The Benefits of Mixing Vernacular and Classical Techniques in the Voice Studio

Lecture-Recital Document

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by

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Inspiration

My vocal journey has been typical of many American singers seeking a career in performance and teaching. I grew up hearing music at home, took piano lessons, sang hymns in church, joined choir at school, and started performing in musicals as early as I could. A major in music education seemed like exactly the right fit. When the time came to choose between piano and voice as a primary instrument, I knew that I needed to explore this art of singing that I loved so deeply in order to have a better understanding of the fascinating instrument that is the voice.

Until college, formal private voice lessons were not on my radar. My “teachers” were the musical theatre singers that I listened to, watched on television, and saw on the stage. When I listened to artists like Sutton Foster, Patti LuPone, and Barbra Streisand, I knew they were singing differently than the way I sang in choir. I could hear the difference between a “belt” and a “classical” sound but did not know the technical terms or how they were being produced. Upon starting voice lessons in college, I came to understand more about the voice in basic terms like “chest” and “head,” but still did not learn the mechanics of voice production. However, I did learn about alignment, breath support, legato line, vowel modification, and other factors that contribute to an aesthetically pleasing “classical” voice. My vocal training in college was foundational and exactly what I needed at the time as a beginner.

After completing undergraduate studies, I gained invaluable experience as a classroom music teacher at a small middle school. Compassion for my students and respect for their vulnerability were among the many lessons I learned during my time teaching in the classroom; this would prove to be equally impactful on the next part of my teaching journey. The next step was for me to continue my own vocal studies and to begin teaching voice privately, a new and very different instructional style. Through teaching private lessons and taking graduate-level
courses, I have learned a great deal about the singing instrument, pedagogical styles, and vocal literature, but possibly the most challenging and exciting way in which I have grown is through musical theatre singing lessons. Learning first-hand about singing techniques for a nonclassical style was an opportunity that was not easily accessible before my graduate studies. Exploring how the elite musical theatre performers, whom I have revered for years, were producing those thrilling and emotionally charged sounds has been paramount to my effectiveness as a voice teacher. The way in which my classical and musical theatre vocal training have informed one another has been no small thing. Likewise, the integration of these two styles in my own teaching has proven to be wonderfully effective and richly inspiring.

What is vocal cross-training?

It is widely recognized that having knowledge of a subject or discipline that is outside of one’s primary field is helpful for widening perspective and contributes to a well-rounded education or performance. This is why some athletes engage in cross-training, or the multidisciplinary training which helps to improve performance in their main sport. Voice pathologist and singing voice specialist Dr. Wendy LeBorgne advocates for cross-training the voice with the analogy that if an athlete engages in the same physical exercise day after day, there will likely be strain on the muscles receiving the repetitive patterns. Varying the exercises through cross-training will lessen the likelihood of injury.¹ The same concept is applied to singing; exercising the muscles of the vocal mechanism in multiple ways will minimize vocal

injury and allow for “the exploration of a variety of vocal colors and nuances that can be drawn upon for performance.”

Vocal cross-training, which involves the rich integration of techniques and literature of multiple singing styles, is extremely relevant in the twenty-first century voice studio. A singer can be cross-trained in any given style, but we will be examining the combination of musical theatre, a genre that includes many vernacular styles, and classical singing. The term “vernacular” describes a style of singing that differs from Western classical music in its sound and its approach to many pedagogical elements. Vernacular styles can include, but are not limited to, folk, gospel, rock, pop, country, and jazz. Since musical theatre singing encompasses all of these genres and more, performers seeking a career in musical theatre are expected to sing them with the appropriate style. The job of the voice teacher is to train the singer to understand these stylistic differences and to healthily produce the sounds needed to effectively communicate the character.

Given the stylistic tradition of classical repertoire in the voice studio and on the operatic or concert stage, classical technique often places emphasis on one part, or register, of the voice. In very broad terms, female singers use mainly the head register, and male singers use mainly the chest register. This is not to say that female classical singers never access the chest register, or that male classical singers the head register, but most classical repertoire lends itself to one or the other, depending on the voice type. In musical theatre singing, however, there is more flexibility with the use of registers, especially in the female voice. A hallmark of this technique is creating a singing quality that is almost identical to the speaking voice. To produce this sound, female musical theatre singers use a chest-dominant sound in a larger part of the range than do female

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classical singers. When taught healthily, musical theatre singing will strengthen the muscles that are typically not used in the classical female’s middle and upper ranges, yielding greater flexibility in all parts of the range. Using these techniques in the classical voice studio will greatly support the nurturing and strengthening of the entire voice, which fosters resilient and versatile singers, regardless of style.

**Technique**

All healthy and commercially viable singing requires a good technical foundation, but there are differences in how these fundamental elements are executed depending on the style being sung. The basic concepts traditionally taught to a beginning classical singer are important for all beginners, regardless of style. It is never too early to teach stylistic differences when cross-training, but many technical differences lie in more advanced concepts. The same methodical and intuitive approach to building a singer’s technical foundation is of key importance, no matter which styles are being taught. Equally important is making sure the technical differences between styles do not conflict, as this could lead to uncertainty about healthy function. Teachers who wish to combine two styles in the studio should employ the “not instead of, but in addition to”3 rule in order for their students to grow in both styles.

While there are many elements involved in the training of a vocal performer, much of our work in the studio is focused on technique. Ultimately, our job is to teach the singer to “provide the most output with the least ‘cost’ to the system.”4 In other words, our technical work with students has to provide them with the tools they need for longevity in the increasingly

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4 Hall, So You Want to Sing Music Theater, 60.
demanding industry of professional singing. This requires dedication as well as high but realistic expectations from the teacher and the student alike. It is important to recognize that we cannot bestow perfect mastery of vocal technique upon our students, but we can help them find their most efficient ways of producing vocal sounds with an end result of individual and effective communication.

For any singing teacher, a basic understanding of the anatomy of the larynx is imperative. Most pedagogues are aware of the interaction between the primary muscles responsible for phonation, or the act of making sounds with one’s vocal folds, which are housed in the larynx. The thyroarytenoid, or TA, muscles shorten and thicken the folds, resulting in a sound that is associated with “chest voice.” The cricothyroid, or CT, muscles stretch and thin out the vocal folds, resulting in a sound that is associated with “head voice.” While the terms “head” and “chest” have been and are currently used by countless teachers, they are not entirely factual, since the voice is not physically produced by the head or the chest. Rather, they describe the sensations felt when either the TA or CT muscles are predominantly active. “Head” and “chest” can be helpful for a singer’s kinesthetic awareness of the voice, but it is crucial that the teacher and student know the factual reality of phonation, which is produced by the air that causes the folds to vibrate and is then filtered through the vocal tract.

Other vital aspects of voice pedagogy that apply to all singers regardless of style are alignment, breathing, breath management, registration, resonance, and articulation. All singers use these elements while in the studio or on stage. However, depending on the style in which they are singing, these elements could be executed differently, though ideally not any less healthily. Two aspects of voice performance that are arguably the same across all genres are

physical and mental health. Since “the singer’s instrument is uniquely intact and subject to the emotional confines of the brain and body in which it is housed,” mental and whole-body wellness should not be overlooked in the voice studio.

**Differences in Classical and Musical Theatre Techniques**

There are many technical aspects taught in the classical tradition that contribute to a healthy and stylistically correct vocal production. However, certain elements like a low laryngeal position or tall and spacious vowels are not always appropriate in vernacular techniques and can possibly be counterproductive. If a classical pedagogue wishes to incorporate musical theatre techniques, he or she must be well-versed in the differences in technique and how to apply them in the studio.

Because musical theatre is driven first and foremost by the text, the singing in this genre is closely related to speech. Speaking does not require the same attention to lung capacity as does most singing, so while the musical theatre singer should still employ a balanced inhalation with minimal tension, his or her breath may not always need to fill the lungs as fully as is generally required in classical singing. A singer in any style must also practice a controlled and stable exhalation using adequate breath support. Different styles, however, require an adjustment of airflow which affects how much breath support is needed. In musical theatre singing, a female will need to utilize a TA-dominant voice production more often than not. When the vocal folds are producing this registration, they are closed for a longer period of time in each cycle of vibration, which requires less airflow.7

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6 Hall, *So You Want to Sing Music Theater*, 49.
The “defining difference” between musical theatre and classical techniques is the use of registration, or the series of notes produced by the same vibratory pattern of the folds and that possess the same basic quality. A register is a muscular adjustment that is controlled primarily by the TA and CT muscles. In order to produce a sound that is like speech, a female singer will often use a “mix,” a vocal fold configuration in which the TA muscles are dominant to create the thicker folds required for speech. Because the TA and CT muscles are always working in tandem, both classical and musical theatre singers essentially use a mix. The female “classical mix” is often CT-dominant, and the “musical theatre mix,” is often TA-dominant. This TA-dominant mix is often difficult for a classical female to navigate because of the CT-dominance that is required by her classical repertoire. Both muscle groups must be developed, however, in order to lay the groundwork for a mix that is flexible and can be called upon at any time and on any pitch. In many ways, a healthy and balanced mix is to musical theatre singing what a legato line is to the bel canto style.

Out of the TA-dominant mixed voice flows the belt, which is an optional color that occurs on open vowels from approximately F4 to D5. The belt is effective in musical theatre when it responds to the drama in the lyric and the emotional state of the character. It is exhilarating for both the performer and the audience, but it is important to remember that it is optional. The belt is a very useful and effective tool when it is part of an assortment of vocal colors that can be called upon for the dramatic needs of the moment.

8 Hall, So You Want to Sing Music Theater, 69.
An aspect of vocal production that works closely with registration is resonance, “the process by which the basic product of phonation is enhanced in timbre and/or intensity by the air-filled cavities through which it passes on its way to the outside air.”\textsuperscript{12} As females move up the treble clef, CT activity increases until it finally becomes dominant. At the same time, slight adjustments in the resonators, which are the soft and flexible interior surfaces that vibrate with the air during phonation, are required. Similar to the classical singers who adjust their resonators to enhance the ideal “ring,” musical theatre singers adjust their resonators to enhance the ideal speech quality.

One of the most important resonators is the vocal tract, or the inside space that spans from the top of the larynx to the lips or nose. This space is unique to the individual and contributes to a singer’s timbre, or tone quality, helping to distinguish that person’s voice from others. Singers are capable of a multitude of vocal timbres by modifying the shape of the vocal tract, which is partly accomplished through articulation. The lips, tongue, and jaw are the articulators that help the singer find the ideal resonance on particular vowels. For classical singers to maintain optimal space and beauty of the line, modifications to the vocal tract and the articulators are essential as they move up the scale and past the staff. In most musical theatre singing, however, the shape of the vocal tract and the position of the articulators do not stray far from natural speech, as the communication of the words is of utmost importance.

“All singers must breathe, phonate, resonate, and articulate,”\textsuperscript{13} and the singing teacher’s job is to guide the student in finding healthy and efficient ways to do so while staying authentic to the particular style. If a teacher is serious about introducing an additional style into the studio,

\textsuperscript{12} McKinney, \textit{The Diagnosis & Correction of Vocal Faults}, 125.
it is imperative that he or she studies it, seeks guidance from experts, and uses it in a way that benefits the students. As contemporary singing specialist Robert Edwin says, “for each style of singing one chooses to teach, one needs to understand and appreciate the vocal technique and repertoire that supports it.”

### Sound

The great nineteenth-century Italian singing teacher, Francesco Lamperti, defined the necessary vocal qualities of the ideal classical singer as “the fullest development of tone, the union of the registers, legato singing, sweetness of quality, security of intonation, an even agility, and a general elegance of execution.” To achieve this pleasing and fully integrated quality of sound, classical singing teachers encourage their students to use tall vowels, consistent vibrato from the onset to the release, and a legato line. The classical singer’s vocal tract and throat are often spacious to create a warm sound, while resonance strategies are used to maintain a forward, or “bright,” placement. This balance of bright and dark is defined by the Italian term *chiaroscuro*, the ideal resonance pursued earnestly by all classical singers.

A seamless tone quality across the range is also essential for the classical tradition. Female singers are trained to mix the registers around their first *passaggio*, or register transition, to mask the break that otherwise would be heard during that transition. Pitches that lie above the first *passaggio* are then sung with a CT-dominant function. It is not uncommon in the classical studio for female singers to be discouraged from using TA-dominant sounds in pitches that lie above the “normal” speaking range.

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It is difficult to define the ideal musical theatre sound because the genre is overflowing with different styles. Nonetheless, vocal sounds in musical theatre are “less related to beauty and more related to the ability of a given voice to evoke a unique emotional response.”\(^7\) The communication of the text is paramount, so musical theatre performers sing in a way that is conversational and speech-like in tone quality. This is achieved through a narrower vocal tract, more emphasis on forward resonance, and for the female singer, more use of the TA muscles.

While comparing the sounds of classical and musical theatre singing, it is important to remember that individual voices within these styles have varying sizes, ranges, weights, and colors. In the classical tradition, these vocal qualities are some of the criteria for assigning voice classification, or *Fach*. Classical singers are familiar with the qualities of sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, contraltos, tenors, baritones, and basses, as well as the many subtypes within these categories. Musical theatre also has vocal categories, though they do not hold the same weight as the *Fach* system does in the classical singing tradition. Aspiring performers in musical theatre are expected to sing a wide variety of material to serve the stylistic diversity in the industry. These categories are better described as registration events, as they identify the particular register positions and resonance strategies being used.

**Why should the classical soprano be singing musical theatre?**

**Technical Benefits**

Christy Turnbow, Penn State’s first graduate of the MFA in Musical Theatre Pedagogy degree, has written, “While working on my high soprano literature I often found that the best

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warm-up was to belt.”  

Voice teachers Norman Spivey and Mary Saunders Barton explain that “after experimenting with musical theatre sounds, classical sopranos return to their operatic repertoire with a sense of greater resilience and power.”

Why does the singer who mainly uses a CT-dominant vocal fold configuration in her repertoire need to worry so much about a TA-dominant function?

Most women speak with a TA-dominant function. Common in the classical studio is a focus on the CT-dominant function because of the requirements of traditional classical repertoire. It is easy to get caught up in perfecting the ideal “classical” sound, which can result in a glossing over of the speaking voice. Since speaking and singing are produced by the same mechanism, these things should not be treated as two separate entities. When working on technique, the permission to use a speaking quality in singing should not be limited to a small range of pitches in a female singer’s voice, keeping in mind the stylistically appropriate sound for the repertoire that is assigned.

Because a speech-like quality requires more activity from the TA muscles, a classically trained woman might have difficulty using that quality on pitches above the first passaggio. Although it may not be used in the context of formal classical training, TA activity in the middle range is used in everyday life. Heightened speech, laughter, and calling often use more TA activity and are not confined to the “normal” speaking pitch range. Allowing the singer to bring these visceral and emotionally driven sounds into the voice studio can open up a much wider array of vocal colors.

19 Spivey and Saunders Barton, Cross-Training, 29.
Since the TA muscles make up the base of the vocal folds, they play a major role in the glottal closure, or the bringing together of the folds, that is required for phonation. When the folds do not close efficiently, there is often noise or breathiness in the sound caused by the escape of extra air. Exercising the TA muscles in a larger part of the range will improve glottal closure, which will ultimately create “more robust vocal folds”\textsuperscript{20} that have increased flexibility with the use of registers and greater balance throughout the entire range. Playful and healthy speech-to-singing exercises that encompass a wider range will strengthen the TA muscles and contribute to a balanced voice that can create any register configuration on any given pitch, which should ultimately feel very freeing.

**Artistic Benefits**

The singer has a unique artistic responsibility to communicate words through music. While it is dependent on the practice of technical skills, “the voice is not a mechanical instrument separated from the innermost nature of an individual communicator.”\textsuperscript{21} There is a heavy focus on technique in the classical voice studio, and rightly so; a beginning singer must learn how to breathe efficiently, and an advanced singer must learn how to develop stamina for a challenging role. Beautiful and efficient vocalism is essential, but it is not the primary driving force of the story or the emotion. The dramatic element of singing is expressed through sincere and honest communication of the words and is just as much a part of the technique as is the vocalism.

Performers in musical theatre have many responsibilities on stage, but their primary job is acting. This is why the pedagogy of this singing style is rooted in drama. Speech-to-singing

\textsuperscript{20} Bozeman, *Practical Vocal Acoustics*, 33.
exercises in the studio allow the singer to use an emotional response to inform the vocalism. Healthy integration of these exercises in the classical studio will not only benefit the technical element but will allow for more options of expression and delivery of the text. Although the classical tradition leans toward the vocalism, sincere emotional conviction is still essential, and will often be the factor that sets a singer apart from the rest.

For the classical singer, so much of vocal training is pointed toward the goal of a consistently beautiful sound. There can be many reasons why a classical singing teacher might resist the inclusion of nonclassical techniques into the studio, but a big reason is that nonclassical sounds are not all considered “beautiful.” If looked at from a purely aesthetic standpoint, not every sound a human being makes is “beautiful” in the Western classical sense. But the ability to relate singing to the raw, emotionally driven sounds people make in everyday life is something uniquely wonderful about this art form. Modern audiences want more than just beautiful singing; they want to relate to the story being told through the singing. Voice teacher Jeannie Gagné in discussing belting says that “there are plenty of well-known belting singers…whose voices are not beautiful in the traditional sense. It doesn’t matter. Do you love their songs? The rhythms? The messages? Their confidence? Perhaps these things are what you find intoxicating!”

**Versatility**

In an effort to keep modern audiences engaged with opera, many opera companies are integrating musicals into their seasons. It is becoming the norm for classical young artist programs to ask their auditionees to include musical theatre selections in their audition packages. Opera singers who performs their musical theatre pieces with a stylistically appropriate sound

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will be set apart from the singers who use the same CT-dominant function used in the arias. The ability to call upon any configuration of registration and resonance not only yields technical benefits but gives the singer a greater sense of suiting their vocal choices to the character’s emotions and may lead to professional opportunities. Voice coach Lisa Popeil says, “the more versatile one’s vocal technique, the more able the acting singer becomes in expressing human emotion.”

The majority of research on voice pedagogy has been embedded in the classical tradition. Recent research has been done on the teaching of contemporary commercial music, or CCM, which encompasses the musical theatre genre. Although the opinion that CCM techniques are harmful to the voice is becoming a thing of the past, classical singing is still often deemed as the superior vocal technique. If singers and teachers hold this belief, there is a greater sense of isolation, as these performers are limiting themselves to the sounds that are acceptable in that particular singing style. This isolation does not allow two dramatic art forms like opera and musical theatre to inform and inspire one another. In order to grow as an open-minded and versatile artist, one must remember that “no style is an island.”

Practical Application for Teachers

It is becoming increasingly necessary for singers pursuing a classical career to be able to sing in multiple styles. This reality requires that voice teachers expand their skills so that they are competent in teaching several singing styles, most commonly classical and musical theatre. Teachers of this generation of singers need to have the tools to guide them on their journey. If

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the changes in the industry are ignored by the teacher, the student’s ability to succeed in the profession could suffer.

The teacher of singing is entrusted with the great responsibility of guiding aspiring performers in finding healthy ways to make the vocal sounds expected by the industry. As the vocal arts continue to evolve and diversify, teachers of the new generation of singers must immerse themselves in the new concepts that are adopted by this art form. If a classical singing teacher is unwilling to change preferences stemming from the stylistic tradition, then perhaps he or she should choose not to teach students who require musical theatre or other CCM styles. For example, the insistence of tall vowels and warm timbre may keep the singer who wishes to study musical theatre from making true musical theatre sounds. Turning our focus to healthy voice production and asking ourselves if the voice is “functioning correctly for the style the artist is singing”25 will help us avoid the imposition of classical technique on contemporary styles.

Immersing oneself in the stylistic and technical demands of musical theatre singing is only part of the process of introducing these sounds into the classical studio. The teacher must take time to listen mindfully to musical theatre professionals of the past and present. Each of these performers has a unique color and weight to their voice, so that one person’s belt may not sound the same as another. Teachers need to rethink any preconceived notions of what constitutes the “quintessential” musical theatre sound because it will be different for every singer and generation and may change from original cast recordings of Golden Age musicals to the aesthetic of contemporary revivals. Having limited exposure to the sounds of these singers can result in a misunderstanding of musical theatre or CCM styles. It only makes sense that a teacher’s uninformed interpretation of any given style can create issues in vocal function for the

student. The ears of the teacher wanting to bring musical theatre techniques into the studio need to be accustomed to the wide variety of sounds encompassed by this rich genre.

Along with an in-depth study of the sounds and techniques of the genre, teachers must also practice diligence in the studio. Building the muscular strength required by these registration events takes mindful practice, and the process will be different for each student. Personally producing these sounds is perhaps the most effective way for a teacher to explain to a soprano who has never belted, that she may not be able to wake up the day after her lesson and have a perfectly balanced belt. The process that leads to a balanced voice requires time, as well as trust and patience from both the teacher and the student.

A wonderful tool used by many voice teachers to demonstrate all styles of singing is modeling. While being careful not to impose their own sound onto the students, good modeling is incredibly helpful in reinforcing healthy function and imparting important stylistic elements. It goes without saying that a teacher should be able to model what is expected of the students. If one wishes to incorporate musical theatre techniques in one’s teaching, healthy modeling of these sounds is essential. Voice teacher Robert Edwin advises teachers not to demonstrate nonclassical sounds if they cannot do so in a professional fashion.26

One consideration that might be overlooked by teachers is the importance of liking the styles one teaches. Teachers must be honest about how much they want to teach musical theatre and the motivations behind the decision to include it in the studio. If the teacher’s only motivation is that the demands of the industry are changing, the instruction might lack sincerity or even respect for the genre and its performers. One must evaluate the willingness to expand

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26 Edwin, “Apples and Oranges,” 44.
beliefs about what is viable and worth the effort. If one does not believe a certain style is legitimate and can be healthily taught, one should not try to teach it.

Incorporating musical theatre techniques in the classical voice studio does not mean that the teacher must give up classical singing in order to focus on the newer style. The goal of cross-training is not to replace one style with another, but rather to allow each style to enrich and strengthen the other. The goal of all vocal instruction is “holistic, [or] a sum of all the parts,”27 so allowing the voice to healthily produce all of the sounds of which it is capable is exceedingly beneficial and highly rewarding.

**Application to Repertoire**

Let us examine the ways in which musical theatre techniques can be helpful in specific repertoire. The five pieces chosen for this project showcase a broad range of musical styles and are examples of what a mezzo-soprano might sing if she were to incorporate both musical theatre and classical repertoire into her studies. This acknowledges the fact that most musical theatre roles are written without a specific voice classification in mind, but classical repertoire is generally more specific to voice types. For example, a classical mezzo-soprano most likely sings the repertoire specific to her voice type, while a musical theatre female is expected to sing both legit and belt, to put it simply. Each piece contains its own challenges, showcases different parts of the range, and varies in registration events and resonance strategies. These highly contrasting pieces demonstrate the benefits of mixing classical and musical theatre techniques in the voice studio.

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**Smanie implacabili from *Così fan tutte*, K. 588, W. A. Mozart**

This aria from Mozart’s 1790 comic opera is a favorite among mezzo-sopranos and is frequently heard in auditions and recitals. The tessitura, which lies between Bb4 and F5, is fairly high for mezzo-sopranos. Nevertheless, there are a few notes in the melody that dip into the first *passaggio*, shown in Figure 1. Since the melody comes back up rather quickly, it would not be advisable for the singer to switch into a full classical chest voice on the lower notes because it could cause those notes to stick out and disrupt the consistency of tone. A CT-dominant mix on those pitches would maintain the tone quality that is heard in the rest of the piece and will allow the singer to move through that line with more fluidity. Speech-to-singing exercises that span over the first *passaggio* can aid in developing a mix in that pitch range, helping to create a seemingly continuous vocal register that is expected in classical singing.

![Figure 1](image)

Since starting musical theatre voice study, I have noticed more clarity of tone in my classical repertoire, and this aria is no exception. I can confidently say that the greater use of TA activity in the middle voice with speech and belt exercises has strengthened my vocal folds, which results in a healthy and efficient vocalism, no matter the style.
Will there really be a Morning? from *Four Dickinson Songs*, Lori Laitman

A stark contrast to the Mozart aria is this art song by living composer Lori Laitman from a 1996 song cycle featuring Emily Dickinson’s poetry. The transposed version of this piece for mezzo-soprano utilizes a wide range, spanning from G#3 to F#5. Similar to its use in “Smanie implacabili,” the mix can aid in smoothing out the repeated passages that span over the first *passaggio*, shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4. Speech-based exercises used to develop the mix also aid in bringing clarity to the vowels and consonants used in the vernacular. In “Will there really be a Morning?” it is important for the words to be clearly enunciated, even on the higher pitches. For example, words like “bird” in Figure 3 and “famous” in Figure 4 can be challenging to enunciate on their pitches but must be clearly articulated for the listener to engage with Dickinson’s contemplative poem.

![Musical notation](image)

*Figure 2.*
In classical singing, vowels are typically modified on higher pitches to maintain healthy and comfortable vocalism. On the contrary, musical theatre singing does not emphasize vowel modification because of its text-driven nature. The speech-based exercises used in musical theatre training can be incredibly rewarding for the classical singer, as they bring focus to the meaning and communication of the words, therefore resulting in clarity of articulation. This is not to discourage the classical singer from vowel modification, but rather to maintain comfortable vocalism without losing intelligibility of the words.
When Did I Fall in Love? from *Fiorello!*, Bock and Harnick

For the female classical singer beginning to explore musical theatre repertoire, greater use of the TA muscles in a larger range can seem a bit daunting and possibly quite foreign. While I believe the singer wanting to perform or teach this repertoire should start experimenting with those healthy speech-like sounds, the process should not feel rushed. In other words, the classical soprano experimenting with belt sounds for the first time should not expect to belt advanced repertoire, like “Defying Gravity,” with ease the next day. Musical theatre repertoire that is close to the classical model can be a great starting place. Many musicals of the Golden Age, which were written approximately between 1943 and 1965, contain songs that require a vocalism that is closely related to the classical model. Although it is generally expected in contemporary revivals of these Golden Age musicals for a female singer to use a CT-dominant mix rather than a lofty classical sound, it still leans toward classical singing.

“When Did I Fall in Love?” from Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick’s 1959 musical *Fiorello!* is an example of a Golden Age song that utilizes a CT-dominant mix, often referred to as the soprano mix. While “mix” indicates a registration event, the use of resonance is just as important in producing this sound as the activity in the larynx. A soprano mix has the sweetness of a classical sound but uses a “narrower” or more speech-like position of the vocal tract. The loft heard in classical singing is occasionally used in soprano mix songs, but not as often. An example in which a classical loft is used is shown in Figure 5. On the rest of the phrases that lie in the middle voice, my vocal tract is more similar to natural speech.

While these Golden Age songs can be a great place to start, it can be easy to approach them like operatic arias. The challenge I found in this song was to resist the temptation to use a

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loft throughout. I needed to step away from vocal technique for a moment and ask myself how I would speak these phrases. Would I prepare the spoken phrase by raising the soft palate and lowering the larynx, or would I simply say what I needed to say? Without undermining the technical work that went into preparing this song, I challenged myself to sing it as though I were speaking it, and the soprano mix became much more natural. When using this simple soprano mix, I came to realize how much more satisfying the blossoming of the lofty high notes were and how they excite the storytelling of the song.

What's Gonna Happen from Tootsie, David Yazbeck

Because musical theatre encompasses so many genres, the twenty-first century musical theatre performer must be able to sing in a variety of styles. For women, it goes without saying that they must have a strong but flexible mix that can have any degree of TA or CT dominance. The close but distinct relative to the soprano mix is the speech mix, which uses more involvement of the TA muscles. Most would agree that this TA-dominant speech mix can be quite challenging for a female classical singer because of the navigation required in the middle voice. When climbing the scale in a speech mix, there is a strong desire to “flip,” or for CT-
dominance to take over, at around Bb4 or B4. Energized speech-to-singing exercises are incredibly useful for maintaining the TA-dominant quality all the way up the scale and even past the seemingly daunting Bb4.

A song that uses the speech mix throughout is “What’s Gonna Happen” from *Tootsie*, a 2019 musical based on the 1982 movie of the same name. It is a comic patter song about a woman expressing her anxieties about an upcoming audition. By nature, it requires the energized speech-like quality that a nervous actress might employ if she were rapidly spouting off scenarios of bad auditions. The biggest challenge I found in this song was maintaining the TA-dominant speech mix on notes that lie on or above Bb4, an example of which is shown in Figure 6. Speech exercises that use the range of the song have helped strengthen the TA muscles so that the vocalism closely matches speech.

![Figure 6.](image)

Another challenge presented in “What’s Gonna Happen” is the sheer number of words. My first instinct was to over-articulate the consonants, therefore causing unnecessary tension. Over-articulation can also exist in classical singing, which is partly why we often turn our focus to the vowels. During a recent masterclass in which I sang this piece, the instructor addressed
my over-articulation by having me sing each line of the song to individual audience members. One attendee expressed that the story was easier to follow after I had simplified the articulation. An additional benefit that resulted from simplification was finding greater ease in maintaining the speech mix on higher pitches because there was less tightness.

**Back to Before from *Ragtime*, Flaherty and Ahrens**

A thrilling and empowering sound in musical theatre is the belt, the optional color in a TA-dominant mix that is driven by heightened emotion. The song “Back to Before” from Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens’s 1998 musical *Ragtime* is an example of a power ballad that ends on an open vowel on A4, which falls directly in the middle of the belt range, backed up with full orchestration shown in Figure 7. The music and the dramatic element both call for a belt which, when healthily executed with purpose, can be highly effective.

![Figure 7.](image)

Balancing the voice in such a way that the belt feels like an easy, floated call takes methodical work and a great deal of patience. Asking the vocal folds to be in a configuration that they are not used to creating is not a small task and takes time to develop. It is encouraging,
However, to know that practicing these TA-dominant registration events helps to strengthen the folds, which is beneficial for singers of any style.

**Not “Instead of,” But “In addition to”**

As singers and teachers, our job is to ensure healthy function for ourselves and for our students. Healthy voice production has a seemingly endless list of contributing factors, but my hope with this project is to show how musical theatre techniques can positively influence voice production, specifically in the classically oriented studio. Even if one does not pursue musical theatre as a career or regularly study the repertoire, practicing vocalises that use a variety of registration events on any pitch allows for the exploration of all the sounds the human voice can make. The text-driven nature of musical theatre can also give a technique-driven classical singer further permission to connect with the story of an aria or art song.

Incorporating musical theatre techniques into the classical voice studio does not mean classical technique must be given up or compromised. Take an example of a young singer who grew up on musicals and finds so much joy in belting with Sutton, Patti, and Barbra in the car. If she were handed a musical theatre song in her classical singing lesson, and if she were anything like me, that might be one of the most exciting moments of her vocal training. If we allow both techniques to enrich and strengthen the other, we can give our students encouragement, and give ourselves permission, to make the sounds that match natural human responses to emotion, allowing us to connect with an audience in a profound way.
Works Cited


