

Queer Voices: Innovations for Inclusive Singing and Vocal Training

An international research-practice partnership is rethinking vocal training and musical theatre pedagogy to support transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive performers.

A CHANGING PERFORMANCE LANDSCAPE

Musical theatre has long been associated with queer creative communities, yet vocal pedagogy and ensemble practices often remain grounded in gendered assumptions about voice type and performance roles. Many vocal classification systems, including the standard four-part soprano, alto, tenor, and bass framework, emerged from centuries of European musical practice and have an assumed relationship between voice type and gender. As more performers publicly identify as transgender or nonbinary, educators and practitioners are seeking evidence-based approaches to training singers whose vocal identities and ranges do not align with traditional gendered classifications.

A significant dearth of codified knowledge continues to limit how vocal pedagogy can evolve in this area. Many performance artists, music teachers, and academic researchers are working to expand the pedagogical tools and developmental resources available for gender-inclusive vocal training. These individuals are addressing questions related to adapting existing repertoire, supporting singers whose voices may change over time while utilizing hormone replacement therapy, and fostering rehearsal environments that affirm gender diversity. This work requires interdisciplinary collaboration across music education, theatre, and speech science.



Undergraduate musical theater student performer at Northwestern University's first Queer Voice, Vocal Training, and Singing for Inclusion workshop in 2025

REIMAGINING VOCAL PEDAGOGY FOR GENDER-INCLUSIVE PERFORMANCE

Among the scholars addressing these gaps is [Kelli Morgan McHugh](#), Associate Professor of Instruction in the Department of Theatre at Northwestern University's School of Communication. In response to the scarcity of research and pedagogical resources available to transgender and nonbinary singers, Professor Morgan McHugh conducted independent research and created curriculum examining queer, transgender, and nonbinary singing practices in musical theatre, supported in part by a grant from Northwestern's Women's Center. While substantial scholarship exists in speech-language pathology and music education aimed at supporting gender-diverse voices, particularly in school choir settings,

far fewer resources address the needs of singers in advanced performance contexts. As her work developed, she met the University of Sydney's [Alice Motion](#), Professor of Science and Culture, and [Narelle Yeo](#), Associate Professor of Opera Production and Vocal Studies. Together, they further explored their shared interest in gender-expansive vocal practice.

Seeking additional training, Professor Morgan McHugh pursued certification as a trans voice teacher, where she found that most participants were speech-language pathologists rather than vocal educators. She also discovered that only a handful of pedagogical texts addressed singing-specific concerns, leaving practical questions unanswered, including how voices shift during hormone therapy, how to adapt musical keys during vocal change, and how to support singers in developing an authentic vocal sound. To address this gap, Professor Morgan McHugh and her collaborators are working to translate insights from speech-language pathology into singing pedagogy, developing best practices that emphasize flexibility over fixed vocal categories. These approaches encourage adapting repertoire to individual voices, rethinking ensemble voice parts, and avoiding gendered assumptions in vocal classification.



Collaborating Professors Alice Motion and Narelle Yeo from the University of Sydney, pictured with fellow scholars and participants at the 2025 Queer Voices workshop

THE QUEER VOICES WORKSHOP: COLLABORATION, PEDAGOGY, AND PRACTICE

In April 2025, Northwestern University hosted *Queer Voice, Vocal Training, and Singing for Inclusion*, a workshop convening more than 60 scholars, performers, speech-language experts, and fine arts students to develop practices that allow singers to express their voices and identities more fully and authentically. Led by Professor Morgan McHugh and supported by a Global Collaboration Grant from the Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Affairs, the event brought together collaborators from Northwestern University — including Professors [Sarah Inendino](#), [Nathan Waller](#), and [Neil Verma](#) — and the University of Sydney — including Professors [Lee Wallace](#), [Alice Motion](#), [Narelle Yeo](#), and [Aisha Malik](#) — to rethink how gender identity, vocal training, performance practice, and community formation intersect.

Presentations explored topics including gender-affirming voice care, the relationship between speech-language pathology and vocal pedagogy, strategies for creating more inclusive rehearsal environments, and methods for teaching music within increasingly diverse ensembles. Presenters included Melanie Stapleton, a trans activist and PhD candidate at Northwestern's Bienen School of Music, and Case Davidson, a queer inclusion educator. During the workshop, participants also engaged in collaborative group exercises. This allowed participants to become part of a mock rehearsal to demonstrate how vocal range, tone, and ensemble arrangements can be adapted to better reflect individual singers' identities and abilities.

Several sessions illustrated how traditional musical theatre practices can be reimaged through more inclusive approaches, including a collective rehearsal and performance of "You Will Be Found" from *Dear Evan Hansen*, and a presentation by actor and singer Dani Goldberg, whose capstone production of *Funny Girl* portrayed Fanny Brice as nonbinary to show

how established roles can be reinterpreted across a broader spectrum of identities. The workshop concluded with a performance by Honey West, a renowned Chicago-based entertainer and LGBTQIA+ activist whose career has long challenged conventional expectations of gender and performance, and was documented by sound artist and engineer Isa Hernandez under the supervision of Professor Neil Verma, resulting in sound collages capturing voices, performances, and conversations from the event.



Scholars, performers, and fine arts students gather at the 2025 Queer Voices workshop to rehearse and perform “You Will Be Found” from Dear Evan Hansen

BEYOND THE BINARY: THE SYDNEY CONSERVATORIUM EVENTS

The collaboration continued in spring 2026 at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, where the team brought the initiative’s second major convening to an international stage. Professors Morgan McHugh and Inendino collaborated with Professor Yeo in preparation for the Conservatorium’s musical theatre senior showcase, taught individual masterclasses to the entire musical theatre student cohort, and performed together at a monthly lunchtime concert. Writing and think tank sessions were also held in collaboration with Professor Lee Wallace at the Sydney Social Sciences & Humanities Advanced Research Centre, laying the groundwork for future publications.

The centerpiece of the Sydney visit was *Beyond the Binary*, held on April 15 at the Conservatorium of Music and drawing more than 75 attendees. Three nonbinary students from the Conservatorium’s Musical Theatre program presented original “critical cabaret” performances, each weaving a personal story about gender identity into their performance. A community singing workshop followed, in which attendees learned three songs together using inclusive language and best practices. Finally, sound artist Isa Hernandez led a field recording workshop for University of Sydney students and captured audio from the evening’s events. This material will be included in a podcast component of the project — a series of sound collages telling the story of the initiative and codifying its learnings for a broader audience.

Following the performances, attendees were invited to write reflections and attach them to an olive tree displayed at the venue, a communal gesture that gathered some of the evening’s most moving responses. One participant, a pediatrician from Thailand who works with gender-diverse adolescents, wrote:

“Today was truly a memorable and deeply meaningful experience for me. I really appreciated how the instructor guided us to find keys that suited our own voices — this helped me learn much more quickly and feel more confident. As a pediatrician who works with adolescents, including those in gender-diverse communities, this session made me reflect deeply on the importance of gender equality and human dignity. I will carry this inspiration with me and hope to incorporate music into sessions

at my hospital in Thailand, using it as a way to connect with children and promote awareness of humanity and inclusion.” this inspiration with me and hope to incorporate music into sessions at my hospital in Thailand, using it as a way to connect with children and promote awareness of humanity and inclusion.”



Group photo capturing leaders and participants from the “Beyond the Binary” programming held at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 2026

WHAT'S NEXT

Looking ahead, the team is producing a teaching article and a best practices guidebook for inclusive musical theatre pedagogy and practice, alongside an audio documentary featuring the voices and experiences of project participants. Organizers hope to convene a larger international symposium spanning several days and bringing together scholars, performers, and educators from across disciplines to further advance research and dialogue on gender inclusion in the performing arts. By expanding this global network, the Queer Voices initiative seeks to ensure that vocal training and musical theatre communities better reflect the diversity of contemporary performers.

