

Stephen Schwartz - Advice for Performers and Directors

Also see individual musicals for specific advice.

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Auditions

Question:

Hi Stephen, I can't believe I didn't find this site sooner. Firstly let me just thank you for 'Out There' it is the best audition song ever for a tenor and I'm three for three with it. it is perfect in that it isn't a musical theatre song (yet) but sounds like one, so it gets into those auditions that dont allow them. it demonstrates range, acting everything, it's brilliant.

As someone who has probably sat in on a few auditions do you have any advice you could impart, or any other suggestions for good, interesting songs to use? Thanks again.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks! You didn't sign your name, so I can't address you directly, but needless to say I'm delighted you have had such great success with using "Out There" as an audition song. I think it's always good if you can choose a song that shows off your voice, gives you something to act, and isn't one of the songs everybody else seems to sing (I'm guilty of writing one of them -- "Corner of the Sky".) The only other piece of advice I can offer about auditions is to remember that the people doing the casting really are rooting for you to be good -- they're not your adversaries, though it sometimes seems like it. And it's important to be yourself and not try to second-guess what they are looking for as far as the part you're auditioning for. They'll tell you if they need to see or hear something else. Thanks again for taking the time to write, and I hope "Out There" continues to get you work. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Can you give me some advise?

Question:

Hi there, I'm an aspiring music theatre actress and I have an audition for a performing arts uni and I really want to be accepted. This sounds naive but I was wondering if you could give me some advise as to what you would look for if you were auditioning people? Are there any things I could do to make my audition stand out? Do you know anything that would be helpful? Thank you so much Sera

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Sera: The art of auditioning is, as you know, not something that can be fully discussed in a brief email. There are books written and classes taught about it. But briefly, I would say the following: What you most want to do is to present who you truly are and to show your skills to their best advantage. Here are some ways to do that:

1. Know something, if you can, about the role or roles for which you are auditioning, and pick appropriate material to show. For instance, if you're auditioning for CAROUSEL, don't sing a rock song from RENT, and vice-versa. The same holds true for what you wear to the audition -- you don't want to come in a costume, obviously, but you want the auditioners to be able to envision you in the show. Thus, you wouldn't wear a punk "streety" outfit to an audition for THE SOUND OF MUSIC, nor look like a

cheerleader if you go in for HAIR. I know these things seem obvious, but you'd be surprised how many people don't consider them.

2. Beyond the above, don't try to second guess the auditioners. Just go in and do your piece to the best of your ability. Be focused and as in-the-moment as you can.

3. Be REALLY well-prepared with your material, if possible. Remember you're likely to have an accompanist who can't play it perfectly, and you will be nervous, which will be distracting. So be ready to the extent you can.

4. Don't try to sing beyond your range or riffing ability. You would be surprised how many good singers decrease the effectiveness of their auditions by adding a higher note than they can hit comfortably or a riff that they are not good at, when they don't need to do either. Know what you're good at, and stay within it.

5. Never apologize for anything. As I said before, try to seem (and feel) as relaxed, confident, and focused as you can. Just be true to yourself, and you will impress people, at least in my experience. I hope you find these tips helpful. Good luck, Stephen Schwartz

Should I Consider Career With My Vocal Range?

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz: I saw the production of Children of Eden at the Papermill since I lived in Short Hills, NJ. I thought it was brilliant! I think "Stranger To The Rain" is one of your best songs. Which others are among your favorites? Also, last year (in my junior year), our school (The Pingry School) held a production of "The Baker's Wife," in which I played the village cure. I think I have to thank you personally because I tried out for the musical with no singing experience (though I play the piano, so I had musical experience). I learned how to sing by listening to your songs on the London Cast CD, and now I have joined a professional choir in Singapore and have a dream to be on Broadway one day.

I also have another, unrelated question: I have a two octave range from a low bass F to a high baritone F and I'm 17. Based on your experience in the industry, should I consider a career in musical theater with that vocal range or no?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for the message and the compliments. As you may have read, "Stranger to the Rain" is one of my personal favorites of my songs ("Chanson" from THE BAKER'S WIFE is another.) In terms of your question about vocal range: yours is sufficiently large that by all means you could consider pursuing musical theatre. Just don't expect to be playing tenor roles. But so what? There are lots of baritone roles. Plus, songs can always be transposed if necessary. Good luck to you, and thanks again for writing. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Tall actresses

Question:

So, I'm a actress/singer/dancer. I'm also 6'1". Do you think that would be a big hindrance to hiring possibilities? I mean, I realize that there are certain roles that I will probably never even be considered for because of it. But do you feel that there's a market for that kind of thing? Thanks for all of your wonderful shows. Wicked is amazing, as is the remarkable cast! Katie

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Katie: Yes, I know, height can sometimes make things difficult for an actress. I am a fan of another tall young singer and actress in New York named Kate Shindle, and I specifically know of two shows of mine for which she gave excellent auditions but ultimately was not cast in partly because of her height. But Kate does get quite a bit of good work because of her talent, and I'm sure if you persevere, you will too. I wish you the best, Stephen Schwartz

Songs for Bass/Baritone

Question:

Dear Stephen! I am wondering why the most modern shows have nearly no solo-songs for men with low voice. The most of the stuff is mostly written for high baritone or tenor. I have a low voice and most songs I can sing are from classic shows, like Oklahoma and so on. Have you written some solo-songs for men with low voice? Can you propose some songs from your works or in general? Greetings from Germany

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

You are correct that most contemporary theatre writing for male voices tends more towards the high end, and I guess I would include my own writing in that description. The obvious exception, which you probably already know about it, is Frolo's song "Hellfire" from HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME (DER GLOCKNER VAN NOTRE DAME in Germany.) That of course has music by Alan Menken. Speaking of Alan Menken, the big first act closer "If I Can't Love Her" from BEAUTY AND THE BEAST is also written for a lower male voice, a la Pinza in SOUTH PACIFIC. Another song of mine that would probably fit the bill is "The Hardest Part of Love" from CHILDREN OF EDEN, though it is a lighter and "folkier" feel. And another thought that occurs to me, also so obvious it has probably occurred to you as well, is Javert's material from LES MISERABLES. I hope these suggestions prove helpful or trigger some helpful ideas for you. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Good Audition Songs for Baritones

Question:

Hello Mr. Schwartz. First off I want to thank for writing Wicked. It is such an AMAZING show. I constantly sing along with all the songs on the soundtrack, and I just ordered the vocal book, just cause I can't get enough of the show! Anyway, onto my question. I will be auditioning for a show in about a month, and the director wants the auditionees to do a Schwartz song. I was wondering (since you wrote all of them and would most likely be the best person to ask), what songs would you recommend for a Lyric Baritone to sing? They don't have to be from a specific show, just either written by you or in your style (and since I have, well, will be getting both Wicked and your Compamation Vocal book shortly, I figured I would just do a song written by you and go for he gold). Also, any of you other reading this out there who could help me out, it would be greatly appreciated. Thank you, and again, thanks for such a great show!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thank you for your message. Believe it or not, I have struggled trying to figure out how to answer your question. I couldn't really think of a "baritone song" (in the sense of say, "This Nearly Was Mine" from SOUTH PACIFIC or -- which may be a good idea for you -- "If I Can't Love Her" from BEAUTY AND THE BEAST) that I have written or co-written, other than "Hellfire" from HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME. Then I realized that my difficulty in answering stemmed from the fact that I didn't really know what kind of role or show you were auditioning for -- is it a "pop" show or a more legit score? Is the role a hero, a villain, a comic role, young or old, etc.? In the end, I think it's more important to audition with a song

that fits the show and/or role in some way, and if you're a baritone and the specific song is written in a key that is a little high for you, just transpose it down. (Make sure the transposed chords are written in for the accompanist, as some accompanists are not great sight-readers or transposers.) Hope this helps in some way. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

Going into the Biz

Question not available

Comment that includes a quote from Stephen Schwartz:

At a recent symposium in New York City, during the question/answer section, Stephen Schwartz responded to a question from a college student. The student said she was having doubts about theatre as a career choice because she had heard countless times how difficult the business is. She asked for advice:

Stephen Schwartz: I'm kind of a follow your bliss believer. I think that if you go after what you want and what your passion is, that even if you don't wind up doing exactly what you thought you were going to do at your age, it will take you somewhere that you're glad to be. If you have to make certain practical choices, let's say you start out to be a writer and you discover that that's too tough or you don't have the affinity for it that you thought you did but you wind up being an agent or producer, you stay in the area that you love and you find out what part of that area is right for you.

What I think happens for people is that knowing how tough the business is, they get afraid ever to start at all. And so early on they make some sort of other choice that they don't actually really want to do because it's the practical thing to do, because it's the sensible thing to do, because it's the thing that will make their parents more comfortable. And then they wind up not being so happy about where they end up in their lives. I've seen that a lot. I guess what I feel is that if this is where your heart is, then I always encourage people to go for it, because it will take you somewhere. Everything is challenging. Everything is tough. Life is tough. So why not be challenged by the thing that you love, rather than by boredom or disappointment, or by trying to get yourself out of bed in the morning? I mean, you might as well have other challenges that are closer to your heart.

Singers

Question:

Hey Michael. Maybe you can give me some help. I'm a 16 year old male whose still going through the stages of puberty. I was always able to sing tenor, but lately (as we call can guess) my register has significantly dropped. While this can be discouraging, I still maintained singing. However, it was difficult to tell myself I was a baritone/bass. Despite this change, my singing teacher and chorus teacher always told me to sing tenor. Now I think I really damaged my voice by pushing and sometimes "screaming" through the notes. Is there any advice you can give me to maybe connect and undermine the "break" I have between my head voice and bottom voice? Perhaps maybe even increase my range?

Answer from Michael Cole:

Hi MattyB: I'm afraid I'm not qualified to give you advice on this, but I will share some thoughts. I do think it's probably smart to go to an ear, nose and throat doctor to eliminate the possibility that you've done permanent damage. If you're pretty confident that you've not done serious damage, I would suggest finding a vocal coach who specializes in repairing damaged voices (even if you're not damaged, a coach who specializes in this kind of problem, could possibly help you with this transitional period). Which brings me to my next idea: Puberty. I'm no expert on this (having only barely survived it once),

but I imagine this is something you will have to wait out patiently. There may be only so much you can do about the break in your voice during this period. On the other hand, a coach might be able to help you find ways to sing around it or give you exercises that will help speed up the process. If you clarify your goals, (i.e working on the break in your voice and increasing your vocal range), you should have a better chance of finding the right vocal coach/teacher.

I can't tell you how much I wish I had gotten vocal training in the beginning of my career. The time and money would have been so wisely spent. I spent YEARS singing incorrectly and losing my voice. Now, at least I know proper placement and focus which helps immensely with vocal production (it sounds much nicer when your voice is ringing/pinging) and also with fatigue (it's so much easier on your voice when you're singing properly). If I had it to do over again...

Making it as a Professional Singer

Question:

I am a 27 year old voice teacher and singer/songwriter from a small suburban town pursuing my big musical dreams. I am driven first by the promise I made to my mother in her last days that I would never give up on this dream. I can remember like yesterday the tears that would gather in her eyes as I would sing "reflection" or "journey to the past" at her bedside. I am driven second by the desire to help support my family in the way my mother was always able. I am driven third by the fact that nothing makes me feel more alive than letting the music resonate through my soul as I melodically wrap my voice around it. I want to make my mom proud, I want to make my family proud, I want to prove to myself that silly childhood dreams can be more than just that. While I will continue to pursue success with my original works as well, I am also highly interested in singing for animation/film etc... I figure there are many people out there making a living in this industry, so why not me? So, here I am...seeking direction on how to get started in this business and trying to treat it as just that, a business. I'm so far overwhelmed, but not close to giving up. Any words of wisdom you may have for me would be truly appreciated. Thank you so much for your time.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

As you probably also know, "making it" as a professional singer has as much to do with perseverance and getting yourself out there as it does with talent. Your question to me seems to be about how you pursue more "professionally" a career as a vocalist. It's a little hard for me to advise you without knowing more details of your life circumstances, specifically:

1. Where is your "small suburban town" located, and what opportunities exist there, and is it relatively proximate to somewhere (i.e. Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Nashville, etc.) where greater opportunities exist?
2. What are your responsibilities in helping to "support your family"? Do you have children, are you married, how tied down are you to your current location?

The truth is that, as you are already discovering, choices need to be made and a balance of priorities worked out. Do I think you have the talent to begin working as a professional vocalist, be it singing for film/animation, in live venues, recording, etc.? Yes. But as you know it is an extremely competitive industry, and many other talented people are focused single-mindedly on becoming successful. There are definitely interim possibilities that might give you creative and emotional satisfaction if you are in a life situation that you really can't or don't want to change -- singing locally in the available venues and circumstances, for instance. One of the best singers I have ever heard, a friend of mine who moved

from New York to Orlando, Florida to raise a family and be with her husband who worked there, gave up a career singing in NY clubs and recording with NY writers, etc. but has found some fulfillment singing locally in Orlando. In my opinion you need to think about these choices (which I have no doubt you have and are.)

If on the other hand, you are in a place in your life where you want to subsume everything to pursuit of your goal, I think getting yourself out of the "small suburban town" and going somewhere the work you are looking to do is actually being done is a first step worth considering.

I hope this opinion is helpful, and I wish you the best in your pursuit of your (and your mother's) dreams, no matter how you prioritize your goals. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

Amateur vs. Professional [more of a comment than advice]

Question:

From Peggy: As we've rehearsed and performed the show I've been involved with, I started to wonder about the differences between the ways amateurs and professionals put together a show. For example, it seems like during the last couple weeks before our show opened, we spent every free moment rehearsing, and on weekends (including the Labor Day holiday), we'd go from 9:30 A.M. to about 10:00 P.M.

I originally thought that professionals would have to work even longer hours, but from what I understand, because the musicians belong to unions that require them to be paid overtime after certain hours, the rehearsals are actually shorter. So do professional casts have to do a lot of the work on their own, so that all that's needed is to polish the show when everyone finally comes together?

Also, I remember our producer telling us when we did COE that the difference between amateurs and professionals is that amateurs wait for the audience to give them energy, by their laughter and applause, etc., while professionals give the energy to the audience and tell them by their performance what to laugh and applaud at, etc. I can imagine it must be extremely hard work for a professional cast to work at that level all the time, and I wonder how they keep their energy and focus. Would be interested in hearing more about how the pros do it. I just hope they have as much fun as we have, without the exhaustion. :)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The difference between professional rehearsal schedules and amateur ones can be summed up in one word : "unions". Having started out doing non-Equity stock, I can tell you that no schedule is as ridiculously full as that. But as one gains more experience, one learns to plan and budget time better and make the most of the schedule one is given. That's not to say that every single show I have ever been involved with doesn't have the director saying, as previews approach, "If we only had more time." You know the famous saying -- "Work expands to fill the time allotted to it." It just seems in the theatre it always goes a little bit past it.

As for professional casts giving energy to the audience rather than taking it, I suppose that's true to a certain extent -- that after all is why they're professionals -- but I must say I've seen some pretty flat shows performed to half-houses in my time. Thanks as always for writing with your interesting questions, and best wishes for your upcoming productions, whatever the hours! Regards, Stephen Schwartz

Becoming a Director: Advice from Richard Maltby

Question:

You are a "creator" in the musical theater arena (as opposed to a "performer"). How does one achieve this? I hear many success stories of such-and-such an actor or actress, but never of the composers, the writers, the directors. I assume you just can't rush off to New York and become a director. Or can you? Directing is what I am interested in, but I have no idea how to go about it.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In terms of getting started as a director: The best advice I ever heard was offered by Richard Maltby. Get yourself to a city, such as New York or Chicago or Los Angeles, where a lot of theatre is being done. Look for projects by new writers that need a director for a reading or workshop or showcase. Attach yourself to as many of these as you can and hope one of them takes off. This actually works sometimes! Best, Stephen Schwartz

Stephen Schwartz on Performer Interpretations

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Interpreting Music

Question:

Stephen, I would like to know your feelings on the singers interpreting the music in a performance. As in the recording of Stephanie Mills' performance, she strays from the score a little giving her songs her own twist here and there. Must one sing every line exactly as written? A longer hold here. A trill there. Not that it needs help at all. I just want to be able to become emotionally involved during a performance. I am truly honored to be able to sing this wonderful score. Thank you.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Ali: Many of my friends who are composers are very strict about wanting their music sung exactly as they wrote it. I am much more comfortable with singers taking liberties and bringing their own interpretations to my songs, as long as they stay within character (if they are in a show) and come from a place of emotional honesty. So go ahead and see what you come up with! Hope the show goes well and you have a great time playing Eve. Thanks for having the consideration to ask. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Addendum: I already replied about this, but reading Peggy's response got me thinking, and I think I agree with her that before taking liberties with a song, one should learn it exactly as written. That way what liberties one may eventually take will grow more organically out of the original intention. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Interpretations of Songs: Exciting and Terrifying

Question:

(from Peggy) Hello again. This question is from my daughter Jennifer. We just got our copy of "The Stephen Schwartz Album" and love it. But Jennifer finds it hard to accept the fact that "In Whatever Time We Have" is done so much slower than how it's done on the Papermill version of COE. I told her it was probably just because she was used to the other version, and we started wondering which version is closer to what you had in mind when you composed it. After getting over her amazement that you

actually answer posts, Jennifer asked me to post the question. I'm sure your answer would make a 13-year-old fan of yours very happy.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy and Jennifer: I agree with you that the version of "In Whatever Time We Have" on the new Varese Sarabande album is a good deal slower than I would do the song (though I do think it is very well sung.) But one of the exciting and terrifying things about having other people record your songs is that they will do their own interpretations, which often are quite different from the writer's original intent. Sometimes this can lead to delightful surprises, other times to disappointing results, but in either case, that is the nature of the business. So I have learned just to "let go" of my songs and listen with interest whenever anyone else records them. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Interpretation of your songs by Barr; Coulter

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Question:

Dear Stephen: I had a chance finally, to hear John Barr's interpretation of "Corner of the Sky" and other songs of yours. I could listen to him forever. Amazing voice. I'm quite fond of the unusual orchestration on "Corner of the Sky." I'm also glad to have Scott Coulter's CD, not only for his sensitive and passionate interpretation of songs by you and others, but also for another chance to enjoy your piano playing. The recording allows listeners to hear the way YOU interpret the piano score without an orchestrator's overlay.

Here's some specific questions

1. I enjoyed the way Scott and Debbie sang "In Whatever Time We Have" at the Stephen Schwartz and Friends concert. Did you guide their version of this duet on Scott's CD? For example, did you suggest to them how long to hold the word "black"? One of the recorded versions has it end abruptly.
2. Who puts together medleys? "Just Around the Riverbend/Corner of the Sky" is a fascinating one on Scott's album. Is that your creation? Also, do you have opinions about medleys? Do they offer different insight to the individual songs when combined? Other examples would be "God Help the Outcast/Someday" on Debbie Gravitte's album and "With you/Gifts of Love" on the Stephen Schwartz Album.
3. Can you comment on Scott's use of slightly different lyrics at the end of "Corner of the Sky"?
4. Is it usual or unusual for a songwriter to be lenient on interpretations? Is it unusual for someone like you with such expertise in music (and clarity about how you like to hear your shows done) to encourage artists to "do their thing" with your work? Do you have any regrets or are you mostly happy with the recordings out there?

Thanks Stephen. I hope you're enjoying doing something different on your pianos these days. Gratefully, Carol

Dear Carol: Glad to hear you've been enjoying Debbie, Scott and John's CDs. In answer to your questions:

1. The version of "In Whatever Time We Have" recorded by Scott and Debbie reflects what they do in the Stephen Schwartz & Friends show. Specific choices, such as how long to hold notes, etc., were

worked out when we put the show together and were made with the collaboration of all three of us deciding what felt best for this particular version of the song.

2. It was Scott's idea to do a medley of "Just Around the Riverbend" and "Corner of the Sky" and I worked out a basic approach, then we refined it together as we rehearsed it. I had nothing to do with the other two medleys you mention and don't know who put them together, though I did give Bruce Kimmel revised lyrics for "Gifts of Love" to suit the medley when he asked for them.

3. I assume the changed lyric you're referring to is the one at the end of "Riverbend", where Scott sings "Always knowing what's to come/Is all my dreaming at an end?" This seemed preferable to his singing "Should I marry Kokoum" for obvious reasons. I have suggested this lyric change to others who sing the song out of context as well, as the listeners are unlikely to know or care who Kokoum is.

4. Different songwriters have different levels of leniency when it comes to others interpreting their material. I know some who are extremely strict about having songs done exactly as they originally wrote them. I tend to feel that as long as I have a version of a song out there that I like, the singer is free to do what he or she wants with subsequent versions. I would be stricter if it were the first recording of a song. I'm happy with some of the recordings out there and don't like others, though I won't say which, again for obvious reasons.

Thanks as always for your interest. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Also see the Notes for Performer sections of this Forum archive for Wicked, Godspell, and others.

Find audition tips from Wicked director Joe Mantello, Stephen Schwartz, and others, as well as books on auditioning, see <http://www.musicalsingers.com/auditioning/auditions.htm>