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Deciphering Vocal Demands for Today's Broadway Leading Ladies

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[Associate Editor's note: Unlike opera, there are several terms used for theater with music: *musicals*, *musical theatre*, *musical theater*, and *music theater*. We at the JOS prefer the term *music theater* because it is consistent with the disciplines of *music education*, *music theory*, and *music therapy*, as well as that beloved academic course, *music appreciation*.]

IT'S A SAFE BET THAT ALMOST every voice teacher has encountered a student who dreams of performing on Broadway. While many voice teachers are confident in their ability to address foundations of technique and vocal health, far fewer have the time or resources to keep up with the trends of the complicated, billion-dollar industry that commercial music theater has become. Although traditional opera repertoire largely remains consistent from season to season, Broadway's musical and vocal styles are in a constant state of flux. The current influence of top 40 music and American Idol-style vocal pyrotechnics on Broadway may be a passing fad. Music theater may eventually return to the conservative traditions of Broadway's Golden Age. But is that realistic? What is today's music theater industry requiring of its singers?

Last year, we collected and categorized six months of music theater audition notices, and found that current music theater repertoire generally falls into four main categories:

- legit/classical—songs in the style of opera/opera; and
- traditional—songs in the style of Golden Age Broadway;
- contemporary—pop influenced songs written for the theater;
- pop/rock—songs from top 40 or nontheatrical popular artists.

These categories were taken directly from the job listings posted in *Backstage* magazine, one of the industry's most popular publications to advertise current auditions. During that study, we discovered that over 55% of all paying jobs in music theater requested that the performer bring in a contemporary or pop/rock song to his or her audition. And it seemed that the highest paying jobs—those on Broadway or national tours—requested far more pop/rock audition material than lower paying jobs.¹

Based on the size and scope of last year's research, we realized we would have to narrow our focus in order to more closely observe the details of singing on Broadway. So, we decided to limit this year's research to a very specific demographic: the leading female role in every current Broadway show. Our goal was to answer the following questions:

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- What is the terminology used by the music theater industry to indicate voice quality and production?
- What range and tessitura do these elite female performers need to achieve in order to perform eight shows a week?

In short, what are these women being asked to sing and how are they being asked to sing it?

Reading Audition Notices

When we gathered the audition listings for the twenty-six Broadway musicals open as of May 2014, it became clear that the music theater industry does not have a standardized *Fach* system. Instead, casting directors used many different terms to describe the voice qualities required for a role. In May 2014, “belt” was the most popular term used for voice quality in female roles. Some other terms appeared multiple times, including “mix” and “float.” We also found general voice classifications such as “soprano,” “mezzo,” and “alto.” A few notices specified the top note the performer was expected to sing, as well as the vocal quality needed for that top note. Other notices only used general descriptors such as “great voice.”

This part surprised us: whereas “chest voice” and “head voice” are fairly common terms in the voice studio, they did not appear once in the twenty-six casting notices. The distinction between “belting” and “not belting” was the industry’s preferred choice for terms defining voice quality.

We also found “alto,” “low voice,” and “rock” or “pop voice” as terms used in conjunction with belt, indicating that many theater professionals may consider these terms synonymous to “belt,” or at least similar. But what if the performer was not required to belt? Then the audition notices used terms like “soprano” or “float” to signal that a performer is not belting. The term “legit” also appears as a nonbelt voice quality, but be aware that the music theater industry also uses this term to refer to a genre of repertoire. Performers can sing a song in a “legit style,” or they may be asked to prepare a song from the “legit repertoire.”

Voice Quality Breakdown

Of the twenty-six leading female roles, sixteen requested “belt” alone as a voice quality. Six requested “belt” along with another voice quality, usually a “mix,” and the

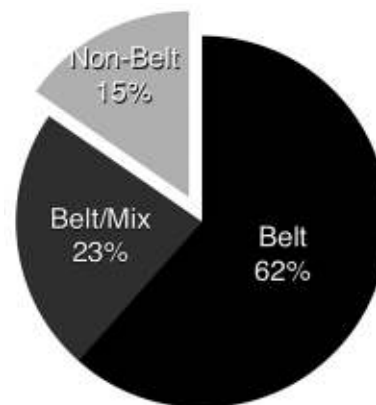


Figure 1. Roles by voice quality requested.

remaining four of roles asked for a “soprano” or “legit” (nonbelt) voice (Figure 1).

So how do these voice qualities break down by the genre categories we found last year?

- 2 legit/classical—neither of which belt;
- 4 traditional music theater—3 of which needed belt;
- 10 contemporary music theater—9 belt;
- 10 pop/rock—all belt.

As one can see, if a performer has a diverse repertoire of contemporary and pop/rock songs in her book, as well as a few traditional songs that also showcase her belt, she is more prepared for the current Broadway landscape.

Translating Audition Sides

Once we had an idea of descriptive terms used for Broadway voices, it was time to find out exactly what notes they have to sing. Since getting a copy of the entire music score of every Broadway show would be difficult, we set out to find the “audition sides” for every show. Audition sides are specific pages from the score chosen by the music director that usually contain the most vocally challenging aspects of the role. If Broadway corresponds to the Olympics of contemporary commercial singing, these audition sides are the Olympic qualifiers. Singers must train to meet these requirements before they are even considered for a leading role.² So, we knew if we could get our hands on the sides for every show, we would have a good idea of what it takes to be considered for a leading role on Broadway.

When we contacted industry professionals to ask for audition sides, many were glad to let voice teachers

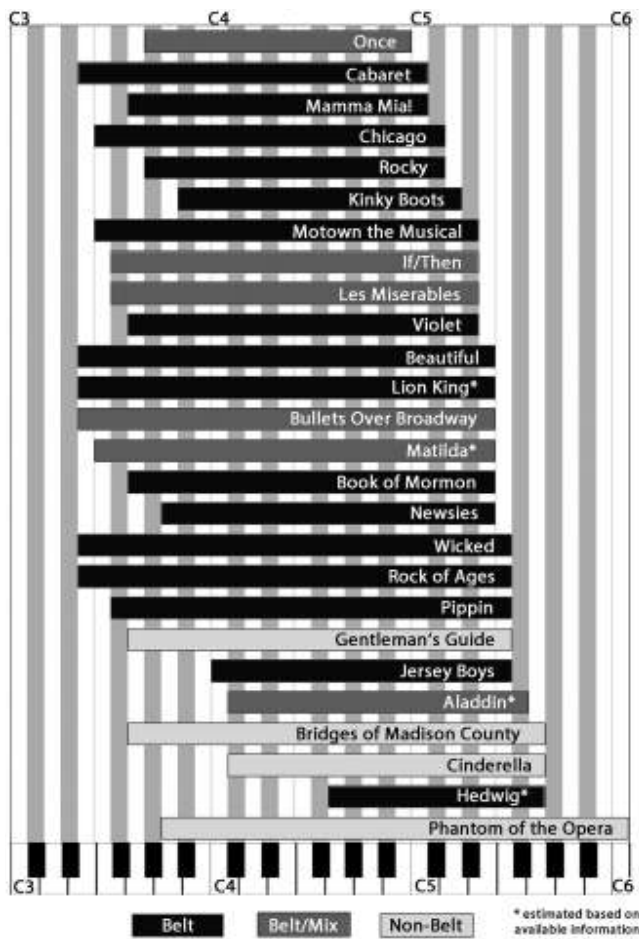


Figure 2. Vocal ranges for Broadway leading female roles as of May 2014 (based on songs required at audition).

have more information to help their students, but on the condition that we would not reveal the actual songs and excerpts that are required for each leading role. Broadway casting directors are by necessity a secretive bunch, as they deal on a daily basis with confidential information between producers, directors, composers, and actors. So, our strategy was to convert the melodic line of each song into a digital file that would provide data on only the pitches of the sung melodies. While this analysis has the limitation of divorcing a pitch from its context within a song, we were at least able to learn how much time each performer spends in each part of her range. By comparing this information with the voice qualities requested in the audition notice, we created a profile of what female Broadway performers are expected to sing in order to compete at the highest level.

Based on these audition sides, Figure 2 charts the singing ranges of every leading female role on Broadway in May 2014. This chart is shaded to illustrate the method of voice production that the audition notice requested for each role. Please remember that even though a role is categorized as a “belt” role, this does not mean that the performer is belting every note throughout their range at all times. Also, this chart may not include the complete range required for each role, only the range required by the audition sides. There were four roles for which we could not obtain complete audition materials, and so we used cast recordings and published sheet music to estimate the range for these roles.

Breaking Down the Information

Once we had all of this raw data, we used the digital note values to create a “tessigraph” for each role, a term coined by Philip Sargent. These charts gave us a visual representation of the most sung pitches by the amount of time spent on each note. Whereas a traditional tessitura is a subjective estimate of where most of a song’s notes lie, the tessigraph shows the exact percentage of time a singer must sing on each pitch. For instance, in a tessigraph for the musical, *Rock of Ages*, we see that the leading female role requires about two and a half minutes combined singing time in the audition, 15% of which is spent on A₄ (Figure 3). That’s about 18 seconds at 440 Hz (identified as the MVP, or Most Vocalized Pitch).

Once we had this information, we divided each tessigraph into three areas based upon our understanding of a traditional *passaggio* at E₄, and music theater’s definition of “high belt” at C₅ and up. While these divisions vary from singer to singer, categorizing each section of the voice helped us visualize what percentage of time our leading ladies were singing in the low, middle, and high extremes of their belt voices.

When we calculated the average of the belt roles only, we found that less than half of the average audition time was spent in a low range, E₄ and below (Figure 4). Over half of the total singing time is spent above the E₄ and 14% of that time is in what could be called “high belt,” C₅ and above. Keep in mind, we’re not saying that these women are belting the entire time, but that the roles requesting “belt” hang out in these ranges.

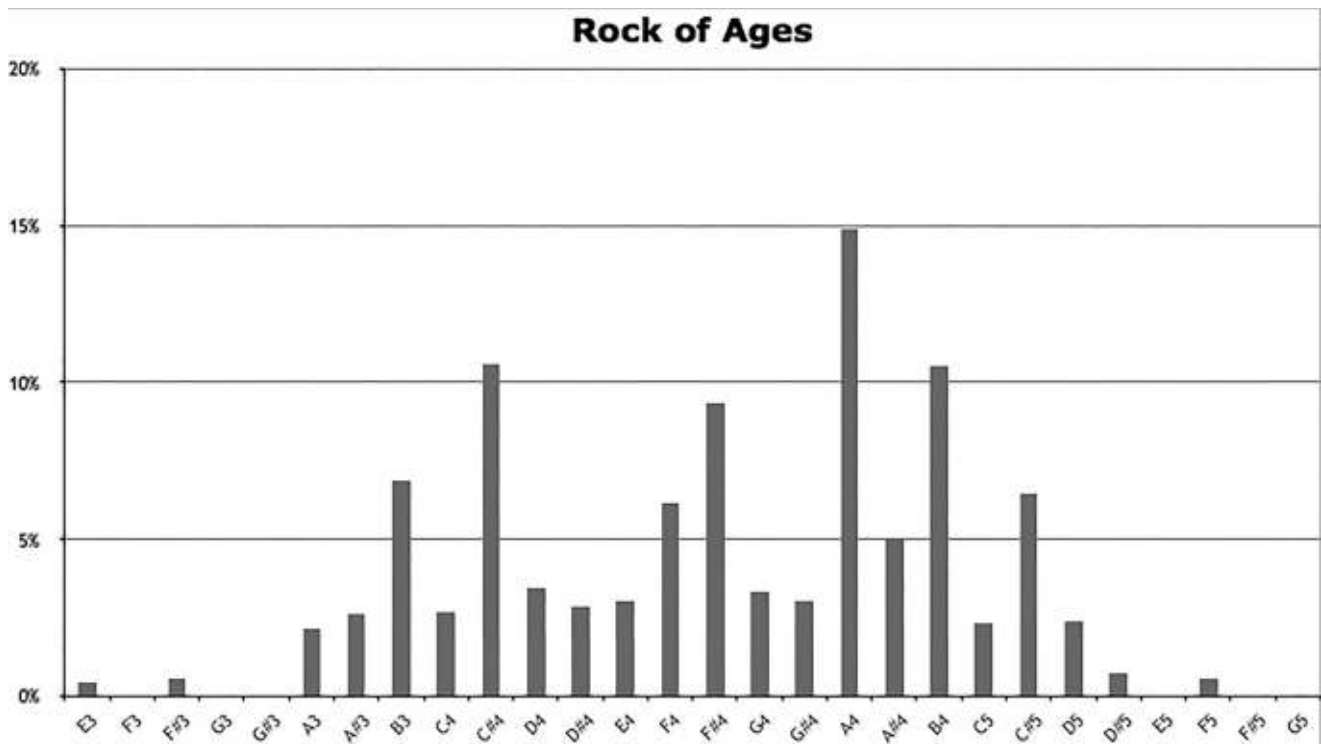


Figure 3. Tessitura for *Rock of Ages*.

This invites the question, what do these audition notices mean by “belt?” For the purposes of this research, briefly set aside your own ideas of “belt,” and consider what the music theater industry thinks of belt.

In a 2010 article, a panel of music theater casting directors and belters reported that the main shared characteristics among “elite” belt voices were a perception of loudness, brightness, and a focused or clear

tone.³ With this perception of belt in consideration, let’s take a look at the high belt notes required by these auditions (Figure 5). On this chart, each note represents one show. Keep in mind that C₅ is the C above middle C. To put this chart in perspective, Ethel Merman, the queen of belt, became a star singing “I Got Rhythm” with a “money note” on a sustained C₅. As you can see, almost two thirds of belt shows today require a top note at D₅ and higher.

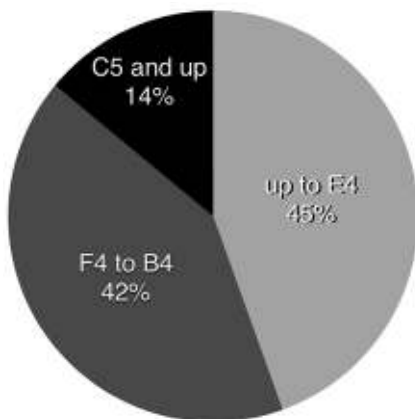


Figure 4. Percentage of singing time in each section of the voice (belt roles).

Putting It Together

While the analyses of charts and graphs may be fun for the researcher, what do they mean for the voice teacher? First of all, be aware that voice teacher terms don’t always align with the terms of the music theater industry. Casting directors, directors, and choreographers don’t necessarily understand the voice, and they don’t have to! They have so many other things to worry about; it is the singer’s job to figure out what they want and give it to them.

Based on our research last year, it seemed that contemporary and pop/rock shows were dominating the industry, and that trend has continued this year. The



Figure 5. Highest belted note/number of shows requiring note.

2014 Broadway shows indicated that 84% of leading female roles require belting, and over half of that time is spent above a traditional *passaggio* at E₄, meaning that traditional voice techniques might not be appropriate for a majority of these belt roles.

In the same vein, we need strategies for the “high belting” range of C₅ and above. Because so many shows are asking for a belt up to notes that are historically head voice territory, what are Broadway’s leading ladies doing, and how are they doing it eight shows a week? That is beyond the scope of this article, but we must acknowledge what the industry is requesting.

Finally, be aware that music theater is constantly changing! While these charts and graphs represent our best guess as to the state of the current industry, they are already partially outdated, as old shows close and new shows open on a regular basis. We remain passionate about teaching our students the beauty of traditional music theater, but this research has encouraged us to listen closely to the business in order to determine what singers must do to be successful in music theater today. It is our hope that you, the voice teacher, will be inspired by the challenges of contemporary musicals and work with your students to tackle Broadway’s singing demands in an exciting and healthy way.

NOTES

1. Kathryn Green, Warren Freeman, Matthew Edwards, and David Meyer, “Trends in Music Theatre Voice: An Analysis of Audition Requirements for Singers,” *Journal of Voice* 28, no. 3 (May 2014): 324-327.
2. Jonathan Flom. *Act Like It’s Your Business: Branding and Marketing Strategies for Actors* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 155-178.
3. Wendy DeLeo LeBorgne, Linda Lee, Joseph C. Stemple, and Heather Bush, “Perceptual Findings on the Broadway Belt Voice,” *Journal of Voice* 24, no. 6 (November 2010): 678-668.

Kathryn Green is a full professor of voice and director of Shenandoah Conservatory’s graduate voice pedagogy program as well as the CCM Vocal Pedagogy Institute. Dr. Green received her DMA in Performance at Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. She has performed and been a guest clinician throughout the United States and internationally, including the Universität der Künste Berlin and Hochschule der Künste Lübeck in Germany, and Sao Paulo University in Brazil.

Warren Freeman graduated from Penn State University with a BFA in music theater and spent over ten years performing roles in New York, on national tours, and at regional theaters across the country. In 2014, he became the first graduate of Shenandoah Conservatory’s new masters program dedicated to contemporary voice pedagogy. He currently works as a voice teacher, music director, and performer in the Washington DC area.

Bass baritone **Philip Sargent** holds the rank of Associate Professor of Music at Shenandoah University, where he has taught music theory, technology, diction, literature, and applied voice for nearly four decades. Dr. Sargent earned a BM from Lawrence University and the MM and DMA degrees in vocal performance from the University of Illinois. He has performed roles from Faust in *Mephistopheles* and Geronimo in *Matrimonio segreto* to Caiphus in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Wazir in *Kismet*. For several years he performed music from the Civil War era with the Homefront Minstrels. Recent solo performances include Kevin Putz’s *Einstein on Mercer Street*, Brahms’s *Requiem*, and the role of Gen. Daniel Butterfield in the premiere and Chautauqua performances of *Norton*, an opera by David Chavez.