PIANO/CONDUCTOR

. . . So They Talked You Into Being Music Director

By ARMANDO FOX
Illustrations by Joanne Romeo

Illustrations by Joanne Romeo. Cover concept by Tonia Fox, designed by Arthur Klepchukov.

 Back cover photo: A toucan's help is no help at all, but it's entertaining. This is Pogo, our keel-billed toucan, in 2010. She is "helping" the author figure out the orchestral reduction for *Man of La Mancha* described in Chapter 7. Sadly she is no longer with us, though her feisty spirit still pervades our home, and gives Pogo Press its name. (Photo: Tonia Fox.)
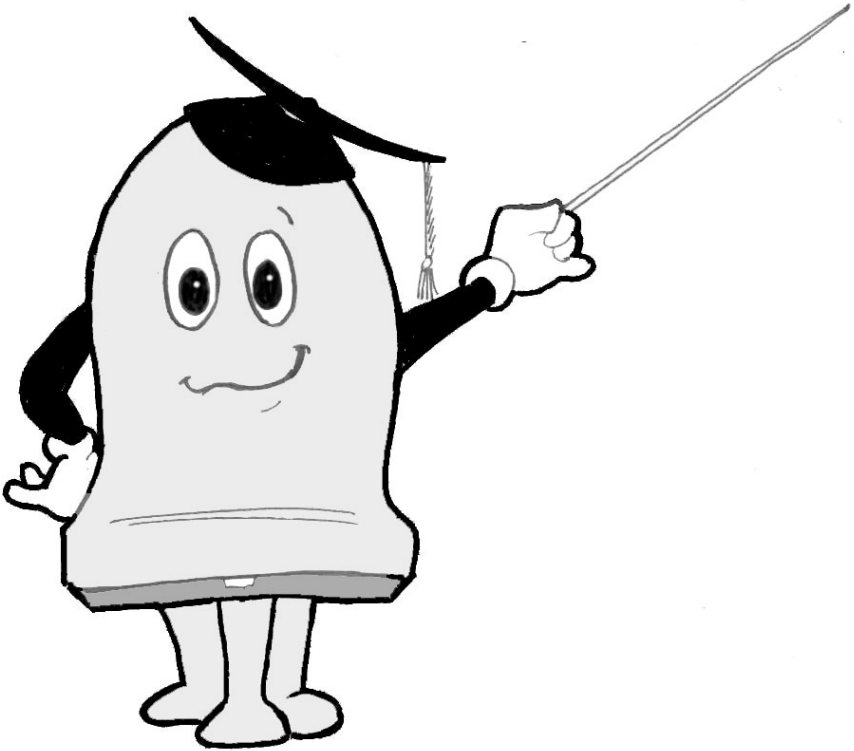
Teaching the Music

3 Teaching the Music

Great! The show is cast, and the actors are eager to start rehearsals. It's always a good idea to start working on the music *early*, because the songs are so important to the tone of the show that performing them should be "second nature" to the actors when they start putting them together with staging, dialogue and dance.

The most important thing in teaching the technical aspects of the songs is to *know your singers.* Trained and experienced singers will learn a lot on their own, and can even help the less-experienced singers; completely untrained singers may rely on muscle memory only (you should strongly reconsider having such people sing—Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady* was the exception that tests the rule). In between these two extremes are the majority of singers, who are less experienced but do have a sense of pitch.

To help all of them perform at their best, this chapter will help you to:

- Plan vocal rehearsals to make the best use of everyone's time

- Suggest techniques and exercises singers can do at home to practice material *outside* rehearsal

- Suggest techniques that can be used *during* rehearsal to help polish tricky spots, including harmony and counterpoint, pitch accuracy, and rhythmic precision, especially for singers in the all-important ensemble.

3.2 The Seven Habits of Highly Successful Vocal Rehearsals

With that caveat, here are some time-tested tips for successful vocal rehearsals:

1. Make a Schedule and Follow It. Keep the rehearsal moving along and focused. Use the above rules of thumb to estimate how long each rehearsal selection will take, but if things are stalled on a particularly difficult passage, move on and stick to the schedule, and use one of the offline "learning acceleration" methods described in the rest of this chapter to help the performers prepare to polish that material at the next rehearsal.

2. Stay Focused. When switching to a new selection or repeating a section that needs work, minimize the "dead time" to avoid people losing focus; once focus is lost, it takes additional time to get back to where you were, and the time adds up fast. Similarly, avoid people wisecracking or otherwise losing focus. I've had directors who want to attend rehearsal and end up distracting the cast and wasting time. Vocal rehearsals are grueling and require concentration, so build some breaks into the schedule—at least one 15-minute break every hour and a half. In my experience, three hours is about the longest you can rehearse with the same group or on the same material before people get exhausted and lose focus, or their voices give out.

3. Bring Extra Copies. People sometimes forget to bring their vocal book. Admonish them, loan them your extra copy, and move on. If the rehearsal space has Internet access, you may be able to post rehearsal materials on the Web so you can access and print them from any browser (see Section A.1).

4. Start on time with a 5–10 minute warmup. Warmups are extremely important to avoid damage to voices. Boyd Boyd, *Rehearsal Guide for the Choral Director* has extensive advice on how to use the warmups to get singers psyched for the rehearsal as well as limbering up their voices. Start on time, even if some people haven't arrived yet, but don't let people get into the habit of thinking the warmup is optional and they can arrive 5–10 minutes late.

5. Include those challenging passages in every warmup. Every show has a few "trouble spots" that feel like they could always benefit from more practice: a tough counterpoint or harmony section, an ensemble number with lots of weird entrances, and so on There may even be two or three of these. Make a point of making them part of every warmup. Besides more practice time for the tough parts, this serves another purpose: since the usual vocal warmup exercises don't really require a lot of musical thinking, singing a tricky passage that requires concentration warms up the brain as well as the vocal cords, so to speak.

6. Play the score consistently. The vast majority of the rehearsals will be done with a rehearsal pianist only, not with the orchestra. It's always a surprise for the actors (usually a pleasant one) the first time they get to sing with the orchestra. To ease that transition, keep in mind that most conductor's scores try to indicate which orchestra cues will be most prominent by notating them in the piano part or as cue notes. Be consistent and play those cues when you accompany during rehearsal.

7. Write It Down. When you give a technical or dramatic note, voice a chord, and so on, *write it down,* and insist that everyone else do so as well. For example, in a block chord, you may assign individuals to specific notes in the chord; in a choral number, where the singers are identified in the score as "Group 1", "Group 2", and so on, you may assign individuals to particular groups. Make sure you capture these notes.

■ *Resist when people say, "I'll Remember"*

They will not. I have done many shows, and inevitably, as the rehearsal process goes on, both they and you will be asked to remember a million more things, and the vocal notes slip away. I recommend that each actor make a photocopy of the vocal book to mark up, which also helps if you are *double-casting* or unexpectedly have to call in an *understudy*. I have never, *ever,* done a show where people who said "I'll remember that" actually remembered without writing it down.

3.3 Practice Tracks For At-Home Preparation

The most commonly used technique in amateur productions is "learning at the piano": you play and sing the melody first, then the singer(s) sing along with you as you play it again, then they sing it without you given only the accompaniment. However, this is a poor use of time since each singer is "learning at the piano" while others are probably standing around idle. A better approach is to have each performer prepare *before* rehearsal, and use rehearsal for technical polishing or working on interpretation.

Singers used to bring a portable tape recorder to rehearsal and ask the rehearsal pianist to record their part for at-home practice. Today you can do this just as conveniently *in advance* with a computer or smartphone at home, and email or post the practice tracks on the Web as MP3 files; see section A.3 for suggestions and instructions. You can get a jump on the rehearsal process by making and distributing practice tracks prior to the first rehearsal. Actors are expected to study their lines before coming to rehearsal, so why not their music?

What should you record? Here are some useful permutations:

- The singer's melody with block chords, so that less-experienced singers can get used to how their melody sounds with the harmonies, especially if the harmonies are weird.

- The singer's melody with bass notes or other obvious notes that they can use to find their pitch; particularly useful in cases where the orchestration is sparse or the harmonies are very unusual. Figures 3.2 and 3.3 show an example that combines this suggestion with the previous one.

- The singer's starting melody note, then accompaniment only (like a rehearsal pianist might do), or the song intro from which the singer should get their starting note, perhaps with emphasis on that starting note, as Figure 3.4 suggests. This will teach the singer not to rely on hearing their melody notes played by the piano (or orchestra). See Chapter 7 for suggestions on doing this if entrances are tricky or singers would need to remember a starting note for a long time.

Figure 3.2: This excerpt from the conductor's score shows the vocal line and piano reduction around an ostinato (third and fourth measures) that has a weird key change just before and just after. The next figure suggests how to make a practice track for this passage, which is also a good candidate for Interval Training, described in the next section. (*Agony (Reprise)* from *Into the Woods*)

Figure 3.3: In this suggested practice track, the right and left hands in the piano part have been collapsed down to just the left hand, with the right hand playing the singer's melody for the practice track. In the third measure, the original piano/conductor arrangement had a prominent F-natural in the upper voice of the left hand; we retain it in the collapsed version, because it matches the starting note of the ostinato and gives the singer something to listen for in the orchestration. Similarly, we retain the prominent F-flat in the final measure, so the singer can get used to the dissonance he will hear in performance against his prominent E-flat. (*Agony (Reprise)* from *Into the Woods*)

- For harmonies, a couple of passes of other permutations of voices, so the singer can practice her own part relative to other voices.

3.4   Pitch and Interval Training

These are simple exercises singers can do at home (or wherever they have access to a piano) to help learn tricky melody lines. They require only that the singer not be tone-deaf, i.e. that she can tell whether the pitch she is singing is the same or different from a pitch played on the piano.

Figure 3.4: "Same note as" cue: The singer can pick up his starting note from the prominent A-flat in the horn part. The practice track should therefore include this horn line, and you should make sure if you don't have a horn player that another instrument covers that line in performance. (*Married* from *Cabaret*)

Pitch training. Play a key on the keyboard somewhere in the middle 3 octaves (roughly, a three-octave interval with middle C in the center). While holding the key, sing the note using "la" or "ya" or any open-vowel syllable. The goal is to be perfectly in tune with the piano; the first several times, the singer may be way off pitch, or on pitch but slightly out of tune. Ask the singer to "hear" the note in her head after the key has been struck but before singing; this is surprisingly effective at prepping your vocal cords to do the right thing. A more advanced version of this exercise involves hitting a key *outside* of that 3-octave range, and singing the note that is an octave above or below the struck pitch.

Interval training. This technique is more advanced and requires some basic music-reading ability. It is particularly useful when the singer must get a starting pitch from another note; for example, if the first note of a sung phrase is G, but the most prominent sound in the accompaniment is (let's say) a C in the bass. The singer can use this technique to practice singing the interval C to G (perfect fifth), so that when the C is heard, the singer "mentally sings" the C to herself along with the accompaniment, then actually sings her note G.

Pick an interval to train—this may be an interval from an interior vocal line of a song, or for drilling, just start with the easy ones like perfect fourths and fifths and then move on to the more difficult ones like sixths and sevenths. A melody line, especially interior lines in counterpoint singing, may contain weird intervals that lend themselves well to this prac-

tice method. (The *Agony* ostinato in measures 3–4 of Figure 3.2 would be a good candidate for this kind of practice.)

1. Play the interval on the piano one note at a time, then sing the interval using either "yah-yah" or the lyrics if you're using this exercise to work on a specific passage.

2. Play the first note of the interval on the piano; then release it; then have the singer sing the interval; then play the second note of the interval on the piano and check the singer's pitch.

3. Sing the interval while playing only non-melody "reference notes"—say, a block chord or the bass note of the chord—on the piano.

4. Once it's solid, add one or two notes before and one or two notes after the interval; then repeat that phrase over and over.

5. Once that is mastered, have the singer sing the entire phrase containing the interval, but hold each note of the interval and verify its tuning with the piano.

6. Finally, have the singer sing the whole phrase in tempo, but ask him to mentally pay special attention to the weird interval. My experience is that once they have mastered the singing of the interval, thereby demonstrating their ability to tune it, the only thing that causes it to go out of tune is simply not thinking about it enough. After it has been repeated enough times with special concentration, it becomes second nature.

■ *No, I cannot play you your note!*

Many singers, when having trouble with a particular interval, will ask you to just play back the specific *note* that they sang off-pitch. Similarly, a singer who's been singing a wrong note in a harmony may ask you to "please play me my note." You should resist such requests. Instead have the singer sing their note *relative to* some other note in the block chord, and have the singer train the *interval* between the wrong note and a previous note (or if part of a block chord, the interval between the correct note and someone else's part). Less-experienced singers do not always realize that hearing "a note" may be useless without such context.

Interval training is also useful when singers have to get their starting note from a non-vocal cue. A common example is a canon or other multipart harmony where one singer's starting note must be cued off a note sung in a different voice, or if there is no good candidate note for this, a prominent note in the orchestration, such as the note that's in the bass or being played by a prominent instrument, as in Figure 3.4.

The strategy is to treat the interval between the cue note and the opening note as an interval to train using the procedure above. I find that it helps to have you play the cue note and then have the singer hit her entrance note *and hold* it to get used to how it sounds against the cue note; the goal is to avoid "sliding" onto the correct pitch due to uncertainty.

3.5 Harmonies and Counterpoint

Books on auditioning and rehearsing choruses, such as Lamb, *Choral Techniques*, suggest "pitch retention" exercises that can be used to strengthen singers' ability to stay on pitch when they're not singing the melody. Inexperienced singers and those without good pitch retention tend to get thrown off by other people around them singing different parts, and may eventually "slide onto" the line being sung by someone else who happens to be near them.

Part of teaching harmony is teaching singers to listen to each other and

Figure 3.5: One of the most challenging chords I had to teach a minimally-trained ensemble to sing is the final couple of bars of the short Overture from Sondheim's *Company*. It's presented here as an example of what you can work toward using the harmony training outlined in Section 3.5 (. from *Overture*)

"lock up" on harmonies. Some good warm-up exercises for doing this are suggested in Lamb, *Choral Techniques* and Boyd, *Rehearsal Guide for the Choral Director*, but here is the general idea. Break up the singers into three groups (doesn't necessarily have to be according to range) and have them sing a simple chord—not a triad in root position, but a chord built from different intervals, such as an inversion, with each group singing one note in the chord. Have them listen to each other and lock pitch. Then shuffle the singers and break them up into four groups rather than three, and try some additional chords with four voices, working your way up to six or seven groups, as in Figure 3.5, or alternatively, three or four groups but with octave doublings within a group to achieve big "open" voicings of different chords.

Company

For moving lines and counterpoint, start by teaching each inner line as if it were a melody line using the techniques above, including practice tracks. One way to practice putting moving lines together is permutations of voices. For example, in a 3-voice harmony, first have voices 1 and 2 sing together, then 1 and 3, then 2 and 3. Of course, with large multipart harmonies, you probably don't have time to try every permutation, but the idea is to get people accustomed to how their part sounds when combined with other parts.

Furthermore, pick some key points during the line at which the singers will stop and hold a chord together (see example below); these serve as intermediate "milestones" to keep singers listening to each other. Vary the milestones on different practice runs, so that eventually the singers will have held at least one "milestone" chord in each measure or so. When they

hold a chord and lock pitch in it, their muscle memory is trained as well, and this kind of drilling will eventually result in focusing attention on each note.

3.6 Variable-Stress Practice and Long-Line Extraction

In moving passages with weird passing tones or neighbor tones, pitch accuracy on the in-between notes can be a problem. Even if the melody is straightforward and diatonic, pitches on unaccented notes (e.g. pickups), or pitches that the singer must leap onto or away from very quickly, may suffer from being indistinct or inaccurate. Variable-stress practice[1] can help fix pitch-accuracy problems in both situations by forcing the performer's attention to focus on every note.

For chromatic or otherwise unusual melodies, it may help to first identify the "skeleton" or long line of the phrase. (If the melody is straightforward or diatonic, you can probably skip this step.) Sometimes the long line outlines the melody, as bars A–D and G–H in figure 3.6 outline the rising melody line of bars 1–4 and 7–8 respectively. Other parts of the long line may outline important harmonies, as bars E–F outline the augmented major triad spelled out in measures 5–6. Help the actor perfect the pitches in the long line, singing the appropriate syllables, as in measures A–H.

The next step is to use variable-stress practice to polish the interior pitches (passing and neighbor tones). As Figure 3.7 shows, the idea is to sing the passage a tiny bit under tempo, but "sitting on" (stressing and holding) different notes each time. Stressing and holding a note forces the performer (and you) to really listen to it and make sure it's on pitch; this trains the vocal muscles to retain that pitch when the note is sung at full speed in performance. A practice track can be very helpful for a performer who wants to work with this technique at home.

There are various permutations you can do, depending on where the trouble spots are. For example, you could drill the selection in figure 3.7 by first stressing and holding every third note (variation 1), then every fourth

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[1]The technique is inspired by one that I use for practicing tricky technical passages on piano.

Figure 3.6: Identifying the "skeleton" or long line of a patter melody both accelerates learning to sing it and improves pitch accuracy, often by highlighting a structurally important melody feature such as the augmented chord outlined in measures 5–6. (*How I Saved Roosevelt* from *Assassins*)

note (variation 2). Disregard the original rhythm during variable-stress practice: all notes should have equal duration except the stressed notes, whose duration should be three or four times that of the unstressed notes.

Figure 3.7 shows how to combine long-line extraction and variable-stress A variation on this technique combines it with variable-stress practice. The bottom staff of shows the long line of the passage. Have the performers sing the passage slowly but in rhythm, but stressing-and-holding the notes in the passage corresponding to the long line (syllables *tics, streets, end, world, Cit,* etc.) while doing so. This is tedious work, since the overall practice time can end up being several minutes per measure, but it's the most reliable way to really polish these passages (and is a good candidate for the "90/90 rule" above). Most performers can only do this for 20–30 minutes at a time before their sense of pitch becomes a little numb, so plan your rehearsals accordingly. Once a passage has been polished with these techniques, put it together by singing it *slowly* and speeding up gradually, keeping a sharp ear for any lax diction or rhythm creeping in after you've worked so hard on accuracy and precision.

Figure 3.7: Long-line extraction and variable-stress practice can help in learning tricky passages like this, and can even be combined. (*City On Fire* from *Sweeney Todd*)

Figure 3.8: **For tricky syncopations, like this 3-measure syncopated pattern in double meter, slow down the practice tempo until you can tap out every eighth note. (*Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat* from *Guys & Dolls*)**

3.7   Teaching Tricky Rhythms

We'll distinguish three situations that can make rhythms tricky to learn:

1. Syncopations or other difficult rhythmic figures in the context of "straight" time.

2. Odd or compound time signatures such as 7/4 or 7/8.

3. Switching between time signatures, especially between time signatures whose beat unit is different, as in going from 3/4 to 9/8.

Here's an example of each, with some suggestions on how to practice with the actors. What all of the suggestions and examples have in common is to learn the rhythm first, *then* sing the notes. This is especially true when the rhythm involves harmony or counterpoint, as in the first two examples below.

Figure 3.8 shows an example of situation 1. It may help to subdivide the measure into the smallest beat unit that will accommodate the syncopations—in this case, eighth notes—and have the actors note and mark down which eighth note the syncopations occur, as written over the staff. Then practice *really slowly* tapping out *every* eighth note and ensuring everyone's together, gradually speeding it up so you're tapping only quarter notes, then only half notes, and so on. Once the rhythm has been mastered, you can teach the notes.

Figures 3.9 is a compound-meter example in which most of the song alternates between 6/8 and 5/8. A big help in this song is the accented eighth notes in the orchestra on counts 4 and 5 of each 5/8 measure, which can help the singers prepare the next 6/8 downbeat. When conducting or

Figure 3.9: **A compound 6/8+5/8 can be counted in a "lopsided 2+2", but in this particular song we can take advantage of the accented eighth notes in each 5/8 measure to help prepare the singer for the next 6/8 downbeat.** (*Superboy and the Invisible Girl* from *Next to Normal*)

playing, it may help you to think of the count in terms of a "lopsided 2+2", as shown above the first staff: count the 6/8 measures in two, and start counting the 5/8 measure in two but then cut to the two eighth notes on 4–5. Counting in 2 also helps because a few measures later on, the song goes into a steady 6/8.

Figure 3.10 shows a compound meter example in 7/8 that is trickier because the vocals and the orchestra figure are syncopated differently. This example can also be conducted and practiced in a "lopsided 2," as the numbers above the staff suggest. In fact, when practicing with the actors, you can even count out the "1–2–3" to prepare the pickup for each next measure. Since the orchestra figure is syncopated differently, it may be best to practice with the actors while counting straight eighth notes, then add the bass figure in later. Again, if may help to learn the rhythm first by just speaking the lyrics in time, and adding the notes later.

One of the hardest scenarios is a change of meter where the beat unit changes too. Figure 3.11 shows an example. One trick here is to realize that for all practical purposes the change in feel from groups of two eighth notes to groups of three eighth notes really begins in measure 5, with the dotted-quarters in the accompaniment effectively emphasizing two groups of three. Since the actor isn't singing during this meter change, he can

Figure 3.10: Both the melody and the bass figure suggest that you should think of this particular 7/8 as "4+3" rather than "3+4". The numbers above the staff suggest how to conduct it in a "lopsided 2." (*Wish I Were Here* from *Next to Normal*)

listen to the prominent dotted-quarters in measures 5 and 6 to time his pickup into measure 7.

3.8   Putting It All Together

As you start doing whole-scene, whole-act, or whole-show rehearsals where all the elements are finally combined—staging, dialogue, musical numbers, choreography—the actors will be challenged to remember all the tips they got from the director and stage manager, from you, from the choreographer... so be patient! It is a lot to remember. The production staff can make this process smoother—and improve the show—by ensuring that the work of the director, music director, and choreographer don't work against each other.

For example, when actors are singing in harmony or counterpoint, choreography matters. It's natural, and even helpful for the audience, if actors singing counterpoint or canon (think *Fugue For Tinhorns* from *Guys & Dolls*) are spaced apart on stage or moving in different orbits. Some distance between the actors can help the audience distinguish the sung lines. But separating actors who are singing in block harmonies makes the harmonies harder to lock up and may also sound bad to the audience: the sound will not appear to be coming from one place, and audience members much closer to one of the actors will disproportionately hear that harmony part. This is a risk even when mics are used. Another way to look at it: what characters are singing—counterpoint vs. harmony—should tell the choreographer and director something about the relationship among those

Figure 3.11: In this tricky meter change, the actor can listen to the prominent dotted-quarters in measures 5 and 6 to time the pickup into measure 7. (*Johanna (Judge Turpin)* from *Sweeney Todd*)

characters on the stage.

A similar issue arises when choreographing or blocking a large ensemble that has a musical number: placing singers close to each other when they have potentially dissonant lines is risky. You don't have to arrange them strictly by section like a church choir, but it helps to be sensitive to who is singing what.

No matter what you do, every show has some ensemble music sections that need constant refreshing and polishing to stay in top condition. Maybe it's only 16 or 32 bars of a particular number, or the finale of the show, or something in the opening number. (The opening number and finale are particularly important, because if you nail those, you will be forgiven for a lot in between!) Whatever the selection, I make it a point to practice it during *every rehearsal*—whether it's a complete run-through of a full act, a vocal-only touch-up, or a full dress rehearsal. This also helps get the cast's heads into the show and can reinforce camaraderie before launching into the rehearsal itself.

3.9   Performance: Putting the Show in Context

Just as performing a play is more than reading the lines, performing a score is more than singing the right notes. The rest of this chapter will help you work with actors to make sure the songs receive the same dramatic attention as their spoken dialogue, and suggest specific questions to help guide this exploration.

Most actors are eager to be part of the process of defining and inhabiting their character; that is why actors love to act. The advice in this section can be boiled down to a single observation: *Don't stop acting when you start singing.* More precisely, *a song performance should call attention to the way the* character *sings it, not the way the* actor *sings it.*

There are two variants of this pitfall. In the first variant, the actor is so focused on technical execution that he forgets to stay in character. This pitfall can be overcome by practice. In the second pitfall, which occcurs especially in so-called "star vehicle" shows, the actor temporarily forgets that the songs are there to serve the show, not vice versa. This can be

overcome by remembering that the song belongs to the character, not to the actor.

Part of your job, then, is to help your actors "deconstruct" the music they will perform, just as they would do with spoken dialogue. Part of this deconstruction comes from the context of the show, part of it comes from the story, part of it comes from the structure of the music itself, and part of it—surprisingly—may even come from the orchestration.

■ *Don't co-opt the director*

None of the advice in this section is meant to suggest that the Music Director should take over the Director's job. Matters of interpretation and performance require agreement among all production staff—Director, Music Director, Choreographer—and the process by which you reach that agreement depends on the nature of the working relationship you all have.

The first step is to contextualize a show by understanding the cultural references, idioms, slang, and so on in the lyrics and dialogue. Even if your production has a *dramaturg*, good book research is the shared responsibility of all performers and production staff.

For example, during the rehearsal process for the contemporary song cycle *The Last Five Years*, I learned that the actor playing Jamie didn't understand the significance of "the JCC of Spring Valley is crumbling to the ground" (in reference to his character, a nice Jewish boy, falling for a non-Jewish girl), in part because he didn't know what "JCC" stood for. Without an understanding of that phrase and its cultural context, it's hard to inhabit the song *Shiksa Goddess*, in which the lyric occurs. (Homework: Go find out the answer. "Use the Google.")

Some shows' action occurs in a different time or place, making them appear to be period pieces or products of their time. But *Company, Hair, A Chorus Line,* and *Cabaret* have themes that are timeless even if the plot and characters are not. What was happening in the world then? Can it be connected to things that are happening today?

When I worked on *Company* in 2004, same-sex marriage was making waves in California (where I live) that were being felt in the Oval Office.

We all knew that *Company* was controversial in 1970 for presenting non-traditional and nuanced views of marriage and relationships that defied the simplistic "happily ever after" formula so popular in musical theater at that time. Indeed, when the show was first staged, some critics and theatergoers proposed that Bobby was unable to sustain committed relationships with any of his girlfriends because he was actually gay but unable to come to terms with it. Although composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim and book writer George Furth have both denied this, from the vantage point of 2004 it was clear that there must be both heterosexual Bobbies and homosexual Bobbies: *Company* shows us that through Bobby's eyes his friends' marriages defy simplistic conventions, yet somehow his friends seem to find the relationships rewarding. *Et voilà*, the stage is set for a 2004 audience dealing with same-sex marriage to draw their own conclusions.

When I worked on *Cabaret* in 2005, we saw parallels between the way Weimar Germany was lulled into a disastrous nationalism leading up to WWII and some of the things happening in our own country following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and we took that as a reference point for the production. Although we did not change a single line of lyrics or dialogue, many patrons told us how intriguing it was that we had made the connection. In fact all we did was keep the connection in mind in interpreting the show, through the occasional emphasis or inflection of a line or a lyric, or a carefully placed "beat" in the dialogue. It was the patrons themselves who made the connection, based on the subtlest of cues.

In 2010 I got to work on *Man of La Mancha*. Don Quixote, the mildly deluded idealist who is initially the object of ridicule but with whom the audience ultimately identifies, may have inhabited Inquisition Spain, but he'd be right at home as an activist in today's America. In a nation rocked by the Enron scandal and with the news seemingly dominated by stories of corruption, cynicism, greed, and oppression, there is an opportunity to really make the audience *want* to cheer for this idealistic underdog, ridiculous and pathetic though his actions may initially seem. Making these connections gives the actor (and, in performance, the audience) something to identify with, and they're more likely to "get it".

In rehearsing the show, I also had the opportunity to point out, as a

native Spanish speaker, that Quijote (alternate spelling of Quixote) is simply Quijana (the name of the deluded gentleman who believes himself Don Quixote) with the Spanish augmentative ending "-ote", meaning roughly "the big one." That is, Quijana has deluded himself into believing he's "the BIG Quijana", or "el Quijote". This simple etymological observation sheds additional light on Cervantes's writing and therefore on the character: his illusions of grandeur extend even to his self-applied moniker.

Let's examine three specific examples showing how to apply these general remarks to individual songs and characters. **Spoiler alert:** These examples include possible spoiler details about each show, which are unfortunately necessary to provide the context for the example. So go see the shows before you read the examples.

3.10 Example: *So What (Cabaret)*

When an actor approaches an important piece of monologue or dialogue, he may spend hours deconstructing it, trying to connect what is said back to the character's overall "arc" through the show in order to create a performance. To help actors give the same level of attention *to song lyrics* as they do to dialogue, I spend a good chunk of an actor's first rehearsal of a song (up to 20 minutes of a one-hour rehearsal) discussing three points:

1. Why is this song in the show?

2. How would you read (and act) these lyrics if they were spoken dialogue?

3. How will we deal with repetition in the song—both repetition in time, such as repeated words, phrases, or stanzas, and repetition in space, such as in "list songs"?

By the time we agree on how the song will be performed, we have a good answer for each one. Sometimes we even find subtle clues in the music or in the orchestration that can be used to bolster the interpretation or the performance.

Our first of three examples is from Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, in which we meet Fräulein Schroeder, a Berlin innkeeper during the rise of the Third Reich. Over several pages, we learn that though once wealthy, she has lost her fortune and her previous lovers, survived a war, and weathered a depression. Frl. Schroeder embodies both *survival* and *resignation*.

In the musical *Cabaret*, which is inspired by Isherwood's work, the character has been renamed Frl. Schneider, and all of this background must be presented in two and half minutes during her song *So What* early in the show.

Why is this song in the show?   It introduces the audience to Frl. Schneider's personality by letting her tell her own backstory. This sets the stage for how she will handle breaking off her soon-to-be engagement to Herr Schultz, the Jewish grocer, under pressure from the Nazis.

How would you perform the lyrics as dialogue? Frl. Schneider's body language, facial expressions and cadence would all be different when recounting happy times than when describing the times she managed to just survive despite everything. So should they be when sung.

The song has three verses, each of which addresses a different sides of her personality—losing her fortune, losing love, and ultimately survival—and indeed even the orchestration is different in each verse. In particular, the last verse, which deals with her much better earlier days ("So once I was rich, and now all my fortune is gone—so what? / And love disappeared, and only the memory lives on—so what?") has a much more subdued orchestration—the rhythmic "oom-pah-pah" waltz figure is replaced by simple held chords, with the addition of a high, melancholy violin line. The actor's performance should work with rather than against such textural cues in the orchestration.

Where is there repetition and how should we use it? Not only should the three verses be sung differently despite having the same melody: at the end of the song, there is a coda in which she sings "It all goes on . . . So who cares? *Who cares?* WHO CARES? So what?" (emphasis mine). By this point in the song, the audience has heard these phrases repeated many times. The coda isn't there to lengthen the song—it only adds 8 bars. So

why is it there?

Often there is no "right" answer; but what is important is that there be *some* interpretation for why the coda is there. Our interpretation was that while most of the song has been about *survival*, the coda punctuates her *resignation*. Each "Who cares?" can get more and more resigned, until the last "So what?"

This amount of detail may seem like nitpicking, but with only two and a half minutes to make the audience really care about this character when they see her in trouble later, every nuance of the performance counts.

3.11 Example: *Dulcinea (Man Of La Mancha)*

When Don Quixote first sees Aldonza, the kitchen wench and prostitute, he believes he has found Dulcinea, his (mythical) noble and chaste lady patroness, about whom he then sings.

Why is this song in the show? Aldonza is initially scornful of Quixote, then uneasy when he worships her apparently without guile, then resentful that his sincerity disarms her toughness, and ultimately, becomes a believer in Quixote's ideals and his "quest," identifying herself finally as Dulcinea. In this song, seeing her take the first steps on that journey is at least as important as hearing Quixote sing the lyrics, which without this deconstruction come across as overwritten.

Lyrics as dialogue. Although Aldonza/Dulcinea is onstage with Quixote throughout the number, we decided he is not serenading her but rather singing *to himself*; the song then serves to show us Dulcinea's reaction. The actor playing Quixote and I identified a key lyric:

> Let my fingers but see,
> Thou art warm and alive, and no phantom to fade in the air!

So far, everything about Quixote's interactions has been in his head: the windmill was to him a giant, the inn a castle, the innkeeper a lord. But now Quixote is telling us, "See, it's *not* all in my head. Dulcinea is real! She's standing right there!"

Figure 3.12: Even though it's difficult to avoid some emphasis on the high note of the phrase ("Now"), we decided to make "found you" just as significant by adding a small tenuto, because it was the more important lyric in our reading. (*Dulcinea* from *Man of La Mancha*)

In the last stanza, Quixote sings "Now I've found you, and the world shall know thy glory!" Because the word "Now" coincides with the high note of the phrase, most actors make it the climax of the phrase. However, given the above reading, the more important phrase is "found you", so we decided to emphasize that with some tenuto marks. Indeed, highlighting "Now" subverts the song's drama by focusing on the actor's singing rather than the character's thoughts, and by this point in the show Quixote has already had two solos, so the audience already knows he can sing.

Dealing with repetition. My Quixote actor perceptively compared the endless repetition of "Dulcinea" in the lyrics to *Maria* in *West Side Story*:

Dulcinea, Dulcinea
I see heaven when I see thee, Dulcinea!
And thy name is like a prayer an angel whispers—
Dulcinea!

Maria!
Say it loud, and there's music playing
Say it soft, and it's almost like praying
Maria, I'll never stop saying—
Maria!

So we decided that Quixote would use the repeated word "Dulcinea" throughout the song to savor all the different ways it sounds as he says it to himself, as Tony does with "Maria". Indeed, the performance might be a bit different every night—and that's OK, it's live theater!

3.12 Example: *I'm Alive* (Next To Normal)

In this brilliant and quirky musical about Diana's struggle with bipolar disorder, Gabe is her long-dead son about whom she still has delusions. (Sorry about the spoiler if you haven't seen the show.) *I'm Alive* is Gabe's first big solo: he is nominally singing to Diana (inside her head), but he's also revealing to the audience the relationship between Diana and himself.

Fundamentally, this is a *list song,* with Gabe enumerating all the different ways he has his hooks in Diana, letting us see why it's so hard for her to let him go. Some lines include:

> I am what you want me to be,
> and I'm your worst fear, you'll find it in me...

> I am flame and I am fire,
> I am destruction, decay, and desire...

> I'm your wish, your dream come true,
> I am your darkest nightmare too...

Interestingly, each couplet opener above can be tied to a specific moment in the show. The first couplet could refer to the fact that Gabe only exists in Diana's fantasy, so he is "what [she] wants [him] to be," but also her "worst fear" because the fantasy is fueling her psychosis and tearing her from the rest of her family. The second couplet could be an allusion to Gabe's destructive effect on Diana's psyche, which will ultimately drive her to attempt suicide. The third couplet could be seen as a flash-forward to when Diana reveals near the end of the show (*How Could I Ever Forget*) the joy of experiencing the birth of her first child, too soon afterward followed by the nightmare of being told he had died of pneumonia.

It's true that at the time these lyrics are sung, some of the moments to which they arguably allude haven't happened yet. But as with so many other examples, the important thing is that the audience can tell when there is depth in the acting, and creating interpretations like this gives the actors something to work from, even if they later change their minds about

what moments in the show each lyric refers to. And it may even inspire audience members to return for another visit, to mine the additional depth they perceived in the performance!
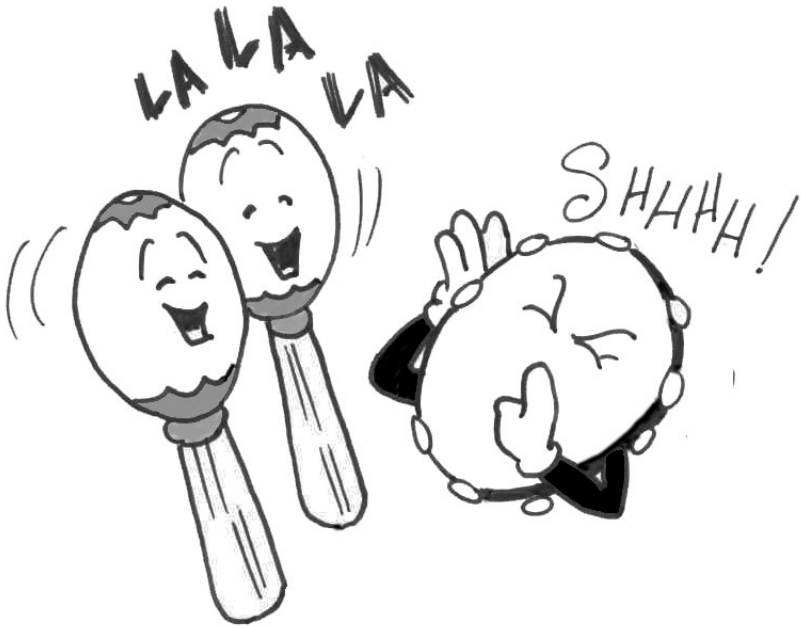
Diction, Rhythm, and Dynamics

4 Diction, Rhythm, and Dynamics

Actors worry about singing wrong notes or dropping a lyric, but the audience notices only the most egregious such errors. In contrast, since lyrics are critical to most musicals, and they can go by very fast without giving the audience a chance to "rewind the recording," the audience gets angry if they don't understand every word—that is, if the performers have poor diction, rhythm, or dynamics, any of which can keep the lyrics from being easily understood. Such problems usually reflect lack of effort or lack of directorial attention, rather than lack of ability. This chapter will help you:

- Identify performances whose diction needs improvement

- Apply simple (usually) practice and performance techniques to address some of the most common problems related to diction, including some connected to rhythm or dynamics

4.1   Diction Basics

Each style of sung music has its own conventions for diction. Theater is no exception. A few specific cases are worth calling out before we go any further.

Theater diction is not opera diction. Classically trained ("legit") singers may need to be reminded that "sing" and "kiss" are not pronounced "seeng" or "kees", no matter how long the syllable is held. Furthermore, tremolo is usually the enemy because it compromises diction; while Barbara Cook can pronounce every word clearly *and* maintain a beautiful (and non-overbearing) tremolo, most of us have to compromise. When compromise is necessary, clear diction should be the highest priority.

Theater diction is not pop diction. "Natural" untrained singers with great voices often need the most help in fine-tuning and polishing their pitch and diction, because they are used to being told that they sound great but not that they need to be more precise. In most pop songs, diction is deemed secondary to "authenticity" (whatever that means when you can't understand half the lyrics). In theater songs, *diction is just as important as acting.* It is not "second" to anything.

Gratuitous melisma belongs on American Idol, not in a musical. Melisma refers to varying a pitch while holding a single vocal syllable: it may surprise you that Idina Menzel's melisma at the end of *Defying Gravity* is actually written in the score, Figure 4.1 shows. However, if the score does *not* indicate melisma or a similar marking such as *vocal ad lib.*, the performer shouldn't insert it. Whereas in pop songs melisma is sometimes added as a special improvisational effect by the performer, in theater songs it usually sounds cheesy unless it's specifically indicated because a specific pop (or comic) effect is desired. Gratuitous melisma is a particular peril for show tunes that have become famous independently of the shows they came from (such as "Memory" from *Cats*), or when burgeoning young singers try to imitate a performance they've heard on *American Idol*. Unfortunately, combined with the current Broadway trend to feature the "American Idol favorite of the week" in musicals, thousands have been misled into thinking that those performances represent good theater diction.

Figure 4.1: Until I saw the conductor's score, I thought the melisma that closes Act I (in measures 195 and 198) was improvised by Idina Menzel, but it's right in the score! (*Defying Gravity* from *Wicked*)

Hard breaths are for cheaters. A nasal "hard breath" before a word that starts with a vowel—e.g., saying *hyou* for *you*, *hall* for *all*, *hi* for *I*, and so on—is a device used by amateur pop singers when they can't nail the pitch properly in full voice on an initial vowel. Like melisma, it is cheesy in the extreme and should not be done unless the show's score calls for it as a special effect—that is, to make a song more cheesy.

Now that we're clear on what theater diction is *not*, here are some suggestions to help singers achieve what it *is*.

4.2   Vowels and Consonants

Distinguish the vowels, especially when the lyrics are going by very fast. *Even the lowliest sixteenth note deserves to be heard as a distinct vowel sound.* Remember that "uh" (represented phonetically by a *schwa*, ə) is not a proper vowel sound and is rarely the sound called for by the sung syllable. For words whose vowel pronunciations depend on dialect (*roof, either*, and so on), you and the director should make an appropriate choice depending on the show's setting, the character's persona, or other dramatic factors, and everyone should be consistent about following it.

Emphasize interior consonants (i.e. the ones that occur in the middle of a word as opposed to ending the word). The vocal warmups on the book's web site pianoconductor.com help somewhat with vowels and

consonants: for example, when singing "Doo-bee", the lips should be exaggeratedly rounded for "Doo" and exaggeratedly cracked on "Bee". For the second part of this same exercise, "Too-bee", overemphasize the dental "T" and plosive "B" to warm up those muscles.

Close off final consonants by putting a tiny ə after them. Trained vocal performers call this a "shadow vowel," and it is especially critical for words that would otherwise be ambiguous. For example, if holding the syllable "too" on a long note, is the word going to end up being *too, tune, tomb,* or *tube*? Often it is evident from context, but not always. Avoid the risk and sing *too, too-nə, too-mə, too-bə* accordingly. The final ə should be just enough to allow the consonant to be crisply pronounced, no more. Remember to have everyone **write down** the specific beat on which to close the consonant; if you happen to have a free conducting hand during the performance, you can use it to give the cutoff cue, but the singers should not rely solely on this cue as a crutch.

Distinguish double consonants. In Stephen Sondheim's famous song *Send In the Clowns,* Désirée sings the lyric "Don't you love farce?" Unless the *v* of *love* is closed off *before* pronouncing the initial *f* of *farce*, it will sound like "Don't you love arse?", which is particularly amusing to speakers of the King's English. Similarly, consider the lyric "This is my quest, to follow that star" from *The Impossible Dream*. Without first closing off the *t* of *quest*, the audience might hear "This is my quess, to follow that star". Some of them will be wondering "What the hell is a *quess*?" and by the time they figure it out they will have missed the next lyric[1] and they will be angry.

The solution in both cases is easy, as Figures 4.2 and 4.3 show, though the specific fixes must be applied slightly differently due to the rhythm of the lyrics.

4.3   Diction and Rhythm

Good diction is particularly imperiled in "patter songs" or up-tempo songs whose lyrics go by very fast, especially when the rhythm of the lyrics is

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[1]"No matter how hopeless, no matter how far."

Figure 4.2: Literal (and somewhat exaggerated) depiction of placing shadow vowels to disambiguate closing consonants. In the first lyric, the performer can use an interior beat of the measure to pronounce the schwa. (*The Impossible Dream* from *Man of La Mancha*)
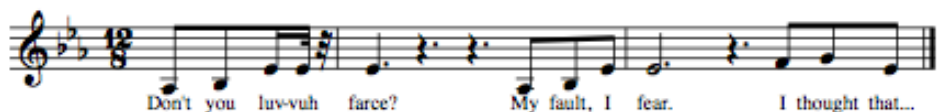

Figure 4.3: When no existing rest is available for a shadow vowel, the schwa must be hurried in between two lyric counts. If you listen to the original cast album, Glynis Johns puts a tiny pause before "farce" and turns it into an "actable moment." (*Send In the Clowns* from *A Little Night Music*)

"swung". This is similar to pitches getting "thrown away" when they occur on unaccented notes such as pickups, and the variable-stress practice technique (section 3.6) can be used here as well.

For example, consider the excerpt in figure 4.4 from "Don't Tell Mama" in *Cabaret*. There is a tremendous risk that the diction rules about over-enunciating vowels and pronouncing interior consonants will go out the window on the short (16th-note) swung syllables. An easy fix for this is to have the singers sing the rhythm nearly straight as opposed to swung. A *tiny* amount of swing, plus the fact that the musicians are playing swung, will suffice to give the impression of a swung melody, as Figure 4.5 suggests.

A related problem occurs when diction or pitch accuracy is imperiled because of a pickup that is shorter and unaccented. Again, the solution

Figure 4.4: Diction is at risk on the sixteenth notes in this swung melody. (*Don't Tell Mama* from *Cabaret*)
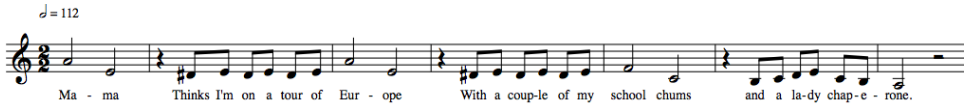
Figure 4.5: An easy fix is to have the singers perform the melody nearly "straight". (*Don't Tell Mama* from *Cabaret*)
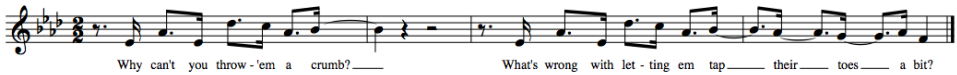

Figure 4.6: The pitches on "Why can't you" were indistinct, because they are both non-accented short notes and low pitches. (*Opening Doors* from *Merrily We Roll Along*)

is to overcompensate: have the singer write in an accent (and if necessary a **tenuto** mark) over the pickup to remind herself of this fact, and use variable-stress practice if necessary to drill it. For example, in Figure 4.6, were no pitch problems on "throw" because the melodic leap naturally accents the note, nor on "crumb" because it's a downbeat. But the pitches of "Why can't you" were getting "thrown away", i.e. not struck with the same accuracy as the other notes. Figure 4.7 shows a similar problem in a song from the recent original musical *Oh My Godmother!* Overenunciation and applying the occasional tiny *tenuto* avoid the pitfall.

4.4   Tempo: Jump On the Entrance

Related to diction is precise timing. Left to their own devices, the ensemble will drag behind the orchestra more and more during long passages. This

Figure 4.7: The pitches on the first eighth notes of each pickup (*I'm, in, just, they*) are particularly vulnerable because they're both unaccented and in a lower register. Recall that tenor melodies are usually notated an octave higher than sung. (*CinderAlbert* from *Oh My Godmother!*)

Figure 4.8: **Singers must anticipate their entrances by counting beats; if they wait to "reply" to the singer who has the previous line, they will be late. (*Just Another Day* from *Next to Normal*)**

is human nature. If the orchestra then slows down to match, the ensemble will slow down even more.

The remedy is to remind singers to mentally *anticipate* their vocal entrances, or "jump" on the entrance. This works because the only way to do so is by counting on one's "internal metronome" until the entrance in order to anticipate it. The alternative, which many singers do, is get their cues by listening to someone else, for example, in a patter or dialogue, listening for the line to which they are presumably replying. Figure 4.8 illustrates the pitfall: invariably the second entrance will be just a hair late, the orchestra will slow down just a tiny bit to match the singer, and this will keep happening until the song grinds to a slow tempo.

Figure 4.9 shows an extreme example of "jumping on an entrance," in which each singer must follow their internal metronome and subdivide the beat as necessary. For example, for an eighth-note pickup in 4/4, ask the singer to mentally count the pickup measure ("1-and-2-and-3-and-4-and"). To sing on the "and" of 4, the pickup breath must occur on the ictus of 4. Whereas many singers in this situation would instinctively aim for the downbeat after the pickup, that would run the risk of "losing" both pitch and diction on the pickup syllable as described previously. Just as when practicing tricky rhythms (Section 3.7), it may help to practice speaking the lyrics in rhythm before adding the melody.

Figure 4.9: In this patter song, the characters argue about whose fault it is that terrible things have befallen everyone. Singers should cue their entrances based on their internal metronome rather than cuing off of other singers, especially for vowel or soft-consonant entrances such as *YOU* (pickup to measure 3). (*Your Fault* from *Into the Woods*)

4.5   Dynamics

Pitch and dynamics. Whether in solo or ensemble singing, lower pitches naturally sound softer than higher pitches, especially when there is a large enough interval leap in the melody that it straddles ranges of the singer's voice that have different timbre. The solution is to actively modify the dynamics to compensate for the difference: sing the low pitches louder and/or the high pitches softer. Figure 4.10 shows an example.

Ensemble dynamics. When singing in ensemble, the ensemble members must understand that *everyone's* volume control, taken individually, contributes to the ensemble's sound. A small change in the volume of every ensemble member creates a large change in the overall ensemble volume, so when something needs to be louder, each individual ensemble member may only need to be a little bit louder.

Consistency is also important. If you want the ensemble singing *f*, you need everyone singing somewhere between *mf* and *f*, rather than one or

Figure 4.10: The lower pitches on the first syllables of "Easy" (bar 3) and "recipe" (bar 4) will be softer by default, so special precautions must be taken to maintain a constant volume. (*I Speak Six Languages* from *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*)

Figure 4.11: In this duet between Quixote and Sancho, if each can hear the other's lyrics about as well as his own, the audience will be able to hear both lines as well (*I Am I, Don Quixote* from *Man of La Mancha*)

two people belting and others singing *sotto voce*. The latter are simply going to sound unconfident and wrong (Section 4.6). Conversely, when you want the ensemble singing *p*, this means each individual will be singing between *pp* and *p*, but it *doesn't* mean "sing indistinctly under your breath"—it means sing with equally precise (or even more precise) diction, pitch control, and intensity, but less volume.

Counterpoint. When two or more soloists singing overlapping or counterpoint lines—a duet, as in Figure 4.11, or a trio or multipart counterpoint in which the lines are all of essentially equal importance—an easy way to self-regulate volume is to ask each ensemble member: Can you hear the other lines as easily as you hear your own when you're singing? If the singers (or groups) can clearly hear each other, the balance will be approximately correct for the audience too. (Needless to say, each vocalist must master their own line before concentrating on listening for balance!)

Projection. Projection refers to the ability of a vocalist to "sing to the back of the room" and is a quality that is *different* from volume. Good projection consists of applying all of the above polishing—precise diction,

precise rhythm, expressive dynamics—and combining it with just enough volume to "hit the back wall of the theater" without compromising any of that precision. Sometimes, simple physical things such as keeping one's chin off of one's neck will help projection, but projection is an *active* effort that singers must think about at all times. Many situations of "undersinging" result not from a lack of volume but from a lack of precision in the other ingredients. (A loud singer with poor diction or imprecise attention to the details discussed in this section will not be perceived to be projecting well.)

4.6   Polishing Away Easily-Avoided Pitfalls

An unpolished performance lacks the clarity and energy that the show deserves, and nothing saps the energy of a song worse than a bunch of people mumbling. A potpourri of easily-avoided (through rehearsal) vocal performance pitfalls rounds out our discussion of polishing the material. Note that polishing is even more critical for the ensemble than for soloists—the only thing worse than someone mumbling lyrics is a whole group of people mumbling lyrics!

Uncertain or tentative entrances. Less-confident singers may start a phrase tentatively, and once they're sure (usually by listening to other singers around them) that they're singing a correct note or coming in at the right time, they get louder. This must be avoided at all costs: in performance, tentative entrances *always* sound wrong, whether they are or not. Pay special attention to tentative starts when tricky intervals are involved—everyone seems to wait for someone else to sing it first. If necessary, work with individual singers or groups of singers by training the entrance pitch using the "interval method" (Section 3.4).

Uncertain or tentative cutoffs. Cutoffs should occur at the exact same time for everyone. A bunch of vowels fading out at different rates, or a bunch of people closing off a "t" at slightly different times, just sounds sloppy. You should mark what beat (or part of a beat) signals the cutoff of each held note, and *have the singers write it down*. If the cutoff is on a vowel, there should be no decrescendo leading to the cutoff (unless it's specifically

Figure 4.12: The stepwise chromatic motion of this melody makes pitch accuracy particularly important, since each syllable's pitch must be distinct. (*All I Need Is The Girl* from *Gypsy*)

marked as such in the vocal book). If the cutoff is a consonant, everyone must close it off at the same time. You may be able to cue the cutoff while conducting, but this should be an "extra help" and not something that the singers rely on.

Sounds flat/sounds sharp. Some unusual intervals like tritones and minor seconds (half-steps on the piano) are particularly troublesome to sing without sounding flat or sharp. Examples are the motif for "Maria" from *West Side Story*, which starts with a tritone from C to $F\sharp$, and the excerpt below from *Gypsy*, which has lots of half-step neighbor tones. Furthermore, some regular major and minor intervals may present tonal difficulty for whatever reason to less-experienced singers. The solution is disarmingly simple: if a note sounds slightly flat, just ask the singer to mentally "aim a little higher" to fix it, and vice versa. (And make him write that down in his vocal book!) For flat/sharp problems in harmony singing, a different approach is needed; see Section 3.5.

Goes flat/goes sharp. A related problem occurs when a long-held note gradually goes flat or sharp. This is particularly common when the harmonies are changing under the held note, as in Figure 4.13. The problem arises because of the physics of sound vibration and the relationships between pitches in diatonic intervals: A note G sung against a D major chord is a *different note* than that same G sung against a C major chord. This difference is formally called a *comma*, and a surprisingly good way to help the singer hear it and adjust accordingly is to have her "re-sing" the note (instead of holding it) with each chord change, as the figure suggests. This practice technique forces "re-tuning" against each chord change, by presenting each change as a renewed opportunity to re-establish pitch based on how the note sounds relative to the new harmony.

Sloppy ensemble diction. Singing well in an ensemble is often *more*

Figure 4.13: Left: Diana holds an A while the strings play a figure that transitions between A major and D major (I and IV in Roman numeral harmony notation). Right: Mentally (or during practice, physically) re-articulating the A over each change will help re-tune the note. (*So Anyway* from *Next To Normal*)

demanding than singing solo, yet it's distressingly common for the MD to treat the ensemble as second-class citizens, giving them less time and attention than the principals. Performers must be aware that the ensemble is not a place to hide! A strong ensemble is a joy to the audience and adds tremendously to the music; a sloppy ensemble sounds like a place where deficient singers are sent as punishment. Drill the ensemble as hard or harder than the leads—you will be highly rewarded, and they will be energized when they realize how critical they are to the show.

Inconsistent performance. Singers are human, and they sometimes forget rehearsal notes. You can minimize the likelihood of this happening by always telling them to *write down* things like pronunciation, cutoff beats, technical notes (remembering to "aim high" or "aim low" on a tricky interval), and so on Then, if you are able to cue them in performance, the cue is an added help rather than a crutch. Ideally, once the music starts the singers should be able to perform the song correctly and consistently without seeing you or relying on your conducting. This will be helpful in tricky situations such as when eye contact with singer(s) is impossible or when you don't have a free hand to conduct them onstage; we discuss these situations further in Section 6.3.

4.7 Microphones: A Blessing and a Curse

There are two principal reasons that mics are often badly misused. One is that the tech staff may not realize how hard it is to get the right balance and sound with mics: it requires a mixer, possibly wireless/body mics, a sound board, amplifiers and speakers appropriate for the space, and a sound operator who can competently set up and actively operate that equipment for every performance. In other words, you can't just turn a mic on and forget about it. (For an excellent discussion, see Campbell, *Technical Theater For Nontechnical People*.) More often, though, even when properly set up, mics are misused by performers who haven't been taught how to use them properly. Mics and amplification systems increase the volume of sound put into them. *Under the best of conditions, that is all they do, and they do it to varying degrees for different timbres and pitches.* If the sound going into them is flawed, the audience will simply hear flawed sounds loudly. And even if the sound going into them is good, all amplification systems, however expensive, introduce some distortion and noise. Here are some guidelines to help actors make effective use of mics.

Mics are not a substitute for projection. A singer with poor projection will be mumbly and unintelligible through a mic. A singer with good projection probably doesn't need a mic unless the orchestra is large and the house is vast. Good projection is possible even in softer passages. Worse, the mic can become a psychological crutch that the actor relies on "when my voice gets a little tired." This can result in "undersinging", which can actually be *more* dangerous to the health of the actor's voice than "straining", and once the crutch habit is acquired it is very difficult to break.

Mics are not a substitute for diction. I've already beaten the diction horse to death in the preceding sections. Some singers think that a mic relaxes the restrictions of good diction. This is wrong, and in fact the opposite is true because even the best sound systems introduce some distortion. Less-experienced singers may not realize this because they listen to recorded albums and they think that is how a mic makes you sound. But those albums are recorded in soundproof studios under ideal conditions and postproduced by expert sound engineers using thousands of dollars'

worth of electronics. Less-experienced singers may also assume that the sound of a mic in live performance resembles live performances they have heard recorded for broadcast or for sale as albums. Again, such recordings require hundreds of microphones placed hours ahead of time, a crew of professional sound engineers, and hours of pre-show trial-and-error sound checks with and without the orchestra. It is extremely expensive and error-prone, which is why live recordings of stage performances are rarely done.

Finally, no mic can change the fact that the acoustics of a live room are hard to control and differ fundamentally from those of a studio sound booth. The close-in "studio sound" of a mic simply cannot be achieved under live conditions. Using studio singing technique in a live setting will result in the audience hearing a lot of sibilance (hissing) and unintelligible vowels.

Mics are not a substitute for good stage acting. Much more than actors realize, audience members rely on visual cues and even some lip-reading to catch all the lyrics. If the actor has her back turned to the audience while singing, those lyrics will be harder for the audience to catch, *no matter how loudly they are amplified.* This is a particular challenge in theaters where thrust (audience on 3 sides) or arena (audience all around) staging is used: vocal numbers *must* be staged so that the audience is able to see the singer's face as much as possible.

Does this mean mics are *never* appropriate? Hardly. If the staging is careful, the singers are projecting, and their diction is good, *but* they are still not loud enough to be heard over the orchestra, it's appropriate to try mics as a way to bring the vocal balance up a bit. But do so with a realistic understanding of what they can and can't do, and of the technical requirements involved in getting it right.

4.8   Summary and Checklists

The following list summarizes the most common diction-related problems that arise in rehearsal, as described in this chapter. Keep it at hand and you'll have it memorized sooner than you think!

- Emphasize final consonants and cutoffs.

- Make interior vowels distinct.

- Don't sacrifice diction to rhythm: swing it less, and "sit" on a pickup or short note to make sure it gets the pitch accuracy and diction it deserves.

- Use dynamics to compensate/cancel out "built in" volume changes due to pitch or rhythm: lower pitches sound softer, so compensate by singing a bit louder, and vice versa.

- In ensemble counterpoint, cue yourself based on the metronome, not on others' lines, and anticipate ("jump on") your entrances just a tiny bit.

- When using a mic, sing as if you weren't using it. In fact, sing as if you were singing through a handkerchief.

Closing Thoughts

The modern musical is a quintessentially American art form. While its roots lie in opera, it was the English-language light-opera works of Gilbert & Sullivan that were economically viable to produce in colonial America, starting musicals on the path to attracting a popular audience. The subsequent influence of vaudeville and jazz (themselves American contributions) made it acceptable and even expected for musical theater to feature popular music styles. The "book musical," foreshadowed by *Show Boat* in 1927 and definitively established by *Oklahoma!* in 1943, made it acceptable and even expected for the songs to serve a story about characters and situations, rather than the other way around. Since then, the combination of music accessible to a popular audience but driven by the needs of a good story has produced eight musicals[2] that have won the Pulitzer Prize for drama—a distinction historically awarded to "serious" plays—and many others that have won dramatic acclaim. When I started Music Directing, I missed out on this combination by focusing almost entirely on the technical aspects of getting the music right; only later did I become involved in the dramatic aspects of the job, by working with enlightened stage directors. Great musicals, in other words, not only have something substantive to say, but (in my opinion) they can say it more potently because they can employ music, lyrics, and dance as well as spoken dialogue.

Of course, not every show you do has to be a Pulitzer or Drama Desk

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[2]*Of Thee I Sing*, 1932; *South Pacific*, 1950; *Fiorello!*, 1960; *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, 1962; *A Chorus Line*, 1976; *Sunday in the Park with George*, 1984; *Rent*, 1996; and *Next to Normal*, 2010.

contender with a serious message; some shows are just plain fun to do. I hope this book makes those shows even more fun by smoothing the rehearsal process and helping you polish the performances to perfection. And when you do get involved with a show that has something substantial to say, I hope the information in this book not only helps you appreciate the ability of musicals to carry such a message, but also inspires you to communicate that message to audiences for whom "musical" is perhaps synonymous with "jukebox" or "revue." When you do that, you will have created something new, and the audience will remember it.

> *Look, I made a hat . . . where there never was a hat.*
>
> —Stephen Sondheim, *Sunday in the Park with George*

Bibliography

Boland et al.: Musicals: Directing School and Community Theatre

Robert Boland and Paul Argentini. *Musicals: Directing School and Community Theatre*. Lanham, MD, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1997.

Abstract: A good step-by-step to putting together a musical, aimed primarily at the same kind of audience I'm aiming for. The kind of book to which the present one would be a good companion. If you're interested in what your counterparts on the production staff have to do for "the show to go on," this is a good overview of the problems that arise and practical approaches to solving them.

Boyd: Rehearsal Guide for the Choral Director

Jack Boyd. *Rehearsal Guide for the Choral Director*. West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing Co., Inc., 1970.

Abstract: A book that attempts to do for the high-school choir director what mine attempts to do for the first-time Music Director. Full of great ideas about running rehearsals, auditioning singers, teaching singers, and keeping their attention focused during the learning of difficult pieces. An essential for the Music Director's bookshelf, in my opinion.

Campbell: Technical Theater For Nontechnical People

Drew Campbell. *Technical Theater For Nontechnical People*. Allworth Press, 1999.

Abstract: If you want to understand the technical aspects of putting a show on, this belongs on your bookshelf. Realistically, very little of it will directly impact the Music Director's work (unless you need to mic the orchestra), but I find it's useful and interesting to understand what is involved in putting on the whole show.

Grote: Staging The Musical: Organizing, Planning, and Rehearsing the Amateur Production

David Grote. *Staging The Musical: Organizing, Planning, and Rehearsing the Amateur Production*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1986.

Abstract: A great starting point for the creative team staging their first musical; does for the rest of the production staff what I've tried to do for the MD. The material in the present book can be considered a supplement to Grote's book. Also contains excellent suggestions on selecting a show given your talent and budget constraints, and so on.

Lamb: Choral Techniques

Gordon H. Lamb. *Choral Techniques*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1974.

Abstract: Aimed at the director of a semi-pro choir, but has some good suggestions for vocal warm-up exercises and for auditioning singers. I tried to capture the highlights of the audition techniques but this book is well worth a read.

McElheran: Conducting Technique: For Beginners And Professionals

Brock McElheran. *Conducting Technique: For Beginners And Professionals*. 2nd Revised Ed. New York, 2005.

Abstract: This is a great no-nonsense concise book on conducting, covering both the basics and tricky situations. If you read only one book on this topic, this is the one. The original 1966 edition is just as good.

Novak: Staging Musical Theatre

Elaine Adams Novak. *Staging Musical Theatre*. 1st ed. Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, 1996.

Abstract: This is a good all-around guide to getting your first show up, since it covers show selection, production, direction, choreography, the audition and rehearsal process, and more. It also has an extensive bibliography on various aspects of musical theater production and a useful glossary of terms used in musical theater production.

Sebesky: The Contemporary Arranger, Definitive Edition

Don Sebesky. *The Contemporary Arranger, Definitive Edition*. Alfred Publishing Company, 1984.

Abstract: With a focus on arranging for medium-to-large bands, this book discusses both the artistic aspects of arranging—voicing, combining instrumental timbres, and so on—and the technical ones, such as what figures or notes are hard or impossible to play on certain instruments. Unique to the book is a handful of annotated anti-examples explaining how NOT to do something.