

The Singer's Library: *Queering Vocal Pedagogy*

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



A new book provides insights on creating gender-affirming voice studios.

Throughout history, students have learned how to sing according to the master-apprentice model. While author and professor William Sauerland (he/they) believes this has led to positive results for many singers, they also feel it can leave other students behind. They advocate a different approach in their new book *Queering Vocal Pedagogy: A Handbook for Teaching Trans and Genderqueer Singers and Fostering Gender-Affirming Spaces*.

Sauerland cites music educator and researcher Freya Jarman-Ivens, who defines “queering” as an open-ended practice of reexamining and dismantling normativity,

power, and privilege. By applying this approach to vocal pedagogy, Sauerland intends to disentangle the field from normative practices and traditions that have historically promoted only cisgender narratives. By doing so, they also hope to create a more welcoming space for trans and genderqueer singers within the discipline of vocal pedagogy.

Sauerland posits in the book that a queer application of vocal pedagogy will lead to increased agency and autonomy for all voice students, whether they are LGBTQ+ or not. They expand on these ideas in the interview below.

As a self-professed lifelong student of vocal pedagogy, you believe that the interactions, practices, and rapport that exist in the voice studio between student and teacher can either promote or stifle vocal development, artistic expression, and self-expression. How can the master-apprentice model be harmful to holistic, individual growth in the voice studio?

Not only am I a self-possessed lifelong student of vocal pedagogy, I am also a lifelong learner of the students I teach. Maintaining a position of lifelong learning mitigates a person from assuming a “master” identity, a persona to some that indicates superiority, proprietorship, or complete comprehension of a subject.

If we, as teachers, foster an attitude where we are prepared to learn from our students, to give them agency, and to honor their curiosities, goals, and interests, we harness the possibility of being more inclusive and heightening vocal development, artistic expression, and self-expression.

In the traditional master-apprentice model, a student is subordinate to the teacher, expected to follow their directives without hesitation. In my own teaching, I encourage critical thinking by inviting my students to problematize the approaches and paths that I pursue with students.

Though I fully believe a teacher should be an authority in singing, this does not necessarily mean that a teacher is an expert in the interest and desires of every student—this knowledge will be gained by listening empathetically and openly with each student.

Additionally, as vocal pedagogy continues to change with emerging technologies, a pedagogue needs to remain vigilant in learning new ways of teaching.

What are some of the more common practices you have observed in the voice studio that ostracize or “other” trans and genderqueer singers?

From my perspective through personal experience and research, trans and genderqueer singers are most frequently marginalized through traditional pedagogical language and repertoire. Many of our widely printed vocal pedagogy books—though very well meaning and eruditely written—use gendered language to discuss voice functionality and vocal range. Discussions of “female” and “male” voices do not leave room for diverse gender identities within vocal pedagogy.

Furthermore, singing competitions and auditions that require specific repertoire do not always welcome gender-expansive singers. I hope *Queering Vocal Pedagogy* empowers teachers to enact practices and policies that honor and affirm trans and genderqueer singers in studios, concert halls, auditions, and competitions.



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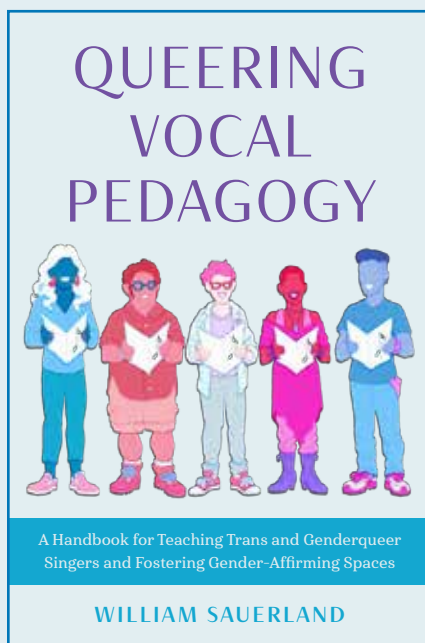
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As might be expected from the title, *Queering Vocal Pedagogy: A Handbook for Teaching Trans and Genderqueer Singers and Fostering Gender-Affirming Spaces* is anything but a traditional vocal pedagogy text. There are no chapters dedicated to posture, breathing, or resonance; no detailed diagrams of the larynx; and no one-size-fits-all

vocal exercises. Instead, author William Sauerland presents a multicase study of six genderqueer singing students and their teachers to provide an inside view of how they each work toward individual vocal development.

Preliminary chapters provide the necessary discussion of gender-, trans-, and queer-related vocabulary while also relating some of the challenges genderqueer students face in music education at all levels of study. Sauerland then examines various teaching practices, focusing specifically on how a “queering” approach deviates from more traditional methodologies. Going beyond simply using appropriate pronouns and avoiding unnecessarily gendered language, queering vocal pedagogy is intentionally and intensely student centered.

Sauerland admits that the experiences and perspectives provided by the research participants may not reflect those of all trans and genderqueer singers. As such, the book is not intended to be a step-by-step guide for teaching “the trans voice.” Similarly, Sauerland makes no claim of being an expert on the subject and remains true to the role of researcher, presenting information without prescribing how the findings should be interpreted.

Rather, Sauerland is adamant that readers should use the book as they see fit, hoping it will encourage teachers to once again become learners, increasing awareness of how they can better advocate for and affirm their gender-expansive students. By taking responsibility for doing their own “cultural competency” homework, teachers avoid putting the onus of this work on students themselves.

Queering Vocal Pedagogy is as practical as it is compassionate, offering invaluable insights and descriptions of best practices designed to encourage teachers to see every student, as Sauerland states, “as a whole, emotional, worthy human.” Voice teachers who approach the book with an open mind and an open heart are bound to find ways to make their studios more inclusive, their teaching more impactful, and their worldviews more accepting.



William Sauerland

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You state that it is important for readers to know something about your background, identity, biases, and lenses, so you share that the book emerges from your personal and professional spheres as a gay, genderqueer music educator, researcher, and vocal pedagogue. How does this particular intersection of identities influence what you bring to *Queering Vocal Pedagogy*?

In academia, I have observed that facets of vocal music teaching are often siloed into three zones: (1) choral conducting, (2) applied studio instruction, and (3) music education. In my professional life, I have worked diligently to maintain a presence in all three areas. I think I have learned a lot from one area that influences my work in another and vice versa.

In my personal life, gay and genderqueer are just two qualities of a more complex identity. I believe being a part of the LGBTQ+ community enables me an insider's view

to the lived experiences of trans and genderqueer singers. Though I support all emerging scholarship on trans singers, I think the research of trans musician-scholars offers greater authenticity to the lived experience of trans and genderqueer musicians.

Queering Vocal Pedagogy is, in part, a call to dismantle hegemonic customs that oppress or marginalize certain identities and voices in singing lessons. As a gay, genderqueer teacher, I have tried to shed some light on how we, as a profession, can be more open to gender diversity in our studios and performing arts spaces.

In the book, you encourage readers to examine all aspects of teaching, from individual practices to foundational philosophies. You ask how vocal pedagogy might change if success could be measured by the number of students who live a fulfilled life of singing instead of by how many of our students major in vocal music, win competitions, or find material success in the professional industry. How would you answer that question yourself?

In my portfolio career as a choral educator, I have taught choirs of many levels, from elementary school to university, church, and community choruses. As an applied studio teacher, I have had the privilege of working privately with students of all levels, from very beginning stages to

vocal performance majors. I am so proud of students who go on to earn graduate degrees or have professional singing careers.

I think it is important to celebrate the students who move on to careers outside the arts, but continue in life as avocational singers, performing in their community choirs and theatres. I am equally proud of former students who use the skills and habits of mind they learned through music lessons in their everyday lives, even if that work is not directly related to music-making.



Brian Manternach

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