

From: The Enraged Accompanist's Guide to the Perfect Audition By Andrew Gerle

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THE SONG

Leverything I've talked about so far is important, of course, both for the impression you make to everyone in the room and for maintaining your cool and sense of fun in the audition environment. But we all know the biggest factor in whether you get a callback: the Song. The Song is what you've been practicing, in and out of school, for, I would safely guess, years. The Song is what makes your stomach churn, maybe even as you're reading this, what preoccupies your waking and possibly sleeping hours, what you've paid countless professionals thousands of dollars to help you select and craft and perfect. You agonize over the choice of the Song, how to frame it, interpret it, cut it, "inhabit" it or any other actory verbs of your choice. The rest of your audition is about learning the customs and accepted procedures of the room. The Song is all you.

Let's go back to why you're there. You have goods, the tablepeople are in the market for goods. The Song is how you present your goods in the best light. These goods include your voice (tone, pitch, size), your personality, and your physical appearance and bearing. You don't need to show

every trick in your book. It's impossible and unhelpful, as half of your tricks are irrelevant to the role for which you're auditioning. Do your homework and know the show and role(s) for which you're being considered. Then tailor your song(s) to showcase those aspects of what you do that are most appropriate to the show, and that will most easily allow the tablepeople to picture you in their production.

Unless you intend on only auditioning for shows from one particular style and period (a bad idea), you will need a variety of material in your book. Many coaches and voice teachers have lists of "Songs You Should Have," and the ones I've seen are mostly good. Here's mine:

• Two to four musical comedy standards

This means anything by George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Rodgers and Hart, Harold Arlen, E. Y. Harburg, Johnny Mercer, Irving Berlin, or Frank Loesser. You can also find similar songs by lesser-known writers (there are some gems from movies from the '30s and '40s), but these are your main guys. Try to find ones that aren't done all the time. This goes for all categories, but it's easier with this period because the canon is so vast. Sometimes an obscure Berlin or Porter song is obscure for a reason (it's dated, silly, or boring—sorry, Irv, sorry, Cole). But there are plenty of good ones that are lesser-known that will show off your tone, line, and musical phrasing without the risk of triggering a director's song allergy.

Song allergies afflict everyone, for several reasons. First, some tablepeople just get sick of songs. They almost seem

to enjoy rejecting a song (or an actor) because of some allegedly uncontrollable visceral reaction. You can try to ask around, keep an ear to the ground, and avoid the song du jour that everyone is doing, but ultimately you have no control over a director's song allergies. You can and should, however, have a second choice prepared, just in case someone says, "Oh, God, not that again." Song allergies also occur because after hearing a song a hundred times, it becomes difficult to concentrate on the performer, no matter how much you like the song or him. It's the old law of diminishing returns: the first glass of lemonade on a hot summer day is wonderful, the tenth makes you sick. The overdone song goes by in a familiar blur, and the second you leave (or even before), they've confused you with the other four people who sang it this afternoon. People also tend to have strong opinions about extremely popular songs and how they should be interpreted, or they have certain favorite performances in their minds that you simply can't compete with. It's much easier to get a clear impression of an actor who sings a lesser-known song, one without attached baggage.

• Two comedy songs—one old, one new

This one is hard. Most comedy songs that have been around for more than five minutes have been done to death and are no longer funny. Tom Lehrer songs are almost impossible—we've just heard them too many times. Ditto the handful of start-off-sweet-then-turn-very-rude songs. Most importantly, don't rely on the song to be funny. "I'm Not Wearing Underwear Today" from *Avenue* Q is surprising

in the show and always gets a laugh, but in an audition, simply selecting that song to sing is not enough—you must

be funny yourself; you must bring your own creativity and sense of humor to the song and make it your own brand of funny.

A great strategy can be to take a song that wasn't originally a comedy song and change the context or performance to turn it on its head. One actress I know of sings "What Did I Have That I Don't Have?," a serious song, but loses a

false eyelash almost immediately. She spends the rest of the song discreetly chasing it around her face while everyone in the room

howls. Some actors rewrite lyrics, which can be a great idea, but do this only if you know your lyrics are funny. Try them out for honest people (not just your friends). Setting a song in a new and funny context can also work well—"He Touched Me" as a germ-phobic subway rider instead of a love song, for example. Show your creativity and make them laugh—it's a one-two punch that's sure to succeed. It takes extra work, but it's worth it.

• A song that shows off your highest good notes

For obvious reasons, high notes are generally the limiting factor when casting certain roles. An actor either has the

range to sing the role or he doesn't. The most important word of this category, however, is "good." Sounding fantastic on a G is a lot better than sounding pinched and strained on a B. This is a touchy subject and one that easily leads singers to attempt unnecessary vocal feats that are beyond their ability. For some reason, this especially afflicts sopranos, so let me be specific.

Sopranos, please hear me when I tell you that your high C is not good. In fifteen years of playing auditions, I have heard two high C's that were actually terrific, and those singers both graduated from Juilliard opera. It's just not something that normal people can do brilliantly. But here's the good news: you don't have to! No one cares if you have a high C; in musical theater, there are very few roles that call for even an A. There is just no reason to put yourself and others through the trauma of trying anything higher. "A Call from the Vatican," which has a trick C at the end, is not a good audition song, and wouldn't be even if five thousand other people weren't doing it. Going up at the end of "I could have danced, danced, danced / All NIGHT!!" is alarming and in poor musical taste. Don't interpolate high notes into well-known songs, ever—someone at the table is going to hate it, I guarantee you. Find a song that shows off your relevant range without your needing to rewrite it. If you think you're being considered for an ensemble role in a classic, big-chorus show (Herman, Kern, Willson), some of which take ensemble sopranos quite high, find a song that has an actual A or B-flat written in it. If the musical director needs to hear something higher, he will vocalize you up. Note: for reasons I don't understand,

a lot of people hate "Vanilla Ice Cream" from *She Loves Me*. Find something else (operettas are good places to look).

• Two to four songs from contemporary musical theater—up-tempo and ballad

This category includes Adam Guettel, William Finn, Jonathan Larson, Jason Robert Brown, Stephen Schwartz, Ahrens and Flaherty, and other writers from the last fifteen years. They have a pop feel around the edges and are usually in a colloquial or conversational voice but are definitely theater songs; that is, they show tons of character and often have a dramatic arc.

Use your ear and your musical taste when choosing contemporary musical theater songs by lesser-known or up-and-coming writers. While your friend the composer may have written a great song with a tightly focused, inventive hook, a rockin' groove, and a soaring melody, he may also have written one of hundreds of bland, meandering, verbose, and tune-free songs that I have to play every day. You need to capture the tablepeople's attention, and songs that take too long to get to the point, or don't have a point, or sound like fifty other songs aren't going to serve you. Supporting your friends is great, but it's your audition.

• At least one Sondheim or similarly musically complex song

Sondheim shows have notoriously difficult scores, and having a song that shows your musicianship and sense of pitch is a must. There are many current writers who are following in this vein, including Michael John LaChiusa, Ricky Ian Gordon, and Scott Frankel, and showing off your ear is very useful when auditioning for these composers.

• One pop song and one rock song

These are for new pop/rock scores as well as juke-box musicals and revues. You'll need to try some of these out with a pianist, as some songs that are amazing with a band fall completely flat with a lone upright. Endings can also be tricky with these songs, "repeat and fade" being a common technique that ends your audition on a limp note. If the song doesn't have a decent ending for the piano, get someone to write one. And try to find songs whose lyrics aren't completely idiotic. Anything at all that you can actually *act*, not just riff all over.

• One patter song

A fast song with a ton of words can be surprisingly useful. Sometimes these can be effectively created by taking a moderate-tempo song and doing it twice as fast (as long as you can make it make sense dramatically).

• One dramatic acting piece

With the number of shows in recent years about serious subject matter, you need a piece that explores some heftier

dramatic territory. This does not mean melodramatic poperetta ranting-and-railing-at-the-Stars-type songs. *Les Misérables*, though an effective show, does not make for good audition material; it is both overdone and overblown. Often, an intense but quiet song can be much more effective in an audition room than pulling your hair out. Find a song that moves-you deeply and perform it simply.

There are two types of songs to avoid First, anything with a terribly difficult piano part, or that has lots of meter changes or other problems that make it impossible to perform with a pianist without a rehearsal. Maybe you'll get a pianist who knows the song or is an amazing reader, maybe you'll both happen to feel it the same way and miraculously stay together, but don't chance it. More than likely it won't go well, one of you will make a mistake and the train will come off the rails. There are hundreds of good songs out there, there's no need to choose one that is so tricky it has a greater than 50 percent chance of falling apart. If you have a very difficult song that is perfect for a particular call, find a pianist you can rehearse with and bring him to the audition. This is perfectly acceptable and the audition accompanist will be happy to take a break.

The second type of song to avoid is the obscure song with lots of dissonance. There are some very thorny Sondheim songs where certain notes in the vocal line sound "wrong" or dissonant with the piano, but everyone is familiar with these songs by now and knows that you're singing what he wrote. But if the song is both unfamiliar and extremely dissonant, no one will know whether what you're singing is really on the page or if you're just off-pitch. You don't

want the tablepeople thinking, "Did she mean to sing that? Is she flat? What the heck is this crazy song anyway?" instead of listening to your performance. By all means choose challenging, new material; everyone in the room loves to hear new songs. Just make sure it's listener-friendly enough that people aren't left scratching their heads. Your audition should be all about you. Just like you don't want to wear clothes that draw focus, stay away from "songs that make them go 'huh?'"

Above all, choose songs that allow you to put your own personal stamp on them, songs with a definite point and point of view, filled with details that give you the chance to create a specific and unique performance. The title song from *Hello*, *Dolly!* is a fun tune, but there's no character there, nothing to play, no way to show who you are. That's what your audition is all about, and what makes choosing songs such a fun and personal process. With a book full of material that you love to perform that also covers all the bases of style, tempo, and period, you'll be ready to audition for any show—and have a blast doing it.