Your notes

GCSE Music: revision notes

Music for stage: musicals

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What a musical is

- A **musical** tells a story through songs, spoken dialogue and dance. Famous examples include Wicked, Les Misérables and The Lion King.
- Types of song: solo songs (often an "I want" song where a character says what they wish for), duets, **ensemble numbers** with many characters, and the big **showstopper**.
- Songs move the plot on or show what characters feel. **Underscore** can play under dialogue.

How the music tells the story

- Leitmotifs (themes for characters or ideas) return through the show.
- Key changes, a rising melody and a build-up of the orchestra or band show a character growing more determined.
- **Belting** (a powerful chest voice) is used for big moments; quieter, speech-like singing for thoughtful ones.
- The accompaniment may be a **pit orchestra**, a rock band, or synthesisers, chosen to suit the story and period.

Structure and texture

- Many songs use verse and chorus, or AABA (**32-bar song form**): three sections with the same tune and a contrasting middle section.
- Textures change to show the drama: one voice for a private moment, overlapping melodies when characters disagree, a full chorus for a finale.
- Dialogue and song flow into each other, sometimes through recitative-like singing.

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Key terms

Musical	A show that tells a story through songs, dialogue and dance.
Showstopper	A big number that gets huge applause.
Ensemble number	A song for many characters together.
Belting	A powerful, loud singing style using chest voice.
32-bar song form	AABA: three matching sections and a contrasting middle.
Underscore	Music played under spoken dialogue.
Pit orchestra	The band or orchestra that accompanies a stage show.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. How does a musical tell its story?
2. What is a showstopper?
3. What is belting?
4. What is 32-bar song form?
5. What is an ensemble number?
6. What is underscore in a musical?
7. How might a composer show a character becoming more determined?
8. What is a pit orchestra?

Answers

1. Through songs, spoken dialogue and dance
2. A big number that gets huge applause
3. A powerful, loud singing style using chest voice
4. AABA: three matching sections and a contrasting middle
5. A song for many characters together
6. Music played under spoken dialogue
7. A key change upwards and a build-up of the orchestra
8. The band or orchestra that accompanies a stage show

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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