



# Musical Theatre Singing for the Classical Singer

Neil Semer's summer program and master classes across the country are well known. In the November issue of CS, Semer wrote about Italianate "Chiaroscuro." Here he speaks of the possible role that musical theatre can play in the life of a classical singer.

by Neil Semer



*The beautifully quaint city of Aub, Germany is the home of the Neil Semer Vocal Institute.*

**A**s a teacher of professional classical singers who are always looking to widen their employment possibilities, the issue of whether it is possible or advisable to seek work in musical theatre comes up frequently. This article deals with this important issue on several different levels.

## Is Musical Theatre Singing Damaging to the Classical Voice?

Works written for the musical theatre vary greatly in style, some of which are more in sync with the opulent legato, ease of emission and evenness of register one seeks in classical singing. Musical theatre as an art form is an outgrowth of European operetta. Therefore, it is not surprising that early musicals written

before the advent of amplified sound tend to have vocal writing that thrives on a classical vocal production, most particularly for the romantic roles. Even early on, character roles often were written in a style that is not as conducive to a fine lyric line, often with much "patter," and could be considered more akin to the vocal demands of the in opera.

Nowadays, operettas figure importantly in the seasons of many opera companies. Therefore, even those people who see their career path leading in a purely classical direction would do well to have the ability to sing in excellent, clear and unmannered English. This is an ability one must have as a musical theatre performer, but sadly is all too frequently overlooked in classical training. The great Italian voice teacher of the last century,

Giovanni Battista Lamperti, whose philosophy forms the core of my teaching, said "If clarity of diction and beauty of tone seem to be incompatible, you are on the wrong road."

Musical theater early on in your career or training is an invaluable tool for developing a natural, direct style of singing, and the ability to act and move well on stage. Many casting directors of regional opera companies look for musical theatre credits on a resume for proof of a singer's abilities in those areas.

Some opera singers who have performed in musical theatre include Tatiana Troyanos, Patrice Munsel, Patricia Craig, James McCracken, Cesare Siepi, John Riordan, Ezio Pinza, Giorgio Tozzi, Robert Merrill, Jan Peerce, Roberta Peters, Reri Grist, Julia Mignens-Johnson and Timothy Nolen. The

great Ilene Farrell was a wonderful jazz singer, and Renee Fleming often sings a jazz-inflected tune as one of her recital encores.

So—the big question—what can classical singers do in musical theatre that will help them move towards their classical goals, rather than harm them? Musicals by Richard Rodgers, Cole Porter, George Gershwin and Jerome Kern are often revived today. Provided that you are singing a role that is suitable for your Fach, the experience should be satisfying and not at all harmful. It is important to recognize that generally, tessitura is often very middle-voice oriented, even in many of these composers' vocal writing. Therefore, very high, light voices might need to be judicious in which roles they accept, for fear of attempting to sing too heftily in their relatively more delicate middle voices.

Conversely, musical theatre is great training for those singers still putting their technique together. You can get stage experience without buffeting against the more extreme vocal demands in opera you might not be ready for yet.

Nowadays, almost all theaters, excepting those on the most limited of budgets amplify their artists. The effects of that on our musical world are an important issue, but outside the scope of this article. The classical singer, whose main focus is to project his or her "titanic" voice, is often unemployable in musical theatre, due to a misunderstanding of what makes a successful musical theatre performance.

The microphone is the aural equivalent of the film close up. In a leading role, nuance of expression is what is needed. Sadly, singing



*Aub, Germany, home of the Neil Semer Vocal Institute.*



*Neil Semer participants interact after a concert.*

big is often not even noticed, as the sound technician has the final say over who sounds large in the theater, simply by twisting the dial up on some smaller-voiced colleagues, and turning you down. All that vocal capital being expended for nothing!

Nowadays, many of the new musicals (though certainly not all) are written in a pop or rock vocal idiom. Realistically, the vocalism sought in these pieces is simply not in accord with what is prized in fine classical singing, and should therefore be left to those whose ambitions lie in that direction. In a conversation I had recently with a well-known Broadway musical director of a current rock musical hit, he made it clear to me that the kind of clean, healthy sound typified by the well-trained classical voice wouldn't be engaged for his show.

He wanted a kind of gritty, strained vocal production that represented a raw vitality to him. In this kind of situation, the classical singer must simply accept that this engagement is meant for someone else.

#### **To Belt or not to Belt?**

Belting is a generally misunderstood and maligned art form in classical circles. It's important to know that it is no more inherently damaging to the voice than athletic singing of any sort, when done with a good technique and good vocal hygiene (not over-singing, marking in rehearsals, healthy speech habits, appropriate rest and diet). Belting is a more aggressive use of the thyro-arytenoid muscle (the muscle that forms the body of the vocal cord) than the same pitch might if sung classically.

To presume classical singing is inherently



*Flowers and smiles about at this summer's final concert of the Neil Semer Vocal Institute.*



Participants pause during a rehearsal break for a photo.

healthy, and belting inherently unhealthy makes little sense when you look clearly at the brutal demands on the voice made by highly dramatic operatic roles (Turandot, Lady Macbeth, Tristan, Florestan, Abigaille) compared to the many simple songs sung by popular artists.

The more important question is: where do you want to go with your singing? If you want to be a brain surgeon, you don't study nuclear physics. If your real goal is to sing the great Bel Canto roles, belting is simply going to derail you by training your muscles in a different direction than that goal requires. If, however, you wish to be a crossover artist, you should know that it is possible to both sing in a classical style and belt well, albeit not at the high level expected of a the person who chooses to specialize.

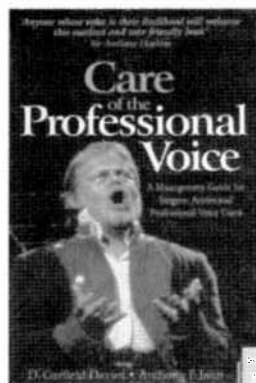
There are as many schools of thought on belting as there are on classical singing, but it is this voice teacher's contention that many currently popular ideas about belt training

create unnecessary throat tension, locked breathing, high larynx, and a tinny sound lacking amplitude, expressiveness and warmth. Basic ideas of alignment, low control of breath, open throat and evenness of breath flow are as useful in belting as they are in classical singing. This philosophy would not be valued by the aforementioned Broadway rock musical director, who wants a strained sound, but would absolutely be useful in more standard Broadway singing, as typified in the musicals of Sondheim, Herman, Lloyd Webber, Maltby and Shire, etc. where a healthy sound is not necessarily a dirty word.

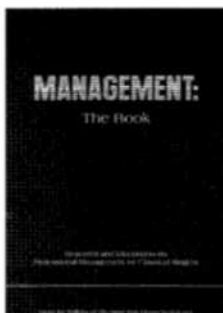
One of the ascribed qualities of belting is brightness of tone. This frequently leads to an attempt to "place the voice forward," or have "more nose in it," resulting in laryngeal rigidity. The continual rebalancing of head and chest voice functions make for healthy registration in a voice. We have direct control over muscles, not sound waves. Good placement (as well as fine artistry) is the positive but passive result of coordinat-

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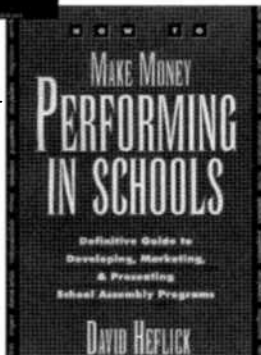
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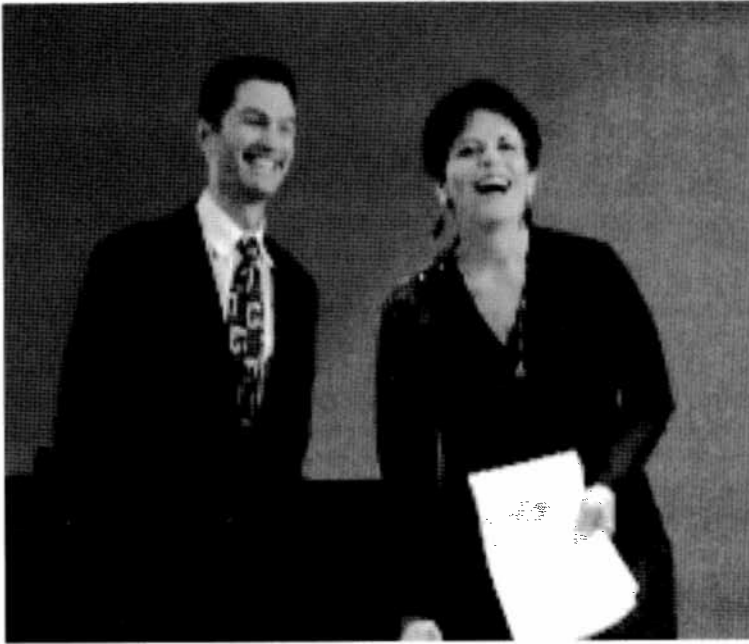
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*Neil Semer with Roberta Cunningham.*

ed muscular and skeletal function controlled by a discerning ear, good proprioceptive sense (sensual awareness of one's body) and fine artistic impulses.

As to whether musical theatre is a viable enterprise for you, consider a few things. You will be competing against other performers whose first love is musical theatre. Is your skill as a singer, actor, dancer, or stage personality competitive in this realm? Are you targeting the right kind of shows?

Tatiana Troyanos was a nun in the original Broadway production of *The Sound of Music*, Reri Grist sang "Somewhere" in the original production of *West Side Story*, and Julia Migenes-Johnson sang "Far From the Home I Love" in the original production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. The musical style required was certainly in line with their future operatic ambitions, and did not sidetrack them. Singing the lead role in *Funny Girl* is certainly not on the same career path.

Often, classical singers are valued in a chorus for the richer sound and wider range in which they can sing. This may be the case in shows even where the leading-role artists sing in a style for which the classical singer would not be appropriate. Be clear about what you are getting yourself into before a contract is signed. Talk to the musical director about what is required vocally, if you are not clear about the nature of the score.

*Neil Semer will conduct his 8th Annual Neil Semer Vocal Institute in Germany in July and August 2004. His main private studio is in New York, though he regularly teaches in Toronto, London, Paris, Berlin, Dresden, Frankfurt and Cologne. Information is available on his website at [www.neilsemer.com](http://www.neilsemer.com) and he welcomes e-mail correspondence at [neilsemer@aol.com](mailto:neilsemer@aol.com)*



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