

***Glee*: Give Us Something To Sing About**

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You Can Have My Madonna Mic When You Pry It from My Cold, Dead Hands: *Glee* and the In Vogue Practice of Aural Over-Production

As I do with each new movie musical, I came to *Glee* with a complex and conflicting swell of hope and dread. Since at least the 1990s (if not the 1960s), the Hollywood musical has been struggling through an identity crisis. What is the musical? Is it merely a reflection of the heyday of the genre, a place for giddy folk to burst into song, find love, and unite the community? Is it a response to the success of music video: loud, quick, more visual/visceral than musical/narrative? Is it an attempt to capitalize on characteristics found desirable on the Broadway stage: a combination of parody, pastiche, pomodoro, and spectacle? Well, I don't think the film musical has figured out what it is, and *Glee* is in the same musical boat. Fox's breakout hit combines MTV visual aesthetics, a hodgepodge of intertextuality—both in terms of song use and star involvement, and the fashionable over-produced aural qualities associated with today's Broadway stage, music videos, and contemporary movie musicals (e.g. *Evita*, *Chicago*, *Nine*). While I find *Glee*'s negotiation of various generic tropes fascinating, this latter characteristic grabs hold of me most firmly. Since the show's post-*American Idol* premiere—notably a show also fancy in its microphone use and guilty of dubbing group numbers to reach perfection—fans, scholars, and critics have questioned *Glee*'s use of vocal over-production. Why all this aural fuss?

In theatrical performance sites, the manipulation of the aural has become linked to notions of vocal power, audience satisfaction, technological progress, and spectacle. Eschewing the natural sounds of voices or the use of somewhat subtle lavalier microphones (taped to the body), productions such as *Spring Awakening* (which sprung *Glee* alums Lea Michele, Jenna Ushkowitz, and Jonathan Groff), *Good Vibrations*, and *Fela!*—to name just a few—have used a combination of visible boom mics (think Madonna) or hand-held microphones (think rock-n-roll). Newspapers (both the *Wall Street Journal* and *LA Times*) and industry blogs (such as Broadway World) have contemplated these shifts in amplification. Are they just too loud and distracting? Does it take the emphasis away from the “sincerity” of the moment? Can anyone sing like Ethel Merman anymore? I think these same issues and questions plague *Glee*. What does it mean that a group of misfit adults and teenagers can transform from outsider status to a projection of aural perfection in a world free of ambient sound and defect. (Notable exceptions include Kurt advertently blowing his audition for the “Defying Gravity” solo and the quadriplegic and tone deaf football player singing “One” a cappella, both of which evoke our sympathies.) This over-production raises a few issues I hope we can ultimately discuss. It illustrates the Catch 22 musical vehicles may be experiencing in the new millennium. If in fact audiences do expect aural perfection—as projected through heavy-handed mic use, overdubbing on stage, and the historical use of dubbing in film and video—where does that leave a group of high school misfits? Would anyone want to listen to mediocre singers or really good high school choirs week after week? What does this nutty amplification accomplish? I, personally, had a very difficult time accepting this aural choice early on in the series. A friend then suggested that the perfect sound we hear is actually the voices inside the misfits' heads. I can't say that's true, but the suggestion that this world of perfection is the projection of the internal hopes of the adults and kids of McKinley High (and their friends and foes) allowed me to make it through the

next episode. It well rationalizes the continuous shift within the show between the dog-eat-dog world of high school and the escapist perfection of the glee club. However, at the same time—as is often the case on stage—does this over-aural production simply add to the rifts between character, music, and story? When the shift in sound quality jars the listener/viewer out of the moment, how does this contribute to telling the story of underdog high school kids? Their vocal perfection makes them appear so much less imperfect. I don't have an answer. It just seems that the folks at *Glee* are caught between a rock and a hard place: a historical desire by the audience for perfection, a need to tell an everyman tale of overcoming adversity, and a desire to reflect the latest theatrical, televisual, and filmic trends.