

# Preparing Sheet Music for Auditions

(courtesy of Music Theatre Educator's Alliance)



Photo of *Spring Awakening* courtesy of Fullerton College, 2018, Directed by Tim Espinosa, Choreographed by Haley Izurieta.

**By John Pike**

A singing audition is like a dance partnership: the more you understand what your partner needs, the more likely they will be in step with you—even if you have never met them before. In an audition, the accompanist is the singer's dance partner. They want to provide the best musical support possible, but that can be challenging if sheet music is not well-prepared.

Here are some common-sense guidelines to help your students prepare for this critical partnership and a successful audition.

## What's on the Page (and What's Not)

Ensure that your sheet music is complete. Even if your music is a cut, include the title, composer/lyricist names, and all key and time signature information at the beginning of your music. If a pianist recognizes the song or composer, this cuts down on the need to explain your music.

Many times, singers are confused when the piano accompaniment does not sound like the cast recording. If you want a song arranged like the cast album, make sure the music is marked like that. Before you take music to any audition, have someone play the accompaniment for you so you know what to expect.

If music has been photocopied, make sure that it is not missing the bass line (the bass clef staff at the bottom of the page), or the brackets that link the piano staves on the left side of the page. If you're using a photocopy, every page of the music should be "squared up" and not on an angle. If you are enlarging or reducing the sheet music copy, all pages should be the same size. (Note: Don't make your music too small!)

Make sure that your printer or copier has enough ink. A faint photocopy is unacceptable, as is a tenth-generation photocopy. Some older, hard-to-find music may be a copy-of-a-fax-copy, which is very hard to read. Invest in your audition by going to one of the many sheet music websites and purchasing a clean version of your song. There is an additional advantage: You can get your song in the key you want. If your song is no longer in print, there are many musicians who will rewrite your music using Finale or another music notation software for a reasonable fee.

A pianist will often refer to lyrics in order to follow you, especially if they have never heard the song or if you are taking significant melodic liberties. When the words out of your mouth don't match what's on the page, that can be problematic. Therefore, if you sing different lyrics, write them in legibly, and cross out any lyrics you are not using.

Make sure that both your beginning (will you be using an intro? a bell tone?) and your ending are clear, simple, and clearly marked. This will help you get off on the right foot, and finish strong.

## Cutting Your Music

Auditions frequently call for 32-, 16-, or even 8-bar versions of songs. Complicated cuts can make your music hard to follow, no matter how well you explain them.

Although it takes time, it is not hard to edit PDFs on a Mac using (free) Preview, Screenshot, and FormulatePro software. The result will be a clean, readable song cut. Here is a link to a video showing how to do this: <https://youtu.be/eYSnLMBvwPc>

If you have access to a copier, you can prepare your music with scissors, tape, and paper. Start by making a photocopy (or two) of your entire song, and then begin cutting and pasting to achieve the version you desire. Put blank paper over unnecessary bars so the pianist will not accidentally play them. When you are finished, make a final, clean copy of the music.

When cutting bars between two sections, make sure the key and time signatures are the same in the measures before and after your cut. You cannot simply cut measures and hope that the sections will match or assume that the accompanist will be able to fix it.

Designate a specific and logical ending to your song if it's not in the printed music so that the pianist stops at the correct point and in the right key. Get rid of what you don't need: if there are multiple endings, cross out alternate ones you are not using.

Your final version should eliminate as many page turns as possible. Start your copy with two pages open so that there is no need for a page turn until page three. That gets things off to a good start. The correct time to turn a page is when it will interrupt the accompaniment the least. If you don't play the piano, look for a page with few notes in the final measure. (A single chord or a blank bar is the best!) However, if your song changes key, time signature, or tempo at the top of page three, this would not be a good place for a turn as your pianist would have a big surprise immediately upon turning the page. In that case, start with page one facing the pianist, and then have them turn to reveal pages two and three.

Always have page turns moving forward (right to left). Never ask the pianist to turn backwards. Just because a song was published that way does not make it workable in the audition room. Generally, if you copy your music from the original piano/conductor score, page turns won't be a problem. Vocal selection books are the primary offenders since publishers reduce the number of pages to save on printing costs.

If you have made substantial cuts, it's always a good idea to have someone to play the cut version prior to your audition to be sure it works.

## Marking Your Music

Know the basic markings: fermatas, caesuras, rubato, repeats or vamps, and write them in.

**Fermatas / Caesuras:** If you hold a note longer than its written value, draw a "bird's eye" over the note. If you pause, or want the pianist to completely stop before you continue, use two slashes (called a caesura or "Railroad tracks").

**Rubato** means that you are not following an even tempo, but are taking liberties. In this case, you want the pianist to follow you. So, be sure to indicate where the rubato stops and the regular tempo starts.

**Vamps** are also called safeties. If you have a specific number of vamps in mind before beginning to sing, you should mark that number (e.g. 2x meaning two times, 3x meaning three times, etc.). Otherwise, the pianist will assume "vamp until ready."

## **Presenting Your Music**

Purchase an appropriately sized three-ring binder to accommodate the amount of music you have in your rep book. It should lay flat against the piano without having to be forced back (many cheap plastic binders are flimsy and will not stay open). The pianist's full attention should be on what they are playing—not on whether your book is stable.

Often actors bring in binders that need some spring cleaning. Keep your audition book lean and mean by removing songs you are no longer using. Many actors keep two books (one large and one small), and move music back and forth between them. If your book is very full, don't place the song you are auditioning with at the very beginning of your binder. Place it in the middle so that the pages will turn more easily.

You should immediately address the following:

### **Loose Pages**

Whether due to ripped hole punches or photocopies long past their prime, this is an easy fix: use hole-reinforcements or re-photocopy the page.

### **Broken or Non-closing Rings**

Broken rings snag and rip pages. They also make the book less stable and music can fall out. The best fix is a new binder.

### **Staples**

Staples are an absolute NO. If you have used staples to make your music "two sided," the pianist could cut their fingers as they turn pages. Also, stapled pages will not turn in a binder and will have to be taken apart. This wastes valuable audition time.

Audition pianists have almost come to blows over whether plastic sheet protectors or plain paper are preferred for audition books. There are advantages and disadvantages to both:

### **Plastic**

- Pro: keeps your music clean and pages usually turn easier than paper.
- Con: Can reflect light making the music hard to read in certain audition rooms.
- Con: Is not conducive to making last-minute markings on your music for the pianist.

### **Paper**

- Pro: Last-minute markings can be made without pulling your book apart.
- Con: Pages could rip if the pianist makes a quick page turn.
- Con: Frequent handling of pages can leave them smudged or bent.

If you three-hole punch your music, it can be kept inside or outside of sheet protectors. You may be able to learn the pianist's preference while waiting in line to audition, and adjust.

## **What to Expect**

Many audition pianists do not transpose on sight; it's never been an absolute requirement of the job. Your sheet music should be in the key you need. If you can't find the song online in your key, then consider asking someone to create an appropriate transposition for you. If your pianist is willing to transpose on the spot, understand that your audition may not go perfectly.

Realize, also, that a piano is not an orchestra. That crazy clarinet solo that backs up the vocalist on the cast album won't happen at piano audition. Many contemporary or pop musicals were written "guitar-specific." Therefore, even if the pianist is using the score or vocal selections, the written piano accompaniment won't sound like what you are used to hearing. Prepare for this by having someone play the accompaniment for you, prior to your audition.

A good musical theatre pianist will be familiar with basic repertoire, but even that is constantly growing and changing. A pianist may know *Pippin* from the 1972 original but not the stylistic changes made for the 2012 revival. In order to support you more fully, the pianist may ask you for information about the song or your interpretation of it. Knowing who wrote the music and lyrics, knowing what show it is from, the original dramatic context, and the name of the character who sang the song should make you able to handle any questions. If you are auditioning with a pop song, know the original artist or who wrote and performed it as well as the period in which it was written.

## **Etiquette**

Audition pianists often sit and play for hours. They will appreciate it if you treat them with courtesy and professionalism. Here are some general tips:

Respect the pianist's personal space. When you approach the piano, be aware that you are entering someone else's domain. Don't crowd the pianist or push your music toward them. Don't touch the pianist, and remember that the piano is a musical instrument. Treat it with care.

Be considerate. Have your book open, marked, or put your audition song in front of your book so that you can easily find your music without flipping through pages in front of the pianist. If the pianist immediately looks at your book or turns a page, give them a moment to take in your song before starting to talk. Consider limiting your perfume or cologne, and if you are prone to a nervous stomach, have a mint before your audition so your breath is fresh.

Instructions should be brief. Because you'll be nervous at an audition and have a tendency to rush or forget things, practice your instructions at home. Pick one or two important items you wish to communicate and let them sink in. If your music is well-marked, you shouldn't need to explain too much. And, if the song is well-known, you only need to point out what's unusual about your interpretation.

If a song is well-known and you are using the show tempo, you may not need to give tempo. If you do want to give tempo instructions, either sing a portion of the song that is in steady rhythm (not rubato, swung, or triplets) or tap or gently slap your chest or thigh, in an even, non-aggressive manner. Do not snap your fingers. Nerves and adrenaline can lead you to give a faster tempo than intended. Therefore, always take a deep breath and feel the beat internally before giving your pianist the tempo.

Above all, be polite. Saying please and thank you is professional and always appreciated.

There you have it! You have prepared your music and communicated your needs to your pianist-partner. Now, take the lead with your voice, and perform with specificity and confidence. Good theatre pianists want you to succeed in your audition. And by having acted kindly with both your music preparation and etiquette, your partnership will get off on the right foot.