

Something Wonderful: Enhancing the Performance of Musical Theater Songs Through Analysis

Songs in the musical theater canon offer so many musical morsels for performers to sink their teeth into. Study of the text, the accompaniment, the context of the song within the musical, the character, the composer, the lyricist, and the time period in which the show was written are just some of the pieces of the puzzle of a musical theater song. This deeper study informs a more polished performance.

The presentation begins with a brief explanation of the purpose of songs in musicals. Songs occur when the spoken word is not enough for the character to express themselves. If we look at songs as stepping stones in a character's development arc, and if we view each song within that arc as its own journey from point A to point B, then we have the foundation to begin a deeper study of that song.

Then, the presentation turns to a discussion of how to approach a "deep dive" into each of the aforementioned elements of a musical theater song. This includes turning the text into a monologue, looking for clues in the accompaniment (rhythm, chords, etc.), familiarizing oneself with a composer's style, and digging into the music for points of emphasis and clues about the character's dramatic intentions.

The presentation then moves into the application portion. Depending on the pandemic guidelines at the time of the conference, this could involve any or all of the following: pulling volunteers from the group to show this method of analysis in action; leading attendees through an analysis of a song as a group; or leading one of my students through this process for attendees to observe.

If time allows, there can be a question and answer session at the end.

I think this is a necessary approach, not just to musical theater, but to all vocal music and for singers of all ages. This approach can be adjusted depending on the singer and the type of song. I have used this approach successfully with my ten-year-old students, my collegiate music majors, and professional actors in summer stock theater. So, it is my hope that students and teachers can take something from this for all their repertoire and that teachers who may be apprehensive about including musical theater in their students' repertoire may become more comfortable with using these songs.

Laurie Lewis-Fritz is a Music Instructor and the Private Applied Coordinator at Lincoln Land Community College. Prior to this, she was the Lead Faculty for Vocal Performance at Lincoln College and the Director of Music at MacMurray College. At LLCC, Ms. Lewis-Fritz directs the choir and teaches various courses in music, including music history and private applied voice and piano lessons. She has been the Music Director at various professional theatres, including the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre, Ozark Actors Theatre, Bigfork Summer Playhouse, and McLeod Summer Playhouse. At the Showboat, she was recognized by the *River Cities' Reader* with a "Tony Award" for her music direction of *The Who's Tommy*. She has performed around the world, including a solo

jazz piano/vocal recital in Skopje, Macedonia and as a guest operatic soloist with the Sangamon Valley Civic Orchestra. Ms. Lewis-Fritz holds a MM in Opera/Music Theater from Southern Illinois University Carbondale.