

# HOW TO WIN THE LENYA COMPETITION

*What can contestants do to best prepare for the Lenya Competition? We asked a few winners for their advice, and asked judges to tell us what they are looking for in contestants' performances.*

## Advice from Winners

**Amy Justman:** Start with variety, to make sure you can show as many different sides of your voice and yourself in your song choices. And although it's a dramatic competition, the voice should be as strong as possible—not everyone who enters is a classically trained singer, but the voice has to be able to serve the songs without any distracting technical issues. Beyond that, it's all about the acting. This is definitely the opposite of a "park-and-bark" competition; the judges want to believe every word you're singing, to feel that there is no separation between you and the song.

**Richard Todd Adams:** Pick interesting, strong material that allows for the emotion to seep through. Be emotionally open to the material you choose. Don't be afraid to "go there." Holding back and playing it safe emotionally is not what this Competition is about. I often see people choose material that is pretty and safe, and doesn't really do anything emotionally. That won't get you very far.

**Michael McKinsey:** The choice of rep is uniquely critical in the Lenya Competition. The judges must *believe* what you are singing about. Be honest with yourself. Not every singer is Tony in *West Side Story* or Rodolfo in *La bohème*. I know I'm not! Have the courage to look at yourself in the mirror and figure out who you truly are. I believe acting boils down to honesty above all else. If you feel yourself doing something phony, the audience will feel it too. That is true in just about all stage singing, and it's certainly no different in the Lenya Competition.

**Jonathan Michie:** Seek out repertoire that shows who you are now, not who you wish to become. Immediacy with text and language is key, which can be difficult if you're attempting to portray someone vastly different from your age and physical type.

**Analisa Leaming:** Choose material you *love!* I spent months poring over repertoire before finding the pieces that I wanted to live in for a while. When you make it to the Kilbourn Hall stage don't think of it as a competition anymore, but an opportunity to perform in a beautiful space and sing from your soul!

**Kyle Barisich:** Take risks. Be bold. Only choose music that you are truly in love with. And do what feels right to you. Take all the advice of your teachers and coaches, but ultimately it's just you up on that stage, so you absolutely must be true to your own motivations and impulses and be yourself.

**Rebecca Jo Loeb:** Pick music that is age-appropriate and try to formulate a program that tells a story within itself. You have four songs (which is a lot), so show everything you've got!

**James Benjamin Rodgers:** Explore the repertoire and find pieces that speak to you. Work on the material to find what you and most people around you believe is a great performance, then find a way to take it further. When you are performing live in the Competition, if a thought or idea comes to you, have the courage to be spontaneous in your interpretation.

**Doug Carpenter:** First of all, pick things you're going to sing phenomenally. But even more importantly, it's about telling the story. Spend time with coaches and really work on your selections, making sure you know everything that is happening moment to moment, what every single action is, and who you're singing to. Craft your program and make sure everything is working together to show yourself off as an entire performer—everything you can do.

## What the Judges are Looking For

**Rob Berman:** The Lenya Competition celebrates and rewards performers as much, if not more, for their interpretive and acting abilities as for their vocal and technical abilities. It rewards artists who make the listener lean forward to hear *why* they are singing a song, not just *how* they sound singing it. The contestants who win are the ones who show the most versatility and the most convincing performances in a wide range of styles. Someone who can effectively deliver a wordy Sondheim piece and turn around with a beautifully sung aria will always do well in this competition. The thing I'm looking for is that sweet spot where the vocal ability and the acting ability are happening in equal measure. So whether it's a comedic number, an operatic aria, or a contemporary song, the contestant needs to inhabit the style convincingly and really communicate what the song's about, *truthfully*. That's what this competition's about, and what sets it apart from other competitions.

**Teresa Stratas:** Ultimately, I'm looking for something that will stir my heart. I want these young singers to be truthful, to strip away artifice. I want them to go away knowing that the most important thing is for them to bring what is special about themselves to their singing.

**James Holmes:** The first thing I look and listen for in a contestant is a theatrical spark—a way with words, an ability to color the voice, inflect the text, and shape the phrase in a manner that make a character, a dramatic situation immediately vivid—even on a bare stage. No less than Lieder or 'classical' arias, the great music theater songs of Weill, Sondheim, Rodgers, and the rest tend to be miniature one-act dramas; I like to sense that clearly in a performance.

**Rebecca Luker:** The Lotte Lenya competitor must have it all: acting and singing chops from a wide variety of theatrical and musical realms and also that certain something—charisma, star quality, call it what you will—that puts them above all others.

**Ted Sperling:** Many, if not all, of the contestants sing beautifully and with great artistry, but it is those special few who can also convey a real sense of character in each selection that stand out. The Competition awards the top prizes to the performers who best integrate acting and singing in their performances.