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FROM DREAMIN' OF HER DEARIE TO DEFYING GRAVITY: THE
EVOLUTION OF THE FEMALE VOICE IN MUSICAL THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

For the past 90 years, the female singing voice in musical theatre has developed dramatically due to the changing social climate and desire for change. The effort to maintain gender roles and the resulting backlash triggered the evolution of the female singing voice and the repertoire provided for her throughout the 1900s and 2000s. The women's movement of the 1960s paved the way for women to raise their voices and ask questions about self-worth and personal identity, prompting composers and female singers to re-examine the female voice in musical theatre repertoire. With new knowledge and an understanding of the female struggle, writers and singers began to accurately represent the wants, needs, and desires of women. As gender roles continued to shift in the 1980s, the female belt and the use of the female chest voice developed and transformed the way we hear women. The female belt became an eerie echo of the American woman's political emergence. However, although we have made a lot of progress on the quest to accurately represent the female voice in musical theatre, we must ask ourselves these questions, "How can women be truthfully represented on stage when the majority of material comes from men? If men are writing the material for women, is it only an imitation of the true female voice? As twenty-first century women, do we have the responsibility to approach golden age material with a modern sensibility?" There is still much to be discovered about the female voice and its place in musical theatre repertoire, and it is only by asking questions and striving for a deeper understanding that progress can be made.

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1.

Introduction

I began my freshman year with unequivocal energy and an eagerness to begin my career as a musical theatre performer. I was starting my training at one of the top universities in the country; I felt like nothing could hold me back. I had never questioned my identity as a female in this business until the day my musical theatre history professor said, “A woman’s belt is a cry from her uterus.” Those words sounded strange coming out of the mouth of a 60-year-old man. They made me feel small and unimportant, as if my reproductive organs were the only things that allowed me to have a voice. It was as if these anatomical parts of me, and only these parts, gave me value. I have thought about his words a lot over the last few years, and as I mature and open my eyes to the problems of the world, I am beginning to realize that I do not need to accept his words as the truth. Women are so much more than their reproductive organs. I believe that a woman’s belt is a declaration, rather than a cry. It is the sound of a woman who wants to be heard. The sound that we hear today, however, did not always exist, and is the product of the female struggle to be heard throughout the 1900s. The sound and quality of a woman’s singing voice and the repertoire provided for her has evolved throughout the 1900s due to shifting gender norms and the reception of the female voice.

Defining Gender Normatives and the Construction of Gender

Judith Butler has theorized that gender is a construction of the mind, developed through the subconscious repetition of daily activities. She uses the word “performance” to describe the physical and mental manifestation of gender, since it is no more than an imitation or impersonation of a widely accepted ideal (Butler 519-520). This performance of gender is not only present in our everyday lives, but also in the representation of women on stage. This

performance of gender is most evident in the physical and visual appearances of female characters in musical theatre repertoire. If we listen closely, we can hear the enforcement of gender in the music written for these women. One needs only to listen to the score of *Oklahoma!* or *Carousel* to hear the carefully constructed differences between the male and female characters. From the beautiful ballads of Julie Jordan to the driving marches of Eva Peron, each song written for women in musical theatre provides a lens through which we can explore the expectations of the female gender during the time period in which it was written.

It is important to recognize these gender expectations as malleable, as they continue to shift. The shift in the gender expectations is often due largely in part to a shift in the political and social climate of the country. For example, the expectations of women in the 1940s were very different from the expectations of women in the 1950s. In the 1940s, women were expected to be strong and powerful as they joined the workforce during WWII. After men returned home from the war, in the 1950s, most women were forced back into the role of caretaker, wife, or mother. This shift in gender expectations became the catalyst for change, and sparked the beginning of the women's movement, led by the fearless Betty Friedan, who identified the "ideal woman" and wrote about it in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. And with the rise of the female voice in society in the 1960s, came another shift in gender expectations. This persistent desire for change continued through the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, shaping the modern female voice.

The Relationship Between Sound and Emotion

This evolution of gender has been ongoing since the Victorian Era, when women were considered the weaker and more fragile sex due to their constant corset-induced fainting (Dijk and Wouter Wieling, "Fainting, emancipation and the 'weak and sensitive' sex."). The assumption that women are weak and emotionally unstable beings is still present in today's society, as proven by the ever-present gender discrimination in workplaces across America and in the outcome of the most recent election. The assumption that women are emotionally and physically weaker than

men has not only informed the way women have been viewed in politics over the past 90 years, but also in the way women have been heard and represented in musical theatre. Jo-Anne Bachorowski, associate professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University, has conducted an in-depth study on the connection between emotion and sound, stating, “Listeners associate particular patterns of acoustic cues with various discrete emotional states” (Bachorowski 53-57). She is referring to the source-filter theory of speech production, a theory that helps us understand the ways in which speech acoustics can provide information about a person’s emotional state. In emotions research, F0 (the fundamental frequency of speech) is used to measure sound. It is important to note that F0 is directly associated with vocal pitch. It has been found by Scherer, Banse, Wallbott, and Goldbeck, authors of *Motivation and Emotion*, that emotional and physiological arousal are associated with increases in F0, F0 variability, and vocal intensity. In other words, the higher a person’s pitch, the more emotional they are perceived to be.

In separate studies conducted by Addington (1971) and Pearce (1971), a higher and more variable pitch was associated with passion and ebullience, while a lower pitch with reduced inflection range was associated with feelings of trustworthiness and competence. If a lower pitch is associated with groundedness and strength, and a higher pitch is associated with intense, fleeting emotions, what does that say about our golden age women? When we look at the music sung by Julie Jordan and Laurey Williams, there is rarely a moment when they drop below an E4 or a D4. When they do sing either of these notes, it is only because they are preparing to ascend back up the scale to notes like E5 and F5.

The music written for golden age female characters tends to live below A5 and above A4. It is placed in a part of the female voice that is predominately head resonant. Though most musical theatre singers use a healthy mix of chest and head resonance at all times, it is important to note that women become more head resonant than chest resonant once they reach their second *passaggio* (around B4, C5, and D5). In Colleen Ann Jennings’s dissertation *Belting is beautiful : welcoming the musical theater singer into the classical voice studio*, she states, “Most musical theater singers will use more head voice as they ascend in range, but rarely as much head voice as

a classical singer.” The music written for female ingenues in the 1940s and 1950s was often written above the passaggio or right on it, excluding the woman’s true chest voice and only allowing her to live in a lofted, floaty placement. Since a higher pitched sound is directly related to intense and fleeting emotions, the composition of music that consists of only that specific sound is perpetuating the belief that women are more emotional and weak. The stark contrast between the deep, chest dominant sound of golden age men and the high, floaty sound of golden age women helps enforce the notion that men are more intellectual and grounded than women. It puts women in a very small box. It gives them only ten notes to express their thoughts and ideas.

2.

The Golden Age

If female musical theatre singers cannot control the music they are singing, perhaps it becomes the composer's responsibility to write music that accurately represents the strength and intellectual capabilities of women. Composers play a vital role in setting parameters for the female sound by writing a specific tessitura to match her character.

The Relationship Between Sound and Emotion

In a study done by JanClaire Elliott, she demonstrates that a tessitura most often involves the majority of pitches within a piece of music (JanClaire Elliott, "Frequency, Duration, and Pitch or What Makes a 'Tessitura?"). According to Julie A Noonan,

Sounds occur around us constantly. It is our organization, reference and metaphoric connections between sound source and sound identification which allow us to make sense of them. Fales defines timbre in the musical context as a process involving the hearer's association of the musical sound with a meaning referent. In other words, music is interpreted as "sad" because the hearer associates the production or structure (i.e., minor mode or instrumentation) with "sadness" (Noonan 2006).

Similarly, we associate singing voices with specific characterizations. So, if women spoke with less force and power due to their place in society, Rodgers and Hammerstein naturally would write the tessitura of *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* to have more head and less chest resonance. The same goes for the understanding of the female physicality. Julia Kristeva's description of genotext and phenotext explains that the genotext is the "process" involved in communicating the phenotext which is "structure" that "obeys rules of communication" (Kristeva 87). The genotext is connected to the body and physicality which is involved in producing sound. Therefore, how one speaks is affected by the body and social constraints upon that body. If the women of the late

1940s and early 1950s were expected to act physically demure and subservient, it would seem that Rodgers and Hammerstein's tessitura for their female ingenues was not a direct product of sexism but rather a reflection of the socially-acceptable, but constrained, female. This misunderstanding resulted in music that was, according to Rodgers and Hammerstein, "feminine, young, nervous, and, if possible, pretty like a girl," a sound that did not quite match the strength of the female characters they were creating at the time (Wolf 2002).

The Sound of the 1930s

This specific sound can be heard in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*. Though *Oklahoma!* opened in 1943, Rodgers and Hammerstein began writing the musical in 1942, just before women became heavily involved in the war. During this time, there were just about 4,000 American service members in the United Kingdom, but many more were on their way to prepare and train to storm the beaches of Normandy two years later. It was not until 1943, when approximately 135,000 Americans were stationed in Great Britain, that women dominated the work force, making up about 65 percent of the aircraft industry and following the example of Rosie the Riveter. Therefore, the sound of the Laurie in *Oklahoma!* matches that of a 1930's woman rather than a 1940s woman.

The sound of a 1930s woman had a lot to do with the Great Depression as more and more women began focusing on their own independent economic journeys. In fact, the 1930s was considered the "Golden Age for Spinsters," a fact that is reflected in the character development and personality traits of Laurey Williams (Judith S. Baughman, "Working Women of the 1930s"). Laurey is an independent, fiery, and hopeful young woman. She is a progressive ingenue who works on the farm and has the ability to intellectually and comedically challenge her love interest, Curly. However, despite Laurey's strong narrative, her tessitura and vocal qualities reflect the challenges and discrimination that 1930s women faced. Women struggled to find a way to be independent while also having a family, and when women did find work, they were paid wages

that most men would not accept. A 1936 poll in *Fortune* magazine asked, "Do you believe that married women should have a full-time job outside the home?" Only 15 percent of the respondents approved, while 48 percent disapproved, with the remaining 37 percent giving it conditional approval (Judith S. Baughman, "Working Women of the 1930s"). Most people believed that women were too weak and fragile to hold down both a job and a family. This belief that women were inherently weaker than men can be heard in Shirley Jones's rendition of "Many A New Day" from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*. The vibrato is prominent and constant throughout, resembling the sound of a bird. The melody line features triplets which allow the voice to remain light, floaty, and buoyant (Jenna L. Moore 50-51). Her tessitura remains in her passaggio, giving her few dramatic options and making her appear more emotional and weak than her male counterpart, Curly. [Sound Example 1: "Many A New Day", From the Album *Oklahoma! (Expanded Edition/Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*]

Further proof that a woman's tessitura was, and still is, a reflection of her place in society is Laurey's best friend, Ado Annie. While Laurey portrays the ideal woman with her light, delicate voice, Ado Annie portrays the opposite, further highlighting Laurey's goodness and idealized femininity. It is assumed, but never said, that Ado Annie is not a virgin, and enjoys the company of different men, stating that she just, "cain't say no." In Susan C. Cook's article "Pretty like the Girl: Gender, Race and *Oklahoma!*", she explores the differences between the two characters, explaining, "Ado Annie and Laurey set up the well-worn, if comic, virgin/whore dichotomy that circumscribes appropriate modes of gender and class-based femininity..." Because of Ado Annie's desire to kiss different men and her inability to remain faithful, her voice sits in and below the second female passaggio. She is certainly not the ideal woman of the 1930's and early 1940's, so her voice does not match a song bird in its quality. Because of Ado Annie's tessitura, she is able to mix her head and chest voice more evenly. More specifically, she can balance the use of her CT (cricothyroid) and TA (thyroarytenoid) muscles more effectively due to the tessitura that was written for her. When listening to Gloria Grahame sing "I Cain't Say No", we can hear a more speech like quality with little elegance or grace, solidifying the connection

between female gender norms and sound. [Sound Example 2: “I Can’t Say No”, From the Album *Oklahoma!* (Expanded Edition/Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)]

The 1940s and 1950s: The Dichotomy Between Sound and Narrative

In musicals of the 1940s and 50s, physical beauty and the soprano singing voice were the staples of the heroine as she set out on her quest to find love, marriage, and family (Hanson 13). The 1950s are known as the “golden age” of musicals because of the large number of musicals being released at the time and the large number of audience members (Kantor 2004). World War II had recently ended, and during the war, people had no choice but to accept the intelligence and capabilities of women as they began to fill men’s roles in an effort to free as many able-bodied men as possible for combat. The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 marked the beginning of the rise of women in the workforce. In the next four years, the female percentage of the U.S. workforce increased from 27 percent to nearly 37 percent. In 1945 nearly one out of every four married women worked outside the home (“American Women in World War II”). Because of the rushed marriages that many couples had before the soldiers went overseas, more married women than ever were working. Women quickly “became proficient cooks and housekeepers, managed the finances, learned to fix the car, worked in a defense plant, and wrote letters to their soldier husbands that were consistently upbeat” (Stephen Ambrose 488).

The Backlash

However, as the soldiers returned home from war, many women resumed their traditional duties as wives and mothers. The need for female mobilization during the war and the return of the soldiers is reflected in many of the musicals produced at the time. As women were forced back into their traditional societal roles, musical theatre repertoire struggled to decide how it

wanted to portray its women. Women had now tasted freedom, and this frightened men who yearned for the comfort and consistency of the patriarchy. Though women did not regress to their pre-war status, there was significant backlash that enforced traditional gender roles in an attempt to regain the “traditional woman”. Richard Johnson explains,

During and after the Second World War, discrimination in the workplace and military acted as an immediate backlash, even as women were actively encouraged to join the military or male dominated jobs. The idea of masculinized women is often referred to as the threat and causal agent of backlash. So, many of the jobs women held during the war were contracted post-war and returned to the men who had held them pre-war. And, methods that reinforced the female subservient role were employed. (Johnson, 48)

Due to the combination of female progress and societal backlash, musical theatre repertoire began changing for women. Interestingly, the narratives assigned to these female characters did not always match the tessitura and lyrics that were written for them. For example, *The King and I* and *Carousel* portray strong young women who, while still maintaining their demure and feminine qualities, work to support themselves. The strength of these characters reflects the strength of women during the time of the war, however, I find it very interesting how the sound of their singing voices does not reflect their strong narratives. Both Anna and Julie Jordan sing with a lofted quality which lacks chest resonance. It is a sweet and demure sound, similar to the chirping of a bird. However, both of these characters have so much more depth. Author Richard M. Goldstein noted, "To recognize her, one only had to look for the female singer of a waltz" and one would find Rodgers and Hammerstein's leading lady (Goldstein 1). It is as if there was a subconscious need to reinforce the idea that, although women had entered the workforce, they were still the inferior gender. The sweet melodies and male-centric lyrics ensure that the audience will recognize the female characters as inherently weaker than men. In addition, the lyrics that were written for these female characters constantly revolved around men. In *Carousel*, Julie Jordan explains why she won't leave her abusive husband, singing,

What's the use of wond'rin

If he's good or if he's bad,

Or if you like the way he wears his hat?

Oh, what's the use of wond'rin

If he's good or if he's bad?

He's your feller and you love him,

That's all there is to that.

[Sound Example 3: “What’s the Use of Wond’rin”, From the Album *Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Carousel (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*]

For the women in these golden age musicals, there is nothing more important than their quest for love. Even if the character is single and working to support herself, she still has an idealistic view of love. In Richard M. Goldstein’s article “I Enjoy Being a Girl: Women in the Plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein”, he discusses the traditional roles assigned to the heroines in many golden age musicals. He writes, “the heroine is an idealist, holding an extremely romantic view of male-female relationships. She is not concerned with the dull, dark reality of the everyday world.” Now, one could argue that there is nothing more present in a human being’s life than the desire to love and be loved. Diane Ackerman explains the human desire to love in her book, *A Natural History of Love*, saying, “Love is not a choice. It is a biological imperative. And just as evolution favored human beings who were able to stand upright, it favored human beings who felt love. It favored them because love has great survival value” (Ackerman 151). However, though love is very present in our lives, we exist for more than that, and to create a female character who sings only of men and love is to diminish her worth as a human being. The contrast between the female narrative, vocal quality, and the lyrics written for Golden Age women, prove that the female voice was still not fully realized in musical theatre repertoire by the end of the 1950s.

This dichotomy between the narrative and vocal quality did not stop in the 1950s and bled into 1960s. Though the 1960s brought with it the movement towards equality and triggered the liberation of the female voice, it also created fear and discomfort among many (Wolf 55). Because of this, many 1960s musicals presented a disconnect between the female voice and

narrative, resulting in the absence of accurate female representation. *Bye Bye Birdie*, written by Charles Strouse and Lee Adams, is one of the first musicals in which we hear a resonant, pingy sound coming out of a woman. However, the story line and lyrics that were written for the female roles in this musical provide a stark contrast to the brassy sound that the actresses were producing. The character Rose, and the teenage heroine, Kim, are fed up with their men. In a lyric by Mr. Adams, they ask each other, "Do we need them? No we don't. Do we want them? No we don't. Will we leave them? No we won't. Now tell me what did I say that for?" Even in *Hair*, a revolutionary musical which changed the course of musical theatre, women are still singing lyrics that revolve around men. The voices of the female characters are full of chest resonance and strength from the moment they are introduced, however, it soon becomes apparent that they, too, are treated primarily as love interests, sexual objects, or both (Wollman, "Busted for Her Beauty: Hair's Female Characters"). At one point during the musical, the character Jeannie says, "This is the way it is. I'm hung up on Claude. Sheila's hung up on Berger. Berger is hung up everywhere. Claude is hung up on a cross over Sheila and Berger." The character Sheila may have represented the rapidly changing woman in a way that had never been seen before, but she ultimately functions as the central love-interest, either adoring Berger or existing to be adored. [Sound Example 4: "Easy to Be Hard", From the Album *Hair (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*]

3.

The Rise of the Female Voice: 1960s and 1970s

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s served as a catalyst for the development of the modern musical theatre female. Historian Sara Evans explains,

The power of the women's movement lay in its capacity to stimulate such deep rethinking, to pose, as a problem, concepts such as femininity and motherhood, relationships previously taken for granted. Most Americans, both male and female...were not converted. They were angry, defensive, confused, but they were thinking about gender nonetheless. (Wolf 3)

The Feminine Mystique

During the 60s, more women than ever were entering the workforce. There was a growing rebellion among women regarding huge gender disparities in pay and sexual harassment in the workplace. By the end of the 60s, more than 80% of married women used contraception after the federal government approved the birth control pill 10 years prior. This freed many women from unwanted pregnancy and gave them much more freedom in their personal lives. The 1960s also saw the rise of one of the early leaders of second-wave feminism, Betty Friedan. Journalist, activist, and co-founder of the National Organization for Women, Betty Friedan wrote a revolutionary book entitled, "The Feminine Mystique", addressing questions many women had never thought to ask. She comments on the growing movement, saying, "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (Friedan 20). In an interview conducted by JMU student, Jessica Oostdyk, with her grandmother Alice Oostdyk, Alice reminisced,

The Feminine Mystique, when that started circulating, I mean it really caught on with women, frustrated women. Remember there was, in the 60's, I think there was only about six percent of women in professional schools, as opposed to now when medical school or law school probably has almost 50% females. That was unheard of. The women that graduated high school with me, they were either nurses, teachers, secretaries. There was not that much open to us. We didn't even

think about it. That was 1957 that I graduated from high school. Nursing was what I thought about and, like I said, my friends and the graduates, the women, were pretty much in the same situation. (Oostdyk, *Feminism and Changing Gender Roles in the 1960s and 1970s*)

Betty Friedan was not alone on her quest to release the true power and potential of the female in the 1960s. Gloria Steinem also sought liberation from gender normatives, believing the creation of gender to be the source of the problem. She spoke out against gender expectations, stating, “A gender-equal society would be one where the word ‘gender’ does not exist, where everyone can be themselves. Men are as dehumanised by the masculine role forced upon them as women are by the feminine role.” Women were starting to talk about their hopes, dreams, and rights, shifting the singing voice from pleasant to pleasantly assertive.

The rise of the female voice in society mirrored the rise of the true female voice in musical theatre. Actresses such as Ethel Merman and Barbra Streisand, two iconic belters of the time, were paving the way for future strong female actresses with their brassy belts. These actresses sunk into their chest voices in ways that had rarely ever been seen before. They found strength and groundedness in their voices; qualities that would become iconic and inspiring for many young female vocalists. Critics described Ethel Merman’s voice as “highly unusual,” writing, “Merman’s chest voice was highly unusual in not being dusky but rather bright and almost a spinto soprano in timbre – in a word, brassy” (Jennings 13). Glenn Litton wrote of Streisand’s 1962 debut, saying:

Barbra Streisand was the real thing: a singing actress who could belt with the focus, if not the volume, of Ethel Merman and who could clown in a style made half of self-caricature and half of devilish charm. (Wolf 174)

According to Stacy Wolf, Merman and Streisand are linked by their belting and by their ability to sing a song like they wrote and owned it (Wolf 174). It would seem that both of these actresses were taking music written by men, and making it their own through the sound and tone quality of their voices. With the female belt, came power and ownership. Although many did not like the sound of the belt, it was almost impossible to ignore.

Sondheim's Women

Despite the conflict between narrative, lyric, and vocal quality throughout the 1960s, there were some musicals scattered within the decade that represented both the female voice and the female narrative. These musicals paved the way for future revolutionaries who sought to shatter glass ceilings and represent voices unlike their own. Dr. A Miller addresses these musicals, writing, "Every female who enters the star spot is paired with a less brightly lit male figure, ridiculous or pathetic, of whom it is variously demonstrated that he may not take her place there" (Miller 73). One of the first writers to write music that accurately represented women onstage was Stephen Sondheim. He defied the "norm" of the 60s and created female characters with gumption, wit, and goals that extended beyond marriage and the reciprocation of love.

Author Joanne Gordon writes,

By the time Stephen Sondheim's work emerged on Broadway, however, society and the role of women within that society were changing. A nation that had been through the Kennedy assassinations, the Vietnam War, and the women's movement no longer believed in love at first sight or happily-ever-after ending of traditional musical theatre. (Hanson, 14)

A wounded and rattled nation, America became a place of cynicism and dissatisfaction, creating the perfect atmosphere for change in musical theatre. While the fate of men and women was once very predictable and often pre-planned, men and women alike found themselves trying to find their place in a world of loss and mistrust. This shift in societal roles is demonstrated in Sondheim's tendency to write complicated love stories rather than predictable love stories. While female characters once dreamed of finding love and knew that someday their "princes would come," Sondheim's women found themselves entangled in the complications and emotional distress of being in love. This is demonstrated in the songs "Losing My Mind" and "Send in the Clowns". Although neither Sondheim nor his collaborators (nor the characters in Sondheim's musicals) were radical feminists, the issues were present and lingered in the air (Wolf, "Keeping Company with Sondheim's Women"). In the Sondheim woman, we see the influences of

visionary women's rights leaders such as Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Bella Abzug, Robin Morgan and Betty Friedan.

Sondheim began playing with a female prototype who brought different ideas and expectations to love and marriage. This new woman made her first appearance in two minor musicals of the 1960s, both with books by Arthur Laurents, *Anyone Can Whistle* and *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, with music by Richard Rodgers. In these shows, sexual equality began to emerge in the musical. Laurie Winer, writer for the New York Times, declared, "It was Stephen Sondheim who went on to free the musical heroine from her past." He gave full voice to the values of women who sang out their wants, needs and desires in musicals of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Author Laura Hanson writes,

Sondheim women tend to be more realistic and multidimensional than their more traditional counterparts. Their choices are not so clear-cut, their motivations not so predictable. They express doubts and fears about life and love and are not always so sure about what they want, as they proceed haltingly along the road to greater self-awareness. (Gordon 31)

In *Sunday in the Park with George*, Dot expresses the process of accepting and taking responsibility for one's own self as she sings:

I chose and my world was shaken -

So what?

The choice may have been mistaken,

The choosing was not.

You have to move on.

These lyrics accurately represent the journey that many of Sondheim's women take. Musicals such as *Into the Woods* feature strong women who, throughout the show, attempt to develop an understanding as to where they fit in the world. The character Little Red in *Into the Woods* becomes a symbol of strength as she accepts her sudden womanhood with pride, and does not see her development as source of shame. Sondheim chose to use both Dot and Little Red's tessitura to support their self-discovery and story line. Much of his music begins in a low place in a woman's voice which encourages her to bring her chest voice up into her passaggio. [Sound

Example 5: “I Know Things Now” 0:46-1:08, From the Album *Into The Woods* (Original Broadway Cast Recording] Critic John Lahr points out, “Instead of celebrating the ease and spontaneity of emotion that was the stock-in-trade of the traditional musical responding to a world it insisted was benign, Sondheim’s songs report the difficulty of feeling in a world where, as his song says, there’s so little to be sure of” (Hanson 14). He paved the way for future musical theatre writers who followed his lead, creating female characters with anchored, speech-like voices to match their strong narratives.

The Female Belt

Many vocal specialists have struggled to agree on a definition for the sound that began to be produced in the 1960s, but Jeannette LoVetri, one of the leading experts on belt defines it thus:

Belting is just a label given to a certain aspect of chest register function. This definition is supported by decades of use in the theatrical community to characterize a specific type of singing and singer who could be heard at the back of the house long before there was electronic amplification. (LoVetri, “Voice Pedagogy: Female Chest Voice.”)

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the female belt began to be incorporated into almost every musical. *Chess*, *Les Miserables*, *Into the Woods*, *Cats*, and *Assassins*, are all examples of musicals that portrayed strong women with powerful, belting voices.

I think that it is important to note how the definition of the female belt has changed within the past 30 years. I believe that this change in the placement and quality of the belt can be attributed to pop music of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Beth Miles and Harry Hollien, authors of the article “Whither Belting?”, described belting “as a mode of singing that is typified by unusually loud heavy phonation that exhibits little or no vibrato but a high level of nasality” (Miles and Hollien, “Whither Belting”). When K.D. Lang sang “Crying” as a tribute to Roy Orbison at The Songwriters Hall of Fame in May 1989, it changed the game. Her voice was rich, deep, open, and warm. It was a sound that had never been heard before. She brought her

chest voice up through her passaggio and challenged the known limits of the female voice. There was little to no nasality in her sound, proving that women did not have to place everything behind their nose to create a belt. Her influence can be heard in musicals like *Once*, *Caroline or Change*, *Ragtime*, *Natasha Pierre and The Great Comet of 1812*, *Wild Party*, and *The Lion King*. [Sound Example 6: “If You Want Me”, From the Album *Once: A New Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*]

“Beware the Belt”

There are many people who are afraid of the female belt, believing it to be dangerous and potentially harmful to the vocal chords. I think it is interesting, however, that the sound of the male belt does not frighten or concern anyone. There is something about the power and strength of a fully open and brassy female voice that makes people nervous, especially those who grew up in a time when a woman’s true voice was not often heard. I spoke to my esteemed voice teacher, Mary Saunders-Barton, about the controversy of the female belt, and she told me that very recently, she visited another university to teach some of their music theatre students. She reported that the students who were learning how to belt were given Andrew Lloyd Webber material which is very vocally taxing and challenging. One young woman was singing the song “Someone Like You” by Frank Wildhorn, and as soon as she reached her second passaggio, she flipped up into her head voice. When Mary tried to correct her, the student’s voice teacher told Mary that it sounded right to him. He said he didn’t hear anything wrong with the sound. When she told me this story, it became very clear to me that those who grew up in a time when the female was expected to be demure and obedient may still not fully grasp the sound and meaning of the female belt. Perhaps this is why my freshman year history teacher could not see that the female belt comes from her soul and inner strength rather than her reproductive organs.

Although many still do not appreciate the sound and use of the female belt, women continue to find new ways to stretch their voices that were not conceivable in the mid-1900s. In musicals such as *Wicked*, *Spring Awakening*, *Sister Act*, and *Hamilton*, women stay locked into their speech resonance for as long as possible without naturally flipping into a more head dominant and lofted sound. Idina Menzel portrayed Elphaba in the original Broadway cast of *Wicked*, and the sound that she created in the song “Defying Gravity” defied many vocal normatives of the 1980s and 1990s. She took out vibrato and replaced it with straight tone; a sound that cut through the air like a knife. In State College’s own Danya Katok’s dissertation, *The Versatile Singer: A Guide to Vibrato & Straight Tone*, she defines straight tone as “a valuable tool that can be used by singers of any style to both improve technical ideals, such as resonance and focus, and provide a starting point for transforming the voice to meet the stylistic demands of any genre.” After speaking with Mary Saunders-Barton about the technique of straight tone, I learned that straight tone is produced by minimizing the airflow. By controlling the subglottic pressure, or the amount of air that builds up beneath the vocal cords, it is easier to switch back and forth between straight tone and vibrato (Katok, 20). [Sound Example 7: “Defying Gravity” 4:30-5:14, From the Album *Wicked (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*] This vocal technique takes a lot of control, and I believe that it reflected the new sense of control and strength that women were uncovering throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s.

4.**Third-Wave Women: 1980s, 1990s and 2000s**

The control and power that women were gaining throughout the 1990s and 2000s was partly due to third-wave feminism. Third-wave feminism attempts to expand feminism to include women with a diverse set of identities, recognizing that women are of "many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds" (Tong 285). Because feminists of this time had fears about misrepresenting the "identities and issues of particular groups of women," third-wave feminists strove to listen to and include those who were different than themselves in the movement (Tong 285). This is definitely reflected in the portrayal of women onstage in the late 90s and early 2000s as well as in their singing voices. Musicals began to follow the trajectory of powerful female friendships. Each friend would, most often, have a very distinct vocal tone quality that differed from the other. Both *Wicked* and *Little Women* are examples of musicals that follow the lives of women who are connected by a bond so strong that nothing, and certainly no man, can break. This emphasizes and reflects the united front that women of all nationalities, ethnicities, and religions were beginning to form.

Intersectionality and Womanism

This new wave of feminism brought about an awareness of women that had different beliefs, values, religious views, and cultural backgrounds. Though this inclusive mindset may have seemed revolutionary at the time, it is important to note that the feminist movement arguably began with an African American abolitionist named Sojourner Truth in 1851, who spoke the words, "I could work as much and eat as much as a man ... and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?" Sojourner Truth argued that black women and white women were equal and deserved equal rights and respect. Many other black feminists followed in Sojourner Truth's

footsteps including Anna J. Cooper and Mary Church Terrell. While representation of white women increased on the stage throughout the mid/late 1900s, it is clear that the representation of black women did not evolve at the same rate. This is, in part, because black women were fighting an entirely different intersectional battle. Not only were black women struggling to find their voices as women, they were also struggling to be heard and accepted as a racial minority. While white women were granted the right to vote in 1920, black women were not granted the right to vote until 45 years later in 1965. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, an appreciation and understanding of the intersectional battle that black women faced grew. Though Sojourner Truth was the first to talk about intersectional feminism, it was not until 1989 that the term “intersectionality” was coined when civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw realized that race and gender were treated as completely different issues. It was Crenshaw who said, "When feminism does not explicitly oppose racism and when anti-racism does not incorporate opposition to the patriarchy, race and gender politics often end up being antagonistic to each other and both interests lose." This shifting mindset can also be seen in Alice Walker’s 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden: Womanist Prose*. Within this book, Alice Walker coined the term Womanist. She defined a womanist as,

Womanish, the opposite of girlish...A Black Feminist or Feminist of Color...A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. (Walker 1)

Alice Walker explained the difference between Womanism and Feminism by saying that womanism was simply, “another shade of feminism.” It allowed black women and other women of color to be recognized for being consistently on the forefront of the feminist movement, though they had previously received little acknowledgement or recognition due to discrimination within the media.

Wicked

The appreciation of different races and the growing understanding of intersectionality can be seen and heard in the 2003 musical *Wicked*. The musical follows the friendship of two young women as they grow up and experience life together. One of the women, Glinda, is white, while the other woman, Elphaba, is green. Elphaba suffers from harsh discrimination because of her color and Glinda sticks up for her, supporting her on her journey to the Wizard. The musical is showing two women of different colors overcoming their differences and accepting each other as equals.

Influences of third-wave feminism are also present in the sound of Elphaba's and Glinda's voices, and it is evident that the lyric, narrative, and vocal quality match each other in strength and power. While each woman has a different tessitura, their voices blend and utilize all parts of the female voice. When Idina Menzel sang "Defying Gravity" on May 28, 2003, society heard a sound unlike anything they had ever heard before. They heard the sound that my male professor naively labeled "a cry from the uterus." It was unwavering, contained little vibrato, and resonated in her nasal cavity. The combination of compressed airflow, an open channel, and a strong anchor to the chest voice created a sound that resembled that of a woman fighting for what she wants. It was the sound of resistance and defiance coming out of a character who not only faced discrimination because of her gender, but also because of the color of her skin. This is fascinating because the sound of straight tone is the result of literal glottal resistance caused by muscles constantly firing in an effort to inhibit vibrato (Vennard 137). As Idina Menzel's voice was fighting to produce a powerful and unrelenting sound, her character was fighting to find her place in a world that refused to accept her as an equal.

The female duets that were written for Glinda and Elphaba by Stephen Schwartz are similar to Stephen Sondheim's female duets. They do not revolve around men, but rather focus on the personal journeys of the women singing them, thereby passing the "Bechdel Test". The Bechdel Test was created by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel and Liz Wallace to challenge a

work of fiction that features two women in a scene together. If the women discuss something other than men, the scene passes the Bechdel test. The representation of women as individual beings with different backgrounds was certainly important, but seeing them share the same space and sing a love duet together was revolutionary.

This image was particularly important because it was happening live and in real time. In 1963, Peggy Phelan, an American feminist and scholar, wrote, “Performance’s only life is in the present”; that it ‘cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan 146). When audience members watch two women with different colored skin holding hands and unleashing their true voices, they are watching the representation of social and gender equality on live bodies. They are experiencing liveness, which is a term that can be used to describe the temporary nature of theatre. It is gone as soon as it exists, but it forever lives on in the memories of those who have witnessed it. Peggy Phelan comments on the importance of the fleeting existence of theatre in her book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, saying, “Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control” (Phalen 148). Once an audience has seen live bodies representing female equality and power, they cannot pretend to be naive or ignorant. The image will live on in each audience member’s memory, dispelling the reproduction of patriarchal discourse.

High-Heels and Witches

We can also see influences of third-wave feminism in musicals like *Legally Blonde* and *9 to 5*. The leading ladies of both *Legally Blonde* and *9 to 5* use sexy vocal affects like growling, mirroring the third-wave re-adoption of “very lip-stick, high-heels, and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines that the first two phases of the movement identified with male oppression” (Rampton, “Four Waves of Feminism”). Pinkfloor expressed this new position when

she said, “It’s possible to have a push-up bra and a brain at the same time” (Rampton, “Four Waves of Feminism”). The leading women in these musicals may wear heels and form-fitting outfits, but their singing voices are speech-like and their narratives are strong.

The feminist movement in the 1990’s was also responsible for the influx of television shows that revolved around female witches. In these shows, women were gifted with supernatural powers, and often relied on the strength of their female friendships to enhance these powers. Prominent examples in this vein include “Sabrina the Teenage Witch”, “The Craft”, “Practical Magic”, and “Charmed”. I find this very interesting because only a few years later, in 2003, *Wicked* opened and introduced the world to a Broadway witch whose power and ferocity were reflected in her singing voice.

5.

A New World: Where Are We Now?

In the 2000s, we have come closer than ever before to the representation of the female voice onstage. In 2014, an all-female composer-lyricist duo won the Tony Award for best score for the first time for *Fun Home*, a musical that follows the life of a homosexual woman. In 2016, *Waitress* opened on Broadway, which follows the life of a woman who fights her way out of an abusive relationship. Not only did *Waitress* provide Broadway with three strong female characters, it was also the first musical to have an all-female creative team. Society is in an age of rebellion as different movements and campaigns such as the Me Too Movement and the Times Up campaign surface in an effort to help women who have experienced discrimination and sexual assault in the workplace. The Times Up Letter of Solidarity states, “We harbor fear that no one will believe us, that we will look weak or that we will be dismissed; and we are terrified that we will be fired or never hired again in retaliation.” Women have been fighting for decades to be treated as equals, and are now joining together through campaigns, confessions, and women’s marches to stand up for the rights they know they deserve. This unification of women of all different religions, cultural backgrounds and races can be seen on stage as writers and female vocalists fight to undermine the discriminatory practices and beliefs of our conservative administration. We can see this backlash in new musicals like *Hamilton*, *Frozen*, *The Band’s Visit*, *Once On This Island*, *Come From Away*, and *Beautiful: The Carol King Musical*.

However, although the female voice now appears to be accurately represented onstage, we are not done. We must look at these musicals that we idolize, and ask ourselves if women are truthfully being represented onstage. We must look at Broadway’s beloved and undeniably progressive *Hamilton* and wonder: Where are the women? Yes, there are three intelligent and savvy women featured in the musical, but upon a closer look, it is clear that each woman only

exists to further the plot of Alexander Hamilton. In Stacy Wolf's review of the show, she comments,

In the end, then, the three women in the musical occupy the most conventional and stereotypical roles—muse, wife, whore—which is all the more troubling since Hamilton goes such a long way to dismantle stereotypes of race and masculinity. In his review in *The New Yorker*, Hilton Als called the musical a “bromance” and found the female characters to be “plot point in silk.” (Wolf, *The Feminist Spectator*)

Though we have come a long way in the accurate representation of women onstage, *Hamilton* is an excellent example of why we must remain ever vigilant. We cannot be blinded or dazzled by progress. Instead, we must use it to push us further in the direction of equal representation of women and men on stage. We must promote liveness as a method of enacting change, and trust that seeing can, in fact, lead to believing. There are many who believe that we live in a time of perfect equality, and that feminism has achieved its goals. In her book, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Women's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*, Jessica Valenti argues,

There's no doubt that women have made progress, but just because we get to vote and have the “right” to work doesn't mean things are peachy keen. Anyone who thinks women have “won,” that all is well and good now, should ask why the president of Harvard can say that maybe women are naturally worse at math and then have people actually take him seriously. Or why a teacher can still get fired for being pregnant and unmarried. (Valenti 3)

Although we have made a lot of progress on the quest to accurately represent the female voice, we cannot settle. Asking questions and challenging the existing social structure of the musical theatre industry is crucial. We must ask ourselves, how can women be truthfully represented onstage when the majority of material comes from men? If men are writing the material for women, is it only an imitation of the true female voice? Perhaps the next step is to increase the number of female writers in the industry and allow the female voice and narrative to be heard on an even broader and grander scale.

There is no denying that we live in a time when women are still fighting to be heard. We still fight for our rights. We now live in an era in which women are not only asking the questions, “Who am I? What do I want?,” but also “Why don't I have what I want and how do I get it?” We

belt because we know that people cannot ignore the sound a woman who knows what she wants and is not afraid to march and protest in order to get it. We must continue to write and sing music that highlights the female struggle and represents the possibilities of total gender equality. After all, our voices have the ability to change the world.

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