

# Music in Theatre

A portfolio of compositions and  
accompanying commentary

by

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Submitted for degree of M. Litt. in Music

to the Department of Music,

Maynooth University, Maynooth

2019

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Ryan Molloy for all his help and encouragement throughout the completion of this masters, and without whom this would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank the entire Music Department for all their assistance and support.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their never-ending support throughout this masters.

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## **Introduction**

This write-up accompanies a portfolio of compositions under the category of music in theatre. These compositions have been created with a view to explore a soundworld inspired by different genres within the realm of music in theatre, primarily opera and musical theatre. The music I have written reflects the research that I have conducted of these genres, and demonstrates musical elements that are frequently associated with each genre, but not typically used together in one piece of music. I have chosen to focus primarily on these two genres because I am intrigued by the vastly different critical reception, public perception and general popularity of the art forms. The chasm in the reception of these two examples of music in theatre is made all the more interesting given the fact that they are (seemingly) very similar genres. The following dissertation details the research that I have completed prior to completing the compositions more explicitly, and serves to further validate the portfolio of music as a product of academic investigation.

In Chapter 1, I will discuss my background as a musician and musical director within the sphere of musical theatre, and illustrate my personal interest in the genre. I will outline my reasons for conducting this research, and justify my statements regarding the perception of opera as a 'high art' form, and musical theatre as a 'low art' form.

In Chapter 2 I will outline the history of musical theatre. I will briefly discuss music and theatre in the nineteenth century, before offering more in-depth examination of musical theatre throughout the twentieth- twenty-first- century. This will involve examining the forms of entertainment that evolved into what we now know as musical theatre, and discussing the shifting public perception that surrounded these art-forms before arriving at the dichotomy that we now see today between musical theatre and opera.

In Chapter 3 I shall discuss contemporary musical theatre, aiming to distinguish musical theatre as a genre. I will examine the various musical genres and styles that can be heard within today's musicals, and detail elements that identify them as examples of postmodern art. I shall investigate the factors that have led to the differences in cultural capital associated with musical theatre, such as wealth disparity between audiences and the positive and negative class associations that people perceive when thinking about these genres. I will also use musical parameters such as rhythm, instrumentation and tonal language to observe commonalities between contemporary musicals with a view to define the genre in clearer terms.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I will discuss my compositions *The Ghosts of Detention* and *Macbeth* respectively. I shall explain why I chose those texts and will offer an analysis of the music to which they were set. I shall discuss the compositional choices I made with reference to the research I have completed, and make a case for the music as a product of the exploration of different soundworlds that exist in the realm of music in theatre.

To conclude I shall reflect on my research and discuss areas of music in theatre that could be further explored from both an academic and compositional standpoint.

## Chapter 1: “Don’t mention Andrew Lloyd Webber”

‘When they ask you to mention your favourite composer, whatever you do, don’t mention Andrew Lloyd Webber’. This advice, which was given as part of a workshop to help students with upcoming entrance exams for music degrees (arguably best left anonymous), was greeted by a knowing chuckle from around the room. A chuckle that I found somewhat puzzling at the time. Yet the separation of musical theatre from the world of modern art music, opera and other musical theatrical forms was something that would become apparent to me in time. A separation that has both intrigued and bothered me, given my background. I have been involved in numerous musical productions as a musician, musical director and occasional performer. Musical theatre is an art form that I have great respect for, while also being one that I, for some time now, have simply accepted as a low art form without much questioning. This cognitive dissonance is what inspired me to pursue this research, through the means of composition. There are of course numerous examples of musical theatrical productions within the realm of art music that do not perfectly fit into the category of opera. Monodramas such as Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) come to mind, and twentieth- and twenty-first century composers have explored various ways to add an element of theatre into their music, for example involving instrumentalists in the drama or visual performance as can be seen in Maxwell Davies’ *Eight Songs For A Mad King* (1969) or Heiner Goebbels’ *Schwarz auf Weiss* (1996). However, I am primarily interested in comparing musical theatre to opera, given the strong element of narrative that both of these genres share. The commercial success of these genres is also comparable, although in the case of opera twentieth- and twenty-first century works are considerably less popular than that of the nineteenth century. According to *Operabase*’s list of the ten most popular operas of the 2015/2016 season, operas by Verdi appear twice, Puccini and Mozart three times each, and



Bizet and Rossini both once.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, musical theatre is a genre in which new productions, even those composed within the last ten years, are often the most popular. For example, Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* has broken countless records, including the most *Tony Award* nominations ever in 2016,<sup>2</sup> and the most *Olivier Awards* ever won for a musical (tied with Tim Minchin's *Matilda*, 2012) in 2018.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, opera is still held to a much higher esteem by the general public. In 2011 *The Guardian* asked its readers what they thought the differences between opera and musical theatre were, with some humorous yet interesting results.<sup>4</sup>

One is a blowsy, overblown and preposterous melodrama played out to a hysterical score. The other usually features some dancing.

*Steve Pine, Brighton*

When someone starts singing after being stabbed, its an opera.

*Michael Whooley, Dublin*

Sit through a performance of *Götterdämmerung* and slowly but surely the truth will dawn.

*Barry Jackett, Barton-on-Sea Hants*

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor Gills, *Top 10 Most Popular Operas in the World*, <<https://www.operasense.com/most-popular-operas/>>, accessed 10 October, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Playbill staff, *See Full List of 2016 Tony Award Nominations*, <<http://www.playbill.com/article/2016-tony-nominations-are-being-revealed>>, accessed 10 October 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The Stage, *Olivier Awards 2018: the winners in full*, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2018/olivier-awards-2018-the-winners-in-full/>>, accessed 10 October 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Reader answers, *Notes and queries: What's the difference between operas and musicals? Is getting there quicker cheaper? The house where Handel and Hendrix lived*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/may/04/difference-between-opera-and-musical>>, accessed 27 November 2017.

Snobbery.

*Art Butler, Luton*

Ears.

*Steven Thomson, London W6*

Operas are for cultured people with refined aesthetic taste. They are subsidised.

Musicals are song and dance for the rest of us, and are not.

*Richard Broad, Kinvara, Co Galway*

Fig 1. *The Guardian* readers' answers to 'What distinguishes an opera from a musical?'

None of these responses are particularly positive, but they do show a considerable amount about the general public's opinion on what separates musical theatre from opera. The element of dance in musical theatre is noted twice, and while it is true that musical theatre singers are more likely to perform significant dance routines than opera singers are, it is a somewhat arbitrary distinction to make given the fact that not all musicals rely heavily on dancing, and ballet and other stage movement is often incorporated into many operas. The melodramatic (referring to the exaggerated and dramatic nature of many operas rather than the genre of melodrama) storylines of opera are also referred to, however dramatic storylines are a feature of many musicals too, such as the mega-musicals of Boublil and Schoenberg. In fact, many popular pieces of musical theatre are retellings of operas. Jonathon Larsson's *Rent* is a retelling of Puccini's *La bohème*, and principal protagonist Roger's guitar theme incorporates the melody of *Musetta's Waltz*. The difference that is of the most interest to me is the classification of opera as being a higher art form, which is evident from the mention of 'snobbery' and talk of 'cultured people with refined aesthetic taste'.

As a composer-performer, my theories regarding how and why such a divide has occurred between the genres are informed by my own personal experience and observations,

and supported by preliminary contextual study into this apparent dichotomy. I will examine the history of musical theatre, public perception of the genre as an art-form, and musical features of the genre that are typically not found in opera. The music that I have set reflects this research and these observations, and serves as my attempt to explore a soundworld that lies between musical theatre and opera.

## Chapter 2: Historical context

### 2.1. Music and theatre before the twentieth century

To quote musicologist and composer Edith Borroff, ‘The history of musical comedy begins in confusion’.<sup>5</sup> A vast array of art-forms combining both music and theatre have existed for centuries, and so there is no specific show or production that can be objectively credited as the first musical. It is also very difficult to trace geographical origins of the genre. Take the following quote by Miles Kreuger, president and founder of the *Institute of the American Musical*; ‘Like most elements in American culture (except jazz), the musical's earliest roots are European’. This contrasts sharply with prolific drama critic Martin Gottfried’s assertion that ‘Unlike our dramas, musicals are purely American as a stage form’.<sup>6</sup> However, there is a general consensus amongst many scholars, such as Katherine Preston and Susan L. Porter, that the birth of musical theatre as we know it today took place in North America sometime between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Prior to this, 1735 saw the first example of an opera in English-speaking America, *Flora, or, Hole in the Wall*. From the 1730s to the Revolution, touring or ‘strolling’ companies were a common form of entertainment, and these travelling thespians resumed their activities after the War.<sup>8</sup> By the early nineteenth century at least half of the theatrical activity in America was musical in nature. Every theatre had an orchestra, and an evening’s entertainment could contain four to five hours of performances. A typical performance would open with ‘waiting music’ played by the orchestra, followed by a prologue which in turn was followed by the principal dramatic work. After this came a shorter farce or pantomime as the afterpiece, and

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<sup>5</sup>Katherine K. Preston, ‘American musical theatre before the twentieth century’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3-28: 3.

<sup>6</sup> Edith Boroff, ‘Origin of Species: Conflicting Views of American Musical Theater History’, *American Music* 2/4, (1984), 101-112: 101.

<sup>7</sup> Preston, ‘American musical theatre before the twentieth century’, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

both the afterpiece and mainpiece would incorporate songs and dances performed by the actors. The night would conclude with variety of songs, dances and pieces performed by the orchestra, and it was not uncommon for the repertory to be chosen in response to audience requests.<sup>9</sup> American theatre in the final decades of the eighteenth century was heavily influenced by Britain, with comic operas, costumes, scripts and even actors coming from there. However, towards the final decade of the century, it became more common to see musical-theatrical works written in America such as operas by James Hewitt and Benjamin Carr.<sup>10</sup>

In the nineteenth century melodrama came to America, a European theatrical form that combined spoken dialogue with musical passages.<sup>11</sup> As years went by the emphasis on music in these melodramas increased, and the productions often made use of ‘melos’ such as ‘hurry music’, ‘sorrow’, ‘diabolical music’ etc.<sup>12</sup> It was also common for French ballet dancers who toured America to perform as a part of these productions, creating a crossover between ballet-pantomime and melodrama.<sup>13</sup> Around this time it became common for ‘vocal stars’ to visit, often from Britain. Initially these singers were most likely to perform in English comic and ballad operas, pantomimes and melodramas, but as the years progressed and the quality of performance increased, foreign-language operas (particularly Italian) and more difficult *bel canto* operas became popular among audiences of all economic backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> Around the 1840s there was no clear distinction between opera and other forms of musical theatre, or even theatre, however around the 1850s a stratification between

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<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Adams Hoover, ‘Music in Eighteenth-Century American Theater’, *American Music* 2/4, (1984), 6-18: 7-11.

<sup>10</sup> Susan L. Porter, ‘English-American Interaction in American Musical Theater at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century’, *American Music* 4/1, (1986), 6-19: 10.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Dhu Shapiro, ‘Action Music in American Pantomime and Melodrama, 1730-1913’, *American Music* 2/4, (1984), 49-72: 56.

<sup>12</sup> Preston, ‘American musical theatre before the twentieth century’, 7

<sup>13</sup> Shapiro, ‘Action Music in American Pantomime and Melodrama, 1730-1913’, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Preston, ‘American musical theatre before the twentieth century’, 9

genres and economic class of audiences began to occur.<sup>15</sup> Blackface minstrelsy began to rival melodrama in popularity, and it featured singing, dancing but also irreverent humour.<sup>16</sup> Burlesque (without the striptease element it became known for later) and pantomime also became popular forms of entertainment.<sup>17</sup> Towards the end of the century a variety of these popular genres such as burlesque, minstrelsy, opera, melodrama, pantomime, dance and plays with songs began to evolve and crossover with each other. New styles such as operetta, farce-comedy and spectacle/extravaganza as well as continuation of variety shows became common.<sup>18</sup> 1866 saw the premiere of Thomas Baker's *The Black Crook*, which is cited by many as one of the first real precursors to the modern day musical.<sup>19</sup> With a running-time of five-and-a-half hours, it is arguably much longer than the musical theatre of today, however it combined many elements of popular forms of theatre at the time, such as elements of melodrama, fantasy, ballet, and spectacular sets and costumes.<sup>20</sup> Edward Everett Rice's *Evangeline; or the Belle of Acadie* (1874), is another example of a show that combines many popular contemporary theatrical elements, such as the humour of minstrelsy or burlesque, and the songs, dances and chorus numbers of comic operas.<sup>21</sup>

Over the last thirty years of the century, an observable split between 'high' and 'low' culture can be observed in the various theatrical forms, a split that is very much observable today. This occurred as the American population grew, making it more economically viable for theatres to engage in 'niche marketing'. Foreign-language opera gradually became more elitist, while English language opera and other forms of musical theatre became more and

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<sup>15</sup> Preston, 'American musical theatre before the twentieth century', 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-15

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Porter, 'English-American Interaction in American Musical Theater at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century', 103-110.

<sup>20</sup> Preston, 'American musical theatre before the twentieth century', 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

more catered to the general public. Sometimes foreign-language operas were translated into English and marketed as ‘opera for the people’.<sup>22</sup> This era also saw the rise of theatres devoted specifically to other forms of musical entertainment, such as variety entertainment. The genre was seen as somewhat disreputable due to its association with saloons and often inappropriate material and humour, so managers of these theatres such as Tony Pastor began to make the content of the show more family-friendly and use the term ‘vaudeville entertainment’ to describe the shows.<sup>23</sup> These variety shows often contained extended comic skits, that eventually evolved to performances that resemble today’s musical comedies. This evolution was pioneered by the actor, lyricist and playwright Edward Harrigan and the actor Tony Hart, who together were known as *Harrigan and Hart*. Despite initially finding success performing songs and sketches in Irish character and in blackface, by the 1870s the duo were expanding these sketches into one-act pieces and eventually longer dramas.<sup>24</sup> Harrigan also collaborated with established theatre composer Dave Braham to produce a series of comical musical plays, such as *The Mulligan Guard*. While the first version of this show in 1873 was only a ten-minute long production comprising three or four songs, dialogue, and ‘gags and business’, the sketch evolved into a full-length play that, in turn, spawned an entire cycle of related ‘Mulligan’ musical plays that were performed in America throughout the 1880s and into the 1890s.<sup>25</sup> The duo are also credited with creating productions that constructed a sense of New York Irish identity, attracting both upper-class and lower-class audiences.<sup>26</sup> Another genre that expanded into full length musical plays was vaudeville. An itinerant vaudeville troupe known as ‘The Four Cohans’ expanded a vaudeville sketch into a show called *The*

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<sup>22</sup> Preston, ‘American musical theatre before the twentieth century’, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Porter, ‘English-American Interaction in American Musical Theater at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century’, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Gillian M. Rodger, ‘Harrigan, Edward Green’, in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <<https://doi-org.jproxy.nuim.ie/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2283102>>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Preston, ‘American musical theatre before the twentieth century’, 26-27.

<sup>26</sup> Michelle Granshaw, ‘Beyond the Caricature: Harrigan, Hart, and Braham’s Music and the Construction of New York Irish Identity’, *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 19/3 (2007), 51-78:51.

*Governor's Son* in 1901. Although the show itself was not successful, one of the troupe's members, George Cohan, created the musical play *Little Johnny Jones* in 1904, which is another show often credited as being the first American musical.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.2. The twentieth century

The musical activity of America before the twentieth century shows that musical theatre was a very varied and changeable art form. Although the final decades of the nineteenth century showed a breakdown between what was considered high art and low art, for at least the first third of the twentieth century composers and performers moved readily between variety, film musicals, burlesque, revues and book musicals.<sup>28</sup> The evolution of operetta into what is often considered musical theatre is worthy of note in the early twentieth century. The genre was popular, partly due its sense of nostalgia and escapism. Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century operettas, or light operas, were often set in a fictionalised Balkan domain with nobles and peasants, such as Franz Lehar's *The Merry Widow*, of which an English version (1907) was immensely popular. However, the desire for European or Germanic undertones ceased following World War I, and operetta had to adapt to this cultural shift. Yet the genre still retained its element of escapism. While contemporary musical comedies centred on contemporary, every-day characters in comic situations, operettas were situated in remote times or places, and as European regions such as Germany were no longer as popular, plots began to reflect the growing fascination with exoticism.<sup>29</sup> An example of this is Rudolph Friml's *Katinka* (1915), a musically eclectic show with

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<sup>27</sup> Preston, 'American musical theatre before the twentieth century', 27.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>29</sup> William A. Everett, 'American and British operetta in the 1920s: romance, nostalgia and adventure.' in in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 72-88: 72-73



Viennese, American and Arabian characters that made use of pentatonic melodies to create a sense of orientalism.<sup>30</sup> The genre remained immensely popular for quite some time, and in the 1920s six out of the eleven longest-running musicals were operettas.<sup>31</sup> The genre proved to be pivotal in shaping the future of musical theatre.

The dramatic model provided the foundations for the musical plays that were to dominate this era, and for various film adaptations, revivals, parodies and pastiches. In contrast to the splendour and exoticism of operetta, musical theatre and musical comedies of the 1920s to 1940s favoured stories often set in America. These shows drew musical inspiration from a variety of sources including operetta and contemporary styles such as ragtime, blues, jazz and - after 1930 - swing.<sup>32</sup> Composers such Cole Porter, George Gershwin and Richard Rodgers dominated much of this era, and many shows from this period are still popular today, such as Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's *Show Boat* (1927). *Show Boat* in particular marked a turning point in musical theatre, given the more serious and political storyline and operatic elements.<sup>33</sup> It became the prototype for the 'musical play' as opposed to the 'musical comedy', or 'American operetta'. These musical plays were popularised by further works from the team of Rodgers and Hammerstein.<sup>34</sup> Shows such as *Oklahoma!* (1943) were not only immensely popular but also innovative in their structure. The show integrated music and dance as a vital part of the storytelling, as opposed to the contemporary and earlier shows which primarily used songs and dance numbers as entertaining interludes. Rodgers and Hammerstein jokingly commented on other

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<sup>30</sup> Everett, 'American and British operetta in the 1920s: romance, nostalgia and adventure.', 74.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Block, 'The melody (and the words) linger on: American musical comedies of the 1920s and 1930s' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 103-123: 110.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Ann Shears, 'The coming of the musical play: Rogers and Hammerstein' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 147-163: 148

more unusual aspects of the show that had the potential to make it a failure; ‘the chorus girls didn’t appear until the curtain had been up for forty minutes; the first act had no plot except a girl deciding which young man to go to a dance with; there were virtually no important new numbers in the second act; and so on.’<sup>35</sup> It showed that musical theatre did not need to be limited to simplistic American Cinderella stories. The story of *Oklahoma!* is set approximately forty years earlier than when it was created, and showed that historical eras, even ones that were not particularly glamorous, could be portrayed in a sentimental way while avoiding farce or parody.<sup>36</sup> Musical theatre from the 1940s onwards focused on both contemporary romantic stories, such as *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), but also shows with a fantasy element such as *Brigadoon* (1947).<sup>37</sup>

This period also saw another level of sophistication added to musical theatre as renowned composers such as Leonard Bernstein and Kurt Weill contributed to the entertainment form. Regarded as prototypical ‘crossover composers’, they composed in cultivated forms, such as the symphony and chamber music, and in vernacular genres, such as film scoring and the musical.<sup>38</sup> Weill’s 1941 musical play *Lady in the Dark*, which dramatised a woman undergoing psychoanalysis, showcased very innovative treatment of musical leitmotifs that were central to the plot. Weill fragmented phrases from a childhood song of the protagonist’s nightmares, and resolved tonally ambiguous musical phrases to parallel the heroine’s psychoanalytical treatment.<sup>39</sup> The musically eclectic *Street Scene* (1947) featured music in the style of late nineteenth-century Italian opera as well as contemporary

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas L. Riis and Ann Shears, ‘The successors of Rogers and Hammerstein from the 1940s to the 1960s’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 164-189: 165.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 164

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 166

<sup>38</sup> Bruce D. McClung and Paul R. Laird, ‘Musical sophistication on Broadway: Kurt Weill and Leonard Bernstein.’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 190-201: 191

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-194.

styles such as blues, jitterbugs and children's songs for different characters. It was Weill's goal to create 'a special brand of musical theatre which would completely integrate drama and music, spoken word, song and movement', and the show has been billed as both a 'dramatic musical' and 'American opera', showing the arbitrary nature of these distinctions.<sup>40</sup> Similar to Weill, Leonard Bernstein made use of various musical styles in his Broadway productions, and shows such as the ever popular *West Side Story* (1957) availed of an eclectic range of genres and Wagnerian-style treatment of leitmotifs to add a new level of sophistication to Broadway.<sup>41</sup> *West Side Story* also became a prototype for the fully integrated musical, in that it showcased a true integration of dance into the show and the arrival of the choreographer-director.<sup>42</sup>

Musical theatre began to establish itself as more than plays with music; the element of music and dance became intrinsic to the storytelling. Choreographers such as Bob Fosse (*Sweet Charity* (1966), *Chicago* (1975)) became renowned figures for their contribution to the development of the fully integrated musical.<sup>43</sup> 1967 saw the premiere of *Hair*, widely regarded to be the first rock musical, although the term 'rock musical' remains a somewhat nebulous term.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, rock music had made in appearance on Broadway in the 1960 show *Bye Bye, Birdie*.<sup>45</sup> However *Hair* was considerably more innovative both musically and dramatically. It employed avant-garde theatre techniques such as the breaking of the fourth wall through audience interaction. The show was created in an era when the New York theatre community was attempting to make theatre more relevant to modern-day life, and the

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<sup>40</sup> McClung and Laird, 'Musical sophistication on Broadway: Kurt Weill and Leonard Bernstein.', 193-194

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 200-201

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Scott Warfield, 'From Hair to Rent: is rock a four letter word on Broadway'. in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 235-249: 235.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 236

use of rock music was highly effective in the modernisation of 1960s musical theatre.<sup>46</sup> The music contained prominent basslines and strong back-beats, and while it favoured the verse-chorus format song that was typical of Broadway, it did not feature the complex harmonies associated with showtunes and instead used the harmonic language of 1960s rock.<sup>47</sup> In 1970, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* made the transition from album to stage show, and boasted an eclectic range of musical styles such as progressive rock and vaudeville. Billed as a 'rock opera', the show contained little to no dialogue, and included the use of recitative passages to aid in the story telling, a trend that continued with the rise of the megamusical.<sup>48</sup>

The megamusical, often categorised as 'poperas', and are typically sung-through productions where great emphasis is placed on set design, choreography, special effects and dramatic storylines concerning aspects of human suffering and redemption.<sup>49</sup> Many of today's most popular musicals, such as *The Phantom of the Opera* (Andrew Lloyd Webber, 1986), *Les Miserables* (1980), and *Miss Saigon* (1989) are archetypal examples. Building on the sophistication of 1950s musical theatre, composers such as Claude-Michel Schoenberg used music to enhance the dramatic plot. In *Les Miserables*, the shared musical material of Javert and Valjean represents how the two seemingly opposite characters are united in different ways.<sup>50</sup> Andrew Lloyd-Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* 'made opera hip, after half a century of being outflanked by musical comedy and the musical play' according to Mark Steyn.<sup>51</sup> Although the classification of *The Phantom of the Opera* as a modern opera is

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<sup>46</sup> Warfield, 'From Hair to Rent: is rock a four letter word on Broadway', 236

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 238

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 242

<sup>49</sup> Paul Prece and William A. Everett 'The megamusical: the creation, internationalisation and impact of a genre'. in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 250-269: 250.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 253

<sup>51</sup> Prece and Everett 'The megamusical: the creation, internationalisation and impact of a genre', 261

a somewhat controversial one that many would disagree with, the music is clearly influenced by both the musical style of nineteenth century opera, as well as contemporary rock music. The mega-musical is perhaps one of the most influential classifications within twentieth century musical theatre, with many of today's most popular musicals fitting into the category. The final decades of the century also saw the adaptation of popular films into musicals, such as *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1980), *Sunset Boulevard* (1994), and *The Lion King* (1994).<sup>52</sup> The genre remains incredibly popular in the twenty-first century. In fact, all the nominees for Best Musical at the 72nd *Tony Awards* (2018) were shows based on films or television programmes (*The Band's Visit*, *Frozen*, *Mean Girls* and *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical*).<sup>53</sup>

The jukebox musical, which is a musical that avails of pre-existing songs, also grew in popularity around the end of the twentieth century. Early examples include *Ain't Misbehavin'*, (1978) which featured the music of Fats Waller, although perhaps the most popular example of this genre is ABBA's *Mamma Mia!* (1999), which has gone on to become one of the longest running musicals of all time.<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that both the film adaptation musical and jukebox musical are clever conceptions, in that they both deal with material that audiences are already familiar with, thus increasing the chances of financial success. Nowadays, a plethora of musical genres can be seen within musical theatre, although musicals with a scores inspired by popular music genres such as pop and rock tend to dominate the world of new musical theatre. In recent years, with the success of Lin -Manuel

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<sup>52</sup> Garrett Eisler and Jessica Sternfeld, "Musical theatre 9: 1975-2000", *Grove Music Online*, <<https://doi-org.jproxy.nuim.ie/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2262833>> accessed 20 October 2018.

<sup>53</sup> CBS, *72nd Annual Tony Awards: The Complete List Of Nominees*, <[https://www.cbs.com/shows/tony\\_awards/news/1008494/72nd-annual-tony-awards-the-complete-list-of-nominees-/](https://www.cbs.com/shows/tony_awards/news/1008494/72nd-annual-tony-awards-the-complete-list-of-nominees-/)> accessed 20 October 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Bud Coleman, 'New horizons: the musical at the dawn of the twenty-first century'. in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, second edition, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 284-301: 289.

Miranda's *In The Heights* (2008) and the extraordinarily popular *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015) hip-hop and rap are also making their way into the world of musical theatre.

## Chapter 3: Contemporary Musical Theatre

### 3.1 Musical theatre as a genre, postmodern art-form and ‘low culture’ entertainment:

Even after looking at over two centuries’ worth of music and theatrical activity, it is difficult to note any consistent, observable differences between what we now know as musical theatre and opera, particularly with regards to the music itself. I have found that there are countless sources of information regarding the history of musical theatre in the twentieth century, but very little literature that can objectively discern exactly what makes a musical a musical. Much of the history of musical theatre details descriptions of the evolution of storylines, details of the production etc., but it is somewhat difficult to find literature that is purely devoted to defining the factors that distinguish musical theatre from other musical and theatrical genres, especially the purely musical ones. The music of musical theatre has drawn influence from countless genres, from nineteenth-century opera to rock, pop and hip-hop. In a sense musical theatre, particularly that from the 1970s onwards, may be viewed as a postmodern art form. Frederic Jameson has asserted that pastiche is one of the most prominent features of postmodernism, which he defines as ‘blank parody’. Like parody, pastiche relies on the imitation or mimicry of other styles and genres within an art form, but without the humorous and satirical nature of parody.<sup>55</sup> Within the realm of musical theatre, pastiche has become a very common for composers to evoke certain eras or settings. From the jazz style numbers in *Chicago* to the Eastern influence in songs such ‘The Wedding Ceremony’ in *Miss Saigon* to the 1960s style of *Hairspray*, composers will often write in a particular musical style to aid in the portrayal of a particular time period or location.

Conversely, musical theatre often draws from an eclectic range of styles within one show, or may feature music that is seemingly at odds with the setting of the show. Examples

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<sup>55</sup> Frederic Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, *Postmodern Culture* 115/11 (1985).

include the rap music of *Hamilton*, which tells the story of one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, or the rock score of *Spring Awakening*, which is set in nineteenth-century Germany. The modern music in these shows does not appear to fit the world in which they are set, and instead serve to highlight how the themes and challenges faced by the characters are still relevant to some extent today. *Hamilton* is billed as ‘An American Musical’ and, as a genre of music with roots in America, the hip-hop score represents this, while the rock music of *Spring Awakening* connects the struggles of the adolescent protagonists to the struggles of teenagers today.

Postmodern thinking in musical theatre is also evident in the form of collage and musical eclecticism co-existing in single works, one example of this being *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (Richard Thomas, 2001). The show is commonly referred to as a musical rather than an opera as its title would suggest, even though it is almost entirely sung through. The music of the show is extremely eclectic in nature, with styles ranging from baroque fugues and nineteenth-century opera to rock and bossa nova style numbers, as well as the inclusion of more modern, less-tonally rooted harmonies. Often these styles do not appear to fit the characters at all, and although one may assume this is for comic effect, it may also be reflective of the postmodern drive for what David Harvey called ‘discontinuity over continuity, difference over similarity and indeterminacy over rational logic’.<sup>56</sup> However, Frederic Jameson posits that the dawn of postmodernism heralded an erosion of the ambiguous line between low and high culture.<sup>57</sup> I would argue that in the realm of musical theatre, this is not the case. Rather than an erosion of the boundary between high and low culture, the history of musical theatre shows that this line between musical theatre and opera in fact became more pronounced over the course of the century. By calculation of Peterson

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<sup>56</sup> Jann Pasler, ‘Postmodernism’, in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <<https://doi-org.jproxy.nuim.ie/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40721>>, Accessed 19 October, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’.



and Simkus, the music of the musicals is ranked third in terms of high aesthetic value after classical (which includes opera), and folk music.<sup>58</sup>

Why exactly does this divide exist? Trying to answer this question proves itself to be almost as difficult as trying to define what exactly musical theatre is. As we have observed, the final decades of the nineteenth century saw the establishment of foreign-language opera as a more elitist art-form than English-language opera and other forms of musical theatre. Theatre companies were able to market these operas and shows to specific audiences and create a divide between the socially elite and the general public. According to Marxist theory, “high culture” and “low culture” are social constructions which represent divisions between different economic classes.<sup>59</sup> Yet while the concept of musical theatre as an art form with much less cultural capital than opera still exists today, the same social divide between audiences does not exist, at least not in terms of wealth. The Survey of the Public Participation of in the Arts (1982, 1992, and 2002) indicated that 41.5% of musical theatre audience members are making \$75,000 or more yearly.<sup>60</sup> So why is opera still considered more elitist than musical theatre?

Bethany Bryson has suggested that ‘individuals use cultural taste to reinforce symbolic boundaries between themselves and categories of people they dislike’.<sup>61</sup> Typically, popular culture is seen as something that is consumed by the least educated people in society, whereas more educated, upper-class people look to consume with greater discretion.<sup>62</sup> The popular music influence that is heard in musical theatre may therefore be a large reason as to

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<sup>58</sup> Jung Park, ‘Musical Theater as a Bourgeois or High Art’, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal Convention Center, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, Aug 10, 2006, <[http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/1/0/4/2/7/pages104276/p104276-1.php](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/0/4/2/7/pages104276/p104276-1.php)>, Accessed 18 October, 2018, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>60</sup> Park, ‘Musical Theater as a Bourgeois or High Art’, 1

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

why the boundary exists, as well as the highly commercial nature of musical theatre. The culturally elite wish to distance themselves from this financially driven aspect, as it is perceived to cater to the lowest of society. It cannot be denied that artistic decisions are often made within musical theatre with the sole hope of being financially successful. The jukebox musical, film adaptation musical and the practice of stunt casting celebrities in musical roles (often for roles that they would not have a chance of obtaining without their celebrity status) are clever marketing techniques that would often make one doubt the artistic credibility and authenticity of the musical theatre genre. However, I would posit that while musical theatre is at times a genre that places much more emphasis on financial success than twentieth and twenty first century opera does, this does not mean that the inclusion of accessible musical genres or adaptation of already familiar material is always a mere marketing ploy. The inclusion of rap in *Hamilton* may be interpreted as a shrewd business move, given the fact that rap is a genre that dominates the charts nowadays. It may also be interpreted as a brilliant decision reflective of postmodern thinking that avails of a popular modern musical genre to juxtapose with the setting of eighteenth-century America, while also uniting the America of today with the America of the show. This ultimately depends on the show in question, and one's level of cynicism.

### **3.2 Defining musical theatre**

Ultimately, my goal as a composer is not to define a clear-cut reason as to why musical theatre is considered a lower art form than opera, not out of lack of curiosity but because in order to do so would require a clear-cut definition of what exactly musical theatre *is*. I would propose that to do this would require a great deal more research from both a musicological and sociological point of view. Rather, my interest lies in the soundworld

between these genres and the potential that can be explored there from a composer's perspective. To do this, it is necessary to note some of the most common differences that can *typically* be noted between musical theatre and opera. These differences are by no means a definitive list, but rather ones that I myself have observed and found to be useful concerning my own compositional work. This is another area that I propose requires more scholarly research.

### *3.2a Musical theatre as a narrative*

The importance of storyline in musicals is perhaps one of the most interesting distinctions between it and opera. The history of musical theatre shows how the genre as we know it today ultimately has its roots in operetta and English-language opera, which then developed into musical plays. The specification of English-language opera is important here. It can be argued that in musical theatre, the lyrics, dialogue and (ultimately) the storyline is more important than the music. The reasoning for this lies in how musicals are typically performed in the language that will be most widely understood by the audience, even if they were originally performed in another language. One example of this is *Les Misérables*, which was written and premiered in the French language but has always been performed in the West End and Broadway in English.<sup>63</sup> The same translations do not occur in the world of opera, certainly not nowadays. The conclusion I would draw here is that in opera, ultimately the music takes precedence over the narrative or theme of the show, while in musical theatre the converse holds true. Further evidence of this theory lies in the existence of the jukebox musical, in which pre-existing songs are adapted into a musical play format. The emphasis with these musicals is not so much on the composition of new music as it is on availing of

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<sup>63</sup> Prece and Everett, 'The megamusical: the creation, internationalisation and impact of a genre', 253.

songs with lyrics that lend themselves to be adapted to the telling of a story, examples of which include *We Will Rock You* based on the music of *Queen*, and *Rock of Ages* which makes use of many popular songs from the 1980s. Jukebox musicals may also use the music of a particular artist to tell their story, with shows such as *Jersey Boys* and *Sunny Afternoon* being examples of this. Either way, the jukebox musical and its emphasis on narrative over original music further validates the theory of plot as the main driving force of musical theatre.

### *3.2b Instrumentation in contemporary musical theatre*

It is evident that the music musical theatre throughout the years has drawn influence from a plethora of musical genres, ranging from nineteenth century opera to more popular genres such as rock, pop and hip-hop. It is no surprise then, that an attempt to find a ‘standard instrumentation’ of sorts for musical theatre proves difficult. Taking the 2017 and 2018 *Tony Award* nominees for Best Musical (eight shows in total) as a sample group for modern successful musicals, I examined the instrumentation of each production and overall found that they differed from each other in more ways than they were alike.<sup>64</sup> The shows comprise an eclectic range of instruments featured across bands and orchestras that vary in size from eight musicians (*The Band’s Visit*) to twenty-one (*Frozen*). The musicals differ greatly from each other in terms of physical and chronological setting, and the instrumentation reflects these settings. The large orchestra of *Frozen* comprising archetypical orchestral instruments evokes a sense of nineteenth-century European royalty, which inspires the show’s the fictional setting of Arendelle. *The Band’s Visit* setting of Israel is made more authentic through its inclusion of instruments such as the oud and the darbouka, and the music of the

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<sup>64</sup> Seth Kelley, *Tony Nominations Announced: Full List of 2017 Nominees*, <<https://variety.com/2017/legit/news/tony-nominations-2017-full-list-nominees-1202406314/>>, accessed 23 May 2020.

modern high-school story *Dear Evan Hansen* is grounded by typical rock and band instruments of today (guitar, drums, bass and keys) with the addition of a small string section.

However, the following similarities can be observed:

- Each musical featured two or more keyboard players, with the exception of *Come From Away* which featured one keyboard player.
- Each musical included drums in its instrumentation.
- Each musical featured at least one guitarist.
- Each musical included bass.
- Each musical featured at least one violin or cello, and most featured a string section.<sup>65</sup>

Despite their differences, all these musicals incorporated contemporary rock/pop band instrumentation with a blend of more classical, orchestral influences in some way. In shows such as *Dear Evan Hansen* or *Mean Girls*, a simple explanation for this is that the modern instrumentation serves to compliment the modern setting of the musical, with the additional instruments adding to the texture of the music thus creating more musical interest. However, this logic does not explain its inclusion in *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* (which is based on Leo Tolstoy's novel *War & Peace*) or *Frozen*. In instances such as these, the inclusion of these instruments contrasts sharply with the location and era of the plot. I would posit that in cases such as this, a probable explanation for the prevalence of the standard band instrumentation is a purely practical one; the fullness in sound that can be created achieved with so few musicians, particularly through the use of electronic keyboards to synthetically produce a multitude of sounds. Musical theatre productions, which are often amateur-level or touring productions, benefit from requiring as few musicians as possible,

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<sup>65</sup> *Broadway Musicians*, <<http://www.broadwaymusicians.com/>>, accessed 25 May, 2020.

something I can vouch for as a musical director myself. Productions that require fewer musicians will face less issues regarding physical space, availability of musicians and even a need for a conductor. It is worth noting that out of the 2017 and 2018 *Tony Award* nominees, *Frozen* was the only musical with a conductor/musical director who was not also playing keyboard.

### 3.2c *Rhythm and text setting in music and theatre*

As in integrated art-form, the rhythms of the music heard in of any form of music and theatre are informed not only by the decisions of the composer, but by the narrative. Even without the element of music, rhythm in theatre and acting is incredibly important. Factors such as the pace at which an actor chooses to deliver a line and the internal rhymes and assonance of the dialogue are non-musical elements that influence the mood and atmosphere of a scene. When setting a given text to music, this atmosphere must be considered, as must the natural rhythm and accents of the language used. That is not to say that composers have always followed the natural rhythm of a language when setting it to music. In his analysis of seventeenth-century comic operas in Paris, Donald Jay Grout noted a difference between what he refers to as ‘airs’, which “uniformly adapt the melody to the words rather than the converse,” and ‘chansons’, “in which the text is subordinated to the rhythm of the melody—usually a dance rhythm”.<sup>66</sup> Scholars such as Andre Pau have examined what many have perceived to be poor text setting in French opera in the nineteenth century with musicians and writers such as Richard Strauss asking “Why do the French sing differently [from] the way they speak?” Pau has argued many of these seemingly unsuitable settings of French text to music can be explained by composers’ attempts to differentiate diageitic music (music as speech) from non-

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<sup>66</sup> Andrew Pau, “‘Sous le rythme de la chanson’: Rhythm, Text, and Diegetic Performance in Nineteenth-Century French Opera”, *Music Theory Online* 21/3 (2015), 1-19:5.

diagetic music (music as song).<sup>67</sup> Setting the text is such a way that may seem to undermine that natural stresses, accents, and rhythm of a language may actually be a way in which to further illuminate the dramatic content of the work. One example included by Pau is the misaccentuated street urchin chorus in act 1 of Bizet's *Carmen*, in which the seemingly incorrect emphasizing of certain vowels actually creates a march-like rhythm that fits with the performance of the children onstage as they mimic the strutting soldiers.<sup>68</sup>

Within contemporary musical theatre, I find that it is less common to find music that intentionally misplaces the stresses of a language, most likely because musical theatre is almost always written in the language of the target audience or translated into that language. When this rhythmic effect is used it is often for comedic effect. An example of this occurs in the second chorus of *Popular* from Stephen Schwartz's *Wicked*, in which Glinda realises that her pronunciation of the word 'popular' does not rhyme with the word 'are' at the end of the previous line. She remedies this by pronouncing the word 'popular' with an absurdly overenunciated 'are' sound, and the audience is invited to laugh at her bizarre pronunciation for the sake of a simple rhyme. The first verse of *School Song* from Tim Minchin's *Matilda the Musical* is an example of a musical theatre number where strange syllable emphasis later proves to be for dramatic purpose. The first chorus includes lyrics with what appear to be incorrectly accentuated words, for example the word 'energy' is sung with an emphasis on the final syllable rather than the first, as it would when being spoken. However, in the second chorus it becomes apparent through the use of props (though this may vary depending on the production) that the singers are emphasising the letters of the alphabet. In the case of the word 'energy', they are emphasising the letter G. When the lyrics 'double, you' are sung as run-on words rather than with an pause to emphasis the break in sentence, it is revealed that

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<sup>67</sup> Pau, 'Sous le rythme de la chanson', 1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

they are in fact singing the letter W. By manipulating the natural rhythm of the English language through his music, Minchin evokes in the audience the memory of reciting the alphabet in school, thus further emphasising the classroom setting of the song in a less overt way.

Another way in which rhythm manifests itself and can be manipulated within music and theatre is through the medium of dance. There is the course the element of dance as a sonic contributor. Percussive styles of dance, such as tap dance, add another rhythmic layer to the music, with musicals such as *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* and *Singin' In The Rain* being clear examples of this. On a less obvious note, the visual element of dance can manipulate the way in which audience members may interpret the rhythm of a piece of music in theatre. Choreographers such as Busby Berkeley have been credited with adding to the rhythmic qualities of a piece of music in theatre by creating dance numbers with rhythmic emphasis that contradicts the metrical structure of the music. A musical director who worked with Busby is quoted as having said that he did not dare to watch the dancing for fear he could not move his baton in the required beat of the score.<sup>69</sup> As I am neither a dancer nor choreographer, I have not utilised the medium of dance within my own compositions, however its use as a rhythmic device within music and theatre productions is worthy of note.

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<sup>69</sup> Allison Robbins, 'Busby Berkeley, Broken Rhythms and Dance Direction on the Stage and Screen', *Studies in Musical Theatre* 7/1 (2013), 75-93: 78.



### 3.2d Musical theatre singing style and history of the vocal belt

A difference between contemporary musical theatre and opera that may seem like a very simplistic one, but one that does hold true, is the style of singing that is required. Opera is associated with a certain style of singing, with a considerable amount of vibrato in comparison to what one would consider musical theatre singing. Although musicals with operatic singing do of course exist, *The Phantom of the Opera* being perhaps the most glaringly obvious example, musical theatre is generally associated with ‘pop’ singing, with considerably less vibrato and a greater tendency to sing high notes in a chest voice rather than head voice, often referred to as ‘belting’. The history of these vocal styles and their implications is worthy of closer attention.

#### 3.2d (i) Coloratura and hysteria

The supposed connection between women and madness is centuries old, with hysteria regarded as one of the oldest mental health conditions attributed to women. Ancient Egyptian writings dating back as far as 1900BC identify the cause of hysterical disorders in spontaneous uterus movement within the female body, and up until the time of Freud hysteria was considered an exclusively female disease.<sup>70</sup> It comes as no surprise then that tropes of mad or hysterical women, and indeed insanity in general, have long been a feature of opera.<sup>71</sup> This is often expressed vocally through the use of coloratura, defined as ‘florid figuration or ornamentation, particularly in vocal music’.<sup>72</sup> This style of singing was particularly

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<sup>70</sup> Cecilia Tasca et al. ‘Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health.’, *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health*: CP & EMH 8 (2012): pp. 110–119.

<sup>71</sup> Courtney Miller, ‘The Evolution of Madness: The Portrayal of Insanity in Opera’, Honours thesis, Eastern Kentucky University, (2015), 1.

<sup>72</sup> Owen Jander, and Ellen T. Harris, "Coloratura.", *Grove Music Online*. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.jproxy.nuim.ie/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000006154>>, accessed 12 May, 2018.

prominent in soprano roles and can be interpreted as a marker for madness, lovesickness or feverishness.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it can be understood why, with long melismatic phrases that seem to battle harmonically with the surrounding instruments and harmony, take for example Elvira's aria *Qui la voce sua soave* in Bellini's *I Puritani*. The tragic heroine (another common trope in opera) falsely believes her lover Arturo has returned to her, and her disconnect from reality is mirrored in her coloratura, with descending scales that become increasingly more and more chromatic, thus less harmonically stable and reflective of her own instability.<sup>74</sup>

However, the trope of the insane woman is not the only reason why coloratura singing has traditionally been associated with women, particularly sopranos. There is a strange sense of objectification in how the female voice has been treated in opera. Scholars such as Michael Poizat and Joke Dame have noted how as years progressed, women's arias have become higher and higher, with the result being that the words are often quite difficult to understand. The use of melisma and coloratura singing have added to this effect, and consequently arias are reduced to fragmented sounds. As the words of these arias become indiscernible, the female singer disappears as a subject, and instead her voice becomes an object. Conversely, there has been an increase in spoken language in male operatic roles.<sup>75</sup> While coloratura is also undoubtedly a chance for singers to display their virtuosity, the gendered implications of the technique is certainly worthy of attention.

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<sup>73</sup> Freya Jarman, 'High Notes, High Drama: Musical Climaxes and Gender Politics in Tenor Heroes and Broadway Women', in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2017), 137-151: 138

<sup>74</sup> Courtney Miller, 'The Evolution of Madness: The Portrayal of Insanity in Opera', pp 13-14.

<sup>64</sup> Hannah Bosma, 'The electronic cry: Voice and gender in electroacoustic music', PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, (December 2013), 70.

### 3.2d (ii) Vocal styles in musical theatre

Musical theatre is an interesting area of research in terms of a variety of vocal styles, in that it is infamously difficult for singers due to the variety of singing styles they may be asked to utilise. To quote Mary Saunders-Barton; ‘All boys are bari-tenors; all girls are sopranos who belt’.<sup>76</sup> I am particularly interested in the emergence of vocal styles amongst female performers and how they relate to an expression of (or lack of) femininity. To do this, it is important to note a disparity between male and female vocal settings in the world of opera which preceded musical theatre. As I have already discussed, coloratura singing and melismatic phrases in incredibly high registers became subtle codes for hysteria amongst female performers. However, for male singers, specifically tenors, sustained clear notes were often the climactic point. Part of the reason for this may have been the growing emphasis on words and drama for male operatic performers which was beginning to replace the coloratura style favoured by the dying breed of castrati singers. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, around the time of operas such as Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, it became increasingly common for these climactic notes (often around the range of the A above middle C) to be sung in a full chest voice, or ‘belt’, rather than the more traditional falsetto.<sup>77</sup> We later see this trend mimicked among female singers in the context of musical theatre. The emerging popularity of performers such as Ethel Merman are an example of this. Credited for her big, booming voice from a young age, Merman recalled her performance of *I Got Rhythm* in George Gershwin’s musical *Girl Crazy* in 1930, describing how enthralled the audience were by her ability to hold a high C for 16 bars ‘not because it was sweet or beautiful, but

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<sup>76</sup> Katrina Margaret Hunt, ‘The Female Voice in American Musical Theatre (1940-1955): Mary Martin and the Development of Integrated Vocal Style.’ PhD thesis, The Australian National University, (May 2016), 4.

<sup>77</sup> Freya Jarman, ‘High Notes, High Drama: Musical Climaxes and Gender Politics in Tenor Heroes and Broadway Women’, 138.

because it was exciting. Few people have the ability to project a big note and hold it.’<sup>78</sup> It is worth noting that biographer Geoffrey Mark claims the band played at double speed while Merman held that top note, and that the note was not a C4 but an A4, yet the response of the audience to this belting style, far removed from the more classical style voice that had always prevailed amongst female singers in theatre, says a great deal. Why did the style emerge in the first place and what are its gendered implications?

### 3.2d (iii) *Emergence of the vocal belt*

The belting style amongst female singers in musical theatre did not emerge overnight and certainly did not replace earlier vocal styles. One reason for its emergence may be to represent different roles and characters, and often this is related to the portrayal of femininity. Mary Martin was a musical theatre performer renowned for her ability to sing in a variety of vocal styles, and one of her earliest endeavours to explore a ‘belt’ style of singing was in her 1942 performance of Kurt Weill’s *The Saga of Jenny* from the musical *Lady in the Dark*. This particular song is described by Katharine Hunt as ‘a raunchy number about a girl who would make up her mind (usually with disastrous results)’.<sup>79</sup> Given the time period, a ‘raunchy number’ certainly would not have been a marker of quintessential femininity. There is evidence to suggest that this chest singing was used as a method of characterisation rather than for purely aesthetic reasons, and many of the female characters that are seen to employ this style of singing are ones that are not typically lady-like. A glaringly obvious example would be the character of Eliza in *My Fair Lady*. Her transition from a cockney flower girl to a lady is mirrored by Julie Andrews’ styles of singing. Although she makes use of a chest

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<sup>78</sup> Katrina Margaret Hunt, ‘The Female Voice in American Musical Theatre (1940-1955): Mary Martin and the Development of Integrated Vocal Style.’, 124.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

voice to represent the working-class element of the character, Andrew mimics Eliza's peak in sophistication through the use of her 'legit'(operatic) voice.<sup>80</sup> Other musicals from the same period parallel this trend. In Bernstein's *West Side Story*, Chita Rivera often employs a chest voice in her portrayal of Anita, and this aids in framing the innocence of the character of Maria who employs a lighter, 'legit' voice, as can be heard in 'A Boy Like That/I Have A Love'.<sup>81</sup> Freya Jarman writes of a trend that soon develops with Nancy's song 'As Long as He Needs Me' from *Oliver!* (1960) as an early example: the belting finale. It became quite common in musical theatre for a female protagonist to conclude a musical number by holding a sustained belting note as a climactic end to a number. By the time the film version of *Cabaret* (1972) was released, this was common practice.<sup>82</sup> A trend that followed not long after was the belting finale followed by a softer, reflective coda. Jarman cites Éponine's 'On My Own' from *Les Misérables* (1985) as an archetype of this style. This particular technique is still commonplace today and can be heard in numbers such as 'With You' from *Ghost, The Musical* (2012).<sup>83</sup> This is not to say that the styles of legit singing (as can be heard in *Jekyll and Hyde* (1997)) or full belt (as can be heard in *Wicked* (2003)) have been replaced, but the use of the belting technique amongst female performers in musical theatre has undoubtedly increased over the last seventy to eighty years.<sup>84</sup> Modern musicals such as *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015) even employ the use of rap in an attempt to dismantle typical vocal conventions in musical theatre, particularly amongst women. It is worth noting however that many scholars have pointed out that in *Hamilton*, only one female character raps while most of the male characters do, which is potentially problematic given the fact that the use of rap in

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<sup>80</sup> Freya Jarman, 'High Notes, High Drama: Musical Climaxes and Gender Politics in Tenor Heroes and Broadway Women', 140.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 141-142.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

the show represents the characters' complexity and progressive thinking.<sup>85</sup> So to conclude, the use of belting in musical theatre nowadays for male and female performers can be traced back to the evolution of public perception of gender roles. Although arguably bordering on cynicism, I would assert that it is also very likely that many musical theatre composers write for this style of singing as it bears much more resemblance to modern pop than operatic singing does, thus making it a more accessible genre.

### *3.2d (iv) Gendered implications for the modern composer*

It is important to recognise how this information is relevant to composers in this field. On a personal level, I have found myself questioning many of my own creative decisions since beginning this research. One of the first ways that I sought to explore the soundworld that may exist between musical theatre and opera or art music was by employing a belting tone. The first piece that I began to work on was a monologue called *Wishing from D.M. Larson's play The Ghosts of Detention* (2014), and the monologue is spoken by a female character, Penny. The character sustains an E5 in her chest voice at the climactic point of the song, a dramatic point in which she questions her ability to keep living as she is. I previously believed that the reason I chose to write this was that I enjoyed the sound of the chest voice in that register, and that it would be a good way to incorporate more musical theatre elements into my work, as part of the blurring of the sound worlds of 'low' art and 'high' art. However, now I find myself analysing that decision. Is it really just the sound of the belting tone that attracted me? Perhaps I was attempting to convey a sense of strength by employing this 'big' tone, as the work concerns a teenage girl and her refusal to give up hope on what

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<sup>85</sup> Kelsey Klotz, 'Hamilton is Innovative, But Not Quite Revolutionary', *Common Reader*, posted February 28, 2017, <<https://commonreader.wustl.edu/c/hamilton-innovative-not-quite-revolutionary/>>, Accessed 13 May 2018.

her life has become. From there I wonder why I felt that a belting style would be a better indicator of strength and resilience than a legit voice. I realise that I may be influenced subconsciously by the idea that high notes in an operatic tone have connotations to a hysterical, mad woman rather than a strong one, and I have no doubt that I am not the only composer to which this has happened. I am not suggesting that as composers we over-analyse every single decision that we make in search of subconscious biases that we may or may not hold, but as someone who is employing the use of vocal belt in their compositions, it seems wise to acknowledge these biases, thus paving the way for more innovative vocal writing. This topic is explored further in the discussion of my own musical works, beginning on page 38.

### 3.3. Tonal language of musical theatre vs modern opera

Another notable difference between musical theatre and modern opera is the overall musical language used and treatment of tonality. If we are to compare twentieth- and twenty-first century operas such as Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Anna Nicole* (2011) and Thomas Ades' *Powder Her Face* (1995) with many of today's most popular musicals, musical theatre is far more likely to avail of harmony that is often associated with pop music, such as the ubiquitous vi IV I V patterns that can be heard in numbers such as *Waving Through A Window* (*Dear Evan Hansen*, 2015) and *Candy Store* (*Heathers: The Musical*, 2014). The formulaic and often predictable nature of some contemporary musical theatre scores is not something that I will be so naïve as to ignore, although I think it unwise to allow it to colour one's opinion of the genre as a whole. Relating back to my point regarding the inclusion of popular musical genres and familiarity in the realm of musical theatre, this perceived simplicity is subject to how we interpret the decisions made by composers and other members of the creative team. I have given examples of musicals where I feel that the more accessible, pop-style music is used for artistic purposes, although it can be difficult to vouch for musical theatre as a genre worthy of the respect that opera is attributed, when there are musicals that appear to intentionally avail of formulaic and simplistic music in order to appeal to the masses and therefore be financially viable. However, I feel that as scholars we run the risk of automatically dismissing musical theatre as a valid art form because of the inclusion of popular music elements, or as composers we are reluctant to employ these techniques. This is ultimately my goal with this research, to address this issue, and encourage fellow contemporary composers to do the same.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, there are various ways in which twentieth- and twenty-first century composers have created musical theatrical art-forms that deviate from the standard format of opera, such as the format of the monodrama and theatrical song cycle.



There are also musical theatrical productions that include some of the elements of musical theatre that I have observed yet are marketed as operas. Philip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach* (1975) employs a style of singing that is at times devoid of the vibrato associated with opera, and instrumentation varies from traditional orchestral instruments to electric organ. The production is still marketed as an opera, despite Glass's assertion that;

We had no idea it was an opera! You could call the piece anything you wanted to, but the only place we could perform it was an opera house. People began to talk about it as an opera. It was a discovery for us as it was for everybody else.<sup>86</sup>

More recently David Fennessy's production *Pass The Spoon* (2011), which deals with a cooking show, is labelled on its posters as a 'sort of opera' and by critics as a 'sort of pantomime'.<sup>87</sup> The production involves a blend of operatic singing, musical theatre style singing and spoken word over music, making it difficult to categorise. There are countless ways in which composers can adapt popular or musical theatre style elements into their music, my goal ultimately is for composers to be able to do this in an environment where 'musical' is not a dirty word.

The following pages discuss my own music, a practice-based research enquiry and personal effort to bridge the mysterious gap between musical theatre and opera. I chose to set extracts of two plays, the first of which functions as a mini-musical or song-cycle of sorts, the second which contains extracts of a larger work. I use these classifications lightly, as

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<sup>86</sup>Lucinda Childs, *Einstein on the Beach: 'People thought this was going to change the world'*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2013/jul/31/einstein-beach-philip-glass-opera>>, accessed 02 November 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Kate Molleson, *Pass the Spoon – review*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/nov/22/pass-the-spoon-tramway-review>>, accessed 02 November 2018.

ultimately it is not my goal to produce a body of work that fits too neatly into any one category or genre, as will hopefully be gleaned from the portfolio presented.

## Chapter 4: The Ghosts of Detention

This work by D.M. Larson is one that I was fortunate enough to stumble across, somewhat by accident. When starting this project, I was unsure as to what text would be the most sensible to set. I was determined to set a work that appealed to me as a text in its own right, rather than just simply choosing something that I felt would be convenient to set to music. I decided that setting a poem or short monologue would be a beneficial practice exercise, that may or may not make it into the final portfolio of works. I came across the *Wishing* monologue online, and was struck by it. I realised that it was part of a larger work, D.M. Larson's play *The Ghosts of Detention* (2014), a play set in a high-school detention in the 1980s. The play opens with four monologues that introduce four of the teenage protagonists, before then progressing to the main plot and events that occur while they are in detention. The four monologues are quite different in tone, some funny and some bleak, however the four characters show a great longing for something in their life, be it a longing for another person's love or a longing for something in their life to change. Although I initially planned to set different sections of the play to music, I eventually decided that the four monologues would work well as a standalone work given the common theme of longing between them. This theme is something that I hoped to tie together musically, through the inclusion of the line "Have you ever wanted anything that badly? So badly that you can't imagine your future without it?" in each song, although it originally only appears in the *Wishing* monologue. So although the work doesn't follow any substantial plotline, I feel that the show works as a song-cycle of sorts. An unintentional parallel can be drawn here with Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats* (1981), which is similarly based on T. S. Eliot's book of poems, *Old Possum's Book Of Practical Cats*, thus deviating from the standard narrative format for musical theatre.

The work is set for piano, synth (Dyno Piano (Korg 01/W)), electric bass and drum kit. As the play is set in the 1980s, I wanted to write using instrumentation that was reflective of that time period, which proved to be quite a challenge, particularly with regards to writing for drum kit. Drummers often improvise and play by ear, and there are as many systems of percussion staff notation as there are percussion setups. I have adopted one of the most common five-line system in my score. It was also a challenge to incorporate the drum kit in a way that did not too closely resemble standard pop and rock rhythms. I aimed to avoid overusing the more traditional patterns that typically utilise heavy emphasis on backbeats and rhythmic drive.

To fit the overall 1980s feel, and to incorporate a typically musical theatre element into the work, I have specified that all singers are to use a musical theatre/pop style of singing, rather than a typically operatic voice, known as a 'legit' one in musical theatre terms. Higher notes are to be belted or sung in a chest/mixed voice, rather than using the head voice or falsetto, unless otherwise stated.

In line with an approach to language more consistent with art music than pop or musical theatre, I have not adapted the play's dialogue into lyrics that follow a clear verse and chorus structure, with phrases of similar length and a rhyming structure. For the most part, the dialogue is left as Larson wrote it, which proved challenging in that the dialogue is not particularly poetic. By this I mean that the dialogue is written to flow quite naturally in spoken terms, making it somewhat difficult to set to music without resulting in the entire work resembling an extended recitative.

The harmonic language varies between tonal sections (in a nod to a quintessential musical theatre approach) and less diatonically-rooted, dissonant harmonies at different points of the music.

#### 4.1. I Need Detention/The Girl Who Broke His Finger

Following an overture that introduces the main musical ideas of the entire work, the first song of this mini musical is a combination of two separate monologues, spoken by Jimmy and the object of his affections, Harmony. Although in the play they are performed separately, starting with Jimmy's monologue, I have chosen to combine them into one song. The characters speak about each other in their monologues, and the combination allows audience members to witness each character's perspective on events that occurred between them, often for humorous effect. An example of this that I feel proved to be quite effective is the sequence from bar 23 to 29, where Jimmy and Harmony describe the interaction between them that concluded with Harmony breaking Jimmy's finger. I opted to use rap for the character of Jimmy, as I thought its fast pace would complement the energetic nature of his dialogue as he enthusiastically expresses his fondness for Harmony, while also contrasting sharply with the bleakness of Harmony's character. Setting the rap was certainly something I was very new to. Rap is a genre that is typically not notated traditionally, and so I looked to the likes of scores such as *Hamilton* for inspiration. In that particular score, the rhythm is set on the third line of the staff, leaving the intonation at the discretion of the performer as can be seen here in this excerpt from a piano/vocal reduction from *Alexander Hamilton*.

Fig 2. Bb. 6-7 of *Alexander Hamilton* from Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical*, rap notation.

I decided to adopt this notation also, feeling that setting the intonation and pitch would result in a somewhat forced sound that was inauthentic and that could potentially stifle the rapper's performance and ruin the overall effect. The work is intended to be played straight after the overture without a pause and is approached by a heartbeat-like drum rhythm. In bar 3, a staccato, dissonant chord that resembles a warped Bb, with no major or minor third, is played. This chord, accompanied by a triangle in the percussion section, features quite prominently throughout the entire work, serving different purposes in each song. In this number the chord is used primarily for comic effect, as a kind of 'lightbulb' sound. The chord is used in instances such as Jimmy's initial declaration 'I need detention' in bar 4 and following his humorous description of the nickname 'Harm' as 'cute' in bar 18. Jimmy's vocal line alternates between rap, melodic singing and free rhythm dialogue. I felt certain lines of dialogue would carry more dramatic or comic impact if they were left to the discretion of the actor, an example of this being bar ten of Jimmy's part; 'But this girl is different! I mean it this time!'. A line like this is more effective when the actor is able to gauge the reaction of the audience and use their own comic timing to decide how long a gap should be within the words and sentences. The work is primarily in 4/4, with the drums and bass providing the rhythmic drive as can be found in much contemporary pop and rock music and musical theatre. I availed of typical rhythms such as accented quavers in the bass line and bass drum and snare rhythms as shown in the example below (bar 21 of score).

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'E. Bass' and is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It contains two measures of music. The first measure starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a series of eighth notes with accents. The second measure features a crescendo (*cresc.*) dynamic and continues the eighth-note pattern. The bottom staff is labeled 'Dr.' and is in common time (C). It shows a drum pattern with a snare drum and a bass drum. The snare drum plays a steady eighth-note rhythm, while the bass drum plays a pattern of quarter notes and eighth notes.

Fig. 3. Bb. 21-22 of bass and drum parts of *I Need Detention/The Girl Who Broke His Finger* from *The Ghosts of Detention*

However, the 4/4 drive is often interrupted for dialogue such as the free-rhythm I have mentioned above, or to emphasise other musical lines for dramatic effect. An example of this can be found in bars 12 to 13, where the tempo itself does not change but the musical style changes dramatically. The rhythmic bass and drums are replaced by a sustained bass note and a mark tree, while an ascending D major chord is played in the piano accompanied by harpsichord. The music is deliberately romantic, but gradually distorts as Harmony and Jimmy slide out of tune with each other, humorously reflecting the lack of harmony and stability between the pair. Harmonically, the music shifts between passages with a clear tonal centre and sections that are more harmonically ambiguous. Intervals such as fifths, sixths and octaves that are commonplace in popular music appear in the sections where the pop-like drums and bass appear, such as bars 21 to 23, whereas sections such as the dream-like sequence from bars 36 to 42 are less tonally centred. Bar 43 sees the first appearance of the ‘Have you ever wanted anything that badly?’ theme, a phrase of dialogue that only appears in the *Wishing* monologue in the play, but one that I chose to include in all the songs in this show as a way to unify the characters and highlight their similarities. The tempo slows down, and the music is driven by steady crotchets in the bass drum and accented semiquavers in the electric bass. The harmony follows a vi-IV pattern, a standard pop or musical theatre chord progression.

43 *mf passionately*

Jimmy

Have you ev-er wan-ted an-y-thingthat bad- ly? So bad-ly that you can't im-ag-ine your fu ture\_with-out it?

Fig. 4. Bb. 43-46 of *I Need Detention/The Girl Who Broke His Finger* from *The Ghosts of Detention*, ‘Have you ever wanted anything that badly’ theme.

This section is intentionally far-removed and musically isolated from the rest of the music, drawing attention to a musical and lyrical theme that serves as the string tying characters of the work together. Following sudden return to the musical theme that first appears in bar 6, Jimmy's section concludes with a free-rhythm promise to give the principal a 'good old over the head wedgie' and the light-hearted Bb chord is played yet again to end his line on a comic note.

The function of this chord changes from one of humorous effect to a sinister drone underpinning Harmony's vocal as she gives her version of events. Beginning in bar 60, Harmony's section introduces an element of darkness to the song, in stark contrast to the upbeat, rhythmic nature of Jimmy's rap. The tempo decreases, and the music is driven by slow moving harmonies, tritone intervals and a low, dark vocal range that contradicts Jimmy's assertion of Harmony as 'cute'. She employs a mixture of 'belt' or chest voice and soft, whispering tones over the course of her solo to convey the wide range of emotions in the relatively short monologue. To subtly begin the transition into the following work, *Wishing*, bar 75 pre-emptively one of its prominent motifs. Harmony repeatedly whispers the phrase 'I've stopped wishing' in the final six bars of the work, and the synth plays a set of chords that will become the primary harmony of *Wishing*, creating a seamless transition between the two songs.



## 4.2. Wishing

From a performer's perspective, *Wishing* is possibly the most challenging song in this work. The role of Penny requires an actress that can portray a childlike innocence at times and contrast this with despair and panic at others. The song is also challenging vocally, in that it is to be sung, for the most part, in a chest or mixed voice, even when in a high register. The opening bars establish a harmony that pervades much of the work, with major seconds being a particularly prominent interval. The major seconds are sonically pleasing and a somewhat common harmony in pop and musical theatre music, yet are also dissonant enough to create a sense of tonal ambiguity that matches the uncertainty of the text. The interval is a very prominent feature of the whole-tone scale, again contributing to this tonally unstable element. Penny's monologue is perhaps the vaguest of them all, in that she does not explicitly talk about what has happened to her, only that she longs for her life to change. Given the subject matter of the piece and the dream-like nature of Penny's dialogue, I felt that a repetitive and hypnotic score would be most suitable. In contrast to the rhythmic drive of *I Need Detention*, the 4/4 metre of *Wishing* is not very heavily emphasised by the vocal line. At times Penny appears to be following a different meter, an example being bars 8-13, where her triplet rhythm gives the illusion of being in 9/8 time.

Penny *in a nasal, childish tone*  
 "Star light star bright, first star I see to-night laugh I  
 Synth.

Penny *ord, getting sadder*  
 wish I may I wish I might, have the wish I wish to - night."  
 Synth. *mf*

Fig. 5. Bb. 8-13 of *Wishing* from *The Ghosts of Detention*, Penny's vocal and synth.

These bars also showcase the first example of the *Star Light, Star Bright* theme, based on the nursery rhyme that Penny speaks of. The theme is sung in D major, making it harmonically at odds with the synth as well as rhythmically contrasting. The aim here is to give the effect of Penny being in her own world, separate from her surroundings. In bar 17 the metre of the music is more clearly defined as Penny's dialogue becomes less wistful and more assertive. She sings of how she really wants her wish to come true, and the rhythm of her vocal line places greater emphasis on the natural beats of the bar. The instrumentation fills out more in line with the pop style of *I Need Detention*, with increased movement in the synth line, a lively bass line and rhythms on the crash cymbal. A more secure tonality also becomes more apparent in bar 17, which follows a vi-VI chord progression in Db major. This falling third chord progression manifests itself many times in the entire work and is an example of a musical theatre/popular music influence in the harmonic language. The progression also serves a dramatic purpose; it occurs at moments when Penny is most

assertive and clear in her text. In sections such as bars 1-13 and 31-47 (which function as ‘verses’ of sorts, alluding to typical musical theatre structural forms) Penny is harmonically and rhythmically at odds with the rest of the instruments, yet during bars 17-26 and 49-50 clear tonal centres and time signatures are established. The tonally and rhythmically ambiguous verses coincide with the moments when Penny is at her most dreamlike and speaks of seemingly mundane things, such as her habit of wishing on stars (verse 1) or throwing pennies into wells (verse 2). However, when Penny is at her most determined and coherent this coherence is mirrored in the music and in the relationship between the vocal line and surrounding instruments. In bar 51 the ‘Have you ever wanted anything that badly theme’ returns, this time with a modulation in bar 53. The added modulation adds a layer of drama to the theme not heard in Jimmy’s rendition. While his scene is relatively light-hearted in tone, Penny expresses a much deeper and more severe longing for change in her life. Bars 56 to 64 feature a dramatic build-up of tension as Penny considers what her life would be like ‘if things didn’t change’, before the music reaches its climactic point in bar 64 with a belted D5 note. The music fades out and comes full cycle as the synth plays the opening chords, and the song concludes with Harmony singing her last line to the tune of *Star Light, Star Bright* acapella. However, the depressing nature of the line in question is in stark contrast to the cheerful nurse rhyme (‘Make this suffering worthwhile’) and so the song ends on a sinister and unsettling note, while the contrast highlights Penny’s vulnerability despite the hardships she faces.

### 4.3. Big Zero

*Big Zero* serves as the dramatic finale of the work in its entirety. The song is primarily sung by Biff, an enthusiastic athletic supporter. The opening theme on the synth (using a trumpet sound) accompanied by the snare serves to mimic the school band that one would expect to hear at a high school football game.

The image shows a musical score for two measures of the song 'Big Zero'. The top staff is for a Synthesizer, marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The bottom staff is for a Drum Set, marked with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The tempo is indicated as quarter note = 75. The drum set part features a snare line with eighth notes and triplets. The second measure includes an 'accel.' marking with a dashed line.

Fig. 6. Bb. 1-2 of *Big Zero* from Ailbhe Kehoe's *The Ghosts of Detention*

The trumpet line is based on the *Star Light, Star Bright* theme, easing the transition from *Wishing*. The trumpet theme modulates and evolves into a two-bar motif in bars 11-12, a motif that is continuously developed throughout the song. Biff enters with a glissando that functions as a musical representation of the chants of football supporters as he sings 'Go team!'. The melody is marked by tritone intervals, and is driven more by interval-based and rhythmic motifs than the lyrical melodic lines one would expect of contemporary, pop-based musical theatre. In contrast to *Wishing*, the beat is firmly established in the music with an alternating 4/4 and 5/4 metre, and Biff's enthusiasm for the sport is reflected in the fast-paced music, particularly in the rock-style semiquaver-driven hi-hat line that begins in bar 17. The song is not rapped in the way that *I Need Detention* is. However, the vocal line is at times quite rapid and features speech-like rhythms, such as in bars 20-21, as such functioning as a quasi-rap of sorts. This approach to the vocal line allowed me to showcase a variety of styles

within the overall work *'The Ghosts of Detention'* while also helping to convey the energetic, almost frantic nature of Biff.

20  
Biff *gliss.*  
I am the 'O'in go team!\_ May-be I am a ze-ro to

Fig. 7. Bb. 20-21 of vocal line of *Big Zero* from *The Ghosts of Detention*

In the play, the monologue is spoken by Biff alone, however I felt that there was an opportunity to avail of some chorus singing that serve as a Greek chorus representing Biff's inner thoughts and doubts. For convenience purposes this chorus is sung by Jimmy, Harmony and Penny off-stage. Their voices enter in bar 27, emphasising the word 'zero' as Biff anxiously attempts to reassure the audience (and himself) that he is not a 'zero'. The fast pace of the music becomes a marker for anxiety as well as excitement; the hi hat rhythm changes from a steady semiquaver pattern to one with inconsistent interruptions and rests.

Dr.

Fig. 8. Bb. 27-28 of percussion *Big Zero* from *The Ghosts of Detention*

In a similar but less overt fashion to *Wishing*, the harmonic and rhythmic stability is strongest at times when Biff is at his most assertive, and less clear when he is at his most vulnerable.

Bars 26-29, where the chorus first enter, are tonally ambiguous and marked by tritone

intervals rather than a clear tonal centre, whereas bar 30 sees the appearance of what fleetingly seems to be a C# minor theme (this is later expanded in bars 50-53).

This number differs from the previous two songs in how the monologue is adapted to music. The lyrics of *Wishing* follow the text of the original monologue somewhat faithfully. While the two monologues *I Need Detention* and *The Girl Who Broke His Finger* are interspersed together, the text of *I Need Detention* is followed quite accurately and *The Girl Who Broke His Finger* is rearranged only slightly in order to illustrate the narrative of the song. However, in this work sections of text are repeated and rearranged considerably. From bars 46 to 105, all the lyrics heard are sections that have been used previously in the music. The lyrics are not reused in a verse and chorus sense, but rather to make obvious Biff's insecurities. The phrase 'I am not a zero' serves an anchoring point for the character as his musical battle with the Greek chorus conveys his inner struggles in a much more overt way than the original dialogue of the play.

The biggest divergence from the source material of the play occurs in bar 128, when Jimmy, Harmony and Penny join Biff on-stage to sing the 'Have you ever wanted anything' theme together. The entrance of the other characters is not something that occurs in the original text, but rather something I felt would be effective in showing the unity of the characters and in creating a dramatic finale for the work. The characters sing the musical theme in a canon, before a contrapuntal section in bars 134-137 in which they sing a specific line about their own struggles and desires; Jimmy about his love for Harmony, Harmony about her struggle for acceptance, Penny about her dissatisfaction with her life and Biff about his insecurities as a supporter. This style of polyphonic singing is very common in the world of musical theatre across a variety of genres, featuring in numbers such as *One Day More* (*Les Miserables*), *Prima Donna* (*The Phantom of the Opera*) and the end of *Cell Block Tango* (*Chicago*). Biff then concludes with the final line of dialogue from his monologue; 'Anyone

who fights in a war is just a big zero'. The characters echo the word 'zero' again, yet this time they are also on stage and the attention is no longer solely on Biff. The word unites the protagonists in a bleak finale, and it is on this dark note that the entire work ends.

## Chapter 5: Macbeth

In a sense, this text is the polar opposite of *The Ghosts of Detention* (henceforth *Ghosts*), and one which I found appealing and daunting in equal measure. While *Ghosts* is a relatively unknown, modern play, *Macbeth* is one of the literary gems of Jacobean Britain. A tragedy set in eleventh-century Scotland, *Macbeth* has already been adapted for the musical stage in works such as Verdi's eponymous opera dating from 1847. It is a text that I am personally very familiar with, having studied it in the past, and while the idea of setting it was intimidating given its almost sacred literary provenance, I felt that in order to really explore the idea of music in theatre properly, it would be necessary to deviate from *Ghosts* and explore something completely new. Unlike *Ghosts*, this does not function as standalone piece, but is instead an extract. Setting the full play to music was not something that I considered possible within the timeframe that was available to me during this period of research. While I had originally planned to do something like what I had achieved with *Ghosts* by taking out separate scenes and using them to create a show that would function in its own right, this did not prove to be feasible given the complex and well-known plot of *Macbeth*. Instead, I opted to select a few scenes that differed from each other and, in doing so, to showcase what an extended version of the miniature musical tragedy might sound like.

While the primary aspect of *Ghosts* that differentiates it from an operatic setting was the adoption of musical theatre instrumentation and its style of singing, *Macbeth* is scored for flute, clarinet (doubling percussion), violin, cello and piano, commonly known in art music as a *Pierrot* ensemble, with reference to its provenance in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. In addition to that much-feted and seminal dramatic musical work from 1912, this ensemble has been used in other important works such as Peter Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for A Mad King* (1969) and is – generally speaking – more commonly associated with art music than pop or musical theatre. In a further attempt to differentiate this work from *Ghosts*, I have not



specified that a pop style of singing is required; instead, the harmonic language used is intended to indicate a world inspired by musical theatre. Yet in a similar vein to *Ghosts*, the music is often informed by harmonic structures found in popular music, which I shall now discuss in more detail.

### **5.1. Fair is Foul (ACT I SCENE I)**

Aside from being a chronologically obvious starting point, the well-known opening scene of this Shakespearian tragedy proved to be a musically optimum departure for my work. The scene itself is a very ominous and dramatic one; it introduces the three Witches and establishes the supernatural elements of the play. Being central characters of the tragedy, I felt that it would be fitting to establish a musical theme for the Witches. I wanted to compose something that would create a sense of foreboding whenever they appeared, particularly when they made a prophecy.

In terms of the libretto, I was very reluctant to alter drastically any of Shakespeare's original dialogue. *Ghosts* is a relatively unknown work and as such it provided me with more creative licence when it came to adapting dialogue to lyrics. The same cannot be said for *Macbeth* and I decided that it would be best to honour the original text as faithfully as I could.

The scene opens in a 'desert place', and I attempted to recreate this sense of isolation by opening the work with a sustained note of A in the violin, which is eventually joined by high-pitched, open fifths in the piano line to create a bleak, eerie effect. These open fifths also outline the tonality that underpins the music in a nod to the geographical setting of the play. Given that the play is set in 11<sup>th</sup>-century Scotland, it seemed fitting to acknowledge this by emulating the folk music of Scotland through the use of drone-like open-fifths and

harmonies that are heavily influenced by dorian and aeolian modes. The music builds to a semiquaver motif in bar 29, and The Witches' motif is established; a rapid alternating outlining of a D minor and C major triad.

The musical character of the motif explores a clear sense of tonality and meter; however, rather than using this musical certainty as an anchoring point, the motif instead serves as a device which the Witches often sing *against* rather than with. Their sinister utterings of 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' overlap each other in a disorientating fashion to mirror the paradoxical prophecy. The tonality also shifts between passages variously based around the dorian mode starting on D and E, as I felt that sticking to one mode rigidly would put a stifling limit on the amount of musical colour that could be created with the work. I also felt that strict usage of these modes alone may run the risk of creating a score that leaned closer to parody than pastiche, with a geographical musical influence that bordered on insulting the audience with its blatant obviousness. In order to delve into this soundworld between opera and musical theatre, I felt it was necessary to attempt to strike a balance between musical creativity and more accessible genres.

In a similar fashion to *The Ghosts of Detention*, the performers playing the Witches are called upon to speak some of their dialogue, with the script written underneath the bars in order to give a rough estimation of when to speak, for example bar 88. In *Ghosts*, the reason for such dialogue was to allow the actors playing these characters greater creative freedom, and while this reason is also valid in the case of *Macbeth*, spoken dialogue is also used here to actively contribute to the overall timbre of the soundworld. By speaking rather than singing certain lines over the metrical instrumental lines, another level of disjointedness is added to the music, thus adding to the unsettling nature of the Witches. An influence here was Knee Play 5 from Philip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach*, the mixture of speaking and singing creating a hypnotic atmosphere that I hoped to emulate.

## 5.2. The Prophecy (ACT I SCENE III)

In contrast to *Fair is Foul*, the structure of *The Prophecy* differs from the typical song structure of much musical theatre and popular music, with no discernible verse/chorus sections. I wanted to select a scene that when set to music would feature moments like a recitative of sorts, and thus be reflective of both opera and the sung-through musical. In this scene, Macbeth and Banquo encounter The Witches for the first time and hear the prophecy that sets the events of the play in motion. This makes it a very dramatic scene, thus one that I felt would have a great deal of theatrical potential when set to music.

The work opens with a snare drum pattern, a decision that was not made by me but rather by the script itself with the direction of ‘Drum within’. I decided that the clarinet player should be the one to take on the role of percussionist, given the status of flute and violin as staple instruments of the folk tradition that inspires the music.

The opening of the scene is one with an intense air of foreboding, as The Witches herald Macbeth’s entrance with a series of shouts and whispers. Yet again keeping with the setting of the play, the music is driven by drone-like intervals of open-fifths and octaves, and the instruments mirror the semiquaver rhythm of the war drum to add to the building tension as the audience wait for the protagonist’s entrance. The time signature changes to 3/4 time in bar 19 as the Witches sing the lyrics ‘Thrice to yours’, and then to 9/8 time as they sing ‘nine’ in a deliberate, if not subtle, effort to word-paint metrically. The third Witch speaks while the other two sing, creating a distorted, demonic timbre to match the evil of the Witches.

As Macbeth and Banquo enter, I chose to indicate that their opening lines are spoken over a repeated drum pattern. This is partly to give more dramatic weight to Banquo’s exclamation upon seeing the Witches, yet it also serves a more practical purpose: my experience as a musical director has shown me the convenience of using vamps or repeated

music as a way to allow actors to enter the stage at their own pace. Upon noticing the Witches, Banquo and Macbeth sing a recitative-style passage under dissonant interjections from the instruments. The recitative passage is arguably a more common element of opera and art music than of musical theatre, with the latter typically favouring regular time signatures and distinct tonal centres as per modern pop music, although exceptions may be noted in some sung-through musicals, such as *Notes* from *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The Witches sing the ominous prophecy in triplets of minims, which rubs against the semiquaver rhythm that is present particularly in the piano, creating a kind of rhythmic distortion. In a similar fashion to *Wishing* in the *The Ghosts of Detention*, this is done to show the other-worldly nature of the Witches as they utter the prophecy that will eventually be the doom of Macbeth. In the original text, the prophecy is spoken by the Witches one at a time, however I felt that the scene would be more impactful and dramatic if the Witches performed the text together. I still wanted the audience's attention to be drawn to the Witch that speaks each individual line in the play, and this is done by having each Witch sing their line while the other two Witches speak or whisper the line.

Despite the short length of this musical extract from Macbeth, I wanted to use the music to help convey to the audience a strong sense of who the individual characters are. It is evident that the work in its entirety draws influence from Scottish/Gaelic folk traditions, however I envisioned elements of different musical styles being associated with different characters as a way to express their personae. The supernatural element of the Witches is conveyed through the hypnotic, repetitive piano (leit)motif associated with them, and the decidedly more modern vocal setting of their text. Banquo is one of the more noble characters of the play, and the use of a canon and tonally centred theme in his vocal line is used as a way to place him as a character of the real world as opposed to the paranormal entities of The Witches. Macbeth initially sings in a somewhat similar style, with tonally centred passages

evident in his line. However, from bar 103 we see a change that does not occur in the vocal line of the virtuous Banquo. Although initially dismissing the Witches prophecy as one that ‘stands not within the prospects of belief’, he sees fit to question the origins of the Prophecy, indicating a semblance of belief that may be growing in his mind. Macbeth sings a melody that begins in the dorian mode, but with the addition of accidentals in bars 106-107 it evolves into more tonally ambiguous harmonic language. The brief transition from the traditional-sounding dorian mode to less stable, modern harmonic language symbolises Macbeth’s imminent transition from a noble man of his time to one that will be heavily influenced by the evil, supernatural power of the Witches. The work ends dramatically, with the five characters on stage singing together before the Witches’ sudden exit. The conclusion of this scene creates an ideal transition to the next work, as despite the fact that the two scenes do not run directly one after another in the play, the events of *The Prophecy* are the subject matter of the *Lady Macbeth* letter scene.

### 5.3. Lady Macbeth (ACT I SCENE V)

I chose to set the monologue of Lady Macbeth as it is one that has always struck me as a very powerful piece of theatre. The scene is a highly dramatic one, in which we see the ill-fated character alone on a stage, reading her husband's account of his encounter with The Witches. Asserting that he is too virtuous by nature to carry out the atrocities required to become king, Lady Macbeth takes it upon herself to summon evil spirits to rid her of her humanity. She longs to be filled with the necessary cruelty that will enable her to guide her husband and assist him in his evil deeds. The role of Lady Macbeth is a very challenging one, both in terms of acting and, in this case, singing ability. Like the Witches, the performer must make use of shrieks and raspy tones, but in addition to this the piece has a wide ambitus and features many sustained notes, making it a difficult work to sing.

Like her husband, Lady Macbeth is a character that progresses from a noble lady to a woman corrupted by the evil spirits of the Witches, and as such the musical style of the work changes to mirror this change of persona, in a similar yet much more obvious way than in *The Prophecy*. The work opens with a melody led by solo clarinet, functioning practically as scene-change music as well as establishing a musical theme. Lady Macbeth enters, reading her husband's letter to us through a monotonous, recitative-like musical theme over sustained notes in the instrumental line. As the events of the letter unfold, the music progresses in tandem with Lady Macbeth's realisation of their significance. In bar 24, the piano plays rhythmically augmented fragments of the Witches' piano leitmotif, however a strong sense of pulse is not heard until bar 30, when Lady Macbeth realises that the Witches' prophecy is beginning to come true. The rhythm of both the vocal line and instrumental line begins to place greater emphasis on regular pulse and a clear sense of tonality becomes more obvious. The resulting increase in textural and harmonic clarity parallels the increasing possibility of the Witches seemingly impossible predictions becoming a reality. The final portion of the

letter is spoken with Macbeth off-stage as the music fades away, allowing the performer playing Lady Macbeth time to pause for as long she or the director feels necessary. She then sings the opening theme acapella, taking the place of the clarinet, the slow pace of the music reflecting her thought process as she makes sense of the information given to her. What follows is a somewhat subdued musical section, with the ensemble outlining a predominantly diatonic harmony, alluding to popular music and musical theatre. The text here revolves around Lady Macbeth's description of Macbeth's solidity of character, correspondingly there are no sudden changes of tempo, dynamics or texture. However, a change of mood occurs in bar 70 when she realises that she may have to play a part in Macbeth's attempts to become king. Following a pause for the performer, Lady Macbeth sings of her desire to 'pour her spirits' in Macbeth's ears and teach him to be as cruel and cunning as is necessary.

A dramatic sudden break in the music occurs as a servant enters to inform Lady Macbeth of Duncan's imminent arrival in their castle. The section is spoken, the resulting contrast with the previous sung section allowing audience members to experience Lady Macbeth's broken stream of thought. The music returns in a much more aggressive fashion as Lady Macbeth plots the murder of Duncan, and summons evil spirits to aid her with the sinister deed. Despite the instrumentation and style of singing, there is a subtle influence of rock music to this part of the work. The harmony is primarily minor/aeolian, and the cello and piano operate as the primary rhythmic propellant, emphasising the 4/4 meter in place of what a drum kit would do in a comparable musical theatre context. This musical style incorporates an element of contemporary musical theatre into the work, and the genre helps reflect Lady Macbeth's sudden aggression and sense of masculinity. This masculinisation is also reflected in the vocal line. The melodic ambitus here is very wide in my effort to portray the contrast between Lady Macbeth's femininity and humanity which she wishes to abandon.

She calls on evil spirits to ‘unsex’ her, the pitch dropping dramatically from an Ab 5 to a raspy G3 on the word ‘unsex’ in the space of 4 bars, as shown.

89  
L.M. *rough*  
Come \_\_\_\_\_ you spi - rits that tend on mor - tal thoughts, un - sex me here

Fig. 9. Bb. 89-93 of vocal line of *Lady Macbeth* from *Macbeth*

Directions such as ‘rough’ and ‘growl’ become very common, as any semblance of sweetness or humanity diminishes. In her final request that the darkness of night blinds her to the wounds her knife will make, Lady Macbeth’s vocal line ascends into a high, yet shrill finale, accompanied by the Witches chanting off-stage. The timbre of their sinister chants add to the dark atmosphere, and make clear the influence of The Witches’ prophecy on Lady Macbeth’s descent to evil.



## Reflection

Contextual research regarding the history of musical theatre and observations of contemporary musical theatre have proven what has always been somewhat apparent; there is no distinct criterium that must be met for musical theatre to transcend from the realm of low art to high art. The precise difference between the two is near impossible to define, yet it is also near impossible to remain ignorant of the perceived chasm between musical theatre and opera. It is because of this glaringly obvious disparity regarding the reception of these genres that I feel it is worthwhile for contemporary composers to further explore the soundworld between them, despite its nebulosity. I will admit to a certain degree of bias, as it is probably painstakingly obvious at this point that musical theatre is a genre that is very close to my heart. Although I concede that the genre may not be to everyone's personal taste, I do feel that it should be somewhat troubling that in today's musically eclectic age, it is still not uncommon to hear advice such as 'Don't mention Andrew Lloyd Webber', a veiled recommendation to dismiss an entire genre, without a concrete reason as to why.

This research has afforded me the opportunity to compose with a direct influence of an art-form that I love. I have produced a body of work in which I hope this influence is clear, in choice of text, structure, instrumentation and general harmonic language but to name a few. I believe that the mixture of singing styles is a feature that worked well, particularly the addition of rap in *The Ghosts of Detention* and the mixture of singing and speaking in *Macbeth*. Being a quintessentially popular/hip-hop style of vocalisation, the use of rap is a very clear nod to a popular and musical theatre influence, while also aiding in expressing the energy and overall character of Jimmy. Similarly, the use of various vocalisations such as chant, whisper and shrieks in the characters of The Witches places a large emphasis on the drama of the story of Macbeth, a sense of drama that is central to the world of musical theatre given its common emphasis on narrative over music.

While neither work has been performed as of time of writing, I am looking for opportunities in which this could occur, particularly with regards to *The Ghosts of Detention* given the fact that it is a completed work. However, an issue that I feel has potential to arise in a project like this would be the issue of necessary inclusion of stage direction. Given the integrated nature of music and theatre works, I feel that it would be unwise and unfaithful to the nature of these works to have them performed without the addition of a director of some sort. Given my background as a musical director, I am fully aware of the overall importance of stage direction, and it is partly because of this awareness that I am reluctant to stage a performance of the music without the input of a director that would bring the works to life in an authentic way. This is also an area that I feel is worthy of further research; the integrated nature of music and theatre works and the balance and relationship between the music and drama, a relationship that I believe varies from work to work, for example a song-cycle of sorts (*The Ghosts of Detention*) vs narrative, plot-based works (*Macbeth*).

Given the obvious factor of time restraints, I believe that there is much more potential for further development of this compositional research. Many contemporary composers are producing theatrical musical works that do not fall under any distinct category, and I am optimistic that through this ever-growing repertory of works and an increased focus on how and why these high and low art boundaries occur, we can expect to see a blossoming world of contemporary music and theatre.

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