

Creating musical revues--legally

Putting together a revue based on numbers from Broadway shows has its challenges.

One is that performing songs under copyright requires that you get clearance from the publishers. The best way is go through ASCAP or BMI, which represent composers and lyricists. Such clearance, however, has certain limitations. One danger area in particular is the revue that presents fully staged, costumed production of individual numbers. This is a violation of the authors' copyright.

"The only legal performance of such numbers is without costumes and sets specifying the show's content, with no dialogue used into or around the song, and a valid ASCAP or BMI 'small rights' performance license," says John Prignano of Music Theatre International. "Such a performance license does not cover dramatic presentation of such songs, only their performance a la cabaret, or in concert, and normally only three songs from any one musical can be performed."

Prignano urges you to pay particular attention to proper licensing when putting together revues of this nature. "Checking with the licensing agency that represents the musical from which the number or numbers come can save a lot of grief during or after production," he says. "It is also wise to check with the music publisher, since some songs need special clearance even for cabaret or concert presentation. 'Adelaide's Lament,' from *Guys and Dolls*, is a good case in point--composer Frank Loesser never wanted it performed outside the confines of the show, and his music publisher clears each specific performance.

"Performance rights are a complicated business and asking permission never hurts," Prignano adds. "After all, there are plenty of revues already cleared and waiting to be licensed by MTI and other licensing agencies."

Songs performed without any reference to the original staging (no costumes, dialogue, or choreography referring to the context of the show) can be cleared through the music licensing organization representing the particular song or composer. The sheet music normally lists the organization representing the particular song (normally at the bottom of the title page.)

The simplest point of contact for both ASCAP and BMI is via their websites, which provide licensing information and allow you to submit requests for performance of authors whom they represent. Both sites have search forms, so you can search for particular songs or songwriters.

- Contact ASCAP online [www.ascap.com] or at One Lincoln Plaza, New York, NY 10023; 212/595-3050. ASCAP Concert & Recital Licenses booklet: http://www.ascap.com/licensing/SERIOUS_CONCERT.pdf
- Contact BMI online [www.bmi.com] or at 320 West 57th St., New York, NY 10019; 212/586-2000]. BMI Non-Dramatic Public Performance Rights: <http://bmi.com/licensing/broadcaster/public.asp>