

# Trends in Musical Theatre Voice: An Analysis of Audition Requirements for Singers

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**Summary: Objectives.** The American musical theatre industry is a multibillion dollar business in which the requirements for singers are varied and complex. This study identifies the musical genres and voice requirements that are currently most requested at professional auditions to help voice teachers, pedagogues, and physicians who work with musical theatre singers understand the demands of their clients' business.

**Study Design.** Frequency count.

**Methods.** One thousand two thirty-eight professional musical theatre audition listings were gathered over a 6-month period, and information from each listing was categorized and entered into a spreadsheet for analysis.

**Results.** The results indicate that four main genres of music were requested over a wide variety of styles, with more than half of auditions requesting genre categories that may not be served by traditional or classical voice technique alone.

**Conclusions.** To adequately prepare young musical theatre performers for the current job market and keep the performers healthily making the sounds required by the industry, new singing styles may need to be studied and integrated into voice training that only teaches classical styles.

**Key Words:** Musical theatre–Vocal pedagogy–Auditions–Contemporary commercial music–Broadway–Casting.

## INTRODUCTION

Musical theatre is unique among other genres involving vocal performance in that it draws upon whatever musical styles suit its purpose, especially popular music.<sup>1</sup> When musical theatre performers browse for auditions at one of the popular online job search engines, they may find requests for “gritty,” “gravelly,” or “smoky” voices. Other auditions might require a confusing variety of vocal approaches within one role, such as a “coloratura soprano to high C with mix belt.”<sup>2</sup> Based on these audition listings, it would appear that musical theatre performers face the possibility of vocal demands far beyond the parameters of classical or even traditional musical theatre training. The American Academy of Teachers of Singing asserts that “nonclassical” or Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) styles require their own pedagogical approach.<sup>3</sup> However, without specific data regarding the prevalence of CCM genres in the musical theatre industry, how can voice teachers determine the value of CCM pedagogy when training and maintaining the voice of the musical theatre performer? How can medical professionals and researchers understand the terminology and the range of demands that the musical theatre performer may encounter? In short, what are the most requested kinds of singing for professional auditions?

Terms such as “legit,” “traditional,” “belt,” and “pop,” found in actual audition postings, imply the use of specific vocal timbres and stylistic traits that are expected by the producers and casting directors in a musical theatre audition. In her pedagogy lecture at the 2013 Voice Foundation Symposium, LoVetri stressed the importance of using industry-

recognized language to identify and discuss musical theatre genres rather than creating new terms.<sup>4</sup> Based on her assertion, this frequency count of current trends in musical theatre casting has the following goals: to identify the standard terminology that the industry uses to define genres; verify the vocal attributes and qualities that the industry aligns with those genres; and quantify which genres are most requested for professional employment at various pay scales and levels of prestige.

## METHODS

Audition listings are distributed by theatre producers and casting directors to several print and online publications, including *Backstage*, *Playbill Jobs*, *Actors Equity Casting Call*, and *Stage Door Access*.<sup>5</sup> To avoid duplications, the data pool for this study was limited to one source, [Backstage.com](http://Backstage.com), which has a robust online search engine and provides continuously updated daily postings that include both union and nonunion jobs. To limit the results to a manageable number, the study was designed to focus on jobs available to young performers entering the industry. This demographic was chosen because musical theatre performers are generally expected to start professional careers in their late teens and early 20s<sup>4</sup> and in consideration of the many undergraduate training programs that have become popular and respected institutions of musical theatre education.<sup>5</sup>

A customized search was created on the *Backstage* website to return results for paying jobs for singers aged between 18 and 24 years. During the 6 months from October 2012 to April 2013, this search returned a total of 1238 job postings. Information from each posting was recorded in a spreadsheet and categorized according to show title, performance venue, casting director, contract type, pay scale, role, voice requirements, and audition repertoire to prepare.

When a listing requested audition repertoire from a specific genre (eg, “traditional musical theatre,” “legit,” and “pop”), voice characteristics found within the posting were analyzed to identify markers that could help define the genre (eg, “belt,” “lyric soprano,” and “rock tenor with soaring

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falsetto”). If a specific genre of repertoire was not explicitly requested, these voice characteristics and other available information (eg, the composer, the year the show was written, and analysis of music samples) were used to place the role into an appropriate genre category.

### LIMITATIONS

This study does not include “agent submissions,” which are private appointments directly requested by casting directors and are, therefore, unavailable to the public.<sup>5</sup> Auditions for starring roles or immediate replacements for Broadway, tours, and larger regional theatres are rarely found in the public auditions of *Backstage*, which may skew these results toward lower paying jobs that do not require agent representation.

In addition, the study may be affected by its timing and short span. October through April was chosen because this represents the period that young musical theatre performers might be seeking their first job: typically employment in a summer theatre.<sup>5</sup> However, continuing the study for a longer duration may yield more accurate results and reveal annual trends.

Musical theatre repertoire covers a wide spectrum of styles, ranging from classical to contemporary and everything in between. Best efforts were made to accurately categorize each audition listing using all available information, but there is possibility for error of judgment. Each category was reviewed by a professional musical theatre performer and music director to minimize error.

### RESULTS

The four most commonly requested genres were: Legit, Traditional musical theatre, Contemporary musical theatre, and Pop/Rock (see Figure 1). Although these were not the only terms found in the postings, other terms were generally variations on these four genres. By examining the voice requirements

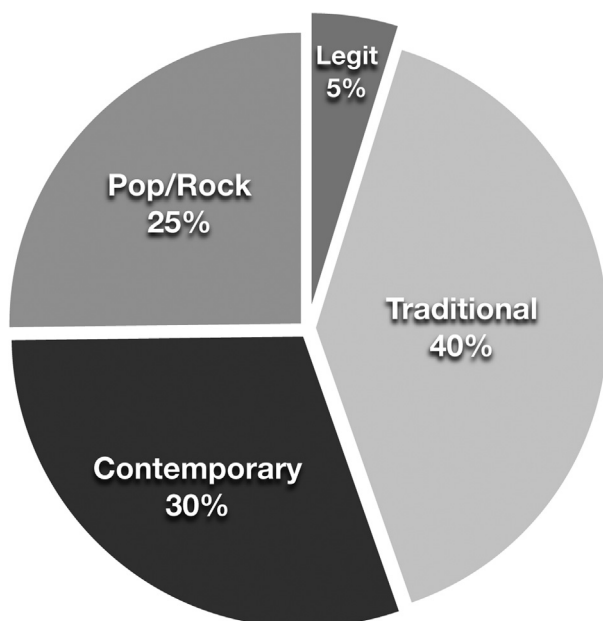


FIGURE 1. Total job postings by vocal genre.

and the musicals identified, a broad description of each genre was developed using direct quotes from *Backstage* and a review of pedagogical literature.

### VOCAL GENRE CATEGORIES FROM BACKSTAGE

#### Legit

The term “legit” is the musical theatre’s industry’s shorthand for the word “legitimate” and generally signifies a round resonant tone with consistent vibrato throughout the phrase.<sup>6</sup> Although musical theatre repertoire of this type may use a lower tessitura and more restricted range than that found in the operatic repertoire, the Legit vocal quality has a distinctly classical timbre.<sup>7</sup> Legit audition postings were the only ones to reference the fach system (eg, “coloratura soprano” and “lyric baritone”). Listings in *Backstage* that requested this repertoire included roles in *The Light in the Piazza* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. The Legit category comprised 59 of 1238 total job postings (5%).

#### Traditional Musical Theatre

Although Traditional musical theatre repertoire still uses some legit production for romantic characters, the emphasis on the lyrics rather than the melody results in a more speech-like quality when compared with classical production.<sup>1</sup> Belting, the chest-dominant production associated with CCM singing, first appears in this genre. Audition postings from Traditional musical theatre productions that require belt singing included Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*, Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*, and Velma Kelly in *Chicago*. Based on the requirements in *Backstage*, female roles in this genre generally concentrate their efforts on either a legit quality (appropriate for ingenue lead roles) or a belt quality (reserved for the comedic- or character-driven roles). For instance, in *Oklahoma!*, the comic character Ado Annie requires belt, whereas the romantic lead Laurie requires a head voice dominant soprano. The Traditional musical theatre genre comprised 494 of 1238 job postings (40%).

#### Contemporary Musical Theatre

If Traditional musical theatre is the Broadway version of classical singing, then Contemporary musical theatre is the Broadway version of pop and rock. Contemporary repertoire may require a higher belt than Traditional belt roles, using “mix” (neither pure chest nor head-dominant) production, and straight tone (no vibrato) or “speak-singing” of the text.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary musical theatre may also draw upon the vocal ornamentations and embellishments found in rock and pop music.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Traditional repertoire, which allows performers to specialize in either legit or belt, audition postings in this category asked performers to “sing effortlessly in many styles and vocal registers,” including requests for a “legit singer with strong contemporary musical theatre mix” or a “conversational belter with legit head voice effects.” The Contemporary musical theatre category comprised 373 of the 1238 total job postings (30%).

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