

Theatre People: Music Director

In theatre, a music director leads the coordination and execution of music for a production. They work with the director to help ensure that the musical motivations and techniques uphold the vision of the show, and with the actors and musicians to carry out all the music in the performance. If the orchestra is onstage, they would also consult with the set designer to make sure there is space for all the musicians and instruments, and of course they will work with the sound designer!

Music directors are hired by the theatre as an independent contractor on a show-by-show basis, the same way a designer or choreographer is.

Tasks and activities in a typical day

The scope of responsibilities varies based on the needs of the production, but here are some of the typical ways the music director is involved!

Plays with music

Sometimes a play will have musical requirements while not necessarily being classified as “musical theatre” in the traditional sense. For example, characters in a play may all sing a song around a piano, or perhaps they have to chant a sea shanty during a scene transition. For smaller-scale musical needs such as these, the music director will only be present for a portion of the rehearsal process. They will work with the director to insure they have the necessary context and information to realize the director's vision for the musical moments and will come in on an as-needed basis to teach and shape the music. In cases such as this, where the music needs are relatively limited, the play may have a composer or sound designer who will double as the music director.

Musical Theatre

Musical theatre presents much more responsibility for the music director. In musical theatre the music director should be prepared for any (and usually all) of the following responsibilities:

- Attend auditions for the production, providing insight into the musical needs of the production to ensure that a cast is hired who can meet those needs.
- Deliver music direction to the cast (including teaching them the signs, providing insight into interpretation such as dynamics, articulations and note cut-offs).
- Work with the rest of the creative team (the director, choreographer, and other relevant creative team members) to ensure that the show's music is supporting the overall needs of the production.
- If the show has an orchestra, hold rehearsals with the orchestra to prepare them to join the show (in most cases, the music director also conducts the orchestra, and sometimes also plays an instrument in the orchestra!)
- Accompany rehearsals from the piano, providing the cast and creative team with an approximation of what they can expect from the music of the show once the orchestra is added.
- Attend production meetings to ensure that the musical needs of the cast and orchestra are communicated to the technical departments.

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Skills that a music director uses:

- Having an understanding of a wide variety of musical styles and genres.
- Knowing how to conduct: essential.
- Knowledge of piano and vocal techniques.
- Teaching: a solid foundation in music pedagogy lets you effectively communicate your direction.
- Performance experience, both solo and with other musicians in various settings.
- A collaborative attitude.
- A big-picture focus: to let the music be a part of the entire production, not always at the centre.
- Knowledge and appreciation (at least) of the processes and techniques used by the other production departments and disciplines. Start with the direction and choreography departments, typically your closest collaborators.



Left: The MD may work with the full group or one-on-one. (MD Joseph Tritt with Ethan Ribeiro rehearsing *Billy Elliot*; photo Robert Tinker.) Mid: MD Rachel Cameron plays keyboards with the band for *Bittergirl* – they all appeared in costume (Set/costumes Charlotte Deanm lighting Scott Henderson; photo: Dylan Hewlett). Right: In *Once*, the cast was the band, so part of the process for the MD was building them as an ensemble and equipping them to perform without conductor. (Jane Miller, Alicia Toner, & Nathan Caroll; set/costumes Brian Perchaluk, lighting Scott Henderson; MD Joseph Tritt; photo Dylan Hewlett.)

Building Abilities

Music direction is a big job that requires not only a deep understanding of music, but the ability to communicate information about that music to artists who may or may not have musical backgrounds themselves. Music director Paul de Gurse has suggested some things that you can do, or may already be doing, to build the necessary skills:

- Study music formally, either through school or private lessons. This will teach fundamentals of western musical language (reading music, what terms mean, etc), the tradition that theatre music is based in.
- Learn piano. The piano is a very useful tool for teaching music, accompanying rehearsals, and leading a theatre orchestra. The more fluent you are on piano, the better.
- Study vocal technique. A music director for theatre finds themselves providing musical direction to singers quite a bit. Even if you're not a singer yourself ("I'm not!" says Paul), a solid understanding of musical theatre vocal technique will make it much easier to communicate direction to your coworkers. This can be done at school, in private lessons, and online!
- Study management techniques. As a music director, you're a department head. Even reading a book or two about people management will do a world of good. As practice, participate in projects where you are leading a group of people and making decisions!
- Listen to different kinds of music and observe their characteristics. A music director works on shows that vary in era and style – from *Carousel* to *Legally Blonde* to *Hamilton*.
- See as much theatre as possible. The more you see, the more you'll understand the role that music plays in any given theatre production. – and it will also connect you to the community you're working in.