

Serial TV Musicals: A Taxonomy

by

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During the 2010s, American network television experienced an unprecedented influx of musical television series such as *Glee*, *Smash*, and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. By engaging with television studies, musical theatre studies, semiotics, and affect theory I seek to categorize these programs within a distinct genre of musical I call the serial TV musical. Serial TV musicals are fictional television series which use music as a necessary part of their storytelling mechanism. Musical numbers in this capacity can act to advance the plot on the scale of the episode, arc, season, or series as well to elaborate characterization or relationships. The music in these shows may be original or interpolated. Because of the nature of television, serial TV musicals have slower pacing than other genres of American musicals and as a result complicate plot beyond the romantic union of characters or the dramatic transformation of a protagonist.

I begin with a taxonomic approach to delineate what constitutes a serial TV musical and defend its significance as a category. I then go into some of the television theory that grounds my argument and begin to present examples of the distinctness of serial TV musicals. I briefly discuss musical episodes of non-musical TV shows because they are the most similar to musical series, and then I discuss *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* as an extended example of the conventions of this televisual musical genre.

Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction.....	1
2.0 What is a Serial TV Musical?	4
3.0 Specificity of Medium	14
4.0 On Musical Episodes.....	26
5.0 <i>Crazy Ex-Girlfriend</i> as Exemplar	30
6.0 Conclusion	38
Bibliography	40

1.0 Introduction

At its peak over thirteen million people tuned in to watch *Glee* (2009-2015) every week. The show was critically acclaimed, winning numerous Emmys and Golden Globes. Over the course of its run *Glee* had 207 entries on *Billboard*'s Hot 100¹ and sold millions of albums. There was a concert tour, novels, and *Glee*-branded versions of games such as *Yahtzee* and *Uno*. Audiences were so enamored with the show that there was a spin-off reality competition show—*The Glee Project*—whose prize was a role as a guest star on *Glee*.² It was a phenomenon.

I missed the memo when the show premiered in 2009. As a high school student absorbed by ensemble music classes and the spring musical, it did not take long for me to hear the buzz from students like me who were thrilled to see choir geeks on TV. So, when I fell ill for a time and picked up the first few episodes on DVD from Blockbuster Video I consumed them with a voracity I had experienced but a few times in my young life. *I was hooked*.

Rachel Berry's melodramatic tantrums, the petty cruelty of Sue Sylvester, but most importantly: the music. I felt seen. It was cool to see the nerdy thing I did on TV. Sure, realism in *Glee* was not to be found, real show choir requires rehearsal and Finn Hudson's untrained teenage tenor lacked expected voice cracks and strain but nevertheless it was infectious.

Glee's success opened the door for musicals to return to American consciousness in a way that had not been seen in over half a century. Hollywood films such as *Pitch Perfect* and *La La Land* were hugely popular as well as critically acclaimed in the case of the latter. Broadway

¹ "Glee Cast," *Billboard*

² Joshua Alston, "Glee Harmonized Art and Commerce, Then Gradually Became a Commercial," *AV Club*

musicals such as *The Book of Mormon* and *Hamilton* left huge imprints on culture outside of New York. Non-musical television shows as varied as *Grey's Anatomy* and *The Flash* produced musical episodes and there was a trend of made-for-TV productions of classic musicals such as *The Sound of Music* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In the pre-*Glee* era, stand-alone musical episodes were less frequent; the most significant of these were the musical episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, as well as “My Musical” from *Scrubs* (Season 6, Episode 60).

Most intriguingly, after *Glee*'s most successful seasons were behind it, a new musical series premiered to great acclaim: *Smash* (2012-2013), about a fictional Broadway production and two actresses battling for the lead. For a time, these shows were massively popular, but both started to falter in 2012, when *Glee*'s third season ended with the graduation of several of the show's main characters and the end of the first season of *Smash*, which would be going into a second season with a new showrunner. On this transitory phase critic Kevin Fallon wrote, “Some might view these as opportunities to regroup, restructure, and reboot. But perhaps a better idea would be to face the music: The TV musical experiment has failed.” Fallon asserts that the issue for *Glee* was that “What started as a candy-colored breath of smart-and-snarky air quickly became muddled by overly earnest ‘message’ episodes, laughable dialogue, a glut of unlikable characters, and jarring tonal shifts.”³ One of Fallon's main points in declaring TV musicals a failure was that the pilots in development for networks looking to cash in on the *Glee*-phenomenon had not, with the exception of *Smash*, come to fruition. In 2012 it could have appeared that it was time to “draw the curtain on the TV musical.”⁴

³ Kevin Fallon, “The TV Musical Is Dead,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2012

⁴ Ibid.

But 2020 hindsight shows that Fallon was premature in his assessment of the genre as defunct. Since *Glee* and *Smash*, several more musical series have aired with success on network television including *Nashville* (2012-2018), *Empire* (2015-2020), *Galavant* (2015-2016), and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019). These shows, while extremely varied in their format, subject, and treatment of music share some important qualities which place them all under the genre I call the *serial TV musical*. I am suggesting that we consider serial TV musicals as distinct from stage or film musicals due to characteristics specific to their medium.

My goal in this thesis is to make a case for the serial TV musical as discrete genre. I begin with a taxonomic approach to delineate what constitutes a serial TV musical and defend its significance as a category. I then go into some of the television theory that grounds my argument and begin to present examples of the distinctness of serial TV musicals. I briefly discuss musical episodes of non-musical TV shows because they are the most similar to musical series, and then I will discuss *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* as an extended example of the conventions of this televisual musical genre.

2.0 What is a Serial TV Musical?

After being told that I am interested in “TV musicals” people will often ask if I have seen the 2018 broadcast of *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert* starring John Legend or if I knew that *Scrubs*/*Grey’s Anatomy*/*Psych*, etc. had musical episodes. I would exasperatedly try to explain that while those things were musicals and they were on TV, they were not what I was interested in. I quickly came to realize that many people I spoke with had not considered that televised musical productions, musical episodes, and musical series were in fact discrete categories of television program. Furthermore, it became clear from my research that critics did not necessarily consider musical series to be *musicals* at all. In reviews of *Nashville* and *Empire* especially, the music is often completely ignored. We can see this in Andrew Goldman’s extensive interview with *Empire* creator Lee Daniels where the show is discussed at length but the its original, commercially successful, music is not mentioned. To me, the music plays an integral role and the program should absolutely be considered a musical. But how do we know if something is a musical if it exists outside of traditional contexts and forms?

As a means to understand musicals on television, it is useful to interpret definitions that have been applied to film musicals rather than stage musicals because many of these definitions seek to distinguish regular film from film musicals in much the same way that I wish to distinguish serial TV musicals from regular TV shows. Thomas Hischak most broadly defines musical film as “a film that utilizes songs sung by characters rather than a movie that just includes singing or music

on the soundtrack... the true screen musical involves story, characters, songs, and usually dance.”⁵ This definition allows us to begin to consider that in a musical, songs should be performed by the characters and therefore can be connected to characterization and story. These numbers, for my purposes in thinking about serial TV musicals, tend to be “integrated,” a term which has many nuanced interpretations in the history of scholarship on the American musical. I find Nina Penner’s interpretation of John Mueller’s formulation to best represent how I understand integration in musical series: “the number’s content makes new things true in the story, either about the characters’ personalities, relationships, and endeavors, or about the fictional world they inhabit. In other words, removing the number from the musical would sacrifice narrative logic.”⁶ This point about the narrative importance of the numbers in a musical is significant to understanding musical series as musicals rather than just television programs with songs.

To test this theory of integration we can look at a scene from *Nashville*, one of the shows which is less obviously a serial TV musical. In Season 1, Episode 2: “I Can’t Help It (If I’m Still in Love with You),” there is a duet between Rayna and Deacon, two characters who are known to have had a romantic past. In the lead-up to this number the two decide to go out on tour together to play the old songs from when they were a couple. Rayna’s husband is skeptical and accuses Rayna of still having feelings for Deacon and she assures him that there is nothing going on there and that he has nothing to worry about. However, in the number, a romantic ballad called “No One

⁵ Thomas Hischak, “Musical Film,” Grove Music Online, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-3000000204>.

⁶ Nina Penner, “Rethinking the Diegetic/Nondiegetic Distinction in the Film Musical,” *Music and the Moving Image* 10, no. 3 (October 26, 2017), 8.

Will Ever Love You,” the chemistry between the two singers is palpable. For the first time the audience can really see the connection between Rayna and Deacon and understand that their relationship is intimate and complex. Without this number the audience would have nothing other than anecdotal evidence to believe that these two have a connection. The integration of the musical number elaborates their relationship more intensely than dialogue alone could. If *Nashville* were not a musical, it would be emotionally impoverished—the music is a necessary component of the show.

With a definition of what makes a musical in hand, we can now consider television more specifically. A problem we see in much of the literature is that one term, “TV musical,” covers disparate media. This is best exemplified in “Big Dreams on the Small Screen: The Television Musical,” Mary Jo Lodge’s chapter in the third edition of *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. Lodge’s purpose in writing this chapter is to define the media that constitute “television musicals.” I will include here the entirety of her definitional paragraph:

So what then, is a television musical? Several types of televised musical entertainments seem to still fit the bill, and these have several things in common. First, these television events feature performers who do some combination of singing, dancing, and acting. Also, they tend to borrow from stage and film musical conventions. In addition, they must feature more than one musical number per event, and nearly always, these musical sequences serve to advance the plot, even in some minor way. These criteria leave three prominent forms for the television musical: (1) the full-length, written or produced specifically for television stand-alone musical;

(2) the stand-alone musical episode of a typically non-musical series and (3) the musical series.⁷

Lodge's criteria for inclusion into the category of TV musical are sound. Inclusion of musical numbers, potentially styled after existing musical conventions, which advance the plot is a sign of a TV musical. However, Lodge's criteria are too simple, an issue when we consider that she considers televised stand-alone musicals, musical episodes, and musical series all to be unified under one term: "television musical." This term is too broad to be useful to a researcher interested in any one of these program types. For example, it would include 2013's televised production of *The Sound of Music*, the 2011 musical episode of *Grey's Anatomy*: "Song Beneath the Song" (Season 7, Episode 18), and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* without differentiation. These media are extremely different from each other, one is a canonical film musical staged for live TV, one is an episode of a non-musical series with interpolated songs, and the other is a serial program with original music. A researcher interested in any one of these things would not find it useful to know about the others because they have very little in common.

The inexactness of "television musical" can provide frustration when looking through tables of content or indexes looking for something specific. We can see this issue play out when we consider Robynn Stilwell's chapter, "The Television Musical" in *Media and Performance in the American Musical*. Stilwell's focus is televised stand-alone musical productions based on *Cinderella* in 1957, 1965, and 1997.⁸ This is of course a completely valid and accurate use of

⁷ Mary Jo Lodge, "Big Dreams on the Small Screen: The Television Musical," in *Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. Paul R. Laird and William A. Everett, 3d ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 425

⁸ Stilwell, "The Television Musical."

“television musical” but the term is too imprecise to really give a hint as to what is going to be discussed in the chapter.

I am particularly troubled by Lodge’s flattening of the distinct attributes of musical series as they had developed by this chapter’s publication in 2017. Even if one only considers *Glee*, the differences in storytelling, ideology, and function between a twenty-first century musical series and a single episode of television or a televised production of an existing musical are significant and warrant specific attention. For instance stage/film musicals are closed narratives and are driven primarily by either character transformation or romantic union, serial TV musicals by the very nature of their seriality cannot share these same goals because the story must go on semi-indefinitely and concrete endpoints such as those are inimical to that form. It is this attention such as this that I seek to provide by writing this thesis. I assert that we must consider musical series as a discrete category of musicals and use language which emphasizes their difference.

If we consider Lodge’s definition as a starting point to define what constitutes a serial TV musical we begin with the idea that such shows must 1) “feature performers who do some combination of singing, dancing, and acting;” 2) “borrow from stage and film musical conventions;” 3) “feature more than one musical number per event;” and 4) use musical sequences to advance the plot.⁹ Later in the chapter, Lodge goes on to specifically address “musical television series” which she believes function as a hybrid between produced-for-TV stand-alone musicals and musical episodes of non-musical shows because they use “many of the conventions of the stage and film musical” and feature “multiple songs,” while producing “new episodes week after

⁹ Lodge, “Big Dreams on the Small Screen,” 425.

week that develop the characters and the larger story arcs of the series.”¹⁰ This is where I reach a significant disjuncture with Lodge. Serial TV musicals are much more complex than Lodge, and many other scholars, give them credit for.

So then, what makes a serial TV musical? To me, the single most significant aspect of the genre, as suggested by the term, is seriality. I will discuss seriality at length later in this thesis, but it is important to understand that seriality is more complex than a series of episodes featuring the same characters. Seriality, especially as it manifests in the 2010s, is a mode of storytelling that informs the kinds of stories that can be told and the way in which they are told. For musicals, seriality is largely incompatible with conventional plot trajectories and ideologies, making serial musicals appear strange when viewed through filmic or theatrical analytical lenses. It is essential that we include seriality in any term describing these media because it speaks to the specificity of their production and form.

Although taxonomy is not necessarily the most interesting or productive means through which to consider genre, I find it helpful to have a few guiding principles in mind when thinking about serial TV musicals. Serial TV musicals are fictional television series which use music as a necessary part of their storytelling mechanism. Musical numbers in this capacity can act to advance the plot on the scale of the episode, arc, season, or series as well to elaborate characterization or relationships. The music in these shows may be original or interpolated. Because of the nature of television, serial TV musicals have slower pacing than other genres of American musicals and as a result complicate plot beyond the romantic union of characters or the dramatic transformation of a protagonist.

¹⁰ Ibid, 429.

I will acknowledge at this point that I am not the first person to try to parse the differences between televised musical media. Sandy Thorburn's 2004 article "Insights and Outlooks: Getting Serious with Series Television Musicals" uses some similar terminology but for slightly different programs. She refers to the stand-alone televised musical production, such as the aforementioned *Sound of Music Live!* as "special musicals" and musical episodes of non-musical series as "series musicals."¹¹ The wholly musical series was not yet an established genre at the time of that article's writing though she does mention *Cop Rock* (1990), *That's Life* (1968-69), and the British program *The Singing Detective* (1986) as examples of such a program. I find Thorburn's work to be in dialogue with my own but, from different eras of television. Mine is specifically situated in the twenty-first century because of the evolution of television and seriality as described by scholars such as Jason Mittell. Serial TV musical, although it sounds similar to "series musical," is crafted to reflect the specificity of that genre. I used the word "serial" to indicate the mode of storytelling encoding in these programs, an aspect which has broad consequences on the particularities of the programs. "TV" was chosen as part of the term because it specifies the medium of these musicals and "musical" was included to indicate that these programs are primarily *musicals* as opposed to any other type of program.

Including Thorburn's article, the available scholarly literature on contemporary television musicals is rather sparse, regardless of which form one is referring to.¹² As far as I am aware,

¹¹ Sandy Thorburn, "Insights and Outlooks: Getting Serious with Series Television Musicals," *Discourses in Music* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

¹² My study is interested only in literature on twenty-first century television musicals. I do acknowledge that there is a tradition of televised musical productions dating back to the mid-twentieth-century but these are not particularly relevant to the topic at hand. For information on these see Joan Baxter, *Television Musicals: Plots,*

there are no major monographs dedicated to the genre in any of its contemporary forms and most of the information is to be found in book chapters or articles. Robynn Stilwell's chapter, "The Television Musical" in *Media and Performance in the American Musical* focuses on televised stand-alone musical productions based on *Cinderella* in 1957, 1965, and 1997¹³ and is an excellent look at that part of the TV musical genre. In one chapter of *Ubiquitous Listening*, Anahid Kassabian takes an affective approach to analysis of musical episodes of non-musical series. She considers the enjoyment of such episodes that parody musical conventions to be rooted in the affective experience of giving undivided attention to something in order to reap benefits such as understanding subtle jokes and self-referentiality.¹⁴ There is also Mary Jo Lodge's "Big Dreams on the Small Screen: The Television Musical" which I will discuss at length.

Literature that is primarily concerned with a particular show has also yielded some interesting findings, for example the collection *Buffy, Ballads, and Bad Guys Who Sing: Music in the Worlds of Joss Whedon* edited by Kendra Preston Leonard.¹⁵ This book features essays about music in the Whedonverse, or the televisual universe created by Joss Whedon including *Buffy the*

Critiques, Casts and Credits for 222 Shows Written for and Presented on Television, 1944-1996 (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1997).

¹³ Robynn J. Stilwell, "The Television Musical," in *Media and Performance in the Musical: An Oxford Handbook of the American Musical, Volume 2*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, vol. 2, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 55–78.

¹⁴ Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 87.

¹⁵ Kendra Preston Leonard, ed., *Buffy, Ballads, and Bad Guys Who Sing: Music in the Worlds of Joss Whedon* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011).

Vampire Slayer, Angel, Firefly, Dollhouse, and Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog. There are a few essays in this collection about *Buffy's* sixth season musical number "Once More with Feeling" including Jeffrey Middents' "A Sweet Vamp: Critiquing the Treatment of Race in *Buffy* and the American Musical Once More (with Feeling)."¹⁶ Information on Whedon's musicals can also be found in *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* which contains "Joss Whedon and the Geek Musical" by Renee Camus.¹⁷

There is also a growing body of literature on specific musical series, especially *Glee* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. For example, Jack Harrison's excellent chapter "The Television Musical: *Glee's* New Directions"¹⁸ is structurally similar to my own argument in this paper but with different conclusions. Harrison is also interested in seriality and how that affects the structure of the musical but finds that, in *Glee*, the primary effect of seriality is the ever suspended narrative synthesis of a romantic union and as a result the show can cycle through many "experimental" romantic couples as a way to tease the promise of a final synthesis¹⁹. Other articles of note are Hunting and McQueen's "A Musical Marriage: The Mash-Up Aesthetic as Governing Logic in

¹⁶ Jeffrey Middents, "A Sweet Vamp: Critiquing the Treatment of Race in *Buffy* and the American Musical Once More (with Feeling)," in *Buffy, Ballads, and Bad Guys Who Sing: Music in the Worlds of Joss Whedon* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 119–32.

¹⁷ Renee Camus, "Joss Whedon and the Geek Musical," in *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 364–73.

¹⁸ Jack Harrison, "The Television Musical: *Glee's* New Directions," in *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First-Century Programming*, ed. Melissa Ames (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 222–31.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 223.

Glee”²⁰ and “*Glee* and the Ghosting of the Musical Theatre Canon” by Barrie Gelles.²¹ As for *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, stay tuned for the forthcoming *Music and the Moving Image* Volume 3, Issue 2 featuring articles by Jessica Shine, Raymond and Zelda Knapp, and myself on the topic.

Now that we have defined serial TV musical and considered the existing literature, we can now move on to the finer details of the characteristics I have defined.

²⁰ Kyra Hunting and Amanda McQueen, “A Musical Marriage: The Mash-Up Aesthetic as Governing Logic in *Glee*,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no. 4 (May 1, 2014): 289–308.

²¹ Barrie Gelles, “*Glee* and the Ghosting of the Musical Theatre Canon,” *Popular Entertainment Studies* 2, no. 2 (September 21, 2011): 89-111.

3.0 Specificity of Medium

The history of television studies or media studies focused on television has experienced a parallel to the struggle for serial TV musicals to be considered as seriously as film musicals. Television studies owes much to film studies, as explained by Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz in their overview of the field: "...by the time television analysis began in earnest, film scholars had already developed a host of techniques for interpreting moving images, thereby allowing early formal analysis of television to do and to analyze a lot with techniques developed elsewhere. It is perhaps no coincidence that television studies often grew not simply from fresh ground... but especially in universities with strong film programs."²² As scholars trained with emphasis on television emerged, television studies was free to consider the specificity of televisual media.

For my study, the two most significant aspects of the difference between film and television are their industrial functions, or how they generate money, and their modes of storytelling. In American culture, the propensity for something to generate money is a significant and often primary concern of the thing's existence. The ideology of revenue encoded into a medium has a significant effect on the form the medium will take. This concept is delineated by television scholar Horace Newcomb in relation to film and television. He writes:

One factor distinguishing television narrative from that of Hollywood film, however, resulted from the different economic structures underlying television. Following the 'broadcast model' developed for commercial radio, American television was planned as an advertising medium.

²² Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies*, Second, Short Introductions (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 35.

Programs were designed not to ‘sell tickets’ as were movies but to sell the attention of viewers to advertisers. The larger the audience, the higher the fees returned to producing and distribution/exhibition entities.²³

Films are designed to sell tickets, which means that it behooves films to have a complete narrative with beginning, middle, and end all contained within the film. People go to films to see a complete story. Of course, there are exceptions—films that leave the story unresolved and open to sequels—but this is a gamble generally reserved for specific genres and movies with the privilege of presumed success.

In popular films, which is to say films that fall into the Hollywood mainstream and not the indie or art periphery, audiences expect to see a set of characters faced with some problem that they must overcome. Many Hollywood films follow a three act structure: the first act is expositional, introducing the audience to the characters, the storyworld, and the inciting incident, or problem, that the characters must overcome; the second act, or rising action, involves the characters trying and failing to resolve the problem, thereby gaining new skills and growing as a character until they have achieved the necessary progress to proceed to act three; where the problem is overcome and the story ends.

Television shows, to contrast, traditionally generate most of their revenue not through ticket sales but through advertising, and are therefore structured to include space for advertisements, causing many to take the form of a four-act structure. Film and media scholar Kristin Thompson’s book *Storytelling in Film and Television* is all about the particulars of form in television and she documents this four-act structure throughout. One method she uses to do this is

²³ Horace Newcomb, “Narrative and Genre,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2004), 8.

to quote from instructional manuals for teleplay writers. She quotes Madeline Dimaggio, “All one-hour scripts are broken into four acts. Each act averages fourteen to fifteen pages. Each act in the one-hour episode is a separate unit with a crisis and climax all its own. Why? The commercial breaks are placed between acts.” Thompson goes on to explain that the biggest cliffhanger happens after the second act because that is where the longest commercial break typically is.²⁴

As a side note, this advertising-informs-structure paradigm is complicated in the age of shows which are made-for-streaming by companies such as Netflix who do not incorporate advertisements into the shows they stream. However, many of these shows still utilize a four-act structure and have breaks where a commercial would fall simply because it is conventional, familiar, and comfortable for viewers to consume media structured in this way.

The difference between the structures of film and television transfers to the structural differences between musical films and musical shows. Musical films tend not to follow the Hollywood three-act model but instead mimic the form found in stage musicals—two acts, the first establishing the world and introducing the central issue, and the second, shorter, act showing the process of resolution of the issue. An example where this is most obvious is the film version of *My Fair Lady* (1964) which is known to be a very faithful adaptation of its stage counterpart.

One thing that is interesting about the business model for some serial TV musicals is that they generate revenue not only from advertising, as per the traditional television model, but they also make money from selling albums of songs performed on the show. The originator and most prolific show in this model is *Glee* for which singles of songs performed in each episode were released on iTunes after they aired, as well as compilation albums and soundtrack albums. All told

²⁴ Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 42.

the show had six compilation albums, nineteen EPs, four-hundred sixty singles, and sixteen soundtrack albums.²⁵ As of 2012 the show sold “more than 42 million songs and more than 12 million albums worldwide.”²⁶ In fact, music sales were such a boon to *Glee*’s profitability that the showrunners faced criticism that the music was driving the story instead of the story driving the music.²⁷ *Nashville* and *Empire* were two other shows that released albums, with the latter finding success as evidenced by the 470,000 copies sold of the Season 1 soundtrack album.

Aside from industrial needs driving the structure of serial TV musicals, the characteristic that most distinguishes serial TV musicals from other musicals is the use of seriality as a mode of storytelling. To fully explain this and its implications on the genre, I will need to define seriality and explain how it works in TV. Then I will explain how film/stage musicals typically tell their stories and how seriality is inimical to this, creating a completely different mode for serial TV musicals that I argue makes that irreconcilable with the other forms.

One difference between a serial and a closed narrative is the way in which an ongoing story in a serial show removes the need for each episode to provide closure, and thereby opens them to an exploration of different kinds of narrative structure. Television scholar Jason Mittell provides this basic definition for a serial television program: “... a television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over

²⁵ “*Glee* Albums Discography,” in *Wikipedia*, March 22, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glee_albums_discography

²⁶ Lesley Goldberg, “‘Glee’ Hits Digital Sales Music Milestone (Exclusive),” *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 28, 2012.

²⁷ Alston, “Glee Harmonized...”

time.”²⁸ This definition is broad and covers a wide range of programs including serial TV musicals. In *Complex TV* Mittell argues that since the 1990s a model of storytelling, which he calls narrative complexity, has emerged which hybridizes “conventional episodic and serial forms.” He elaborates this:

At its most basic level, narrative complexity *redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres.²⁹

An example of this narrative structure can be seen in *Galavant*, a serial TV musical created by Dan Fogelman and featuring original musical numbers composed by Alan Menken. The show is one of the more fantastical of the contemporary musical series as it does not provide any conceit for why the characters break into song; in this storyworld musical outbursts are just a condition of existence. *Galavant* opens with a musical montage flinging the audience into the story: Galavant, the show’s eponymous hero, is a gallant knight who falls in love with Madalena, a peasant maiden, who is kidnapped by an evil king and forced to be his bride. In the montage we see *Galavant* rushing on horseback to stop the wedding, a classic romantic trope, but when he arrives Madalena decides she would rather stay with the king. All of this takes place within the first few minutes via musical narration and then the show drops us in to the present time in the story where Galavant has fallen into a deep depression and is no longer the great knight of legend. The inciting incident for the season’s arc is the arrival of Isabella, a princess who seeks to hire Galavant to help save

²⁸ Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 10.

²⁹ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 18.

her parents and her kingdom, a task Galavant only agrees to once he learns that it is the same king who “stole” his love that has imprisoned Isabella’s parents. And thus the stage is set for the overarching plot of this season: Galavant, his squire Sid, and Isabella must make the trek across the land to save Isabella’s kingdom and to give Galavant a chance to enact revenge on King Richard. This trek is the part of the story that is conventionally serial—from episode to episode the group makes progress on their journey. The episodic aspect of the storytelling in the show comes in the form of the side quests the group encounters along the way. For example, in Season 1, Episode 2, “Joust Friends,” Galavant enters a jousting competition in order to win traveling money for the group. It becomes clear during his preparations for the tournament that this is also about him regaining some of his heroic form. This sort of episodic hijinks is characteristic of older forms where things that happen in an episode are typically contained within that episode and their ramifications do not extend into the subsequent storyline. In episodic TV, the characters are stable and the things they go through in the course of an episode are not significant enough to change anything about them—at the end of the episode the problem will be resolved and the show will return to comfortable stasis. But in a narratively complex show like *Galavant* the episodic bits inform the larger serial arc. This is typical of narratively complex programs as Mittell and I understand them.

Mittell explains that the most important aspects of serial programs are not “the ubiquitous persistence of storyworld and characters” but instead “the ongoing accumulation of narrative events—what occurs in one episode will have happened to the characters and storyworld as

portrayed in future episodes.”³⁰ For this reason television shows are relatively stable. Change happens very slowly.

This is primarily true for characters. Mittell says:

Characters rarely shift significantly, but our understanding of them often does, a change of a somewhat different narrative order that we might call *character elaboration*... This model of change exploits the serial form to gradually reveal aspects of a character over time so that these facets of the character feel new to the audience, even if they are consistent and unchanging character attributes.³¹

An example of this can be seen in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* in reference to Greg’s alcoholism. Over the course of the first season we get little hints that Greg has a drinking problem, including the scene where he references his “study drinking.” But Rebecca, the character that the audience perceives events through, does not fully realize it until the point in Season 2 when she finds out that Greg has been going to Alcoholics Anonymous. While this is a revelation for Rebecca, it is not a revelation for the attentive viewers of the show.

This slow mode of character elaboration is fundamentally opposed to the way characters perform in stage and film musicals. Raymond Knapp writes, “As theater, the musical is about enacting change, and it is not coincidence that one of its most time-honored devices has been the transformation scene. In this, it plays... to a characteristic American optimism, to beliefs about realizing potential and the capacity for redemption, or for responding to disaster by starting

³⁰ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid*, 136.

afresh.”³² We can see examples of this in both stage and screen musicals. Take *Thoroughly Modern Millie* for example. At the beginning of the show, Millie Dillmount is a girl who moved to Jazz Age New York from Salina, Kansas seeking a “thoroughly modern” life. She wants to bob her hair and marry for money rather than love. The lesson that Millie must learn over the course of the musical is the importance of love. Over the course of the show Millie falls in love with Jimmy Smith, an apparently poor but actually wealthy young man. At first, she is highly opposed to Jimmy and is trying to seduce her boss Trevor Graydon through her impressive stenography skills (“The Speed Test”) and accidentally refers to herself as Millie Dillmount “Someday Graydon.” At the end of the first act, her connection with Mr. Graydon never really takes hold and her flirtations with Jimmy increase up until the point where he spontaneously kisses her, leading her to sing the song “Jimmy” about how she actually does like him. In Act 2, Millie thinks that Jimmy is involved with her friend Miss Dorothy and sings “Forget About the Boy” to try to get over him but finds that task insurmountable. In the “I Turned a Corner/Falling in Love with Someone (reprise)” both Millie and Jimmy croon about their desire to be loved by someone. In her final solo number, “Gimme Gimme,” Millie maintains her modernism by demanding, not asking, for the love she desires. This number shows that her transformation is a dialectic—where the ultra-pragmatic modern woman synthesizes with a starry-eyed lovesick crooner to produce her final form.

Another example of character transformation driving the story in a musical is *The Sound of Music*, which provides an excellent example of a classic storytelling mode in film musicals—

³² Raymond Knapp, “Performance, Authenticity, and the Reflexive Idealism of the American Musical,” in *Identities and Audiences in the Musical: An Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, vol. 3, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 207.

Rick Altman's dual-focus narrative. Altman asserts that American film musicals in general follow a form where the focus of the film is not the progress of one single character but is instead "built around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values." The role of the viewer in this form is not to be attentive to the outcome of the romantic pairing, which is predictable, but instead the reconciliation of the characters' differences.³³ In *The Sound of Music* the opposing sides in Altman's frame are the carefree Maria and the uber-disciplined Captain Von Trapp. Over the course of the film the two become more alike, with Maria learning some discipline and responsibility and the Captain welcoming music into his life again. This softening of the boundary between their characters is what makes their union possible, therefore fulfilling the goal of the musical as it sits in a relatively conventional sector of film musical.

The story-driven-by-character-transformation model of musical storytelling is generally not sustainable beyond one show or film. There is a reason that musicals do not have sequels. The characters in a musical are typically going through the most significant change of their lives, something that should only happen once. It would not feel authentic to see these same characters go through a personal upheaval *again*.

How does television as a medium that requires stories to go on for long periods of time assimilate music and musical conventions without the centrality of character transformation? I argue that music is still involved in character but in the more televisually specific realm of character elaboration, as I have previously described in relation to *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. As Newcomb says: "In most serial narratives, the psychological and emotional aspects of characters'

³³ Rick Altman, "The American Film Musical as Dual-Focus Narrative," in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, In Focus: Routledge Film Readers (London: Routledge, 2002), 42.

lives also become a layer of story and plot... Moreover, because serial narratives usually focus on groups, on ensembles of characters, the intertwining of relationships, both professional and personal, increases the potential for new story lines as well as for complications among plots and stories.”³⁴ Because character interiority is accepted as a legitimate aspect of television storytelling now, the opportunity exists for serial TV musicals to use musical numbers as their primary model for character elaboration.

In many musical series, the music functions to reflect what the characters are feeling. For instance, in *Glee* many of the musical numbers are framed as performances during Glee club rehearsals but these songs are often topical or related to what the characters are feeling about a situation that they are in. One example that I find particularly illustrative of character elaboration is one of the few songs from the early seasons which is not related to rehearsal at all. In Season 3 the seniors in the glee club are preparing for graduation and are applying to colleges. Rachel and Kurt have both decided to audition for the fictional New York Academy for the Dramatic Arts, the nation’s premiere performing arts college. In “Choke,” Episode 18, the two have their auditions. Kurt performs very well but Rachel falters, forgetting the lyrics to her staple anthem “Don’t Rain on My Parade” from *Funny Girl*, a song that the audience saw from Berry in the Season 1 episode, “Sectionals.” Rachel is devastated but tries to maintain composure in front of Kurt. He reassures her that she can still come to New York with him and that she will have more chances to make her dream of performing on Broadway come true.

She is visibly struggling to maintain a happy face until Kurt leaves and the introduction to Kelly Clarkson’s “Cry,” a pop rockish power ballad about heartbreak, is heard. We see Rachel

³⁴ Newcomb, “Genre and Narrative”, 9.

walking down the school hallway. The scene cuts to Rachel and her boyfriend Finn in her bedroom, he is cradling her in his arms while she sobs, the song continuing over the scene. Then the camera returns to the hallway and Rachel sings the lines “Pretend I’m ok with it all, pretend there’s nothing wrong,” as the music swells into the first iteration of the chorus and the scene cuts to Rachel alone on the stage of the school auditorium, illuminated by harsh white spotlights. The lyrics of the chorus are as follows:

Is it over yet?

Can I open my eyes?

Is this as hard as it gets?

Is this what it feels like to really cry?

Cry

The anguish that Lea Michele portrays in her performance of this song is palpable and representative of the way Rachel is feeling especially in the third utterance of the chorus. Up to this point in the show, whenever Rachel performs a solo number to an empty auditorium like this it is just that, a *performance*. Rachel is most comfortable when she feels like she is the star. Having a stage all to herself is empowering, as we can see in the emotional counterpart to this song, Jason Mraz’s “I Won’t Give Up” from two episodes later in this season. In that number Rachel is hopeful, staring directly out into the audience, making a promise to herself that she will get through this and become a star. But in “Cry” we meet a Rachel previously thought not to exist—scared, broken, unsure of herself. This is most clear in her body language as she sends her sorrow into the unyielding darkness of the auditorium. Instead of the typical sure-footed Rachel, belting with a smile and gleam in her eye, arms outstretched, this Rachel is very small. She holds her hands close to her body, usually very close to her face. Her shoulders are rolled forward and her eyes are often closed or her gaze is down towards the floor. This posture makes it seem as if she is, for the first

time, shrinking away from the spotlight. The show has made it very clear that the only certainty in Rachel's life is that she will be a star and nothing can get in her way but now, we see her adrift, robbed of her identity—if only for this number. Of course, Rachel as a person had to have some doubt hiding in her psyche somewhere, but the audience has not been given a window into this part of her until now that the show has presented this opportunity to elaborate her character.

4.0 On Musical Episodes

Surrounding the rise of the serial TV musical as a viable television venture was the influx of non-musical TV shows that featured musical episodes. These musical episodes largely do not act within their show's seriality and instead function as gimmicks. Lodge says about musical episodes:

Single-episode television musicals typically function in one of two ways: (1) as revue shows, which feature unrelated, often interpolated songs with new lyrics or (2) as book-driven original musicals, which feature original music *and* lyrics. While the former of these options is certainly a musical and mirrors many of its stage counterparts, such types of television musical episode do little to advance the form, since their songs typically exist as gimmicks or novelty moments.³⁵

Based on this definition I would argue that most musical episodes function as gimmicks. They engage with what Mittell terms the operational aesthetic. To parse Mittell, the operational aesthetic is a phenomenon of complex TV wherein the viewer's enjoyment of a program is based less on what happens in a narrative, but *how* they did it. This is the same allure that many find from heist movies such as *Ocean's Eleven* where the audience generally knows the plan, but enough details are withheld to allow the film to reveal how they pulled it off once it is over. When this device is well-executed one can rewatch the film and notice these details.

A musical episode invokes the operational aesthetic because it takes the characters and the scenarios we have come to expect from a show and turns them on their head, now the rules of the

³⁵ Lodge, "Big dreams...", 428.

story world have changed and, if it goes well, the audience is quite impressed with the result. Also, many musical episodes parody the musical as a form instead of simply utilizing it. In order to appreciate the parody, the show asks an enhanced level of attention of the viewer. Kassabian speaks to this:

But parody of this kind is not addressed to the inattentive consumer. It requires focused attention to recognize the gestures, sounds, and choreography that are being quoted or referred to. If you look away or talk over something, you stand to miss a good laugh. And once you recognize the reference, you're apt to stay attentive, looking for more. In this way, it becomes clear that television and music, those forms that taught us multitasking and networking as we know them, joined forces in these works to make a bid for our undivided attention. These episodes are chock full of puns, quotations, parodies, and self-referentiality, all of which demand a high level of attention and familiarity with the materials being quoted or referred to.³⁶

As with the heist film, focused attention is rewarded in the musical episode.

While musical episodes engage with musical theater tropes in general, I disagree with Lodge's assessment that musical episodes of TV shows are part of the hybrid genre of serial TV musical. I find that most musical episodes do not actually engage with the larger narrative of the show they are in. Most operate as sort of a filler episode which could easily lift out of the rest of the show. "Duet" from *The Flash* and *Supergirl* is a good example of this. In this episode a magical, musical alien from the *Supergirl* universe arrives and throws Barry and Kara into a shared coma where they both must play their roles in a musical in order to escape. However, the episode does not really follow its own rules. The world they are in frames itself as the setup for a backstage

³⁶ Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, 87.

musical, they are both performers at a supper club, their boss is evil, there *is* singing—but that is pretty much where the similarities end. The story they enact is not a musical, it is more of a romantic comedy with an undercurrent of mob activity. The musical numbers are not integrated, bearing no influence on the episode or the show at large. The duet “I’m Your Super Friend” is a charming number and it is nice to see Grant Gustin and Melissa Benoist flex their musical theater chops, but it is not necessary to the plot. It would be easy enough to skip this episode and not feel as though one missed anything in either *The Flash* or *Supergirl*.

One show whose musical episode actually functions in a way similar to a serial TV musical is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in its sixth season episode “Once More with Feeling.” The explanation for the musical elements in this episode is that a demon named Sweet has been summoned to Sunnydale. Sweet’s power is that he inflicts a musical plague upon a town and can cause people to dance to their death like a Broadway *Rite of Spring*. The manifestation this takes in the show is that the Scooby Gang, or the protagonist ensemble, is compelled to expose their greatest secrets, worries, and insecurities through song. This episode is the culmination of a series of growing issues among the group: Buffy is depressed because her friends resurrected her even though she was in heaven, a fact she has been hiding; Spike is in love with Buffy but she is the slayer and does not reciprocate his feelings; Dawn has been stealing things; Xander and Anya are engaged but both are having serious doubts about the union; Giles feels like he is holding Buffy back; and Tara and Willow have been fighting about Willow’s increasingly unethical use of magic when Willow used a spell to make Tara forget, allowing them to have a blissful loving relationship under false pretense. The individual numbers in the episode are confessional moments for each character to expose the way they have been feeling and many of the things they have been hiding are revealed in this episode. The drama that happens in this episode has lasting effects. The musical form is

useful in this instance because it allows the show to expedite the revelation of these issues beyond what would be possible with traditional dialogue. The numbers, as they would in a serial TV musical, act as character elaboration. The way that *Buffy* used music to allow the characters to reveal their secrets is similar to the way that serial TV musicals, such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, use music to show the audience things about the characters that would not be possible within the “realistic” confines of non-musical television.

5.0 *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* as Exemplar

While I could do a small overview of elements from each of the serial TV musicals I have mentioned to synthesize the theories I have explored so far, I will instead focus on *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* because of the fluency with which it employs elements of the serial TV musical. From its outset the show took the deconstruction of musical and romantic comedy tropes as its task and as a result outlined many of the elements of musical series that I have discussed.

One such element of the serial TV musical's structure is the use of music less for character transformation than character elaboration. In *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* we can not only see the way that the show uses music for elaboration, but also how it explicitly *does not* engage with character transformation through music. This is best demonstrated in the song "Rebecca's Reprise" from the Season 2 finale. This song is sung by Rebecca on the eve of her wedding to Josh, the focus of her obsession. She feels as if she has overcome much of her unhappiness and sings a medley reprise of four previous songs from the series, each representing a facet of her unhappiness: "You Stupid Bitch," "I'm the Villain in My Own Story," "I Love My Daughter (But Not in a Creepy Way)," and "We'll Never Have Problems Again." As I will demonstrate, this number subverts conventional expectations that a reprise will show how a character has changed by reusing material from earlier in the show in a new context. That is not to say the song does not *appear* on the surface to function as a conventional reprise. "You Stupid Bitch," a self-described anthem of "self-indulgent self-loathing," is Rebecca's go-to song to sing whenever she feels like she has made a grave mistake. The song begins "Well Rebecca, you've done it now / Karma's come to tap you on the shoulder." The chorus is the admonishment "You ruined everything you stupid bitch." However, as I explain in my article "'Cruel Optimism' and Subjectivity in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*",

the reprise inverts the meaning of the opening line, changing it from a sarcastic jab to an indication of accomplishment. The line now reads ‘Well Rebecca, you’ve done it now / You’ve gotten everything you said you wanted.’ “She is so happy in this moment, but the phrasing of this lyric is intentional: everything she *said* she wanted.” She has neglected her therapist’s advice to deal with her own issues instead of running from them into Josh’s arms. “The fact that she feels so euphoric now, having almost manifested every moment of empty happiness from the Josh fantasy, is but an indication of how far she has to fall.”³⁷ The remaining songs also deal with a misrecognition of empty happiness as growth for Rebecca. “I’m the Villain in My Own Story” sees Rebecca go from originally having had a shred of self-awareness to realize that her behavior in relation to Josh is unacceptable, to now feeling that she is the princess in the fairy tale because she is going to marry Josh, her prince. “I Love My Daughter” reflects her deep discomfort with her boss’ affection for his daughter because neither of her parents were affectionate. However, now, in the reprise, her father has come to the wedding and she feels that his presence means that he finally can give her the love she has always craved.

In order to truly see how these songs subvert the convention of the reprise we need to do a careful semiotic analysis. In order to do this I find the linguistic anthropological theories of voice and footing, as established by Erving Goffman³⁸ and Jane Hill,³⁹ to be particularly useful in parsing the ideologies encoded in “Rebecca’s Reprise.” Footing has to do with one’s alignment to an

³⁷ Anna Knapp, “Cruel Optimism and Subjectivity in Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,” *Music and the Moving Image* 3, no. 2 (Forthcoming).

³⁸ Erving Goffman, “Footing,” *Semiotica* 25, no. 1–2 (1979): 1–29.

³⁹ Jane H. Hill, “The Voices of Don Gabriel,” in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, ed. Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 97–111.

utterance. Basically, it is the ground upon which one builds their understanding of a social situation. To use an example from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, when Greg is having the conversation with Rebecca that she perceives as the song “Settle for Me” there are various footings happening. Greg’s footing in this interaction is one of earnest interest in Rebecca. For her, the footing is automatically different because she is perceiving this interaction as a musical number, a very different position from Greg. She also interprets the intention of the utterance differently. The two of them are not on the same page about this interaction, or more precisely for our framework: they are not standing on the same ground. When Rebecca later tells Greg that she perceived him as having a “settle for me” vibe his footing shifts because he realizes that they were not experiencing the interaction in the same way and he must alter his positioning in order to effectively move forward in the conversation. To sum up I will quote Goffman: “A change in footing implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance. A change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events.”⁴⁰

The other linguistic theory that I will draw on is that of voice, which I initially encountered in Jane Hill’s essay “The Voices of Don Gabriel” but best understood through Webb Keane’s interpretation of it in “Indexing Voice: A Morality Tale”⁴¹. Voice is derived from footing but is more specific in the aspects of talk which it engages with. While footing can explain the alignment of any participant, ratified or otherwise, in an interaction, voice is concerned primarily with the

⁴⁰ Goffman, “Footing,” 5.

⁴¹ Webb Keane, “Indexing Voice: A Morality Tale,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (2011): 166–78.

speaker's alignment. This conception of voice does not necessarily have to do with the sound of the voice, but instead it deals with the multivalent stances and ideologies contained within a speech act. In this theory, it is impossible to speak completely originally. Within any utterance could be ideologies, phrases, sentiments that have been picked up from culture, family, or the people around you. These different sources and types of material that a speaker might draw upon are all considered to be distinct voices. These shifts between voices are also usually shifts in footing but they are more specific in their effect—; therefore I consider footing to be an umbrella term that voicing fits under regarding shifts in utterances.

For my purposes in this thesis, I will consider every time Rebecca shifts to a new song in “Rebecca’s Reprise” to be a shift in voice. Because each song is encoded with its own conception of love, “Rebecca’s Reprise” therefore comes to represent a rich tapestry of emotion that lends the song affective potency. Below are the lyrics of the song with shifts between songs and therefore the big shifts in voicing marked with “//”.

Well, Rebecca, you've done it now
You've gotten everything you said you wanted
So, take a moment and take a breath
After today, you'll start fresh
And finally, I'll be //
The hero of my own story
The princess in the tale
In an unexpected twist
It turns out magic exists
I'll feel it in my dress and in my veil //
Daddy's little girl
Princess of his world

That was never something I knew before
But now that I'm a bride
He'll look at me with pride
'Cause my daddy will love me
And then, in a wonderful way
Everything in the past will just fall away
My daddy will love me
And my mommy will love me
And Josh will love me
And then //
I'll never have problems again

Except for the last song invoked in this medley, all the songs contain unattainable ideologies of love and self. Rebecca fully expected to always see herself as a “stupid bitch”, a villain, as someone who cannot gain the love her of parents. These were tropes that were not meant for Rebecca. But now, in conjunction with so many shifts in the possibilities for her life, she feels that perhaps she could have “everything [she] said [she] wanted.” However, I believe that if we consider these invocations through linguistic voice we can see through this hope and into the impending collapse of these dreams. While she does change the lyrics of the songs to reflect more positive outlooks, their origin is in disillusionment and as such they carry that affect with them regardless of the actual lyrical content. The stance of each of these songs is the original darkness, and a few new words and new instrumentation cannot fully reverse that, just as a grand wedding cannot reverse years of self-loathing. My reading of this scene is confirmed later in the episode when Josh, having learned that Rebecca is hiding aspects of her past from him, leaves her at the altar. The prize promised by her reprise is ripped away and she is left publicly humiliated and reeling.

In conjunction with a point that Keane makes in his essay, the very form of a medley is significant to Rebecca's self-formation at this critical point in the series. Keane's essay is an interpretation of Jane Hill's essay which is about the various voicings in the story of Don Gabriel, a man near the end of his life who is recounting the story of his son's murder. Gabriel's primary language is Mexicano but he switches between that and Spanish during the story. However, Spanish is used primarily in his depiction of morally bankrupt capitalists who took his son's life. By using a language other than his own, taking on the "voice" of the other, he is morally distancing himself from these people. Hill also locates changes in voicing in Gabriel's many disfluencies which similarly serve to index his relative distance to figures in the story, as well as to act as performance of certain emotional affects that lend the story potency. Keane writes: "If the formal variations in Don Gabriel's speech display his effort to map out a moral terrain and position himself within it, they are also evidence for his lack of full self-mastery."⁴² Don Gabriel needs to use so many voices because he is not certain where his own voice may lie. This same idea can be applied to Rebecca. At such an emotionally intense point in the season, it might have made sense to use an original song, as the showrunners do in Season 3 with "A Diagnosis." But here, they choose to recycle previous songs, mainly from Season 1. This choice helps to illustrate that Rebecca is still a fundamentally fragmented subject and that the love she is so hopeful to obtain will not make these pieces fuse. They are fundamentally disparate.

The inseparability of the original emotion from the songs combined with Rebecca's aching hopefulness is the primary source of the potency of "Rebecca's Reprise". In a typical musical, a reprise is an opportunity for some significant change to be performed. The affect of the song

⁴² Keane, "Indexing Voice," 171.

actually *does* change normally. However, because *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* seeks to undermine conventions of musicals, this is not the case. The reprise here is a red herring. Perhaps the show was about Josh and Rebecca. Perhaps she will get a “happily ever after”. Afterall, a reprise should be a beacon of change. But to subvert this convention the show sets up the reprise in order to make the devastation of Josh’s abandonment even more salient.

Another way that *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* rejects the musical convention that character transformation must drive the story is by explicitly demonstrating that simply performing an identity does not necessarily grant you that identity. This is prominently on display in the series’ penultimate musical number, “Eleven O’Clock.” In this number Rebecca sums up the events and her personae throughout the series by singing a medley of songs representing these periods while the costumes she wore in those numbers circle around her on a giant turntable. The song is an eleventh hour number, where the stakes are which man Rebecca will choose to be with, the natural ending to a conventional musical. But Rebecca cannot decide between men and is frustrated because she feels that after everything she has been through in four seasons of the show she should have “earned a frickin’ ever after.” While the costumes circle around her she steps towards the camera until we can only see her head and sings “I need to end this song, but I don’t know how / Eleven o’clock / Still eleven o’clock / Well, Rebecca, you’ve done it now.” She turns around and we see that she is wearing the dress from “You Stupid Bitch,” the one persona she never had to affect. Although Rebecca has done plenty of performing throughout the series, she had never really addressed the core of her unhappiness and therefore could not be transformed, even by the power of music. With this move, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is explicitly rejecting the typical musical drive towards transformation.

Thus the show rejects the reflexive idealism often encoded in musicals. Raymond Knapp explains that this idealism is “based on the implicit belief that renewal and redemption are always possible, that people can and should reinvent themselves, and in the process discover and unlock unexplored capabilities and capacities.” In my article “‘Cruel Optimism’ and Subjectivity in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*”⁴³ I argue that the show can be read as driven not by optimism but by Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism” which is “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”⁴⁴ In the show the primary instance of this is Rebecca’s attachment to Josh. She truly believes that love conquers all and that if she can win the love of this man then she will never have problems again. However, by using Josh as an emotional crutch, she prevents herself from doing the difficult work to become happy with herself, with or without romance.

This cruel optimism is also used in other musical shows and is a useful way to prolong the stories for television—by having characters driven by things that are inimical to their musical happy endings, the story can go on, allowing the characters to struggle with issues that would be quickly overcome in a stage or film musical.

⁴³ Anna Knapp, “Cruel Optimism”

⁴⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

6.0 Conclusion

I hope that it is clear now that the TV musical is definitively *not* dead⁴⁵. In fact, in 2020 we are still seeing new serial TV musicals debut, most exciting among them being *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist*. The premise of this show is that the protagonist, Zoey, is involved in an accident in an MRI machine which somehow transfers all the world's music into her brain. After this incident she realizes that she can hear people's thoughts and emotions as songs. She sees fully choreographed numbers by people she knows as well as random people on the street or in coffee shops. It is not entirely clear what the rules are for when she perceives music from someone, but she decides to use her new ability to try to help people. What is most interesting formally about this show is the prevalence of dance in each number. Celebrity choreographer Mandy Moore is heavily involved in the production and dance is included from the outset of the production process. This is a fascinating development considering the existing serial TV musicals, whose relationship to dance is usually a bit of an afterthought. Perhaps we will be able to analyze the role of dance in *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* as a salient feature of the show's poetics.

Regardless, it should be clear by now that the serial TV musical is deserving of its own term and distinction as a genre within the American musical. Although they share certain characteristics, the purpose and execution of serial TV musicals are much different from stage or film musicals. We now possess the vocabulary to discuss musical series as distinct from any other musical media on television, something I hope will be of use to scholars going forward. The shows

⁴⁵ Fallon, "The TV Musical is Dead"

I have discussed are not the only programs that might conceivably fit within this framework. I have not tried to apply it to anything predating *Glee* or to anything that was made-for-streaming. Might we be able to redeem *Cop Rock* using this model? Time will tell.

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