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An exploration of musical theatre vocal technique and style 1950 - present

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An exploration of musical theatre vocal technique and style 1950 - present

Abstract

My Honors Thesis Recital is the culmination of my study of how singing techniques and styles have changed in musical theatre since its Golden Age in the 1940's and 50's from a semi-classical, operatic style and technique, to a sound much more infused with jazz, pop, rock, and other contemporary music styles. This recital explores works by some of the greatest musical theatre composers and lyricists, starting with giants like Rodgers and Hammerstein and Leonard Bernstein, and working up to present day with modern greats like Stephen Sondheim, Stephen Schwartz, and Jason Robert Brown. I will demonstrate the evolution of musical theatre styles and vocal techniques using the works of these legends in my recital. Included is a video of the recital, and lyrics to each of the songs.

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An Exploration of Musical Theatre Vocal Technique and Style 1950-Present

By

Emily Slomovits

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Musical Theatre (Theatre Arts)

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date April 20, 2017

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Abstract

My Honors Thesis Recital is the culmination of my study of how singing techniques and styles have changed in musical theatre since its Golden Age in the 1940's and 50's from a semi-classical, operatic style and technique, to a sound much more infused with jazz, pop, rock, and other contemporary music styles. This recital explores works by some of the greatest musical theatre composers and lyricists, starting with giants like Rodgers and Hammerstein and Leonard Bernstein, and working up to present day with modern greats like Stephen Sondheim, Stephen Schwartz, and Jason Robert Brown. I will demonstrate the evolution of musical theatre styles and vocal techniques using the works of these legends in my recital. Included is a video of the recital, and lyrics to each of the songs.

“Shall We Dance/Getting to Know You”

This medley of Rodgers and Hammerstein songs from “The King and I” is not as much in the classical music vein as opera or operetta, but their music is certainly meant to be sung in a more classical way than is common in musical theatre today. American musical theatre grew out of vaudeville, British operetta and many other influences, and Rodgers and Hammerstein are two of the first pioneers in the art form. There are several distinct ways in which classical singing is noticeably different from pop or rock ‘n roll singing. In classical technique, straight tone, in which the singer uses no vibrato on the notes, is rarely used. A classical singer mostly uses vibrato starting right at the beginning of the note, while a more contemporary singer would either use no vibrato at all, or would hold the straight tone on a note for a little while, and then begin to color it with vibrato. Another difference between classical and contemporary musical theatre singing is placement of the sound. Typically, classical placement is forward in the mouth, and the sound is rounded and focused toward the front. A pop/rock singer’s placement is much more toward the back of the throat, and the sound is produced throughout the mouth.

“Shall We Dance?/Getting to Know You”

We’ve just been introduced
 I do not know you well
 But when the music started
 Something drew me to your side
 So many men and girls
 Are in each other’s arms
 It made me think, we might be
 Similarly occupied
 Getting to know you, getting to know all about you
 Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me
 Getting to know you, putting it my way, but nicely
 You are precisely my cup of tea

Getting to know you, getting to feel free and easy
 When I am with you, getting to know what to say
 Haven't you noticed? Suddenly I'm bright and breezy
 Because of all the beautiful and new things I'm learning about you
 Day by day

"Ohio"

In addition to Rodgers and Hammerstein, there were several other giants of musical theatre composition creating masterpieces during the "Golden Age" of musicals, the 1940's through the 1960's. Leonard Bernstein is perhaps one of the most towering of those figures, and this next song is from one of his early musicals, "Wonderful Town", which he wrote with legendary musical theatre lyricists Betty Comden and Adolf Green.

This style is brassier, bolder, and is much more influenced by jazz than some of the other musical theatre works of the time. It also requires a slightly different vocal technique than the previous songs; although the vibrato remains more of a constant, the placement is farther back in the throat. Because my voice is not ideally suited to this kind of singing, I've invited my dear friend Sera Shearer to sing this song with me. Her voice has a dark, rich quality, and is the definition of bold.

"Ohio"

Why, oh why, oh why, oh
 Why did I ever leave Ohio?
 Why did I wander to find what lies yonder
 When life was so cozy at home?
 Wondering while I wander,
 Why did I fly?
 Why did i roam?
 Oh, why oh, why oh
 Did I leave Ohio?
 Maybe I'd better go
 Home/ O -- h -- i -- o
 Maybe I'd better go home
 Now listen, Eileen

Ohio was stifling
 We just couldn't wait to get out of the place,
 With mom saying --, what no date for this evening?
 And pop with, do be home, dear, by ten
 Ugh!

The gossipy neighbors
 And everyone yapping who's going with whom
 And dating those drips that I've known since I'm four
 The Kiwanis club dance
 On the basketball floor
 Cousin Maude with her lectures on sin
 What a bore!
 Jerry Black!
 Cousin Min!
 Ezra Nye!
 Hannah Finn!
 Hopeless!
 Babbity!
 Stuffy!
 Provincial!

Thank heavens we're free!
 Why, oh why, oh why, oh
 Why did we ever leave Ohio?!
 Wondering while we wander,
 Why did we fly?
 Why did we roam?
 Oh, why oh, why oh
 Did we leave Ohio?
 Maybe we'd better go
 Home/ O -- h -- i -- o.
 Maybe we'd better go home

"Will He Like Me?"

Many people have called "She Loves Me" a perfect musical. With music by Sheldon Harnick and lyrics by Jerry Bock, the same pair that wrote "Fiddler on the Roof", "She Loves Me" is set in the 30's and retains the jazzy, Golden Age sound of its predecessors, but also manages to be fresh and new. In this song, "Will He Like Me?" the jazz and classical subgenres of musical theatre come together, as they did in "Ohio", and result in a song that is one of my favorites to sing. But it's also a slightly daunting task for me, because the

woman who played the role of Amalia in the original Broadway cast is Barbara Cook, who has one of the most sublime and effortless voices in musical theatre, and in music, period. Despite that intimidating factor, I love singing this song because I relate so much to the feelings it expresses so beautifully; uncertainty, longing, and hope.

“Will He Like Me?”

Will he like me when we meet?
 Will the shy and quiet girl he’s going to see
 Be the girl that he’s imagined me to be?
 Will he like me?
 Will he like the girl he sees?
 If he doesn’t, will he know enough to know
 That there’s more to me than I may always show?
 Will he like me?
 Will he know that there’s a world of love
 Waiting to warm him?
 How I’m hoping that his eyes and ears won’t misinform him
 Will he like me? Who can say?
 How I wish that we could meet another day
 It’s absurd for me to carry on this way; I’ll try not to!
 Will he like me? He’s just got to...
 When I am in my room alone, and I write
 Thoughts come easily, words come fluently then
 That’s how it is when I’m alone, but tonight
 There’s no hiding behind my paper and pen
 Will he know that there’s a world of love
 Waiting to warm him?
 How I’m hoping that his eyes and ears won’t misinform him
 Will he like me? I don’t know
 All I know is that I’m tempted not to go
 It’s insanity for me to worry so; I’ll try not to!
 Will he like me? He’s just got to...
 Will he like me? Will he like me?

“Where Do I Go?”

“Hair” was not the first musical to use rock ‘n roll music, but its hard-driving grooves introduced a more intense rock sound to Broadway. It was also one of the first

musicals to be squarely set in the present and written by young people about their own culture, in this case 1968 New York hippie pacifist culture. The musical was one of the first to work with a non-linear structure and use less of a plot than most previous musicals. It dealt with many hot-button issues, including racism, sexism, and most importantly, the very prominent backdrop of the Vietnam War, which was raging during the show's conception and first run. Though much of "Hair's" score is harder rock music, there are some more pensive, slower songs in the show, and "Where Do I Go?" is one of those, a sad, sweet, aching song about trying to find meaning and purpose in one's life.

"Where Do I Go?"

Where do I go? Follow the river
 Where do I go? Follow the gulls
 Where is the something? Where is the someone
 That tells me why I live and die?

Where do I go? Follow the children
 Where do I go? Follow their smiles
 Is there an answer in their sweet faces
 That tells me why I live and die?

Follow the wind song, follow the thunder
 Follow the neon in young lovers' eyes
 Down to the gutter, up to the glitter
 Into the city where the truth lies

Where do I go? Follow the children
 Where do I go? Follow their smiles
 Is there an answer in their sweet faces
 That tells me why I live and die?

Follow the wind song, follow the thunder
 Follow the neon in young lovers' eyes
 Down to the gutter, up to the glitter
 Into the city where the truth lies

Where do I go? Follow my heartbeat
 Where do I go? Follow my hand

Where do they lead me?
 And will I ever discover why I live and die?
 I live and die

Why do I live, why do I die?
 Where do I go?
 Tell my why, tell me where?
 Tell my why, tell me where?
 Tell me why?

“Simple Joys”

The role of The Leading Player in “Pippin”, who sings “Simple Joys”, is, I believe, entirely unique, because it can be, and has been, played with equal success by people of different races and genders, and with varying degrees and types of training. In fact, it’s the only role for which a man, Ben Vereen, and a woman, Patina Miller, have both won Tony Awards. Because Stephen Schwartz wrote the character of the Leading Player with the intention that almost anyone could play it, the role is inherently flexible and broad in how it can be interpreted. This song, “Simple Joys”, is moving into an even jazzier, funkier kind of music than before, as we are now solidly in the 70’s. It also highlights the use of belting and chest voice singing - a bigger, more spread-out sound, as well as more in the back of the throat and more straight tone – than the song from “Hair”.

“Simple Joys”

Well I'll sing you the story of a sorrowful lad
 He had everything he wanted, didn't want what he had
 He had wealth and pelf and fame and name and all of that noise
 But he didn't have none of those simple joys
 His life seemed purposeless and flat
 Aren't you glad you don't feel like that?

He ran from all the deeds he'd done, ran from things he'd just begun
 He ran from himself, now that's mighty far to run
 Out into the country where he played as a boy

He knew he had to find him some simple joys
 He wanted someplace warm and green
 We all could use a change of scene

Sweet summer evenings, hot wine and bread
 Sharing your supper, sharing your bed
 Simple joys have a simple voice: It says why not go ahead?
 Wouldn't you rather be a left-handed flea
 Or a crab on a slab at the bottom of the sea
 Than a man who never learns how to be free
 Not 'til he's cold and dead

Sweet summer evenings, sapphire skies
 Feasting your belly
 Feasting your eyes
 Simple joys have a simple voice: It says time is living's prize
 And wouldn't you rather be a left-handed flea
 A crab on a slab at the bottom of the sea
 A newt on the root of a banyan tree
 Or a fig on a twig in Galilee
 Than a man who never learns how to be free
 Not till the day he not till the day he not till the day not till the day he dies!

"Losing My Mind"

So far, this program has gotten steadily more contemporary, but this song will seem like we're going backwards; it has a more classical/jazz sound, but it is farther along chronologically. A musical theatre program would not be complete without at least one song by Stephen Sondheim, whose music and lyrics are some of the most intricate, complex, and ultimately beautiful of the musical theatre cannon. His songs are definitely in that jazz/classical crossover subgenre of musical theatre, but in many ways, his work is in a genre all its own, which even varies from show to show. Sondheim's shows were and still are groundbreaking and unique, because in many cases, they showcase the innermost thoughts of their characters, and the psychological problems they face on top of their tangible ones. One of the wonderful things about Sondheim is that although he writes gorgeous, soaring melodies, his lyrics are the key to making his songs work. If you over-

sing a Sondheim song, paying more attention to the music than communicating the lyrics, it will be more evident than with almost any other composer. "Losing My Mind" from "Follies" is a jazz and classical infused ballad that would be easy to over-sing, but being a good musical theatre singer means not being attached to holding a long note if it won't do justice to the words. That's why I love singing this song, because it challenges me to really communicate the feelings the character is having, instead of focusing just on hitting notes. I'm honored to be able to perform this song with my dad, San, on guitar. This arrangement, of course, differs from how the song is usually performed, and is therefore even more jazz-inspired.

"Losing My Mind"

The sun comes up, I think about you
 The coffee cup, I think about you
 I want you so, It's like I'm losing my mind
 The morning ends, I think about you
 I talk to friends and think about you
 And do they know, it's like I'm losing my mind
 All afternoon doing every little chore
 The thought of you stays bright
 Sometimes I stand in the middle of the floor
 Not going left, not going right.
 I dim the lights and think about you
 Spend sleepless nights to think about you
 You said you loved me, or were you just being kind?
 Or am I losing my mind?
 I want you so, it's like I'm losing my mind
 Does no one know, it's like I'm losing my mind
 All afternoon doing every little chore
 The thought of you stays bright
 Sometimes I stand in the middle of the floor
 Not going left, not going right
 I dim the lights and think about you
 Spend sleepless nights to think about you
 You said you loved me, or were you just being kind?
 Or am I losing my mind?

"One Song Glory"

"Rent" was a game-changer in musical theatre when it first premiered in 1996. Stylistically, it fits into the rock musical category, but also has been called a "rock opera", fitting because composer/lyricist Jonathan Larson drew the story very loosely from "La Boheme". When I first started learning to play guitar five years ago, "One Song Glory" was one of the first songs I ever learned to accompany myself on, and because of the kind of singer and guitar player I am, it took on a completely different feel than the original; still hopefully biting and edgy, but a little softer and more influenced by folk music.

"One Song Glory"

One song glory, one song before I go
 Glory, one song to leave behind
 Find one song, one last refrain
 Glory, from the pretty boy front man

Who wasted opportunity
 One song, he had the world at his feet
 Glory, in the eyes of a young girl
 A young girl, find glory

Beyond the cheap colored lights
 One song, before the sun sets
 Glory, on another empty life

Time flies, time dies
 Glory, one blaze of glory
 One blaze of glory, glory

Find glory in a song that rings true
 Truth like a blazing fire, an eternal flame
 Find, one song, a song about love
 Glory, from the soul of a young man

A young man, find the one song
 Before the virus takes hold

Glory, like a sunset
One song to redeem this empty life

Time flies and then
No need to endure anymore
Time dies

“Who Will Love Me As I Am?”

My dear friend H Jugowicz, with whom I will sing this next song, is actually somewhat similar to me when it comes to vocal style, because they can do a more classical sound as well, but one thing that they have that I don't really is the ability to sing in chest voice, or to belt. What I do is called mixing, which is taking the classical and contemporary placements of the voice and combining them. I'm never really belting, but using something between classical and contemporary placement. H. is much more of a belter than I am, but they also use classical placement very well. So you'll still get a sense of a different kind of voice, it just won't be as drastic a change. This is “Who Will Love Me As I Am?” from “Side Show”. H and I will be playing Daisy and Violet, conjoined twins who are part of a circus sideshow.

“Who Will Love Me As I Am?”

Violet:

Like a fish plucked from the ocean
Tossed into a foreign stream
Always knew that I was different
Often fled into a dream
I ignored the raging current
Right against the tide I swam
But I floated with the question
Who will love me as I am?

Daisy:

Like an odd exotic creature
On display inside a zoo
Hearing children asking questions

Makes me ask some questions too
 Could we bend the laws of nature?
 Could a lion love a lamb?
 Who could see beyond this surface?
 Who will love me as I am?
 Daisy & Violet:
 Who will ever call to say I love you?
 Send me flowers or a telegram?
 Who could proudly stand beside me?
 Who will love me as I am?
 Daisy:
 Like a clown whose tears cause laughter
 Trapped inside the center ring
 Violet:
 Even seeing smiling faces
 I am lonely pondering
 Daisy & Violet:
 Who would want to join this madness?
 Who would change my monogram?
 Who will be part of my circus?
 Who will love me as I am?
 Who will ever call to say I love you?
 Send me flowers or a telegram?
 Who could proudly stand beside me?
 Who will love me as I am?
 Who could proudly stand beside me?
 Who will love me as I am?

“Almost Real”

I couldn't talk about what has shaped the musical theatre landscape in general without talking about what has shaped my personal musical theatre landscape, and to do that, I have to talk about people who inspire me. Besides Barbara Cook and Dame Julie Andrews, there are many other Broadway men and women who have made me a better artist just simply by their example.

Kelli O'Hara rises to the top of any list of inspirations I've ever made, and I've undertaken the incredibly daunting task of singing tonight several songs that she sings. Part of the reason I chose that medley of songs from “The King and I” to begin the program

was that the first show I ever saw on Broadway was “The King and I”, with O’Hara in the role for which she finally won her first Tony Award. I’m not presuming to compare myself to her in any way, but O’Hara is inspiring to me partly because her voice has a similar lightness to mine, a quality that we don’t really hear in modern Broadway. There are the pop/rock belters, and there are the more operatic singers, but many of those classical singers have heavier, darker tones to their voices, even if they are sopranos.

“The Bridges of Madison County”, for which O’Hara was nominated for her fifth Tony, premiered on Broadway in 2014, and although it contains a lot of very modern-sounding jazz, Americana and country styles of music, the songs of the main character Francesca are very much rooted in the older, more lyrical and operatic traditions of musical theatre, almost coming full circle in terms of this program. This song, in my opinion, is one of the most gorgeous musical theatre songs ever written; it’s called “Almost Real”.

“Almost Real”

When a girl grows up in Napoli, there are roads laid out before her
 And you understand, I'm speaking of the times before the war
 When a girl grows up in Napoli, she is more or less a target
 For her mama's expectations, for the boys' infatuations
 All she gets is one decision: will she give them what they want?

My sister Chiara wore tight-fitting sweaters, unbuttoned just so
 Chiara would squeeze every drop of attention wherever she'd go
 Chiara said, "Cesca, you must be prepared"
 Chiara would act as though nobody cared
 Chiara would laugh at me, quiet and scared...

And I dreamed of a flat in Siena, on the market square,
 With a book and a pot and a window, and a single chair
 Far from lonesome, far from Chiara, almost real

Paolo was a boy from down the hill with silver eyes and hair like coal
 And massive hands that trembled when he looked my way.
 Paolo was a boy who loved to swim, and who knows why I fell for him,
 But soon enough I kissed him on a winter's day.

Chiara said, "Cesca, he's dull and he's dumb.
 You'll end up a farm wife, exhausted and numb.
 I'm off to the serviceman's club; you should come!"

But I dreamed of the beach at Ancona, where our kids would play,
 Paolo right by my side, and the ocean only steps away
 Close to heaven, far from Chiara, almost real.

Chiara went dancing while air raid sirens were shrieking.
 Chiara would open her legs just as easy as speaking.
 Paolo went off with the Army and never returned.
 And all that Chiara could say was, "I hope now you've learned."

And the streets were rubble, and the water was filthy
 And there were no cigarettes and no haircuts
 And no thinking about the future.
 And I sat at the harbor, watching the American ships
 And then...

I looked up and I saw an American smile down at me.
 And I knew if I just took his hand, I could at last be free.
 I could love him, I could want him
 Only take me from Italia,
 Far from Chiara, far enough that I could feel almost real.

"Beautiful"

This final song perfectly combines the folk-rock music that I grew up singing and musical theatre styles. "Beautiful: The Carole King Musical", is about the life of another of my songwriting and musical heroes, and uses her own songs to tell her story. King's unusual voice is not one that I am going to try and imitate, because it is much more of a gutsy, rock 'n roll voice than mine, but this is another song that I've had a lot of fun trying to make my own. The message of this song is wonderful, and dare I say, timely. This is "Beautiful".

"Beautiful"

You've got to get up every morning
 With a smile in your face

And show the world all the love in your heart
 Then people gonna treat you better
 You're gonna find, yes you will
 That you're beautiful, as you feel

Waiting at the station with a workday wind a-blowing
 I've got nothing to do but watch the passers-by
 Mirrored in their faces I see frustration growing
 And they don't see it showing, why do I?

You've got to get up every morning
 With a smile in your face
 And show the world all the love in your heart
 Then people gonna treat you better
 You're gonna find, yes you will
 That you're beautiful as you feel

I have often asked myself the reason for sadness
 In a world where tears are just a lullaby
 If there's any answer, maybe love can end the madness
 Maybe not, oh, but we can only try

You've got to get up every morning
 With a smile in your face
 And show the world all the love in your heart
 Then people gonna treat you better
 You're gonna find, yes you will
 That you're beautiful as you feel

Thank you to:

I want to thank my parents, of course, for providing lifelong love and support. I'd like to thank Rebecca Sipe and all the people at the Honors College for treating this recital as an acceptable thesis project, and Pam Cardell for letting me use the Lab Theatre and working with me to find a good time to do the recital. I'm so grateful to my wonderful friends Sera and H, who took time out of their busy schedules to come sing so beautifully with me.

I want to say a huge thank you to the incomparable Ryan Lewis, who of course played beautifully and helped so much with arrangements of these songs. Finally, I want to thank my incredible mentor Pirooz Aghssa, who always found time to offer superb advice and guide me through this project. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with him on this.