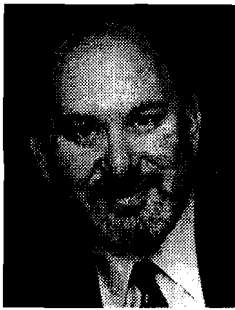


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Preparing Logical 16-Bar Cuts for Audition Songs

Robert Marks



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WHY DO SO MANY AUDITIONS require that singers prepare 16 bars of an audition song? Should that length be taken literally? Which 16 bars should be chosen? Why 16 bars?

In the pre-pop days of music theater, when the standard American song was 32 bars (usually in AABA form), a 16 bar cut would usually be the bridge (“B” section) leading into the final “A” section. It was simple, and is often still acceptable. But contemporary music theater song forms have radically changed, and it is necessary to reexamine the requirements of the 16 bar audition. Singing teachers and coaches must prepare logical 16 bar cuts for singers that maintain the integrity of the music, are playable at sight by an unfamiliar accompanist, show the vocal strengths of the performer, and make a coherent dramatic statement.

A 16 bar audition is essentially an introduction to the audition panel—a kind of enhanced type casting that determines whether the performer will go on to the next step of the audition process. Although appearance (“type”) counts as much as anything else, since the panel is seeing and hearing the performer for the first time, it is important to demonstrate more than just an appealing voice. Performers need to communicate who they are, and show their strengths as actors and as singers. Since this initial evaluation rarely, if ever, results in a job, there is only one possible positive result: a callback in which more time is allowed for detailed appraisal. The initial 16 bar audition must generate the auditors’ interest sufficiently that the performer’s picture and resume get placed on the callback pile instead of in the garbage can.

One common misconception in considering the 16 bar cut is that we are talking about 16 literal measures of music. Limiting an audition to 16 bars is an issue of time, but a musical bar is *not* a quantity of time. One bar of slow 12/8 music will take much more time to perform than a bar of an up-tempo 2/4. I’ve always felt that requesting 16 bars of a singer’s repertoire is somewhat unfair, like asking someone to bring 16 pieces of fruit to a picnic—16 raisins are very different from 16 watermelons. Generally, I assume a bar to be about two seconds in duration. At that rate, a 16 bar song would last about 32 seconds. Allowing for a short musical introduction and an extended ending, I advise my students to cut their songs to under a minute, preferably about 45 seconds.

This cut *must* be prepared in advance. A singer should never go into an audition unsure of exactly what to sing and what the accompanist is expected to play. Performers should not start from the beginning of the song and ex-

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pect to be cut off; getting stopped in midstream is never a good idea. If an audition piece goes on too long, it may appear that the singer did not follow the instructions. In the audition room, more usually is not better.

One of the most important considerations of the logical 16 bar cut is the piano introduction. It can set the mood, tempo, key, and style of the song. During an introduction that is played in tempo, a singer can determine whether the tempo is correct and can stop if necessary to make a change before starting to sing.

Knowing where to begin singing, and on what note, is the main function of the piano introduction. Many singers have their music marked at the vocal starting point of a 16 bar cut, but few mark a specific musical introduction. They might say to the accompanist, "Oh, just give me a bar or two." In that case, the singer is following the pianist! Introductions should be specific and clearly indicated on the sheet music.

I would recommend a maximum of two bars for the piano introduction. Often a simple bell tone is a good way to begin, but the singer is required to instantly get into the mood of the song. Practice is imperative; if a song is in the key of C, starts on an E, and the pianist plays a G bell tone, without sufficient rehearsal the singer easily might start on the wrong note.

Sometimes the music before the intended vocal entrance can be misleading; it may be in a different implied key, even though the key signature doesn't change. In that case, a new introduction may have to be written out for the pianist. This is not a trivial undertaking. Because it must set the tone and the tempo so quickly, the introduction to the 16 bar cut may have to be quite different from the introduction to the complete version of the song. Therefore, many singers require two copies of their songs: the full version, and the 16 bar cut. Preparation with a teacher, coach, or accompanist is extremely important so the singer is not hearing the music on the piano for the first time at the audition.

If the audition pianist is unable to decipher the markings on the sheet music, or has to turn multiple pages while attempting to, say, "start from the 1st ending, go back to the verse and cut to the coda," the audition may be sabotaged. Generally, a separate photocopy of the song pasted together to minimize page turns and key changes is best. A shortcut to the process is Michael Dansicker's set of *16 Bar Audition* books, published by the Hal Leonard

Corporation. Although these four volumes are good guides for quick cuts, I usually make my own arrangements, rather than depending on someone else's ideas. In any case, it is important for the singer to know the entire song before making any cut; after singing the 16 bar version of a song, the entire number might be requested.

A good 16 bar arrangement will sound like an entire piece, only shorter. It should tell a story or make a statement, and have a logical resolution. Avoid beginning the cut version with words such as "but" or "and." Listeners should not feel that they have missed something. I start the process by deciding which part of the song best shows off the performer's "money notes," the memorable "show-off" notes in a singer's range, often (but not always) found at the end of the piece. If the song is to be played at a moderate tempo (each bar lasting about two seconds), one common method is to count 16 measures back from the beginning of the last note, not including the "rideout." (The rideout is the music that is played under the final syllable of the lyric, and may be as short as one note or last several measures.)

However, at times one might find that the first 8 bars plus the final 8 bars make a better arrangement. Sometimes, the music of one section makes more sense with lyrics from a different section. Many contemporary music theater songs are quite lengthy, with multiple changes of tempo, style, and range in one piece. When dealing with this type of music, there may be several 16 bar possibilities, all of them valid. There is no one specific formula for cutting songs, but you must take care to protect the rhyme scheme, maintain the logic of the storytelling, and retain a cohesive musical line.

Auditors can determine within a few notes whether or not a person can sing; however, while being able to handle the vocal demands of the show is essential, a successful audition will depend on whether the performer can act the song and communicate the meaning of the lyric. Essentially, just as in a full length piece, a cut song needs to be treated like a monologue. Cutting a piece of music in a well thought out manner and rehearsing the cut by paying specific attention to the musical and dramatic integrity of the song, will allow the singer's voice, personality, and acting ability to shine.

Robert Marks is a conductor, arranger, composer, and vocal coach. He was a pianist for the Broadway and national companies of the hit musi-

cal *Annie*, and spent two seasons as the associate conductor of the St. Louis Muny Opera. His music arrangements have been heard on many recordings of the "Revisited" series on Painted Smiles Records. Recently, he directed ragtime legend Max Morath in *Ragtime and Again* off-Broadway at the York Theatre.

Mr. Marks holds a degree in speech and voice pathology and has taught at the American Musical & Dramatic Academy and the Weist-Barron School in New York. He has been Special Guest Instructor at the Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah Conservatory in Virginia (www.su.edu/tvpc), The New York Singing Teachers' Association (NYSTA) Professional Development Program at

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