

# Musical Theatre Vocal Education in China

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## Abstract

This paper explores the evolution and current state of musical education in China, from its initial introduction of Western influences to the development of local programs over the past 30 years. Despite rapid growth, the field faces challenges such as a shortage of students, teachers, and teaching resources, as well as a diverse and multi-level educational landscape. Various institutions offer musical education with distinct approaches, from undergraduate to post-doctoral programs, and from state-run to private institutions. Key advancements include the integration of Chinese national arts, redefined curriculum structures, and increased emphasis on creative practice and innovation. The collaboration with international experts and a focus on localized content are helping to shape a new generation of high-quality talents for the growing Chinese musical industry, aiming for continued transformation and growth in response to market demands.

**Keywords:** Musical Theatre; Vocal Education; China

## Introduction

Musical theatre is an art form that combines music, dance, acting, and drama, originating in the West and gradually developing into a global artistic expression. The earliest forms of musical theatre can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, where music and dance elements were already present in theatrical performances, and music and dance were an important part of Greek theatre. Theatrical performances often accompanied by music to enhance emotional expression, this intertwined performance form played an important role in the birth and development of musical theatre. In the Middle Ages, religious plays and miracle plays were widely popular in Europe, these productions combined music and drama, becoming the earliest forms of musical theatre. However, the rise of Italian opera in the late 16th century and early 17th century became an important predecessor of musical theatre, opera combined music, drama, and dance, and had a profound impact on the gradual emergence of musical theatre. Especially in the 18th century, British folk opera and comic opera (such as John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera") began to become popular, these works combined music and drama, laying the groundwork for the birth of musical theatre. Following this were the French operettas of the 19th century in France and the British musicals, whose birth and development (such as Gilbert and Sullivan's works) played a crucial role in the development of modern musicals. In the late 19th century, American musicals began to emerge, gradually forming their own style. They not only provided rich material and inspiration for musicals, but also laid the foundation for dramatic and musical elements, promoted the innovation and development of art forms, and facilitated cultural exchange and dissemination. These influences have enabled musicals to continuously absorb and draw upon the artistic achievements of various periods of drama, forming a unique artistic style and

expression. In this way, the Broadway musical in New York City in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was officially established and became the center of musical development. The works of producers such as Florenz Ziegfeld began to attract large audiences. In the early 20th century, many classic works were born, such as "On the Town" (1914) and "Lullaby" (1918), which marked the establishment of musicals as an independent art form. The 1940s to 1960s were called the "golden age" of musicals, during which many classic works were born, such as "Oklahoma!" (1943), followed by "South Pacific" (1949), "My Fair Lady" (1956), "West Side Story" (1957) and "The Sound of Music" (1959), among others. In the 1970s and 1980s, the form of musical theater began to diversify, with the emergence of conceptual musicals and large-scale productions such as "Jesus Christ Superstar" (1971) and "Hairspray" (1988). There were also internationally renowned super productions by Andrew Lloyd Webber, such as "The Phantom of the Opera" (1986), "Cats" (1981), and "Les Misérables" (1980), which greatly promoted the global dissemination of musical theater. In the 1990s, Disney began producing musicals, bringing successful works such as "The Lion King" (1997) and "Beauty and the Beast" (1994), which attracted a large number of family audiences, and this was also a golden period of musical theater development. In the 21st century, musical theater has become more diverse and internationalized globally. Non-English-speaking countries' musical theater also began to emerge on the international stage, such as "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and "Les Misérables" (French version). The evolution and development of musical theater is a process of continuous innovation and integration, and each era's works reflect the social and cultural trends of the time. Musical theater continuously innovates in terms of subject matter and form, such as "Hamilton" (2015), which combines hip-hop music with historical themes, achieving great success. The globalization of musical theater marks the entry of musical theater art into a new stage of greater prosperity, diversity, and openness on a global scale. This development not only enriches the cultural life of global audiences but also promotes cultural exchange and cooperation between different countries and regions (Mu, 2006).

The development of musical theater is a process of continuous evolution and innovation, from early religious dramas and operas to modern diverse stage art forms, which has accumulated and evolved over hundreds of years. In this process, the joint action of society, economy, technology, and culture has driven the prosperity of musical theater, making it a popular art form. However, because of the international and era fusion, the vocal singing method of musical theater has also become diverse. It can be roughly divided into three categories.

1. "Opera Bel Canto": Its characteristic is to emphasize the technical aspect of voice production, which usually requires actors to have a solid foundation of vocal technique and strong control over their voices. During singing, they pay attention to the purity of tone, pitch accuracy, and volume control. They often use a wide vocal range and rich emotional expression. This singing style accurately covers many traditional and modern musical theater works that require advanced vocal skills and dramatic expression. Opera Bel Canto is an important part of musical theater, especially in those works with deep dramatic content and complex musical structures. For example, musical theater works such as "The Phantom of the Opera" by Andrew Lloyd Webber; "Les Misérables" by Claude-Michel Schönberg.

2. "Popular Music Singing Style": The characteristic of singing music drama works in popular singing style is that the musical style integrates elements of modern popular music, the melody is easy to remember, and the emotional expression of the song is direct. It usually pays more attention to the uniqueness of tone color and the authenticity of emotional expression, rather than strict vocal techniques. The singing may use special techniques in popular music, such as humming, breathy singing, sliding notes, and ornaments. It has strong melodic and infectiousness. This singing style occupies an important position in contemporary music drama because it can attract a wide audience, especially the younger generation, and has a strong young audience support base. The flexibility and diversity of popular singing style also make it the preferred choice of many music drama creators. Its classic representative works are "Mamma Mia!" by Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus; "Hamilton" - Lin-Manuel Miranda.

3. "Mixed Style Singing": That is, combining various musical styles and vocal techniques, including traditional opera elements and modern music elements such as popular, rock, and jazz. The actor needs to have diverse vocal skills and be able to switch between different styles freely. It emphasizes expressing the complex emotions of the character and the story plot, and enriching the performance through various musical techniques. Its rock music style works with strong emotional expression and dynamic stage effects, such as "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" by John Cameron Mitchell and "Jesus Christ Superstar" by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Its jazz music style works with free rhythm and improvisation, such as "Chicago" by John Kander and "Cabaret" by John Kander. There are also lighthearted works with comedic elements and beautiful melodies, such as "My Fair Lady" by Frederick Loewe and "Wicked" by Stephen Schwartz. There are also works with innovative and varied music elements, such as "Hairspray" by Marc Shaiman and "Little Shop of Horrors" by Alan Menken. The hybrid singing classification accurately reflects the diversity and innovation of modern musicals. Many contemporary musical works no longer limit themselves to a single musical style and create unique artistic effects by integrating multiple music elements. This definition fully reflects the cross-border and comprehensive nature of musicals, and is an important trend in modern musicals.

## **Musical theatre vocal education in China**

### **Early attempts and introductions (late 20th century)**

After the reform and opening up, with the introduction of western musicals, China's musical market began to sprout. For example, performances of classic musicals such as *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* in China have sparked people's interest and attention in musicals. Musical theatre education in this period relied on informal training from drama schools, conservatories and dance schools, mainly in acting, vocal and dance courses, and there was no specific musical theatre education program.

### **Establishment of formal educational institutions (early 21st century)**

With the development of the musical theater market in the 2000s, more and more art colleges began to set up specialized musical theater majors. For example, the Shanghai Theatre Academy established the Musical Theater Department in 2002, which was the first higher education institution in China to set up a musical theater major, and its comprehensive curriculum has trained many outstanding musical actors and creative talents. In the 2010s, the Central Academy of Drama established a major in musical Theatre to focus on comprehensive

training in performance, vocal music and dance, and to maintain close cooperation with internationally renowned musical education institutions. The Beijing Dance Academy has established the Musical Theater Department, which has quickly become a key department of the academy, emphasizing the combination of dance and performance, and cultivating musical talents with all-round qualities. Subsequently, he joined the Musical Theater Department of Zhejiang Conservatory of Music, the Musical Theater Department of Beijing Film Academy, the Musical Theater Department of Communication University of China, and so on.

### **Improvement and Development of Education System (Mid-21st century)**

In the 2010s, more and more art colleges and universities set up musical theater majors, which provide more resources and platforms for musical education. Many Chinese art colleges have cooperated with famous foreign musical education institutions to conduct teacher training, student exchanges and joint performances. For example, the cooperation between the Shanghai Theatre Academy and the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University (NYU) gives students access to advanced international musical education resources. The curriculum of musical theatre education is richer and more diverse, covering not only acting, voice and dance, but also stage technique, playwriting, and the history of musical theatre. With the development of the Internet, more and more musical education resources are disseminated through online platforms. For example, online master classes, online courses and live lectures give more people the opportunity to learn knowledge and skills related to musical theater. Modern musical education emphasizes the combination of theory and practice, and students not only learn in the classroom, but also gain experience by participating in actual performances. For example, musical theater departments at many colleges and universities regularly host musical theater productions where students practice their acting skills on stage. Musical education is not limited to art schools, and many universities have begun to set up music-related courses and cooperate with art schools. For example, the collaboration between Peking University and the Central Academy of Drama has promoted interdisciplinary musical theater education and research (Cheng, 2017).

## **Musical theatre vocal teaching methods**

### **Teaching methods from the West**

Western musical vocal music teaching methods are diverse and comprehensive, pay attention to the combination of technology and performance, and cultivate students' adaptability in different music styles and performance environments. These methods not only help students master solid vocal skills, but also cultivate their performance ability and comprehensive quality, laying a solid foundation for becoming excellent musical actors.

#### Teaching Method:

##### 1) Traditional classical vocal music training

Many musical theatre vocal teachers initially use traditional classical vocal training to build a foundation for their students. This includes training in breath control, intonation, range extension, and empathy. Some musical theatre teaching courses have students sing elementary art songs and opera arias as vocal songs to help them build a solid foundation for better use of vocal techniques. For example, Manhattan School of Music, whose vocal music teaching emphasizes the combination of classical music and musical, cultivates comprehensive vocal skills.

## 2) Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM)

Focus on vocal techniques in modern pop and rock music, such as mixing, falsetto, and breathing support. Training students on how to maintain optimal vocal performance while using microphones is very important in modern musical theatre performances. Students are trained to use a variety of timbre and expressiveness in different musical styles. Famous American vocal educator "Jeannie LoVetri", she is a pioneer of CCM vocal education, in the New York vocal education industry for 45 years, she emphasizes healthy vocal techniques, applicable to a variety of modern music styles (Han, 2020).

## 3) Integrated Performance Training

Combine vocal music, drama performance and dance training to develop students' comprehensive performance ability. Focus on role analysis and role building, and express the emotions and motivations of the characters through singing. Through improvisation and creative training, inspire students' performance inspiration and personality. Michael McElroy is a distinguished professor at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and his teaching method emphasizes the organic combination of performance and vocal music.

### **Specific implementation of teaching methods**

#### 1) Technical training

By practicing abdominal breathing and controlling the flow of breath, the sound is stable and lasting.

Including resonance training, intonation exercises, vocal range extension, etc., to ensure that students can use their voice flexibly. Through different styles of singing, students are trained to adapt to various styles of music in the musical.

#### 2) Acting training

By analyzing the lyrics and character background, students are trained to convey the emotions of the characters in singing. Combining dance and drama performances, students are trained to use body language to enhance their performance in singing. Make sure students keep their lines clear while singing and incorporate acting elements.

### **Practice acting**

Help students accumulate acting experience through small performances in class. Students are encouraged to participate in school musical productions or community theater productions, and apply their vocal and performance skills to actual performances (Jin, 2013).

## **Teaching methods from China**

### **positioning and short board**

From scratch, from import to imitation to self-production, after the introduction and introduction of Western musicals in the 1980s, the development of Chinese musical education has experienced a long wait and rise in just 30 years, and the "fans" of musical theater defend this dawn with their own determination. From the perspective of educational talent structure, most of the musical education practitioners are scholars who have returned from overseas study, or those who have changed their careers to continue to work in the field of opera, dance drama and drama. From the perspective of the implementation of musical education in China, we have chosen to set up musical series and the basic content of the course from large to small, that is, from the colleges and universities of music, drama and dance in first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Then to the provincial and municipal music colleges, comprehensive art colleges, middle and higher vocational schools, etc. Set up musical-related transfer and course content; From high to low, the basic courses and teaching methods of

musical theater are set up in college students and college students first, and then the curriculum training and expansion of musical theater education in primary and secondary schools are compatible downward. The goal of its education is to cultivate a variety of artistic skills in a comprehensive type of "multi-ability and one professional" art talents. To realize the upgrading and innovative development of comprehensive quality education (Wang, 2022).

The current situation of musical education in China has exposed a series of problems due to the shortage of students, the shortage of teachers, the shortage of teaching materials, the lack of creation, and the complex educational reality of multi-level and diversity. Multi-level refers to the national key art colleges with state-owned systems such as Zhongxi, Beiwu, Shangyin, Shangxi, etc., the local art colleges with state-owned systems such as Chuan Yin, Nanyi, Hunan Art Institute, and the private art colleges such as Chuan Shi Modern Art Institute and Beijing Modern Music Institute. These colleges and universities with different systems have created musical theater majors. Secondly, there are different levels of academic system and educational background. Colleges and universities such as Chinese Opera, Northern Dance, Shangyin, Shangxi, and Southern Art have undergraduate degrees, as well as master's, doctor's, and even post-doctoral degrees. Some art schools have a three-year program in musical drama (or song and dance). Hunan Art Institute is a "3+2" school system with three years of secondary school and two years of secondary school, while Wuhan Art School is a six-year secondary school system. Diversity refers to the diversity of teaching emphases in art colleges according to their own characteristics. Musical itself is a diversified art category, the diversity of musical education is fully in line with the law, there is no need to force unity. The four colleges with a long history, namely, Zhongxi, Beiwu, Shangyin and Shangxi, each have a very strong original single major, coupled with rich teaching resources and high-quality students, which are incomparable to local colleges. The "3+2" system of Hunan Art Institute and the six-year secondary school system of Wuhan Art School have designed their own distinctive teaching systems. Although Xinghai Conservatory of Music has not established a musical major, it has opened a musical course in the Department of Popular Music, which has broadened the employment direction for some students with potential. The Music College of Hunan Normal University has set up a musical teaching group, which has carried out musical performance teaching for some non-musical students, which has greatly developed and activated the potential comprehensive quality of students (Gui, 2015).

### **Implementation and breakthrough**

First of all, the course name and teaching content are further clarified, such as adjusting "vocal music class" to "vocal music performance class", emphasizing the dramatic expression of musical singing. Secondly, the content of Chinese national art is strengthened, such as Chinese classical dance and national folk dance are included in dance teaching, and drama and Tai Chi are added as elective courses. Thirdly, the basic training stage is shortened and the comprehensive training and creation practice stage is extended. For example, the opening of repertoire class is advanced from the junior year to the sophomore year, so as to enter the training of musical comprehensive performance and creation ability as early as possible. Finally, through various campus activities and practice platforms, strengthen the training of students' independent creative ability, such as the rehearsal of original small musical in a certain teaching stage. The new training program does not continue the characteristics and advantages of dance teaching, emphasizes the coordination and cohesion of various

professional courses, and deepens the concept and measures of strengthening creative practice and cultivating innovative talents. (Take Beijing Dance Academy as an example)

In the first stage, with reference to the training mode of musical actors in Europe, America, Japan and South Korea, and relying on the traditional professional advantages of each school, a preliminary teaching system is established. Vocal music is mainly vocal practice, and different vocal music practice works are sung according to the learning level from low to high. The lines are based on the basic pronunciation accuracy as the core, and the accumulation of tongue twisters, vignettes and stories is mainly practiced. Form (Dance) is based on flexibility and flexibility practice, focusing on the coherence and tension of modern dance, and emphasizing the unity and innovation of collective and individual in dance. Acting classes, also known as "liberating nature" classes, require students to have a deep understanding of the character's background, personality, and motivations in order to truly represent the character's emotions and behaviors. Convey a character's inner world and emotions through facial expressions, body language and lines. It emphasizes the real representation of the role and the accurate expression of the drama conflict in the work. In the second stage, in the continuous teaching practice, colleges and universities gradually adjust the curriculum system and teaching syllabus according to the situation of students and teaching effectiveness, and strengthen the integrated performance training which belongs to the musical. In the third stage, with the needs of the musical industry, the teaching reform of colleges and universities not only focuses on the training of actors' comprehensive performance ability in song, dance and performance, but also pays more attention to creative practice, so some increase the frequency of classic musical rehearsals, while others increase the research and development of original musicals (Sun, 2022).

Actors and directors who have returned from the Four Seasons Theatre Company of Japan and have rich experience in frontline performances, as well as experts in British and American musicals, are hired to teach the department. The teaching of these experts and scholars not only opens up students' international vision, but also promotes the growth of teachers. On the one hand, it is necessary to continue to improve the level of international education, on the other hand, it is necessary to enhance the incubation and creative ability of local musicals, and to combine teaching and research with creative practice (Guo, 2018).

To cultivate high-quality talents capable of creating Chinese musicals. With the rapid rise of China's musical industry, musical education is bound to undergo transformation and develop through self-revolution. The vigorous development of the musical industry is expected to drive the continuous improvement of China's musical education system and cultivate a large number of high-quality contemporary musical talents for the market.

## Conclusion

The development of musical education in China has progressed from initial importation to imitation, and now self-production over the past 30 years. Despite significant strides, challenges such as shortages in students, teachers, and teaching materials, along with a diverse educational landscape, persist. Musical education in China is characterized by varying levels of training systems across different art institutions, reflecting the diverse nature of musical theater itself. In addressing these challenges, institutions have redefined courses, integrated Chinese national arts, and placed greater emphasis on creative practice. Through collaboration with international experts and adapting foreign models, Chinese musical education is poised for growth, aiming to cultivate talents capable of contributing to an evolving musical industry, with a focus on innovation and localized content.

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