



Musical Theatre – A syllabus at last!

'Putting on a musical has got to be the most fulfilling thing a person could hope to do.'

Spoken by Lt. Frank Cioffi, in Act 1 of *Curtains*. Book by Rupert Holmes. Music by John Kander. Lyrics by Fred Ebb & Rupert Holmes.

I've been working between music and theatre for all of my performance life. As a result, I have come to believe that, while not every actor sings, all singers must be able to act. This aphorism holds especially true for my favourite art-form, music theatre. Here, when the emotions run too high to merely speak, we sing.

Music theatre, disparaged by some as 'the poor man's opera', is hard to define but easy to spot. Michael Dale, writing on the Stephen Sondheim website, observes waggishly, '*Sweeney Todd* is an opera when the orchestra is dressed in black tie. *Sweeney Todd* is a musical when the orchestra is dressed in black T-shirts.' (7th March, 2004, www.sondheim.com)

With the increasing popularity of music theatre with singers of all ages, AMEB has recently completed a sharp new syllabus designed both to delight and challenge singers. I've been privileged to be part of the AMEB's national Music Theatre Advisory Group. Spearheading all this collaborative planning and research is George Torbay, whose training and experience, both in Australia and overseas, have prepared him well to oversee this huge project as Syllabus Consultant.

I asked George if he could define what are the hallmarks of this new syllabus; what makes it unique? He replied, 'We have composed a set of vocalises and exercises specific for musical theatre. Each vocalise is written in a specific musical theatre style. **There are over 1,350 songs in the syllabus, representing over 450 different musicals.'**

When I asked George to explore more thoroughly the range of available repertoire offered by this new syllabus he said, 'The student has the opportunity to cover repertoire from the birth of the modern musical through to the glorious Golden Age, the turbulent 60's, the diverging paths of the 70's, the birth of the blockbuster musical, to shows and songs composed within the last year.'

Given George's breadth of training and experience, I suggested to him that he would have found it easy to pull together all the elements needed for a pedagogically respectable music theatre syllabus. George disagreed with me: 'Creating any syllabus is not an easy job. There is no way to please everyone. I kept reminding myself that it was the students that this was for. All voice teachers would have students who want to sing musical theatre from the very young to the mature. I wanted to find material that would suit that broad range of ages and technical work that was focused and essential.'

For George, it's all about optimising the learning journey of the student performer. Together with his AMEB Advisory Group, George has worked to create a syllabus which is, he says, '...entirely focused on creating performers who sing with a free, open tone. We hope to create performers who understand the dramatic arc of a song with a superior connection to the text. We want truthful storytelling!'

Professional or amateur, old or young, male or female – I don't think you can better this as a goal for music theatre excellence.

Pat H Wilson,
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Advisory Group member