

Contemporary Legit Musical Theatre Singing

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Component 1

The Project Portfolio

Rationale

As a collegiate voice instructor, my job is to prepare aspiring musical theatre performers to audition, and ultimately work, in the current musical theatre world. In order for students to be successful in this generation of musical theatre, they need to be vocally proficient in a variety of genres within the contemporary commercial music (CCM), or non-classical, style of singing (Lister, 2013; Green, et al., 2014; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; Moore, 2024). Musical theatre singing has and continues to evolve, influenced by the trends in popular music and the necessity of holding the attention of the audience (Roll, 2016; Bourne and Kenny, 2016; Moniz, 2024; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). One of the byproducts of the evolution of musical theatre singing is the change in the way we expect older musicals to sound (Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; Becker and Watson, 2025). Golden age singing has long been an important part of the Broadway landscape, and thus, part of the training for students of musical theatre; however, the sound expectations for this genre are different in our modern era than they were at the time of these shows' composition (Lister, 2013; Moore, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023).

I have spent a great deal of time in my studio over the years convincing students that golden age repertoire and technique are important, and that we will sing golden age music differently than what they have heard on recordings of original early 1900s performances (Kayes and Welch, 2017; Becker and Watson, 2025). This prompted questions in me as a voice practitioner that became the basis of my research. What is contemporary legit singing? How do I best prepare my students to sing golden age music in the modern era? Are there vocal neuroscience advances that should inform my practice to prepare students to be successful in this genre, in this generation?

Planned Program of Study

Aims and objectives

My aims are

- to find out if current research agrees with my hypothesis that we are singing legit style differently than performers of the golden age time period, and that our collegiate musical theatre pedagogy for legit singing should be informed by current Broadway practice and advances in the neuroscience of the voice (Becker and Watson, 2025)

- to enhance my knowledge and teaching of legit style musical theatre with specific and effective strategies that act within the context of the current musical theatre climate (Moore, 2017)
- to examine the implications these strategies should have on teaching both the sound qualities of the style and the vocal neuroscience that is available at this time (Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023)
- to bring clarification to the terminology, necessity, and pedagogy of contemporary legit singing (Lebowitz and Baken, 2011).

To execute this, my objectives are to

- define legit singing
- research the history and implications of golden age singing
- evaluate legit singing as it compares to golden age singing and contemporary musical theatre styles
- investigate the importance of teaching legit style to the modern student, while considering the advances in the neuroscience of the voice and their pedagogical implications on the collegiate approach to legit singing
- add to the broader knowledge base in the area of contemporary legit singing and support further growth in this emerging field.

Learning outcomes

I spent time in previous modules strengthening my vocal pedagogy around contemporary musical theatre belting. As a result of that study, I have a robust pedagogical tool kit when it comes to assessing and strengthening a student's ability to be a successful belter. For this module, I wanted to shift my attention to the legit voice in order to become a more well-rounded practitioner.

I found it interesting that one of the repeated barriers present for students in my practice regarding their initial lack of motivation around learning legit style singing was their distaste for the timbre and stylistic choices they heard on golden age recordings. This sent me into an investigation surrounding the current terminology and stylistic approaches to legit singing in hopes that I could have the following learning outcomes

- remove barriers for students around singing legit style repertoire
- increase my knowledge and understanding in teaching legit singing, including vocal exercise strategies and practical application to legit repertoire
- excite students about legit singing in our seemingly belt dominate musical theatre climate.

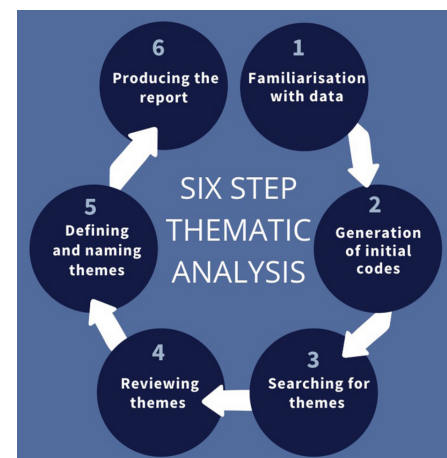
Methodology

Positionality and Worldview

I have been teaching voice for almost two decades, the last 8 years of which have been as a musical theatre specialist at a university in Southwest Virginia where I teach private lessons and masterclasses to BA and BFA Musical Theatre and Theatre Performance majors, along with the occasional directing student or theatre minor. This positions me as both a practitioner researcher and insider researcher, both of which have implications around the necessity of avoiding bias and maintaining objectivity in my review (Poulton, 2023). My collegiate teaching experience has all taken place at one small liberal arts university, and while I love our program and think very highly of our education and our graduates, I acknowledge that my perspective is limited to one institution.

I initially chose to use a narrative literature review because of its story format, but as I studied, I found the semi-systematic approach to be beneficial for building rigor while maintaining flexibility (Rowe, 2014; Juntunen and Lehenkari, 2021). I appreciated the ability to build my positionality as I went, and to focus my findings on the research outcomes and strategic applications to my practice while synthesizing my discoveries to build a knowledge base of how legit singing has evolved into its current form (Rowe, 2014). Further, using the semi-systematic review model allowed me to research in a manner that built knowledge while leaving room for creativity and interpretation as I sought to apply my research to my practice (Juntunen and Lehenkari, 2021). This aligned with my constructivist worldview, allowing knowledge to be built and applied as data emerged from my lived experience in the studio; those discoveries then fueled my engagement in the research process and my desire to learn more (Mohajan, 2020). Operating under my constructivist worldview organically allowed me the benefit acquiring knowledge without separating it from my stance as a practitioner (Gaus, 2017). I was able to make direct applications in my practice through experimental interaction in my studio, then return to the research to deepen the scope of my aims and objectives as I continued the process of seeking and defining knowledge (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012).

To synthesize data on the neuroscience of the voice and its practical applications to teaching contemporary legit singing in the modern voice studio, I used Braun and Clarke's six step thematic analysis and will discuss five themes that emerged from my research (Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield, 2022).



(McInerney, et al., 2022)

Search Strategy

I began my research process using the online library of University of Wales Trinity Saint David, berry picking key terms like “legit singing,” “golden age singing,” and “modern golden age singing,” (Bates, 1989). My rationale for this research included a process of inclusion and exclusion criteria based on relevance to my research hypothesis and usefulness in my practice (van Wee and Banister, 2024). The literature used in this research was filtered to ensure that all literature was peer reviewed and full-text. I found that the word “evolution” was a beneficial addition to my search criteria, and so I began to systematically expand my search by adding “evolution” to some of my previous searches, for instance, “evolution of the legit voice,” “evolution of golden age musicals and revivals.” I expanded my narrative by searching for “terminology of the legit voice,” “collegiate pedagogy for legit singing,” and “vocal science of legit singing,” with 2020 and beyond as my search criteria. Though the literature was extremely limited for such a small and recent time window, I was able to expand the dates by using backwards citation chaining, first reading the most current relevant articles that were available, and then using their reference lists to help locate other relevant articles (Juntunen and Lehenkari, 2021). I ended up with a research base that spanned roughly from 2014 to 2025 for this section of the paper. I found a pearl when I searched for “evolution of the Broadway mix” in the form of an article about musical theatre singing using mixed registration (Schlosser, et al., 2006). McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes (2025) engaged in a very recent study of female Broadway performers and their personal experiences with the musical theatre mix, and indirectly, their legit technique. Their study provided perspective on how the Broadway sound has changed in recent decades. I was able to use snowballing and backwards citation chaining based on their research to expand my own research base (Juntunen and Lehenkari, 2021). Finally, I looked for peer reviewed literature without date restrictions to find the historical context of golden age singing and to research the style and timbre of the productions that took place in 1930s-1960s.

The body of literature I discovered proved to be relevant and credible material from experts in their fields. I went into this research process with the hypothesis that legit singing in the modern era is different in sound quality and in vocal production than golden age singing, and that current collegiate training should reflect these advances. I found that the literature had the potential to support and grow that idea (Lister, 2013; Becker and Watson, 2025; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). This furthered my intuition that change is needed in collegiate musical theatre programs in language, procedure, and very practically, in our audition preparation and repertoire books (Moore, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023). This fueled my desire to assimilate research that would provide answers for what should actually be required of current musical theatre students within the legit sub-genre, and gave shape to my

aim of being better equipped to prepare the current musical theatre student to enter the modern musical theatre realm.

Component 2

The Project Report: Review

Introduction

This literature review first seeks to define contemporary legit musical theatre singing and evaluate it against other styles within the musical theatre genre. Then, I will discuss the historical implications of golden age musicals and their impact on golden age singing in the modern era, followed by discussion around the evolution of legit pedagogy in the voice studio and its implications on the modern musical theatre student, the voice practitioner and collegiate training programs. Next, I will investigate the neuroscience of the voice and the themes that emerged from my analysis of the literature, along with their implications for contemporary legit pedagogy. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of my research and draw conclusions for my practice and my MA study.

What is contemporary legit musical theater singing?

In musical theater voice lessons at the collegiate level, current practice suggests training our students to prepare a wide variety of styles including but not limited to legit or “golden age” singing, contemporary musical theater singing, contemporary musical theater belting, rock, pop, and jazz (Lister, 2013; Moore, 2024). All of these styles have evolved over time, particularly in the last 20-30 years with the addition of pop sounds and rock musicals (Roll, 2016; Edwin and Cafaro, 2021; Moniz, 2024). While many experts agree that golden age musical theater is limited to compositions written in the early 1900s, it’s also clear that the stylistic expectations around performing golden age music have also evolved (Simonson, 2025; Becker and Watson, 2025; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). This poses the question, what is legit musical theater singing in the modern era? This research paper seeks to define legit musical theater singing in the contemporary age, discuss the evolution of golden age singing, and look at the pedagogical implications of the advances in the neuroscience of the voice on teaching legit singing to the modern musical theater student.

Definition of legit musical theater singing

The term “legit singing” is the musical theatre industry’s shorthand for the term “legitimate singing” and generally signifies a round resonant tone with consistent vibrato throughout the phrase (Green, et al., 2014). The sound quality of legit singing is described as being close to a classical sound, but with a smaller range of pitch and the inclusion of lower notes and

conversational singing due to use of amplification of the voice (Kayes and Welch, 2017). Green, et al. (2014) agree that though musical theatre repertoire of this style may use a lower tessitura and more restricted range than one would expect to find in operatic repertoire, the legit vocal quality has a distinctly classical timbre. Roll (2014) confirms that legit singing is stylistically similar to classical singing and further, classifies legit singing as a vocal technique that is head voice or cricothyroid dominant in function. Bourne and Kenny (2016) describe legit singing as a warm tone, lyrical, but with a speech like component, projected, with clear textual comprehension and storytelling.

The early instances of legit singing in musical theatre can be found in the repertoire of golden age musicals (Greschner, 2011). Examples of golden age legit singing would include what we would expect stylistically from the original early 1900s productions of famous shows like *White Christmas* or *The Music Man*, more specifically from ingenue roles like Laurey in *Oklahoma*, or Nellie in *South Pacific*. Moore (2017) suggests in her study of non-classical teaching approaches for undergraduate musical theater training that the significant composers in this category include Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Bernstein, Loesser, Styne, Bock and Harnick, Adler and Ross, Lane, Wilson, Rome, Ross, Merrill, Porter, and Berlin. These shows and their composers are still considered by musical theatre historians to be the pinnacle of Broadway's artistic achievement, and are still looked to as the quintessential composers of musical theatre (Greschner, 2011; Moore, 2017; Rostosky, 2017).

This distinctiveness of the legit style coupled with the significance of the long renowned composers of the golden age provide significant evidence for the collegiate voice teacher that legit singing still has an important place in musical theatre repertoire and thus, our training programs need to be equipped to teach this quality (Bourne and Kenny, 2016). Voice teachers need to have a knowledge base of the literature from this early 1900s time period and be prepared to help students find repertoire that challenges and educates, then becomes demonstrative of students' abilities in this style (Moore, 2017). This can be problematic in the studio, because students are often reluctant to study legit music. Frequently, my students are so consumed with contemporary literature that legit becomes an afterthought or a style they only pursue because it is a course requirement. This issue is further complicated by recordings from original productions; listening to more current productions or revivals, it is perceivable to students that modern productions do not use the same tone quality heard in early 1900s recordings (Lister, 2013; Becker and Watson, 2025). The implications of the changes in sound present a significant challenge to vocal pedagogy (Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023, Moniz, 2024; Simonson, 2025). It is clear that expectations for legit sound have evolved, but

defining those expectations and the terminology that surrounds them may make preparing students to audition and book roles challenging (Lebowitz and Baken, 2011; Lister, 2013; Moore, 2017, Moniz, 2024; d'Amato and Puccinellio, 2024).

Evaluation of legit singing as compared to belt, classical, and CCM styles

LoVerti pioneered the term contemporary commercial music or CCM, replacing the term “non-classical” by categorizing any music of a more popular orientation under the umbrella of this new genre (Green, et al., 2016; White, 2017). Legit musical theatre singing, though stylistically the closest musical theatre genre to classical singing, would be included in her definition of CCM (Moore, 2017; White, 2017). It may be helpful, however, since much of the research in the musical theater sphere focuses on the belting phenomenon (Kayes and Welch, 2017; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025; Rudisch, et al., 2025), to consider defining legit singing by contrasting it to other contemporary styles, like mixing and belting (White, 2017; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). Becker and Watson (2025) did a comparative study on legit singing versus belt, specifically as it relates to vibrato use. They assert that while more research is needed on these styles and the sub-genres within them, one of the chief distinctions between the legit and belt styles is a difference in vocal quality; the timbre of the legit style is judged to be more in line with the lighter quality of the western-operatic tradition for which the head voice is the dominant physiological function (Becker and Watson, 2025). Bourne and Kenny (2016) concur, describing legit as lighter in sound than belt, and further, state that legit uses different glottal and resonance productions than belt. Henrich uses what is perhaps a more current terminology that classifies registration dichotomy by surface closure of the vocal folds; he describes the registration used in earlier musicals as mechanism 2, or a glottal configuration using elongated and thinned vocal folds (Zuim, Stewart, and Titze, 2024). The implication of the distinctions provided by the experts suggest that because both legit and belt are needed for the modern musical theatre performer, the voice instructor will need pedagogical approaches specific to legit and belt styles and further, will need to be fluent in assessing student needs and providing tools to strengthen students' abilities across the varying spectrum of musical theatre repertoire (Moore, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; d'Amato and Puccinellio, 2024).

While belting seems to be in stark contrast to legit singing, a recent study of laryngeal adjustments claims that the vocal mechanisms responsible for belting and legit singing can be mixed or blended; this study evidenced that crossing the passagi may not imply shifting registers, but rather provide access to a bridge between the two styles (Young, 2019). Though

the term mix has varying definitions across the spectrum of musical theater literature, for purposes of this paper, we will define mix as singing using elements of head voice and chest voice at the same time (Roll, 2014; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). Mix is a relatively new technique that allows the singer to produce a sound similar to belting, but in a less taxing, more physically efficient manner, or a sound similar to legit, but with more clarity and power (Roll, 2014; Bourne and Kenny, 2016; White, 2017; Young, 2019). Mix is a speech styled mechanism that can be carried up and over the second passagio into the typically head dominant range or brought into the lower, typically chest dominant range (Moore, 2024). It serves to create unity across the singers' entire vocal range (Bourne and Kenny, 2016; Young, 2019; McAllen, Forbes and Hughes, 2025).

Mixing, though new and with varying definitions among voice scientists, performers, and pedagogues, has changed and modernized the tone quality of legit singing (Bourne and Kenny, 2016). It has both opened doors and contributed to the growing vocal demands of the musical theatre performer (Freeman, Green, and Sargent, 2015; Zuim, Stewart, and Titze, 2024). Congruently, as vocal demands have evolved and increased for the singer, the demands of vocal instruction have evolved and increased (Moore, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; Moore, 2024). If we want to adequately prepare students for professional musical theatre auditions, and ultimately work, we have to be prepared to instruct all of these sub-genres and adjust our pedagogy to include the evolving demands of the industry (Roll, 2014; Green, et al., 2014; Moore, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023). Voice teachers need to be educated in the styles and terminology of the modern musical theater world, even if this means seeking understanding through studying definitions that are not necessarily in agreement (Weekly and LoVerti, 2009; Roll, 2016; Kayes and Welch, 2017; Freeman, Green, and Sargent, 2015; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025).

Historical Evolution of the Golden Age

Experts agree that musical theatre styles are separated into two categories, golden age, which spans roughly from the late 1930s to the 1960s, and post-golden age (Guest, 1993; Edwin, 2009; Rostosky, 2019; Simonson, 2025). Golden age singing is often characterized by a romanticized exploration of the emotions the characters are experiencing, supported by tone and rhyme schemes that on the surface appear simplistic, but in performance grant depth and clarity (Peck, 2009). Golden age traditions also included an expected structure that used song as a means to further the story or investigate an idea (Sansom, 2010). Golden age tradition has a high artistic level while maintaining a wholesome quality that is free of the use of gimmicks and shock value (Guest, 1993). While revues, vaudeville acts, and other musical entertainment

options of the time often dropped popular music into their shows for purposes of financial gain or to provide comedic relief, musical theatre lyricists and composers were committed to the cultivation of plot driven songs that were part of the action (Peck, 2009). This created an integrated and cohesive book musical experience around a unified vision with controlled interaction of book, songs, and dance (Rostosky, 2019).

While the term golden age singing is often used interchangeably with legit singing, they each have some of their own distinctions (Freeman, Green, and Sargent, 2015; Lister, 2013; Becker and Watson, 2025). Golden age singing is derived from the Western European classical tradition and gained traction with the popularity of the operetta (Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny, 2011). It is marked by long legato lines, use of vibrato, mouth shape, rounded vowels, and a balanced, warm tone (Edwin, 2009; Bourne and Kenny, 2016; Moore, 2017). Like legit singing, golden age is closely linked stylistically to classical singing, though lower in tessitura than opera (Edwin, 2009). Unlike legit singing, golden age style was used in the early 1900s but is rarely heard in the current musical theatre landscape (Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny, 2011; Lister, 2013; Moore, 2017; Becker and Watson, 2025).

Rostosky (2019) suggests that 1943-1964 saw the death of the golden age fueled by the impact of amplification and the influence of the cultural climate surrounding the end of the war. The trajectory of the plot and even the style of musicals in these decades reflects the impact of war torn audiences on the art (Greschner, 2011). As the golden age faded, the 1970s brought concept musicals without linear plots, jukebox musicals that included rock music, and experimental productions where directors asserted more control and designers went more avant-garde (Roll, 2016; Kayes and Welch, 2017; Rostosky, 2019). This shift, though possibly indirectly, also impacted the trajectory of golden age style singing (Sansom, 2010; Lister, 2013; Moore, 2024).

Golden Age Singing in the Modern Era

Golden age musicals that are remounted following the original production are referred to as revivals (Weekly, 2023). Revivals become so popular on Broadway in the 1970s that a Tony Award category was introduced for “Best Revival of a Play or Musical” in 1977 (Rostosky, 2019). These productions seem to be fueled by either nostalgia for the original show or the desire for radical changes that allow designers to create a new vision (Sansom, 2010). Golden age revivals mounted closer to the actual time period often honored the original productions with nods like full pit orchestration, similar choreography, and often even copied staging and scenic design, while more modern revivals often seek to re-imagine the show or bring shock value to

the audience (Rostosky, 2019). Interestingly, in effort to prevent these extremes and protect the original vision of the show, Rodgers & Hammerstein: An Imagem Company, was created to monitor regional and amateur level productions by creating a culture of replication that would honor the intent of the original production (Rostosky, 2019).

Current revivals often include key changes, opt-ups, or other modern techniques meant to capture the attention of the present-day theatre audience by mirroring the progression taking place in popular music (Lister, 2013; Moore, 2024). Revivals can also detour from the original golden age stylistic expectations by incorporating elements pulled from non-musical drama, thus bringing a more eclectic and vibrant feel to the art form (Sansom, 2010). Further, revivals often address issues with the book revolving around race or gender (Rostosky, 2019). This highlights a need for evaluation for the contemporary legit singer and instructor and invites curiosity (McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). If we are mirroring current popular music trends, is it enough to sing the song as written, or do students need to be prepared to include trends like opt-ups and riffs even in older repertoire? Will one audition cut sung identically for two different directors be applauded by one and thought too much by another? Students and practitioners may have challenges to navigate in terms of the expectations around golden age standards and the terminology that surround it (Lebowitz and Baken, 2011; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025).

Practical Teaching and Pedagogy

Evolution of Voice Pedagogy

At one time, being a crossover artist implied a classically trained artist venturing into non-classical performance repertoire, but in today's world, being competent in multiple musical styles is expected for professional singers; this expectation is rightly beginning to impact training programs and academic institutions in many areas including repertoire requirements for students and education for professors (Weekly and LoVerti, 2009; Moore, 2017; d'Amato and Puccinelli, 2024). Correspondingly, Lister (2013) suggests that, "The modern Broadway soprano should be educated about her lineage but evolve with the times. And the training of musical theater singers needs to reflect both the history and the ongoing development of the genre," (p. 39). While the bel canto tradition prioritizes purity of tone and vowel-driven legato, vocal traditions of the past are being supplemented by the direct, forward sound aesthetic associated with classical musical theatre style (d'Amato and Puccinelli, 2024; Simonson, 2025). Becker and Watson (2025) assert that there is an audible difference in the 2013 revival of Cinderella when compared to the original golden age production, suggesting that many modern golden age revivals are using contemporary musical theater technique, including mix and belt.

Simonson (2025) states that even in the context of revivals, tessituras have gotten higher and vocal demands have increased. His research on the evolution of musical theatre voice classification evidences the broader vocal ranges that are expected of current performers of golden age repertoire (Simonson, 2025). Moore's study of unique vulnerabilities of today's musical theatre performer (2024) agrees with Simonson, and further describes the ever-increasing requirements for Broadway singers while investigating the compensatory habits that can emerge in performers, such as over-pressurized phonation and muscle tension. Students and professionals alike can run the risk of injury if they pursue these demanding styles and performance schedules without the intervention of a qualified voice practitioner (Moore, 2024). As a result of the increased vocal requirements for Broadway singers, the literature agrees that training programs for emerging artists, particularly at the university level, would be wise to adapt, incorporating technique that supports both the scope and sustainability necessary for the modern Broadway artist (Bourne and Kenny, 2016; Young, 2019; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; Moore, 2024).

Implications for Collegiate Programs

In the broader scope of collegiate training programs, current programming must be evaluated against changing audition requirements and the widening scope of musical theatre repertoire (d'Amato and Puccinelli, 2024). Formal voice education is deeply rooted in the bel canto style, but that alone is insufficient to the modern student's education (Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; Sherwood, 2023) the contemporary voice teacher must have technical and historical knowledge of the demands of musical theater to effectively teach the contemporary voice major (Moore, 2017) Green, et al. further state that adequate preparation for aspiring young performers within the current musical theatre job market that helps performers maintain healthy production of the sounds currently required by the industry may demand that new singing styles be taught and integrated into programs that previously were only teaching classical styles (2014). Further, collegiate programs should consider adapting in response to advances in scientific knowledge of the voice (Moore, 2017; Sherwood, 2023). This may require voice instructors to be willing to continue their education to stay current in repertoire requirements and science based technique (Weekly and LoVerti, 2009; Kjeldgaard, 2019; d'Amato and Puccinelli, 2024).

Implications for the Voice Teacher

More specifically for the voice teacher, modern voice pedagogy should integrate pedagogical tradition along with emerging techniques that aid in the achievement of better vocal results in

less time, thus eliminating extra vocal effort, minimizing constriction, and finding successful phonation as efficiently as possible (White, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; Sherwood, 2023).

Bourne and Kenny (2016) found that while the majority of teachers represented in their study taught breathing for belt and legit the same way, the surveyed teachers disagreed on registration with regards to teaching and terminology. While the teachers disagreed on some of the registration and terminology, they agreed that musical theater is a demanding genre and requires training in style, physiology, and acoustic properties in order to ensure a safe and sustainable pedagogy (Weekly and LoVerti, 2009; Bourne and Kenny, 2016; Becker and Watson, 2025).

The literature suggests that though the pedagogical approaches to teaching golden age and legit singing might still be linked, perhaps it is time for voice teachers to separate golden age and legit repertoire (Moore, 2017; Moore, 2024). It may be time to examine new applications for traditional voice techniques that honor the evolution of the sound aesthetic musical theatre has experienced since the golden age, identifying the areas we have previously discussed as technique that we now know are actually style (d' Amato and Puccinelli, 2024).

Implications for Terminology

The terminology of golden age and legit singing presents complications for the contemporary singer and instructor as Broadway singers, vocal pedagogues, and voice scientists rather distinctly disagree on the vocabulary of vocal pedagogy, particularly in regards to evolving contemporary techniques like the musical theatre mix (Green, et al., 2014; Roll, 2016; Moore, 2024; Becker and Watson, 2025; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). Lebowitz and Baken (2011) sought to bring clarity to current musical theatre practice by defining the physiological and acoustic terms specifically of the belt. Their examination stated that terminology of the voice can be both very controversial and vaguely defined, and further, that the value of a term lies in the extent to which its meaning can be agreed upon by scholars with differing opinions (Lebowitz and Baken, 2011). While potentially challenging for the voice teacher, this suggests that continuing education is needed to stay current in the instruction of musical theatre terminology for the contemporary legit singer (Weekly and LoVerti, 2009; d' Amato and Puccinelli, 2024; Becker and Watson, 2025; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025).

Audition Implications

While revivals often continue to include traditional legit songs, both revivals and modern musicals are trending towards modern popular music sounds, blurring the lines of classical and modern styles and requiring the contemporary Broadway singer to be adept in multiple genres (Lister, 2013; Freeman, Green, and Sargent, 2015; Moniz, 2024). In their study of audition trends on Broadway, (Green, et al., 2014) categorized audition notices from the 2013 listings in *Backstage Magazine* for performers entering the workforce by styles that included legit, traditional musical theatre, and contemporary musical theatre. Their category for legit auditions includes *The Light in the Piazza*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *The Phantom of the Opera* (Green, et al., 2014). All three of these shows describe their audition requirements as legit style singing, but were written in the contemporary period (Moore, 2017). Their study also found that legit audition postings were the only ones to reference the fach system, eg, “coloratura soprano” and “lyric baritone” (Green, et al., 2014; Moore, 2024). Further study of audition notices for legit roles a decade later can be found in Moore’s research on the evolving vocal demands of the musical theater singer (2024). She found that while legit roles were still the only audition notices that included classifications that match classical singing like soprano, countertenor, or baritone, golden age musicals were not the only instances where legit vocal quality was requested (Moore, 2024). These notices further described the requested legit style as classically based sound, linked to head register but brighter and twangier; the legit category comprised 59 of 1238 total job postings 5% (Green, et al., 2014). This supports the idea that legit and golden age are styles not necessarily the same (Lister, 2013; Moore, 2017; Becker and Watson, 2025). Based on Green’s audition information, perhaps better language for audition categories in our students’ repertoire books would be legit (of any production year), traditional musical theatre (golden age), contemporary musical theatre (including mix and belt), and pop/rock. Similarly, Moore (2017), based on her research around teaching CCM to today’s undergraduate voice major, suggests categories of operetta, jazz influenced, golden age, contemporary pop, and contemporary classical for the modern audition book.

Neuroscience of the Voice

Perhaps the most significant evolution within vocal pedagogy involves the study of the neuroscience of the voice (Kayes and Bartlett, 2024). Neuroscience of the voice is a rapidly evolving field with very practical applications for the voice instructor (Greschner, 2019; Erickson, 2022, Kays and Bartlett, 2024). Being current in this field allows voice teachers to wisely use their instructional time with students, and beyond that, to teach students to maximize their practice time (Kjeldgaard, 2019). Though the foundation of singing mirrors that of speech, potentially making it seem simplistic, singing is one of the body’s most complex behaviors as it

requires the cooperation of over 100 respiratory, laryngeal, and vocal tract muscles (Maxfield, 2019; Erickson, 2022). Vocalizations like those used for singing are created by a combination of signals produced by the larynx that move through the vocal tract, filtered by the articulation of the tongue and lips (Belyk, Johnson, and Katz, 2018). Advances in neuroscience provide information about the anatomic and acoustic aspects of vocal production that were mere hypotheses just years ago; these insights have the potential to positively impact the training available to the contemporary legit singer, with direct implications to both the singer and the voice instructor (Greschner, 2019; Erickson, 2022). Using Braun and Clarke's six step thematic analysis, themes of auditory input, repetition and scaffolding, relationship, physical movement, and rest emerged from the literature (Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield, 2022).

Theme One: Auditory Input

Auditory input allows students to grow their capacity to imitate pitches, rhythmic patterns, and stylistic markings through sensorimotor learning (Erickson, 2022; Esmergül and Önder, 2022). Further, audiation, or the perception and assimilation of musical pitches inside your head, activates vocal muscles without actually singing, allowing for rehearsal to take place within the brain with or without sound production (Erickson, 2022; Çenberci and Tufan, 2025). Erickson's neuroscience based practice strategies go so far as to suggest that students not attempt to sing until they can hear the song excerpt or exercise in their heads (Erickson, 2022). Gordan's contributions to music education research through his theory on children's music aptitude and learning, emphasize auditory experiences as a prerequisite to musical literacy both in tonalities and rhythmic patterns (Çenberci and Tufan, 2025). This has direct applications to the contemporary legit singer in regards to learning music, practicing efficiently, maximizing lesson time, and grasping the hallmarks of legit stylistic expression like legato line, phrasing, storytelling, and vibrato (Sansom, 2010; Moore, 2017; Young, 2019; Erickson, 2022).

Theme Two: Repetition and Scaffolding

Vocal learning can be achieved efficiently in the repetition of a small amount of music at a time, using the scaffolding technique of focusing on one new task before layering another (Kjeldgaard, 2019; Erickson, 2022). For the contemporary legit singer, this might look like giving the prefrontal cortex the task of speaking in rhythm, then singing the correct pitches in conjunction with the rhythm, then layering stylistic characteristics of legit singing one at a time (Sansom, 2010; Kjeldgaard, 2019; Young, 2019).

Theme Three: Relationship

The psychosocial relationship between teacher and student is important to include, as attentiveness, feedback, and reward from the tutor during the learning process creates dopamine. This neurotransmitter is involved in student motivation, meaning that a healthy instructional dynamic that welcomes questions and is free of excessive stress and criticism aids in the process of vocal learning (Kjeldgaard, 2019; Erickson, 2022). A holistic music education that allows students an active role in the construction of their education promotes social and emotional skills in secure relationship with their tutor and motivates the success their overall musical development (Çenberci and Tufan, 2025). Historically, voice lessons have been taught in the master teacher tradition consistent with the bel canto approach, with expectations for teacher to have absolute authority over their proteges, so the contemporary legit student and instructor are largely impacted by the neuroscience based shift to a student-led, constructivist approach to voice education (Sherwood, 2023; Moore, 2024; Çenberci and Tufan, 2025).

Theme Four: Physical Movement

Teachers have long used movement as part of music instruction (Erickson, 2023; Çenberci and Tufan, 2025). New research on the motor theory of vocal learning confirms that using the limb motor pathway simultaneously to the vocal pathway establishes a novel vocal motor pathway that aids in the brain's ability to remember (Erickson, 2022). In addition, physical involvement aids in concentration by increasing oxygen to the blood stream (Kjeldgaard, 2019). Thus, gestures can be a valuable practice tool (Erickson, 2022). Physical movement offers benefit specifically to the contemporary legit singer in the context of range, legato line, and phrasing (Moore, 2017; Young, 2019). Further, neuroscience of the voice suggests that the contemporary legit instructor will see quicker memorization of the stylistic choices that mark legit singing with use of movement and gesture (Erickson, 2022).

Theme Five: Rest

It seems obvious that the brain requires sleep, but to function optimally, breaks from concentration are beneficial for consolidation of knowledge (Kjeldgaard, 2019; Erickson, 2022). This is also true for the voice (Zuim, Stewart, and Titze, 2024). Allowing the brain and the vocal mechanism adequate rest may contribute to vocal longevity for the contemporary legit singer in terms of both the short term rehearsal/performance hours for a given show and the long term singing career that spans years (Hartley and Thibeault, 2014; Kjeldgaard, 2019; Erickson, 2022; Zuim, Stewart, and Titze, 2024).

Impact of Neuroscience Advances for Voice Practitioners

While the magnitude of evolving data may appear daunting, incorporating research findings into the study of vocal technique is valuable to accomplishing the level of vocal mastery required for professional singers in the contemporary musical theatre landscape (Greschner, 2019; Weekly, 2023; Kayes and Bartlett, 2024). Further, while vocal science may confront traditional practice, it also has the potential to offer specific tools that address challenging legit technique with depth and clarity (Ford, 2023; Kayes and Bartlett, 2024).

Kayes and Bartlett (2024) published a report on the conversation held by a panel of singers, voice teachers, and researchers that met at the Pan European Voice Conference for a session called *Voice Science-Do We Need It?* They reported that the panelists unanimously agreed on both the need for voice science and its positive implications to their day-to-day teaching, with one panelist noting that a wise and knowledgeable voice instructor will synthesize information from various disciplines to create a sophisticated and holistic teaching structure curated by inter-disciplinary research (Kayes and Bartlett, 2024). This type of practitioner understands that because the lack of education currently provided in the neuroscience of the voice correlates to the propensity for vocal injury, voice science education has the potential to drastically improve modern musical theatre education available to students by integrating instruction around the anatomy and physiology of the voice, vocal health, and vocal injury prevention (Ford, 2023; Hersh, et al., 2023).

Perhaps controversially, McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes (2025) conducted a study to explore the musical theatre mix through the experiences of 36 female musical theatre performers. Inclusion requirements for these performers determined that each participant must have at least one Broadway credit and consider themselves highly skilled in the area of singing using the musical theatre mix; they sought to address the literature gap around the physiology of how performers achieve a mix and deepen the pedagogical understanding and teaching implications of the musical theater mix (McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). Rather surprisingly, they found that though their participants acknowledge the importance of understanding the advances in the scientific knowledge of the vocal mechanism and highly value their own vocal instrument, they were not pursuing additional instruction in emerging pedagogy or vocal science, though they all live and work in New York City, and thus have access to a variety of opportunities and highly esteemed practitioners in this field (McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). The surveyed Broadway performers all stated that they value voice science and its continuing evolution, but similarly to Hersh's findings among university students, all discussed mixed voice without including terms regarding physiology or acoustics (Hersh, et al., 2023; McAllen, Forbes, and

Hughes, 2025). Further, though they passionately described the significance of their previous educators, none have chosen to further their education, instead opting to rely on their own instinct and experience (McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). Though their study found that successful Broadway singers were not necessarily adept in the area of vocal science, the surveyed performers and the researchers alike still advocate for scientific principles to be integrated into voice pedagogy to cultivate a holistic education that merges science and art (McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025).

Limitations

Though the research around the neuroscience of the voice is expanding rapidly, less research exists for the musical theatre genre than other genres of singing, and often, within the musical theatre genre, the emphasis is on belting (Kayes and Welch, 2017). In addition, this research is not exhaustive and there is still much to explore, specifically in the area of neuroscience of the voice and its implications to the contemporary legit singer and instructor. Additionally, time constraints of life and work while pursuing progress within the MA program proved to be a limitation.

Conclusion

I set out to examine legit style singing through the lens of contemporary musical theatre singing through the discovery of the historical significance of the golden age, and evaluation the changes and implications to the current colligate landscape in regards to terminology, auditions, and neuroscience of the voice. The literature has given me valuable insights into the evolution of the legit singing voice and the implications of this evolution on both the contemporary musical theatre instructor and the applications to training programs available to students at the collegiate level. The research applications to my practice are innumerable and I look forward to implementing them as we move into a new semester.

Critical Reflection

Introduction

I was drawn to Gibbs' six step reflective model because it aligns nicely with the constructionist worldview, promoting learning through doing, encouraging challenging assumptions, providing a new lens for information, and helping create direct links to practical application. This critical reflection will follow his framework of description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan.

Description

My research sought to identify and understand the nature of legit singing in the contemporary world of musical theatre and the impact this evolution should have on modern collegiate training programs with regard to terminology, audition preparation, and neuroscience of the voice (Moore, 2017; Erickson, 2022; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; Becker and Watson, 2025). I knew intuitively that industry expectations around legit singing were shifting, and that I, as a collegiate voice instructor, needed to adapt, but my research on this project was a necessary catalyst to these practical applications within my studio and as part of my collaboration with my team at the university.

Feeling

Prior to this research project, I felt unprepared to adequately teach legit singing. I was well versed in classical technique and in other contemporary musical theatre styles, but felt lacking in the realm of contemporary legit singing. It seemed that there was much to explore in this area of vocal pedagogy but I did not know where to begin and struggled to find time and resources to pursue it. For this project, I knew I wanted to spend time studying and strengthening my practice around legit singing. The more I discovered about contemporary legit singing, the more I was motivated to try things out in the studio, and return to the research to deepen my findings. As I finish my project, I feel stronger and more well-rounded as a practitioner, prepared to teach this necessary style for musical theatre students in the modern world (Moore, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023).

Evaluation

A positive aspect of this research process is that I found my hypothesis to be correct. The industry standards for legit singing have in fact evolved (Lister, 2013, Roll, 2014; Becker and Watson, 2025) and these changes should have an impact on the way we are preparing students for success as musical theatre graduates, particularly as it relates to terminology, audition preparation, and the application of discoveries around the neuroscience of the voice (Moore, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023). This strengthened my positionally and affirmed my instincts as a teacher. A negative aspect of the research process is that there is still a great deal of confusion with regard to terminology and specific description of industry standards in both the area of legit contemporary singing, and beyond in the broader scope contemporary musical theatre singing (Lebowitz and Baken, 2011; Green, et al., 2014; Moore, 2024; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). Though it is difficult to teach terminology that seems fluid, a positive aspect of the research is that practitioners are applying the neuroscience advances and basing pedagogy on the scientific data that is emerging (Kjeldgaard, 2019,

Erickson, 2022). Another positive aspect of my research is that the literature shows that as a culture of music educators, we are moving towards emotionally healthy teaching, leaving behind some of the authoritative master teacher/apprentice style of the past (White, 2017; Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023; Sherwood, 2023).

Analysis

Through this research project, I was able to link what I was finding in my own collegiate studio to the literature and create an action plan for the betterment of my practice and the impact of my university on the future of our students (Edwards, Zito-Edwards, and Meyer, 2023). I was able to find a significant body of research that supported my hypothesis that the industry expectations for legit singing have evolved and that collegiate training programs should adapt in order to adequately prepare students for the current musical theatre climate (Moore, 2017; White, 2017; McAllen, Forbes, and Hughes, 2025). I found that while golden age repertoire is still relevant and necessary to musical theatre voice education, styles have evolved from what was expected in the early 1900s, and expert pedagogues agree that our teaching of this music should evolve too, bringing modern applications and contemporary sound aesthetics, and creating space for stylistic choices that we may previously have identified as techniques to build a sustainable framework for our students to carry with them (Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny, 2011; Lister, 2013; Moore, 2017; Rostosky, 2019; d'Amato and Puccinelli, 2024; Becker and Watson, 2025). I thoroughly enjoyed the neuroscience research involved in my study and am interested to apply it to my practice, both in lessons, and in the work I assign students to complete on their own. Practice between lessons has long been a marker of progress or the lack thereof in the scope of private instruction, and I am very curious to find how the use of neuroscience based practice tactics will impact my students (Kjeldgaard, 2019; Erickson, 2022).

Conclusion

Within the research process, I found that this research question served my MA journey well because it strengthened an area of my practice that needed depth of knowledge, understanding of the current literature, and practical applications and teaching strategies. I found the process simplified a daunting gap in my own education by giving me specific steps to follow as I searched and synthesized information. I am completing the project more secure in my own comprehension of contemporary legit singing and the pedagogy that supports it.

Action plan

My next steps following this research are to meet with the other voice instructors at my university to share what I have learned from this process. My hope is that we will be able to

implement new strategies together in our individual studios and our performance classes. I hope to encourage a shift in our syllabi and in our students' audition books, with categories that are more in line with current industry standards (Moore, 2017). I also plan to implement a broader scope for legit singing that is no longer tied specifically to golden age repertoire (Green, et al., 2014; Moore, 2017; d' Amato and Puccinelli, 2024). Further, I plan to have students include components of the themes that emerged from the neuroscience of the voice literature in their practice journals to provide opportunities for testing and honing these theories (Kjeldgaard, 2019; Erickson, 2022; Kays and Bartlett, 2024).

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