

Theatre Laboratory Task 2 (Written)

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Theatre Laboratory Essay

Over this module, I attended a manifold of weekly Theatre Laboratory classes, tutored by David George Harrington. Prior to the commencing of this module, I set myself some personal goals for improvement, including choosing appropriate vocal qualities and colours, blending in choral singing, and training my ear to cope with dissonant harmonies. During this module, we developed performances of songs in a plethora of musical styles, by a variety of composers and librettists. Alongside this, we became better acquainted with the musical lexicon and expanded our vocal production skills. These songs and skills would be put towards a showcase in our 'Lab Weeks'.

The group repertoire chosen for the first Theatre Laboratory Performance included: 'Oklahoma' written by Rodgers and Hammerstein from the 1943 musical *Oklahoma*, 'Ascot Gavotte' written by Lerner and Loewe From the 1956 musical *My Fair Lady*, an original Harrington arrangement of a 'Mamma Mia Medley' written by ABBA from the 1999 jukebox musical *Mamma Mia*, 'Make Them Hear You' written by Ahrens and Flaherty From the 1996 musical *Ragtime*, and another original Harrington arrangement of a 'Queen Medley' with some songs written by Queen from the 2002 jukebox musical *We Will Rock You*. For each of these musical numbers, I was on the Soprano 1 harmony line.

Through rehearsals of these pieces, we workshopped different dynamics, vocal qualities, and colourings to audibly create the desired effect on the audience. For example, 'Oklahoma' needed a balance between legit singing and a bright sound. I was very interested in vocal qualities and so did some independent research after class. I discovered that Jo Estill had created 'Principal Qualities of Voice' including: Sob, Speech, Belt, Twang, Falsetto, and Opera. Estill identified vocal structural placements and resonant locations in the body for each of these qualities. With this information, and in keeping with her 'cookbook' analogy, Estill created individual 'recipes' for them. On this, Estill said, "there is no single 'best' voice quality; 'best' depends on what you like to hear". **(Estill, date unknown)**. I interpreted this as

being able to choose the best quality for a particular song; a skill I would learn to harness. Estill's 'Principal Qualities' bolstered my ability in other pieces; now, I was able to employ Twang and Belt quality in the euro-pop style 'Mamma Mia Medley' and the rock style 'Queen Medley', Speech quality in 'Ascot Gavotte' and Sob quality in 'Make Them Hear You'. However, I still found vocal colouring a strenuous concept to fathom until I discovered that vocal quality is intrinsically linked to vocal colouring. For example, Sob quality has a dark colouring, Falsetto quality has a light colouring, and Twang has a bright colouring.

Armed with the knowledge of vocal qualities and colouring, I took the liberty of researching how dynamics affect mood. From this, I uncovered that musical dynamics are a great tool for varying intensity in a piece of music; regardless of the emotion being conveyed, the narrative journeys through volume. From earlier experience, I was already familiar with dynamic terminology such as: pianissimo, piano, mezzo-piano, mezzo-forte, forte, fortissimo, crescendo, and diminuendo. Nevertheless, during my research, I came across some dynamic terms that were new to me, including: pianississimo or '*ppp*' which means extremely quiet, fortississimo or '*fff*' which means extremely loud, and sforzato or '*sfz*' which means a sudden emphasis. All of these new terms will greatly contribute to my musical storytelling henceforth.

One other and I were chosen to perform a solo for the end of 'Lab Week 1'. For this, I was tasked with finding a Golden Age piece that could be twisted into a crazed characterisation. I chose 'She Touched Me' written by Milton Schafer from *Drat! The Cat!*. My only real obstacle in this song was being able to belt and sustain an Eb5. Eventually, with a combination of new vocal exercises and anchoring, I was able to reach it comfortably.

During our first 'Lab Week', the class collaborated on blocking and choreography for each musical number. We attempted to create routines which correlated with the pieces' style. Furthermore, we refined the vocal aspects of the songs to create a well-rounded and polished performance by the end of the week. An obstacle we had to overcome was coordinating movement and singing; we had to make sure the vocals did not suffer during higher-intensity dance moments. Eventually, we tailored the choreography to allow for better vocal production; a decision I very much agreed with. In my opinion, we worked well as a team and successfully showcased our learning in the final performance.

The group repertoire chosen for our second Theatre Laboratory performance included: 'Another Op'ning' written by Cole Porter from the 1948 musical *Kiss Me Kate*, 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd' and an original Harrington arrangement of 'Wait' written by Stephen Sondheim from the 1979 musical *Sweeney Todd*, 'Still I Will love' written by Shania Taub in 2018. In contrast to the previous Lab, I was on varying harmony lines. I felt this gave me chance to explore different parts of my vocal range and made me more adaptable in choral singing.

Through these pieces, we advanced rhythmic precision and vocal blending; blending, in particular, was vital as almost every piece had laborious dissonant harmonies to navigate. These features were most prevalent in 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd' as the class had to adapt to mixing homophonic and polyphonic vocal lines, the famous but tricky Dies Irae motif, and clashing harmonies like the Hermann Chord. To prepare for the rhythmic challenges here, we brushed up on some musical symbols and their meaning such as: minims, crotchets, quavers, semi-quavers, triplets, dotted rhythms, hemiolas, fermatas, and rests. Despite not utilising them all, it was helpful to be able to identify those symbols in future. Moreover, we looked closely at vocal blending, ensuring an even mixture of choral voices with no discernible stand-out singers. The intention here was to create a wall of sound, merging everyone's voices into one strong unit; particularly, in the homophonic opening. However, there is also a polyphonic section later in this piece, wherein the texture consists of three separate vocal lines with opposing melodies. This was initially troublesome to gauge as the contrasting lines contended with each other but, without a doubt, was made easier with practice. Another challenge in this number was dissonance; harmonies that purposefully clash to cause the audience audible discomfort. Initially, many members of the group struggled to train their ear for the complexity of these harsh-sounding harmonies, but we eventually became accustomed to the complexity of the acrimonious sound. From my learning here, I found the other pieces much easier to digest; especially, 'Wait', and 'Another Op'ning which also feature unusual harmonies.

In juxtaposition, 'Still I Will Love' was the only song in the style of Pop. In keeping with the style, this song featured melismatic notes and vocal fry. Previously, I had not often encountered vocal fry; ergo, I researched the vocal production of this sound. Once again, Jo Estill identified that the vocal folds must be in a 'slack' state within the 'body-cover' section of her model.

During the second 'Lab Week', the creation of blocking was divergent from the first. This was because we had a singular movement director, Angharad Rees. Her directing approach is quite surrealist, generating visually stylised pieces of theatre. As a stimulus, Angharad gave us concepts to instil into each piece; frequently, this gave our songs a fresh angle. Firstly, for 'Another Op'ning', Angharad asked us to act hungover whilst our characters hurriedly get ready to perform in a show. Then, for 'Wait', she split us into pairs and gave us the concept of 'impatience', employing Frantic Assembly's '3-Point Contact' method; where one actor makes three points of contact on the other actor's body and vice versa, which is repeated until the end of the piece at a myriad of speeds. In my opinion, this set of movements was incongruous with the vocal production because it was difficult the blend when angled solely at one other. Unfortunately, though visually interesting, I believe this also to be true for the blocking of 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd' which included lots of 'flocking' into tight clumps which made it toilsome to hear oneself; let alone, each other. Nonetheless, we attempted to combat these difficulties with exaggerated diction. The final piece of group blocking was for 'Still I Will Love', which consisted of simply staggered standing and allowed for superlative singing. To my mind, we performed to the best of our ability when showcasing these pieces, but our first showing was of higher standard. Despite being narrowly disappointing in comparison to our first showcase, it was still a valuable lesson in how movement must be symbiotic with singing in Musical Theatre.

As has been demonstrated in this essay, it is evident that I found this module useful. Additionally, I very much enjoyed the style of teaching in this module which made me more receptive to critique and adaptations. From the range of styles and eras taught, I feel that my knowledge of the history of Musical Theatre has been widened through practical application. Even more, I feel my understanding of music theory has been broadened and my teamwork skills have been built upon. I hope to utilise my new adroitness in future performances.

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