

You never know when you may need one!

It's your duty as a life-long scholar and lover of musical theatre not just to be able to perform, but to build your knowledge of the history of musical theatre. You should dive into the plethora of work from the last hundred years with great excitement, joy and anticipation, and immerse yourself in every style and nuance that the musical theatre repertoire has to offer. If you hear a song you like that's new to you, write it down and try to find it. If you see a show and you like a number, write it down and add it to your portfolio. Build your tastes, talk to colleagues about their new discoveries (although don't be surprised if they're not keen to share too much with you when they've found something special).

These songs are your audition meal ticket, so make sure they are absolutely right for you, your voice, your personality, your character and your sensibility. If you've done your homework and studied at least those composers and shows I've mentioned above, as well as conscientiously chosen at least two contrasting songs from each category, you should be well on your way to having an excellent and useful repertoire of songs for all audition scenarios.

## **What makes a good audition song?**

Audition songs have certain requirements:

- *A song should last around two minutes.*
- *It should immediately grab the panel's interest and attention from the outset – in a first-round audition, you may only have three to five minutes to prove yourself worthy of getting a call-back, so make sure your song engages us immediately. Don't waste time on lengthy*

piano introductions; let's hear your voice as soon as possible.

- *It should show off as many of your talents as possible* – this is difficult as not many two-minute songs can show all your skills and range of vocal quality, but see if you can include as many as possible. Be sure of choosing songs that are *within* your talents – a hugely complex song that stretches you beyond your capabilities should be worked on in advance until it's second nature. You should aim to stretch yourself, absolutely, but do so with your vocal coach and not for the first time in an audition.
- *It must be in your vocal range* – yes, I'm afraid so many people come in with songs that have notes they just can't reach.
- *It must provide an acting narrative* – each song should have a sense of narrative, or at least (if it's a pop, country song or jazz standard) allow you to add your own context in order to achieve a sense of narrative and drama. Remember, if you're singing for a musical audition, it's not *just* about your voice; it's about singing *and acting* as the character within a dramatic context.
- *It should be appropriate for you, the actor* – we want to see a bit of your own personality in your initial audition round, so find songs that make sense to you as well as your character, which will allow you to express and engage within the song. And be aware of descriptive lyrics that go against your physical appearance.
- *It should be appropriate for the character you are auditioning for* – if your character is uplifting, cheery, in love, etc. you will do yourself no favours in singing a suicidal dirge.

- *Choose a song within the period of the production for which you are auditioning* – singing a rock song for a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical is obviously foolish and says a lot about you as a performer. Personally, I wouldn't even let you sing it and would ask you to come back another day with something more appropriate.
- *It should allow you to be imaginative and inventive* – interpretation and context is an interesting discussion in itself which I'll address in the coming pages; but showing a degree of imagination in your song choices rather than presenting a standard version makes us sit up and pay special attention.
- *It may include text/dialogue* – only a little, but it's nice to hear how you handle the technique of speech to song.
- *All songs should contrast and provide variety against other songs in your repertoire.* You will almost certainly be asked to show a contrast in your audition pieces, so don't have too many songs in your repertoire that sound the same.
- *It should be a song you enjoy performing and it should give you confidence* – don't choose songs you hate. Chances are if you enjoy singing it, we'll enjoy listening to you.
- *It should demonstrate your ability as a musician.* You should choose a song that shows that you can stay in tune, have a good rhythmic sense and can stay on pitch, even if the piano part wasn't there and you were singing on your own (a cappella). It's possible that the pianist may stop playing for some reason. You must still hold your ground as if nothing has happened so that when he comes back in, you're still in the same key, and tempo.

## What songs shouldn't you sing?

- *Don't sing your karaoke favourite.*
- *Don't sing something from the show you are auditioning for, unless you are specifically asked to.*
- *Don't sing songs in a foreign language unless you are asked to.*
- *Avoid songs which have a few places where the panel can say 'STOP!' Some songs just need to be sung all the way through to show you off at your best. Most people on the panel will not be rude and stop you mid-vocal (unless you're doing something really awful); they'll generally wait until a solo piano moment. Therefore, don't choose a song that has too many instrumental breaks in it.*
- *Don't sing a song where you're constantly aware of the technical difficulties.* If your mind is more focused on how you're going to get that top B♭, rather than on 'being in the moment' dramatically, then it's the wrong song for you. If you've prepared properly and have learnt your songs well, you shouldn't be worrying about any technical difficulties during the song. Believe me, an auditionee who is worried about the technical aspects of the song might as well have a neon sign saying 'Don't Hire Me' above their head. It's that obvious.
- *Don't sing a song that is boring or earnestly self-indulgent.* Something which takes for ever to show off your skills, and is terribly slow and doesn't say much, means we probably won't say much about you either. Bear in mind we may have been sitting there for hours already, it's hot, the mind wanders, and the last auditionee has left the panel wondering what's for

supper. Another boring song will, I'm afraid, have the producers snoozing at the table.

- *Don't sing something that you can't handle emotionally.* One must, as an actor, dancer and singer, retain control of emotion and not allow it to take you over completely. If you are out of control of your emotion within a song (and I don't just mean 'upset'; it could be 'anger', 'frustration', 'joy', etc.) you can completely destroy your performance. If you are 'in the moment' as an actor and you cry, that's fine (in fact it can be electric in an audition) but you must maintain your sense of performance control. And, of course, you must know how to replicate that same emotion eight times a week. I've seen sensational, emotionally charged performances in an audition room which have never been replicated as well on stage.
- *Don't sing anything that is too difficult for your pianist.* Part of this comes with experience and the pianist will certainly tell you if your song's a nightmare to play (if you haven't already discovered by him stopping every eight bars). You should have checked in advance during your preparation sessions, of course, and made adaptations. That doesn't mean you can't sing some of the great songs simply because the accompaniment is hard. See if there are other options, easier arrangements, or invest in someone writing a simpler accompaniment for you. A good arranger can do so without affecting the overall 'feel' of the piece.
- *Avoid songs that are overdone.* If you know that the panel regularly hear the same songs being sung, or a song is particularly well known at the moment (perhaps the show's just opened, or it's a hit film theme tune),

put it in the drawer for the moment. Songs come in and out of fashion all the time, which is why I'm not giving you a list here. Just be sensible and get an idea of what others are singing regularly.

- *Don't sing a song that you're bored with.* If you've had a song in your repertoire for ever, and you're bored with it, either take it out and put it away for a while, or reinvent it. It may have got you some great roles, and you may do it very well. But if you're bored singing it, it'll show.

### **The sixteen-bar song**

It's unlikely in the UK, Europe or Australia that we ask you only for sixteen bars of a first song, but in America, in first and call-back rounds, it may happen. You should therefore find the best sixteen to thirty-two bars in each song. If the casting director is musical, or the musical director is present, and they happen to know the song, they might tell you the section they want to hear, but it's important that you've got several sixteen to thirty-two-bar options already prepared which show your talent off quickly. It should include your range, a money note, a belt moment, a soft moment. And of course, throughout all, have a dramatic narrative. Make sure that these bars (start and end points) are clearly indicated for the pianist. Even in the UK, Europe and Australia have these prepared as we are unlikely to hear your second song in its entirety.

## **What do you sing for your specific audition?**

Now that you've chosen the best audition songs that should be in your general songbook, and you have all the information you need for your audition from your agent, you need to marry up the piece and the character with the songs you're going to