

# Serious about Singing: Age Appropriate Repertoire for the Talented Teen

Kari Ragan



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**T**HE 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 teenage 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."<sup>1</sup>

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 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) (B<sub>3</sub>-A<sub>5</sub>) 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) (E<sup>b</sup><sub>4</sub>-A<sub>6</sub>), 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) (D<sub>4</sub>-B<sub>5</sub>), from *Un ballo in maschera* by Giuseppe Verdi, and "Mein Herr Marquis" (Adele) (D<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>6</sub>) 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 D<sub>6</sub>. 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) (F<sub>4</sub>-C<sub>6</sub>) from *La fille du regiment* 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 melismatic passage. Additionally, the *tessitura* of this aria is nice for a young soprano. From Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire, "Poor wandering one" (Mabel) (E<sup>b</sup><sub>4</sub>-D<sup>b</sup><sub>6</sub>) from *Pirates of Penzance* is always a favorite for young women. However, the melismatic passage in this song should not be underestimated, even though there can be preconceived notions in approaching Gilbert and Sullivan.

For the more lyric soprano one might consider: “Laurie’s song” (C<sub>4</sub>–G<sub>5</sub>) from *The Tender Land* by Aaron Copland; “O mio babbino caro” (Lauretta) (E<sup>b</sup><sub>4</sub>–A<sup>b</sup><sub>5</sub>) from *Gianni Schicci* by G. Puccini; “Una donna a quindici anni” (Despina) (D<sub>4</sub>–B<sub>5</sub>) from *Così fan tutte* by W. A. Mozart; “Vedrai carino” (Zerlina) (F<sup>#</sup><sub>4</sub>–G<sub>5</sub>) 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 farò senza Euridice” (Orfeo) (B<sub>3</sub>–F<sub>5</sub>) from *Orfeo ed Euridice* by Christoph Willibald Gluck, and “Voi che sapete” (Cherubino) (C<sub>4</sub>–F<sub>5</sub>) 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) (C<sub>4</sub>–A<sup>b</sup><sub>5</sub>), from *Die Fledermaus* by Johann Strauss; “Faites-lui mes vœux” (Siebel) (D<sub>4</sub>–G<sub>5</sub>) from *Faust* by Charles Gounod, and another of Cherubino’s arias, “Non so piu” (E<sup>b</sup><sub>4</sub>–G<sub>5</sub>), also from *Le nozze di Figaro*. Prince Orlofsky, slightly drunk, has a playful vocal line almost yodeling up to a G<sup>b</sup><sub>5</sub>. This can be challenging for the young mezzo, but also excellent for teaching flex-

ibility. 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) (D<sub>4</sub>–A<sub>6</sub>) from *Ariodante* by G. F. Handel; “Il vecchiotto cerca moglie” (Berta) (C<sup>#</sup><sub>3</sub>–A<sub>5</sub>) from *Il barbiere di Siviglia* by Gioachino Rossini; and “What a movie” (Dinah) (B<sub>3</sub>–F<sub>5</sub>) 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 *fioratura*. Rounding out the list from the Gilbert and Sullivan genre is “When Frederic was a little Lad” (Ruth) (G<sub>3</sub>–C<sub>5</sub>) 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 Mädel” (Pedrillo) (E<sup>#</sup><sub>3</sub>–D<sub>4</sub>) from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*; “Alles fühlt der liebe Freuden” (Monastatos) (D<sub>3</sub>–E<sub>4</sub>) 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 Monastatos’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

articulation. Some singers might particularly enjoy playing the rather smarmy role.

Two other character tenor arias are: “Jour et nuit je me mets en quatre” (Frantz) ( $D_3$ – $A_5$ ) from *Les contes d’Hoffmann* by Jaques Offenbach, and “Who hears me, knows me” (Sellam) ( $F_3$ – $G_4$ ) from *The Rake’s Progress* by Igor Stravinsky. Frantz’s clever aria is very accessible to the young singer, especially one with a good sense of humor and preconceived notions about opera. The ability to make an audience laugh can be very enticing. Although the tessitura extends to  $A_5$ , those notes can be sung in context as screechy or squeaky for comedic effect. In general, singing a character tenor role may be met with some resistance for young men wishing to pursue lead tenor roles; however, giving them an opportunity to explore their acting abilities encourages great conversation in the voice studio.

Two quintessential Handel arias for developing young lyric tenor voices are: “Love sounds th’alarm” (Acis) ( $C_3$ – $A_4$  as written, historically performed at  $A415$ ; approximately  $B_2$ – $G_4$  at  $A440$ ) from *Acis and Galatea*, and “Where e’er you walk” (Jupiter) ( $F_3$ – $G_4$ ) 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  $G_4$  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 *leggiere* arias: “Se il mio nome” (Count Almaviva) ( $E_3$ – $A_4$ ) from *Il barbiere di Siviglia* by Gioachino Rossini, or “Quanto è bella, quanto è cara” (Nemorino) ( $E_3$ – $A_4$ ) 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, “Vainement, ma bien aimée” (Mylio) ( $E_3$ – $A_4$ ) from *Le roi d’ys* 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) ( $G_3$ – $A_4$ ) from *The Gondoliers*.

## BARITONE

The young baritone repertoire is rich with wonderful arias. Beginning with Handel, one might consider “See the raging flames arise” ( $A_2$ – $E_4$  as written, though historically performed at  $A415$ , approximately  $A_2$ – $E_4$  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) ( $C_3$ – $C_4$ ) from *Don Giovanni*; “Weibchen! Täubchen, meine Schöne!” (Papageno) ( $B_2$ – $D_4$ ) from *Die Zauberflöte*; and “Donne mie, le fate a tanti” (Guglielmo) ( $B_2$ – $E_4$ ) 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  $C_4$  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” ( $D_3$ – $E_4$ ) 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) ( $C_3$ – $D_4$ ) 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) ( $A_2$ – $F_4$ ) from *Don Pasquale*, and “Come paridi vezzoso” (Belcore) ( $B_2$ – $E_4$ ) 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  $F_4$  can demonstrate how the voice “turns-over” in that baritone tessitura.

Suitable French arias for the young baritone are “O Rosalinde” (Lescout) ( $C_3$ – $F_4$ ) from Jules Massenet’s *Manon*, or “Ô vin dissipe la tristesse” (Hamlet) ( $D_3$ – $F_4$ , with an *ossia*  $G_4$ ) from *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas. Both are for lyric baritone. Lescout 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!

A 20th century aria, “When the air sings of summer” (Bob) ( $A_2-F_4$ ) 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) ( $C^{\#}_3-E_4$ ) 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” ( $E_2-D_4$ ) 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) ( $F_2-C_4$ ) from *Die Zauberflöte*; “Non piu andrai” (Figaro) ( $C_3-E_4$ ) from *Le nozze di Figaro*; and “Madamina, il catalogo è questo” (Leporello) ( $A_3-E_4$ ) 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  $F_2$  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 its 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) ( $C^{\#}_2-F^{\#}_4$ ) from *Il barbiere di Siviglia* by Gioachino Rossini, and “Vi ravviso, o luoghi ameni” (Count Rodolfo) ( $G_2-C^{\#}_4$ ) 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)

( $E_2-C^{\#}_4$ ) from *Philémon et Baucis* by Charles Gounod; “Vecchia zimarra” (Colline) ( $B_2-E^b_4$ ) from *La bohème* by Giacomo Puccini; and “Il lacerato spirito” (Jacopo Fiesco) ( $F^{\#}_2-C^{\#}_4$ ) 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  $E_2$  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) ( $B^b_2-E^b_4$ ) 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

1. Scott McCoy, “Building the Foundation,” *Journal of Singing* 67, no. 1 (September/October 2010): 43–46.

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