




A Dose of Reality: American Idol 7: The Top 6 Try Their Hand at the "Music of the Night"

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A week ago, I told you that I dreaded Mariah Carey Night on *American Idol*. Of course, that made me practically giddy in comparison to my expectations for Andrew Lloyd Webber Night.

Honestly, the songs of Lord Webber are wonderful, often magical. But they're so incredibly geared toward the stage and are frequently so conversational that it's impossible to conceive that they would translate into a Top 40 style. And let's face it -- we're not looking for the star of the next Webber musical, but for the next great Top 40 artist.

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So that brings us to tonight's show, for which Lord Webber served as the Idols' mentor. Honestly, I was surprised by a number of things:

- **Webber was this season's best mentor.** He gave the Idols genuinely useful advice, and he didn't mince words in his assessment of their rehearsals with him.
- **The girls didn't get flogged by the guys.** Given what we've seen this season, it was easy to assume that the guys would own yet another night. Yet the girls held their own (with one **big** exception) and the guys also had a very strong outing (with one **big** exception).
- **Webber Night wasn't as bad as expected.** To be truthful, I really expected to only see one or two very good performances. Tonight, we got four. I'm still questioning whether this is "the most talented cast ever," but there is a lot of depth remaining in the Top 6.

As I noted above, there were still some big rough spots in the night, both from performers who seemed to make good song choices. I hate to admit that anything that Randy Jackson says is right (since he seems to have followed Paula Abdul's lead and donated at least half his brain to science). But it's true: If you can really sing, then you can sing anything. Tonight, four Idols proved that point, and two of them showed why they're out of their league.

Syesha Mercado - "One Rock 'N' Roll Too Many" from *The Starlight Express*

OK, admit it -- if you heard about Syesha's song choice before the show, you also thought it was a very, very bad idea. As one forum post I saw read, "weak fan base + going first + an unknown song = going home." I agreed, and I simply knew in advance that Syesha was toast. Tonight, that toast was looking mighty good. Syesha's idea was to jazz things up and to have show some personality (for once? -- why not show personality and a "real" side of herself before now?). After all, she is an actress and Webber's songs are from musical theatre. So why not play to the crowd? Why not indeed. Syesha started the number standing atop the piano (and looking ravishing in a sleek red dress, and with her normally unruly hair styled in a classic 40s-style fashion). From there, she simply took over the stage. Syesha worked the crowd (and the band) and won over an audience that hasn't really been behind her all season. This was, without a doubt, her finest moment on the Idol stage, and probably one of the season's best performances. Unfortunately, she doesn't really have much of a discernable fanbase and she's going first -- both of which are prime factors in determining who falls into the Bottom 3. I'm afraid she'll be there again this week, though this level of performance shows that shes deserving of at least the Top 5, and maybe more than that.

Jason Castro - "Memory" from *Cats*

turned in one of this season's weakest performances. "I didn't know it was sung by a cat," Jason said after talking with Webber about the song. That was a bad sign, and his arrangement of it was another. Once again, he was seated on a stool. Once again, he remained there throughout the song. But this time, instead of putting the song into Jason's hazy, folksy world, he tried to sing it like a male, dreadlocked Barbra Streisand ... or perhaps like a dreadlocked, ancient, old glamourpuss. Either way, with his vocal limitations, that was obviously not going to work. Jason was thin vocally, but he was also completely disconnected from the song (something that Webber feared in his interview -- "I think he got it ... I think" ... obviously not). Maybe it was that he followed the supercharged excitement of Syesha's big moment. Or maybe it was that I was angered by yet another appearance of the waving hands of hell, but it just didn't work for me. Simon told him it probably felt like the two longest minutes of Jason's life when he was on stage. Unfortunately for Jason, he made those minutes feel pretty long for pretty much everyone else, too. That will likely put him squarely in line for the Bottom 3.

Brooke White - "You Must Love Me" from Evita

Name something heavier than a rock ... like Brooke's descent from this show's favorites into the group of Idols most likely to leave the show. Tonight, it looked like she had a shot to escape that group for a week. She picked a good song, but it occurred to me during her rehearsal that Lord Webber was trying to get her to sing it as though she was Evita singing to the people of Argentina just before her death, and that following that advice might not be such a good idea. OK, Lord Webber is a great songwriter, but these are budding pop artists. Should Brooke sing this song from her heart, not as Evita Peron, but as Brooke White? Certainly these words apply to Brooke's journey on this show: "Where do we go from here?/ This isn't where we intended to be/ We had it all, you believed in me/ I believed in you." Doesn't that sound like it could be a song from Brooke to her fans? She took his advice, and I still had the feeling like she might do pretty well with it ... but then she went and forgot the second line of the lyric, stopped, and restarted. I'll grant her this much: If that had been a Brooke White concert, she would have done the same thing, and in that respect she was absolutely professional (no matter what lunacy Paula babbles -- seriously, check her cup for foreign substances). However, the fact that she dropped the line in the first place is troubling, and it appeared to make her unsure of herself, and she never really made the connection she needed to make. Even the waving hands of hell didn't seem too enthusiastic. She didn't exactly do badly, but she also didn't soar like she needed to. Following Jason's rough performance should have been a chance for Brooke to shine by comparison. Instead, she came off looking far too similar. In that respect, she should also similarly join him in the Bottom 3.

David Archuleta - "Think of Me" from Phantom of the Opera

This song choice was a bit of a curiosity, given that I've only heard it sung by the likes of Sarah Brightman and Emmy Rossum. It's definitely not a guy's song (something certainly not lost on Lord Webber), but David surprised me a bit by putting it into an acoustic pop arrangement. (One thing Webber did point out: David closes his eyes **WAY** too much! Thank you Lord Webber for saying what a lot of us have been saying all season!) After David endured the producers indulgences (they stupidly had a group of girls come on stage to hug him -- that's a **GREAT** way to prepare for a performance, you dunderheads), he worked his patented vocal stylings on the song -- as we'd expect him to do. (Although the judges -- and pretty much everyone else I've talked to -- missed that David completely botched another lyric in the middle of the song. "Imagine me trying too hard" seemed to turn into "Imagine me talk to me softly." But ... he covered his tracks and recovered seamlessly.) David isn't venturing much out of his comfort zone, but in terms of presenting himself as an artist (and in trying to win this show) he is making smart moves by picking songs he can manipulate vocally, and he's sounding good along the way. Tonight, he also managed to keep his eyes open ... for the most part. (Yeah, it was obviously a struggle.) He's still probably the favorite to win (the other David is dangerous close to seizing the frontrunner status), and he's certainly safely into next week. (Just one personal note from me to David: How about walking around the stage a little bit? While you're performing on it, it's yours. You own it. Act like it!)

Carly Smithson - "Superstar" from Jesus Christ Superstar

Before the show, I thought this was a rather risky choice for Carly. It's another "booming" song that requires a strong vocal, and Carly's interpretation of "strong vocal" is often "strangling the song." Tonight, we learned that her initial pick was "All I Ask of You" (another classic from *Phantom of the Opera*) but she was steered away from that and toward "Superstar" by Lord Webber (who noted that she had a "great big chest

minute of it. For once, she really looked like a star in the limelight, and her vocals on "Superstar" were close to perfect (outside of a few instances of oversinging). (Another note to David Archuleta -- **THIS** is the way you take over a stage and use it to your advantage.) The crowd loved it, I enjoyed it and even Simon liked it. In celebration, Carly retrieved a shirt she got just in case that read, "SIMON LOVES ME (THIS WEEK)." There was excitement and power in this number, and it would have made a great closing to the show. Even so, it was one of the night's brightest moments; it should guarantee Carly another week of safety ... though I'm a little afraid she's still in danger of falling into the Bottom 3.

David Cook - "Music of the Night" from *Phantom of the Opera*

What we love about David is his innate ability to transform recognizable songs into a new, rock-oriented style -- and perform those songs with a standard of excellence. He has done that almost every show this season; the rare exception was his performance of Our Lady Peace's "Innocent" during Idol Gives Back Week. That said, I was looking forward to how he'd transform "Music of the Night" this week. Instead, he stood up there and went toe-to-toe with the original arrangement. Warning! Danger, Will Robinson! I mean, what could we really expect from the scruffy-looking rocker when he's taking on a song most notably sung by Michael Crawford in the original cast of *Phantom*. How about a whole new way to love it? Granted, David has a musical theatre background, but I really didn't think he'd tackle this song with such a beautiful vocal performance. Virtually every note was spot-on, and he injected the number with all of the depth and feeling such a performance requires. When handed a genre that generally demands that the strongest vocalists rise to the challenge, David simply rose to the very top and showed that he's not just a rocker -- **HE** is the voice to be reckoned with this season.

Bottom Three: Brooke, Jason and Syesha

Going Home: Brooke

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