

MUSI 335: Women on Stage
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Sofia Campoamor

Having Her Pie and Eating It Too: Sara Bareilles' Representation of Women through the Convergence of Singer-Songwriter, Stage Character, and Composer in *Waitress: The Musical* by Sofia Campoamor

Waitress: The Musical is an adaptation of a 2007 Adrienne Shelly film that opened on Broadway in 2016 and continues to play today. The story follows waitress Jenna, who becomes unexpectedly pregnant and hopes to win a pie contest to escape from her abusive husband. Created by an all-female team of director, book writer, and choreographer, *Waitress* is also the musical theater composing debut of five-time Grammy Award-nominated singer-songwriter Sara Bareilles.¹ In an era of Broadway where composers crossing over from careers as singer-songwriters are becoming increasingly common², Bareilles stands out as having had a strong impact on both the artistic strength and the economic strength of her show. Her prominence in the pop world and impressive vocal capabilities positioned her to influence *Waitress* from her place as a solo artist. In doing so, she proved both her composing ability outside of the bounds of pop songwriting and the value of the singer-songwriter genre in musical theater. The convergence of Bareilles's identity as a singer-songwriter with the identity of fictional character Jenna provides a new perspective for understanding and communicating theatrical character, as well as for giving voice to female characters in musical theater.

To understand how Bareilles' prior body of work influences the character of Jenna, it is important to examine the kinds of character that exist in the perception of the singer-songwriter.

¹ Sara Bareilles, *Sounds Like Me* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2015).

² Lorne Manly, "Sara Bareilles Takes Her Slice of Broadway with 'Waitress,'" *New York Times*, (March 17th, 2016), <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/theater/sara-bareilles-takes-her-slice-of-broadway-with-waitress.html> (accessed December 9th 2017).

Sarah Suhadolnik consolidates the work of Allen F. Moore into three layers for understanding the identity of the singer-songwriter. First is “performer,” or biographical person with a musical background and interests, as well as a day-to-day personality.³ Suhadolnik contrasts this layer with the “song character,” a person whose perspective the songwriter assumes when singing first-person in their songs.⁴ Suhadolnik explains that Moore’s concept of the “artistic persona” is the blended combination of performer and song character perceived by audiences.⁵ Sara Bareilles appears to cultivate an artistic persona that overlaps performer and song character as completely as possible, writing songs from a biographical perspective and speaking about them as such in public. In October of 2015, she released a book of autobiographical essays, each titled by one of her songs and containing the personal backstory behind many of the songs.⁶

When given the task of writing for fictional characters, Bareilles retains her strategy of connecting herself as performer to song character, thereby creating a stage character fueled by her artistic persona. She describes the process of watching the source material, the film *Waitress*, and focusing on a scene that resonated with her, saying, “It reminded me of my own darkest moments” (176). At the same time, Bareilles and the *Waitress* team employ both the pull of Bareilles’ artistic persona and the power of the songwriter-influenced stage character to sell the show.

The performance of “She Used to Be Mine,” Jenna’s 11 o’clock number, at the 2016 Tony Awards illustrates the distinction between the artistic persona of Bareilles as a songwriter and the stage character of Jenna, as played by Jessie Mueller. Bareilles glides in from the wings on a moving platform while seated at the piano; she appears calm and stately, dressed in black

³ Sarah Suhadolnik, “Outside Voices and the Construction of Adele’s Persona,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter* (2016), 180-181.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sara Bareilles, *Sounds Like Me*.

with long sparkly earrings. Her gaze rests on the keys she plays, and she sometimes closes her eyes. At moments, she opens them to tilt her head out to the audience as she confesses, “most days, I don’t recognize me,” turning back to the piano as she finishes the thought to herself. A small headshake accompanies the words, “she is hard on herself,” followed by a direct plea to the audience as Bareilles insists, “she is broken and won’t ask for help.” Her choices on registration are patient, measured, and microphone-conscious, word painting “she is lonely” with a gentle falsetto and tilting her head back as her full voice rings out on “most of the time.”⁷ Nothing sounds pushed or forced; she is in control of the tempo, followed only by a solo cello line. The performance is honest and direct, but contained behind the instrument and the expectations of an audience she engages with directly. The words are being related, not lived.

At the close of the first refrain, the lights go down on Bareilles as she continues to play, and come up to reveal Mueller dressed as Jenna. The instrumentation fills out, supporting the transition to another kind of world; rather than the piano-driven opening that Bareilles controlled, Mueller’s Jenna is swept up in a drumkit, synth organ, and electric guitar, none of which she interacts with physically. When facing the audience, her eyes remain lifted above their heads. Her voice scrapes over the words, drawing attention to the body from which they came, rasping the word “bruised,” snarling “gets used.” Every note seems to cost her as she stumbles forward with the music. She draws attention to the effort her singing takes only when it serves the lyric, seeming to follow the notes down with her head as she riffs on the word “gone” but turning the gesture into a near collapse of desperate fury, straightening up to claim, “mine.”⁸ On the final “mine,” however, the vocal shift is not indicated at all as her voice breaks from belt to a gentle head voice. Her facial expression reveals only Jenna’s shifting emotions, post-catharsis, that

⁷ Waitress 2016 Tony Performance of She Used to Be Mine, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Erjdg6wwRuU>, (accessed December 4th, 2017).

⁸ Ibid.

allow the music to recede. This illusion of conjuring the musical changes from the character's thoughts in the moment sets stage character apart from song character. The audience observes Jenna living these words, rather than being invited to relate to them by a song character.

At the same time, the choice to present both Bareilles and Mueller as the representative for *Waitress* at the Tony's speaks to the conscious maintenance of Bareilles' solo career for both the promotion of the show and the development of Jenna. Composers generally do not perform at the Tonys, so to center Bareilles and her performance abilities is to continue to reinforce her artistic persona as the essence of the show. The transition from Bareilles to Mueller is made seamless by Bareilles continuing to play the piano. *Waitress* wants audiences to know that this is Bareilles' show, creating an expectation that viewers will be experiencing *her*, not just her music, by coming to see *Waitress*. During the show itself, the stage design reinforces the immediacy of the singer-songwriter by having a small band with a woman at the piano glide into the diner from stage left as Bareilles did at the Tonys. Pies and coffee cups rest on the piano, blending the worlds together. Bareilles' recorded voice sings the prologue: "sugar, butter flour."⁹ On the track commentary for Bareilles' album *What's Inside: Songs from Waitress*, she said that she wanted the opening song that follows to sound "like a Sara Bareilles song, but also was just setting the scene for being inside Joe's Pie Diner."¹⁰ Bareilles recognizes the dual roles of her artistic persona and her work as a composer in realizing and validating her success as a musical theater composer.

Waitress' integration of Jenna's stage character and Bareilles' song character is also visible in the creative team's articulation of their goals in casting Jenna. Casting director Bernie

⁹ *Waitress* featuring Jessie Mueller <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ip6ET5FEnQU>, (accessed December 14th 2017).

¹⁰ Sara Bareilles, *What's Inside: Songs From Waitress Commentary*, "About Opening Up-Commentary," Epic Records (accessed via Spotify December 14th 2017).

Telsey told *Playbill* that Jenna is “so specific to Sara's kind of voice that it needs someone who can break away from that normal musical theatre sound [...] a little bit of that pop sound [...] folk sound—a unique sound.”¹¹ The idea of a Broadway character with a “unique” sound demonstrates the suitability of the individuality that defines singer-songwriters to a theatrical context. Director Diane Paulus went further in tying this individuality to Bareilles’ work, adding that Jessie Mueller was the right choice for Jenna because she “navigates Sara’s music like it was made for her.”¹² And Bareilles herself describes the personal stake she felt in the “scary” task of “handing [Jenna] over to someone else,” calling Jenna her “talisman for renewal” (178). The idea that Jenna’s character was a place for Bareilles to “renew” herself speaks to the investment of her own personality in bringing Jenna to life.

The link between Jenna and Bareilles became even more explicit when Bareilles took over from Mueller in March of 2017 for a ten-week run. Bareilles is not the first composer to star in their own Broadway show, the most notable recent example being Lin-Manuel Miranda’s origination of the characters Usnavi in *In the Heights* and Alexander Hamilton in *Hamilton*. She is also part of a recent trend in non-Broadway celebrities and pop stars starring in shows, including Panic! at the Disco front-man Brendon Urie in *Kinky Boots!*, movie star Daniel Radcliffe in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, and many others.¹³ But unlike in the case of Miranda’s musicals, the starring role in *Waitress* was originated by another actor, demonstrating that Bareilles’ writing ability is not reliant on her own powerful singing voice. To further protect the integrity of her success as she joined the cast, Bareilles was careful to say in

¹¹ Diep Tran, “Why Casting Sara Bareilles in *Waitress* was a No-Brainer,” *Playbill*, (March 18th 2017) <http://www.playbill.com/article/why-casting-sara-bareilles-in-waitress-was-a-no-brainer> (accessed December 9th 2017).

¹² Mervyn Rothstein, “How Jessie Mueller Became Sara Bareilles’ “Soul Mate” on *Waitress*,” *Playbill*, (August 3rd 2015) <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/how-jessie-mueller-became-sara-bareilles-soul-mate-on-waitress> (accessed December 9th 2017).

¹³ Katie Gainer, “Has Broadway Become Reliant on Celebrity Draw at the Box Office?,” *Ticket News* (November 9th 2017) <https://www.ticketnews.com/2017/11/broadway-sales-reliant-celebrity/> (accessed December 14th 2017).

interviews that she joined a “healthy show” where “we’re not doing everything we can to keep the doors open,” perhaps in response to an image of other musicals bringing in famous crossover artists out of necessity.¹⁴

If her casting was not necessitated by economic reasons, the justifications for casting Bareilles as an inexperienced actor become evidence for the further linking of the singer-songwriter skillset to the musical theater stage. Bareilles’ castmates and director Paulus emphasized Bareilles’ transferrable qualities of storytelling as a singer-songwriter to working as a Broadway actor. Actor Will Swenson explained to *Billboard*, “She puts her heart out there and writes raw, emotional songs, and that’s the goal of a musical theater song as well.”¹⁵ Actor Chris Diamantopoulos added, “I don’t think you can be that gifted of a poet and storyteller and not be able to tap into what it takes to act.”¹⁶

The transferability that allowed Bareilles as a songwriter to make the transition to acting also works the other way for her, as a composer creating a piece of theater out of the pop songwriter’s musical vernacular. In addition to the “storytelling” in a singer-songwriter’s lyrics, the flexible musical language of pop adds a unique element to the stage. The singer-songwriter and popular music culture prizes individuality and imagination, artists “covering” other artists and even reinventing their own songs in each performance. Bareilles has demonstrated this sense of freedom in her own career. Her song “Come Round Soon” was released in 2007 on *Little Voice*, her first major label album, but a live performance was also released on the 2013 album *Brave Enough: Live at the Variety Playhouse*. The first one has a driving drum groove, cello, and

¹⁴ Joe Lynch, “Sara Bareilles Shares ‘Waitress’ Acting Jitters and Joys, Talks Whether She’ll Do Broadway Again” *Billboard*, (April 5th 2017) <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/broadway/7751429/sara-bareilles-waitress-broadway-interview-debut> (accessed December 9th 2017).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

piano accompaniment.¹⁷ The second is much slower, just Bareilles and her electric guitar, with many melismas and melodic alterations to the original.¹⁸ For example, the second verse in the *Little Voice* version uses the first through sixth scale degrees in a single octave. The *Brave Enough* version expands this to an octave and a half of melodic content. In the context of this mood-serving melodic experimentation modeled by Bareilles, actors have made subtle but no less significant transformations to the melody of “She Used to Be Mine.”

The musical tradition of the singer-songwriter finds a particularly strong theatrical utility in the vocal ornamentations, inflections, and liberties taken with the melody of “She Used to Be Mine.” While different actors have made different choices with the song, examining the performances of the song across the work of a single actor, originator Jessie Mueller, reveals the potential of the singer-songwriter vernacular to enhance the dramatic action of a piece.

Jessie Mueller’s choices on how long to hold a note before moving down, where to add a vocal riff, where to stretch or accelerate the rhythm, have changed from performance to performance. In traditional musical theater, actors work to solidify the choices made by the composer on the page, or to execute their personal renditions faithfully and reliably night after night. The freedom that the pop musical tradition gives the actor, however, is a useful tool for another goal of the American theater; to present the same story as if it were happening anew each night. Influential playwright and actor William Gillette called this idea “the illusion of the first time,” using it to pioneer a new sense of realism in theater in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁹ By singing “She Used to Be Mine” as a pop singer/songwriter would, Jessie Mueller is able to access a new level of authenticity as an actress by “discovering” in the moment new

¹⁷ Sara Bareilles, “Come Round Soon,” *Little Voice*, Epic Records, 2007.

¹⁸ Sara Bareilles, “Come Round Soon,” *Brave Enough: Live at the Variety Playhouse*, Epic Records, 2013.

¹⁹ *William Gillette: A Connecticut Yankee and the American Stage*. Produced by Films For The Humanities & Sciences. 1985. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C657689, (accessed December 14th, 2017).

musical emphases for the same song, choices born out of the present moment rather than rehearsed to perfection.²⁰

Mueller's November 24th, 2016 performance draws particular attention to the line, "bring back the fire in her eyes." On this night, the "in her eyes" melody is altered, going back up to the fourth scale degree rather than settling down onto the tonic scale degree, adding an inflection of hope, keeping the possibility of this previous girl alive. In her final performance on March 26th 2017, this alteration is not present. But as she sings the first climactic "mine," she waits on the second scale degree for longer than what is usually just an approach from below up to the third. By turning "mine" into a two-syllable word with a stress on the beginning, she makes the word a statement unto itself. "Mi-ine"—not yours, is the implication. She drives this in a few moments later by two sharp jabs up at the fourth before returning to the scored note, cutting off any arguments that try to top her note and redirecting back to her statement without breaking for air.²¹ With the freedom of this genre, Mueller finds musical flexibility to match the flexibility in acting that gives her performance its power.

The pop-songwriter musical affinity for supporting the "illusion" of theatrical authenticity is rooted in the genre's own relationship with authenticity, as defined by Allen F. Moore. Moore describes first-person authenticity as performance that authenticates the persona of the performer, conveying to the audience that the music is representative of the performer's personal history. Second-person authenticity is achieved when the music convinces listeners that their own histories are being expressed. Third-person authenticity occurs in the successfully genuine performance of someone else's musical aesthetic.²² University of Huddersfield Professor

²⁰Clips of Jessie Mueller singing the climax of "She Used to Be Mine" at several different performances <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ut0JucfF7ko>, (accessed December 4th, 2017).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Allan F. Moore. *Song Means : Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing

Rupert Till explains that singer-songwriters are uniquely positioned in popular music to achieve all three kinds of authenticity²³ The second two forms of authenticity are clearly present in musical theater as well. Second-person authenticity is why people go to the theater. And third-person authenticity is what allows audiences to transfer music they know to originate from a separate voice into the genuine first-person of the characters before them. As a piece of musical theater written by a singer-songwriter, *Waitress* comes at all three versions of musical authenticity from two layers.

Authenticity becomes a particularly relevant characteristic to cultivate in both songwriting and theater when considering that the subjects being represented in both channels of Bareilles' work are women. Playwright and director Grace Barnes notes that while heterosexual men are in the minority as part of a Broadway audience, characterizations of women that satisfy the straight male gaze are the norm in musical theater, sexualizing women in moments of distress, and creating female ensembles that conform to artificialized standards of beauty.²⁴ The image of Jenna at her most musically powerful and theatrically vulnerable is one that forges an alternate path from the pattern Barnes observes. Jenna sings "She Used to Be Mine" extremely pregnant and clothed. Her movements are jerky and ungraceful. The Tony performance reveals the rawness available in the music, as Jenna howls the word "mine"

Bareilles' account of her experience writing "She Used to Be Mine" continues to strengthen the link between a song character steeped in first person authenticity and the stage character of Jenna. She writes that upon encountering the character of Jenna, "her story felt personal to me... waking up one day, looking around, and not recognizing your own self,

Ltd, (2012), 269. (Accessed December 11, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central).

²³ Rupert Till, "Singer-songwriter, Authenticity, the unconscious and emotions," *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter* (2016), 296.

²⁴ Grace Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage* (Jefferson, NC, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015). 89-90

because you have given too much of that away”²⁵ She goes into more technical detail about how she constructed the musical material, describing form, tone, and the significance of vocal registration. But the concluding remarks on her compositional choices depict her own emotional connection with the material: “I cried when I wrote it. I still cry when I hear it. It’s my song too” (176). Her choice to emphasize emotion as part of her authenticity is significant to her status as a female singer-songwriter, as will be discussed below.

Bareilles outlines more specifically the second-person authenticity she strives for in her *What’s Inside: Songs from Waitress* track commentary on “She Used to Be Mine.” After explaining how the song was her “portal” into the rest of the show, she says, “I think that that’s something that people can really relate to is that...we can, lots of times...look up at our lives and wonder, whose life is this?”²⁶ By commenting on first her own relationship with the character and then the ways in which “people can really relate” to the song, she continues to build the relationships of authenticity that Moore has outlined as the domain of the singer-songwriter.

Bareilles’ emphasis on emotion as she conjures first-person authenticity in her essay raises the relationship of authenticity to the female artistic voice. York University Lecturer Jennifer Taylor explains that the singer-songwriter was a successful route for achieving female visibility in music because the self-reflective, “self-accompanied female musician with an acoustic instrument...does not challenge traditional representations of femininity informed by white, middle-class respectability.”²⁷ The fact that the singer-songwriter does not pose an immediate threat to traditional gender roles actually made it an empowering site for the female voice. University of Southampton PhD researcher Sarah Boak describes how female singer-

²⁵ Sara Bareilles, *Sounds Like Me*, 174-176.

²⁶ Sara Bareilles, *What’s Inside: Songs From Waitress Commentary*, “About She Used to Be Mine-Commentary,” Epic Records (accessed via Spotify December 14th 2017).

²⁷ Jennifer Taylor, “Gender, Genre, and Diversity at Lilith Fair,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter* (2016), 219.

songwriters in the 1990s had “a high level of agency” in writing and performing their own music and speaking about their own lives, which they used as a platform for discussing their experiences and challenges of living in a female body.²⁸

Bareilles does not challenge the personal connection to her compositional work, reinforcing the bounds of femininity that have allowed women their prominence in the singer-songwriter genre. Her self-reflection on the score further emphasizes the importance of her personal emotional journey through the act of composition. Bareilles writes, “I dug deeper and deeper and poured so much of myself into the score that I know even though it won’t be perfect by any stretch of the imagination, there is nothing in there that doesn’t have a ton of heart” (178). This focus on emotional process and self-deprecation speaks to what is both conforming and empowering about the singer-songwriter as the avenue for female composing opportunities. On the one hand, framing women’s talent for composition as writing about themselves, the “introspection” that Taylor describes, feels limiting. On the other hand, the opportunity for women to see themselves complexly represented, because their character is born of a real, complex woman composer’s experience, does so much for opening up what women see of themselves onstage²⁹—and in turn, what they believe of themselves when they leave the theater. Beyond that, Bareilles uses the same strategy as the songwriters Boak discusses, of using a societally permissible vehicle to speak against the gendered restrictions she faces in the world.

Whatever the limitations of the songwriter that made it an acceptable medium for telling this story, it nevertheless meant that Bareilles made the perhaps semantic but incredibly significant transition from “songwriter” to “composer.” As Bareilles gained composer and Broadway status, the power of telling women’s stories spoke in the language of money. When

²⁸ Sarah Boak, “The Female Singer-songwriter in the 1990s,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter* (2016), 257.

²⁹ Barnes, 107.

the show became profitable in January 2017, Forbes noted the difficulty of achieving this milestone, and the speed with which it was reached.³⁰ Sara's personal opening night in the role of Jenna grossed \$180,000, breaking the Brook Atkinson Theatre's record for a single performance.³¹ She kept up this success throughout the first week, creating a house record by grossing over 1.2 million dollars.³² While *Waitress* may have been a "healthy show" before Bareilles joined, there is no denying the economic boost she gave by taking over the title character.

Throughout *Waitress*'s formation, Bareilles used her own brand as a solo artist to promote the show. A month and a half after *Waitress* began its run at the ART, Bareilles released *Sounds Like Me*, which includes a chapter titled "She Used to Be Mine," where she details her personal experience and emotions with the process of writing the musical. A month after the release of the book, Bareilles released *What's Inside*, a concept album where she sings the majority of the songs from the musical solo, inviting singer-songwriter Jason Mraz to join her for two duets. She also released audio commentary introducing each chapter of her book. In this way, Bareilles never separated herself as a solo artist, with the authenticity she cultivated as a songwriter, from the merits of her work as a composer.

This economic and professional success is particularly notable in that it was built on the career of a woman who has made her name by writing honestly about her life, and often about her experiences as a woman. In "Fairytale," she paints an alternate picture of classic fairytale princesses, disgruntled with their lot in life, bringing her own voice to the story as she sings,

³⁰ Lee Seymour, "Sara Bareilles proves Broadway Cred as 'Waitress' Recoups \$12M Investment," *Forbes* (January 26th 2017) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/leeseymour/2017/01/26/sara-bareilles-proves-broadway-cred-as-waitress-recoups-12m-investment/#607d82352562> (accessed December 9th, 2017).

³¹ Joe Lynch, "Sara Bareilles Shares 'Waitress' Acting Jitters and Joys, Talks Whether She'll Do Broadway Again"

³² Paul Sheehan, "Sara Bareilles Breaks Broadway Records in 'Waitress' Singing her Tony-nominated Songs," *Gold Derby*, (April 12th 2017) <http://www.goldderby.com/article/2017/sara-bareilles-breaks-broadway-records-in-waitress-singing-her-tony-nominated-songs/>

“Once upon a time in a faraway kingdom/Man made up a story said that I should believe him.”³³ In “Beautiful Girl,” she writes a letter to herself about her issues with body image.³⁴ In “City,” she even comments on the role of female songwriter as an avenue for expression that cuts through gendered obstacles: “It’s clear this conversation ain’t doing a thing/cause these boys only listen to me when I sing/and I don’t feel like singing tonight.”³⁵ She expresses how her niche venue for being heard depends on staying within the singer-songwriter position in which she is allowed to speak. At the same time, Bareilles’ agency in being heard through her singing and writing allows her to get those same “boys” to hear her critique of them through her songs—but only when she “feel[s] like” it.

Bareilles’ work on *Waitress* represents a unique achievement of agency in influencing the genre of musical theater to empower the female voice. She demonstrated the utility of the singer-songwriter musical language for creating compelling theatrical moments by capitalizing on its penchant for creating character, authenticity and musical flexibility. This language is especially significant when used by a female composer, given that it is transposed from an arena that has allowed women to gain musical prominence and control over their expression. Furthermore, her own involvement in the economic and critical success of *Waitress* is a testament to the power she built and continues to possess as a female singer-songwriter, power that is drawn from acts of vulnerability. The feminine voice in music is successful, is innovative, is welcomed.

³³ Sara Bareilles, “Fairytale,” <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/sarabareilles/fairytale.html>.

³⁴ Bareilles, *Sounds Like Me*, 73.

³⁵ Sara Bareilles, “City,” *Little Voice*, Epic Records, 2007.

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