

The Singer's Library:

Singing and Teaching Musical Theatre

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

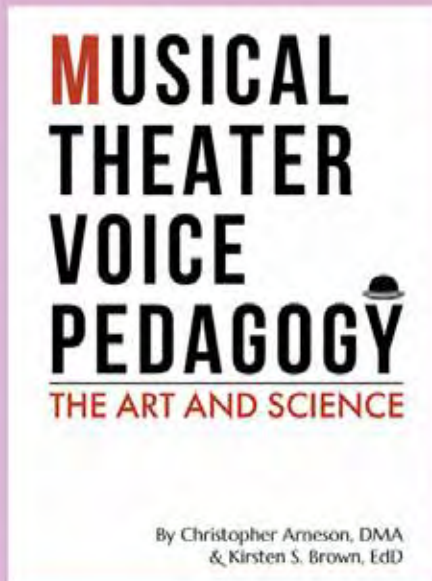
New resources will help both performers and educators give their regards to Broadway.

Two recently published books were written specifically for those interested in musical theatre—one for performers and one for pedagogues. Both of these resources, however, offer an abundance of worthwhile content for both groups of readers.

As the title indicates, *So You Want to Sing Musical Theatre: A Guide for Performers* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022) would seem to be designed primarily for singing actors on stage. But author Amanda Flynn includes a 45-page chapter titled “Musical Theatre Vocal Pedagogy” in the book as well as

many other sections that are sure to hold the interest of the teachers among us.

Similarly, in the introduction to *Musical Theater Voice Pedagogy: The Art and Science* (Inside View Press, 2023), authors Christopher Arneson and Kirsten S. Brown explicitly state that the intended audience of the book is voice teachers. Even so, they believe that it will also be useful for musical theatre singers, especially those who are looking to establish bridges between performing and teaching.



So You Want to Sing Musical Theatre

Although the twentieth and (supposedly) final book of the NATS-sponsored *So You Want to Sing* series was published in 2020, the collection is far from complete. *So You Want to Sing Musical Theatre* is an updated and expanded version of the first book in the series. It carries a slightly altered title, indicating NATS's shift in preferred spelling of the genre from "music theater" to "musical theatre" and incorporating a revised subtitle of "A Guide for Performers" in place of the previous "A Guide for Professionals."

More significant, however, is the change of author from Karen Hall, who penned the first, 159-page volume in 2013, to Amanda Flynn, who wrote the bulk of the new, more robust, 418-page edition. As series editor Matthew Hoch indicates in the foreword, Flynn brings significant expertise to the book from her wide-ranging career, providing extensive information on pedagogy, practice, and industry.

After initial chapters on "Musical Theatre History" and "Musical Genres," four guest-authored chapters appear. The first two are common chapters found in all of the *So You Want to Sing* books: "Singing and Voice Science" by Scott McCoy and "Vocal Health for Singers" by Wendy LeBorgne. The third, "Using Audio Enhancement Technology" by Matthew Edwards, appears in all of the *So You Want to Sing* books dedicated to genres that utilize microphones in performance. The fourth, "How Learning Works: An Introduction to Motor Learning Theory" by Lynn Holding,

made its first appearance in the nineteenth book of the series, *So You Want to Sing with Awareness*.

After these common chapters, Flynn authors the remaining pages, delving into the specifics of musical theatre singing. In the "Musical Theatre Vocal Pedagogy" chapter, she offers an abundance of information, explanations, and even exercises related to technical elements like "legit" singing, mixing, and belting, as well as how to execute genre-specific vocal styles like straight-tone singing and riffing.

Arguably, one unique chapter is "Musical Theatre Developmental Repertoire," in which Flynn identifies all the factors that influence how singers and teachers may select appropriate repertoire. This includes considering dramatic concerns (context of the song, lyrical content, racial and ethnic identity of the character, etc.), functional concerns (range, tessitura, registration requirements, etc.), musical concerns (musical ability, accompaniment), and stylistic concerns (including addressing the "silent obligation" many singers feel to sound a certain way). She then offers repertoire suggestions divided by registration (head voice/legit, traditional belt, contemporary belt, etc.) and skill level (beginner, intermediate, advanced). These categories are further divided into songs for higher voices and lower voices.

Another unique contribution is the chapter "Young Musical Theatre Performers," which addresses the development of youth and adolescent voices, technical challenges typically found among these transitional voices,



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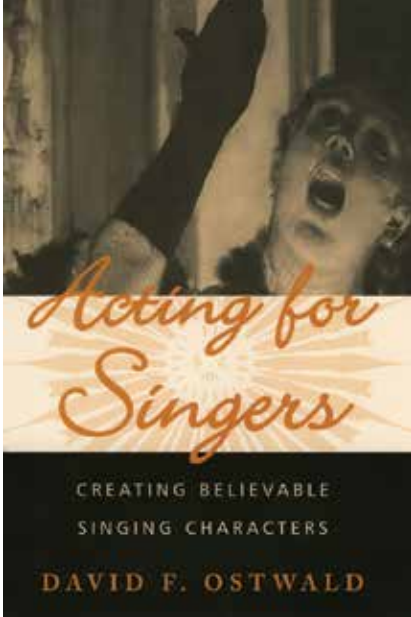
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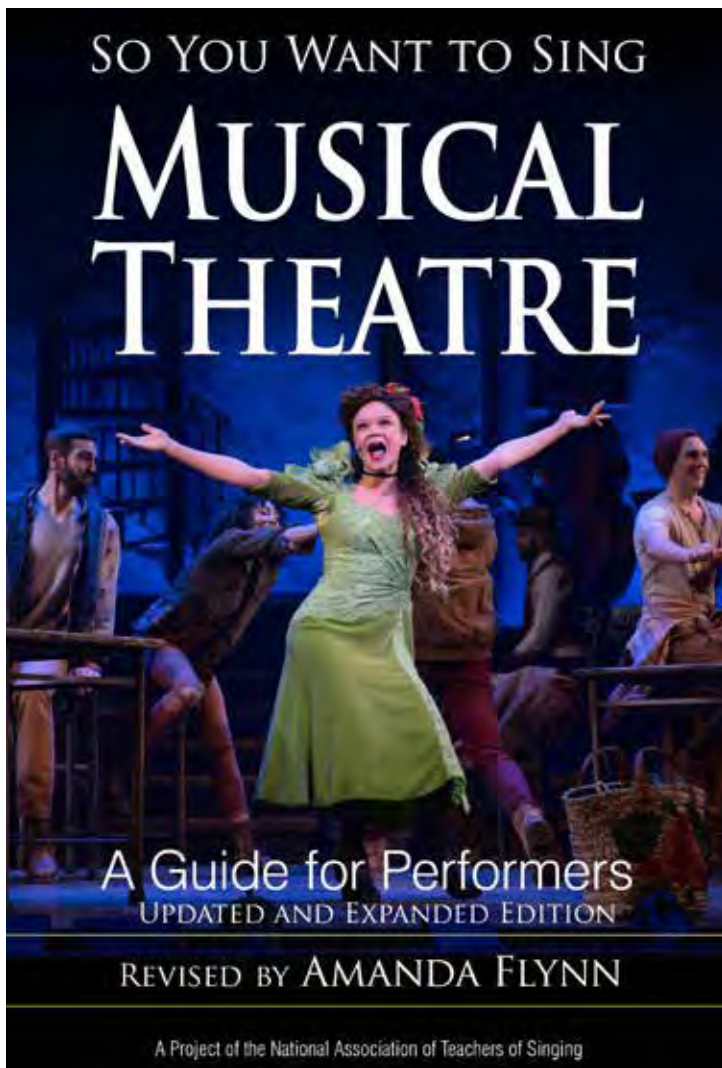
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Amanda Flynn

Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy

Authors Christopher Arneson and Kirsten S. Brown had a more niche primary audience in mind with their book *Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy: The Art and Science*. As they state in the introduction, their goal was to intentionally write for voice teachers who are working with beginning and intermediate musical theatre singers. This group of people may include young singers just starting to teach, voice teachers of classical singing who want to branch into musical theatre styles, or school educators who have been asked to coach singers in stage productions. They also write, “If you have students singing on Broadway, we’re very flattered that you’ve picked up our book, but it wasn’t meant for you.”

Arneson and Brown make an additional statement about what the book is *not*. Acknowledging the existence of many resources that provide an extensive variety of vocal exercises, they offer only a few exercises in each chapter, stating, “Providing an exhaustive list of vocalises was not our goal.” Instead, they hope to supply sufficient information to enable readers to make their own choices to effectively guide students through the “vocal, musical, and artistic wilderness.”

By not attempting to create an all-encompassing resource that is all things to all people, Arneson and Brown have freed themselves to zero in on the particular audience they intend to serve, which they ably accomplish.

The first three chapters—“The Science,” “The Art,” and “The Art of Teaching”—are described as “prerequisites” that establish necessary groundwork for the later chapters that delve into the specific areas of vocal technique, such as alignment, breathing, phonation, and registration, among others.

A unique aspect of their approach is the “Flowchart,” which presents the process of singing in a linear format: alignment leads to breathing, breathing leads to phonation, phonation leads to support, etc. They do this to “break up the science into meaningful chunks, but also to categorize areas of vocal competence, exercises, and even repertoire.” Although this tactic neatly divides the elements of singing

and keys to vocal health for young performers who sing within this genre.

Additional chapters provide information related to acting choices, audition protocols, and the physical demands unique to musical theatre singing and performing. Finally, a chapter titled “Musical Theatre Profiles” provides interviews with four industry professionals, exploring questions ranging from their background and experiences to advice they offer to performers and voice teachers.

In my 2014 interview with Karen Hall (“So You Want to Sing?” *Classical Singer*, December 2014), she acknowledges that the book she wrote as the first in the So You Want to Sing series—*So You Want to Sing Music Theater: A Guide for Professionals*—was a necessary, if incomplete, first step for the series. She also predicts the series would improve as additional contributors joined the process, saying, “It’s a good start that’s going to get a lot better.”

This observation has proven to be incredibly prescient. With the updated and expanded edition of *So You Want to Sing Musical Theatre*, Amanda Flynn has provided as thorough, current, and useful a resource as exists on the topic of musical theatre performance and pedagogy. Singers and teachers at all levels of experience and expertise will benefit from this tremendous volume.



Brian Manternach

into easily understood segments, they emphasize that vocal function is not actually linear, which is important. Instead, they make the more appropriate comparison of the many elements of voice being connected as part of a web.

They further drive this point home at the end of each chapter by tying each highlighted element of singing to those of previous chapters. For example, at the end of the chapter on articulation, there are sections titled “Articulation and Alignment,” “Articulation and Breathing,” “Articulation and Phonation,” and so on. This clever way of

organizing chapters facilitates in-depth comprehension of individual elements while always emphasizing the inherently holistic nature of singing.

Musical Theater Voice Pedagogy: The Art and Science admirably incorporates aspects of specific methodologies alongside best practices from established teachers, but it does so from a wide lens angle that always encourages readers to draw upon their own unique strengths as teachers while maintaining a student-centered approach. By creating such a well researched yet concise guide specifically designed for early- and mid-stage musical theatre voice teachers, Arneson and Brown have provided a much needed, unrivaled resource in the field.

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