prove that these elements were not essential of humorous opera. We resolved that our plots, however ridiculous, should be coherent, that our dialogue should be void of offense; on artistic principles, no man should play a woman's part and no woman a man's. Finally, we agreed that no lady of the company should be required to wear a dress that she could not wear with absolute propriety at a private fancy ball; and I believe I may say that we proved our case. (Bailey 1952, 414)

The works of Gilbert and Sullivan satisfied the English desire for comedic yet unoffensive musical entertainment. Another important contribution was their inclusion of women as respectable characters as well as audience members. Until this point, women's reputations were jeopardized if they were seen in a theatre or performing on stage due to the sexualization of women on stage in burlesque and vaudeville productions. Gilbert and Sullivan succeeded in making comedic musical performances family-friendly in England.

It would be incomplete to discuss the history of musical theatre and American musical entertainment without including minstrel shows. These were overtly racist presentations of "songs and dances interspersed with comic skits and seemingly improvised 'plantation-style' patter" (Kenrick 2008, 51). Prior to the minstrel show, blackface performers had existed for decades. In 1843, a group of four actors performed a show with their skin painted black called the Virginia Minstrels; this became the first minstrel show (Kenrick 2008, 51). Minstrel shows instead declined in popularity after the Civil War and Americans turned to vaudeville and burlesque shows to satisfy their desire for light musical entertainment. This shift, much like the European opera transition from opera to operetta, marked a distinct turning point for the American musical drama. In fact, along with lighter American theatre styles, European operetta was also being

performed regularly. Twentieth-century Americans no longer had interest in serious opera. Julius Rudel, director of the New York City Opera says:

Europeans grow up with music as an integral part of their lives, and as such it is popular, intended to be entertaining and fulfilling, not simply “art” that is to be endured. For Americans the movies have served in this way while serious music, especially opera, has had social and intellectual associations and pretensions. If ever this “snob” barrier is to be broken down, opera must be brought to the people in a form that has both artistic integrity and *appeal*. It must come to life for the audience of today and not reek of the museum. Credibility is important. For a nation accustomed to the naturalism of the movies, opera must pay attention to dramatic values and be performed in a language understood by its audience. (Rudel 1961, 28)

Operetta, however, continued to evolve with the addition of singing that mimicked speech-like sounds. This is a theme that maintains relevance in contemporary musical theatre. Meanwhile, Gilbert and Sullivan inspired American composers to develop their own style of operetta in the U.S. by utilizing many of their unique compositional techniques. John Kenrick said of Gilbert’s songwriting influence:

After Gilbert, the craft of lyric writing would never be the same. Many of the great lyricists of the future found crucial inspiration in his work. P. G. Wodehouse, Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, Ira Gershwin, Alan Jay Lerner, E. Y. Harburg—all freely admitted that they studied Gilbert’s lyrics and emulated his playful use of rhyme. (Kenrick 2008, 92)

Another monumental shift in entertainment can be traced to the onset of World War I. At the time, the U.S. government had a unique relationship with the music entertainment industry. The American Expeditionary Force was mobilized, which raised ticket prices for theatrical entertainment, increased taxes, and raised fuel and transportation costs all in the name of war effort. This caused difficulties for middle- and lower-class people who could no longer afford to attend music and theatre productions. This also led to the federal commission of a new social welfare program that created

“Liberty Theatres” in army training camps across the United States. These theatres provided low-cost entertainment to soldiers with musicals and vaudeville performed by professional actors and singers. Additionally, a ten percent tax was added to all cultural and entertainment events and the National Anthem became a required piece to be played at the end of every performance. Barbara Tischler discusses the “anti-Germany hysteria” in the United States at the time and the use of Woodrow Wilson’s phrase “100 percent Americanism” to maintain public support for the war (Tischler 1986, 164). This affected the music that was considered acceptable to be played in concert halls as well as the public perception of German musicians and conductors in America (Tischler 1986, 173). These effects were long-lasting—in 2009, William A. Everett found direct influences of World War I in European operetta adaptations produced in the United States (Katalinić 2009, 166).

Through the duration of World War I, all non-essential transatlantic travel was ceased, which included the importation of music and theatre (Hurwitz 2014, 77). Prior to 1914, musical theatre productions were large-scale presentations of song and dance, often called extravaganzas. Throughout and directly following World War I, few people could afford to see shows, which forced composers to scale down their productions and reevaluate the American musical as an artform. As a result, the Princess Musicals—or Princess Theatre Shows—were created. These were comedic musical theatre productions performed at the Princess Theatre in New York City by Jerome Kern, Guy Bolton, and P. G. Wodehouse between 1915-1918. These shows deviated from previous musical composition techniques by integrating music, lyrics, and libretto for the first time in musical theatre history (Hurwitz 2014, 81).

The onset of World War II directly influenced both opera and musical theatre with the addition of folk and jazz influences. Keyona Willis describes the influence on American opera as follows:

Looking at the future trajectory of opera and musical theatre, both styles reflect the human experience—the American experience. American opera brought us works by Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Marc Blitzstein, and Kurt Weill. Each of them sought to explore their own concept of folk opera—representing life in America during times of trial, hardship, rebuilding, and protest. These were relevant topics through the duration of World War II. The integration of jazz and folk influences in opera were a musical voice for the thoughts and feelings of the public. (Willis 2015, 11)

Musical theatre, on the other hand, sought to combine the style of operetta with the joy of musical comedies to provide audiences with emotional relief from the war (Kenrick 2008, 252). After World War II, opera and musical theatre in the U.S. shifted entirely away from frivolous entertainment and instead veered toward realistic stories about believable characters.

The works of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein introduced the Golden Age of musical theatre, which spanned from the 1940s to the 1960s. The result of their first collaboration was *Oklahoma!*, a revolution in the construction of musical drama. They evolved common storytelling techniques with the firm integration of every song into the plot (Kenrick 2008, 258). After the success of *Oklahoma!*, a new expectation was set for newly-written musicals. Broadway composers suddenly had to use every aspect of the music to develop characters and, most importantly, advance the plot forward. Even meaningless dance routines of the past were replaced with choreography that assisted in the storytelling.

Following the Golden Age, composers experimented with rock musicals such as *Hair* and more culturally diverse shows such as *Fiddler on the Roof*. During the 1970s, musical theatre was dominated by Hal Prince and Stephen Sondheim who both introduced the idea of a “concept musical.” These shows focused on individual ideas rather than a traditional plot and were usually serious in nature because dramas allow for more complex musical concepts than comedies. The works and innovations of Sondheim are so distinct and complex that they could be considered their own genre. In fact, many auditions will call for a “legit” (a selection from a musical that is sung in a classical style and was written before 1970), a “contemporary” (a selection from a musical that includes belting and was written after 2000), and a “Sondheim.”

The modern Broadway musical historically evolved from operetta while also utilizing vaudeville and burlesque show quality. Gilbert and Sullivan’s operettas created a new standard for theatrical production in England as well as the United States, first by imitation and then by innovation. The Princess Theatre shows between 1915 and 1918 integrated music, lyrics, and libretto. All of these shows incorporated believable characters and plotlines in musicals for the first time.

Chapter 3

Fusion of Styles and Current Performance Standards

Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, and Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* are all part of a crossover genre that lies between opera and musical theatre. However, each of these respective composers firmly labeled them as "musical" or "opera." The distinguishing factor between operas and musicals could sometimes be differentiated by the intent of the composer. However, sometimes that intent was ignored—for example, *Porgy and Bess* (1935) by George Gershwin (1898-1937) was written as an opera but was reworked as a musical; it was revived on Broadway in 2012 and won a Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. Donald Jay Grout offers his thoughts on this type of blurry distinction between opera and musical theatre:

Their creators insist their works are musicals, not operas. To be sure, neither genre is easy to define, for Broadway productions have made their way uptown to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Opera, and operas, such as Bizet's *Carmen*, have reappeared, albeit usually in a different guise, on Broadway. Nevertheless, what the Sondheim and Bernstein scores hold in common are musical-dramatic structures related to the operatic traditions represented by Singspiels and operas comiques. (Grout 2003, 761)

While musical theatre gained its footing as a storytelling method for common people, American opera was on a similar trajectory. Kurt Weill is perhaps the most prolific opera composer to follow this trajectory with a mindset to make art for the people. Weill had the unique perspective of writing music in European and American styles which gave him an appreciation for the people's music. "Weill made clear that he

was writing music, not for posterity, but for ‘today,’ and that this music was designed to be accessible to a more representative public than the limited audiences for whom he had composed during the earlier European phase of his career” (Grout 2003, 756). This sentiment, paired with influences of folk and jazz, was to blame for the genre discrepancies in twentieth century opera and musical theatre in the United States.

Categorizing Sondheim musicals can be challenging for singers and voice teachers. While many of his works are labeled as musicals, they are also performed in opera houses across the country. Even Sondheim himself said, “I really think that when something plays Broadway it’s a musical, and when it plays in an opera house it’s opera. That’s it. It’s the terrain, the countryside, the expectations of the audience that make it one thing or another,” (White 2003, n.p.). These types of shows are performed differently depending on the venue, and if assigned for solo work, they are performed depending on the strengths and goals of the singer. Bernstein offers his thoughts on this evolution of musical theatre:

Among composers who were not hesitant to declare the Broadway musical theatre idiom to be a wellspring for the creation of American national opera was Leonard Bernstein . . . Bernstein remarked that “the American musical theatre has come a long way, borrowing this from opera, that from revue, the other from operetta, something else from vaudeville—and mixing all the elements into something quite new, but something which has been steadily moving in the direction of opera.” (Grout 2003, 761)

Sweeney Todd is the most prominent of these types of multi-genre shows with its lyric singing, operatic style, and young soprano character named Johanna. Johanna’s aria, “Green Finch and Linnet Bird,” must be sung in a head-dominant voice due to its high tessitura. This makes it a common choice for operatic sopranos who venture into musical theatre. This piece features many innovations such as the sounds of birds represented in

the accompaniment and the addition of *leitmotifs*, a German term coined by Richard Wagner in reference to short musical passages that appear multiple times in a show and are usually related to a character. If performed in a musical theatre style, the piece requires moments of straight tone in the voice to create dissonance. These straight-tone moments usually occur at final cadences and resolve with vibrato for relief. A musical theatre performance of this piece includes the utilization of chest voice for sopranos, more acting choices that involve more physicality, and diction that divides sentences and enhances natural speech-like patterns.

Kelli O'Hara is a Broadway actress best known for her work in musical theatre who recently transitioned into opera with performances of Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* and W. A. Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at the Metropolitan Opera. She discusses this transition with the following statements:

Anytime I can diversify the types of work I do, I feel like I am growing and learning—and hopefully becoming a better artist overall. Singing Despina next season is a dream opportunity and one I will never take for granted . . . It scares me in such a positive way because I am driven to work hard and earn my spot. I hope more crossover work can happen because artists never have just one dream. We dream endlessly. (Spivey and Saunders Barton 2018, 25)

While it has become increasingly more common for musical theatre performers to branch into opera, it seems to be more difficult for classically trained singers to shift into musical theatre. The reason for this is unclear, but may relate to the lack of emphasis on acting in opera programs in the U.S. Instead, major emphases are placed on the voice and proper singing technique, so many singers do not take additional classes in acting technique. The skills required to perform at an operatic level require time and dedication, so it can be

daunting for opera singers to shift into an artform where the voice is no longer the most important aspect of a performance (Willis 2015, 55).

Alternatively, musical theatre requires a significant increase in acting skills.

While opera singers should have a certain awareness of their bodies while performing, the voice always takes precedence. The focus is instead given to the music to heighten any needed drama. In musical theatre, the text is far more important than the vocal line. It is mandatory that the sung lines are delivered in a speech-like manner. This requires the singer to have a more developed chest voice. However, both aspects of performance are highlighted in training programs across the United States—musical theatre programs incorporate acting training into their programs at a much higher rate than opera programs.

Willis says the following about this divide between opera and musical theatre singers:

For the opera singer, there is a thin separation between emotional expression and staying true to the music. For musical theatre performers, if the vocal line is occasionally inhibited due to a surge of emotion, the music drama is considered enhanced and more relatable. If the same happened on the opera stage, it could potentially be considered a distraction from the music drama. This creates a slim division between opera singers and musical theatre singers. This does not mean the musical theatre performer should strive to breakdown in tears in order to sabotage the vocal line for the sake of emotion. What this does mean is the musical theatre singer is present and open to the text and what is happening in the moment. If the vocal line is distorted while staying true to the story and the character, then this is a byproduct of the moment. (Willis 2015, 56)

The lower register of the voice—also known as the chest voice—is where most pedagogical differences occur between singing in operatic and musical theatre styles.

While it is important for the cross-training soprano to exercise the head and whistle registers to maintain flexibility of the voice, a significant amount of effort must be made to strengthen the chest voice and chest-mix. Most vowels will require brightening; most notably, [a] vowels will need to become a variation of [æ]. Musical theatre also requires

straight tone moments, but stylistically these moments differ only slightly from adjustments made for Baroque music.

Simply imitating the musical theatre style will likely cause tension, discomfort, and damage to the vocal folds. It is necessary for modern sopranos to understand the specific adjustments that need to be made based on the style of singing and balance those differences for the duration of their careers. These adjustments may vary based on the goals, limitations, or comfort-level of the singer, but many slight modifications are what differentiate those who sing in a stylistically accurate manner and those who do not.

Chapter 4

Cross-Training for the Modern Soprano

The opera industry has been inundated with musical theatre for the better part of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This synthesis of genre and style has evolved into a noticeable twenty-first century shift in culture, described best by Norman Spivey and Mary Saunders Barton:

What seems to be happening is in fact a cultural shift, a gradual artistic union of these two art forms in a way that enriches both, while maintaining the valuable distinctions between them. It is becoming difficult for classical voice teachers to insulate themselves from this new reality. (Spivey and Saunders Barton 2018, 23)

At times, this shift in genre and style is minuscule, as demonstrated in the shift from English operetta to Golden Age musical theatre. However, complications arise with the addition of belting used in modern musical theatre repertoire and the accompanying expectation for female singers to have the skills and training to perform all styles of music.

For an opera singer to create a healthy musical theatre sound, cross-training is required. Cross-training can be defined as “singing multiple styles of music,” but in the realm of vocal pedagogy it is a bit more complex. Cross-training allows the vocal folds to be protected from injury by training multiple muscle systems to do things they rarely do, such as extending the chest voice above the *primo passaggio*, otherwise known as belting. Proper training also involves a slightly higher larynx position and requires

alternate techniques to protect from possible injury. These differences are most notable during the transition of the female chest voice into head voice (Bourne and Garnier 2010, 12).

Belting is a singing technique utilized in many types of Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) genres such as pop, rock, and jazz. Rachel Lebon describes characteristics of belting pedagogy as it relates to the professional singer:

Belting must be regarded and presented as high-efficiency phonation—that is, it exacts tremendous energy, sustained projection and support, and thus optimal vocal technique, control, and efficiency. An integral part of belting pedagogy must therefore include explanations that foster knowledge of the vocal mechanism, awareness of what constitutes vocal abuse and misuse, and strategies to produce the vocal sounds that are demanded, efficiently, with the objective of vocal endurance. Equipped with this factual information, the professional singer would be better able to deal with the pressures placed on vocalists who are often made to feel that they are being “prima donnas” or labeled as “difficult” when they are merely exercising good vocal maintenance. (Lebon 1999, 117)

Because belting requires immense stamina, it is important that the student takes extra precautions to prevent vocal fatigue. Belting, much like classical singing, requires appropriate breath control, vibration of the vocal folds, and manipulation of the resonators to enhance the sound (Ragan 2020, 205). Belters must use microphones to properly amplify their sound in a hall, as opposed to opera singers who use only their resonating cavities—the throat, nasal passages, and mouth—to be heard over an orchestra (LeBorgne and Rosenberg 2014, 274). Belting involves extending the chest voice higher than in classical singing, which requires a developed head voice for the vocal folds to sustain a belt. Unhealthy belting can cause excessive tension in the throat, leading to injuries of the vocal folds. In fact, this occurrence of injury has become so common that many classical voice teachers refuse to educate themselves or their students about belting

in fear of causing vocal injury (Hoch 2014, 3). However, the lack of training or willingness to learn often leads to more injury, as those vocalists never learn the proper belting techniques. Willis describes this phenomenon with the following:

Again and again, when a CCM singer suffers an injury, the voice teaching field immediately states it is a byproduct of voice misuse due to a lack of classical training. Rarely do we think the injury may be from overuse, not misuse of the voice. Musical theatre singers have intense demands laid upon them performing eight shows a week and typically singing in a high intensity manner conducive to contemporary musical theatre singing. In keeping this in mind, it is important for musical singers to have a solid technique to withstand the requirements necessary to sing in a variety of different vocal styles often found in musical theatre singing. (Willis 2015, 64)

All healthy belting involves some form of cross-training to develop a healthy chest voice and head voice. The vocal folds must be strong and flexible enough to thicken and thin as necessary in order to take the chest voice higher than an operatic soprano. Head voice is required to mix into the upper chest voice to thin out the vocal folds, thus preventing the singer from simply yelling.

Musical theatre singing requires a shift towards a speech-like quality to assist in storytelling (Hoch 2014, 25). This is often executed by changing the shapes of vowels to create a difference in tone quality that is more like speaking. The lips, tongue, and jaw all adjust the shapes of vowels by altering space and resonance qualities to enunciate the text clearly. These minute alterations are perceived by listeners as having a brighter resonance, especially in the lower parts of the range. Specific changes in registration occur depending on the specific show, time of composition, composer intent, and desires of the director. For instance, a Golden Age musical theatre production might require tall, round vowels with consistent vibrato throughout each piece while a contemporary

production might require more belting, straight tone, and spoken dialogue (Hoch 2014, 19).

Karen Hall says, “In the simplest of terms, female music theatre singing requires more use of chest register, especially in the middle register, (the middle-C octave), while classical singing uses more head register throughout the entire vocal range,” (Hall 2014, 69). Styles of singing within musical theatre can be separated into four main categories: traditional legit, traditional belt, contemporary legit, and contemporary belt. Traditional legit requires the classical musical theatre sound heard in Golden Age and other pre-1960s musicals, while traditional belt mostly contains spoken dialogue in a speak-sing manner. Contemporary legit is more speech-like than traditional legit, but it still features many qualities of classical singing such as *chiaroscuro*, *sostenuto*, and consistent vibrato (Edwin 2003, 431).

In both operatic and musical theatre productions, the applied breathing techniques are similar. Both styles require a balanced inhalation accompanied by the expansion of the ribcage and release of the lower abdominal muscles as well as muscular antagonism to resist collapsing the chest during exhalation. Airflow, however, needs to be altered to perform any type of mixing or belting. A chest mix voice requires a decrease in airflow while a head mix voice requires an increase in airflow (Willis 2015, 49). The needs of the vocal folds remain the same as in classical singing: the thyroarytenoid-dominant register—chest voice—requires less airflow due to the shorter length of the vocal folds and shorter duration between oscillations. Meanwhile, the cricothyroid-dominant register—head voice—requires more airflow due to the longer and thinner length of the vocal folds and longer duration between oscillations. These adjustments are made with

the ability to monitor breath control and flow. Success in this aspect of singing allows for a smooth transition between singing opera and musical theatre styles.

Some contemporary musicals fall within multiple categories of singing. For instance, *Sweeney Todd* by Stephen Sondheim features legit, mix, and belt roles. An operatic soprano might be more inclined to perform the role of Johanna rather than Mrs. Lovett, but these choices must be made based on the individual needs and skillset of the singer. Some sopranos are comfortable extending their chest-dominant voice above F4. This type of singer must embrace more cross-training to be able to sustain a healthy belt, while lighter sopranos may prefer to sing strictly legit roles that lie mostly in their head-dominant voice such as Johanna in *Sweeney Todd* or Cinderella in Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. Singers must also consider the venue of performance and how certain styles of singing in their voice will be heard in a large hall versus an intimate theatre.

One quality that is unique to musical theatre is the involvement of vocal registration. Register shifts in the voice are celebrated in musical theatre. One of the defining qualities of operatic singing is a legato line that is created with a balance of breath, resonance, and pitch to smoothly navigate the passages and sound like one voice. However, in musical theatre, chest voice, mix, belt, and head voice are all used in collaboration with the text and music to enhance the performance. For the modern operatic soprano to begin cross-training in musical theatre, it is ideal to begin with earlier works that model the operatic structure such as Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* or Gilbert and Sullivan operettas such as *Pirates of Penzance* (Spivey and Saunders Barton 2018, 72).

For a voice student who wishes to cross-train in opera and musical theatre styles, a voice teacher with a high level of musical theatre understanding and an appreciation for classical foundational vocal training is required. This teacher will be able to ensure that a voice student is not overusing or injuring their instrument. Vocal cross-training takes time and dedication, whether it is done by a classically trained singer who wants to learn how to belt or a belter who has never practiced legit singing. Both singers must develop proper strength and coordination to avoid injury (Spivey and Saunders Barton 2018, 32). For the twenty-first century vocalist, these skills are invaluable

Conclusion

While the demands for performing opera and musical theatre are vastly different, much of the vocal technique remains the same. In the modern singing industry, it is imperative to note that these two pedagogical techniques are not opposite, but rather complementary. Modern research has expanded the relationship between these genres through the works of commercial vocal pedagogues such as Wendy LeBorgne, Jo Estill, Karen Hall, and many more. From early American opera and Golden Age musicals to present day musical theatre, there have been distinct shifts in composition style, singing techniques, and the demands of the singer that have made each era of music unique. No single style of singing is better than another; rather, an emphasis on healthy singing is what all singers and teachers of singing should strive to practice. If the aims of this paper have been met, it has opened the conversation to cross-training in the modern voice studio to include genres outside of western classical vocal technique.

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