
Book Review of *Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy: The Art and Science* by Christopher Arneson and Kirsten S. Brown. Edited by Scott McCoy. Inside View Press, 2023.

Matthew Frampton

New York University

Musical theatre singing demands a versatile mastery of skills across an ever-increasing stylistic palette, requiring performers to demonstrate equal comfortability in the legit classicism of productions like *My Fair Lady* as the contemporary commercial music-infused stylings of *& Juliet*. The music theatre pedagogue therefore requires equal specialism in building efficient technical function in their students for a wide variety of high-impact performance contexts. Whilst existing texts examine this intersection for the singing actor, few provide a roadmap for those at the pedagogic coalface—the voice teachers working with young performers in schools, programs, and studios. In *Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy: The Art and Science*, Christopher Arneson and Kirsten S. Brown seek to present a field guide for these teachers to navigate an evidence-based approach.

Through eleven chapters exploring contextual and technical foundations, the authors strive to integrate voice science and authentic musical theatre stylism in a student-centred framework for application. Arneson and Brown begin by outlining pedagogic purpose, employing voice science as a tool to empower teachers through a connection of physiological function to style and genre. The authors strengthen their contention through a historical overview of musical theatre conventions pre-1940 to present, highlighting industry shifts in terminology, style, and performer skillset as imperatives for an evidence-based pedagogical approach. They identify how aesthetic shifts have explicitly impacted vocal function—

delineating technical differences between “traditional and contemporary legit”, “belt”, and “pop/rock” sub-categories, divergences they argue demand an evidence-based approach to authenticity without compromising technical sustainability. The third chapter is notably dedicated to the art of voice teaching. As Arneson and Brown (2023) emphasise, “a great voice teacher is more than just a collection of vocal knowledge and effective exercises. They know both *what* to teach and *how* to teach it” (p. 16). Subsequently, they endorse the teacher as a pedagogic facilitator, establishing a framework of student-centred teaching to incite learner agency and creativity in their vocal development. Here, the authors provide replicable strategies for the applied voice studio, advocating for a holistic process that fosters student self-assessment to enhance intrinsic awareness for learning progression, an “anchor against the shifting tides of others’ perceptions” (p. 20). This leads to a brief primer on educational theory, correlating effective practice habits with positive reinforcement and providing strategies for repertoire selection, advice that the early-career teacher or those with burgeoning experience will appreciate. The authors subsequently endorse a pedagogic intent that scaffolds exploratory awareness, rather than didactic prescriptions of sensations. Equally, Arneson and Brown situate vocal pedagogy within the emotive engagement of the musical theatre artform, prioritising the connection of text and character to achieve artistry. Fostering learner independence, they position a

pathway of “technical prowess so that [students] may have vast choices about how to express sound,” developed in tandem with “creative freedom ... so [they] have the vision ... and the courage to make them” (Arneson & Brown, 2023, p. 28).

Providing authorial expertise in this treatise are Arneson’s credentials as a pedagogue and vocologist, in addition to his contributions to vocal pedagogy research and discourse. Complementing this, Brown’s contribution harnesses the perspective of the early-career voice teacher, influencing the text’s nuanced approach to inclusiveness and wellbeing. Despite the pair’s classical and operatic specialism, this reinforces their textual thesis of physiological function for genre application. Furthermore, Arneson and Brown’s explicit approach to vocal pedagogy synthesises seminal texts across both classical and contemporary traditions, including those by Elizabeth Benson, Jo Estill, Richard Miller, Mary Saunders-Barton, and Norman Spivey. Each chapter is prefaced by a quote from an eminent voice pedagogue, bounding technical discussion through a synthesis of evidence-based methodologies and approaches.

In their evidence-based approach to vocal mechanism, Arneson and Brown posit an understanding of voice science where “learning to teach new styles or genres is a matter of connecting its sounds and conventions to what you already know about vocal function” (p. 1). The remaining chapters are guided by this maxim, with the authors organising their technical discourse through a “flowchart of vocal process” addressing alignment, breathing, phonation, support, registration, resonance, and articulation. These are further subdivided by sections covering anatomical function and technical influence on aesthetic in musical theatre subgenres. In each chapter’s final section, a synthesis of this discourse offers specific technical adjustments to create stylistic authenticity and potential inefficiencies to be aware of. Notably, the authors emphasise the interconnection between technical foci, incorporating additional material on the current technique’s interaction with each preceding area.

This defined yet integrative structure guides the reader through a mechanism-driven approach, exemplified in the explicit delineation between “breathing” for inhalation and balanced “support” through inspiratory and expiratory muscular antagonism. This conceptual separation seeks to address the terminological ambiguity that often exists in such terms regarding respiration—strengthening the authors’ argument for a flexible,

dynamic mechanism. The authors’ viewpoint is reinforced through their acknowledgement of the unique conventions in the musical theatre artform—including frequent use of the speech range and considerations of amplification—highlighting the need for a variable support technique that “serves all the styles, sounds, and types of expression required by the genre” (p. 68). In pursuit of alignment, the authors similarly emphasise this condition of flexibility, being “energised and ready for movement” (p. 84) to achieve functional singing posture even while pursuing the heightened physicality or dance required in musical theatre context. The authors adopt an equally illustrative tactic in their discussion of resonance, finding clarity in linking timbral flexibility to formant frequencies as “filters” that may enhance character expression and identity. Their discussion highlights tenants of speech level singing and twang to assist reader understanding of a non-linear source-filter approach towards optimising acoustical power.

While this discourse provides elucidation on evidence-based process, the average reader may struggle with practical application. However, each chapter incorporates exemplar exercises to illustrate technical adjustments, forming a toolbox for teacher application in developing student awareness. Ranging from imitating a kitten for cricothyroid dominance, medialising vowels for resonance optimisation, or strategising preparation for belting, these exercises are not exhaustive, but they still provide a solid foundation on which to build teacher confidence and expertise. While Arneson and Brown acknowledge there are many pathways to aesthetic authenticity, they recurrently advocate for lyric and emotional intent as the gateway for functional, expressive singing in the musical theatre genre. The text concludes by discussing vocal health, highlighting the voice teacher’s role in guiding physical wellness while cultivating resilience and self-identity. Importantly, the authors employ the inclusive descriptors treble and modal voices, prioritising useability for all aspiring performers. Arneson and Brown equally highlight the role of the voice teacher as mentor and guide, nurturing student resilience and authentic identity as performers against the external pressures of the industry. This is a timely challenge for emerging teachers, as they seek to explicitly facilitate this inclusion within their studios, ensuring each student is “seen as a whole person, not defined or limited by their appearance ... and help them craft performances that more authentically reveal who they are” (p. 133). A final advisory on selecting collegiate programs and an

appendix providing adjustments for rough vocal effects highlight authorial awareness of the increased versatility required from the musical theatre performer.

This text's contribution in the current pedagogical landscape may be examined by its fulfilment of purpose to its audience: elucidating evidence-based and student-centred music theatre vocal pedagogy. Throughout the text, Arneson and Brown strive for accessibility without compromising scientific rigour, skilfully integrating voice and pedagogical research to develop a strategic guide. An egalitarian gateway for knowledge acquisition, the authors seek to expand the skillset of the vocal pedagogue starting their own voice studio, the music educator working in a school or university, or the performer seeking greater edification. Undoubtedly, this work will become essential reading in equipping emerging music theatre pedagogues to empower those they teach to be technically efficient, creative, and expressive performers.

REFERENCES

Arneson, C., & Brown, K. (2023). *Musical theatre voice pedagogy: The art and science*. Inside View Press.

BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Frampton is a singing-actor, educator, and voice pedagogue with experience spanning musical theatre and contemporary commercial music contexts. Originally from Melbourne, Matthew is currently completing his Master of Music in Vocal Performance (Musical Theatre) and Advanced Post-Master's Certificate in Vocal Pedagogy at New York University. Previous studies include a Master of Secondary Education and a Bachelor of Music (Monash University). In addition to his previous role as Head of Performing Arts at an independent secondary school, Matthew is the vocal producer of Starbound Musical Theatre, a summer intensive program connecting adolescents with professionals in the music theatre industry. In 2020, Matthew received the Australian National Excellence in Teaching Award and the Early Career Teacher's Award (NEiTA Foundation) for his work in music education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Matthew is currently an Adjunct Instructor of Voice at New York University.