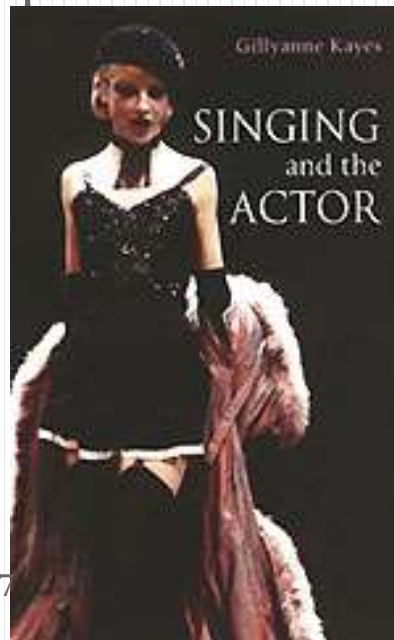


# Singing the Text

Voice, timbre and interpretation in Musical Theatre Singing



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# What is it exactly?





- Hybrid art form combining drama, dance, music and spectacle
- Subject to local cultural influences including popular music, television and film
- Roots in early English Ballad Opera, burlesque comedy, English and European Operetta (1728-late 19<sup>th</sup> Century)
- Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century form called 'Musical Comedy' - subject matter light comedic, romantic
- Contemporary subject matter - dramatic, challenging, intellectual , introspective, satirical, frivolous (any or all)
- US and UK musical traditions currently dominate the 'MT' scene and exported worldwide
- A fast-moving industry with no long-running tradition of pedagogy



# Current challenges

1. Numerous vocal, musical and dramatic styles:
  1. 'legit' e.g. Rodgers and Hammerstein, Sheldon and Brock
  2. Broadway 'show' e.g. Herman, Coleman, Kander and Ebb
  3. 'Verismo' e.g. Sweeney Todd, Les Miserables, Parade, Jekyll and Hyde
  4. Popular music forms - Jazz and Blues to Rock, Funk, Folk, Gospel and Disco e.g. We Will Rock You, The Full Monty, Ain't Misbehavin' Smokey Joe's Cafe, Footloose etc.
2. Singers must have a technique allowing for stylistic flexibility and still maintain vocal health
3. Modern 'MT' singer needs to be a 'triple threat' – how does a training institution cope with this?
4. Decision-makers in 'MT' no idea about voice types - casting mostly on 'look' and dramatic strength
5. Other commercial pressures: 'long runs'; cult of the celebrity

# Some sounds of contemporary 'MT' singing

- Same vocalist, different vocal styles –performed by John Owen Jones
  1. *Bring Him Home* (Boublil / Schönberg / Kretzmer) from 'Les Miserables' 
  2. *King of the World* (Brown) from 'Songs for a New World' 
- Same song, two singers, two styles – *Reflection* (Wilder / Zippel) from the movie 'Mulan'
  1. Lea Salonga 
  2. Christina Aguilera 
- NB all live performance of MT use head mikes and a sound system; sound levels may be high as 95-115dB

# Example -2 client case histories

1. Actor with good movement skills in rock-pop musical needs access to the region B5-D5 – he is a baritone
  - Solutions – ‘thin fold’ singing boosted with ‘twang’; find ‘rock scream’ in falsetto set-up with ‘twang’; use style elements such as on and offset for interest; show how to warm-up and cool down
2. Actress with 8 weeks singing training sings heavy, emotional cabaret numbers in the pitch range E3-A4 – she is a soprano
  - Solutions - address v fold closure at bottom of range; adjust mouth space (formants being ‘lost’); address vocal characterisation for dialogue; raise larynx and use extrinsic support muscles for high ‘chest’ notes; use ‘twang’ for excitement and save the belt notes for emotion *in extremis*

# An exercise in psycho-acoustic perception – *pitch, timbre, duration*

Linda Eder sings *Who am I?* (Wildhorn/Bricusse) from *Jekyll and Hyde* 

- Is she in ‘chest’ or ‘head’? How close is this sound quality to a classical set-up?
- What about that top note – pressed phonation, belt, or just a strong attack?

Clive Rowe sings *Heaven on their Minds* (Webber/Rice) from *Jesus Christ Superstar* 

- Is that belting on ‘Jesus’ at A4 – or just full voice?
- And what is happening between B5 and D5 - ‘true’ – which mechanism is this?

# Voice quality, register, vocal 'fach' and casting

Singing in a variety of different genres means changing vocal production for perceptually different voice qualities

Register mechanisms underlie these qualities; transitions may 'move' and are sometimes exaggerated

Understanding of 'thin' and 'thick' fold phonation is helpful in negotiating possible register transitions within a chosen voice quality

Helping performers understand instrumental nature of *their voice* - essential to maintain vocal health when different sound qualities are required

# Effort and awareness

- Create a system for identifying personal effort levels for individual singers (*after Estill 1992*) e.g.

What is your perceived volume?  
LOW 1-----5 HIGH

How much breath are you using to  
make that sound?

NOT MUCH 1-----5 A LOT

What is the resistance to the  
breath?

MINIMAL 1---5 HIGH

Physical support – where?  
MINIMAL 1-----5 HEAVY DUTY

What is the emotional temperature  
of the song or phrase you are  
singing?

LOW 1 ---HIGH 5

# Breath – one size fits all?

- MT singers more likely to use different phonation types than Western Lyric singers – some qualities more ‘pressed’ or ‘breathy’ – different breath use implied
- Perhaps only possible due to prevalence of microphone in MT?
- Immediacy of text is paramount in story telling –MT singers likely to exaggerate consonant constriction of fricatives and plosives (non-lyric diction)
- Use of multiple on and offsets in popular music genres in MT also changes breath use
- Approaches to breath management need to reflect the important relationship between the breath stream, the valve and the articulators

# An approach for trainers

- Check out underlying register mechanisms - whatever the voice quality – where is the ‘PRT’ – what advice do you have for the singer when they reach this point?
- What is the singer’s full range; how ‘heavy’ or ‘lightweight’ is their voice?
- Ask yourself - can singer sustain *this* voice quality at *this* tessitura over 8 shows a week?
- Be open to different timbres when you work with your singers; help them to express emotional and psychological states for characterisation and story-telling
- Help singers to match voice type with casting type and know their vocal ‘comfort zone’
- Be creative in the way you approach text – MT singing is not about ‘line’ and ‘phrasing’

# A uniquely flexible instrument

- 5 key variables contribute to pitch –
  - Vocal fold mass; tensioning; glottal area; subglottal pressure; damping - Van Den Berg (1958) *Myoelastic-Aerodynamic Theory of Voice Production*
- Vocal tract alterations and linguistic patterns increase the variables.
- Stylistic and character choices increase the variables
- Listen carefully to individual voices - encourage singers towards creative expression in the way that works best for them, *whatever* their performing task, *whatever* their chosen vocal style

# Thanks are due to

- My clients – I am always learning from you
- My husband and Musical Director for many insights into performing challenges of ‘MT’
- Jo Estill - for her observations on voice quality and the concept of effort in singing
- Clinical and medical colleagues at the BVA who have answered many questions with patience and kindness over many years

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