

GCSE: musical theatre

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The origins and characteristics of musical theatre are complex and varied. In this article we examine eight key features, which together form a broad approach to the topic.

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A list of resources for further study can be found on the Rhinegold website, www.rhinegold.co.uk

Resources:

- ▶ Old programmes usually contain plot synopses and background information – check out the UK's theatre museums, including the Mander and Mitchenson Museum in Beckenham, and the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden for back copies.
- ▶ The introductory sections on America and Britain in Gänzl's *Book of the Musical Theatre* are highly recommended, if a little dry! The book is an excellent reference for plots and background, and contains a substantial section on operetta.

Historical roots and influences

Although many people think of musicals as a resolutely American genre, musical theatre actually has its roots in the early ballad operas of the UK (beginning with John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*) and the burlesque comedies of Gilbert and Sullivan, as well as the operettas of Offenbach (France), Johann Strauss and Lehar (Germany and Austria).

The early musicals, usually called musical comedies, follies or revues, were weak on plot, and strong on songs, dance and ensemble. Some had no pretension to plot at all (revues) and others used a skeleton plot as an excuse for a string of songs. George and Ira Gershwin's *Lady Be Good* is a typical example, containing hit songs that endure as standards today (*The Man I Love*, *Fascinating Rhythm*), although nobody remembers their context or the plot of the musical. This type of musical endured into the 1930s.

The art form was evolving from the late 20s and throughout the 30s. In 1927 Jerome Kern collaborated with Oscar Hammerstein to write a musical that explored a difficult racial issue – miscegenation (mixed race). For this reason, *Showboat* is considered by some to be a watershed in the development of musical theatre. It also fused significant popular music influences with a more traditional operetta style, using contemporary dance rhythms and elements of blues.

In the years that followed, up to the end of World War II, the dramatic envelope was pushed by American writers including the composer Richard Rodgers, in association with lyricists Lorenz Hart and later Oscar Hammerstein. In 1945 the integration of song and book (the dramatic plot that the musical is based upon) reached a new pinnacle with the Rodgers and Hammerstein partnership on *Oklahoma!* Previously, the preferred use of the song was to comment upon the story thus far, with the plot effectively stopping while the characters sang. But in *Oklahoma* the songs seemed to grow naturally out of the situations, and so the plot could move forward using song in addition to text. The 'classic book' musical was born and it dominated the genre for 20 years.

Great musicals from this era include *West Side Story* (Bernstein and Sondheim), *My Fair Lady* (Lerner and Loewe) and *Guys and Dolls* (Frank Loesser).

Contemporary influences

Defining musical theatre post-1970 is more complex. Musical influences are numerous, ranging from motown, rock or country (*The Wiz*, *Hair*, *Tommy*) to pop and Bollywood (*Rent*, *Aida*, *Bombay Dreams*) and the epic musicals of the 80s and 90s (*Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*, *Phantom of the Opera*). Dramatic structure also varies enormously, and concept musicals (*Cats*, *Jerry Springer: The Opera*) can rub shoulders with classic book musicals (*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*): we might say that the implausible plot of *We Will Rock You*, which uses some of the greatest popular song material of the 20th century, is a throwback to the old musical comedies of the 1920s (and it is by no means the only example). In the UK Tim Rice breathed a more contemporary life into the British musical theatre scene (*Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* with Andrew Lloyd Webber, and *Chess* with Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson). In the USA, Sondheim has consistently fused book, text and song in a variety of dramatic structures ranging from melodrama (*Sweeney Todd*), through light comedy (*A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*) to historical revue (*Assassins*) to film (*Dick Tracy*).

Finally, we cannot omit the influence of Disney on the contemporary musical theatre scene. Not only are there numerous examples of cartoons using popular song and pop artists (*Mulan* and *Hercules* featuring Christina Aguilera and Michael Bolton respectively), but Disney cartoons are now also being transformed with great commercial success into stage productions (*The Lion King*, *Beauty and the Beast*).

So the musical or, more properly, musical theatre, is a fusion of popular song and dramatic presentation. Songs that would now be considered very dated in style – ranging from *What'll I do?* by Irving Berlin (*Music Box* revue, 1923), through *The Lady is a Tramp* by Rodgers and Hart (*Babes in Arms*, 1937) to *What I Did for Love* by Marvin Hamlisch (*A Chorus Line*, 1975) – were once the hit numbers of the day. How far can we go using the category of 'songs from musicals'? Do we consider the songs from *Toy Story* (think of the excellent *When She Loved Me* from *Toy Story II*) and *Moulin Rouge* to be musical songs? They are presented in a dramatic context, either commenting on, advancing or giving a new perspective on the plot. This fits the definition of musical theatre, even if the original context of the song (Sting's *Roxanne*) is entirely different.

Subject matter

Prior to *Showboat*'s exploration of racial issues, musicals were high on the 'feel-good factor'. This persisted into the early 1940s to some degree until *Oklahoma!* hit the scene, with its undertones of darkness in the character Judd (he kidnaps the heroine, Laurie, plans to rape her and eventually hangs himself). Many musicals post-*Oklahoma* are written around issues of conflict. Contemporary musicals are not afraid to explore difficult issues and these are balanced by comedy or satire, and (usually) some form of romantic interest. Here are some of the types of conflict tackled in musical theatre, with examples:

Racial issues: *Ragtime*, *Parade*, *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Miss Saigon*, *Showboat*, *The Sound of Music*, *Cabaret*.

Gender/sexuality issues: *March of the Falsettos*, *A Chorus Line*.

Sex equality: *Ragtime*, *Yentl*.

Disfunctional relationships: *Tommy*, *Oliver!*, *Into the Woods*.

Occult/spiritual: *Lady in the Dark*, *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, *The Witches of Eastwick*.

Living with serious illness: *Rent*, *March of the Falsettos*.

Ageing: *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Gypsy*.

Rebellion: *Les Misérables*, *Hair*.

Murder: *Chicago*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Assassins*, *Blood Brothers*.

Social pressures: *Grease*, *Hairspray*, *Carousel*, *Porgy and Bess*, *A Chorus Line*.

As musicals deal with contemporary issues, or timeless issues using contemporary means, they usually have a sell-by date, and revivals are often updated.

This gives the composer, lyricist and book-writer an opportunity to improve on the original, usually by writing new plot lines or songs.

Exercise

1. Choose a classic book musical of the 50s, such as *The Sound of Music*, *Guys and Dolls* or *West Side Story*. Discuss the issues that are highlighted in the musical. Are they relevant to the society of today?
2. If you were to put on a new production, what issues would you update and how would you achieve this?
3. Creators of musical theatre are not averse to using challenging issues. What issues might be featured today in a new dramatic musical?

For more on this, see pages 19–25

The Second Mrs Kong, by Harrison Birtwistle and Russell Hoban, contains lines such as 'Nobody ever comes here but the dead and they're dead boring.'

The 1937 smash-hit *Me and My Girl* was extensively rewritten by Stephen Fry for the revival in 1985, and Frank Wildhorn has released several versions of his hit show *Jekyll and Hyde*.

The function of song

The use of music heightens any situation – music is used in films to support the existing emotion or subvert it (an apparently normal scene might have creepy music as underscoring). So when a character in a musical suddenly bursts into song, something of major importance is happening or is about to happen. But what differentiates musicals from opera, since both are dramatic forms with songs and music? Each is capable of exploring the highs and lows of human experience, but they do it via different means. Musical tends to be text-driven with detailed lyrics and strong scripts (books). Opera tends to be voice-driven, with large-scale, technically demanding vocal vehicles and an emphasis on both musicianship and grand emotions. It is interesting to note that in recent years the two forms have begun to merge, with contemporary operas using more colloquial scripts, and contemporary musicals (such as *Les Misérables*) being through-composed with very little unsung script.

It is so unusual for people to burst into song at the drop of a hat that recent television programmes, including the excellent episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – 'Once More With Feeling', have both used and subverted the idea. So when do we sing spontaneously?

Exercises

1. Ask the class to come up with different 'real life' (i.e. not performance) situations in which people sing. Examples might be:
 - in worship and other forms of ritual
 - at a football match
 - singing a lullaby to a child.
2. Discuss what motivates the person or group to sing in this context. Is anything achieved through singing the song (what effect does it have on the listener/singer)?
3. Think of examples in performance art where song is used in real-life contexts – plays, musicals, films, cartoons – and what effect this might have on the audience.

Follow this up with the following exercise:

1. Think of an individual song that you like – it should not be from a musical (for example, Christina Aguilera's *Beautiful*).
2. Create a context for the song, using an event from your own experience.
3. Discuss what purpose the song might serve in your imagined situation – is there an outcome? Does something change as a result of the song?

Music and text

Composers working with text have special decisions to make, whether they write their music before the lyricist (Richard Rodgers with Lorenz Hart) or after (Richard Rodgers with Oscar Hammerstein). In general, word setting in musical theatre sticks quite closely to the shapes and cadences of speech – more so than operatic vocal writing.

Here are two exercises that will help develop insight into the special role of music in musical theatre (as opposed to staging or action); insight into word-setting and an understanding of the emotional messaging of music. Use these exercises to discover how different composers tackle the issues of song writing.

Exercise 1

Choose a solo song from two different musicals, preferably written at least 20 years apart. Discuss the following points:

1. Does the composer set one note or more than one note on each syllable?
2. Does the melody stress each word as it is spoken, or does it change the stress (emphasising an unimportant syllable by putting it on a strong beat or a higher or longer note)?
3. How has the composer demonstrated the most important part of each sentence (higher or longer notes, different rhythms, large pitch intervals)?
4. What emotions has the composer chosen to emphasise in each sentence, and how has he achieved that using musical and rhythmic notation?
5. Now take the lyrics and read them aloud separately, as if they were in a script. Discuss whether it is easy or difficult to read the words without using the rhythm that the composer has set.

Exercise 2

1. Choose a song from a musical and play it to the class. It is essential that the song is presented without the words first, using song accompaniment scores. The class learns the melody without the words, exploring it vocally and instrumentally, as appropriate.
2. Discuss possible emotional messages generated by the music.
3. Decide what words they would like to write to this melody, and write them down.
4. The song is performed with each pupil's words either as a solo or in an ensemble, as appropriate.
5. The class then listens to a performance of the original and comments on the success of the combination of words and music. How appropriate is the word setting, form, shape and feel?

Jason Robert Brown has written *The Last Five Years*, *Songs for a New World* and *Parade*. Lynn Ahrens has written *Seussical*, *Once On This Island*, *Lucky Stiff*, *Ragtime* and *Anastasia*.

When writing for the cartoon *Anastasia*, Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens met only three of the screenwriters, and the songs were written before the screenplay had been completed.

The composer Stephen Sondheim is particularly good at setting words in a conversational style. Sondheim has written many musicals including *A Little Night Music*, *Company*, *Into the Woods* and *Bassassins*, and wrote the lyrics for Bernstein's music in *West Side Story*.

A pre-recorded version of the song is really useful. Prepare a version in which the melodic line is clear and the harmonic structure honoured.

Allow 20–30 minutes for this part of the lesson. You may need to play the accompaniment with melody several times or may prefer to use a pre-recorded version.

Musical style

Musical theatre tends to reflect contemporary issues or stylistic trends. So, if the plot is retrospective, the perspective may well be contemporary. The music is often influenced by contemporary style. The scores of Lynn Ahrens and of Jason Robert Brown are filled with references to country music or folk rock.

Exercise

Occasionally a musical will use contrasting styles.

1. Listen to a recording or DVD of the Disney cartoon *Mulan*. The film contains two versions of the same song, *Reflection*. During the story, the song is sung by Lea Salonga, a musical theatre singer and creator of the role of Miss Saigon; during the credits for the cartoon, it is sung by Christina Aguilera, a highly successful pop recording artist, who brings her own style to the song.
2. Discuss the differences in vocal sound and musical style. What are the stylistic elements of each performance – how do the two singers move between the notes, use volume, pitch-glides (often called 'licks' in pop) or add extra notes? What emotions are evoked by each singer?
3. Discuss possible reasons for Disney using two different performances of the same song. Are both performances valid?

Musical theatre songs can be written as conversational snippets or strong monologues, either talking to someone else or to yourself.

Exercise

1. Ask your students to compose a tune of 16 bars, and to create or find words that fit their melody. Why have they chosen those words? Sample briefs might include buying a CD, asking for a train ticket, or ordering a meal.
2. Take eight lines of a speech or poem. Using either standard musical or graphic notation or a graphic score, students should sketch out the basic pitch-shape of the speech. Then exaggerate the pitch peaks and troughs and add expression marks (*pp*, *cresc.* etc). Ask them to indicate where they would put emotional and/or musical peaks, and where they would place the climax of the text.
3. Take four lines of a simple conversation that might be heard in a TV soap. Set them to music: example briefs might be gentle conversation between two lovers, an argument between friends, parent and teenager interaction. An alternative is to use phrases that students have heard on the bus, in the canteen, walking down the street.

4. Take the same four lines of conversation and music, and ask the class to alter the music or timing to change the atmosphere or emotional content of the piece. Examples might be spikier (dotted rhythms), gentler (dynamic markings and rhythmic smoothness), more heated (bigger pitch leaps, faster tempo markings). Discuss what you have to change to create a different atmosphere.
5. Students should describe a recent event in their life as if they were creating a news item for the TV news. They should aim to make their report factual and unemotional, with description rather than conversation. Ask them to decide how they would set their script to music. What musical style would they use – rap, reggae, waltz, march – and why? What instrumentation would reflect what they want to portray? Would the song have verse and chorus, or be through-composed? Do they want to make the music underline the emotion, or play against it (a comedy song for a serious subject)?

Multi-character songs

An important feature of musical theatre writing (as with operatic writing) is the opportunity for several characters to speak at once, portraying different emotions or reactions to situations. Music enables the audience to multi-task, processing different layers of information. Here are two pieces that demonstrate multiple emotions: *Master of the House* from *Les Misérables*, and *Prima Donna* from *Phantom of the Opera*.

Master of the House is a comedy character duet for Thenadier and Madame Thenadier. In the musical these two characters provide important moments of light relief in an otherwise epic and moral story. This number marks Thenadier's first appearance, and gives a very strong portrayal of the couple's situation, their interaction and their aspirations. Thenadier believes himself to be a good landlord, Madame Thenadier has other ideas. The audience is left in no doubt that the Thenadiers are argumentative (lyrics), basically dishonest (plot, lyrics and orchestration) and charming in their own way (melody and musical style).

The simple, highly repetitive tune has the feel of a music hall number: the emotions are strong and clear, the chorus is repeated so that the audience can learn the tune quickly and feel a sense of connection with the characters (even join in the singing), and there is almost a sense of 'crossing the footlights' – singing directly to the audience as if the characters know that they are in a theatre.

The verse is a simple A-minor tune, and the accompaniment has a classical feel, with 'oom-cha' chords. But the orchestration states that there is something not quite right about the Thenadiers – clashing harmonies using a B \flat in the offbeat chords, a wailing saxophone in the melodic interjections, and a punchy synthesized bass giving a dirtier

Les Misérables Original London Cast Album, First Night records, ROLECDI. *Phantom of the Opera* Original London Cast Album, Universal, 5439282

Internet resources

When sourcing copies of any of the tracks listed in this article, you will find the following useful:

- ▶ Napster or iTunes legal download sites – access to a number of original cast albums and cover versions for listening or downloading.
- ▶ www.musicals101.com – an excellent site on the musical with a large reference section
- ▶ www.musicnotes.com – sheet music sales and downloads, with extensive Broadway music section
- ▶ www.getlyrics.com – reference site for song lyrics

feel to the song. The harmonies are simple and straightforward: the verse uses tonic, dominant and subdominant, with the last four bars forming the transition into the major key; the chorus revolves around a tonic/dominant pattern, with the submediant used only in passing towards the end. Note the tempo differences as Thenadier moves between situations – slower (more ingratiating) for greeting new customers, faster for the chorus (whipping up the crowd to support him). Madame Thenadier's verse is slower, with a different rhythmic pattern in the accompaniment, and more of the feel of an elephantine Schubert lied. The orchestration under her first chorus is more elegant, with upper woodwind semiquaver patterns giving a slightly more feminine, more educated impression. The final chorus continues with Madame Thenadier interrupting and alternating with the ensemble, and there is an extra four bars of music inserted before the ending – the 'repetition for emphasis' rule.

'Prima Donna' is a septet for opera singers Carlotta and Piangi, theatre managers Monsieur André and Monsieur Firmin, Visconte Raoul, dancer Meg and ballet mistress Madame Giry. Carlotta has been insulted once too often by the letters from the Phantom, and threatens not to sing. The other six characters react in different ways, reflected in their music.

Lloyd Webber has chosen to set this scene to a stately 19th-century Viennese waltz, such as those written by Johann Strauss II. The distinctive characteristics in this style include sweeping, arching phrases and rich harmonies. The waltz is always in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, and the particular Viennese lilt is created in performance by bringing the second beat of the bar in slightly early and delaying the third beat slightly. This pattern in orchestral music is usually only followed for the first few bars of each musical section.

At first glance, the scene appears to be a beautiful and melodic ensemble in praise of Carlotta's skill as a singer and the magic of opera as an art form. However, under the serene surface there are several interesting characteristics. The managers usually sing together, and Monsieur André stays within the musical style throughout, indicating his more old-fashioned values and his total focus on persuading Carlotta to sing. Monsieur Firmin's vocal line, however, contains tiny clashes, chromatic passing notes (B \flat s against B \natural s); Firmin is the more pragmatic and resigned of the two managers, and is reluctant to deal with Carlotta's temperament.

Madame Giry's line is particularly interesting as it contains several very strong harmonic clashes, including D \flat against a G minor chord and D \flat against a C dominant seventh chord. In the vocal writing as in the production, Madame Giry, who knows more than she is telling, is held apart from the other characters.

In the coda, the Phantom interrupts the procedure with a spoken voiceover issuing dire warnings. The orchestration under the singers' sustained B \flat chord highlights the tension by using a church organ

sound playing rising and falling chromatic triads. They end on E major, the furthest key from B \flat major – in the medieval period the augmented fourth was considered the devil's interval. The final chord has Carlotta on a high D (the third of the chord in B \flat), giving a more triumphant feel, that the singers will win over adversity.

Exercise

Choose an ensemble piece from a 'blockbuster' musical ('Cell Block Tango' from *Chicago* is a good example) and examine the relationship between the characters in their dramatic context. How much information can we discover about each character? How is this information reflected in the vocal writing and musical style?

This exercise can also be used as character research in preparation for performance projects.

Songs in performance

Every successful performance of a song has a subtext – the thoughts and emotions that lie behind the character's words. Singing the same words but changing the subtext can alter the emotion, atmosphere, and even the purpose of the song.

Exercise 1

Experiment with changing the character's underlying thought. Sing the following sentences (from *Chicago* and *Les Misérables* respectively) using the following subtexts.

'Come on babe, why don't we paint the town, and all that jazz.'

1. 'I'm very experienced, and I can give you a great time' (assertive, inviting).
2. 'Don't keep me waiting, I get angry if I'm kept waiting' (aggressive, bullying).
3. 'I need to score right now, can't you just let me have a little till payday?' (desperate, anxious).

or

(Set in a café) 'Empty chairs at empty tables.'

1. 'I'm a waiter and I won't get any tips. Again' (resigned).
2. 'I'm late for the match, and they've gone off without me' (stressed).
3. 'The café is strewn with the dead bodies of my friends, and I'm the only one left alive' (shocked, numb).

Ask students to detail the differences between the three versions in each case. What did you have to do to portray the differences – tempo, tonal colour, dynamic range? Did you change the way you moved between the words or notes – more slides, more clipped, lazier?

These exercises that will enable pupils to improve communication and performance skills, increase understanding of words and meaning, and give insight into lyric writing and contextual meaning.

George Gershwin began his career as a Tin Pan Alley pianist, playing popular songs for hours each day to prospective buyers.

Lady in the Dark (1941), by Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin, contains one particular song, 'My Ship', that appears throughout the show, but is only sung in its entirety once the leading lady has completed her psychoanalysis.

Exercise 2

What happens if you change the words of a song but keep the general meaning of the sentence? In the *Phantom* duet 'All I Ask of You', Christine sings the following: 'Say you love me every waking moment, turn my head with thoughts of summertime'.

1. Discuss the phrases chosen by the lyricist – what is special about 'turn my head', and why does Christine want 'thoughts of summertime'?
2. Discuss whether the language suits the period (19th-century Paris) and the situation (lovers' meeting).
3. How would students express this in their own words? Get them to find a modern-day situation where this might happen. For example, texting a boyfriend: 'Tell me you think about me all the time – I would love you if you shared your feelings with me.'
4. Sing the musical phrase, inserting your own version of the words (the rhythms will change).
5. Go through the same four points using Raoul's words to the same music: 'Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime. Let me lead you from your solitude.'

Musical influences

Even in the 1920s, the merchandise connected with a musical could bring in a large amount of money for the backers. Before cast albums caught on, sheet music of songs from the shows was available in all the large towns. Tin Pan Alley in Manhattan was a street given over to music publishers, who would sell the latest tunes to anyone who visited. Theatregoers would arrive at the offices and instruct one of the resident pianists to play whatever was popular at the time. Historically this is why sheet music songbooks are often in different keys to the ones found in the show – if the amateur pianist could play the accompaniment, it did not matter that the singer could not sing it, hence songs were transposed into keys that were easy to play and read.

The classic book musical would usually begin with an overture, a medley of sections from each major song, woven into a single orchestral tapestry. This would help the audience to tune into what was about to happen, and introduce them to the new musical ideas incorporated into the show (Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, written this century, has revived this tradition). On a more commercial level, the more a song was repeated during the show, the more likely the audience would remember it and buy the merchandise afterwards. Composers would often bring a melody back in different guises throughout a show.

Since the rise of the recording industry, songs are sometimes written for the show but released as singles; occasionally the success of a song released prior to the opening of the musical will create a frenzy

of anticipation, and give a new show massive publicity ('I Know Him So Well', from *Chess*, was a UK number one several months before the show opened).

Gathering information

By using musical style, orchestration and tempo, a large amount of information is available to the listener before any words have been sung.

Currently running in the West End, *We Will Rock You* is a rock musical based on songs by Queen. The multiple keyboard players, drum-kit and two lead guitarists instantly evoke the sound and feel of a rock concert. Specialist instruments can give a specific feel to the music – *Phantom* has a harp for a more romantic, classical feel; *Me and My Girl* is set in the early 20th century, and the orchestration includes a banjo – a typical instrument from the period.

In addition, an arranger on a musical is often working within guidelines, which can include the size of the orchestra pit. When *Les Misérables* opened at the Palace Theatre in the West End, the production had an orchestra with a string section, woodwind and brass, percussion and two keyboard players, with the first keyboard player playing continuously throughout the show. When the show moved venues recently to the smaller Queen's Theatre, the orchestration was altered and a new electronic 'orchestra' replaced several of the players.

The following exercise will help increase audio comprehension, giving insights into how disparate sections of music are linked:

Exercise 1

My Fair Lady is a classic book musical – play the overture used in the film version and discuss how different songs within the overture are linked. Does the composer (or arranger) use key changes and/or tempo changes, does the orchestration match in each song, do they join seamlessly or is there linking music – and is it successful?

Exercise 2

1. Choose an existing book of fiction with which students are fairly familiar (examples might include works by Dickens, or *Bridget Jones's Diary*). Discuss the place and period of the book – what information is provided that enables one to pinpoint the setting (language, costume, architecture, class structure etc.)?
2. Think of setting the novel to music – what instrumentation or sounds would you use to evoke the period (small band, orchestra, specialist instruments, piano/keyboard, percussion)?
3. What musical styles would be appropriate to that period (classic dances, genre-specific music, contemporary pop)?

See Stephen Citron *Sondheim and Lloyd Webber, the New Musical* pages 3–13

This exercise focuses on the musical as an art form, enabling pupils to gain insights into the complexity of the genre and how commercial and social factors might influence the creative process.

My Fair Lady, original film soundtrack with Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn, Sony Classical, SMK66711. Julie Andrews created the role on stage, but was replaced in the film by Audrey Hepburn, whose singing voice was dubbed by Marni Nixon.

Musical excerpts from all these duets can be found on the Rhinegold website. *Guys and Dolls* original cast album, recently digitally remastered, Universal, 159112. *Guys and Dolls Vocal Selection* ISBN: 0881882011

Musicals use material from many sources, including myths and legends (*Camelot, Jekyll and Hyde*), opera (*Rent, Aida*), classic literature and poetry (*Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Scarlet Pimpernel, Martin Guerre, Cats*), cartoons (*Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King*) and films (*The Producers, Sunset Boulevard*). Many musicals have also transferred from stage to screen (*Chicago, My Fair Lady*) and from screen to stage (*Singing in the Rain, Calamity Jane, Mary Poppins*). Ask students to name a recent musical written for the screen.

Exercise 3

1. *Chicago* was created as a stage musical, and has run in the West End for several years. Recently the show was remade as a film with Catherine Zeta Jones, Renée Zellweger and Richard Gere. Discuss the problems that might occur when moving a musical from stage to screen or vice versa. Think in terms of staging, sets, size of cast, budget, special effects and so on.
2. Discuss a recent (non-musical) film that might be good material for a stage musical, and indicate reasons for choosing that film. Highlight any difficulties that might arise. An example might be *X-Men 2*, a film with a strong, colourful story line, social comment, oppression and racial tension, a variety of important characters, ordinary characters struggling with extraordinary powers, and a blurring of the lines between good and evil.

Vocal styles

Knowledge of various styles can be used to inform any performance element of the exam and project work. It will also contribute to appraisal skills and understanding of form. The vocal styles prevalent in the genre have arisen from two directions. Since the vast majority of performers have trained first as actors, the emphasis is on text and character (unlike opera, where the emphasis is on voice and musicianship). Therefore the singing style has developed from the desire for textual comprehension rather than beauty of tone. In addition, composers of musicals have embraced popular music genres, so songs can contain a number of different influences including rap, fusion, rock and classical. Increasingly, pop and R&B vocal riffs are appearing in the theatre, and crossover songs are becoming the norm.

Here are three duets from musicals written in different styles. Use these notes as a basis for discussions on musical style, vocal style, characterisation, orchestration.

1. I'll know (male-female) from *Guys and Dolls* (Frank Loesser), a classic book musical opening in 1950 and filmed in 1955. This is a 'not-love' duet between Sarah, a Salvation Army leader, and

Sky Masterson, a gambler. The general feel is of a classic book musical, with a classically biased vocal line containing large leaps (9ths) and long phrases. It has a verse/chorus feel similar to Gershwin songs of the 1930s with short, repeated musical phrases and words, and fairly standard harmonies. Using the original cast album as a reference, Robert Alda (Sky) sounds like a pop crooner of the 1940s, and much of Isabel Bigley's singing (Sarah) would not be out of place in an English operetta. The male crooner style, epitomised by Bing Crosby, includes a lazy, de-energised delivery, with a straight, slightly defocused sound. The female classical crossover singing style includes lower notes in chest voice, upper notes in lyric soprano head voice, with clean moves between each note, and sustained vowels with late-changing diphthongs and clipped consonants. Features of these characterisations include the use of different accents, with Sarah singing in a 'correct' standard American and Sky singing with a New York accent. The orchestration is lush, with a heavily featured swooping string section, prevalent in MGM musicals of the 30s and 40s.

2. I'll cover you (male-male) from *Rent* (Jonathan Larson), a rock opera which opened in 1996.

A love duet between Tom Collins, a computer genius, and Angel, a transvestite street drummer. The general feel is rock musical, with stylistic elements in the vocal line including vocal slides and pitch drops, extra notes, use of falsetto, and added scat phrases. The accent has moved away from standard American and more towards motown, for a poppier feel. The sung rhythms move between $\frac{6}{8}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ and the two voices move mostly in unison, thirds and sixths with the impression of improvisation. The music moves in simple chord progressions, but with unusual notes added to the chords (9ths, 7ths, 4ths). The orchestration is light with a small number of instruments including drumkit, synthesizer, keyboards, and electric and bass guitars playing a rhythmic backing.

3. In his eyes (female-female) from *Jekyll and Hyde* (Frank Wildhorn and Leslie Bricusse) a contemporary musical opening in 1997.

A duet for Lucy, a prostitute, and Emma Carew, a society lady, in love with the same man, Dr Jekyll. A short introduction leads into the song proper – the orchestration is lush, with a large string section, woodwind and brass, and a piano. This is an old-fashioned ballad, overlaid with contemporary singing. It is written for accomplished singer-actors – in this case a soprano belter and contemporary lyric soprano. Note that both singers have to belt, but that the more lyric role (Emma) uses a sweeter sound. The musical style includes back-phrasing (delaying important words or musical points beyond the written rhythm while the orchestra continues), and general rubato (flexibility of tempo for singers and orchestra together within each phrase). There is a wide range of tonal colours (including breathy sounds, speech-like singing and belting) which characterises contemporary musicals. The vocal

What other influences might have contributed to the differences in these pieces?

Rent Vocal Selections ISBN 0-7935-7229-0, *Rent Broadway cast album* MAC, DRD50003

Jekyll and Hyde Original Broadway Cast Album Atlantic, 7567829762, *Jekyll and Hyde Vocal Selections* ISBN 1-57560-071-4

lines echo and intertwine as the two women (who do not realise the other exists) express their emotions. This duet is unusual in that each character could sing the other's lyrics and the listener gains a great deal from knowing the situation from previous scenes. There is a more complicated harmonic structure than in the previous two examples, with more interesting chords (flattened 5ths and 9ths) and chord progressions (Cm7, Cm7^{b5}, F7, Gm7^{b5}, G^bmaj7, C7^{b9} and so on).

Exercise

This exercise follows from lessons based on the vocal styles section:

1. Find three songs on the same topic from different eras. The songs can either be assigned by you or researched by the pupils. Alternatively, different pupils can research different eras.
2. Write about the song or songs or give a mini-presentation in class, describing features of vocal writing that you think are significant. Discuss instrumentation, vocal style, musical and rhythmic style, dramatic purpose, portrayal of characters.

Conclusions

In summary, the musical theatre genre contains a wide range of styles, both musical and vocal. It is text-based and strong on plot. The composition style is closely aligned with the shape of the spoken word, and is often monosyllabic (long phrases on one word are uncommon). Dramatically, the musical can cover any theatrical genre from frothy comedy to dark tragedy. Themes are often contentious, and the plot will often include contemporary issues. Harmonically, the musical tends to reflect current popular trends, although there are exceptions that hark back to previous musical styles. Prevalent vocal styles have arisen from two directions. Since the vast majority of performers who work in the genre have trained first as actors, the emphasis is on text and character (unlike opera, where the emphasis is on voice and musicianship). Therefore the singing style has developed from the desire for textual comprehension rather than beauty of tone. In addition, composers of musicals have embraced popular music genres, and songs can contain a number of different influences including rap, fusion and rock, as well as classical. Marketing and finance are an essential part of the equation, and creators of musicals will often seek out ways of increasing their revenue – writing songs that can be released as singles, or engaging celebrities to appear in key roles. It is a young genre, but one that has developed extremely quickly, with a vast body of work created within the last 80 years.