

Singing made simple

*Preparing your students
for their first musical* | BY LISA MULCAHY

THE CHALLENGE of mounting a fully realized stage production is daunting, even if you're a veteran teacher and director. For a new theatre educator it can be nearly overwhelming. You have to find a play, hold auditions, choose a cast, rehearse, build sets, and complete an endless series of small but important tasks before opening night—many of which you never anticipated. But you do it. And then, feeling confident, you have a new idea—a musical. What's more, you want to stage it with a cast of students with little or no singing experience.

Sound crazy? It's not. If you're a teacher with years of experience in musical theatre under your belt, you *already* know that it's possible to produce a full-length musical with middle or secondary school students who have minimal musical chops. So reading this might be old news to you. On the other hand, if you're relatively new at the craft and profession and thinking of making the musical leap, this article can help.

To begin with, stop worrying about whether or not you have actors who can sing. You can make it work—and teach your group to carry those tunes with confidence. Obviously, vocal skill is an important component of what makes a musical successful, but measuring exactly what kind of vocal skill your cast needs to display is a very subjective thing. The core element that makes any musical resonate has nothing to do with high C's or vibrato—the heart of any successful musical theatre production is actually emotional truth. As a genre, all musicals convey strong human feelings—think about an endur-



Normal, produced at the 2007 Thespian Festival by Greendale (Wisconsin) High School.

ing, triumphant tale like *West Side Story*, or a moving modern masterpiece like *Rent*. Yes, those shows also have challenging musical scores. But there are many different ways performers can interpret a song—and effectively acting the emotion that song contains is as important as hitting each note perfectly. Even if your non-singers seem unable to carry a tune at the outset of this process, there are several simple techniques you can employ to teach them the principles of good singing. Remember, you're not trying to produce the next great Broadway hit; this should be a fun, confidence-building, educational experience for every cast member—leads and chorus members alike. Your goal ought to be to teach your students to be comfortable

with their very own sound. Achieve that, and you're on the way to creating an ensemble that will be capable of mounting a musical that will be as good as it possibly can be.

What I'm going to do is give you an overview of how to make singing simple. This article is not intended to be a complete guide for staging a musical—there's choreography, blocking, set construction, and a myriad of other issues that are all grist for another article. Here, we're going to concentrate on readying your cast to sing in a musical theatre production—essentially, choosing a script that's suited to fledgling singers and preparing them through auditions, rehearsals, and performances. The approach I'm going to suggest is *not* traditional—gathering

your group around a piano with sheet music to learn is a fruitless endeavor if none of them reads music. Instead, we'll focus on a very basic but effective "learn by ear" strategy that breaks apart each song of your score piece-by-piece, to make it easier for your cast to master.

This teaching method is going to be most useful with your younger or less experienced students. If you do have students with musical background, use that to your advantage—they can be very helpful in bringing along their peers.

As we go through this process, you'll note that these specifics of teaching simple singing correlate to things your students probably can already enjoy—familiar musical styles, the fun of listening to and learning a song on their CD player or IPOD, and working with and supporting their friends creatively. Incorporating these tried-and-true elements will not only make the process easier and more enjoyable; it will go a long way toward making those students who are nervous about singing (and possibly risking embarrassment) develop their skills much more comfortably.

This project's time frame encompasses a three-week musical rehearsal period (in addition to your prep time, the audition period, and maintenance during regular play rehearsals that will follow teaching the music to your students), and can be used on either the middle or high school level with virtually no variation in teaching technique. One very important caveat: as you will be teaching specific melody lines to your students, it *does* help immensely if you yourself have some familiarity and comfort level with singing. I'm assuming here that, like your students, you're relatively new to the world of musical theatre. That said, you don't have to be Bernadette Peters, but you should be able to pick out and sing along to a melody line or harmony of your show's score. If you do find this difficult, try getting help from a colleague—your school's musical director or bandleader. They can probably coach you on your own singing and perhaps assist you in teaching the les-

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Zombie Prom, Floyd Central High School, Floyds Knobs, Indiana, at the 2007 Thespian Festival.

sons I'm going to propose. Let's get started.

Step one: choose a show

We all love classic musicals—shows like *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, and, more recently, the work of Stephen Sondheim. But those are not the sorts of scripts you want your group to tackle, especially if most of them have little to no singing experience. This may seem to be a very limiting rule, but for your students' initial foray into musical theatre, attempting to master the complexities of a Rodgers and Hammerstein or Sondheim score is just going to end in frustration. For this go-round, I recommend choosing a musical with a pop music-based vibe, as opposed to a more old-fashioned, Broadway sound. There are two reasons why this is the best way to proceed: first, presenting your students with a pop-based show gives them a "hook" into the singing process—these tunes will have a simi-

lar and easily recognizable style to the songs they already sing along to on the radio, or have heard on a TV program like *American Idol*. Secondly, pop-based theatre music tends to be technically straightforward and basic in its construction, which is *not* a bad thing at all in my opinion (though I'm sure there are musical theatre purists out there who would disagree with me). In fact, a pop-based musical is the perfect material to hand your inexperienced singers—strongly defined melody and rhythm are the precise anchors fledgling vocalists need when grasping music for the first time.

So what musicals fit this criteria? The sidebar of suggested shows on page 26 will help you get started on the selection process. It's certainly not a complete list—you should do your own searching as well. Looking online through the major musical theatre publisher catalogues is a good place to start. It might also be useful for you to

check with your colleagues in the music department and perhaps the local community theatre to get some other suggestions. Bear in mind that some of the shows on my list are better suited to high school rather than middle schools students, and vice versa.

Here are some questions to answer when trying to choose a show:

- Does this script's cast of characters consist of a maximum five to seven principal singing roles with strong acting components as well, plus a variable-sized chorus? These numbers will allow you the most flexibility casting actors with varying vocal strengths.

- Does this script require two or three of its principal characters do the bulk of solo singing? If so, mentally skim your potential talent pool to ensure that you have several actors with some musical skills (from chorus, for instance) who can handle such roles. Then, you can build your show's chorus from those with lesser musical experience.

- When listening to the show's recorded score (you shouldn't choose a musical without playing it in its entirety on CD several times), do you find yourself picking up the melody lines easily (by singing or humming along)? If the songs quickly imprint themselves in your brain after a few listens, it's a good sign they'll be equally accessible to your students and easy to learn by ear.

- Do the show's arrangements require complicated harmonies, or complex timing on vocal parts and entrances? If so, you'll definitely need to simplify these elements for your production. If you don't have someone who can help you with this, take a pass.

- Does the score "sparkle" aurally? Try not to choose a show that's too ballad-heavy or melancholy in its lyrics or music. Instead, try to choose material that sounds catchy and upbeat as a whole; this will better capture and hold the musical attention of your beginners throughout the learning curve, plus allow them to interject lots of energy into their singing as well.

Another option to consider is an original show. That might work for you

if, first, and again, the score is contemporary, and second, the show's composer acts as co-musical director, or at the very least, works with you and your cast in person during all musical rehearsals. Third, the composer should make a demo tape/CD of the score (played on piano or guitar), so that copies are available for every cast member. Finally, the composer must be flexible in terms of cutting or reworking any portion of her score that's too tough for your non-singing cast.

I directed an original student show with a student composer who was very possessive of every note he wrote, and put up a constant fuss at first about making the changes that several less-than-seasoned singing actors pleaded for. I cleared up this problem by asking the cast members to sing the pieces of the score that had become per-

manent problem spots for the composer. They were written in a key that were much too high for our performers; once the composer heard them strain his notes very unpleasantly, I simply said, "Honestly, now: does it sound as good as it possibly can sound?" He admitted it didn't and made an easy adjustment (key changes are usually a snap). The actors were able to sing it, and the song sounded much better.

In a nutshell, I'd deem high energy as the most important quality to look for in any musical, as that is what will drive your students' interest in learning (and your teaching) the songs. I've musical directed high school productions of *The Wiz* a number of times, and on one occasion, I found myself faced with a student talent pool consisting of about thirty kids who had very little singing experience, and one girl who had already sung and acted

semi-professionally (she was logically cast as Dorothy). The director, choreographer, and I were undaunted by the fact that most of our students had never done a musical before. They all seemed completely caught up in the rock score of a story that most had only previously known as a movie from their childhood and they wowed us with their eagerness to do their best.

At auditions, some students came in completely unprepared, but plunged right in and sang "Happy Birthday" for us with gusto. (I always ask unprepared auditioners to sing this, because the song's range is varied enough to demonstrate whether a singer can handle both high and low notes.) We were so impressed with their enthusiasm, we knew they could overcome any musical shortcomings. We ended up casting every student who tried out—

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even if they just appeared briefly as a flying monkey. Our students were thrilled to be given the opportunity to prove they could learn music, and applied themselves with tremendous positive energy and focus during long rehearsal days. By opening night, the show sounded great, thanks to the innate musical talent of our Dorothy (who was a wonderful help to her non-singing peers) and the hard work and excitement generated by the rest of our group.

You can do the same thing with your own students, if you give some careful thought to who they are and the story and music they're most likely to embrace.

One other thing: as obvious as it might seem, make sure you secure performance rights to whatever musical you choose. In the first place, many of the musicals you're likely to choose are published by companies

that cater to the school market. They can be a very helpful resource in their own right; in fact, in some cases, you'll discover versions of the musicals that have been specifically re-written to make them more suitable for young voices. More importantly, failure to obtain permission to produce the play and its music is a serious copyright violation that can result in serious legal problems and fines for you and your school.

Step two: break down the parts of each song

Once you've chosen your show, take the score apart, song-by-song, in order to simplify its sections for both you and your actors (this should be done *before* auditions commence). The approach I'm suggesting is done strictly by ear. Ideally, you should devote two to three weeks to this work, depending on how long the score is.

Here are the steps to this process:

1. Listen to an original cast recording of the show on CD as many times as you can manage. This might sound just too simple, but trust me it works—listen while you're driving, grading papers, using your headphones while walking the dog or working out, anytime you can. Repetition will allow you to learn the melodies by heart if you listen to the score for several hours a day for about three days. Test yourself to see how much you've learned by singing along to the lyrics; they should start to come to you easily after about a dozen listens or so.

2. Once you feel you know the melody lines of each of the score's songs inside and out, accurately and completely transcribe each song's lyrics on paper (from liner notes or sheet music) in longhand. Again, this is a way to help you master the work—in this case, the words.

3. Sit down in a quiet room (no distractions or multitasking this time), and cue up the first song on the show's cast recording CD. Using your lyric sheet, note which sections of the song—if any—are character solos, and which involve group singing. Now go back to the first section (probably the chorus) that involves group harmony.



The Arab (Alabama) High School production of *Little Shop of Horrors* at the 2007 Thespian Festival.

Listen to this harmony: how many different keys do you hear? As a general rule, you should be able to pick out a high female vocal part (soprano), a lower female vocal part (alto), a high male vocal part (tenor) and a lower male vocal part (bass). Note how many sections you hear. Now, sing along with the section yourself, approximating the separate vocal parts in turn until you've learned each by ear. If you've mastered the score at this point, this should actually be pretty easy to do. Once you feel you know each part by rote, tape record yourself singing each separate harmony part along with the song on the CD. Obviously, don't expect yourself to be able to sing each part perfectly—the idea here is to simply create an identifiable track of each part of a song's harmony.

4. Repeat this process for each song on the CD. Once you get the knack of this, you should be able to record all four harmony parts for one song per day.

5. Document the vocal parts for your cast. First, make a master of each song's lyric sheet that you transcribed, noting to the left of each song section which character is singing (for solos). For group sections, note both characters and vocal parts. Here's an example:

The Rainbow's End, an original musical

Song 1: "I'm Off To Find The Sun"

Mary (solo/soprano):

"The rain will never get me down.
I'll make a smile from any frown.
I'm not afraid to make that leap
Into a brighter day."

Chorus: (soprano, alto, tenor):

"I'm off to find the sun.
so come along, everyone.
We're bound to have
so much more fun
the day we find the sun."

Repeat this process for each song, then make enough copies to hand out to your entire potential cast.

6. Now go back over the vocal tape you made of each song's parts, and create a mix tape or mix CD for each vocal part: a tape or CD containing copies of each song's soprano, alto, tenor or bass parts, to be handed out to each cast member who will be assigned these separate vocal parts after auditions. Make your original cast recording available or buy or borrow additional copies for students to share.

7. Make sure you have the equipment you're going to need to teach the score in rehearsal—if you don't, this is the time to go out and buy it. Basically all you need is three portable tape or CD players with built-in dubbing decks—one for you to use during rehearsals and two others for students to use so they can review the parts you've recorded for them and perhaps to record and listen to themselves during rehearsal breaks.

8. If you're working on an original musical, make sure to involve your composer from the outset. Don't hesitate to delegate some of the dividing of the harmony parts to her—after all, it is her show. At the same time, remember that you are a team—don't turn this work entirely over to the composer. You both need to understand every action taken so that you're both aware of any changes that need to be (or have been) made to the score. For example, if she decided to change the key of a song, you would certainly want to know. Also, as you did in the selection of your show, solicit advice from your school's music or band director as you learn the score and break it down.

Step three: run your auditions

Now that the time's come for auditions, your first order of business is to make your potential cast members feel as comfortable as possible about the sometime scary prospect of singing. When you post your audition notice, in addition to the essentials such as time, date, and place, clearly state that even though the show is a musical, students needn't have previous singing experience or musical training. Not only will this lower your potential cast members' anxiety, it will also open up the audi-

tion process to students who might not have tried out otherwise. Terrific casting surprises might just result from a bigger, more varied talent pool.

Also make sure you specify on your audition notice that each student should bring a pop song he or she knows well enough to sing a capella. Yes, this may mean you're going to listen to scores of Gwen Stefani songs, but the purpose of allowing your students to audition with a song they like and are familiar with is to, again, raise their comfort level about the singing process. If a student likes the song he's chosen, he's more likely to be relaxed enough to sing it as well as he can. And, of course, since you've chosen a pop-based show as well, having your

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cast try out with pop music is a logical barometer of their skill level with this style of music.

As you listen to the students sing, take note of whether each one seems to be stronger in the upper or lower range—this will help you place them in the right vocal part group. Make special note, too, of those students who do well at hitting both high and low notes (in case you need a tenor, you can shift a potential bass to that higher part if the student can handle this). Also, note the standard information points required at all auditions: what "type" is each performer, and what role might he or she be right for?

After each singing audition, have your students do a cold reading of a script section. Don't be discouraged if that student who really can't hold a pitch at all turns out to be a fantastic actor—you can *still* cast him in a lead singing role. How? By incorporating "speak-singing," a performance hybrid that allows your actor to talk—and act—his way through a song.

Here's an example of how this can work: I was directing an original student show that required the lead actor to sing four numbers in a jazzy style, not unlike Billie Holiday. We found a young woman who brought incredible charisma and acting ability to the table—but whose singing voice was shaky, to say the least. (Literally shaky: she'd tremble like a leaf every time she tried to sing a single verse.) The musical director and I very tactfully told her that we could see she'd be much more comfortable talking and acting out the lyrics to each of her songs, and she was relieved. We cast her, and then basically worked on each song as we would a monologue—working meaning, beats, and

emotion into specific lyrical points. This tactic worked very well, and her performance garnered a lot of praise.

If you find you have an auditioning actor who might be able to flourish in a "speak-sung" role, give her the script during auditions (or callbacks, if you are having them) and ask her to act through the lyrics of a solo song for the character you're considering her for. Even in an on-the-spot cold read, you'll be able to judge whether or not this approach will work. (An important note: if you do cast this actor to "speak-sing" her solos in a principal role, you still can blend her into group vocals for full cast numbers.)

At the end of tryouts, after you have cast lead roles, break down your chorus parts as evenly as possible (five altos, five sopranos, five tenors, five basses, for instance). If you have an odd number of cast members for these vocal parts, try to work the overflow singers in as basses (one or two extra singers in this range will add a nice, hefty underpinning to your score's

sound) and sopranos (which will help balance the score's sound well at its top).

Here's one thing to prepare for: when you hand out vocal assignments at your first music rehearsal, several students *will* ask to be changed. I've heard every excuse: "I can't sing that high, my voice is changing!" "There's no way I can sing that low, I don't want to sound like a guy!" Your strategy: don't move *anyone*. Tell any worried warblers in your cast that you know, based on their auditions, that they have the chops to handle their assigned vocal range, and ask them to give it their best shot. Chances are good that this will reassure them, and once they're thrown into the thick of actually learning their vocal parts, they'll relax and enjoy themselves.

Step four: explain the "Ah" of singing

At your first full-cast singing session, it's important to foster a relaxed and fun atmosphere. There are lots of warm-up exercises and you probably

already have one you use with your students. Here's my own variation for the first singing rehearsal: ask your cast members to stand in a circle, and explain that no matter what role they happen to be playing in the show—lead or chorus—each of their voices counts as an important building block in how the music will ultimately sound. Stress that you know each and every one of them has the skill to pull off singing. Remind them that you saw their potential in auditions and, even if they haven't sung or feel a little nervous about their voices, that the best way to enjoy vocalizing and sound their very best is to be as relaxed as possible.

Next, to emphasize the importance of relaxation as a vocal tool, run a series of warm-up physical-vocal exercises, as follows. (Again, these are my own take on some fundamental exercises—feel free to add your own twist to them, if you think it will help prepare your students to sing.)

1. Ask your students to stretch and tense their muscles (reaching strenu-

ously for the ceiling with their arms, while tightening the rest of their bodies) for thirty seconds. Then, ask them to slowly relax each part of their bodies in turn, starting from their outstretched hands and arms down to the shoulders, torso, hips, and knees, until they are completely relaxed.

2. Next, introduce a few basic vocal warm-up exercises. If you're working with a co-musical director, she can play scales on a keyboard if it's available. If not, you can easily sing a scale (start in the middle range), ask your students to repeat it, then go higher, repeating notes until they can't hit them. Then, go back down to the lowest possible scale your group can sing. (You can also use a pitch pipe to demonstrate scales instead of singing.) Try scales that utilize different vocal sounds as well: have everyone repeat "hee-hee-hee" in a breathy manner in their middle range, then have them repeat the phrase in scale form up and down (this is good for both breath control and proper mouth positioning). Finally, to work on both range and dic-

Getting started with musicals

Here's a list of some solid (and familiar) pop music-based scripts you might want to consider for your student production. Most are suitable for both middle and high school students. It will up to you to figure out what will work best for your students. All of these are available from major publishers. Amazon.com is a great resource for the latest play publishing details regarding price and availability.

The Me Nobody Knows, edited by Stephen M. Joseph. Songs and stories taken from the true experiences of economically and socially challenged young people. (Middle school.)

Grease, by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey. A crowd pleaser send-up of the 1950s that your students will likely be familiar with thanks to the popular 1978 movie version. (Middle and high school.)

Little Shop of Horrors, by Howard Ashman and Alan Menken. A darkly funny tale featuring sharply drawn characters and a catchy sixties-based pop score. (Middle and high school.)

The Wiz, by William F. Brown and Charlie Smalls. This retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* contains great tunes and plenty of varied roles. (Middle and high school.)

Hair, recently updated by James Rado. A great time capsule piece for high school performers to tackle.

Runaways, by Elizabeth Swados. This socially and politically relevant tale of youthful alienation still makes a strong impact. (High school.)

Godspell, by Stephen Schwartz. Easy, breezy music that will engage students both as budding singers and actors learning to interpret songs. (Middle and high school.)

Zombie Prom, by Dana P. Rowe and John Dempsey. A silly ghouloves-girl story featuring catchy fifties-style pop tunes, with a touch of history about the atomic age. (Middle and high school)

Disney's High School Musical, by David Simpatico, Bryan Louiselle, Peter Barsocchini, and various song contributors. A wildly popular and accessible story of teens trying to fit in and stand out at the same time, with the ultimate pop-song score that every 'tween in America knows from the 2005 TV movie. (Middle and high school.)

School House Rock Live!, by Scott Ferguson, Kyle Hall, and George Keating, with songs by various contributors. A bouncy revue-style take on the beloved seventies educational cartoon that teaches history, grammar, math, science, and politics through a breezy score. (Middle and high school.)

—L.M.

tion, have your students repeat the phrase “lee-ha” as they do scales, paying very close attention to its clear pronunciation. Try three up-and-down scale sets of each exercise.

3. Ask your students to open their mouths wide, letting their jaw muscles slacken. Have everyone say “Ah,” as if the doctor were checking their throats with a tongue depressor. Ask them to hold this “Ah” for ten seconds, then another, with instructions that they make it sound louder or softer. Repeat this exercise for five minutes, slowly building to a fifteen-second hold. Then, explain to your group that the way their mouth sounds and feels during the “Ah” is exactly the position they should use vocally when singing every note, for optimum vocal tone, quality, and volume control. (And believe it or not, this is the *most* important vocal skill you will be imparting to your group—the “Ah” is your simple touchstone throughout this musical process).

4. Finish this session by playing your show’s original cast recording CD. Encourage the students to sing along with any portions they might know as they listen. Distribute each student’s specific vocal mix tape (or CD) that you created, as well as the show’s lyric sheets. Ask the group to go home and learn the melody lines for the first song in the show, noting that it will be the focus of their next session with you.

Step five: introduce the first group song

Start this session off with the same physical stretching-relaxation exercise you did in the last session. Then do a vocal warm-up consisting of the following:

- Three sets of standard scales (high back down to low).
- Three sets of “hee-hee” scales (high back down to low).
- Three sets of “lee-ha” scales (high back down to low).
- Ten minutes of “Ah” vocal exercises in which everyone holds their “Ah” for ten seconds, then fifteen, then twenty, then thirty, until they run out of breath. Try “Ahs” in a series of vocal

ranges by taking “Ah” up and down the scale. Repeat for two more sets.

Once you conclude the warm-ups, it’s time to start learning the first song. Here’s how:

1. Begin by playing the song from the show’s score CD three times, asking your singers simply to listen.

2. Next, have everyone sing along to the song on the score CD, allowing any soloists to do their parts, and asking the group to join in the chorus parts. Repeat the song and this process three times.

3. Now, switch to your vocal parts recording, set to the first group entrance (probably the chorus) of the song on your tape player, and cue up to the soprano vocal part section. Ask your sopranos to listen to their part (play it three times). Then play it again, and ask them to sing along. Repeat this five times. Then turn off the tape and ask them to try it a capella. Don’t expect perfect results immediately—if students get off beat, simply repeat the process, doing one-on-one coaching with those who are having tempo problems. If you need to, switch the recorded music section back on, and review the vocal section for any errors before trying it a capella again. Getting everyone in sync will require lots of drilling, perhaps as many as ten times.

4. Now repeat the same process for your altos, tenors, and basses, in that order.

5. When each vocal range group has mastered its part, play the group section on your show CD, asking your students to sing along in each of their designated group parts. Repeat this process as many times as seems necessary, stopping to make corrections as you go. Then ask the group to sing it a capella. Repeat the song (at least ten times) until everyone seems to be singing in sync, and with confidence.

6. Add your soloists in, again, a capella, and drill the entire song another ten times. The above series of steps is the exact process you will now use for teaching each song to your group in the show, throughout all subsequent musical sessions.

Step six: teach the entire score of songs

Repeat the exact process you used for the first teaching session for each subsequent session, from warm-up through end result. As you and your group become accustomed to the process, you should find it easy to teach one song to the group per rehearsal session. I’d suggest that each session run for two or three hours, four or five days a week, over the three-week period—the length of your own rehearsals may vary, depending on the size of your class and other commitments your students might have. You might be wondering: is this amount of rehearsal time too much to expect of your students (especially if you’re working on the middle school level)? The answer is definitely no. They need the time for drilling, more than anything else, in order to cement music taught by ear. Your group will be having so much fun learning this way if you keep the atmosphere relaxed and light that the session length should not be an adverse factor even for younger students.

At the end of each session, remember to ask your students to learn and practice the melody lines at home for the next song you intend to teach. This request need never be a pressured one. Your goal is for your students to simply familiarize themselves with each song on their own; most of the actual learning will take place during your group sessions, so there’s no need to fret if the songs are learned perfectly as homework.

Another important note: from the start, use a positive group dynamic to help your students feel great about the progress they are making as singers. Each time a student sings a solo, or a vocal group sings its part, lead the way, by example, with lots of applause and praise. Don’t, of course, let things get out of hand, but allow your kids to give each other as much positive feedback as possible.

Step seven: teach the solos

During the second week, begin working on one solo song per teaching pe-

riod (ask your instrumentation musical director or band leader to continue to drill group parts of the songs you've already taught as you work to teach your solo singers).

The process you should use for teaching each singer should go step-by-step as follows:

1. Do a full vocal warm-up.
2. Ask your soloist to sing through his/her song to the CD show score.
3. Ask your singer to identify any problem spots she is having with the material. Is she uncomfortable with a note? If so, drill that note several times. Do you detect any other vocalization problems? It might help to review the "ah" exercise work you introduced at the outset of the project.
4. Ask your soloist to sing through the song again, first to the recorded music, then a capella. Drill the song until she seems to have ironed out any big problems she had with projection, diction, or memorization. Again, don't expect perfection—what you're looking for is a commitment to the song. Mastery and really outstanding performance will come with practice.
5. Finally, if you do indeed have a soloist who is doing a song in "speak-singing" fashion pay attention to the nuances of the acting. Offer constructive criticism on characterization and line interpretation if necessary.

This last step in solo work brings up an important point in general: be certain you continually emphasize emotional truth and resonance as the most crucial element of interpreting *any* show number, either by a soloist or by the group as a whole. Discuss the motivation behind the lyrics being sung; talk about how they propel the show's plot forward. Remind your cast continually that the feelings they are conveying in character while they sing are much more important than performing a song perfectly from a technical standpoint.

Step eight: keep singing through regular rehearsals

Once you've taught the basics of the show's music and your students move into regular rehearsals, they're going to begin focusing on blocking scenes and memorizing lines. Still, it's essential that you keep their singing sharp. Here's how to navigate the subsequent rehearsal period, through performances.

1. Hold one show sing-through per rehearsal week, if possible, scheduling this around other production demands.
2. During daily rehearsals, pay very close attention to how movement may be affecting your singers' performances. If you see they're getting too winded, or hear serious problems in their vocal capacities, make adjustments in the show's choreography.

3. Assuming you have a production team that includes other adults, make yourself available for on-the-spot music "clinics" during rehearsals and techs. Let students grab you when needed for song drills or reviews, and gather your group during production lulls to rehearse rough spots.

4. Don't stress your students by giving notes that are too technical. Try not to harp endlessly on a student's weak spot if you get the sense he is already trying as hard as possible to correct it. A non-singer *may* never be able to hold a B-flat, and you know what? That's okay. Instilling confidence in your singers is more important than musical flawlessness.

Finally, on opening night, lavishly praise your student's singing accomplishments, record them for posterity, and present a copy to each cast member as appreciation for a job well done. When they hear how far they've come, your group will be eager to start on their next musical. Just remember, have fun and don't push too hard. Maybe in a year or two, you and your group *will* be doing Oklahoma!

Lisa Mulcahy is the author of The Actor's Other Career Book (Allworth Press) and a frequent contributor to Teaching Theatre.