

**Theatre Laboratory ADPB4007  
Assessment Task 2**

**University of Wales Trinity St. David**

**Musical Theatre BA**

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### Assessment Task 3 - Reflective Essay

Throughout the Theatre Laboratory module, I have enhanced many skills amongst the collaborative work. Our tutor, David George Harrington aimed to challenge us as individuals and as a team, to create complex choral pieces to perform at the end of each term.

Although I have some previous experience with learning harmonies, I was challenged within this module with the intricacy of the work, my knowledge of music theory, and the adaptability of my vocal tone and range.

For our performance in the first term we focussed on Golden Age and jukebox musicals, including 'Oklahoma' from *Oklahoma!*, a *Mamma Mia!* medley, a *Queen* medley and 'Make Them Hear You' from *Ragtime*. We learnt when discussing the history of the Golden Age and jukebox musicals, that there is a dichotomy between the two. Byrne and Fuchs state that a Golden Age musical aims to create a 'complete synthesis and harmony between all of the elements within it', yet the integrated musical of the Golden Age is actually the 'antithesis' of the jukebox (2022, n.p). Therefore, I established that the styles would be incomparable, and both challenge my performance ability in different ways.

During the early rehearsals we recognised where our vocal ranges lay and where we might feel most comfortable holding a harmony. I was placed within the second soprano section for these pieces and felt confident here regarding my current vocal range. At first, I found it difficult to adapt to new harmonies with songs I was already familiar with, such as our *Mamma Mia!* medley, comprised by David. So I recorded the harmony tracks for each piece as we learnt them in sections. Between each rehearsal I would listen to these recordings and sing along so to maintain it, then I would be confident coming to each rehearsal with the sections learnt. I was able to adapt to any of David's musical feedback as I already had the harmony engrained and over time my performance became more successful and

confident. In turn, as an ensemble, our sound improved greatly as we encouraged each other within our parts and collaborated well to create a certain style.

When learning new songs, such as 'Oklahoma' which I was unfamiliar with, I found this more of a challenge. So, I drilled the harmony recordings until it became like the melody to me and eventually the lyrics also became second nature. Yet, there was a benefit to my unfamiliarity, unlike with the *Mamma Mia!* songs, as I was not accustomed to any other harmony or melody line that would conflict this new one.

David did much work with us as an ensemble to perfect timings and stylistic choices within these pieces as he had a clear vision of the sound he wanted us to create. There was a large variety of styles within our first performance: a pop/rock *Queen* medley juxtaposing the accent and style of the Golden Age's 'Oklahoma'. Not only was my ability to carry a harmony challenged, but also adapting my tone of voice and implementing musical feedback. These were also confronted in the second term as our pieces became more complex.

Within 'Oklahoma', we focussed on the phrasing and diction, allowing the use of a southern American accent as we preserved the context of the show.

'(Golden Age requires both) open vowels and beautiful sound, and musical comedy favored consonants and clarity of the words... A speech-like singing quality that matches the spoken voice of the character is an absolute necessity.' (Dal Vera & Deer 2008, p.345)

David ensured this, as we emphasised the use of diction, such as the plosive 't's on the line 'waving wheat, would sure smell sweet' to convey the passion of these characters who are expressing the love of their rural hometown. Also, an example of when we incorporated open vowel sounds, so to fit the Golden Age style, is during the repetition of 'Oklahoma' when the 'oh' sound is often elongated. The harmony line I was placed on, contained a build on the 'oh' as we ascended a scale of notes and with a crescendo. Therefore, using an open

sound and delayed vibrato as we reached the climax created a nice tone and blended well with the other parts. I also discovered that the accent helped to create an open sound on the 'oh' as there was a slight 'ah' quality to it. I felt that my sound was strong and well-supported, and I was confident with this style. I have previous singing experience within the classical genre, so my use of tone and vibrato benefitted me in this piece.

Referring back to the contrast between the jukebox and 'integrated musicals' of the Golden Age, this contrast in storytelling was definitely evident within our performance. We incorporated a freer interpretation of the text within the jukebox medleys and therefore our style of voice also became far more contemporary. Consequently, I was challenged a lot more within this aspect of our performance, such as within the pop/rock *Queen* medley, as I have less experience within this field. My familiarity with the songs helped my confidence though in the performance as I could connect with the lyrics to provide effective communication of meaning to the audience. Especially within my solo section of 'Who Wants to Live Forever', where I focussed on creating a dynamic change in tempo and a lighter airy tone of voice that contrasted the belted previous choral section. Therefore, both a visual and auditory effect was created as the ensemble parted to allow a powerful solo moment which could be exhibited to the audience effectively. I had freedom in my vocal performance due to the jukebox genre and contemporary style of sound which I enjoyed exploring in comparison to the specific phrasing style of the Golden Age.

This performance at the end of the first term challenged me as a versatile performer, to differentiate styles and maintain a confident harmony amongst the dance aspects of the performance. I found the *Mamma Mia!* medley the most challenging overall, due to the high-energy routines and my familiarity with the medley that I had to overcome with my new harmony line. Overall, I was successful in our final performance and made sure to

translate my new skills into the next section of the module: our second project which incorporated the works of Sondheim.

Sondheim's compositions are 'often unconventional, often merging complex rhythms with contrapuntal melodies, married with thought-provoking, complicated lyrics' (Manning, 2014, p.2). Therefore, using the works of Sondheim such as 'Wait' and 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd' from *Sweeney Todd*, caused much more complex harmonies and musical patterns to learn. I was motivated by the prospect of this however, as I understood how the intricate chorus in Sondheim's work can form such a captivating sound, which our strong ensemble could uphold.

I decided to challenge myself further by moving to different harmony sections within the ensemble. For the Sondheim works I was placed on the female baritone and tenor lines. I noticed how my range has improved over the course of the term as I reached low notes that I would have struggled with previously. I was then far more confident with learning these harmonies as I maintained a strong balanced volume amongst the ensemble voices. Again, I used the same method to learn these harmonies: I recorded each rehearsal and listened back in practice. Although, I had heard these two pieces before I wasn't too familiar with the melody that it caused any issues regarding my harmony line. However, I did find difficulties within picking up the patterns of the vocal track and the specificities of timing and cut-offs. For example, within 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd' the notes vary in length at the end of repeated lines. Such as, the first 'Todd' is held for three beats, yet the next 'Todd' is cut off at two. To recognise this, I made visual reminders on my sheet music and rehearsed counting in my head throughout the piece, as other sections also caused similar difficulty. My awareness of musical theory terms and technique was heightened during this process as I learnt of the use of hemiolas within the piece, 'inconspicuous Sweeney was' was repeated

twice with a different rhythm each time, another detail I focussed on. David reiterated how important these precise details were when performing a complex piece as a group, especially to communicate the message of the song: an ominous introduction to the dark character and themes of the musical.

‘Wait’ was arranged by David for multiple sections to come together and form an elaborate blend of patterns and voices. Therefore, I had to ensure I had confident diction and understanding of my part to withstand the contrast of the others. Using strong consonants in ‘The Ballad of Sweeney Todd’ effectively communicated the threatening nature of the song as it became harsh and sinister sounding, in ‘Wait’, ‘Lovett is practical (‘All good things come to those who can wait’) but sly and manipulative, as she almost hypnotises Sweeney into a more relaxed mood.’ (Manning, 2014, p.35). This relaxed mood was evident in our performance, as we incorporated gentle movement sequences inspired by Frantic Assembly, yet our elaborate use of dynamics and harmonies allowed the ‘manipulative’ undertones. David incorporated some dissonant harmonies within this piece to create that ominous feeling, which were a challenge to maintain alongside a movement sequence.

I can recognise my significant growth as a performer in this module, as I am far more confident in learning and maintaining harmonies amongst an ensemble. I now understand the importance of musical principles amongst choral work and how to collaborate to create an effective and successful choral piece. I have challenged myself to vary my vocal tone and style dependant on the theme or genre and to incorporate dance and movement sequences with conviction.

### Works Cited

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