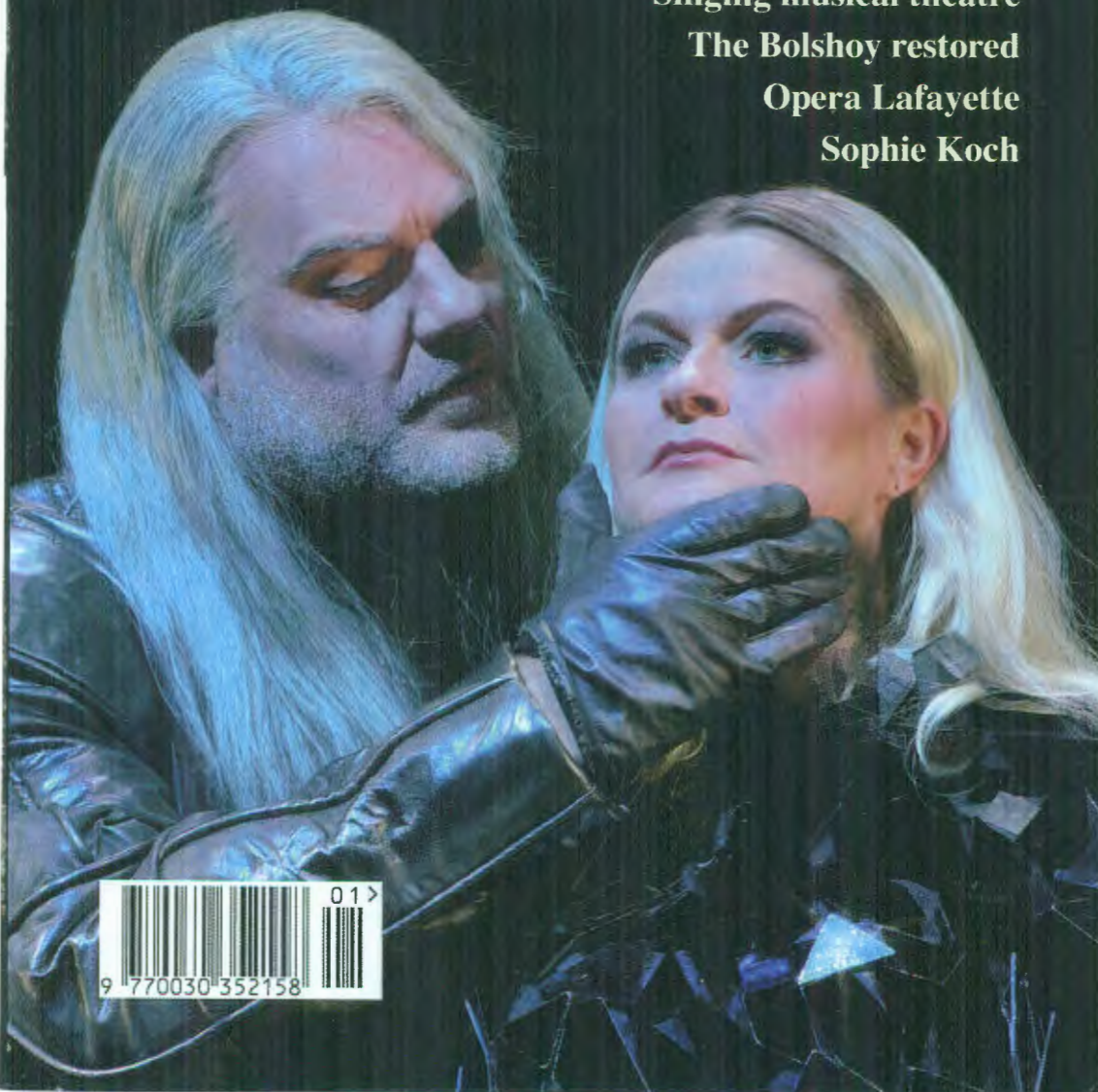


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THAT BROADWAY SOUND

Roger Pines looks at how vocalism in musical theatre has evolved over the decades

In 1979 a long-awaited revival of *Oklahoma!* arrived on Broadway. Having grown up listening to musicals, I had cherished the show's central couple, Laurey and Curley, sung by luminous sopranos and mellow-toned baritones in the 1943 original-cast album and 1955 film soundtrack. I knew the revival's singers in those roles were capable of similarly high-quality singing, yet the conductor and/or director had seemingly prevented them from achieving it. In the theatre their vocalism disappointed, with hard, brassy, un-heady tone that neglected the composer Richard Rodgers's exquisite legato.

The 'trained' voice ('legit', if you prefer) was once essential on Broadway. That sound, while generally not quite operatic in scale, offered full but smooth-textured tone, wide range, easy access to head tone, and clear, unfussy shaping of text—in effect, 'Broadway bel canto'. Then, in the 1960s, as every other aspect of life changed, musical theatre changed, too. Suddenly the 'trained' sound smacked of the opera house, from which Broadway clearly wished to stay far removed. Stylistically speaking, today's musical-theatre creators have little use for the vocal practices and sounds of the genre's Golden Age (1940s, '50s, early '60s). What is needed, however, is producers' and music directors' insistence upon 'legit' sound in the classic shows that clearly demand it.

My long-standing attraction to musical-theatre vocalism has led me to examine it over the decades. Particularly helpful on this journey has been the Metropolitan Opera Guild's massive CD set entitled *Original Cast!*, possibly the most comprehensive recorded anthology of musical theatre ever released.*

Early-20th-century Broadway didn't offer much middle ground between the comedian possessing precious little voice and the opera or operetta singer. The '20s was the era of

■ A typically mixed release from the legendary Ezio Pinza



the dancers who sang, (Fred and Adele Astaire, for example). Kern and Hammerstein's *Show Boat* (1927) stood out for vocal variety, from the opera baritone Jules Bledsoe and operetta tenor Howard Marsh (previously Romberg's first Student Prince) to two contrasting popular singers, fragile-voiced Helen Morgan and earthy Tess Gardella. The next decade found the mighty Ethel Merman achieving stardom in the shows of Gershwin and Porter. The ultimate trumpeting belter, she made every word tell, blended her registers perfectly and, when a song required it, could float admirable head tones (not those of a 'legit' soprano, obviously, but clear and sweet).

**Original Cast!: 100 Years of the American Musical Theater*. MET 800-811CD (23 discs)

A very different but equally celebrated Broadway performer, Mary Martin, also made her first splash in the 1930s. With a more limited instrument—neither pure ‘legit’ nor pure belter, and increasingly reduced in range as her career proceeded—it was Martin’s uniquely lovable personality that earned audiences’ adoration.

‘Musicals of the 1930s were built around comics,’ says today’s pre-eminent Broadway conductor, Ted Sperling, citing Merman, Bob Hope and Jimmy Durante. ‘They weren’t expected to sing in an operetta style—they were there to be personalities and be funny.’ But the more classically-orientated sound thrived, too, as in Kern’s *The Cat and the Fiddle* and *Music in the Air*, the latter starring the former Met soprano Mary Ellis.

The finest ‘legit’ ladies of the 1940s possessed an especially womanly vocal presence, especially the ultra-sophisticated Vivienne Segal, whose warm, ripe timbre didn’t impede her finely etched textual delivery. No ‘40s musical-theatre soprano sang more radiantly than Marion Bell in *Brigadoon* (listen to ‘Waitin’ for My Dearie’, with its ascending scale up to a sustained *piano* high A). Memorable, too, was the darker-voiced Patricia Morison, who brought fabulous panache to *Kiss Me, Kate*.

Among male starring roles, baritones ruled, along with one bass—the legendary Ezio Pinza (in *South Pacific* his voice so intimidated Mary Martin that she insisted their duets not involve any singing together). Other leading men could have tried opera, especially John Raitt, who auditioned for Rodgers and Hammerstein with ‘Largo al factotum’! The voices, looks and charisma of Raitt (*Carousel*) and Alfred Drake (*Oklahoma!*, *Kiss Me, Kate*) assured them of exalted stature in musical theatre. They complemented each other—Drake with luxurious tonal velvet and polished dramatic skills, Raitt with brighter timbre, even wider range and overwhelming machismo.

In the 1950s and early ‘60s, genuinely operatic instruments were welcome only when singers’ timbre, style and acting ability aptly served the work. Helen Traubel, a Wagnerian *par excellence*, was seriously miscast in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Pipe Dream*, but the Met baritone Robert Weede scored in Frank Loesser’s *The Most Happy Fella*. A vocal and dramatic powerhouse, Weede sang with a Verdian amplitude appropriate for the most operatic of 1950s musicals. In contrast, a few years later another notable—albeit lyric—Met baritone, John Reardon, appeared in *Do Re Mi* (music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green). Reardon’s character had a gorgeous ballad, ‘Make Someone Happy’, instantly appropriated by popular singers. The vocalism was thrilling, yet Reardon also served the style as persuasively as one could imagine with a Sinatra or a Tormé.

For women, the 1950s and early ‘60s were peak years for ‘legit’ sound. Would any of those voices have had the ‘oomph’ for certain lyric roles in opera? Very possibly—after all,



■ The ‘mighty’ Ethel Merman

Susan Watson was the Broadway ingénue for more than a decade, beginning with *Bye Bye Birdie* (1961), subsequently appearing in such shows as *Carnival!* (in which she succeeded the original leading lady, Anna Maria Alberghetti), and *No, No, Nanette*. After years in television and regional theatre, she again charmed Broadway in 2010 playing a supporting role in the revival of *Follies*.

Watson trained at Juilliard, 'where the opera teacher said, "I don't want you to sing anywhere else except at school." He wanted us to work on our classical sound. It was definitely "Don't harm that voice—keep it as pure and clear as you can".' Watson remembers the striking vocal contrast heard in the first production of *West Side Story*: 'Maria [Carol Lawrence] had that lovely voice and got the ballads, while Anita [Chita Rivera] had the more talk-sing, choppy, wild stuff. I wished I could sing like that—I always got the "nice-girl" roles.'

Although still on Broadway in the early 1970s, Watson had seen the writing on the wall in 1964 with *Funny Girl*, starring Barbra Streisand. 'She had a sound you loved hearing—all those colours in that one person. It was definitely not the old operatic ingénue sound anymore, and it was also not Ethel Merman or Mary Martin! Streisand pulled pop into musical theatre.'

they were filling theatres on their own power (stars weren't body-miked until *Jamaica*'s Lena Horne in 1957 and *Carnival!*'s Anna Maria Alberghetti in 1961). These soprano heroines were notably individual in timbre—think of the matchlessly dulcet-voiced Julie Andrews (*The Boy Friend*, *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot*) or a singer with a delectable lemony twist to her sound, Barbara Cook (creator of eight musical-theatre leads from 1951 to 1971). Memorably lovely vocalism could also be heard from Carol Lawrence, Doretta Morrow, Jo Sullivan and Susan Watson (see left). A standout for her luscious richness of sound was a performer too little remembered today, Priscilla Gillette, star of Cole Porter's *Out of this World* and Jerome Moross and John Latouche's *The Golden Apple*. One can easily imagine this voice in, say, 'Dove sono'. Porter's show included an exquisite ballad, 'Use Your Imagination', in which Gillette's timbre, deployed in superbly sculpted legato phrases, leaves the listener enraptured.

The careers of several gifted dancer-singers took off in the 1950s (most prominently the adorable Gwen Verdon and the fiery Chita Rivera). Merman still reigned, but two other magnificent beltors were also on hand, with voices characterized by rich cream rather than Merman-esque brass: sultry Dolores Gray




■ Susan Watson as Dolly in 'The Grass Harp' in Los Angeles, 1979

and irresistibly feisty Susan Johnson. As happens so frequently on Broadway today, the '50s found a number of well-known actors testing the musical-theatre waters. Here the greatest achievements came from Judy Holliday (*Bells are Ringing*), whose inherently dry sound proved incomparably expressive, and Rex Harrison (*My Fair Lady*) and Robert Preston (*The Music Man*), each perfecting his own distinctive, subsequently much-imitated 'talk-sing' style.

Moving into the 1960s, one encounters certain musical-theatre roles making exceptional vocal demands: the gamine Lili in *Carnival!* needing Norina's sparkle and Mimi's passion; lovelorn Lizzie in *110 in the Shade*, with soaring ballads, a powerfully dramatic soliloquy and a raucous comic duet; and the exuberant chorus girl Mary Morgan in *The Girl Who Came to Supper*, who—thanks to that show's composer-lyricist, Noël Coward—had a ten-minute, show-stopping *tour de force* that mixed music-hall and operetta styles. In the '50s and early '60s one still heard 'trained' sound from male leads, yet they couldn't be mistaken for opera singers. There was one notable exception: the magnificent Harve Presnell, the leading man of *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* in 1960 (the same year as he recorded *Carmina Burana* with the Philadelphia Orchestra). Compared with their predecessors, the others lacked both Drake's plush tone and Raitt's limitless top. Still, the finest among them—Richard Kiley, Jerry Orbach, Robert Goulet and John Cullum—offered manly sound and exceptionally sensitive phrasing. Orbach's versatility proved especially remarkable, whether in a simple, folk-like ballad (off-Broadway's *The Fantasticks*), white-hot, soul-revealing outbursts (*Carnival!*), or light, buoyant numbers by the pop-music king Burt Bacharach (*Promises, Promises*).

The Bacharach show, which opened in late 1968, confirmed the ascent of pop sound on Broadway as surely as *Hair*, earlier that year, had signalled the arrival of rock. Another



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Lisa Vroman's gleaming soprano is regularly acclaimed in musical-theatre roles all over America. Astonishingly versatile, she's the first singer to portray both Cosette and Fantine in *Les Miz* on Broadway, where she has also starred as Christine in *Phantom of the Opera*.

Vroman's control of her vocal resources is extraordinary. She recalls moving directly from stratospheric Christine to Fantine, 'which was very middle register. I learned how to let a more mature colour and weight serve me in that role. My voice had matured to the point where I knew how to switch weight. I'd take my full chest voice up to a certain place and I knew in what register and with what vowel to alter the sound. You can't go into overdrive—you have to have the training to do what is emotionally viable while staying true to your voice.'

Young singers who come to her for coaching say, 'We want to study a pop technique.' 'They think that's what Broadway is now. I say, "Why don't we just sing well?" It's like pulling teeth for them to learn to take a breath and access their head voice. They say, "Can you make me sound like this star or that star?" My response is "You are your own artist, you have your own sound. Use what you're given to stand out from the crowd."



■ Lisa Vroman as Lilli in 'Kiss me, Kate' at Glimmerglass

change in Broadway's orientation was the supremacy of the lyric. 'In opera,' notes the musical-theatre director and scholar David Bell, 'the words are really a vehicle for the music, and the lyrics don't have the same weight as they do on the Broadway stage.' The 1960s saw the first shows with both words and music by Stephen Sondheim (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*; *Anyone Can Whistle*). Although Sondheim, of course, rapidly proved himself as a truly remarkable melodist, he also created a precedent of lyrics being so vitally important as to draw shows ever further away from large-scale vocalism.

Could musicals requiring 'legit' sound exist beside rock musicals on the one hand and Sondheim on the other? Yes, when performers could also colour the text incisively while exuding vital personality, as in *On the Twentieth Century* (1978). John Cullum as the larger-than-life theatre producer Oscar Jaffe was partnered first by that priceless comedienne Madeline Kahn, whose once-splendid singing voice had lost its lustre by this time. She was replaced by the unknown—and dazzling—Judy Kaye, who became a star overnight. Kahn and Kaye played the movie queen Lily Garland, possibly the last genuinely virtuosic role for a musical-theatre soprano. On Broadway a decade later, Kaye's pristine sound and impeccable technique emerged unscathed from the cruel vocal writing inflicted on the role of Carlotta in *Phantom of the Opera*.

Which brings us to a vocally unhealthy genre—the through-composed 'pseudo-operas': *Phantom*, *Les*

Misérables, *Miss Saigon*, etc. Their composers gave characters an operatic range, but, as David Bell says, 'with the voice produced from the same place as you speak. It's trying to recreate or re-imagine a traditionally-produced sound in a vocabulary aligned to a contemporary, rock-orientated, rock-based listening audience.' Yet another reason for the de-emphasis on the 'legit' voice has been the sheer diversity of American popular music, to which Broadway has responded in depth: the past four decades have brought forth 'not just the rock sound, but also blues, country-western, gospel, '50s retro. The standard Rodgers-and-Hammerstein/Lerner-and-Loewe sound now feels out of place.'

With 'legit' sopranos losing favour, beltors now dominate. The preferred sound—clean, narrow, hard, pushed, often virtually yelled—has become numbingly predictable. The exceptions here are two artists who have captivated Broadway audiences for well over three decades: Bernadette Peters and Patti LuPone, each technically masterful, tonally distinctive, and a vibrant singing actress. Consequently this listener feels rather guilty for longing in their vocalism for a hint of the warmth of a Dolores Gray, a Susan Johnson or a Karen Morrow—the latter a memorably rich-voiced Broadway performer from 1964 to 1987. The mantle of the 'legit' sound is currently carried by several dazzlingly gifted artists who give one some semblance of hope for musical theatre's present and future. Sadly—and some readers may disagree here—male

■ *Ron Raines as Benjamin Stone in 'Follies' at New York's Marquis Theatre, 2011*



Ron Raines is arguably today's finest musical-theatre baritone. Among his Broadway credits are starring roles in major revivals of *Show Boat*, *Chicago* and, most recently, the 2010 production of *Follies*. After singing operatic roles early on, Raines carried his rigorous classical training into his musical-theatre work. 'My vocal technique allows me to do eight performances a week,' he says, citing a demanding song for Ben in *Follies*, 'Too Many Mornings', which he likens to 'soaring Puccini'. Making the opera-to-musicals transition, Raines maintained purity of line 'while being more conscious of the text. John Raitt told me once, "You've studied opera? The opera singers say 'OOOHH!' I say 'Oh!'" I knew exactly what he was talking about. The throat's open, the breath's flowing, the support's happening, but you're just not putting it in such a large form. The voice is the instrument that's telling the story.'

Raines is grateful to American opera companies for offering opportunities to sing classic musical-theatre roles. He ponders on what the newer repertoire would require of him vocally: 'I can make certain adjustments in my technique,' he says, 'but I don't want to compromise—I can't become green when I'm blue.' He was gratified when, 'thank God, Paulo Szot came to [Broadway's 2008 revival of] *South Pacific* and the "legit" sound was accepted. What's old becomes new again.'



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voices do not figure in this group, excepting Ron Raines (see previous page) and Brian Stokes Mitchell, who in major revivals has been nearly as convincing vocally as the originals, Drake (*Kiss Me, Kate*) and Kiley (*Man of La Mancha*). Too many others suffer from narrow and/or grainy timbre, a forced upper register and an insubstantial lower one. As for true head tone—sorry, not a chance.

With these two male exceptions, for the highest standards—whether onstage or in concerts—listen to the women: Lisa Vroman (see p. 8), Victoria Clark, Audra McDonald, Kelli O'Hara, Christine Ebersole and Kristin Chenoweth. They are throwbacks to earlier decades in their technical discipline, tonal shading and thoughtful response to text. Only a few new shows have fully exploited these voices' possibilities: most notably *The Light in the Piazza* (2005), in which Clark and O'Hara played a North Carolina mother and daughter vacationing in Venice; and *Grey Gardens* (2006), with Ebersole as a Long Island socialite in Act 1 and her wildly eccentric daughter in Act 2.

If the 'trained' sound—whether in new or classic shows—has become a Broadway rarity, Ted Sperling doesn't find the move away from it deliberate or prejudicial. He sees a greater emphasis these days on acting ability. 'I think you make compromises or choices when you're trying to balance the singing and the acting—trying to find the person who will be the best for the character and still deliver the music.'

Singing has also changed because of the economics of Broadway—the huge, *Les Miz*-style pieces don't dominate the scene anymore. With a smaller scale now welcomed, 'musicals have become more conversational,' says David Bell, 'and the large, operatic sound seems inappropriate to the stories these authors are trying to tell' (composers include Jeanine Tesori, Adam Guettel and Michael John LaChiusa). But given the

genre's extreme diversity nowadays, one wonders if *any* new show will lodge itself permanently in audiences' hearts, minds and ears. Should that happen, it may be due in part to composers of 'serious' musicals somehow rediscovering the value of tonal beauty and true legato. In such cases the 'legit' voice could possibly find greater favour.

At the moment, however, 'legit' singers *are* being welcomed by opera companies that produce musical theatre. Obviously, operatic artists may figure in the same cast, but they are proving themselves increasingly adept in this repertoire. New York City Opera and Houston Grand Opera first investigated musical theatre quite a few years ago, with many other companies subsequently taking the plunge. This season, for example, Lyric Opera of Chicago unveils the director Francesca Zambello's new *Show Boat*, starring Nathan Gunn. For 2013 Lyric has already announced a new *Oklahoma!*, a show anticipated at Central City Opera this summer. Opera Theatre of Saint Louis will soon serve up *Sweeney Todd*, starring Broadway's Ron Raines, who began his career in opera. In Europe, where many major companies were exploring musicals several decades ago, Paris's Châtelet is reviving its sumptuous production of *The Sound of Music* this season, and *My Fair Lady* is on display in at least 15 German houses.

For the moment, then—at least where the classic shows are concerned—we can count on opera companies to keep the banner flying for great musical-theatre vocalism.

Readers' letters

Mystery solved

The 'unidentified agent' pictured next to Jussi Björling in Stephen Hastings's very enjoyable and perceptive profile of the tenor (November, p. 1314) is Martin Taubman, one of the most prominent managers in Europe and America after the war. He represented many major artists of the time, from Björling to Knappertsbusch and George London. The business was continued by his assistant Rita Dixon and is now called Balmer & Dixon Management.

Ruth Uebel
Via email

Covent Garden coughers

Am I alone in finding the level of coughing at Covent Garden intolerable? Virtually every performance there is now spoiled by people who cough loudly, without any attempt to stifle the noise or to cover their mouths. It seems to me that you are as likely to pick up a germ as you are to enjoy a performance. I am less aware of this being a problem at the

London Coliseum, the Royal Festival Hall or elsewhere. And while I have contacted the Royal Opera in the hope that something might be said before each performance, they are reluctant to extend their pre-performance announcements.

What can be done?
Paul Kitchiner
Via email

Second Sieglinde?

In his review of the recent San Francisco *Ring* (October, pp. 1233-5), Allan Ulrich writes: 'Heidi Melton, a former company Adler Fellow, returned on June 29 for the first Sieglinde of her career.' Actually, Melton, winner of the second prize in the 2009 José Iturbi Competition, sang the role in Glasgow on 30 September 2010.

Andrée Ouellet
Montreal

[That is true—but the Glasgow performance was a concert of Act 1 only, making her San Francisco Sieglinde her first complete assumption on stage—Ed.]