Serious about Singing: Age Appropriate Repertoire for the Talented Teen

Kari Ragan

The next generation of serious young singers is preparing for a career at an earlier age and with more intensity than past generations. This group of talented teenagers requires special multifaceted instruction during their vocally formative high school years, one important element of which is carefully selected repertoire. The challenging aspect is selecting age appropriate arias that are also competitive enough for competitions and top tier university auditions. This repertoire should demonstrate the singer’s particular strengths, and at the same time be technically appropriate as well as textually and dramatically relatable.

Often young singers perform repertoire that is too easy to be competitive at a higher level, the wrong Fach, or too advanced for the developing young voice. Finding the balance is critical. For example, one often hears young mezzo sopranos sing the “Habanera” from Bizet’s Carmen. There is an innate sexuality to Carmen that is completely inappropriate for even today’s overexposed teens. It would be impossible for a young woman of 17 to convey the deep passion and complexity of this gypsy woman. Her interpretation would be enormously uncomfortable for the audience, and, more important, she would not have the vocal maturity necessary to sing this aria.

Sometimes a teacher’s enthusiasm for a young singer inadvertently influences repertoire selection in a less than ideal way. The average teen-age singer is assigned music at the level of 26 Italian Songs and Arias, as is appropriate. However, when a more capable singer arrives in the studio, the enthusiastic teacher can sometimes misplace judgment and, swayed by the young singer’s enthusiasm, assign far too advanced repertoire. This can have long lasting negative repercussions on the student’s vocal development, as well as a lack of success at auditions. It takes time, patience, and guidance to achieve the high standard of singing skills necessary for the operatic repertoire. Scott McCoy states,

The huge repository of song repertoire provides ample support for the developmental need of younger singers. When assigning new repertoire, especially when it will be used for auditions, simpler is often better. I will be much more impressed by a potential freshman who sings “Caro mio ben” with beauty and elegance than someone who struggles through “Vissi d’arte.”

Although singers must offer more than “Caro mio ben” to be competitive for most auditions, the point is nevertheless well made. Therefore, the conundrum remains for the attentive voice teacher. We must select repertoire that gives
our young singers the best chance for advancement in competitive vocal situations while remaining aware of the serious vocal requirements of operatic arias.

There is a great deal to consider when choosing realistic repertoire for the gifted student. It must: 1) be age appropriate and competitive; 2) be chosen for the purposes of developing good vocal technique; 3) be interesting enough to make good audition material; 4) be appropriate to the general Fach of the young singer; 5) be appropriate to the skills of the accompanist; 6) contain relatable text; 7) be appropriate to the tessitura of the student; 8) be appropriate to the level of the singer’s diction; 9) showcase each student’s unique talents. When a singer auditions with the wrong repertoire the fault lands squarely on the teacher. There is a lot at stake for these young singers, and it is the teacher’s obligation to guide them with great care.

This article suggests a list of repertoire that achieves the goals delineated above. These arias are for gifted teens who have a great deal of vocal proficiency, whose technique is functioning at a high level for their age group. They should have a natural talent as singers and musicians. Their vocal technique would have already been developed through repertoire choices from the 26 Italian Songs and Arias and other art songs over the course of several years. Most importantly, these arias would be the singers showcase pieces and be paired with suitable, contrasting art songs. This cannot be stressed fervently enough. Singers must sing these arias with impeccable skill, as they will most certainly be judged more critically when performing an operatic aria for any audition.

Following are some repertoire suggestions for soprano, mezzo soprano, tenor, baritone, and bass Fachs. Each aria has been chosen with regard to tessitura, demands on the voice, artistic opportunities, melodic line, appropriate fioratura, and other considerations making them age appropriate.

Each listed Fach derives repertoire from the Baroque era through contemporary 20th century music. Handel or Purcell are the primary composers chosen for the earlier time period. At least two Mozart arias are included in each category, since that repertoire is essential for any young singer. A carefully selected bel canto composer, such as Donizetti or Rossini, follows and sometimes even a later 19th century composer is included, such as Gounod or Puccini when appropriate. As a way to introduce the young singer to Gilbert and Sullivan and the history of operetta, nearly every list includes a G & S selection. Finally, a 20th century aria is included as a way to expose our young singers to American opera. Furthermore, singing in one’s native language can help to make classical music more accessible. The four primary languages—Italian, French, English and German—are included for each.

**SOPRANO**

To begin with the young soprano, the following arias will allow her to show flexibility, vocal range, and coquettish acting ability. The singer would need great technique in all areas, including breath management, vocal agility, and resonance alignment. To start, “Stizzoso, mio stizzoso” (Serpina) (B3–A5) from La serva padrona by G. B. Pergolesi, has great acting potential as the maid Serpina “shushes” her master Uberto with great pleasure. Since there is a wealth of coquettish soubrette roles, every young soprano can be served by learning how to effectively perform such characters. In that vein, “Appena mi vedon” (Serpetta) (E4–A5), from La finta giardiniera by W. A. Mozart, is another such role. A nice fioratura passage at the end of the aria allows the singer to demonstrate vocal agility. For displaying high notes in a playful fashion, “Saper vorreste” (Oscar) (D5–B5), from Un ballo in maschera by Giuseppe Verdi, and “Mein Herr Marquis” (Adele) (D4–D6) from Die Fledermaus by Johann Strauss, are two appropriate choices. Strauss’s aria requires good coloratura facility, especially in the final cadenza, which includes a high D6. However, for the singer with the vocal ability and dramatic instinct this aria is a terrific showcase, especially at a young age. The aria “Chacun le sait” (Marie) (F4–C6) from La fille du régiment by Gaetano Donizetti, begins with a challenging fioratura passage, but it can be tailored to the particular singer’s ability; after all, that is the point of a melisimatic passage. Additionally, the tessitura of this aria is nice for a young soprano. From Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire, “Poor wandring one” (Mabel) (E4–D5) from Pirates of Penzance is always a favorite for young women. However, the melisimatic passage in this song should not be underestimated, even though there can be preconceived notions in approaching Gilbert and Sullivan.
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For the more lyric soprano one might consider: “Laurie’s song” (C₄–G₅) from The Tender Land by Aaron Copland; “O mio babbino caro” (Lauretta) (E₄–A₅) from Gianni Schicchi by G. Puccini; “Una donna a quindici anni” (Despina) (D₄–B₅) from Cosi fan tutte by W. A. Mozart; “Vedrai carino” (Zerlina) (F₄#–G₅) from Don Giovanni by Mozart. These arias would allow the young lyric soprano to demonstrate beauty in her legato line, breath management, and ability for intimate communication. The one hesitation is “O mio babbino caro,” an example of an aria frequently performed without appropriate training and by singers far too young, as we all know. However, with the right training this beautiful aria displays a great deal of vocal virtuosity. Furthermore, the sentiment of the piece would be appropriate for a 17 or 18 year old young woman. One casting note: “Una donna a quindici anni” is listed in this group even though Despina is now sometimes cast as a mezzo. However, the Mozart soubrette roles remain wonderful arias for any young female singer and should be considered appropriate.

MEZZO SOPRANO

The mezzo soprano Fach has many wonderful options. Since “pants roles” are often teenage characters, and the repertoire very suitable for a developing voice, we begin with two of the most obvious and frequently performed arias, “Che faro senza Euridice” (Orfeo) (B₃–F₅) from Orfeo ed Euridice by Christoph Willibald Gluck, and “Voi che sapete” (Cherubino) (C₄–F₅) from Le nozze di Figaro by W. A. Mozart. Gluck’s aria utilizes more legato line with emotional intensity as Orfeo is grief stricken at the death of his love, Euridice. In contrast is Cherubino, a teenage boy exploring feelings of love for the first time. This aria conveys a playful and charming rhythmic integrity with often angular melodic lines that stay in a relatively narrow tessitura. Other mezzo soprano pants roles would be “Chacun a son gout” (Prince Orlofsky) (C₄–A₅), from Die Fledermaus by Johann Strauss; “Faites-lui mes âveux” (Siebel) (D₅–G₅) from Faust by Charles Gounod, and another of Cherubino’s arias, “Non so piu” (E₄–G₅), also from Le nozze di Figaro. Prince Orlofsky, slightly drunk, has a playful vocal line almost yodeling up to a G₅. This can be challenging for the young mezzo, but also excellent for teaching flexibility. Orlofsky’s arrogance and noble carriage are great for teaching posture and confidence. The challenge of Mozart’s “Non so piu” is the very lively tempo, which requires a good understanding of articulatory flexibility and diction. It also has some lovely moments of contrast between beautiful legato line as the teenage boy tries to manage all the new feelings he is experiencing. Pants roles, because they are frequently written for teenage characters, are certainly age appropriate. Young singers can also learn about very specific characterization, body carriage, and movement. This provides an opportunity to teach aria presentation as well as voice technique in an accessible way. The above arias require a light mezzo quality in addition to lyric line and/or agility.

Mezzo soprano arias that are not pants roles: “Orrida a gl’occhi miei” (Ginevra) (D₄–A₆) from Ariodante by G. F. Handel; “Il vecchiotto cerca moglie” (Berta) (C₄#–A₅) from Il barbiere di Siviglia by Gioachino Rossini; and “What a movie” (Dinah) (B₃–F₅) from Trouble in Tahiti by Leonard Bernstein. The stepwise melodic line of Handel’s aria is valuable for a young singer learning to approach the upper range. Bernstein’s uptempo aria is very popular with the teenage singer. It provides the opportunity for story telling and playful timbre variation of the voice. Rossini’s aria, as one would expect, requires the ability to maintain a slightly higher mezzo tessitura and demonstrate good facility of floratura. Rounding out the list from the Gilbert and Sullivan genre is “When Frederic was a little Lad” (Ruth) (G₃–C₅) from Pirates of Penzance.

TENOR

The repertoire chosen for the young tenor Fach has been divided into two categories, character tenor and young lyric tenor. The first two are character tenor arias by Mozart: “In Mohrenland gefangen war ein Mädchen” (Pedrillo) (E₄–D₃) from Die Entführung aus dem Serail; “Alles fühlt der liebe Freuden” (Monostatos) (D₃–E₄) from Die Zauberflöte. Pedrillo’s aria has a sweet melodic line sung over light string pizzicato with a narrow vocal range. Young men will respond to this charming story of the knight in shining armor coming to rescue his woman. Although Monostatos’s aria is not a broad range, the young tenor needs a good handle on vocal technique to manage the angular vocal line and fast
Two quintessential Handel arias for developing young lyric tenor voices are: “Love sounds th’alarm” (Acis) (C₃–A₄ as written, historically performed at A₄₁₅; approximately B₂–G∗₄ at A₄₄₀) from Acis and Galatea, and “Where e’er you walk” (Jupiter) (F₃–G₄) from Semele. In contrast to each other, these arias provide a broad introduction to early opera. Acis’s aria contains traditional Handel melismatic passages, great for exploring coloratura. Jupiter’s aria will develop beautiful lyric phrases that are not particularly long, which is helpful to the young singer. Additionally, the G₄ onset on the word “shall” requires great control of the developing tenor voice. Both arias can also serve as an introduction to learning baroque ornamentation.

From the bel canto repertoire, one might consider two lovely tenor leggiero arias: “Se il mio nome” (Count Almaviva) (E₃–A₄) from Il barbiere di Siviglia by Gioachino Rossini, or “Quanto è bella, quanto è cara” (Nemorino) (E₃–A₄) from L’elisir d’amore by Gaetano Donizetti. These beautiful ballads have light orchestration and are also dramatically relatable. Continuing in the 19th century vein, “Va! i nomi” (Marenzio) (E₃–A₄) from Le roi d’y’s by Édouard Lalo is a charming aubade (a morning love song, as opposed to a serenade, which is an evening love song) about lovers separating at dawn. It has the same light orchestration and lyric line accessible to a young tenor. From the Gilbert and Sullivan genre, the suggestion is “Take a pair of sparkling eyes” (Marco) (G₃b₃–A₄) from The Gondoliers.

### BARITONE

The young baritone repertoire is rich with wonderful arias. Beginning with Handel, one might consider “See the raging flames arise” (A₂–E₄ as written, though historically performed at A₄₁₅, approximately A₃½–E₄ in today’s A₄₄₀) from Joshua. The coloratura is challenging, but any young bass/baritone will enjoy rising to the occasion of singing this military themed aria. Three Mozart arias are suggested for this Fach: “Ho capito, signor” (Masetto) (C₃–C₄) from Don Giovanni; “Weibchen! Täubchen, meine Schöne!” (Papageno) (B₂–D₃) from Die Zauberflöte; and “Donne mie, le fete a tanti” (Guglielmo) (B₂–E₄) from Così fan tutte. As a historical note, Mozart wrote the roles of Masetto and Commandatore for the same singer, who was indeed a bass. Masetto’s aria, with a top note of only C₄, certainly supports this notion; however, Masetto is traditionally now cast as a baritone, so the aria has been included in this group. Papageno, so sweet and charming, allows for a great deal of character development in an audition setting. Guglielmo’s other aria “No siate ritrosi” (D₃–E₄) is still another consideration, but with a timing of only 1:46 it’s rather short for an audition. The same challenge arises with the aria “Oh, I was goin’ a-courtin’” (Top) (C₃–D₄) from Tender Land by Aaron Copland, which times in at 2:05. However, most young baritones would enjoy the character’s playful musicality, so it should be considered.

Two Donizetti arias are particular favorites for the lyric baritone: “Bella siccome un angelo” (Dr. Malatesta) (A₃b₂–F₄) from Don Pasquale, and “Come paridi vezzoso” (Belcore) (B₃–E₄) from L’elisir d’amore. Both have good ranges, lovely lyric melodic lines, and an opportunity to show a bit of agility. Dr. Malatesta’s F₄ can demonstrate how the voice “turns-over” in that baritone tessitura.

Suitable French arias for the young baritone are “O Rosalinde” (Lescaut) (C₃–F₄) from Jules Massenet’s Manon, or “Ô vin dissipe la tristesse” (Hamlet) (D₃–F₄, with an ossia G₃) from Hamlet by Ambroise Thomas. Both are for lyric baritone. Lescaut would be fun for a charismatic young baritone as he flirts his way through the crowd. As for Hamlet, well, who doesn’t love a good drinking song!
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A 20th century aria, “When the air sings of summer” (Bob) (A₂–F₄) from The Old Maid and the Thief by Gian Carlo Menotti, has a beautiful lyric line for a young baritone. The only caveat is that at 2:05 it is rather short for an audition. A fun introduction to Gilbert Sullivan is “I am the captain of the Pinafore” (Captain Corcoran) (C₃–E₄) from HMS Pinafore.

**BASS**

Although discovering a true bass at such a young age would be unusual, this Fach has been included for reference. The bass aria “Arise, ye subterranean winds” (E₂–D₄) from The Tempest by Henry Purcell, creates opportunities for developing fioratura while remaining in a comfortable bass tessitura. There are some lovely low notes in this aria very suitable for the developing bass to show that special timbre. Three Mozart arias are suggested: “O Isis und Osiris” (Sarastro) (F₂–C₄) from Die Zauberflöte; “Non piu andrai” (Figaro) (C₃–E₄) from Le nozze di Figaro; and “Madamina, il catalogo è questo” (Leporello) (A₃–E₄) from Don Giovanni. Sarastro’s is the lowest of these arias, with a prayerful melodic line that requires good breath management. A young bass will particularly enjoy singing the F₂ at the end. Figaro’s aria requires a vocally proficient singer with great acting ability since he playfully tells poor young Cherubino he must leave his carefree life and become a soldier. This aria will be a favorite with any young singer ready to meet it’s vocal demands. Leporello’s aria, while quite long, is so clever and—dare I say—amusing for a young man. Leporello, reading from Don Giovanni’s “little black book,” tells poor Elivira about his long list of female conquests from around the world.

From the bel canto repertoire is the basso buffo aria “La calunnia” (Don Basilio) (C₂–F₄) from Il barbiere di Siviglia by Gioacchino Rossini, and “Vi ravviso, o luoghi ameni” (Count Rodolfo) (G₂–C₄) from Vincenzo Bellini’s La sonnambula. Don Basilio’s aria is the only basso buffo aria listed. The quintessential Rossini vocal line contains moments of short lyric melody contrasted with angular intervals demonstrating flexibility in the developing bass voice, while Count Rodolfo is the epitome of Bellini’s style—beautiful sustained melody over an arpeggiated piano accompaniment.

From the 19th century there are wonderful choices for the young lyric bass: “Que les songes heureux” (Jupiter) (E₂–C₄) from Philémon et Baucis by Charles Gounod; “Vecchia zimarra” (Colline) (B₂–E₄) from La bohème by Giacomo Puccini; and “Il lacerato spirito” (Jacopo Fiesco) (F₄–C₄) from Simon Boccanegra by Giuseppe Verdi. Jupiter’s beautiful aria provides an opportunity for a young bass to show both elegance in his singing and an E₂ at the end. Fiesco’s is a much more dramatic aria but would be a great showcase for the right singer. The vocal range and phrasing requirements fit the criteria for the developing singer, and with piano accompaniment there would not be the same concerns as with an orchestra. For a contemporary selection the aria “Ah, poor Michele” (Don Marco) (B♭₂–E♭₄) from The Saint of Bleeker Street by Gian Carlo Menotti, is a great introduction to modern opera in english.

Voice teachers are a critical component in the development of the young classical singer. As part of that responsibility, repertoire selection is a key element to acquiring singing technique that will influence future success. These carefully chosen arias require a vocal proficiency and artistry that make the young singer competitive on a regional and national level. However, in undertaking any of these arias, there are strong assumptions. The students who are given this repertoire must be hard working, experienced, and vocally proficient singers with an extremely knowledgeable teacher. They must also possess a natural vocal gift indicative of an aspiring young opera singer and artistic integrity. When these elements align the student is prepared to achieve their optimal singing potential and ideally success will follow.

**NOTE**


**REFERENCES**


Dr. Kari Ragan, soprano, holds a bachelor’s and master’s degree from Indiana University and a DMA from the University of Washington.

In 2012, she was the recipient of the Van L. Lawrence Fellowship, a prestigious award presented jointly by The Voice Foundation and the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS). Her research for this fellowship has been “The Impact of Vocal Cool-Down Exercises: A Subjective Study of Singers’ and Listeners’ Perceptions.”

Among other awards and honors, Dr. Ragan was the recipient of the NATS Pedagogy Award, The New York Singing Teachers (NYSTA) Association’s Distinguished Voice Professional Certificate, and the Wicklund Singing Voice Specialist Certificate.

For over a decade, Dr. Ragan has worked as a singing voice specialist (SVS). This important specialty is done in association with a medical team that includes at minimum a laryngologist and speech language pathologist (SLP). As a result of her specialized training as an SVS, Dr. Ragan has presented at the Voice Foundation Symposium, the National Association of Teachers of Singing conference, and the National Center for Voice and Speech.

Dr. Ragan is pleased to have joined the University of Washington voice faculty, where she teaches applied voice, voice pedagogy, Italian diction, and French art song literature. Additionally, she has maintained a thriving and collaborative independent voice studio for over thirty years.

Dr. Ragan is an organizing member of the Northwest Chapter of the Voice Foundation, the NATS Chat Coordinator, and a charter member of the newly formed Pan American Vocology Association (PAVA).

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