PIANO/CONDUCTOR

So They Talked You Into Being
Music Director

Version 1.0

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. . . So They Talked You Into Being Music Director

By ARMANDO FOX
Illustrations by Joanne Romeo

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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.)

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Contents

2

Introduction: Who Am I? Who Are You? What Is This?

When I served as Music Director for the first time in college, I already had extensive classical piano training, ear training, ensemble playing, some choral conducting, and music theory. I had also played piano in three or four pits, and I had seen dozens of Broadway musicals as a kid growing up in New York, so I sort of knew how theater scores were put together and rehearsed.

But I quickly learned that there's a big gap between musicianship and Music Director. Conducting a pit orchestra is different from conducting an orchestra or a choir, and most community productions introduce additional limitations relating to budget, talent pool, facilities/space, staff/personnel, and other things they don't seem to cover in any book. Being an accomplished pianist certainly helps, but try doing that while also leading the orchestra, conducting tempo changes, and giving cues to actors. And that's just the performances: to get that far you have to teach actors who may have little formal musical training how to practice and perform harmony and counterpoint, and you have to help them understand the relationship between their characters' songs and their dialogue. Delivering a great musical while juggling all of these is the real job of the Music Director, and I learned those things only by doing.

I'm sure I would have learned some of these skills if I had majored in musical theater in conservatory. But I didn't do that. In fact, I didn't even *go* to conservatory. I'm a computer scientist by profession, and while I did get all the formal training I mentioned earlier, that more or less stopped in college. Engineering courses didn't leave a lot of time for continuing all

that formal training. But I still really loved musical theater, so somehow I found time to do shows, and learned the rest along the way.

If you find yourself in a similar position, I hope you find helpful this collection of stuff I wish I'd known when I started doing this several years ago. My primary instrument is piano, and since piano/conductor is a common dual role for the music director, that's my basic assumption about you, but most of this information will apply if you have a separate pianist or separate vocal director.

I'm also making the following additional assumptions about you:

- You have some musical background and can play an instrument. If you've played in pits or done some choral conducting McElheran, *Conducting Technique: For Beginners And Professionals*, some of what's here will already be familiar to you.
- You're working with production staff who have staged musicals before (as opposed to plays). If this is the first show for all of you, I suggest you *first* read one of the many great books on how to stage a musical, such as Grote, *Staging The Musical: Organizing, Planning, and Rehearsing the Amateur Production* or Novak, *Staging Musical Theatre*; then come back and read this, treating it as expanded coverage of the topics specific to the Music Director's role. And if this is your first musical, I hope you're not starting with *Sweeney Todd* or *West Side Story*!
- Most of your singers aren't professional; some may have vocal or other musical training and can read music, while others may be untrained "naturals" with good voices.
- You may lack the resources for a full orchestra, due to lack of money, musicians, or space to put them. Your musicians may or may not be professional-grade, and some may not have played in pits before.
- Your organization is resource-limited and relies at least in part on volunteer labor, and everyone must do multiple jobs. Hence, besides being the music director, you may also be the vocal coach, rehearsal pianist, orchestra manager, conductor, and perhaps orchestra pianist.

- You don't necessarily have access to professional facilities like a "real" pit at the front of the stage, so some creativity may be needed in where to put the pit and how to coordinate the onstage actors with the music.
- Your intention is to perform live music at every show, rather than using a prerecorded music track. To me, a prerecorded show soundtrack is an insult to the audience that completely defeats the freshness and energy of live theater. After all, the audience would walk out of a play if the actors were lip-syncing their dialogue to a prerecorded track.
- Your goal is to put on a show that people will come to because it's a great show, not just because they are the friends or parents of the performers. There is a large middle ground between New York or London productions and "church basement" productions, but I believe an important goal is to aspire to a higher level of professionalism than may be strictly necessary for your venue. I hope to convince you by the end of the book that audiences *will* notice and appreciate that extra effort, even if they do so subconsciously.

Musical Examples and Online Resources

The book makes extensive use of short excerpts from real musicals to illustrate its suggestions by example. In most cases, the transcription of the excerpt is as close as possible to the original show material; in a few cases, it has been slightly stylized or elided to focus on the point of the example.

On the book's website `pianoconductor.com`, you'll find various links that will help you get information about the examples and the shows from which they come, including links to the licensing information for each show, links to purchase the cast albums from which the selections are taken, and links to playlists containing just the individual songs from which selections are taken.

There's also links to other useful materials and for you to leave feedback about the book.

Disclaimer and What This Book Is Not

This book is not a primer on musical theater. If you've never been involved in any productions before, you and your production staff may want to check out one of the great books suggested in the Bibliography to get started.

While the book tries to cover everything that is expected of the MD, from the moment the show materials arrive to the moment the sets are struck after the closing performance, there are two conspicuous omissions: I won't discuss how to select a show and I won't present the basics of conducting. There are good reasons for both omissions. The MD's contribution to choosing a show makes use of her knowledge of her own abilities and limitations as well as those of her musicians and actors: Is the technical difficultly appropriate? Can the orchestra be staffed? Can the necessary roles be cast from the available talent pool? There's no easy way to give specific advice about this thought process without assuming you've read Chapters 1 through 6, and once you've read them, you won't need the advice. And for better or worse, sometimes the MD is hired after the show has been chosen!

Regarding conducting, many MDs (or aspiring MDs) are coming to this book with some basic knowledge of conducting already; and for those who have none, there are already great books on this topic that I could not hope to improve on. For example, McElheran, *Conducting Technique: For Beginners And Professionals* (see Bibliography) is my favorite no-nonsense, no-condescension, quit-your-whining treatment of the basics of conducting; it's a concise gem of a book that gets right to business. This book's website, `pianoconductor.com`, also includes some Wikipedia and YouTube links to show you the very basics. Therefore we will concentrate on the tricky parts of conducting that are specific to the Piano/Conductor role, such as cues, vamps, timing of spoken dialogue to background music (underscoring), and how to conduct when your limbs are all engaged doing other things.

This book won't (can't) give the kind of technical feedback that a voice teacher could provide. Indeed, most Music Directors can't give such feedback unless they have voice training themselves. But it's fair to say that most voice teachers don't give their students the kind of specific advice found here that you might pass on to actors, so the two kinds of feedback

should be considered complementary.

Finally, this book doesn't pretend to be *the* way to do any of the things it discusses—just *one* way, and in particular, a way that has been tested in the field, by me and by others. Your mileage may vary, and there are many ways to deal with the challenges of the important Piano/Conductor role. I hope you find these suggestions provocative and helpful, but it's your show, so any variation that works better for you is the right thing to do.

Map of the Book

Music direction involves picking a show, understanding it dramatically, teaching actors to sing *and act* the songs, getting the musicians to play the music, possibly doing some musical arrangements to cope with resource limitations, and then putting it all together into an actual performance. Each of those topics is a book unto itself, but if you had time to read all those books, you wouldn't need this one. The Music Director's job in a community theater is about breadth as well as depth, so if it seems presumptuous to cover a huge topic like "Rehearsing the Orchestra" in the few pages of a single chapter, it's because I thought you would benefit from knowing *something* about it even if you don't become an expert, and that you'd go read one of the excellent books listed in the Bibliography (none of them by me) to learn more about that topic.

Assuming a show has been chosen, the MD adventure begins when the box of rental materials arrives, so chapter 1 covers the basics of unpacking that box: Will you be able to cover all the instruments called for, and if not, which ones do you leave out? What can you expect in terms of scheduling? How do you use that material to plan for auditions with the show's director? The MD has a crucial role to play during auditions, both in evaluating whether an actor can handle the musical demands of a particular role and whether the actor will be able to take direction to perform the role in a musical sense. Chapter 2 covers how to prepare to hear auditions, how to advise your auditioners to prepare, things to try during the audition if the auditioner's material doesn't give you enough information about her abilities, and what to focus on during first-round auditions vs. during

callbacks.

Once the show is cast, the two major chunks of work the MD then has in front of her are teaching the singers to sing *and perform* the songs (Chapters 3 and 4) and recruiting and rehearsing an orchestra to play them (Chapters 5 and 6). Chapter 3 covers how to teach the singers the mechanics of the songs: how do you work with singers who have little or no musical training? What exercises or techniques can you teach them to help learn particularly tricky material? How can you setup rehearsal schedules to make the best use of everyone's time but still make sure you have allocated enough time to learn all the material? Finally, how do you work with actors to help them *interpret* the songs? (This is musical *theater*, after all, not just a musical concert!) The end of the chapter covers this topic and gives a few specific examples from well-known musicals.

Because the songs in a well-crafted musical are integral to the plot, it's important the lyrics be understood. To that end, Chapter 4 is devoted to diction, including a bunch of diction pitfalls that are easily polished away.

Chapter 5 then covers the analogous challenges of working with the orchestra: How do you read a conductor's score and decode the markings specific to theater work (if you haven't done theater work before)? What should you be looking for when recruiting/auditioning orchestra members? If you can't recruit all the instruments called for in the show's orchestration, what do you leave out and what can you rearrange so as to preserve the flavor of the original score as closely as possible?

Theater conducting brings a number of unique challenges, such as timing music to stage action and conducting when your hands are busy playing the piano. Chapter 6 provides tips for handling some of the most common situations.

Chapter 7 is somewhat advanced: it is aimed at the MD who may need to do significant arrangement or reduction of the provided orchestration to compensate for having a much smaller pit due to constraints such as space or budget. While arranging is a subtle art, and the best arrangers and orchestrators are highly sought after, I at least try to offer a few general rules of thumb to help the MD who is trying to squeeze an orchestration down to a much more modest size.

Finally, the appendix on Resources provides information that wouldn't fit anywhere else but is otherwise crosscutting to the MD's concerns, such as good ways to use technology to facilitate your job and the pitfalls and politics of human resources in recruiting the pit.

"And so. . . on with the show!"

A Music Director's Tour of the Materials

1 A Music Director's Tour of the Materials

If you haven't used theater scores before, this chapter will help you to:

- know what to expect when the box of materials arrives, and how to use each kind of book;
- determine your orchestra staffing strategy based on what's in the box;
- understand musical symbols and notations in the Piano/Conductor score with which you may be unfamiliar.

If you are experienced in reading show scores, you can probably skip this chapter.

The material in this chapter is also useful when evaluating a potential show, since one consideration is whether you will be able to staff an appropriate orchestra. While the free "perusal" materials available for most shows do not include the conductor's score, the information on the websites of the "big four" agencies that control most musicals—Tams-Witmark, Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization, Music Theatre International (MTI), and Samuel French—usually show the instrumentation required for each show.

1.1 What's In The Box

The big day has come! The big box from MTI has arrived! You can start working on the music!

Yes and no. Keep in mind that orchestrations are rented separately from the other show materials. This implies several things for you:

- The *instrument books* are probably not in the box. By default they arrive later (typically 4–5 weeks before opening night), and if you want them earlier you usually have to pay more. But you should have at least one copy in the box of the *piano/conductor score* or *rehearsal score*, which is enough to get started with. We will defer discussion of the instrument books until Chapter 5.

- If there are multiple orchestrations available for your show, make sure the correct one is ordered to avoid extra fees and mailing costs later. In this chapter we discuss the different "sizes" of orchestrations and how to find out if there are different choices available for your show.

- Usually, the orchestration you rent implies something about your performance rights. For example, if you rent only the piano/conductor book and *not* the other instrument books, you may or may not be allowed to embellish the orchestration with additional instruments. I have seen shows get shut down for this, so read the contract carefully before proceeding.

- You'll have to return all materials in pristine condition when you're done (this clause is standard, event though I've never received books that were pristine when they arrived) or else pay an outrageous "erasing fee". Consequently, most musicians I know work from a photocopy and never touch the original book. For the Music Director this makes even more sense.

Here's what you should find in the box:

Conductor's book. This is the book from which the conductor actually conducts during a performance and is usually one of three types. The most

common is the "Piano/Conductor" score, which can be played on the piano but indicates the most important *instrument cues* (selected prominent passages played by other instruments). It may also be a full *partitur*, like a classical conductor's score showing one staff per instrument, with transposing instruments written in their own pitch rather than *concert pitch*, which can be disconcerting (groan) if you're not used to score reading. A hybrid *Piano/Partitur* may be used for a much smaller ensemble: this is just like a conductor's score except that the piano's part is in a larger typeface since the pianist will play from this book.

Rehearsal pianist's or accompanist's book. If the conductor's book is anything *other* than Piano/Conductor, there may be a separate rehearsal book, perhaps called "Piano/Vocal" or "Rehearsal Score". It usually contains the lyrics and basic piano accompaniment but doesn't reliably indicate the instrumental parts. This score is suitable for rehearsal but not for conducting (and indeed, if there is a piano part written into the show, it is usually in a separate book that is substantially different from the piano/vocal score). Note that some scores labeled "Piano/Vocal" are really piano/conductor in that they include hints about instrumental arrangements. From now on we'll say *rehearsal score* if we specifically mean a simplified piano-only arrangement with no instrument cues, and *conductor's score* to mean "whatever the conductor conducts from" (even if it isn't actually playable on a piano, though these days that is overwhelmingly the case).

Script/Prompt Book. The script may be a "Prompt Book" similar to what the stage manager will use, or if you're unlucky, a "side" for each character containing only that character's lines and one or two cue lines before each. Happily, such sides seem to be getting more rare.

Vocal Book/Libretto. There will be several copies of the Vocal Book, which includes the lyrics and melody but usually no accompaniment. Sometimes the script and libretto are combined, other times they are separate books.

Snag the conductor's score, the piano/vocal score if supplied, the instrument books if they've arrived, and a copy of the vocal book for yourself.

1.2 The Conductor's Score

Before going further, get a *lot* of pencils with good erasers, a bunch of yellow highlighting pens, and a looseleaf binder. Photocopy the entire conductor's score onto 3-hole-punched looseleaf paper and put it in a binder in which you can easily reorganize the pages.[1] As you make cuts and rearrangements in the show, or need to re-photocopy a page that has become unreadable from repeated markings and erasures, you'll appreciate having done this. It also lets you strategically insert blank pages to fix tricky page turns.

As noted above, the most common type of conductor's score is called *piano/conductor*, even if the conductor is not actually expected to play the piano and even if there's no piano part in the orchestration. This score is essentially a glorified piano reduction that preserves some of the most important instrumental lines present in the orchestration, often notated with "cue notes" in a smaller typeface alongside instrument names. Depending on how many instrument cues are shown, in some numbers they may be shown on the same staves as the piano part (Figure 1.1) whereas in other numbers there may be one or more separate *cue staves* to prevent the piano part from getting visually cluttered (Figure 1.2). This book is suitable for piano-only rehearsal but may require some creativity on the part of the pianist, since such reductions are not always easily playable or sound particularly good as written. If you're doing the show with piano only, this is the book to use unless a separate piano-only reduction (see section 1.3) is specifically available for the show.

Older scores and instrument books are basically photocopies of the sheets handwritten by *music copyists*, professionals whose job is to prepare the final musical scores for the performers and orchestra. This includes, for example, preparing the parts for transposing instruments from the conductor's original manuscript, which is often in concert pitch. Scores for

[1] Many contracts for staging musicals place restrictions on reproduction of the rental materials. They may require, e.g., that you get permission in writing to make a photocopy for mark-up use or that you destroy the temporary copy after the run is over. Check your contract to be sure.

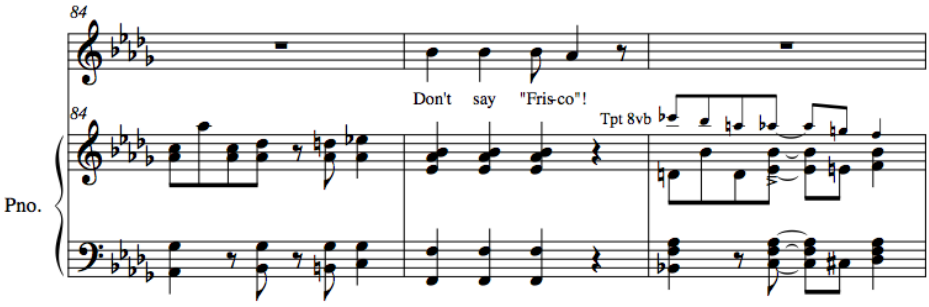

Figure 1.1: Instrument cue on the same staff as the piano reduction. The trumpet will play the line shown in small *cue notes* in bar 86 one octave lower than written (8vb). Cues may be notated in a different octave to avoid clutter and get more information onto one staff. (*Opening/San Francisco* from *Oh My Godmother!*)

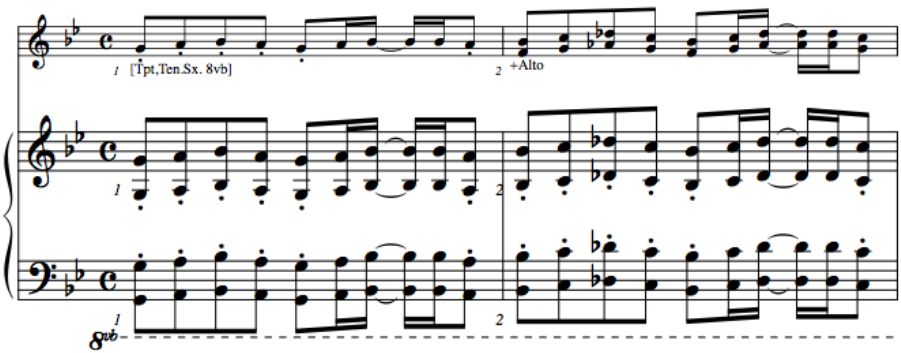

Figure 1.2: Instrument cues on their own cue staff, usually done when the piano part is so dense that there's no room for the cues on the piano staves. In this system, the trumpet plays a melody doubled an octave lower by the tenor sax in bar 1, with the alto sax joining in a fourth below in bar 2. (*Entr'acte* from *Oh My Godmother!*)

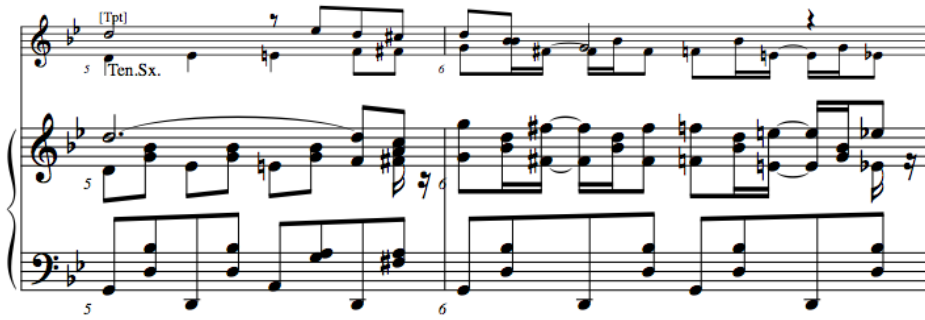

Figure 1.3: Instrument cues: in this system, the trumpet plays a melody while the tenor sax plays a counterpoint line. (*Fabulous* from *Oh My Godmother!*)

newer shows are usually machine-typeset, making them vastly easier to read and less error-prone, since the publisher can fix errors electronically and re-print the scores.

1.3 Instrumentation: Types of Ensembles

Instrumentation refers to the complement of instruments required to play the score. The term *orchestration* is often used, but technically, orchestration refers to the actual arrangements, not the list of musicians needed.

The original instrumentation (when the show was staged in New York or London) is usually listed on one of the front-matter pages of the conductor's score. If not, you can infer it by enumerating the instrument books, or by looking up the show's information online at whichever of the "big four" licensing agencies controls performance rights.

Licensing agencies sometimes use terms such as "large", "small" or "chamber" to characterize the instrumentation (orchestra size) for shows that they license, but the meanings of the terms are not standardized. In practice, instrumentation for most musicals falls into one of four categories.

1. The "traditional Broadway pit" (my term) has the same sections as a symphony orchestra (rhythm/percussion, strings, winds, brass) and

in similar proportions, but is much smaller: a symphony orchestra can exceed 100 musicians, whereas the Broadway pit is 25–40 musicians. This was the dominant format through the late 60's for Broadway musicals, when budgets went further than they do today. It is also the most challenging for smaller theaters because the orchestrations are often difficult to reduce.

2. In the 70's and 80's, budget concerns and a desire for a leaner, drier and more contemporary sound resulted in smaller orchestras of 12–14 musicians, dominated by woodwinds and featuring few or no strings. Nearly all off-Broadway musicals and many Broadway revivals use this smaller format. These arrangements can often be further reduced and are usually within reach for community theaters. Smaller arrangements often call for extensive *doubling*, a term that refers to a single musician who can play multiple instruments (not at the same time!). We will have much more to say about doubling in Chapter 5.

3. Some contemporary shows call for a "chamber orchestration"—8 or fewer musicians, frequent doubling, and very exposed solo lines. The 1994 Rodgers and Hammerstein revue *A Grand Night For Singing* calls for percussion, 1 woodwind (flute doubling clarinet and alto), 1 cello, and 1 harp (which most small theaters omit or cover using piano or percussion effects). The 2001 musical *The Last Five Years* calls for piano, 2 cellos, violin, string bass, and guitar. This format is within the reach of community theaters, but requires strong players since each part is so exposed.

4. Shows with a rock score, such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) and *Hair* (1968), use "classic rock" instrumentation with period-appropriate guitar effects. Similarly, *Rent* (1996) relies heavily on synthesizers, drum machines and other elements central to the early 90s "pop sound". These scores are realistic for community theaters, but unlike other kinds of scores, require careful attention to amplification and sound, and therefore probably require that the singers be

amplified too. This is not necessarily a showstopper, but be aware that it can be a lot of extra work (see Sections 4.7 and 5.7). Some scores like *Next to Normal* (2008) are hybrid, combining a rock sound with strings or woodwinds. These sometimes call for unusual doublings such as guitar/violin.

5. Some very small off-Broadway shows or revues call for piano only (as in 2007's *Musical of Musicals: The Musical*), a "piano combo" (piano, bass, drums, plus possibly a soloist), or piano plus a single soloist (such as *The Fantasticks*' piano and harp). However, unless the show is specifically written this way, or you are *severely* resource-constrained, my advice in general is *not* to reduce shows by doing them with piano only, for reasons I discuss in Section 5.1.

Some shows may also require *specialists* (musicians who play only one or a small set of closely related instruments that do not routinely appear in pit orchestras), such as banjo for *Chicago* or accordion for *Cabaret*, to form the distinctive "signature sound" of those shows' scores.

By way of example, Figure 1.4 compares 3 typical instrumentations: full instrumentation from an older and a newer show, and reduced alternative instrumentation for a (different) older show.

Some important things to notice from this comparison:

- Most of the difference in size between the orchestras of older/bigger and newer/smaller shows comes from omitting strings. Modern orchestrations tend to rely less on strings, in part because it takes 3 or 4 stringed instruments to match the volume and power of a single woodwind instrument (unless your string players are solo quality and the lines they are playing are written as solo lines), making the orchestra larger and driving costs up. (Of course, if you have sophisticated amplification for the orchestra, you might be able to overcome this, but Section 5.7 describes why I think that's a dangerous path.)

- Some string parts are marked *divisi*, such as Violin B of *Oklahoma!*. This means that while all the Violin B players are playing the same

Oklahoma! (1943)—full instrumentation; 28 or 29 players	*Company* (1970)—full instrumentation; 9–12 players	*Cabaret* (1967)—"flex combo" reduction; 7–9 players
Percussion/Drums Bass (2 players) Guitar/Banjo Harp	Percussion/Drums Piano/Keyboard Bass Guitar	Drums Piano Bass Guitar/Banjo Accordion
Cello (2 players) Viola (2 players; divisi) Violin A (6 players; divisi) Violin B (4 players; divisi)	Cello (solo; optional) Viola (solo; optional) Violin (solo; optional)	
Reed 1: Clarinet 1, Bass Clarinet Reed 2: Clarinet 2 Reed 3: Oboe, optional English Horn Reed 4: Flute, Piccolo Reed 5 (optional): Bassoon Horn 1 Horn 2	Reed 1: Clarinet 1, Alto Clarinet, Alto Sax, Flute, Alto Flute, Piccolo Reed 2: Clarinet 2, Tenor Sax, English Horn, Oboe Reed 3: Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Bassoon, Baritone Sax	Reed 1: Clarinet 1, Alto Sax, optional Flute (cross-cued to Clar.) Reed 2: Clarinet 2, Tenor Sax
Trombone Trumpet 1 Trumpet 2	Trombone Trumpet	Trombone (cross-cued Reed 2) Trumpet (cross-cued Reed 1)

Figure 1.4: Full instrumentation for an older show and a newer show, and an alternative reduced instrumentation for a newer show. Note the extensive instrument doubling in the newer show. Doubling and cross-cuing are discussed in section 1.4.

notes during most of the show, in a few sections they split up; usually playing parallel figures such as thirds or sixths. (If these players were playing different parts throughout *most* of the score, there would probably have been a "Violin C" instead.)

- Unlike string or brass players, most reed players are expected to *double*, or play multiple instruments. Section 1.5 discusses doubling and its relative, cross-cuing.

1.4 Instrument Books

The instrument books (which you probably don't have yet) are the ones you actually hand out to the orchestra musicians. Their format should be familiar to musicians with orchestra or ensemble experience, but unlike classical music, they may include theater-specific notation such as vamps and cues, which we discuss in Chapter 6.

Expect to discover errors and inconsistencies between the conductor's score and the instrument books as you rehearse, including: mismatched measure numbers (possibly because a cut or modification didn't get into all the instrument books, or because a vamp or safety is notated differently in different books); missing or extra measures; wrong notes or missing accidentals; missing or different cues; chunks of measures or whole songs in the wrong key; missing accidentals. In general, when in doubt the conductor's score should be considered authoritative.

A common format is one book per pair of parts, e.g. "Violin A & B" or "Trumpets 1 & 2" in a single physical book of which multiple copies are provided. A copy may be given to each player, or more commonly, one copy is shared between two players, so they can also alternate page turns when one has to play across a page turn. Usually parts for separate players are written on separate staves, but occasionally multiple parts (rarely more than three) may be written on a single staff. This is most common for strings and is often accompanied by the notation *divisi* if it only happens occasionally (e.g. "Violin I (divisi)" means that although the Violin I players are *usually* playing unison, occasionally they divide). The implication is

that when planning your personnel, the Violin I book can *mostly* be handled by a single player except for a few parts. (If the divisi parts were frequent, they would probably be broken out as a separate instrument book, such as "Violin II".)

1.5 Doubling and Cross-Cuing

The exception to the multiple-musicians-per-book rule is the woodwind section, which is second only to the rhythm section as the mainstay of modern pit instrumentation.[2] Indeed, the woodwind books often exhibit the inverse relationship, as most woodwind players are expected to *double* or cover multiple instruments, which are usually combined into a single book per woodwind chair.

In earlier shows, flutes were usually a separate chair (flute, piccolo, alto flute, sometimes bass flute). In modern arrangements, single-reed players (clarinets and saxes) are often expected to cover flutes. Sometimes single-reed players must cover oboe, and infrequently English horn. Most oboe players double on English horn, but bassoons are usually played by specialists. A few accomplished reed players can handle instruments from all three categories—single reeds including flutes, double reeds, and bassoons. The ability to cover multiple instruments is common among pit and session musicians, but far less common among classical musicians who tend to specialize in one or perhaps two instruments. In Chapter 7 we'll talk about selective coverage of material from the books for which you can't recruit separate players or players who double.

Two rules of thumb apply when doubling is indicated:

1. The reed books are numbered in approximate order of how critical they are to the score. So if the books are labeled Reed 1 through Reed 4 and you have only two players, try to cover Reed 1 & 2.

2. Besides being grouped so that a single player has time to switch among multiple instruments, the instruments grouped into a single

[2] To paraphrase an old saw: If you don't have a drummer, you don't have a show; but if you don't have woodwinds, you probably don't have a pit.

reed book are often *cross-cued* (see below) to support players who don't double.

■ ***Doubling in other sections***

Doubling in the woodwind section is almost a given in modern orchestrations, but doubling in other sections is slowly becoming more common. Some doublings I've seen include viola/violin, trombone/euphonium, and even violin/guitar.

Some orchestrations go further and include *cross-cuing*, which allows a line assigned to one particular instrument to be played on a different instrument in case the original player is absent. For example, suppose there are four Reed books marked as follows:

- Reed 1, Alto sax/Flute/Clarinet
- Reed 2, Tenor sax/Clarinet
- Reed 3, Flute/Oboe (clarinet)/English horn (clarinet)
- Reed 4, Bass clarinet/Baritone sax

This means that while the Reed 1 and 2 players must each play multiple instruments, the English horn and oboe parts in Reed 3 are both cross-cued to clarinet so that a clarinet player could cover them if needed. This usually means they are provided on a separate staff, since clarinet and English horn are *transposing instruments* that read in different keys, whereas oboe reads in concert pitch.

Note that in the above example, there are two ways to use the cross-cuing. If you have four musicians but none plays oboe or english horn, cross-cuing allows those lines to be covered on clarinet. If you have fewer than four musicians, Reed 2 can use the Reed 3 cross-cues to selectively cover some of Reed 3's material; you'll have to make judgment calls as to what to omit, and chapter 7 has some hints.

In Chapter 5 we return to how you can use all this information to plan orchestra recruiting, and what to do when you can't recruit enough players

to cover all the books (in my experience, this is by far the common case in community theater).

Auditions

2 Auditions

Auditions are generally run in two rounds. From the MD's perspective, the first round determines who is technically capable of learning and singing the show's music, and the second round (callbacks) is for making final decisions. For many shows, rigorous auditions for the *ensemble* (a more accurate term than *chorus*) are at least as important as for the leads.

At callbacks, auditioners usually perform selections from the actual show. Since first round auditions have pruned away any actors who may be unable to handle a role's musical demands, callbacks can focus on *artistic* aspects such as interpretation, some suggestions for which are given in section 3.9.

This chapter will help you to:

- Prepare for first-round auditions by determining what to listen for and test for
- Suggest some basic exercises you can use to evaluate auditioners whose audition song doesn't tell you enough about their abilities
- Determine what nontechnical factors should influence your decisions to call back auditioners for different roles
- Suggest different techniques to use at callbacks to help with final casting choices

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2.1 Preparing to Hear Auditions

We'll restrict our discussions here to musical elements of the audition only (vs. spoken dialogue or dance). Great advice on the general running of auditions can be found in Boland and Argentini, *Musicals: Directing School and Community Theatre* and Boyd, *Rehearsal Guide for the Choral Director*.

Before auditions, if you have a cast recording of the show (*not* of its movie version! they are often quite different), it is worth listening to the recording while following along in the score to identify some of the technical challenges you will have to keep in mind as you hear auditions: difficult vocal harmonies, tricky timings/rhythms, songs calling for a large vocal range, and so on Make some notes in preparing for auditions:

- What vocal range is required of each character? Sometimes songs can be transposed to match a singer's range, but as we discuss in Section 7.1, this is tedious, error-prone, fraught with non-obvious pitfalls, and usually practical only for solo songs.
- Which characters have to sing harmony or counterpoint, if any? This is much harder than singing the lead, and you will need to test for it at auditions.
- Are the characters with the hardest songs also the ones who have the most dramatically demanding roles? (You may audition someone with a great voice, but if they can't act well, it may remove them from the running for certain characters.) Surprisingly often, the technical vocal demands on the ensemble are greater than those on the leads, in part because show tunes were often written for a pre-cast lead actor who wasn't necessarily a trained singer, as was the case with the material written for Ethel Merman in *Gypsy* and the song *Send In the Clowns* written for Glynis Johns.

In the call for music auditions, you should clearly state what you expect auditioners to prepare:

- **What to sing.** Typically each auditioner will prepare one or two song excerpts of 16 to 32 bars each. Often a single excerpt is enough, but

depending on the types of roles in the show, you may want to hear two contrasting selections, for example an up-tempo number and a ballad, or a farce/patter song and a torch song. You and the show's director should discuss what to hear.

- **Are songs from the show OK?** My preference is usually *not* to hear a song from the show, to avoid having actors "pre-slot" themselves into a role for which they may not be appropriate, and inadvertently exclude themselves from being considered for a role that is a better fit. This is particularly true if an actor is auditioning for a part they have played before in another production, as they will usually bring the interpretation of that production to your audition, when what you really want to know is whether the actor can take direction and interpret the role for *this* production. (Of course, during callbacks you will want to hear songs from the show.)

- **Background.** I ask auditioners to answer some background questions that are not always answered by their résumés: Do you read music? Do you play any instruments, and at what level of proficiency? (Complex scores like *Sweeney Todd* are extremely hard to learn by rote for non-readers, and it's more difficult for non-musicians to incorporate your vocal notes into their performance if they don't have a basic musical vocabulary.) Have you sung harmony before, and if so, what kind? (Liturgical? Show music? Barbershop?) Have you sung counterpoint? (Madrigals? Choral music?) My experience is that, especially among untrained singers, counterpoint is *much* harder to teach and perfect than harmony.

- **Conflicts.** I ask auditioners to list *all* date conflicts they have during the rehearsal period. Scheduling is more complex than most people realize, and you'll need this information to put together the rehearsal schedule.

2.2 First Round Auditions: Range, Tone, Pitch Retention, Rhythm

People get understandably nervous about auditions, and you can't blame them: not everyone who auditions will be cast. Just do your best to put people at ease, be friendly, and remind people that the goal is to have fun. Set a collegial tone: your first and last words to every auditioner should be "Thank you for coming," and you should really mean it.

In my view, even "non-dancing" characters must move around on stage, even "non-acting" (e.g. ensemble) characters have lines to speak or reactions to emote, and even "non-singing" characters must have some sense of musicality. Correspondingly, your job is to make sure you listen to everyone sing, *even if they say they are auditioning for a nonsinging part*. There are very few truly nonsinging roles in any musical.

■ ***Pre-casting***

Some directors have already decided on who will play certain roles, with or without auditions. As Music Director I insist on veto power if I really believe an actor is just not strong enough to handle the musical demands of a particular role, whether pre-cast or during auditions.

The goal of the first round of auditions is to identify those people who *might* be able to play certain roles on the basis of meeting some minimal technical criteria. You will want to listen for people's range, tone, pitch accuracy, rhythm, and ability to sing harmony, and match these to the "problem areas" in the score you identified in your preparations.

- Range: what range does the auditioner's chosen song exercise? Typical musical theater songs span from an octave to a tenth, with some songs spanning a twelfth and very few spanning two octaves (the latter usually calls for a trained singer). Where is the "break" between the singer's chest voice and head voice? Songs that have many or prominent notes right around the break may require transposition.
- Tone: does the singer sound "out of tune" on some of the notes?

Sometimes this is because they are at the very top or bottom of someone's range, but often it is because of difficulty in "nailing" a note when the interval (jump) from the preceding note is awkward. Audition songs whose melodies move only stepwise will not reveal this. Particularly good are songs with weird intervals in the melody, such as *Maria* from *West Side Story* (although that is an unusually demanding song). There also may be issues of "blend": certain singers have an unusual vocal character that, while not necessarily bad or unpleasant, may prevent them from blending well with other singers if they have to sing a lot of ensemble material.

- Rhythm/timing: does the performer have a sense of rhythm? Songs with really trivial rhythms won't reveal this; songs with syncopation and compound rhythms are good, like Gershwin's *Fascinatin' Rhythm* or other songs featuring *hemiolae*. I'm surprised how often an actor will bring an audition song that has tricky rhythms or time signatures and then perform it incorrectly; that's often reason enough for me to listen no further.

Unfortunately people often choose audition pieces that show off none of these, so I have my own ways of evaluating them, which you may find helpful. To be consistent and fair, if I use any of these techniques, I ask everyone to do it, however strong or weak their singing audition was, if the requirement applies to them. (So anyone who has to sing counterpoint would have to do the counterpoint exercise.)

■ ***Background doesn't always help***

Don't assume that just because someone plays an instrument or has Music Director experience automatically means they will have good pitch control and retention when singing; test for it. My own ability to complete pitch sequences is only OK, because despite 40 years of piano and musical training, voice is not my instrument.

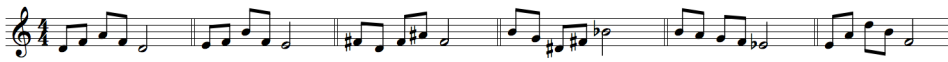


Figure 2.1: These pitch sequences, in increase order of difficulty, may help in testing pitch accuracy when the auditioner's chosen song doesn't give you enough information to judge it otherwise. These are based on the much more detailed treatment in Boyd, *Rehearsal Guide for the Choral Director*.

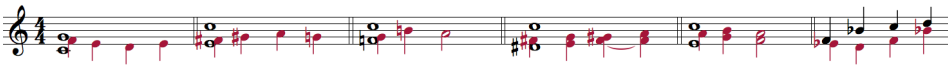


Figure 2.2: Having the singer sing moving middle notes in a chord while the outer notes are held, or vice versa, gives you a rough sense of how stable their counterpoint singing might be. The fourth and fifth measures show a version you can use to test two singers together; the sixth measure is a "sanity check" for testing counterpoint skill before throwing a difficult counterpoint at the auditioners.

2.3 When You Need More Information

Sometimes the auditioner's chosen song doesn't tell you enough about some technically important criterion, such as their pitch accuracy on tricky melodies or their command of rhythm. Here are a few suggestions for testing these abilities separately.

Pitch Accuracy and Retention. Play each of the two-note sequences (intervals) in Figure 2.1 and have the singer sing it back to you with "yah-yah" or "la-la" or some suitable syllable. They're arranged in increasing order of difficulty, so most singers won't be able to do all of them. For singers whose audition song was weak, I start with the easiest interval; for singers who performed solidly, I start with the harder ones right away.

Harmony. A basic test for harmony singing is to have the singer sing a moving line while other lines are held, or vice versa. If you can't find a passage in your show to test on, Figure 2.2 gives some ideas.

Counterpoint. Take the auditioners 6 or 9 at a time and split the six into groups A, B and C containing 2 or 3 auditioners each. Find a 3-part harmony or counterpoint line in which none of the parts is substantially easier than the others (and make sure it has been distributed in advance as part of the callback materials). Teach the three parts to groups A, B and C respectively, and put them together incrementally: just A and B singing

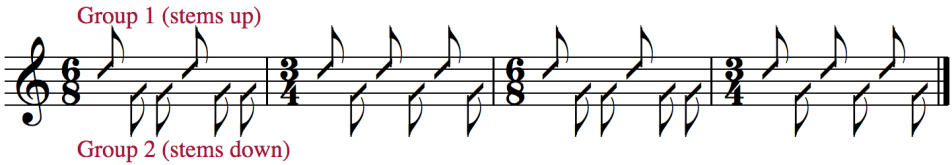


Figure 2.3: In *Man of La Mancha*, there's actually a section in which this flamenco-like pattern is clapped by two groups of performers. Some performers without formal musical training had trouble clapping the syncopated part (Group 2). (*Aldonza* from *Man of La Mancha*)

together, then just B and C, then just A and C, and finally all three groups singing together, so they feel comfortable on the part.

Next, rearrange the way people are standing so that rather than all the A's standing together, etc., they are standing in the order A, B, C, A, B, C, . . . , and have them sing it again. This will expose people who are relying too much on what their neighbor is singing. Lastly, get subgroups of 3 people (one each from A, B, C) to sing the selection.

Rhythm. If there are tricky rhythms in the show, it's worth testing for that. For example, the "flamenco-esque" songs in *Man of La Mancha* contain lots of syncopations and hemiolae. I divided the ensemble into two groups and had them clap the *huapango* pattern in Figure 2.3 (the same pattern underlies the song *America* from *West Side Story*). I then listened to subsets of the groups and moved people back and forth between groups to get an idea of who was most solid.

Based on techniques like the above, I then categorize the ensemble singers:

- **Anchor:** can sing the line correctly even if someone near them is throwing them off, and can even help strengthen the other singers.
- **Teachable:** can sing in an ensemble as long as they can rely a little on someone nearby singing correctly with them
- **Weak:** cannot be counted on to sing the part reliably, even when bolstered by someone nearby.

For very large casts, there may be an intermediate category "Teachable,

but a stretch". Be realistic about how much a weak singer can be "taught," especially if your rehearsals are on a tight timeline (and whose aren't?). This is not just about your ability to teach, but the singer's ability to learn: counterpoint and harmony singing take time and practice to learn, and even if the singer has a good sense of pitch (and not all do), it is probably beyond reasonable to attempt to instill this skill in them *and* teach them the songs in the few weeks before production week. You can save yourself and the singers a lot of misery by making tough choices now. As MD, you should have the final word on whether someone can handle the musical demands of a particular role or not.

2.4 Making Callback Choices

As a courtesy to auditioners, you should make every effort to post a callback list within a day or so after first-round auditions are over, and make callback material (song excerpts, dialogue excerpts, and so on) available. Usually we decide even before first-round auditions on what material from the show will be used at the callback. It's only fair to give singers a few days to prepare and practice these materials; for that reason, first round and callbacks are usually separated by several days. (See Technology in the Appendix for some suggestions.)

Given an actor whom you believe can technically handle certain musical material, the next goal is to identify the actor who can best *inhabit* each character. Sometimes actors can be excluded based on being too old or young, or affecting a manner inconsistent with the character, e.g. coming across as meek when auditioning for Velma or Roxie in *Chicago*. Sometimes particular physical traits are required: in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, we learn that the school's "comfort counselor" is serving a community service obligation (presumably in lieu of serving jail time), so you need someone whose demeanor and appearance are as *unlike* a comfort counselor as possible—for example, a bouncer or a pro wrestler—or else the sight gag doesn't work.

One pitfall in callbacks occurs with actors who have played a particular role before, and therefore bring to the character some preconceived notions

(theirs or a previous director's) about how that character behaves and acts. These ideas may or may not be consistent with *your* creative team's ideas, and it's often hard to get actors to step away from these, but remember it's your show, and the thing that distinguishes one production of a show from another is the artistic choices that are made.

Similarly, operatic or classically-trained singers with no show experience may do poorly in callbacks because they perform the song as they themselves might sing it, not as the character might sing it. This applies not only to interpretation but also to diction: Ado Annie in *Oklahoma!* wouldn't pronounce lyrics the same way as Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls* or Anna in *The King and I*.

We did an interesting exercise in auditioning an actor for the part of the Emcee in *Cabaret*. We liked the actor, but the audition song he had prepared was a love ballad, and we were looking for someone who could come across as slightly dangerously off-kilter. So we found a toy machine gun (a prop from another show being staged in that theater) and asked him to sing the love ballad to the machine gun. He certainly sold us the performance and convinced us that he could act his way through a song (and be creepy).

2.5 Tips to Auditioners for a Successful Audition

This section is for auditioners as well as for the music director, so I'm putting it on a convenient new page that you can separately copy and post for your auditioners. (If you'd like to copy and paste the text to edit for your own auditions call, visit the book's website `pianoconductor.com`.)

Putting Your Best Foot Forward At Auditions

Prepare. Read the call for auditions and know what you're expected to prepare. Don't just show up and expect that the director will suggest a song for you to sing. Since many auditions allow you to choose your selections and prepare far in advance, *the auditors will assume that your audition performance reflects your best work.* Stick to the guidelines: if the call specifies a 16-to-32 bar section or "around 2 minutes of singing," don't prepare a 5-minute solo selection (or, conversely, expect to be cut off and therefore unable to sing the whole selection, even if you didn't get to sing "the best part").

Show your best stuff. To the extent possible given the audition requirements, select songs that show off the strongest part of your range to its best advantage. Note that wanting to be (or claiming to be) a soprano doesn't make you one; if you're unsure about what part of your range flatters you most, find an experienced actor, singer, director or music director to advise you. Remember: if your audition sounds terrific, even if you aren't cast the auditors will remember you in the future.

Bring music. Unless specifically instructed otherwise, bring music for the audition accompanist to play. An *a cappella* audition gives the music director virtually no information about you other than that you have been watching *American Idol* a lot. An audition with a recorded karaoke track is very difficult to judge. Some auditions let you bring your own accompanist if you wish, but generally an accompanist is provided.

Help the accompanist help you. During a typical evening of auditions, the audition pianist will accompany dozens of songs, some of which he may never have played before. His job is to help you sound your best by providing solid support for your singing performance. Here's how to help him help you:

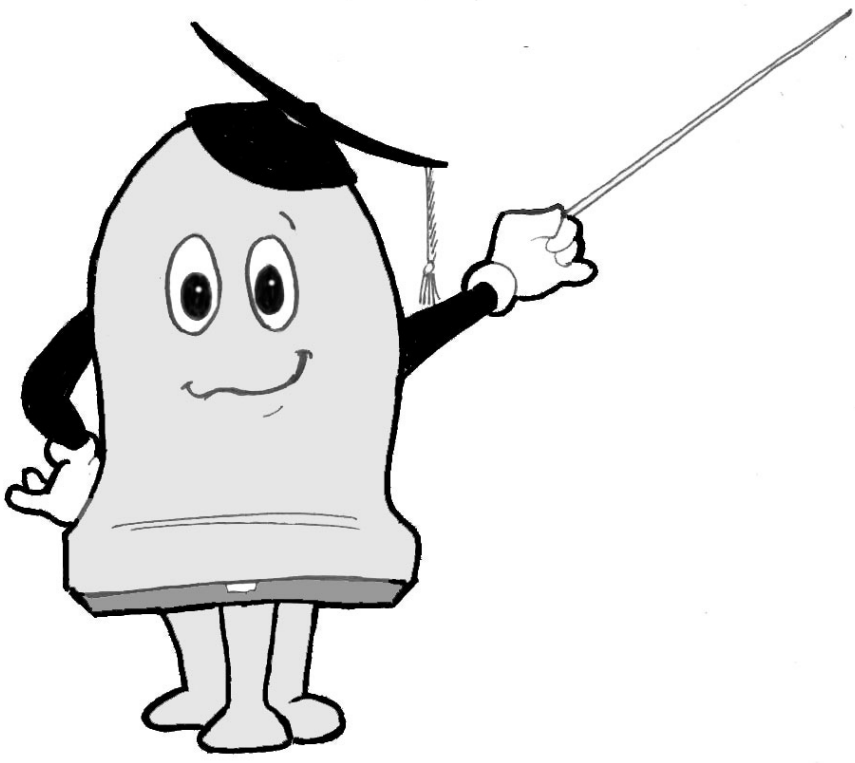
1. **DO** bring pages that are easy to turn and stand up on the piano's music desk on their own. Best is a looseleaf binder that lies flat and whose pages can be turned easily; you will get extra bonus points for protecting each page with clear vinyl sheet protectors, which makes them easier to turn and more durable. "Accordion" fold-outs are OK

if they are no more than three or four pages; more than that won't fit on the music desk. **DON'T** bring loose sheets of paper that will fly around, rolled-up or folded sheets that can't possibly stand up on their own, or a bound book that doesn't lie flat when opened. And **DON'T** complain if you do bring such a book and it's returned to you with the spine cracked and the pages dog-eared; there is no other way to get it to stay open upright.

2. **DO** clearly mark any cuts or repeats in the selection you plan to perform, with a highlighter or a bright color, making it perfectly clear what is to be played. If your cuts are substantial, rearrange and copy-and-paste the pages in advance. Remember, the pianist is thinking about many things and may never have played this particular selection before, and might easily miss a small mark that isn't highlighted. It is to your advantage to arrange the music to minimize page turns; if you want to repeat a section and there's a page turn right in the middle of that section, you can pretty much count on the music "dropping out" for a couple of seconds each time through as the pianist struggles to make the page turn in time.

3. **DO** bring sheet music in the same key as you plan to sing. Most pianists can't transpose on the fly, especially more musically intricate theater songs by composers like Stephen Sondheim or Jason Robert Brown. If the song's in the wrong key, pick a different song, find a different arrangement, visit one of the many websites where you can purchase sheet music for almost any song transposed into a key of your choice, or use Craigslist to find a musician to transpose it (many musicians do this work on the side fairly inexpensively).

4. **DO** use a bookmark or sticky-note if your selection is in a book containing many songs; browsing through the book while others are waiting is not nice and makes you look unprepared. Even better, since bound books often don't stay open on the music desk, photocopy the pages and put them in a binder.



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.

3.1 Planning and Scheduling Vocal Rehearsals

The first task is to come up with a *comprehensive* rehearsal schedule. It's never too early to do this: in community theater, the director and cast usually have day jobs, so we have to schedule very efficiently to make the best use of everyone's limited time. It's not unusual for us to have "split rehearsals" in which I am working with actors on some music while the director or choreographer is working in another location with other actors on blocking, staging or stage movement.

I try to have a rehearsal schedule in place 1–2 weeks before rehearsals begin (indeed, accommodating people's conflicts often requires this amount of advance planning), and an orchestra rehearsal schedule in place at least 4 weeks before opening.

There are many ways to organize a rehearsal calendar. My preference is to run a number of music-only rehearsals before staging/blocking begins, but even if you don't do this, you should clearly distinguish music rehearsals (where the goal is to learn the numbers), staging/blocking rehearsals (where the goal is dialogue and stage movement), and if appropriate for your show, choreography rehearsals.

Since the ensemble numbers require all or most of the cast to be present, I schedule music rehearsals for those numbers first to accommodate cast member conflicts, then schedule rehearsals with soloists around that. I try to arrange the call schedule to minimize the amount of time people are sitting around not working; it's impossible to please everyone, but you will get a lot of credibility and respect for making a good faith effort to minimize wasting people's time.

The schedule template in Table 3.1 seems to work well as a starting point. We won't discuss the rehearsal process in depth (see Boland and Argentini, *Musicals: Directing School and Community Theatre* and Grote, *Staging The Musical: Organizing, Planning, and Rehearsing the Amateur Production* for excellent suggestions on that), concentrating instead on specific techniques for teaching the actors to sing the songs.

In Chapter 5, when we talk about working with the orchestra, we'll discuss orchestra rehearsals in more detail; but you should *schedule* orchestra

12 weeks before opening	Materials arrive and are distributed to cast Teach songs to cast Teach blocking, lines, dances to cast
6 weeks before opening	Start running whole scenes putting singing, dancing, dialogue together Music given to musicians (orchestra materials often arrive only 4–5 weeks before opening night and may require an extra fee if you want them earlier)
2 weeks before opening	Start running whole acts (all of Act I, all of Act II on separate nights) with piano-only Orchestra-only ("play-through") rehearsal, allow 2–3 hours "Sit-n-sing" with cast (see Chapter 5); allow 2 hours
Tech week	At least one, preferably two, dress rehearsals with orchestra Cut sheet finalized and given out to musicians (see below) "Final Dress" with everyone in costume (including orchestra if appropriate); this is like running an actual performance and may be a "preview" with a select invited "preview audience" attending
Opening Night!	Break a leg

Figure 3.1: A suggested rough plan for a rehearsal schedule.

Date	Time	Called		Material	Notes
Aug 5	7:45	ALL	30	7 Good 1-60	
	8:15	ALL	30	7 Good 61-end	
	8:30	(break)			
	8:45	ALL	20	38 Finale	
		ALL	40	38 Finale 90-120 block harmony	
Aug 7	7:00	Dan	15	16 I've Been, 8 Not Here	Add Gabe for 10 mins to put together
	7:20	Dan Di	15	18 Light in Dark	
		Dan Di	30	27 Ever Forget/28 Good reprise	
		Dan Di		4 Crazy/Psycho (Dan/Di sections)	
	8:00	Dan Di Gabe	45	9/10 Don't Know/I Am, 37 I Am reprise	Add Diana for 5-10 mins to put together
		Gabe Di	15	33 Make up your mind reprise (Gabe/Di section)	
	8:30	Dan Henry	20	30 Promise	
	8:45	Gabe	15	12 Alive, 31 Alive reprise	
		Gabe	15	15 There's a world	
		Gabe	15	24 Aftershocks	
Aug 8		Di	45	6 Mountains, 36 So Anyway, 14 Dreamed a Dance	
		Di	30	9 Don't Know, 17 Movie	
		Di Dr	30	32 Break/33 Make up your mind reprise	Add Gabe for 10 mins "catch me I'm falling"
		Dr		11a Dr Rock	
Aug 14	7:00	Nat	15	3 Everything Else	
	7:10	Nat Gabe	15	11 Superboy	
	7:20	Dan Di Gabe Nat (release Gabe)	25	13 Catch me counterpoint (103-end)	
	8:00	Dan Di Nat (release Dan)	45	20 Forgetting, 23 Better	
	8:30	Di Nat		29 Stay	
		Di Nat	20	34 Maybe	
		Di Nat	30	19 Wish Nat/Di sections	
Aug 21	6:00	Nat Henry	60	5 Perfect #1, 21 Hey #1, 25 Hey #2, 35 Hey #3	
	7:00	ALL	60	4 Crazy/Psycho	
	8:00	ALL	60	19 Wish put together	
				Catch Me i'm Falling ensemble section	
	9:00	ALL	60	Review opening, Good, finale	
				(If time: "I've been" Dan/Gabe solo section)	

Table 3.1: A music-only rehearsal plan for *Next to Normal*. The actors playing Diana and Dr. Fine had played those roles previously, so we didn't need to allocate as much time for their solo work. As you can see, with five 3-hour rehearsals we completed a first pass of all the songs in this fairly difficult score.

rehearsals as part of this process. Most musicians who do pit work usually "fill in" their free dates with more work, so it's virtually impossible for them to add new rehearsals or performances after the initial schedule is published. If (a) the pit players are experienced, (b) the score is straightforward, and (c) the MD is experienced, a single orchestra-only rehearsal prior to tech week is probably enough. For each of those three conditions that isn't true, add one more orchestra-only rehearsal. (In the extreme, an inexperienced orchestra playing a difficult show with an inexperienced MD would take six rehearsals . . . but you're probably asking for trouble anyway if you find yourself in this situation! In practice, two or at most three rehearsals suffice.)

In some productions, scheduling is done by the stage manager or production manager. In this case you'll need to come up with a list of material, and for each piece of material, who is called and approximately how much time you will need to work on it. Whether the scheduling is done by the stage manager or by the director and you, you may find the following rules of thumb helpful in scheduling rehearsals:

- For complex ensemble work, allow 3–5 minutes per measure of music to learn, depending on the complexity of the ensemble work.
- For solo material, allow 1–2 minutes per measure of music to learn, and extra time to discuss the performance (section 3.9).
- The 90/90 rule: It's almost a cliché in the world of software (my day job) that "the first 90% of a project takes 90% of the time, and the remaining 10% takes the other 90% of the time." Nowhere is this more true than rehearsing a musical: there always seem to be 16 or 32 bars in the score that end up soaking up a disproportionate amount of rehearsal time, and they won't be the ones you thought would be hard. Leave some slop towards the end of the music rehearsal schedule to review and polish the trickiest material.

Figure 3.1 shows an actual music rehearsal schedule for a production of *Next to Normal* I worked on.

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.

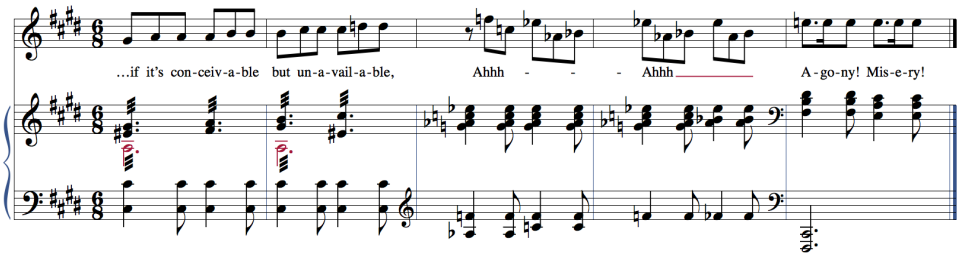


Figure 3.2: This excerpt from the conductor's score shows the vocal line and piano reduction around an ostinato (third and fourth measures) that has a weird key change just before and just after. The next figure suggests how to make a practice track for this passage, which is also a good candidate for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

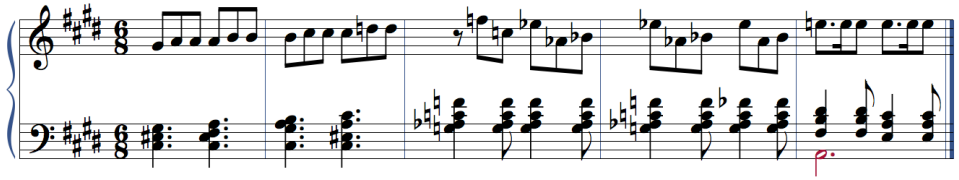


Figure 3.3: In this suggested practice track, the right and left hands in the piano part have been collapsed down to just the left hand, with the right hand playing the singer's melody for the practice track. In the third measure, the original piano/conductor arrangement had a prominent F-natural in 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.

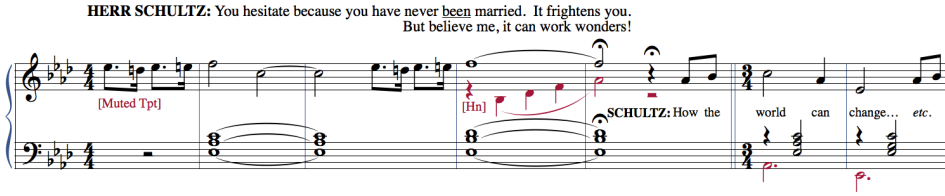


Figure 3.4: "Same note as" cue: The singer can pick up his starting note from the prominent A-flat in the horn part. The practice track should therefore include this horn line, and you should make sure if you don't have a horn player that another instrument covers that line in performance. (*Married*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

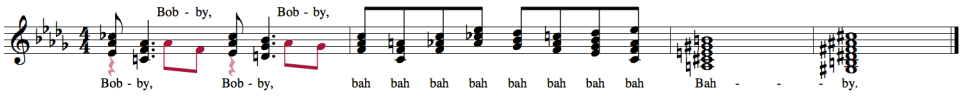


Figure 3.5: One of the most challenging chords I had to teach a minimally-trained ensemble to sing is the final couple of bars of the short Overture from Sondheim's *Company*. It's presented here as an example of what you can work toward using the harmony training outlined in Section 3.5 (. from *Overture*)

"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

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

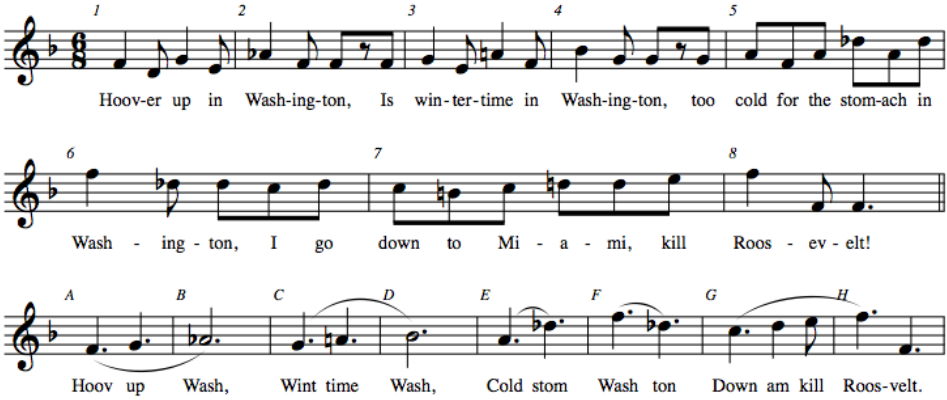


Figure 3.6: Identifying the "skeleton" or long line of a patter melody both accelerates learning to sing it and improves pitch accuracy, often by highlighting a structurally important melody feature such as the augmented chord outlined in measures 5–6. (*How I Saved Roosevelt* from *Assassins*)

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.

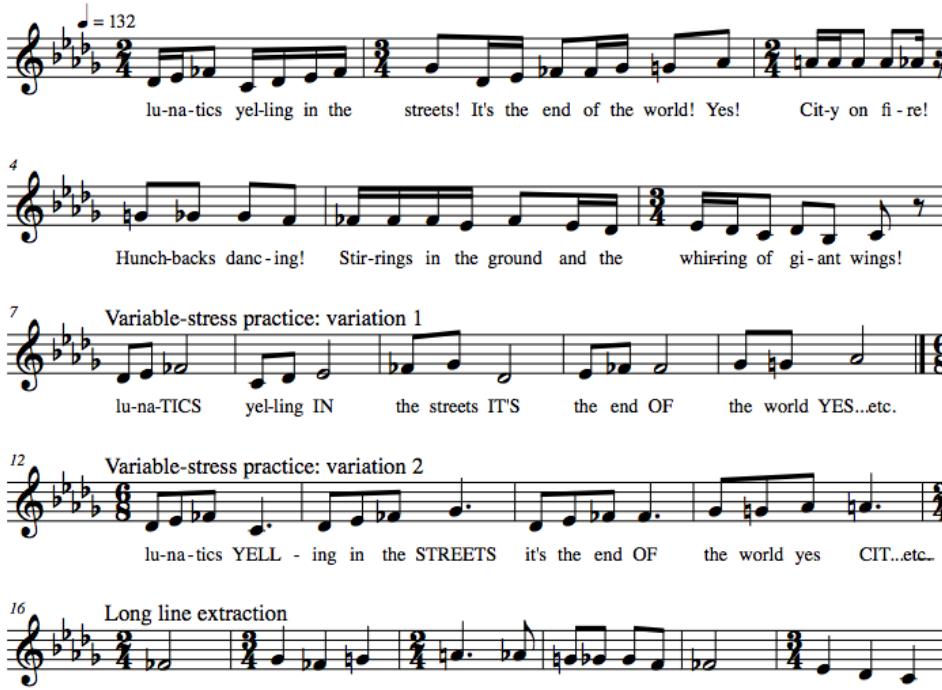


Figure 3.7: Long-line extraction and variable-stress practice can help in learning tricky passages like this, and can even be combined. (*City On Fire* from *Sweeney Todd*)

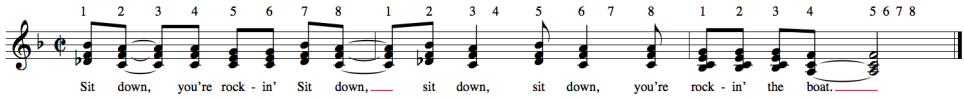


Figure 3.8: For tricky syncopations, like this 3-measure syncopated pattern in double meter, slow down the practice tempo until you can tap out every eighth note. (*Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat* from *Guys & Dolls*)

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

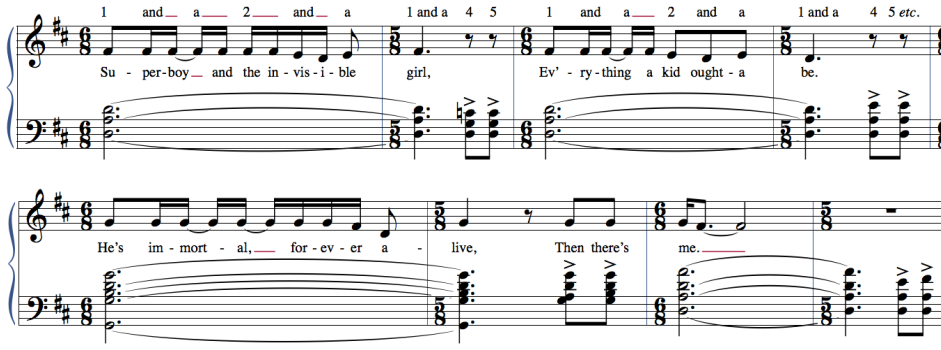


Figure 3.9: A compound 6/8+5/8 can be counted in a "lopsided 2+2", but in this particular song we can take advantage of the accented eighth notes in each 5/8 measure to help prepare the singer for the next 6/8 downbeat. (*Superboy and the Invisible Girl* from *Next to Normal*)

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

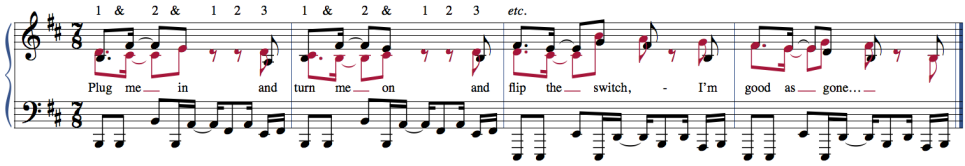


Figure 3.10: Both the melody and the bass figure suggest that you should think of this particular 7/8 as "4+3" rather than "3+4". The numbers above the staff suggest how to conduct it in a "lopsided 2." (*Wish I Were Here* from *Next to Normal*)

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

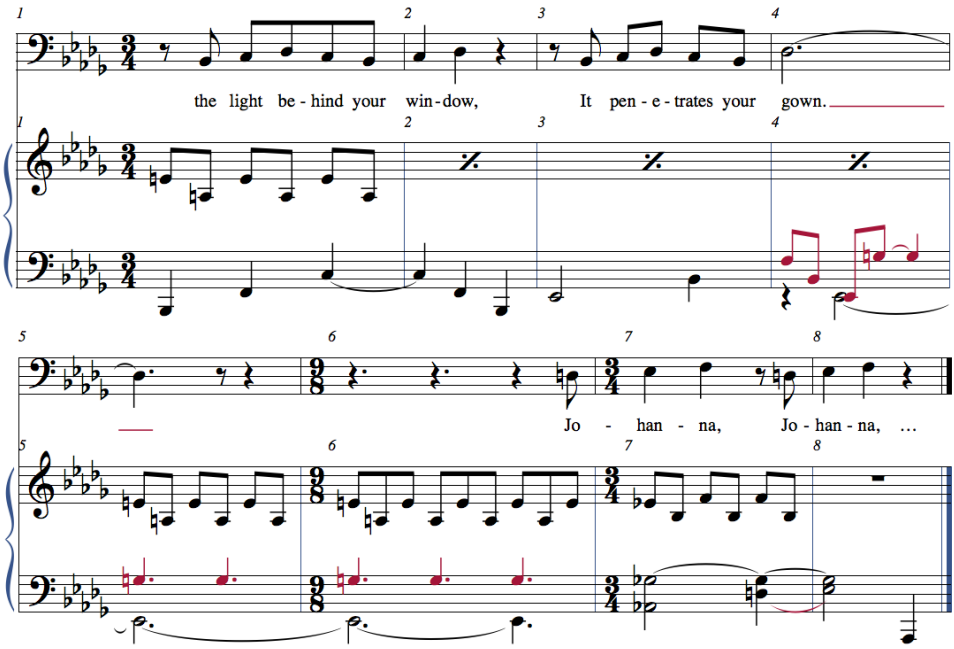


Figure 3.11: In this tricky meter change, the actor can listen to the prominent dotted-quarters in measures 5 and 6 to time the pickup into measure 7. (*Johanna (Judge Turpin)* from *Sweeney Todd*)

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!"

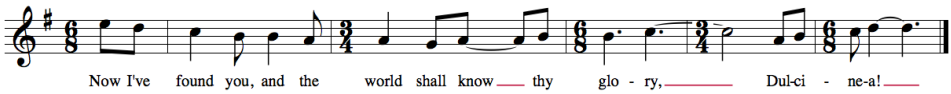


Figure 3.12: Even though it's difficult to avoid some emphasis on the high note of the phrase ("Now"), we decided to make "found you" just as significant by adding a small tenuto, because it was the more important lyric in our reading. (*Dulcinea* from *Man of La Mancha*)

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.

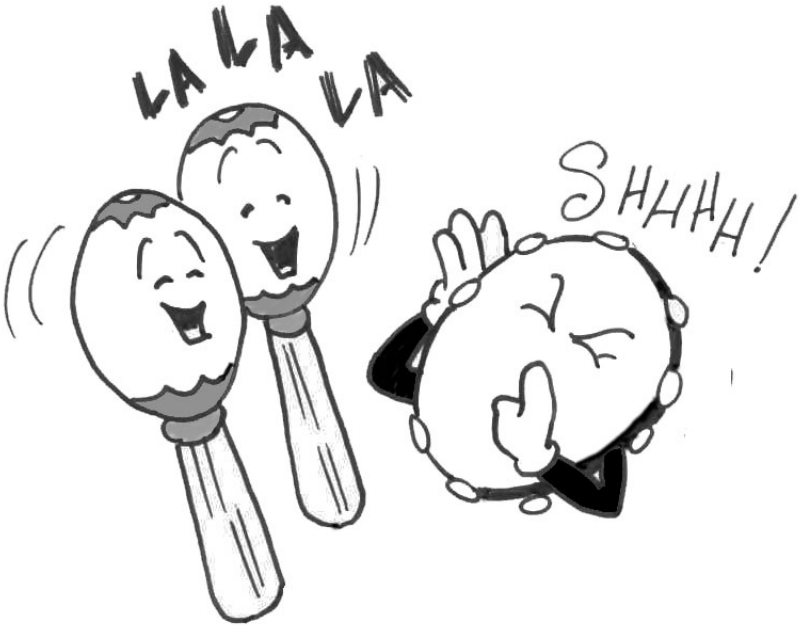
Fundamentally, this is a *list song,* with Gabe enumerating all the different ways he has his hooks in Diana, letting us see why it's so hard for her to let him go. Some lines include:

> 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.

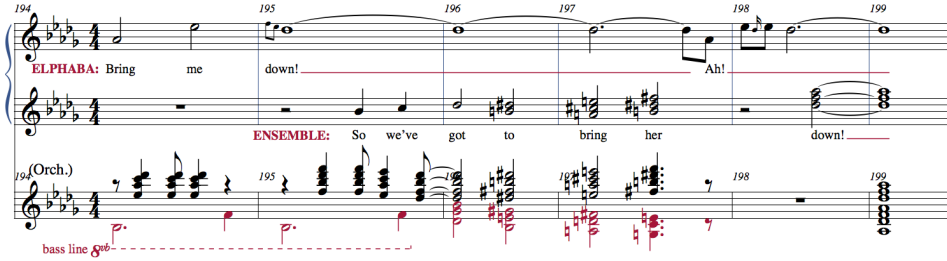


Figure 4.1: Until I saw the conductor's score, I thought the melisma that closes Act I (in measures 195 and 198) was improvised by Idina Menzel, but it's right in the score! (*Defying Gravity* from *Wicked*)

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-n*ə, *too-m*ə, *too-b*ə 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

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

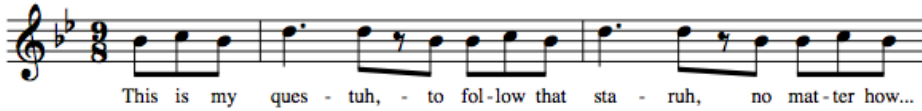


Figure 4.2: Literal (and somewhat exaggerated) depiction of placing shadow vowels to disambiguate closing consonants. In the first lyric, the performer can use an interior beat of the measure to pronounce the schwa. (*The Impossible Dream* from *Man of La Mancha*)

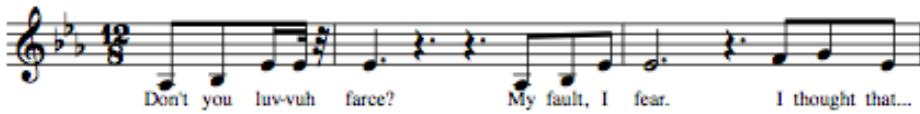


Figure 4.3: When no existing rest is available for a shadow vowel, the schwa must be hurried in between two lyric counts. If you listen to the original cast album, Glynis Johns puts a tiny pause before "farce" and turns it into an "actable moment." (*Send In the Clowns* from *A Little Night Music*)

"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

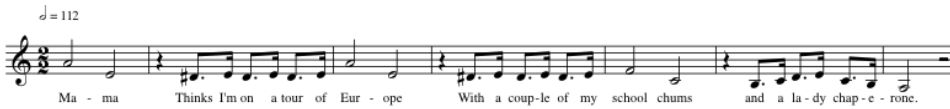


Figure 4.4: Diction is at risk on the sixteenth notes in this swung melody. (*Don't Tell Mama* from *Cabaret*)

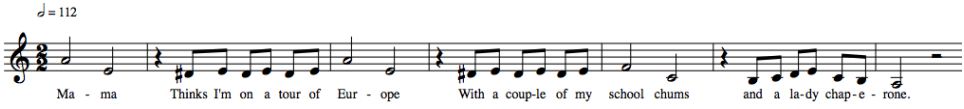


Figure 4.5: An easy fix is to have the singers perform the melody nearly "straight". (*Don't Tell Mama* from *Cabaret*)

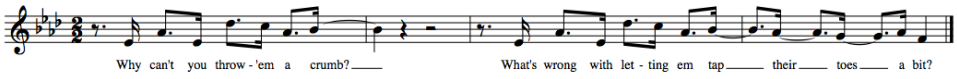


Figure 4.6: The pitches on "Why can't you" were indistinct, because they are both non-accented short notes and low pitches. (*Opening Doors* from *Merrily We Roll Along*)

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

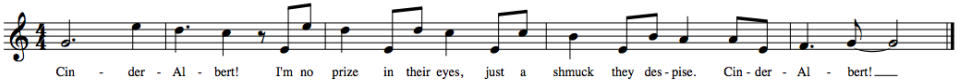


Figure 4.7: The pitches on the first eighth notes of each pickup (*I'm, in, just, they*) are particularly vulnerable because they're both unaccented and in a lower register. Recall that tenor melodies are usually notated an octave higher than sung. (*CinderAlbert* from *Oh My Godmother!*)

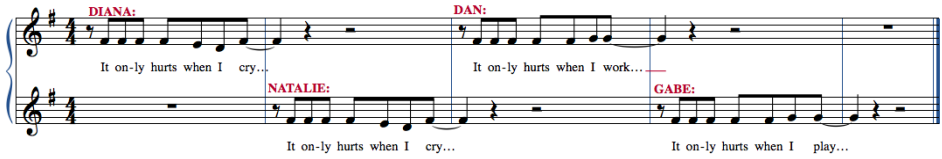


Figure 4.8: Singers must anticipate their entrances by counting beats; if they wait to "reply" to the singer who has the previous line, they will be late. (*Just Another Day* from *Next to Normal*)

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.

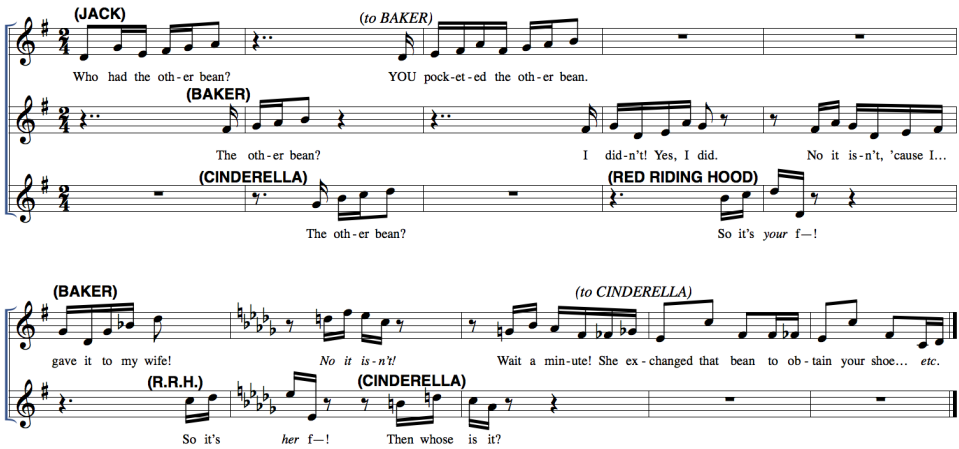


Figure 4.9: In this patter song, the characters argue about whose fault it is that terrible things have befallen everyone. Singers should cue their entrances based on their internal metronome rather than cuing off of other singers, especially for vowel or soft-consonant entrances such as *YOU* (pickup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

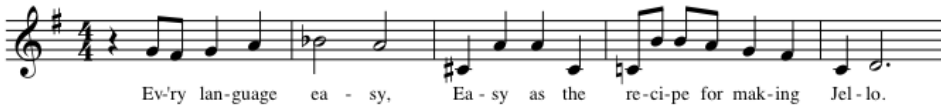


Figure 4.10: The lower pitches on the first syllables of "Easy" (bar 3) and "recipe" (bar 4) will be softer by default, so special precautions must be taken to maintain a constant volume. (*I Speak Six Languages* from *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*)

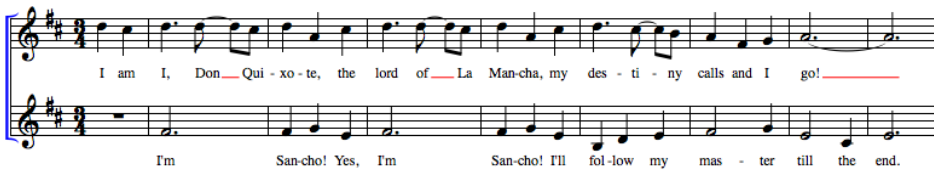


Figure 4.11: In this duet between Quixote and Sancho, if each can hear the other's lyrics about as well as his own, the audience will be able to hear both lines as well (*I Am I, Don Quixote* from *Man of La Mancha*)

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

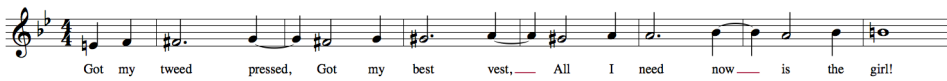


Figure 4.12: The stepwise chromatic motion of this melody makes pitch accuracy particularly important, since each syllable's pitch must be distinct. (*All I Need Is The Girl* from *Gypsy*)

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*

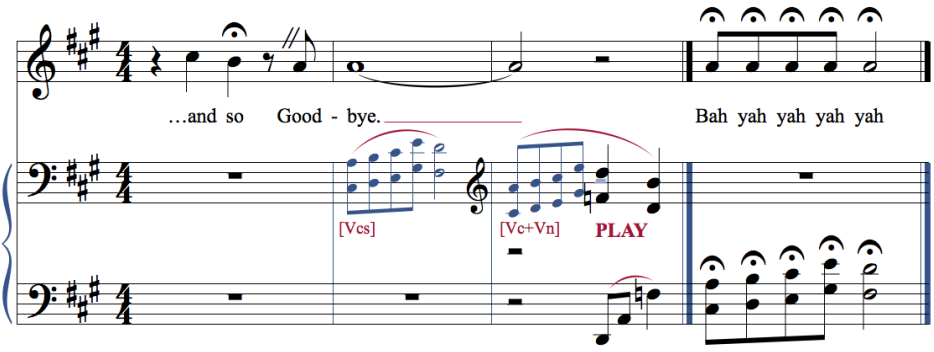


Figure 4.13: Left: Diana holds an A while the strings play a figure that transitions between A major and D major (I and IV in Roman numeral harmony notation). Right: Mentally (or during practice, physically) re-articulating the A over each change will help re-tune the note. (*So Anyway* from *Next To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

The Orchestra

5 The Orchestra

The orchestra's main goal is simple: *Don't be mentioned in the review.* The orchestra is there to serve the show without drawing attention to itself by being the weak point. Therefore a review that doesn't mention the orchestra is a compliment, and a review that praises the orchestra should make you ecstatic (or worry you, because it means they wanted to pan the production and were looking for something nice to say to soften the blow). When in doubt as to whether to simplify an arrangement, relieve a musician of playing a tricky passage, and so on, always decide in favor of this goal.

This chapter will help you as you work through the four main phases of putting up the show with the orchestra:

1. Recruiting: identify which instruments/musicians you'll need; you may find you have to settle for fewer than the official instrumentation requires, something we'll discuss in Chapter 7.

2. Rehearsing: perform one or more *play-throughs* of the score without the singers. If your orchestra is experienced, this is probably also the first time the orchestra will be playing together, and may be the only orchestra rehearsal before tech week. Any technical issues exposed here should be fixed before the sitzprobe.

3. *Sitzprobe* (or "sit-n-sing"): the cast performs the songs with the orchestra, but no staging. This exposes any problems of balance or cuing. This step is optional, and I often skip it for reasons I'll describe later.

4. Tech/dress rehearsals: full rehearsals with staging and orchestra.

5. Production: I usually ask the pit to be prepared for an earlier call than usual for the first two shows (typically 45–60 minutes earlier) to fix last-minute bugs that didn't get nailed down during the orchestra-only play-throughs.

5.1 Instrumentation on a Shoestring

Most small theaters can't cover all the instruments for anything larger than a chamber orchestration because of budget constraints, lack of space to seat the musicians, or both. If yours can—perhaps you have access to a school band or similar and they can sit in a real full-size pit—then all you have to do is get familiar with the instrument books and recruit musicians. Congratulations, you're done!

Otherwise, you have some choices to make.

Before you recruit, get a good look at the pit space and estimate how many musicians can be accommodated. This is discussed in section 5.7.

First, check whether a reduced orchestration is available from the licensing house. These arrangements tend to be quite good because they are usually prepared by a professional arranger and include extensive *cross-cuing* (which was introduced in section 1.5) to allow more flexibility in the composition of the orchestra.

If a reduction is not available, you can try to reduce the orchestration yourself. One easy option is "piano combo" (piano, bass, drums). While using piano only might seem an obvious choice, I wouldn't recommend it unless the show is specifically scored that way; even a tiny complement of instruments will completely change the sound of the show and move you up into a higher league. Adding bass and drums gives the music a tremendous amount more backbone and rhythmic "punch" than even the most muscular pianist can provide. If bass and drum books are provided, you're done; if not, the bass can be inferred from the piano/conductor book, and a good drummer can probably pick up the drum part by listening to the cast album, notating the important breaks, and discussing the part with you.

If you're willing to invest a bit more time, the next step up would be piano combo plus a single soloist—typically a wind player, ideally an accomplished one who can cover multiple instruments. Listeners will hear this as a small "orchestra" even though it's just one additional instrument over piano combo because they will hear multiple sound colors in the tonal palette. If you can cover some but not all of the instruments, another option is to do some reduction, thinning out, or omission of the orchestration.

Chapter 7 gives some helpful hints about selecting the most important instrument cues when doing this kind of reduction.

Your recruiting may be subject to the talent available in your area: There are fewer tuba players out there than trumpet players, fewer bassoonists than clarinetists, and fewer harpists than just about anything. Therefore one instrument may have to cover another, or several others, as we discuss in Chapter 7. I've had good luck using Craigslist to advertise pit work and recruit musicians; the Appendix contains a sample posting I've used.

5.2 Recruiting Tips

A surprising number of amateur musicians, as well as some professionals who have a passion for musical theater, are willing to work for minor consideration such as complimentary tickets, returned favors (you fill in when they need a substitute musician in one of their other bands), and/or a service stipend. Where I live, community theaters that can afford to pay such stipends typically offer from $25 (at the very low end) to $100 (at the high end) per musician per service (performance or rehearsal). This is lower than what semi-pro theaters pay and a lot lower than union scale, so be aware that musicians who rely on their music for a living may find it difficult to absorb the high opportunity cost of working with you. Whatever your budget, be up front about it, to avoid wasting your own time and that of others who are simply unable to justify working for the pay you can offer. And if your budget is zero—if you expect the musicians to play for free—say that too. You will still get some volunteers, if not as many or as experienced as you might have liked.

However you recruit, here are some caveats.

Some technical chops required. While show music is not as demanding as classical symphonic music, neither is it trivial, and some of the older shows have some pretty killer solo parts (the clarinet part in Fiddler is a classic example). Be sure the players are technically up to the job, and/or supplement them with a few "ringers" to anchor the orchestra. Musicians who have played *only* as part of a section in a larger orchestra may find themselves a bit overwhelmed in a small-pit setting where they cannot

blend with (euphemism for "hide behind") other members of their section when the going gets tough.

Small pits require better players. If you're working with a smaller pit of 5–10 people—whether it's because the show is scored that way, or because you have to work with reduced resources—be aware that *every instrument is exposed* and you really need solo-quality players to make it sound good.

Ensemble skills help. Playing in an ensemble is a different skill from solo playing. While pit playing differs from classical ensemble playing in some important ways, classical musicians with orchestra or ensemble experience will do well; strong soloists without ensemble experience may find it more challenging than they expect.

Be cautious with rock drummers. A drummer whose experience is limited to rock bands may be unable to read drum charts or follow the conductor for tempo, cues, and dynamics rather than setting these himself. That is, rock drummers may lack orchestral ensemble skills. A less-virtuoso drummer who has these skills and can read charts is preferable to a technically astonishing drummer who doesn't.

Try to get references. I maintain a "personal Rolodex" (actually just a big Google Drive spreadsheet) of musicians I've worked with. Of course, the theaters I work with have their own contact information in the volunteers database, but their information is not as detailed as mine ("This accordion player can also play harmonica", "This player has great clarinet chops but only so-so flute chops"). Their list also doesn't include my personal blacklist: musicians I will no longer work with, not because of poor playing, but because they have flaked out on previous commitments and left me holding the bag at the last minute, or have been difficult for other musicians to work with. Neither I nor many of the people I work with on these shows are in it for the money, which in my view means I can justifiably reserve the right not to work with jerks.

5.3 The Mighty Piano, or Pit Piano for Classical Pianists

The piano's role in modern pit orchestras is so important that it deserves its own section. In arrangements that include an actual piano part (*Rent, Godspell, A Chorus Line, Chicago, Ragtime, Pippin...*), the piano is the backbone of the rhythm section. In arrangements that don't, the pianist may cover a good deal of what's in the conductor's score if you have less than the full complement of musicians called for by the orchestration. (In Section 7.4 are some hints for the pianist who finds herself handed the conductor book and instructed to "fill in the gaps.") Either way, *the pianist cannot "hide" behind any other instrument and must play with confidence.* Note that sightreading isn't a prerequisite for pit piano (though it may be for rehearsal piano; see below).

I was classically trained when I started doing pit work, and I had to break a number of bad habits. Most of them boil down to the realization that the piano's role in a pit is fundamentally that of a *rhythm* instrument, not a solo instrument. Even classical ensemble work doesn't place as much pressure on the pianist to handle this responsibility. As such, you may find yourself having to break some habits of your own, including these two:

Beat down, not up. Many classical pianists have a habit of "recoiling" from playing a big chord by having their head and body move back or slightly up as their fingers push down on the keyboard. Unfortunately, this is exactly the *opposite* of what your musicians probably expect, which is a rising motion on the pickup and a *downward* motion on the downbeat (or ictus). Train yourself so that your head and body make a downward, not upward, motion when you play on the beat. If your head or body is moving up or backwards on beat 1, instead of down or forwards, your musicians will be confused.

Bass and chords trump melody. In fact, unless you're in an instrumental section (overture, underscoring, and so on), the singer(s) are already singing the melody, they don't need you to play it, and playing along with them will probably make things worse because you won't be precisely synchronized with them. What they do need is to hear some structure in the music: rhythm and harmony. The bass line and chords give them

this. If you have a bass player, make sure you are "locking up" with her (tight ensemble) if you're doubling the bass line on piano; don't play a bass line that is in any way different unless you're sure you know what you're doing—instead use the piano to strengthen and solidify the existing bass part. If you don't have a bass player, it's that much more important that the bassline you play be crisp, rhythmic, and audible. Even in the absence of chords, the bassline at least suggests harmonies and serves as an anchor for the singers.

5.4 Rehearsal Pianists

Some productions budget for a rehearsal pianist; others assume that you, the MD, will do that job (as well as the job of conducting the orchestra). Still others budget a total amount for all music-related expenses and it's up to you to figure out how to spend it. In an case, be aware that a rehearsal with a bad pianist is worse than a rehearsal with no pianist, and almost worse than no rehearsal at all. As above, getting the rhythm and basic chord changes correct are far more important than playing all the right notes. A good rehearsal pianist is a confident player who can slop her way through something given a few days' time with the rehearsal score. A great rehearsal pianist is a good rehearsal pianist who has played this show before or is otherwise familiar with it. Good (and great) rehearsal pianists are hard to find, so if you find ones that you like working with, do everything you can to make them happy.

Rehearsals where there will be lots of drilling of music or adjustment of choreography really need a rehearsal pianist, but rehearsals where music is not the emphasis—scene blocking, run-throughs, and so on—may be able to make do with "karaoke tracks" prepared by you in advance, as Section A.3 describes.

5.5 Strings

The string parts in show scores fall into two categories. "Traditional" scores call for a string *section* of 6–12 players. If you can recruit, pay, and seat that many string players, good for you. If you can't, please resist the temptation to have, say, a string quartet stand in for a full string section written in the score. Besides the volume balance not being right, the intonation probably won't be right. Tiny variations in intonation actually add warmth to a string *section*, but stick out like a sore thumb when the strings are individually exposed. An exception is the cello: a good cello player can probably hold down the cello "section" because of the size and warmth of the instrument.

The other category of show score calls for a small number (1–3) of solo string players, with very exposed parts. For example, *A Grand Night For Singing* calls for a single cello, a reed player, and a rhythm section. *Next to Normal* includes cello, violin, guitar and piano. In these cases, intonation problems will be mercilessly audible and you need particularly strong ensemble players to avoid them. Unfortunately, strings are highly idiomatic to write for, and inexperienced arrangers sometimes end up writing string parts that only an extremely strong player can handle.

Because both scores with large string sections and scores requiring a small number of solo-quality players present real challenges, many modern show scores (especially for smaller pits) omit strings altogether, as do many re-orchestrations of revived shows, in favor of a leaner sound and fewer musicians.

Lastly, accomplished arranger Don Sebesky writes "There have been several attempts to get a large string ensemble to swing, but to my knowledge, none has ever been very successful" (Sebesky, *The Contemporary Arranger, Definitive Edition*). If your show's string parts involve the kind of complex polyrhythms of jazz and Latin music—*The Last Five Years* is a good example—it may be worth the extra effort to seek out string players who also have jazz or world music experience and are comfortable with such rhythms.

5.6 Electronic Instruments

Synthetic instruments. High-end synthetic instrument servers designed for live performance, such as those provided by Apple MainStage and similar high-end products, have come to sound incredibly good. However, beware: making them sound like realistic substitutes for acoustic instruments also requires "playing" them the way the acoustic instruments would be played. String players pay a lot of attention to bowing and articulation; woodwind players must breathe; and so on. Unless you are confident that you can do this, you might be better served omitting those instrument parts, or assigning them to other instruments, as Chapter 7 suggests.

Synthesizers. Synths are becoming more common not only in small orchestras, but in original orchestrations. Synths appear not only in rock/pop scores like *Rent* and *Little Shop of Horrors*, but are also called for to provide essential effects in modern scores like *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods*.

Synths are sometimes used to substitute for string sections, to add midrange to the sound, or to produce unusual percussion sounds such as a xylophone or marimba that would otherwise require a specialist. Whether to use a synthesizer in this way is a matter of taste: to make them sound truly realistic, you need good sound samples, a very good sound reproduction system, and capable sound operators. And as with electronic instruments, you must be able to perform the part as a string section would. Depending on the sound you are able to achieve, omitting the string part entirely may be preferable.

If you lack a bass player, covering bass on synth is an option, but usually a bad one. A real bass can provide so much backbone and punch, even with a small amp and electric bass, that synth bass should be considered an option of last resort (unless, of course, the score specifically calls for synth bass for stylistic reasons).

Digital vs. Acoustic Pianos. A lot of theaters are now preferring digital pianos over acoustic uprights. While not cheap, digital pianos are maintenance-free, easy to move, easy to make louder or softer, and often capable of making other sounds (organ, electric piano, and so on) that ren-

der them useful in situations where space is at a premium. Some advanced models also have features like automatic transposition, which seems like a boon but is really an accident waiting to happen when you forget to turn it back off after playing the one song that was transposed.

The downside is that even a really good digital piano must be properly amplified and reproduced through an excellent sound system in order to sound like an acoustic piano, and much of the "liveness" associated with an acoustic-instrument sound may be gone. I prefer a run-of-the-mill upright piano over a digital piano if at all possible, but budget or technical considerations may dictate your choice; for example, you may need both a piano sound and an organ sound, and lack room for two instruments. If you do use a digital piano, make the most of it, perhaps by also using it for sound effects, other percussion (xylophones, bells, gongs), eerie background noises, and so on

In a few cases, dramatic considerations may intervene. For example, both *Chicago*, which takes place in the 1920s, and *A Little Night Music*, which takes place at the turn of the 20th century, require a piano on stage as part of the action. As there were no digital pianos available back then, the dramatic rationale of preserving a "period look" may carry the day (assuming the stage piano can double as the orchestra piano). Another option is to have a real but nonworking stage piano and play the actual piano parts on a digital piano in the pit, but this only works if you can stage so that there is no way for the audience to tell the onstage player isn't really playing. Otherwise it looks and sounds so cheesy that it's hard for me to recommend (though that doesn't stop a lot of theaters from doing it).

Drum Machines. Unless the show specifically calls for one (*Rent*, *Chess*), a tiny, 3-piece trap set, heavily muffled, sounds much more acoustically interesting than a drum machine. Electronic drums performed by a human drummer may be appropriate if the show has a rock score with which an amplified drum sound would fit.

5.7 Orchestra Rehearsal Venues

Make sure you have adequate rehearsal space for the orchestra rehearsal. Rehearsing in the theater is ideal for working out issues of seating, balance and sightlines, but sometimes the theater is not available because it's needed for stage rehearsal or tech work. When choosing a rehearsal space, keep in mind:

- Will all the musicians fit?
- If a piano is needed, is one present in the rehearsal room or does one need to be brought in?
- Are there music stands and stand lights? Can some musicians bring their own?
- Are there power outlets and/or extension cords for plugging in amplifiers, electronic keyboards, stand lights, and so on?
- Are the acoustics at least tolerable? (A church is not a great place to have an orchestra rehearsal.)

There's also the important question of where the pit is located during actual performances, which you should investigate early even if you're not rehearsing the orchestra in the theater. If you have a real full-size pit in front of your stage, you're lucky and probably in the minority of people reading this. This is logistically the easiest arrangement from the point of view of doing your job (as conductor and MD), though often the least popular among the musicians, who don't get to watch the show as they play because most of their seats are shoved under the apron of the stage. It also means your theater is large enough that you probably will have to use microphones and a sound system to balance the orchestra and singers, which is astonishingly hard to get right, even in "simple" cases (see Campbell, *Technical Theater For Nontechnical People*, for an excellent discussion). I'll assume you are not using microphones and will discuss some ways to address balance problems without using a sound system.

More common is a smaller "pit" that is offstage, backstage, upstage, in a loft, in the wings, and so on Some important considerations for you to think about regarding the pit space:

- Space: Map out where the musicians will actually sit. An upright or digital piano's footprint is about 4'x4', including the seated player; a minimal trap set, 5'x5'; seated soloists (small winds and strings), at least 3'x4'; seated soloists on large instruments (cello, large winds) or who double, 4'x4' or more if they cover lots of instruments. Also, an upright bass (vs. electric or "Fender" bass) player needs somewhere to lean the bass when he's not playing.

- Acoustics: Is the pit closer to the audience than the actors are (e.g., in an overhead loft that is actually closer to the audience's heads than the actors are)? If so, unless it's a real pit, your balance and volume problems may be severe unless you take many steps to compensate: install sound damping (big chunks of foam or blankets), use mutes more often, tone down all dynamics by a notch, and so on Similarly, if the orchestra is higher off the ground than the actors, this will tend to amplify the instruments.

- Eye contact: in general, can you see the onstage performers and can they see you? It's not necessary to have 100% unobstructed view of every performer all the time, but in general, *someone* on stage will need to see you for cues and you'll need pretty good peripheral vision to the stage.

There is a temptation, especially when you have a few electronic instruments like digital pianos or guitar/bass amplifiers, to send only these few instruments through a house sound system while leaving the others unmiked or using only their own small amps. This destroys the illusion of having all the music appear to come from the same approximate location, whether the overhead house speakers or someplace onstage, and can be disorienting for the audience. It also makes it impossible to use dynamics to control the balance among instruments. Don't do it.

5.8 Preparing the Book for Rehearsal

Well before the orchestra rehearsal, you should be in a position to collate your book. This involves arranging the pages to meet several goals. (I assume here that you're working from a photocopy of the original materials; if you're using the actual book that was sent to you, your ability to rearrange pages is very limited.)

- Remove material that has been cut.
- If numbers have been moved or duplicated (e.g., re-using a chunk of scene change music or underscoring), make additional copies to insert in the right sequence in the book so you don't have to flip back and forth during performance.
- If there is a tricky page turn, re-photocopy the pages by inserting blanks to avoid the bad page turn.
- Highlight important cues—vocal, instrument cues, scene changes, stage actions that you need to be aware of, and so on Use a bright yellow highlighter, because during the performance you'll be glad you did.
- Highlight warnings (so you can get musicians' attention to start a number) and segues (so you know to keep their attention when a number is finished).

You should also have your musicians tell you which entrances in which songs are uncertain for them, and highlight those entrances. For example, if the trumpet has 40 bars of rest before her first entrance in a song, she can write in the last couple of lines the singer is singing before she comes in (or if there's no appropriate line, write in something like "2 measures after the vocals come in," or "after flute solo," and so on), and you can highlight her entrance and mark "Cue tpt" to remind yourself to give her a special cue. Some instrument books have such cues written in, and many conductor's scores have the cues written in so you can give them to musicians while

playing. This preparation will speed things up a lot during dress rehearsals when the show has to be stopped (and it will).

Be sure measure numbers are clearly written in the score; as a last resort, you or another musician can stage-whisper measure numbers to a musician who's lost. You'll sometimes find that measure numbering is inconsistent between the books and the conductor's score, or that certain measures appear to have been added or deleted in one or the other. This is less common with modern scores that are machine-typeset, but try to catch these during orchestra rehearsal!

■ ***Musicians should collate their books too***

This is especially important if a sub may be needed. Under emergency conditions, a good sub can play a show "cold," i.e. with less than 1 hour of preparation, from a well-marked-up book. It's your musicians' job to use the cut sheet to create that markup: cuts, vamps, special performance markings (fermatas, unusual conducting, going to double-time or half-time, and so on) should all be marked—you'll be amazed how often the instrument books display these minor inconsistencies—and where necessary, annotated as to how the cue will be given.

5.9 Play-Through and Sitzprobe (Sit-n-Sing)

By the time you rehearse the orchestra, you'll probably have played whole scenes, if not whole acts, with the cast. This means you know where many of the dialog cues, stops, and so on all are; which songs may have to be transposed or have cuts; and so on. You can use this information in various ways when preparing for the orchestra play-through.

Remind less-experienced musicians that they're expected to come to orchestra rehearsal already able to play their parts; there will be plenty to fix during rehearsals—tricky entrances, transitions, dynamic changes, balance, and so on This is especially important in more recent shows with smaller orchestras where the instrument parts are very exposed, and musicians who don't know their parts won't be able to "hide" behind other players in their section as they might try to do in a larger orchestra.

Here are a few of the most common problems with the conducting or arrangements that may be exposed at the play-through, or if you're having multiple orchestra rehearsals, that you can prepare for as you go into rehearsals.

■ ***Budget 30 extra minutes***

During the first orchestra rehearsal—or at least, the first one actually held in the performance space—plan to fritter away about 30 minutes futzing with the orchestra setup: how are the chairs and music stands arranged? Do you need to run extension chords to plug in amplifiers, synthesizers or stand lights? Do all the musicians have a reasonable sight line to the conductor? This all takes time but usually has to be done only once. Add 30 minutes to your first rehearsal to accommodate it.

Tricky Entrances. By now you've read a good book on conducting (right?) and maybe even looked at Chapter 6, and you realize that there's no single right way to conduct tricky entrances. The play-through is the time to clarify how you're going to conduct each one, or to try a couple of methods and see which one works best. For example, for an entrance on beat 3, are you going to conduct the whole measure starting from the downbeat? Or are you just going to give beat 2 as a pickup? Are you going to conduct a full measure going into any of the songs ("1 for nothing") or just give a pickup? Write down (and highlight!) what you're going to do, and make sure the musicians do too. Having them write it clearly makes it easier for a sub to fill in later if needed.

A special case of a tricky entrance is a *button*, the punch at the end of the song that signals the audience to applaud. These are worth practicing because they are the last thing the audience hears in that song, and they won't likely forgive sloppiness there. For similar reasons, make sure the overture and finale are flawless! And while scene change music often gets short shrift during rehearsals, it is one of the few times that the audience is probably listening intently to the orchestra, so it's worth doing right.

Vamps and Repeats. Set aside time during a rehearsal to actually time the dialogue or stage action and figure out how long it will take; you may have to shorten the underscoring by cutting measures, or lengthen it by

repeating parts of it or by marking certain measures as vamps or safety measures (see Section 6.8). They will doubtless change when you go into full rehearsals, but have a definite plan for every such point. How many times are repeated sections played? What's the cue to come out of a vamp? Are some vamps going to be ignored?

Typos in the Score. Surprisingly often, especially with older hand-copied instrument books, there are inconsistencies between the instrument parts and the conductor's score. These can include differently-numbered measures, differently-marked cuts and vamps, and just plain wrong notes. (Although be careful of concluding that a note is wrong without careful investigation. Some scores, notably Sondheim's, have eclectic harmonies that can sound wrong initially, especially if you're playing a spare orchestration like Jonathan Tunick's with only a subset of the indicated instruments, or if there are minor tuning issues among the instrument sections.)

"Holes" In The Arrangement. Most community theater orchestras are resource-limited and can't supply the full instrumentation required by the score, so you will find yourself making decisions about which instruments or parts to omit. We'll discuss this in detail in Chapter 7, but you may find during the play-through that your reduction results in an unpleasant surprise—a "hole" in the arrangement where some part of the texture just seems to fall out of the music. You may have to fix this outside rehearsal and communicate the changes to your musicians before the sit-n-sing. If you had to do a lot of arranging or reduction, this is a good reason to have the play-through and sit-n-sing (see below) on different days; if not, it's probably fine to have them on the same day, since the orchestra will get to play the score twice and you'll save on having to schedule another group rehearsal.

■ ***No hiding***

Holes can also happen because a player is "hiding" or not playing confidently during a certain passage. If she's having a lot of trouble with a passage, it may be best to simplify it. See Chapter 7 for some hints.

Bring out important lines. Especially if you have reduced the orches-

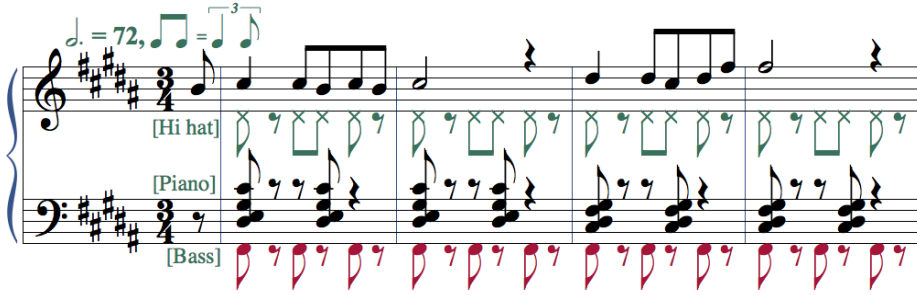


Figure 5.1: The complex polyrhythm in this example between the bass, piano, and percussion is particularly tricky since the transition into it also has a tempo and time signature change, but locking this groove is what makes this part of the song "pick up." (*Have I Got a Girl For You* from *Company*)

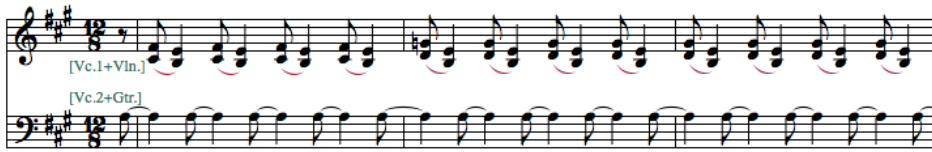


Figure 5.2: This figure is straightforward to play on the piano, but tricky to conduct in ensemble because (a) the guitar and cello 2 have the (syncopated) bottom line while the violin and cello 1 have the top line, and (b) cello 1 has that eighth-note pickup. (*The Next Ten Minutes* from *The Last Five Years*)

tration, be sure you know what the important counter-lines are and that they are brought out. The additional texture of counterpoint lines is a lot of what makes the arrangement sound full. We'll return to this topic in Chapter 7.

Tight Rhythmic Ensemble. Look for the rhythmic figures in the score that are most audible and will therefore make the ensemble sound "tight". Syncopations and polyrhythms are often the place to start looking, as the examples in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 suggest.

Sins of Omission vs. Sins of Commission. Don't be afraid to leave notes out if there is a passage that is so demanding that some of your musicians are simply not quite up to it. In most cases, wrong notes are far

more noticeable than omitted notes. There is no embarrassment in making some adjustments this way—remember the First Goal of the Orchestra.

Once the orchestra has played through the score as an ensemble, some directors like to do a *sitzprobe* (sometimes called the sit-n-sing): the cast will sing the songs with orchestra accompaniment, but no blocking, choreography, or cuing, just so that the cast and orchestra get accustomed to each other. The cast is usually very excited about it, since up to that point they probably have only rehearsed with piano.

Some singers may get completely lost, off-pitch, and so on the first time they sing with the orchestra, often because they are subconsciously relying on something in the rehearsal-piano accompaniment as a cue. (For this reason, it's good to have a competent rehearsal pianist who can stick close to the notes when playing the piano reduction in the piano/vocal score; the reductions are usually pretty close to the orchestration in terms of bringing out important instrumental lines that singers may cue from.)

I have found that with experienced casts and orchestras, a sitzprobe doesn't add much: the tricky part is putting it all together when the singers are on stage and moving around, rather than sitting in chairs watching your cues. But if your singers or orchestra are inexperienced, a sitzprobe is fun and may serve as a good "dry run" before the full dress rehearsals.

5.10 Tech Week

This is it: tech rehearsals are just like playing the show, though the first one (or two) may have a lot of starts and stops. This is your opportunity to identify mundane but important issues in performing the score under realistic conditions, for example:

- Note stage directions that affect the orchestra (e.g. "Turn off stand lights prior to blackout"). It helps for the pit to know what's happening onstage that motivates the non-musical cues.
- Note places where the orchestra must avoid drawing attention to itself, whether aurally or visually. For example, during a quiet moment or dramatic pause in songs or dialogue, avoid extraneous noises such

as turning pages, swapping instruments, silent/muted "practicing" of passages (as reed players do), taking a sip from a bottle of water, or opening that magazine they brought because there's a 20-minute gap in the music during Act I.

- Some issues of balance won't emerge until tech. Be prepared to do last-minute arranging or adjusting using the techniques covered in Chapter 7. In particular, you may find moments where singers are softer/less audible than they were at the sitzprobe, e.g. because they are far upstage or for some other staging-related reason.
- During the first couple of runs with the cast, the orchestra will likely be too loud. This is because they are thinking more about technical things (playing the right notes, following cues) than about dynamics, and the problem tends to go away during tech week. Make sure the cast understands this so they do not panic or burn out their voices trying to sing over the orchestra.
- That said, when the orchestra really *is* too loud, it's usually the rhythm section, since they're always playing. Except in very dense arrangements, horns and other solo instruments usually don't play often enough to be a persistent cause of being too loud.

■ ***Keep your chin up***

I've found that usually the low point is the second-to-last tech rehearsal—I don't know why. Often, that rehearsal seems to go worse than the ones before it. Invariably, things pick up again at the last tech, so hang in there.

5.11 Subs

If you can't get people to commit to all the dates due to schedule conflicts, or if late-breaking conflicts arise (as they often do), you may have to locate subs for certain musicians on certain nights. It's up to you whether doing so is your responsibility or the primary musician's responsibility. Subs are at

a disadvantage because they haven't been rehearsing with your ensemble (usually), so if anything a sub needs to be a *stronger* player than the one she's sitting in for. Good subs are hard to find and often more expensive than the player they replace, especially on short notice. As mentioned in Section 5.8, the sub will rely on the musician to have annotated the book as to how each situation will be handled during a performance, and the sub will rely on these markings being complete and legible, which in practice often isn't the case.

I like to have a sub play at least one rehearsal before playing in a show; if this absolutely impossible, I ask the sub to attend a performance and take notes in her copy of the book regarding cues, vamps, and so on

Finally, I ask the sub to arrive 45–60 minutes before orchestra call if possible and just walk through the book with them, using my conductor's score as a reference and making sure all their cuts, fermatas, and so on are properly notated.

Conducting

6 Conducting

When most people think of the "conductor," they think of someone standing on a podium, wearing a tux and waving a stick around. In fact, the conductor is whoever holds the orchestra together and glues it to the on-stage performers. When the orchestra changes tempo, starts on a cue, starts or exits a vamp, and so on, *one* person must set the tempo, make a cue happen at the same time for the musicians and the cast, or decide when a vamp is over; the conductor performs these functions.

The piano/conductor role is a particularly challenging combination because it requires you to constantly alternate between two roles that call for completely different attitudes towards performance. In the conductor role, you must make decisions and telegraph your every intention to the musicians; in the piano role, you must play like a good rhythm instrument. In other words, you have to switch between leading the ensemble of musicians through starts, stops, and tempo changes, and playing as part of that ensemble when nothing is changing. This chapter gives suggestions on how and when to switch between those roles, and warns of common pitfalls that can happen when one role spills over into the other.

6.1 Pit Conducting vs. Other Conducting Gigs

There's a pile of fine books on conducting, and many bad ones that sound pretentious. My favorite for down-to-earth concise advice is McElheran, *Conducting Technique: For Beginners And Professionals*. If you've done some conducting before, you have a head start. If you haven't, then *please* go read that book, or a comparably good one, before continuing! There isn't nearly enough space here to even review the basics, nor could I pretend to do justice to the topic the way McElheran does. If you're in a hurry, you can check this book's website `pianoconductor.com` for suggestions on online resources and even videos to help you learn the basics. The rest of this section will assume that you have basic knowledge of the mechanics of conducting.

If you've done orchestral conducting, you should be in good shape. The main difference is that you may find yourself having to play piano (or some other instrument) and conduct at the same time, and/or you may find that you're both conducting the pit and cuing actors. Section 6.3 explains the secrets (such as they are) of "hands-free conducting" to help you with this.

If you've done choral conducting, bear in mind that the fluid motions favored by many choral conductors may not work well. In instrumental conducting, the players need a definite ictus (beginning of the beat period) delineated by the "bounce" on each beat, making the beginning of the beat an unambiguous instant in time. Fluid motions work well for choirs because of the naturally soft "attack" of an ensemble of voices, but in an instrumental situation, fluid conducting just obscures where the actual downbeat is, and makes for a mushy ensemble.

Some people find the image of "dipping your finger quickly in water" helps make the bounce definite; others swear that this imagery leads to jerky and difficult-to-follow conducting and should be avoided. A surefire way to evaluate yourself is to watch yourself in the mirror, or even better, constantly ask your musicians how you could improve—after all, they're the ones who have to follow you.

Whether you have previous experience or not, the new ingredient in pit conducting is that the music has to follow the stage action, so there are

probably some new conducting situations—vamps, safeties, starts/stops, underscoring—that you may not be familiar with. In all such situations, I find these three guidelines particularly useful to remember:

Precision. The musicians must know exactly where the downbeats are, as described above. This is largely a matter of technique—practicing in a mirror or with your musicians is the best way to improve.

Confidence. Don't be wimpy. Entrances must be absolutely unambiguous to distinguish them from conducting through rests, setting tempo before a cue, and so on; use whatever body language you have to. It's better to err on the side of too much and adjust later.

Consistency. Once you've identified a particular way that a certain cue or entrance in the score will be conducted, do it the same way every time. This means every time the cue is played is one more opportunity to further tighten your ensemble.

Of course, the most important uber-guideline is: **Get feedback.** If your musicians have trouble following you, it doesn't matter whether you think it's your fault or their fault: you must change what you're doing. Ask them for constructive criticism frequently and use it as an opportunity to improve your skill and your versatility.

6.2 From Pianist to Piano/Conductor

Piano/Conductor is a common dual role because of the piano's role as a rhythm instrument and a substitute for missing instruments and because of limited personnel budgets.

■ ***Other combinations***

Drummer/conductor and other combinations are possible too; in community theater, you have to be willing to improvise a little.

The piano/conductor role is challenging because it is really two roles that call for quite different attitudes towards performance, and a pianist/conductor must be constantly alternating between the two. In the conductor role, you must telegraph every intention; in the piano role, you

must perform like a good ensemble rhythm instrument. Sometimes you have to do both, for example, holding down a vamp on piano *while also* conducting and telegraphing when to come out of the vamp. In most scores, neither the piano part nor the cues to be conducted are technically exhausting, but constantly switching back and forth between the roles certainly can be.

In the role of conductor, the most important task is to **telegraph** every intention. This is most challenging for pianists coming into the conductor role. The players cannot see your hands to know where the beats are, nor should they have to. This means you should more or less "perform the score" with your head, eyebrows, limbs, or other body parts marking the beats. (See Section 6.3 below for some specific ways to do this.) It's not too much of an exaggeration to say that a deaf person should be able to more or less figure out where you are in the score based on such cues. And musicians need time to react; if you're going to cut them off, give a full count of preparation before the cutoff gesture; to give them a pickup, make sure it's a full beat unit in the current meter; and so on.

Bear in mind you need to be "performing" the beats *even when you are not playing them* (such as when the piano is *tacet* or just playing long held notes or "footballs"), since other instruments may have rhythm and they all need to be together too. This is especially true when there are temporary tempo changes like ritards, fermatas, or accelerandos. You may be playing half notes through those measure, but if the cello is playing eighth notes, she cannot follow your ritard unless you're conducting quarter notes, either with your hands or using other body language.

Once a song goes into "time"—that is, once it's underway and there aren't any cues to worry about for awhile—the pianist/conductor must now assume the piano role, which as Section 5.3 describes is the role of a *rhythm* instrument. The rhythm section now owns the tempo, and the pianists's job is to *listen* and form tight ensemble with them. In modern pits, the rhythm section is usually piano, bass, drums, and possibly guitar. In older scores, the strings may be keeping time (see Section 7.4), although even then, the drummer is the best rhythmic reference.

There are two big pitfalls that can occur when you are trying to do both

tasks at once:

- Don't speed up in vamps. In a vamp, your "conductor brain" is concentrated on the stage action so you can come out of the vamp at the right time. Unfortunately, it's easy for your "rhythm brain" to thereby be shortchanged, and a typical side effect is that you will speed up. If you were just the rhythm instrument following another conductor, this would be caught early, but accidentally slowing down when you *are* the conductor is a risk. The remedy is to devote some fraction of your energy to staying in time.
- Don't get louder as you speed up or vice versa. In fairness, many classical pianists have this fault even when they don't also have to conduct, but again, when the pianist *is* the conductor, the stakes are higher. Practicing with a metronome helps check yourself.

6.3 Hands-Free Conducting

Although we'll discuss several strategies for hands-free conducting, giving cues, and so on, all of them are based on the same fundamental "body language" as conventional conducting with your hands. So even if you expect to have to do a lot of hands-free work, it's worth developing a solid conventional conducting technique as the foundation. If you don't have such experience, some experience playing piano in an ensemble will help.

Many musical theater conductors use one hand to conduct the orchestra and the other to help conduct or cue the singers. If you have the luxury of having both hands free and can teach yourself to do this, great, but in the piano/conductor role it's limited to stretches where the piano doesn't play, which are rare. For the vast majority of times when you have one or zero hands free, here are some tricks that can help.

One hand conducts, one hand plays. As described in Chapter 7, many older scores rely on a large group of strings as the "rhythm section". By conducting with your right hand, your left hand is free to play some of this rhythm on the piano. This is a tricky but useful skill to develop. You may find yourself sometimes conducting with one hand while playing the piano

with the other. Sometimes you can do some re-voicing of chords to free up one hand for conducting if need be. You'll be a real hero if you can learn to use either hand to conduct while the other plays.

Conducting with your head. Conductors already rely on body language; you just have to take it to a greater extreme when you lose the use of your hands for conducting. Think of your nose as the baton and conduct with your head. Use your whole body for emphasis: rise up off the bench somewhat in preparation for a downbeat, e.g., and then use smaller bobs of the head to keep the beat. (Think of it as "bouncing to the beat," as you might do in your car when a really good song is on the radio.) But keep these movements subtle or they become distracting; my experience is that even when the musicians are pretty far away from you, subtle movements are surprisingly effective.

A particularly good use of this technique, even when a song has already gone into time, is conducting tricky or compound rhythms. Referring back to Figure 3.9, a slight pickup before the two accented eighth notes on counts 4–5 of each 5/8 measure may help the orchestra stay together the first few times they play the song together.

■ ***Play on the ictus, not before it***

Remember that the point where you "bounce" (change direction) defines the ictus of the beat, so if you're playing the piano while bouncing, be sure that your playing matches the ictus. The tendency is for the playing to slightly anticipate the ictus because most pianists are accustomed to using the downward *portion* of the "bounce" as momentum to start playing, as opposed to playing at the *moment* of the bottom of the bounce. If in doubt, play a tiny bit later than you think you should.

You can similarly suggest dynamics by rising up or lengthening your posture to indicate "more" and crouching or hunching down to indicate "less". It's all about force of will—use your eyebrows, shoulders, facial expressions, or whatever else conveys the dynamic you want (louder, softer, more intense, mellow out, slow down, and so on) Don't overdo it; you'll find your sweet spot eventually.

Setting initial tempo without using your hands. Since the drummer or rhythm section can hold down the basic beat very well once things are underway, one trick is to set the tempo well before the song starts. During pre-song dialogue, start conducting full measures in the target tempo, in a subtle way that all the musicians can see. Then, when it's time to play, you can just conduct a pickup beat with your head.

A major pitfall for conductors is setting an inappropriate initial tempo. If you err on the side of too fast, the singers will be in trouble; too slow, and cues may be in trouble. Metronome markings help (if you have a silent metronome!), but you can also sing the lyrics to yourself to make sure it's not too fast. It's hard to recover from an inappropriate starting tempo since you won't have the use of your hands to call attention to slowing down.

Giving vocal pickups. Silently mouthing the words for onstage singers may be helpful now and then, but if the conductor's face is in full or partial view of the audience, it's very distracting to the audience. (Also, you don't want the singers to rely on this as a crutch.) If you do it, give a visible (but not audible!) "pickup breath" in rhythm, giving it a full beat unit if at all possible, whether it's a true pickup beat or just the beat prior to the vocal entry. For example, for a vocal entry on count 3 in 4/4, the preparation breath is on count 2. (This is the same technique you should advise singers to use for themselves to come in strong on entrances, as Section 4.4 describes.)

The rest of this chapter has some hints on how to conduct the various constructs that are mostly unique to theater.

■ ***Practice the Cues During Cast Rehearsals***

When you're rehearsing piano-only with the cast, pretend the orchestra is there and is expecting to be conducted and cued: Give the drummer that starting tempo. Cue that trumpet player who's been resting for 40 bars. Slow the players down at that *tenuto* or cut them off after that fermata. To do these things, you'll need a free hand, an eyebrow, or some other bodily motion; practicing these during regular rehearsals will make you aware of which limbs are available. If you're playing the piano as well as conducting, you may have to do some planning in order to have a limb or other bodily feature free to give these cues. Now is a good time to start thinking about how you will do it.

6.4 The Secret Language of the Piano/Conductor Score

A key goal of the music copyist is to achieve clarity of what is to be played using the minimum possible number of marks on the page. Various shortcuts have evolved to serve this purpose, as Figure 6.1 shows.

If you're lucky, your score will have measure numbers or letters, for easy reference during rehearsal. Even if you have measure numbers, don't be surprised if there are gaps in the middle of the sequence (such as jumping from measure 55 to 88) or measures inserted with a different numbering (such as inserting measures 16A through 16H between measure 16 and 17). These edits usually reflect changes made very late during the rehearsal process of the original show.

Here's a brief review of theater score terminology to anchor the rest of the chapter:

- **Vamp:** A few bars of music during a song (typically 2–4) repeated while an event of indeterminate length is going on—spoken dialogue, dancers getting into position, or whatever.
- **Safety:** Similar to a vamp, a safety is a measure or a repeat to be played only if needed; it's up to the conductor to come up with a "call sign" indicating whether it's needed during a given performance.

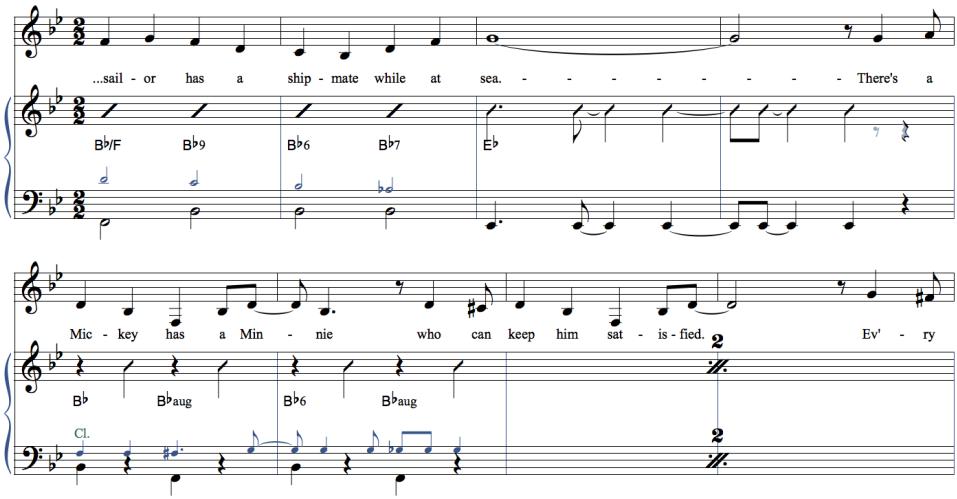


Figure 6.1: Top staff: Slash notation accompanied by chord names give the accompanist some freedom in voicing the specified chords and setting the exact comping pattern; rhythmic notation is used when the rhythm is important, usually because everyone in the orchestra has that rhythm. Bottom staff: Two-bar repeats economize on notation and usually apply to both staves. One-bar repeats (not shown) are also common; the same symbol is used but it sits inside a measure rather than straddling a bar line. (*Somebody For Everybody* from *Oh My Godmother!*)

- **Underscoring:** Music that plays while other stage action, usually dialogue, is occurring. As such, it must usually be played very softly to avoid drowning out the dialogue. Sometimes underscoring is a standalone piece of music, such as when it plays throughout a whole scene. Other times it occurs in the middle of a song, where some dialogue or other action occurs between verses. Underscoring is generally of fixed length, although it may include vamp or safety measures to allow some stretching or shrinking of length.

- **Scene change:** A particular type of underscoring that covers the movement of actors and scenery between scenes.

- **Playoff:** 8–12 bars of additional music to get the actors off the stage at the end of a large "production number." Sometimes it's a separate piece of music in the score; other times you can simply repeat the last 8–12 bars of the number itself.

- **Segue:** Pronounced "SEG-way", Italian for "continue", it means "go on": during or immediately after the applause for this number, go on to the next number, which will probably be a scene change, playoff, or similar. **Attacca** is like a segue, but even faster and more aggressive transition—barely time to turn the page and go. **Segue as one** means go right into the next number without breaking rhythm, i.e. the audience will perceive the whole thing as a single number. Sometimes a long number will be split into multiple sections with all but the last marked **segue as one**; other times a scene change may lead directly into a musical number, and so on

- **Colla voce:** From the Italian "with the voice", indicates a section of music where the performer will take considerable rhythmic freedom and the orchestra must follow him.

- **Time** (sense 1): A song is said to "go into time" when you enter that part of it that is in regular rhythm rather than rubato or colla voce. Markings such as **light time** in the piano/conductor or percussion part mean "play rhythmically, but don't clomp the notes out."

- **Time** (sense 2): At the end of a song, it means that spoken dialogue or other action follows the number, so you can relax for a bit. Sometimes also marked **scene continues**.

■ ***No rest for the weary?***

At the end of a number, your immediate concern is whether you can take a breather ("time" or "scene continues") or whether you have to go straight into more music (segue, segue as one, attacca, playoff). Highlight any kind of segue in yellow highlighter so you know what to do during rehearsals (and while conducting!). It's remarkably easy to be so relieved at finishing a difficult number that you forget you have to immediately go on to the next one.

6.5 Script Cues: Segues and Safeties and Vamps, Oh My

In a song recital or concert, the singer and conductor make eye contact, the song begins, the song is played through, and the song ends. Since theater songs are interspersed with dialogue and stage action, and the actors often cannot make eye contact with you because they are playing to the audience, there are techniques and corresponding notations for starting a song (warnings and start cues), getting into and out of a "holding pattern" during the song while waiting for a line of dialogue or stage action to happen (vamps and safeties), and getting out of a song and right into the next one (segues).

The beginnings of songs will usually be marked with a *start cue*, which tells you when the music starts. The cue may be a line of dialogue (`ADELAIDE: It says here in this book...`) or a stage action (`SALLY sits down`). There may also be a *warning*, which is a dialogue line or stage action that occurs a couple of bars before the cue line; this lets you get your musicians' attention, or if it's just you, lets you get ready to play.

■ ***Early warning***

If no warning is written, look at the prompt book or script and write one in. I usually want a "pre-warning" as well, especially when I'm still getting familiar with the pacing of the show.

Sometimes the singing starts right away, but frequently the music starts before the singing does. There are three variants of this situation:

1. Timed underscoring—you control when the singing starts
2. Vamp—you control when the singing starts
3. Vamp—actor(s) start singing, you follow them out of the vamp

In the first, *timed underscoring*, you have a fixed number of bars of music before the singing starts, though some of those bars may be marked as vamps or safeties to give you more time if needed. If the underscoring is more than a few bars long, write specific dialogue lines or stage actions into your score at the *approximate* points where they occur. These "landmarks" will help you figure out where you are in the underscoring when conducting the scene, and allow you to slow down or speed up your conducting to compensate for minor variations in timing from performance to performance. (However, since staging can be in flux up until and during tech week, don't try to fix this in stone too early in the process.)

The second scenario is a simple vamp until the music starts. In this case, The vamp will usually be annotated with **Continue on** or **Cue to continue** indicating the spoken line or other event that should cue you to exit the vamp. You are responsible for picking up on this cue and indicating to the musicians, that it's time to move on and play past the vamp's repeat bar. Section 6.8 describes suggestions for how to conduct all these types of cues.

The third scenario is a vamp with the marking **vocal last time** or **vocal last x**, meaning that the actor starts whenever she's ready, and when that happens, everyone in the orchestra agrees that was the last time through the vamp. This marking is especially important for musicians who are *not*

playing during the vamp, because hearing the vocals lets them know when to start playing or when to resume counting measures.)

If other dialogue or stage action occurs during the song, there will be vamps, safeties, and/or underscoring to cover it. A **vamp til cutoff** marking means to play until some specific cue happens, at which time the music just stops; usually it'll be your job to watch for the event to happen and then stop your musicians, and wait for the cue to restart.

The famous opening of *Fiddler on the Roof* ties these concepts together. The curtain rises in the dark to the sound of a solo violin playing the motif that has become world famous. After a few bars, a light comes up and we see the fiddler perched on the roof of a house. A few more bars, and Tevye, the dairyman and narrator, appears and introduces the show with these words:

> A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no?
> But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck.
> It isn't easy!
> You may ask: Why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous?
> We stay because Anatevka is our home.
> And how do we keep our balance?
> That I can tell you in one word—Tradition!

As Figure 6.2 shows, Tevye's monologue starts approximately at measure 10, but depending on the production and even the particular night, it may start a measure earlier or later. There are then various vamps and safeties to get from his monologue into the song:

1. The vamp in 33 is repeated until Tevye reaches the line "how do we keep our balance?" in his monologue; and then,

2. The vamp in 34 is repeated under Tevye's phrase "That I can tell you in one word—Tradition!" On the original cast recording, Zero Mostel takes quite a bit of freedom to imbue this phrase with gravitas, requiring four times through the vamp to cover it. Then,

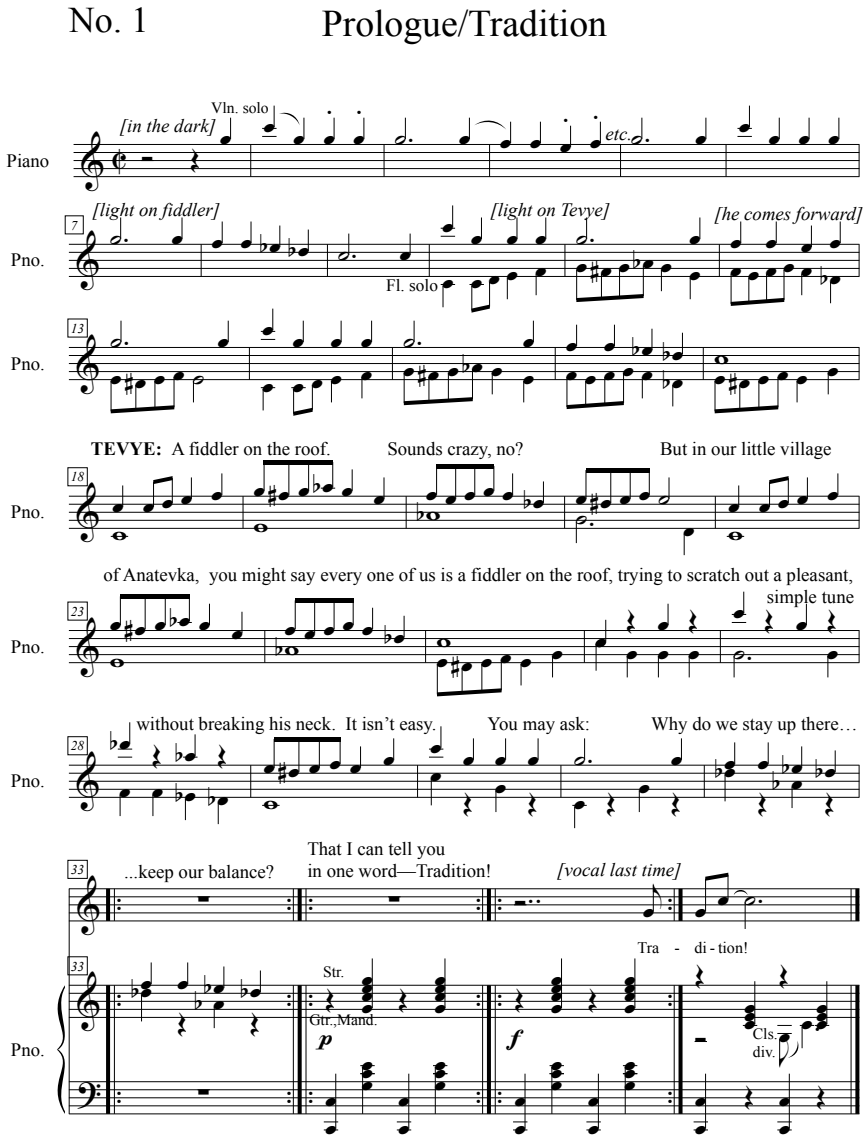


Figure 6.2: The opening of *Fiddler*, illustrating underscoring, vamps/safeties, and "vocal last time" marking. We wrote in dialogue "landmarks" corresponding approximately to Zero Mostel's performance on the original cast recording, following the suggestion in Section 6.5. Copyright 1964, 1965 by the Times Square Music Publications Company. Used for commentary only. (*Prologue/Tradition* from *Fiddler on the Roof*)

3. There is a safety in 35, to allow the other actors to get into position, or to provide a bit of buffer in case you exited the 34 vamp a tiny bit early.

In the original score, the vocal entrance in 35 is actually marked "2nd time"; in this transcription, I've marked it "vocal last time". Note that the musicians as well as the cast need an advance cue for this entrance, since the orchestra has additional material starting in 36 (clarinets *divisi*, explained in Section 1.4).

Why didn't the orchestrator simply include the vocal cue and "vocal last time" notation in 34, and omit the additional repeated 35? Because 34 has the dynamic marking ***p*** (since it's still under Tevye's dialogue), whereas 36 has the marking ***f***, which also serves as a signal to the cast that we're out of the monologue.

6.6 Warnings and Starts

Conducting the opening four notes of Beethoven's Fifth is terrifying for many conductors. Happily, most show music isn't this demanding to conduct, but cuing an entrance can still be tricky.

First, get musicians' attention. Allow 5–10 seconds for this, and write in (and highlight!) a warning cue (stage action, dialogue, or similar) that occurs 5–10 seconds before the music must start, if one isn't already provided in the score. A typical "warning" gesture is raising the baton to chest height and holding it still, or if you're not using a baton, raising your hand to higher than the highest it gets on a normal upbeat.

To actually get the music to start, the most common techniques are giving a pickup only (1 or 2 counts) or conducting a full measure of silence before the downbeat ("one for nothing"). In a fast 2-count tempo, "two for nothing" may be more helpful. The best choice depends on the particular situation, so you'll have to experiment. But whichever you do, *the beat that corresponds to the entrance of the orchestra must be absolutely unambiguous.* In other words, if you're conducting 1-for-nothing, there should be no confusion among the musicians about whether that first measure is the "for

nothing" measure or the cue to play. One common way to do this is that the "silent" measure is conducted with small, almost rigid (straight-line) motions, until the pickup and subsequent downbeat which are conducted using the larger "normal" motion.

Of course, as often as not, the orchestra must come in on a beat other than the downbeat. While the remarks above generalize to those cases, I strongly urge you to read through McElheran, *Conducting Technique: For Beginners And Professionals* for a much better and very concise treatment of such cases. The executive summary is: experiment, work it out with your musicians (and make special note of cases where you have agreed on a specific kind of cue, so that you can inform a substitute musician about them should you need to), and don't assume there's a single right way to conduct an entrance.

6.7 Tempo Changes, Fermatas, Track Marks, Dictated

Abrupt tempo changes aren't too bad as long as (a) you have previously established what the tempi are, so the musicians have some idea what to expect, and (b) *one* person sets the new tempo. This can be you, if you have the time to give a pickup (ideally more than 1 count) in the new tempo, or it can be (for example) the drummer—that's how we handled the tempo change in Figure 5.1 the last time I worked on *Company*.

Be careful to distinguish between fermatas (hold the note) and *track marks* (cut off the note). I usually do fermatas by "holding" my hand (or head, or whatever) in the same location for the duration of the hold, and cutoffs by either making a hand gesture or (if no free hand) physically rising up away from the keyboard.

"Dictated" refers to the conductor conducting every single note in a passage; this is common if the notes are fermatas, if the notes are tied to stage cues, or if some special musical effect is required that can't be easily expressed in terms of conducting a fixed beat. One trick for cleanly conducting dictated notes is to treat each dictated note as a downbeat, and *make the pickup beat the same duration or an easy multiple.* This gives the musicians (and/or the cast) a natural way to figure out when the actual

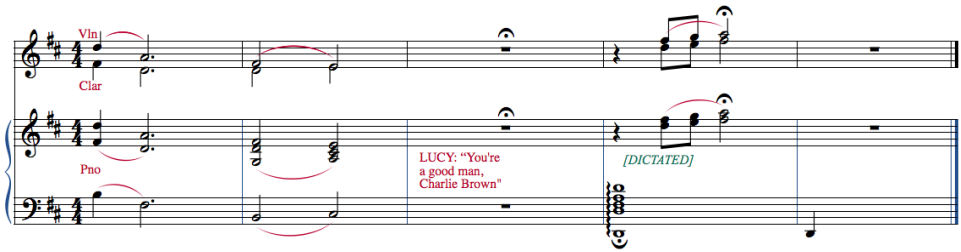


Figure 6.3: After a dialogue in fermata, the last three notes are dictated. Give pickups that are rhythmic with respect to the timing of the dictated notes. (*Happiness/Finale* from *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*)

dictated note is coming: they can observe the timing of your pickup (from beginning of stroke to top of stroke) as the duration of one beat, and come in with you on the chords. For example, as Figure 6.3 shows, the last three notes of *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*, in the clarinet/violin parts, are dictated. One possible strategy might be to give a 16th-note "pickup" to each of the two eighth notes, giving the pickup exactly half the duration of the eighth notes and using the size of your pickup gesture to indicate that duration. If your hands aren't available, you can easily do this by conducting with your head, as section 6.3 suggests.

6.8 Vamps and Safeties

Vamps allow matching the music to the timing of dialogue or other stage business, as Figure 6.4 shows. Conducting through a vamp requires two simple tasks. The **preparation** consists of making sure your musicians know, unambiguously, which measures are vamped; The **execution** consists of *committing to getting out of the vamp* when conducting the song.

Deciding when to come out of a vamp is always a judgment call. If you come out too early, the actor may miss jumping onto her next lyric. If you come out too late, the actors may be standing around awkwardly waiting for the music to come back in. You should practice the vamps with the actors, and their timing should ideally be pretty consistent from

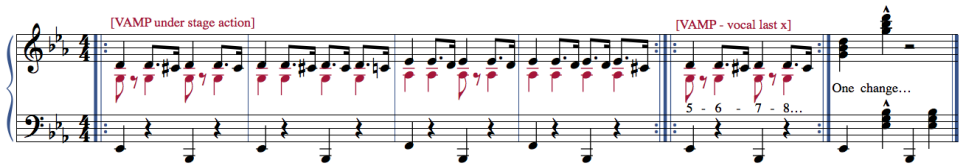


Figure 6.4: In this textbook example of a vamp from *A Chorus Line*, on stage the dancers are being sorted according to who will be cast; there are 17 dancers, so it's a long vamp. Curiously, in the original conductor's score, the vamp we have marked as measures 1–4 is written out as 24 measures, with measures 17–24 repeated; our measure 5, which is measure 25 in the original score, preserves the "vocal last time" marking (described later in this section) in the original score. (*One* from *A Chorus Line*)

performance to performance, but variations (and mistakes) will happen. The important thing is once you have made the judgment call to come out of the vamp, *follow through*. You can't go back on your decision or your musicians will get confused and so will the actors.

How do you indicate to musicians that they should exit the vamp? Depending on your preference and what limbs you have free, you can do as many bands do and hold up a closed fist to mean "This is the last time through the vamp." If a fist isn't available, do a very obvious pickup using one of the "conducting with your body" techniques described in Section 6.3 during the last time through the vamp. *Be sure you give the musicians enough time!* Use body language to "prepare" the pickup as early as you possibly can in the vamp.

A special case of a vamp is often marked "Vocal last time" or "Vocal last x," as in Figures 6.4 and 6.5. In such cases, the vamp measures also serve as the beginning of a sung phrase, and when the phrase is sung, it's time to exit the vamp. Make sure your musicians know about this and you won't have to do much.

Tricky vamps. Some vamps make the judgment call harder if you're trying to time coming out of the vamp and there's no obvious vocal exit. The longer the vamp unit, the harder it is to make a judgment call: if the vamp is a 3-count measure, the "cost" of misjudging the exit is at most 3 counts of idle awkwardness, but if the vamp is four 3-count measures as in Figure 6.6, the cost is up to 12 counts of idle awkwardness. That's

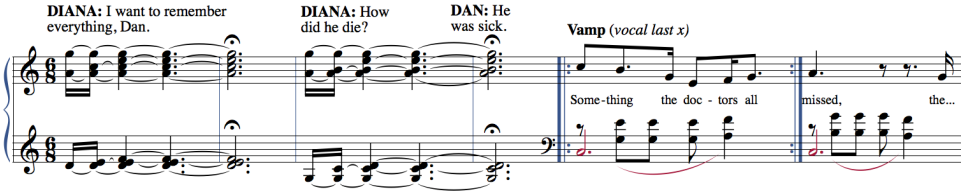


Figure 6.5: This vamp serves as a safety between a timed-dialogue underscoring and going into another verse. It's important for the musicians to know that when the vocals start, that's the last time through the vamp. If you're cuing the vocals, it's important that the musicians know that the vocal cue you're giving the actors comes one measure *before* the orchestra cue to continue out of the vamp, so that they don't confuse the vocal cue with the cue to continue. (*How Could I Ever Forget?* from *Next to Normal*)

probably one reason the orchestrator of *A Chorus Line* reduced the actual vamp in Figure 6.4 to just a single measure.

If you're having trouble syncing up a long vamp or extended underscoring with the dialogue, you may end up in an awkward pause while the orchestra finishes the vamp or underscoring (if the dialogue ends too early) or rushing the actors out of the vamp before they're really ready (if the dialogue ends too late). You have a few options in such cases:

1. Insert a *safety* near the end of the timed phrase, similar to how the vamp measure is used in Figure 6.5.

2. Decide that it's OK to exit the vamp on *any* measure even if the vamp is longer, as directed in Figure 6.6.

6.9 Underscoring

Unlike a vamp, underscoring is nonrepeated music that must coincide with dialogue timing. Depending on how the director has the actors speaking the dialogue, underscoring may need to be cut or extended. When cutting, look for "seamless" cuts in which connecting the two parts across the cut doesn't result in a drastic harmony or texture change—this would be distracting to the audience. When lengthening, consider repeating a subset of the

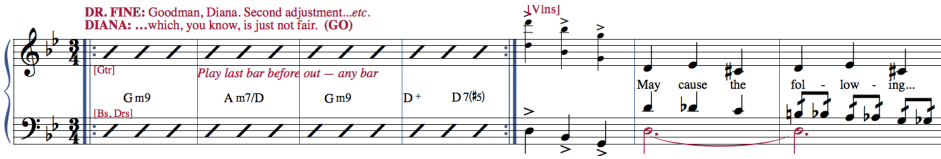


Figure 6.6: This vamp is at the end of another long piece of underscoring, so the dialogue indicated between Dr. Fine and Diana start *after* we're already in the vamp. Although it's a 4-measure vamp, the cue direction says that as soon as Diana says her line "... is just not fair," we immediately finish whatever bar of the vamp we're in and jump immediately to the violin cue in measure 5. (*My Psychopharmacologist and I* from *Next to Normal*)

measures, or turning the last couple of measures into a vamp, whichever is more appropriate. Also, in some situations the underscoring need not be in tempo—you can slow down or speed up as needed during the underscoring section in order make the timing work out.

The key to doing this is to write in "dialogue landmarks" that you can use to vary your conducting speed in performance to match the actor. (If the underscoring accompanies stage action without dialogue, write in "stage action landmarks" instead: `ADELAIDE smacks NATHAN with the back of a spoon.`) The opening of *Fiddler on the Roof* (Figure 6.2) illustrates this nicely: I have written Tevye's monologue in such a way that certain dialogue words line up approximately with the music, but there is a safety at the end, in case the actor speaks the dialogue more slowly than usual during some performances.

Of course, in that example, there's still a nice safe vamp at the end in case the timing doesn't work out, and it's a short vamp (1 measure) so it's easy to use it to compensate for dialogue timing. When that's not possible, you can sometimes insert a fermata in lieu of a vamp before the song starts. For example, in Figure 3.4, the fermatas over the half note and rest in the last measure before the double bar line can be milked a little if Herr Schultz doesn't finish his cue line in time.

Finally, some underscoring doesn't lend itself to either of these tricks, as in Figure 6.7: you have some latitude in the last couple of measures to do a *ritard.*, but there's no easy way to extend the underscoring. In these cases, there's nothing to do but practice with the actors so that their dialogue is

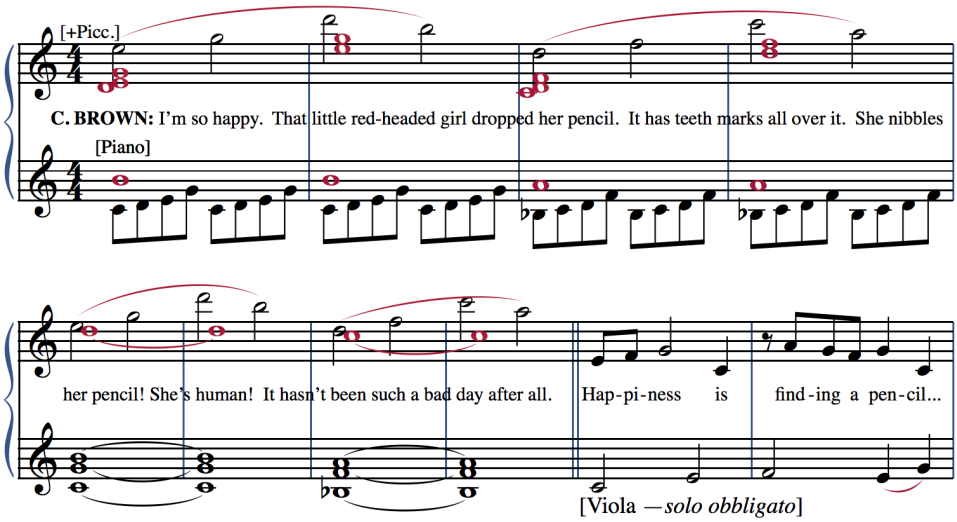
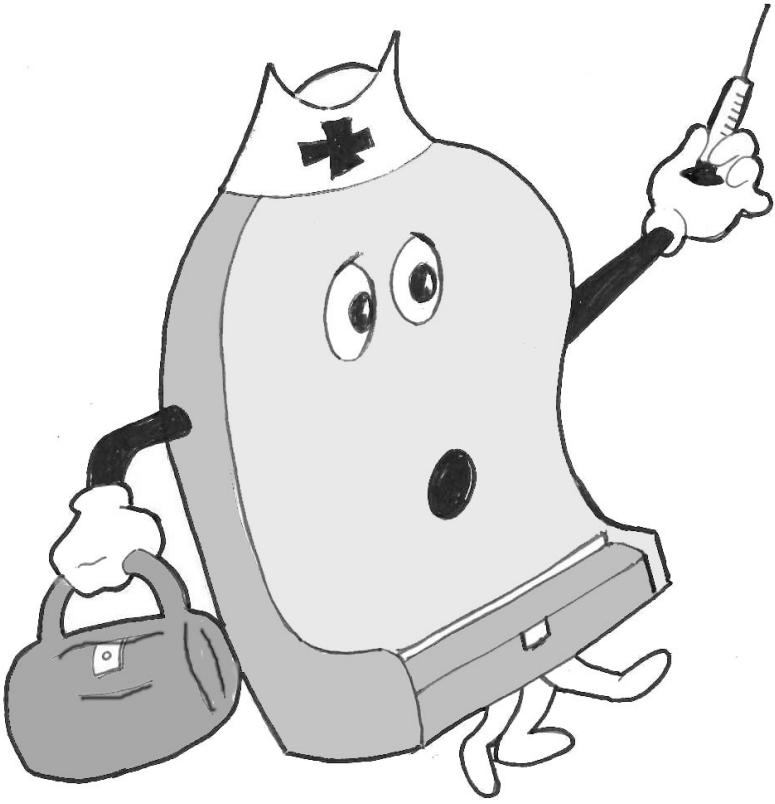


Figure 6.7: The underscoring under Charlie Brown's final monologue gets us from the previous up-tempo song (Snoopy's *Dinnertime* to the serene night-scene mood that sets up the lovely closing song of the show. (*Night Scene/Happiness* from *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*)

delivered with consistent timing, and you can mark dialogue landmarks and adjust tempo as you play.



Emergency Arranging

7 Emergency Arranging

Arranging (and its big brother, orchestration) are specialized and demanding crafts. Reading these few pages won't make you an arranger, but in community theater, sometimes you are forced to do *some* minimal amount of arranging: reduction of the number of instrumental parts to be played by consolidating or eliminating parts, substitution of an instrument you have for an instrument you don't, or using the piano to cover missing instruments. This chapter gives some rules of thumb for how to approach such scenarios and a few examples of those rules in practice for shows I've actually reduced.

7.1 Transposition

Transposition is arguably the simplest change you can make to an arrangement, and it may be needed to accommodate the range(s) of singer(s) or to improve continuity around a cut. At its most basic, you are simply taking each instrument's part and moving it up or down by the chromatic interval between the original key and new key, which seems like the kind of tedious job that can at least be done by brute force. If you're doing piano only or piano combo, this is is not too bad.

Sometimes transposition can't be avoided, but other things being equal, it's a bad idea to cast a show oblivious to vocal ranges and assume you can "just transpose" troublesome songs later. Besides the fact that well-crafted songs won't sound good if sung far outside the range for which they're written, transposition is more perilous and fraught with caveats than most people realize. Most nontrivial arrangements for multiple instruments are surprisingly sensitive to transposition, since part of a good arranger's job is to use each instrument in its most effective range for that piece. Some passages may move out of the playable range of an instrument if transposed. Other passages may become very hard or impossible to play because of idiosyncrasies of the instrument, for example, a trill requiring major changes of fingering between the two trill notes on a valved woodwind instrument, or certain glissandos that are impossible on a slide trombone. Donald Sebesky's book (Sebesky, *The Contemporary Arranger, Definitive Edition*) does a great job of explaining all these cases, but the bottom line is that transposition should be undertaken with caution, kept to a minimum, and announced as early as possible so that transposition-related problems can be identified early and fixed.

If you must deal with multiple instrument transposition, music typesetting programs like Finale and Sibelius (see Section A.4) can save you a lot of time because they can basically do transposition automatically. They also take care of the inherent transposition required for instruments that read in non-concert pitch. (If you don't know what this means, then you probably shouldn't attempt transposition of a multi-instrument arrangement.) The only downside is that you have to first enter the music into the program,

which can be time-consuming. The "pro" versions of music typesetting programs like Finale and Sibelius (see Section A.4, Technology) now allow you to scan printed score pages into them and play melodies in real time using a MIDI-capable keyboard, but both methods usually require manual fix-ups and may not save you any time over doing it by hand. Also, scores for many older shows (anything written before about 1975) have often been written out by hand by music copyists, which makes automated scanning impossible.

MD's I know have varying opinions as to whether it is the MD's responsibility or each musician's responsibility to write out the transposed parts. My musicians tend to be accommodating and able; your mileage may vary.

7.2 Part Consolidation

Before diving into doing a reduction or arrangement, check whether a reduction is available from the licensor, as discussed in section 5.1. The quality of reductions varies from lively to abysmal, but if you have limited orchestra resources, this will save you a lot of work. Flex combos and other reductions already make heavy use of *cross cuing* (section 1.5), which allows the arrangement to be played even if some instruments are unavailable.

If no reduction is available, you can apply the same basic ideas used to create them to shrink an existing orchestration (or to further shrink a flex combo or existing reduction). In a recent production, the orchestration called for a 7-piece flex combo (piano, bass, drums, alto sax/flute/clarinet, tenor sax, trumpet, trombone) but we had room for only 6 players. Since we really wanted to include the trombone for reasons of tonal color, we consolidated the two reed parts into a single part. Specifically, we discovered that most of the tenor sax lines were well within the range of the alto sax (even though they were not all cross-cued to it), although in some cases where both saxes were playing, we had to choose the "best" line.

Sometimes such arranging exercises come down to losing one or another solo line; other times it's a matter of consolidation, deciding which counter-lines we were willing to lose in the process. If you are short on mu-

sicians even after exhausting the above strategies, you can use cross-cues to cover some lines on piano. The decision process includes trial and error, listening to the recording, and looking at the conductor's score. Fortunately, I had help from our toucan during this process, as the picture on the back cover of the book shows.

Synthesizers. Some scores have synthesizers written in, usually for specific sound effects that can't be achieved on acoustic instruments or to simulate other electronic instruments such as Hammond organs and Rhodes electric pianos. I tend to stay away from using synthesizers as stand-ins for acoustic instruments (see Section 5.6), but they can be used effectively in other ways. For example, we performed *Company* with a rhythm section, a single violin (to play some important counterpoint lines), a reed player who covered 5 instruments, and a synthesizer used for a Hammond organ sound and some marimba-like sound effects. We used the Hammond sound to play certain chords that actually had been played on the organ in the show's original 1970 orchestration but were re-scored for more reeds (which we didn't have space for) in the revised orchestration; using the Hammond sound allowed us to pay tribute to the original orchestration, so it made sense to us. We also used the synthesizer effectively for sounds like electric marimba and glockenspiel. Your listeners will thank you, though, for resisting the temptation to use synthesizers to cover string parts; better to omit them or handle them on piano, since only a high-end synthesizer played by an experienced synthesist is likely to even approach the sound of real strings in a live setting.

7.3 Doing Your Own Reduction

If the reduced orchestration is unavailable or still exceeds your resources, and you don't want to go all the way down to piano-only or piano combo, you can do even more of the above tricks and produce your own reduction. This is a lot of work and you will probably want your (experienced!) musicians to help you with it, but it can be done. The key to a successful reduction is to pick out the elements of the original arrangement that are most prominently audible and try to preserve them (or preserve their

spirit, at least), even as you change and thin out the instrumentation. The first step is to determine what kind of pit you can actually recruit, and then match that up with what each instrument or section is going in the score. Here we discuss some reduction strategies and I include some real examples of reductions I've done using these strategies that have worked well.

One motivation for doing your own reduction is that you're constrained in who you can recruit to play in the pit. Do some musicians play multiple instruments? This is common for single reed players, less common for double reed players (except that Oboe/English Horn is a standard doubling), occasionally true for brass players, and rarely true for string players. Are the tone colors appropriate? A tuba makes a beautiful sound but your possibilities are limited if it's your only solo brass instrument. Do the instruments blend well? Clarinet blends with almost everything; saxophones can be made to sound either "more brassy" or "more reedy depending on how they're played and what they're blended with; but strings can sound thin and brittle if they're competing with brass or with a big woodwind section, or if a small complement of strings is being counted on to carry a lush string part. The arranging books in the Bibliography, particularly Sebesky, *The Contemporary Arranger, Definitive Edition*, have a lot to say about this.

7.4 Score Analysis

Your first goal is to identify the "bare bones" elements of each song in the score and come up with a strategy for it: assign it to one or more instruments, omit it, or change it. Covering the third is way into the realm of orchestration so we'll stick to the first two.

The elements of most "traditional" show tunes orchestrations are:

1. Rhythmic foundation
2. Melody lines
3. Counterpoint lines and Embellishments
4. Solo/obbligato lines

5. “Signature sound”

Not all songs have all features or fit this template, but it is a good starting point.

Rhythmic foundation. This is what keeps the song moving. Especially in older shows, the percussion/drums part is less critical to this than you might think; commonly, the rhythmic foundation will be assigned to a full string section, which you probably don’t have, sometimes with flutes or other instruments doubling the strings. For example, the famous opening of *Fiddler on the Roof,* an excerpt of which we saw in Figure 6.2, has the rhythmic foundation carried by the strings, mandolin, and guitar (measure 34). In smaller pits, depending on the character of the song, you can usually assign such a rhythmic foundation to the piano or, if appropriate, a guitar or similar percussive instrument.

In the modern score for *The Last Five Years*, there are no drums at all, and rhythmic movement is left to the guitar (for pop-like strumming-based rhythms) or the piano (for syncopations and more complex rhythms); such scores are difficult to reduce because in these cases those instruments not only provide the rhythmic foundation but provide a distinct sound palette for each song.

Melody Lines. In a large orchestration it’s common for one or more instrument sections to double the melody that the singer is singing. I’ve found that you can usually dispense with these lines altogether. However, if the song also includes some underscoring or other non-sung sections where the melody is expected to be heard, someone will have to cover melody on those sections. The piano may get called on for double duty in this case: covering rhythmic foundation throughout the song, and also covering a melody line here and there.

For example, in Figure 7.1, how would you cover the important clarinet line if you didn’t have a clarinet? One strategy is to observe that while the clarinet plays the melody (measures 125–127), the rhythm part is dominated by eighth-note arpeggios that are split between the harp and electric piano; then at m128, the (electric) piano takes over the melody, and the remainder of the phrase is split between the electric piano and the organ

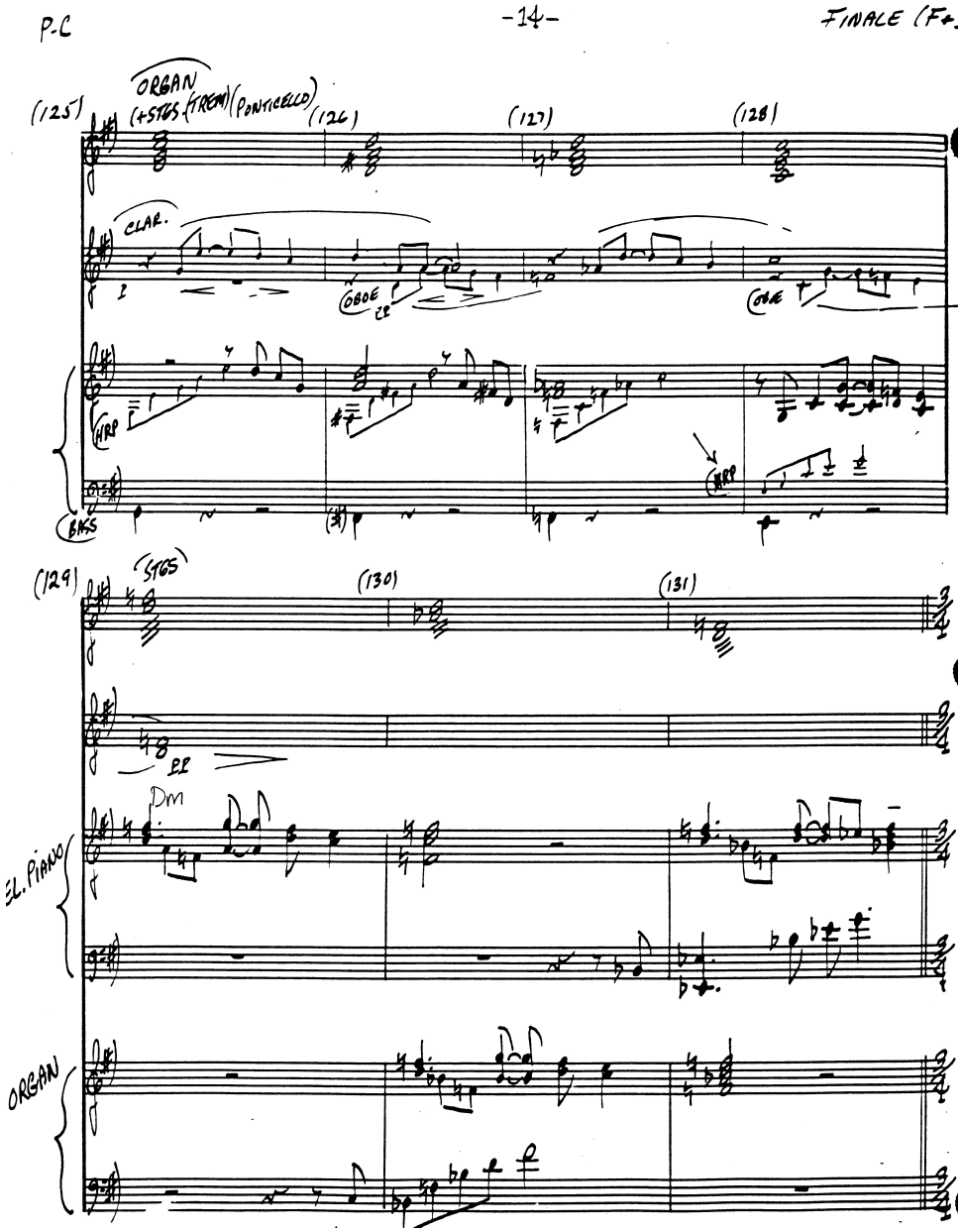


Figure 7.1: This 7-bar excerpt comes between two sections of the finale that are sung; the melody in the clarinet represents the continuation of the sung melody, so this line needs to be heard. (*Pippin* copyright 1972 by Stephen Schwartz, copyright 1975 by Roger O. Hirson. Rights controlled by Music Theatre International. Used for commentary only.) (*Finale* from *Pippin*)

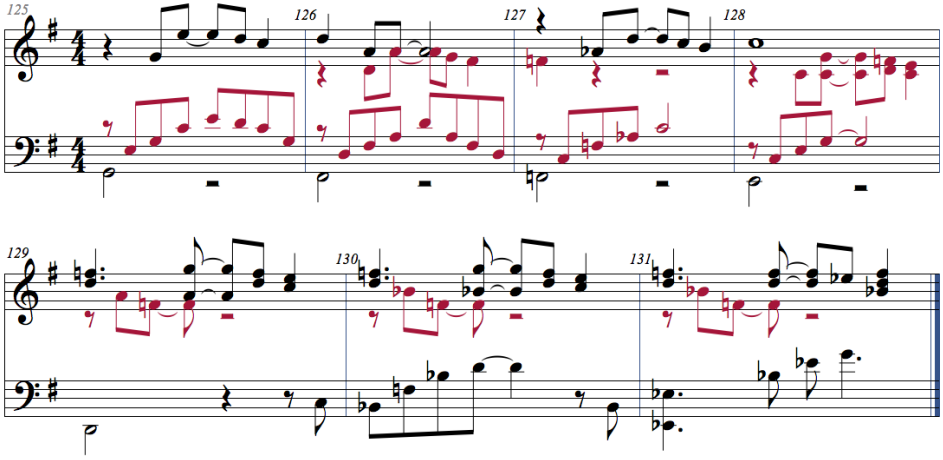


Figure 7.2: Possible piano-only reduction of Figure 7.1. (*Finale* from *Pippin*)

(m129–131).

Most reasonably accomplished pianists should be able to play the piano reduction in Figure 7.2. This "implosion" of parts preserves the flavor of the arpeggios by bringing the harp part down an octave so that the piano can cover it with the left hand, gives the clarinet melody (and the oboe counterline in m126–127) to the right hand, and combines the piano and organ parts more or less as written in m128–131 to preserve the continuous eighth-note motion that moves this section forward.

Throughout all of this, the strings are holding tremolo chords (top staff of each system in Figure 7.1), but with only a piano we don't have the luxury of including that element. Depending on how critical the director judges this lost "texture" to be, one possibility would be to substitute *sotto voce* ensemble singing for the strings.

Counterpoint Lines and Embellishments. Counterpoint lines provide a stable legato line against which the rhythm can play. In traditional large-pit orchestrations, these lines are often given to cellos or horns; this has led some people (including Stephen Sondheim) to call them "thumb lines,"

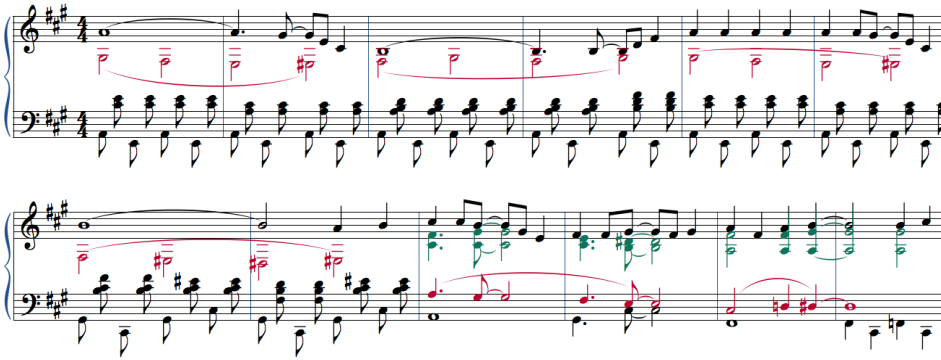


Figure 7.3: In this piano reduction, for clarity we show the bass and accompaniment on the lower staff and the melody and thumbline on the upper staff, except that the thumbline moves to the lower staff in measures 9–12 for notational convenience. In the orchestration it's played by clarinets and cellos. (*One Wonderful Day* from *Saturday Night*)

since a piano reduction of such an orchestration would probably require the pianist to use her left or right thumb to play those lines (since they fall in the middle register right around middle C) while also playing the bass and rhythm chords. Figure 7.3 shows an example.

The other job of the counterline is to keep the general motion of the song going (and give the audience something to listen to) when the singers are holding a long note or have a long rest. Depending on how playable the figure is, you might have the pianist try to cover the entire line or only the exposed "fills." A skilled orchestrator will feature the counterlines when there are rests in the melody lines, as in Figure 7.4.

Obbligato Lines. *Obbligato* is a term from classical music that describes a musical line that is "indispensable" (the word is, unsurprisingly, Italian for "mandatory"). Obbligati are tricky because by definition you can't omit them and still retain the original characteristics of the orchestration. Figure 7.5 shows An excellent example: the woodwind obbligato underlying the Night Waltz in *A Little Night Music* is a signature element that the song won't sound the same without.

Ideally, you should keep as many obbligati as you can and assign them whenever possible to the instrument for which they were originally written.

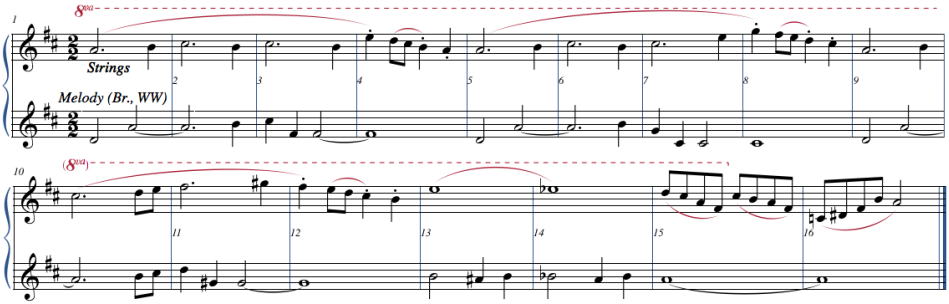


Figure 7.4: A schematic of one of the counterpoint lines in Robert Russell Bennett's classic orchestration of *Oklahoma!*. During the statement of *People Will Say We're In Love* in the overture, the famous melody (lower staff) is carried by brass and horns. Violins and high woodwinds have a lovely counterline that only calls attention to itself with movement when the melody is sitting on a long note, in measures 4, 8, 12, and 15–16. The counterline therefore serves to keep the pulse of the song moving during the whole notes. (*Overture* from *Oklahoma!*)

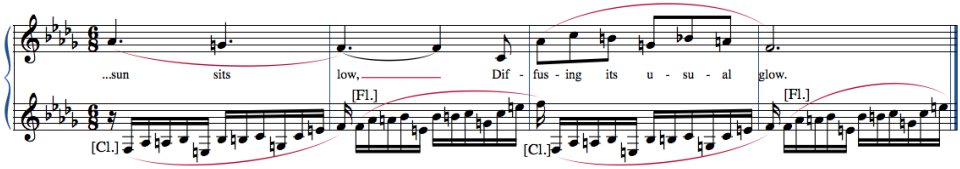


Figure 7.5: In this example, the obbligato is split between the clarinet (stems up) and flute (stems down). The melody and lyrics are shown for clarity; other instruments are omitted. This obbligato is doubly important because it also outlines the harmonic structure in a way that makes a "strong" chordal accompaniment unnecessary. (*Night Waltz* from *A Little Night Music*)

If that instrument's not available, you have three choices:

1. Assign the obbligato to a different instrument. See Section 7.5 for ideas.
2. Assign the obbligato to its original instrument, and decide what to do with the line that instrument would otherwise have played (cover on another instrument, or omit).
3. Omit the obbligato. Your ear will tell you if the result sounds funny. Also, consider whether this obbligato line is part of an important vocal cue (i.e. some singer is getting either the timing or the pitch of her entrance from this obbligato).

"Signature Sound". When a score has a "signature sound"—a timbral color that people will remember as distinct, because it pervades the score, because it's not often heard in musical theater orchestration, or both—you should latch onto it as a "non-negotiable" element of the orchestration. The "signature sound" can take many forms:

- A solo instrument sound or texture that pervades the score, such as the flamenco acoustic guitar in *Man of La Mancha*.
- A particular instrument that gives unique color to "period piece" scores, such as the accordion in *Cabaret* or the vaudeville-style banjo in *Chicago*.
- An instrument that plays solo line(s) strongly associated with the show, like the solo violin in *Fiddler on the Roof* or the bassoon basslines in *Into the Woods*.
- An instrument whose use in the orchestration is unconventional or in memorable contrast to how it's usually used, such as the "rock cello" in *The Last Five Years* and *Next to Normal*

In all cases, the benefit of retaining the signature sound is its distinctiveness: the pit may be a fraction of the size of the one used in New York, but the audience will *remember* that accordion or Spanish guitar simply because they don't hear those sounds as often.

7.5 Reduction and Substitution Strategies

A full treatment of choosing instruments for an arrangement could be the subject of its own book (and there are many good ones; see the Bibliography for some), but in general the key in getting a "big" sound with a small orchestra is to augment the rhythm section with a few instruments that span different ranges and timbres.

The rules of thumb I use are these:

Look for duplication. Who features a line vs. who reinforces it? In larger pits, common reinforcements (having multiple instruments play the same line) include flutes/violins (or high woodwinds/violins), horns/low woodwinds, cello/low woodwinds, cello/low brass.

Move lines to another instruments, including the piano. For midrange solo lines and harmonies, I like clarinets because they blend with pretty much everything and 2 clarinets together sound remarkably full without being overpowering. Saxes are also good because they can be played softly to get a mellow intonation or powerfully enough to blend well with brass instruments (or beef up the sound of a small brass section). Also, since sax often shows up in pop music as well as jazz, sax players may be easier to find than other reed players. On the other hand, my experience is that more clarinetists double on sax than vice versa.

Flute or violin are great for counter-lines (and are often interchangeable when a reduced orchestration is provided, as the flute's volume and agility are comparable to the violin's, especially in the higher registers). Viola can often substitute for violin in solo work unless the range is extreme and/or a very specific sound is required (the viola sounds "woodier" and less bright than the violin, especially in the upper registers, to my ear anyway). Some accomplished reed players can also cover flute.

If the score calls for a traditional string section, you would need 8 or more string players to sound even halfway decent. My advice would be not to attempt that: understand how the string section is being used, and cover those parts on other instruments. For example, if the strings are used to provide a rhythmic foundation, that can be covered on piano. Pizzicato strings and moving block chords can sometimes be covered on a synthe-

sizer. Low string counter-lines (e.g. cello lines) can be handled on clarinet or bass clarinet, and so on.

When I say "the rhythm section" I usually mean piano, bass and drums. In most shows, upright or electric bass will work, especially if the score is "jazzy"; a few shows really call for one or the other (e.g. *Bye Bye Birdie*'s rock and roll songs call for electric bass and electric guitar, whereas *Chicago*'s vaudeville style calls for upright bass if at all possible). However, I've heard nontraditional rhythm sections that sound great; for example, substituting a tuba for the bass, or ditching the trap set in favor of some other percussion.

To give you an idea of how to proceed, the rest of this chapter gives sketches for taking some shows that normally come with full orchestration and reducing them to "shoestring" orchestration while maintaining the character of the piece.

7.6 Example: *Assassins*

The signature sound of this eclectic Sondheim score is the American-folk sound of many of the songs, which can be suggested by the use of folk instruments like fiddle and harmonica. A good solo violinist can play both fiddle and "straight" violin material, and I use an accordion since it can approximate the harmonica sound very well but also provide rhythm, texture, fill, and cover some woodwind solo lines. It can also make the "calliope" sound that opens the show.

A solo violin is necessary for the folksy "fiddle" sound in *The Ballad of Booth, Guiteau,* and other songs. Finally, I know a multi-instrumentalist who plays drums and banjo (among many other things), so he can strum the banjo in some of the folk songs where drums aren't necessary.

With all of that in mind, here's how we performed *Assassins* with a 4-piece orchestra; I would have liked to include bass, but there just wasn't room (the orchestra was onstage with the cast).

1. Piano/Conductor
2. Accordion

3. Drums/banjo (banjo played when no drums)

4. Solo violin

7.7 Example: *Man of La Mancha*

The signature sound of this score is clearly the flamenco-esque feel of many of the songs, which makes the Spanish guitar a must. The guitar is one of the few instruments that is as capable as the piano in carrying the rhythm section—fortunately so, since a piano would sound out of place in this score.

Similarly, the flute/piccolo solos that combine with the guitar to give the "Spanish troubadour" sound are indispensable. A good flute player gives me clarinet coverage as well, and on this show I was lucky enough to work with woodwind players who can play both single reeds and some oboe, letting me keep some of the beautiful oboe solos in songs like *Dulcinea* and *The Impossible Dream*. But most of what I assigned to the oboe could have been covered on clarinet as well.

The show also has a number of "knightly" fanfares scored for one or more trumpets. The original score calls for 2 trumpets, 2 trombones and 2 horns, but the trumpet sounds so distinctive when doing fanfares that I decided a single solo trumpet would be enough to characterize the fanfares.

Two horns provide a nice full texture for some of the other songs, and make a lovely backdrop for clarinet and oboe solos, as well as having a nobler brass sound of their own (for brass passages that sound more thoughtful than fanfare-like). My horn players also double on trumpet, so some parts of the show have 2 horns and other parts have 1 horn plus 1 trumpet. (The original score calls for 2 of each, but in a small space, one of each is more than enough.)

So the final complement is:

1. Spanish guitar

2. Acoustic Bass

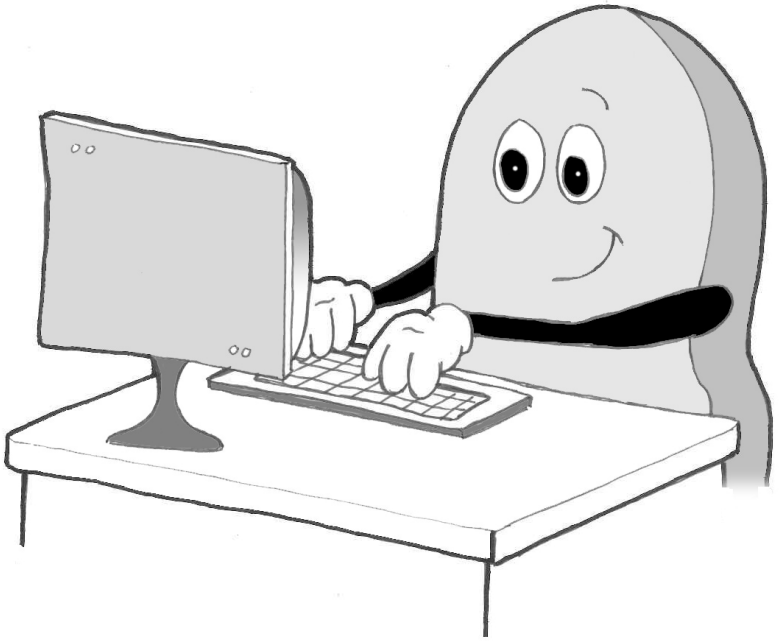
3. Percussion/Conductor: bass drum, snare drum, floor tom "tympani", crash cymbal, castanets. (I found some great YouTube videos that teach how to play castanets, and as a percussionist and pianist I had the dexterity to more or less do it.) We saved some space by using a "cocktail" trap set in which the bottom head of the floor tom doubles as the bass drum. (I jury-rigged it using an angled kick drum pedal for about $20.)
4. Horn 1/Trumpet
5. Horn 2
6. Reed: piccolo, flute, clarinet, oboe

7.8 Example: *Gypsy*

This is a traditional score for a 20+ piece orchestra, and representative of doing a "conventional" reduction. The strings were first to be cut: in songs where the strings carried the rhythm, the piano took over that job, and string solos were given to woodwinds (usually flute). The horn's extensive range (the largest compass of any woodwind/brass) and variety of timbres allow the horn players to also cover important cello and bass clarinet lines, as well as trombone solos or trombone parts in fanfares. Although my horn players generally double on trumpet, there was enough trumpet solo material in this show that it needed its own chair, and the horn players were busy enough doing all the other stuff. And as usual, I counted on my woodwind players to be superheroes. So we have:

1. Piano/Conductor (covers most string rhythms)
2. Bass
3. Drums
4. Reed 1 (alto sax, flute, clarinet, oboe)
5. Horn 1 & 2 (covers parts of horn, cello, bass clarinet, trombone books)

6. Trumpet



Technology Resources

A Technology Resources

In the last 10 years, technology has streamlined almost every aspect of the MD's job—recruiting musicians, creating audition packets, running rehearsals, and creating practice tracks for singers. This appendix suggests some of these uses.

A.1 File Sharing

For keeping the cast and orchestra informed, as soon as the show is cast I set up a free Google Group (`http://groups.google.com`) to which all cast and crew subscribe. The group alias serves as a mailing list, and the messages are automatically archived in case someone claims you never sent that reminder about the upcoming rehearsal agenda.

I also create a folder in Google Drive (`https://drive.google.com`) to post PDFs and MP3s of practice tracks, arrangement sheets, and the cast contact list as a Google spreadsheet; conveniently, you can grant access to the folder for the entire Google Group all at once, rather than having to add each individual. (That's one reason I use Google Drive rather than similar services like Dropbox for this purpose; also Google Drive gives you a generous amount of space for free, which is important when storing media files that can get big quickly.)

For maintaining the rehearsal schedule and cast/crew contact list, Google Drive documents are *vastly* superior to mailing around copies of documents: you have a single online copy of each document that is always up-to-date, and can even be viewed on cell phones when people are away from their computers. If you rely on emailing schedules as attachments, and sending a new email with a new attachment each time the schedule changes, you *will* have at least one incident in which someone misses their call time because they have an out-of-date copy of the schedule for some reason. I am so sure of this that if you have a nontrivial rehearsal period that avoids this problem despite relying on emailing attachments, I'll give you a free ticket to any show for which I'm Music Director or send you a free copy of this book for a friend. OK, that's not a huge prize, but still.

A.2 High Speed Scanners

Many heavy-duty workplace copy machines now offer the option of scanning a document to PDF or a similar format. If I need to mark up a copy of something for an actor's use, I find this method more convenient than making physical photocopies, especially if my own copy of the book is al-

ready marked up. If you don't have access to such a machine, you can scan documents using a flatbed scanner (slower), or, remarkably, take pictures of document pages with a cell phone camera, which is slow but results in very readable copies. Of course it would be tedious to capture an entire score this way, but it's great for making a "callback packet" consisting of a few pages from the Conductor's Score or script that can be uploaded as a PDF file to the Google Drive folder, where auditioners can download and print it at home. The Preview app on Mac computers lets you move pages between PDF files by showing the Thumbnails view of each document; this is a handy feature if you've scanned a handful of sheets from different songs (for example, to make a callback packet) and want to put them into a single PDF file that auditioners can download and print.

A.3 Practice Tracks and "Karaoke" Tracks

For recording practice tracks ahead of time, you can use a program such as Audacity, which is an excellent open-source (free) audio recording program that runs on Mac and Windows and lets you record from the mic built into your laptop or from an inexpensive mic plugged into your PC. Or you can just record to your smartphone. Either way, I always post the tracks as MP3 files in Google Drive so actors have immediate access.

I also use this method to record "karaoke" tracks, which can be used during rehearsal when no pianist is available. A karaoke track contains exactly what the rehearsal pianist would play for particular songs. If there are tricky sections of songs, such as a 32-bar dance section that is likely to require a lot of rehearsal, you can split that karaoke material into its own track for convenience. If music is needed simultaneously for a vocal rehearsal and a dance rehearsal, karaoke tracks are lifesavers; more than once I've ended up recording an entire karaoke CD that could practically be used to run the whole show in rehearsal if I'm absent. It takes the same or less time than playing a full run rehearsal, and it can be used over and over again.

Music Theater International, one of the "big four" US-based licensing

companies for musical theater works,[1] now provides a "RehearScore" with many of their shows—a MIDI file which, combined with a software-based sequencer, can be used to generate karaoke tracks and certain vocal practice tracks. I haven't used these but my understanding is that the process of turning the RehearScore disk into usable practice tracks is nontrivial and time-consuming, so I've stuck with this lower-tech approach to date.

A.4 Music Notation, Transposition, Arranging

For notating arrangements, I use Finale (`http://www.finalemusic.com/`)—indeed, I used it for the examples in this book. This extremely versatile program is available in a variety of levels, including a free entry-level version ("NotePad"), a $50 intermediate version, a ridiculously overfeatured professional version, and a free viewer program that can view, play and print (but not edit) files created with any of the others. Even the entry- and mid-level products are fine for the kind of work discussed in this book. I have colleagues who use Sibelius, which is Finale's main competitor; I haven't used it myself and I am not making any attempt to compare the two, but it is likely that for the relatively straightforward applications I've discussed, either would be fine. These programs have the side benefit that you can simply generate PDF files of your arrangements, and email these to musicians/actors or post them on a groups service. In general, if you have just one simple arrangement (or transposition) to do for one or two instruments, it may be faster to do it by hand, since both Finale and Sibelius have steep learning curves; however, for anything but the most trivial tasks, using such programs will save you time and frustration in the long run, so it is worth getting familiar with them. The most recent versions of these programs can even generate MP3 files of your arrangements using synthetic instrument sounds. They also allow you to connect a MIDI-capable keyboard and play melodies into them in real time for transcription, but a lot of settings have to be tweaked in order to get a usable result, so don't assume this works magically.

[1] The others are Tams-Witmark, Samuel French, and Rodgers & Hammerstein.

A.5 Recruiting Musicians

At least in the Bay Area, Craigslist is pretty great for finding musicians when you need a player who's not in your existing social network. Since musicians with pit experience are often reachable through my social network, when I do an "open posting" I tend to target musicians who don't have pit experience but would be open to trying it out. Below is a sample posting I used several years ago when I was just getting started MD'ing in the Bay Area and didn't yet have a large network from which to draw musicians. (For that reason, I went out of my way to say something about the show. When recruiting experienced musicians, my target recruits would not only be familiar with the show but possibly also have played the book.)

```
SUMMARY: MUSICIANS WANTED (must be able to read music) for a
community theater staging of Stephen Sondheim's "Company".
Drums, bass, 1 reed/wind, 1 string.  Shows every weekend in
April, production week 3/29-4/1, orchestra rehearsals TBD
based on musicians' availability.

THE DETAILS:

If you like musicals but have never played in a pit
(actually in this case, more of a "loft"), it's a lot of fun
and this is a great opportunity.  The Altarena Playhouse
(www.altarena.org) is a long-established (50+ years!)
community theater in Alameda and this spring we're staging
Sondheim's breakthrough show "Company".  The show follows
permanent-bachelor Bobby, in his 30's, who can't seem to
make a commitment to anyone.  Surrounded by his married
friends (who are always trying to set him up, but never seem
to approve of his girlfriends), Bobby defines the marriage
experience both in terms of what he sees in his friends'
relationships---good and bad---and in terms of his own
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aloneness.

You can hear clips of the show's songs at:

<I inserted a URL to Amazon.com album page here>

Since this is community theater, we all have day jobs so this isn't a for-pay gig (mine is http://www.cs.berkeley.edu/~fox), though we have modest amounts of money to cover actual expenses, buy some dinners for the orchestra, etc.

TIME COMMITMENT: 2 (or 3 if needed, which is unlikely) orchestra-only rehearsals of 2-3 hours each, to be scheduled at the convenience of the musicians; dress rehearsal Mar 29, 30, 31, and Apr 1; performances every Fri & Sat in April at 8pm, plus afternoon matinees on Sunday Apr 4 & 18.

If you have to miss 1 or 2 shows, we might be able to work something out. If you can only do part of the shows, let me know, since I may be able to split the shows among two sets of musicians.

All performances and dress rehearsals are at Altarena Playhouse in Alameda; we can arrange transportation from Fruitvale BART. Orchestra-only rehearsals may be held at another location in the City or East Bay if that's better for all of you.

4 MUSICIANS NEEDED (in addition to piano/conductor; that's me) to play a reduction of the full score:

Bass - electric preferred. Bonus if you can strum simple

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chords on acoustic guitar.

Alto (pref.) or tenor sax or clarinet.  A plus if you can
handle both sax and clar; a BIG plus if you also play some
simple flute lines.

Drums - there's room for a fairly compact 3 or 4 pc set.
Must be able to read drum charts.

Violin or viola
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Closing Thoughts

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

[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.