

## **Musical Theatre Cut & Prep by Kati Schwaber**

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Hi everybody, I'm Kati Schwaber. I'm a voice and text coach and a musical theatre teacher. Right now we're going to talk about how to cut a piece for a musical theatre audition and how to prep that piece.

First of all, when you're picking a piece, make sure that it's in a comfortable key. It is possible to change a key of a piece but often the adjudicators know what key it is supposed to be in, so if you have decided to take it down a couple of keys because it is too high, that is something they are going to recognize. So it's better to find a piece that actually really suits your voice and sits really comfortably. When you are deciding what piece you want to do it's important to decide what story you want to tell yourself. We talked about this a little bit in the Shakespeare tutorial as well. Decide what your type is and who you are trying to present yourself as. Again, for a general audition the theatre is looking to see how you fit into an entire season, not just how you fit into one singular play. They want to know how they can slot you into what spaces are available. It is not the most heartwarming of processes, but it is the way they make it simpler for themselves.

Decide how you are trying to present yourself and how you are going to be most effective for them as the producer of this season. That way that brings you closer to getting the job. Decide are you going to present yourself as the funny character, the leading man, the young ingenue, the older woman who dispenses advice. Find what your type is and use that to show the theatre company how you can be useful to them.

Another thing to think about when you are starting to cut a piece is you want to make sure you have a complete story in your audition. Often you'll see people pull a chunk, just pull the middle part that's the highest and we completely lose the storytelling and they don't often get the job. Because what the theatre's are looking for, an unfair ask, is for you to come up in your thirty second audition and tell us a full story and be as close to the finished product as possible.

So, look for cuts inside of your piece that have a full story, that have an arc, that have a beginning and an end, so that we can see how you change from the beginning of your audition piece to the end of the audition piece. Work through that inside of the melody. You don't need to repeat a melody if we've heard it before, just move on to the next section. We'll talk about how to make a cut. What you're looking for is a complete story and not too much repetition in the actual sung melody. You want to look for what makes sense and what's exciting about the piece. You probably want to include the money notes. You probably want to include the high stuff and some of the low stuff so that you have the beginning of the story, the exciting part of the story, and then the end of the story. Sometimes you can accomplish that by just taking out a chunk of the middle but sometimes you have to make what is called a Frankencut where you just pick and choose pieces throughout and just put those together.

So if we're looking at, for example, *Just Breathe* from *The Prom*. Depending on the type of story you want to tell you can just take the first verse and jump ahead so

*\*sung\**

*Note to self*

*Don't be gay in Indiana*

*Big heads up:*

*That's a really stupid plan*

*There are places where it's in to be out*

*Maybe San Francisco or thereabout*

So you have this whole first section that you can choose if that's the story you're trying to tell. Or, if you want to jump ahead, you can take these first two lines if you're making a Frankencut

*Note to self*

*Don't be gay in Indiana*

*Big heads up:*

*That's a really stupid plan*

And then skip to the second verse because it's the same melody, right? So if we're skipping ahead, we skip all of this and come back in this section because it's the same melody. So, rather than coming in with this section here we take the first two lines and actually come in here

*Who knew asking out a girl to the prom*

*Would go over just like an atom bomb*

So when you're making a Frankencut you take the first two lines from the first verse and the second two lines from the second verse and put them together and you get the full melody but with different words. Or, if you want to keep it simpler, you just take the whole verse as it stands

*Note to self*

*People suck in Indiana*

*Leave today*

*Pray the Greyhound isn't full*

Right, but you have the option to decide what is the story you are trying to tell. So when you're looking to either make a Frankencut or just pull a chunk out of whatever piece you're looking at, decide for yourself which is going to be most helpful to you as a performer. What story is going to show you off the best.

So I assigned this piece to a young woman who was auditioning for the musical at her school and she chose, we worked together, and decided that the best choice was to be to use the first

lines of the first verse, “note to self don’t be gay in Indiana, big heads up: that’s a really stupid plan”, and then skip to the second phrase of the second verse: “who knew asking out a girl to the prom” because that story suited her the best.

So once you have started to put together your cut whether it be a Frankencut or just a cut directly from the piece itself, you want to make sure it is clearly marked. This probably does not apply for the Diversity Generals but once we’re back in person you really want to make sure a pianist can clearly read what you have done to your piece. They expect a cut, they expect things to be all over the place, but what you want to do is make sure that it is visible and easy to read because they have never seen your cut before and they are sight reading this piece for you and they want you to succeed. You want to clearly mark where you start your cut. Make sure that you take out pages that you are not using and scribble over measures that are not being played. You want to write in the lyrics that you are using, the correct lyrics, because sometimes a pianist will be listening for what you’re saying and if you’re saying something from a different verse than what they’re looking at it can confuse them and they start to look for where you are to try to catch you in case you just forgot what was happening because they do try to make sure that they follow you as best you can. So if you’re saying something that isn’t written on the page their assumption is “oh, they must have accidentally skipped ahead because they’re nervous I’m going to try to find them” and then everybody gets thrown off and it’s very difficult. So make sure that you write the words that you’re actually singing on the page. Make sure you clearly mark, with a bracket, this is where I’m starting, this is where I’m ending, and scribble out anything that you’re not using. Take out pages, if there’s pages, that you’re not gonna sing, so that everything is as clean and clear as possible for the pianist.

And, again, this is more advice for once we’re back to auditions in person, but you want to make a book. Everytime you sing a song, put it in a binder with the plastic leaflets so that you have those pages protected. You put them front-to-back inside that leaflet so that it’s easy to turn the pages and that way you hold onto the music that you’re going to use for auditions. And then, when you go to an audition, someone’s like “That song was great, do you have another one” you’re like “Yes, right here in my book”. It keeps it nice and organized and simple and these are the ten pieces that I know.

So, again, when you’re looking at a piece, decide if this piece is comfortable for you, in a good key, shows off your voice well, shows off your type, and when you make a cut of it, try to tell a full story. A full story arc. A beginning, a middle, and an end so that we hear your voice shine and see your acting shine.

So, once you’ve selected a piece, make sure you know the melody. This can be tricky. It’s often harder than people anticipate to learn a piece. So really really go over it. Make sure you know it. Sing it with (recordings), listen to recordings, find karaoke tracks, and make sure that you can sing without the singer in your ear. Because sometimes you think you know a piece and all of a sudden you’re on your own and it’s hard to reproduce by yourself. Make sure you know the melody. Use any resources available to you. Do you have friends who read music? Do you have friends who play the piano? Do you play the piano? Do you have any sort of resource that can

help you? YouTube is a great resource. You'll find recordings. You'll find other people singing it. You'll find, often, karaoke tracks. Really go through that process and make sure that you really know your piece and that you know your cut. If you are doing a Frankencut and you listen to a piece a thousand times you're not going to hear your cut so make sure that you know what you're doing in terms of your audition piece. Once you have started to learn your piece, do a little research. Figure out who the composer is, who the lyricist is, what era it came from, what character is singing this song because they might ask at an audition. They might be like "You're singing what from Mystery of Edwin Drood?" "Yes I am, and this is who wrote that" and it might start a conversation with somebody at an audition. It helps to inform your acting because if you don't know where this piece stands inside of a musical it's hard to know where you are in this character's journey. So, once you have done a little research you start to through your piece really with a fine toothed comb. Decide what the important words in the piece are, what important phrases, are those phrases highlighted with the music? Are the important words on a high note? Are the important words on an elongated note? Are the important words sung really softly? All of these things will help to make your piece have peaks and valleys. Let the story speak for itself and help your audience hear better.

So you have your operative words. What are the important things that you're trying to say. Is there a moment where there's a comma in the lyrics that's not emphasized with a rest in the music. You get to make a decision at that point. Do you take a little lift? There's all sorts of ways to start to personalize this piece for you and what type of actor you are. If you are struggling, ask for help. Again, you might have friends who have sung something similar and have ideas. You might be able to find a teacher who is willing to work with you. There's all sorts of people all around Milwaukee who want to reach out and help so don't be afraid to ask for that help. When you're looking at a piece, where are there moments where the music and the lyrics line up really nicely together. Is there a moment where the character's talking about water running the river and there's something in the accompaniment that sounds like the river running. Look for those moments because they have an emotional value that can help you during an audition.

And then look for phrasing and musical time. When you have a piece in front of you, you have an opportunity to decide how you the actor wants to phrase this that may be different than it's been done before or that may be the standard but it feels right for you. If I'm looking at Just Breathe in this section here right after this section we were talking about:

*Who knew asking out a girl to the prom  
Would go over just like an atom bomb  
And make things much worse with your dad and mom*

Right, you've got this section that feels like it really slows down. Slow it down then. If you are auditioning that's your moment to really use your phrasing to your best advantage. So

*Who knew asking out a girl to the prom  
Would go over just like an atom bomb  
And make things much worse with your dad and mom*

*And who'd have ever thought  
That could be possible?*

Use the music, use the text, use these opportunities to give yourself permission to really dive into the audition piece. Again, what the theatre company wants to see is as close to the finished product as possible. So, if there's a moment that you feel like that you want to slow down then slow down. Use that time, use that phrasing to give yourself an opportunity to try something. To give yourself an opportunity to impress them. What you really want to make sure of is that you have differentiation. That you have different style but different dynamics. Different emotional highs and lows. Different pacing. Anything that you can do to make it so that it's not one note. So that it doesn't feel like you're doing the same thing for the entire cut. Nobody wants to be belted at for a full song so you want to make sure that you're belting in the right moments and that you're acting in moments that are going to help you to change your vocalism. So if we're looking at this example piece, if we're looking at Just Breathe, you want this section here, that slows down, that feels soft, feels vulnerable, so you have this moment of:

*And make things much worse with your dad and mom  
And who'd have ever thought  
That could be possible?*

And then you come into the more belted section:

*Just breathe, Emma.  
Picture a because with golden sand.*

I think in the cut that I gave my student we didn't actually get into this section we skipped ahead to this version of the bridge:

*Just breathe, Emma  
Remember that thing called oxygen  
Just breathe, Emma*

So that you have again that moment at the beginning that feels a little bit more vulnerable that leads into the belt so that the adjudicators can see how versatile you are. How many different vocal colors you can make and how you can use your storytelling to affect your vocalism.

It's a lot, it's a lot to think about for a piece that's going to last thirty seconds because it is an audition. But, with any audition, they're asking the impossible. They're asking you to be performance ready with no costumes, no lighting, no prep, just being yourself. So, you want to give yourself as much as possible in terms of prep that can help you to make that possible. You want to make sure that in your piece that you're moving from thought to thought to thought so that you have beginning, middle, and end like we talked about and so that you hit the high notes so you can impress them in terms of what they're looking for for musical theatre. And you want to make sure that you have lots of vocal colors so that you can impress them in terms of acting

abilities. There's just so much to think about but when you break it down what you really want to see is a beginning, a middle, and an end in an audition piece. So whether that means you take it from one section of a song or you take it from many sections in a song and put it together into an audition cut, you want to make sure that you're telling a complete story so that you show yourself off to the best of your ability.

I know that was a lot of information. I hope that that was helpful. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me. My email is [katschwaber1@gmail.com](mailto:katschwaber1@gmail.com). If you don't know how to get in touch with me, get in touch with Adam Qutaishat and he will pass on your questions to me and we can work from there. But, I wish everybody good luck at your auditions and have a good time starting to put that stuff together. Thanks!