

Unit Two: Overview

In this unit, we'll explore differences in voices in the musical theatre. There are so many traditions for each of these voices, for example, the soprano and tenor as ingenues, the baritone as a leading man, the bass as a villain, the mezzo as a comic second lead, the alto as down-on-her-luck and the baritenor as the sunny, happy-go-lucky good guy. All these types may be found in existing works and are types that may still be used today. However, as the musical theatre form develops, composers are writing shows that move away from them and sometimes turning them on their head.

One possible way to think about voices differently is to consider the timbre of the sound. In this case, timbre means the color of the sound. Given the overall mix of sound in a musical, a particular timbre of voice may be more desirable in a role than a more traditional voice type associated with that type of role. Another consideration around timbre is understanding the distinction between range and tessitura. Range, being how high or low a singer can sing, may be less important than a focus on tessitura, usually about a fifth, where the voice is at its richest in sound.

The videos in this unit explore many voice types found in the writing of the genre. All provide examples of roles for that voice, but many are leading roles. Writing in the form has changed many of the traditional types of vocal uses.

A couple of points before launching into the unit. Many of you will be aware of the singer's chest and head voices. In the videos, I prefer the term *passaggio* to reference the "passage" between the voices. In the musical theatre, many people will refer to this as the "break." Either term is acceptable, but passaggio reflects more of contemporary musical writing where voices go back and forth through this area of the voice rather than residing primarily in head or chest for much of a song. One final note, musical notes are numbered by octaves beginning on C counting from the left of the piano — causing middle C to be called C4.

Enjoy exploring all kinds of voices!