The Singer's Library

Vocal Cross-Training

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

A new publication strives to build and unify singing techniques fit for both Broadway and *La bohème*.

Brian Manternach

We've all heard that two heads are better than one. When it comes to teaching voice, however, differences of opinion are notorious for causing confusion among students—especially when attempting to navigate the techniques specific to both classical and musical theatre singing.

To establish some common ground between the two, Norman Spivey and Mary Saunders Barton forged a pedagogical partnership on the voice faculty at Penn State University. The result is the development of an approach that trains students to make the wide range of sounds that are required for performing music from Strauss to Sondheim, Puccini to Pasek and Paul. Their new book, *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*, is written *by* voice teachers *for* voice teachers *about* voice teaching. In this interview with both authors, we explore the philosophies that led to the book.

In a previous *CS* interview ("Bel Canto Can Belto: Talking Technique with Mary Saunders Barton," March 2014), Saunders Barton said, "I feel like this is such an evolving art form. It's better to come to agreements gradually as opposed to having a book that says, 'This is the way we do it.'" Even though you have now written your own book, you still refer to its contents as "a snapshot of where we sense we are now." Why do you choose not to use more definitive language?

Mary Saunders Barton: Being involved in an art form that is constantly growing in new directions, we have been careful to avoid standing on top of our own mountain and preaching an all-inclusive methodology. As soon as you do that, you are in danger of becoming pedagogically obsolete. Change and the absorption and translation of change is a deep obligation if we are to be trusted in any meaningful way.
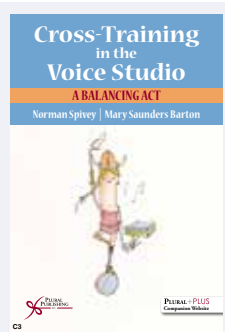
Norman Spivey: Writing about the voice can be really daunting. We knew it was important to start by outlining our journey to this point, because new research and experience will obviously continue to inform us. The
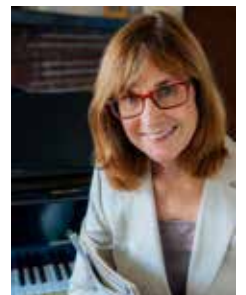
Mary Saunders Barton

Norman Spivey

Book Review

Given the current trend toward political polarization, the word "bipartisan" has all but disappeared from modern discourse. When it comes to vocal pedagogy, however, Norman Spivey and Mary Saunders Barton are proof that when voice teachers reach across the proverbial aisle, it benefits all parties. Their new book, *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*, takes the bold stance that singers can learn to create a range of sounds that work for both classical and musical theatre performance.

Pedagogically speaking, their ideas simply make sense. In the same way that dancers know the importance of using muscles evenly to prevent repetitive strain, singers may consider a similar approach to the interaction of the laryngeal muscles. The book, therefore, focuses on "the intersection of stylistic training" and "the actual balancing act of cross-training" to strengthen the mixed voice that the authors call the "Holy Grail" of vocal technique.

They reference a cultural shift in recent years that has been encouraging the union of classical and musical theatre "in a way that enriches both, while maintaining the valuable distinctions between them." They further state that it is becoming increasingly difficult for classical voice teachers to insulate themselves from the coexistence of both styles.

Certainly, there is much technical insight to be gained from the book, as should be expected from distinguished pedagogues with the successful track records Spivey and Saunders Barton have. But the tone of inclusion and open-heartedness with which they both approach their work is arguably the book's most important message. Both authors speak lovingly about their past teachers and influences, their colleagues, and their students as ideas are shared without the slightest hint of ego attached. Although the techniques presented constitute a major contribution to the field, it is the authors' spirit of collaboration and open-mindedness and their deep desire to learn from others that provides an inspirational model for modern voice instruction.
—*Brian Manternach*

specific technical approach we do share in the book has itself evolved over the years as a result of our willingness to learn from one another (and others) and has proven to be very successful in the training of singers and teachers for diverse careers.

When considering the dozens of reputable resources now available for singing outside of classical genres (many of which have been profiled in this column), your book still contributes something unique by specifically advocating cross-training. Can you explain how this is different from other approaches?

MSB: The book is an invitation to look at voice training more inclusively in terms of stylistic flexibility. The technique outlined in the third chapter ["The Balancing Act of Registration and Resonance"] is specifically designed to condition voices for many career paths.

NS: What we value so much about our focus on cross-training is that it is inclusive from the start. The premise also responds to trends we've seen in the profession, which often require the ability to sing authentically with good function in multiple styles.

You write that the book is intended for studio teachers who need both *strategies* as well as *permission* to work with students in a way that appeals to their interests, their vocal well-being, and the current market. Can you expand on what you mean by giving teachers permission?

NS: Permission can be something powerful. The best way to start is to start. For teachers who are hesitant about working in a new style, the strategies we provide can help demystify the process and encourage playful exploration.

MSB: We are in the process of moving away from an "us and them" mentality with regard to classical and contemporary vocal styles. Classical teachers who have felt afraid to address vernacular techniques in their studios are breathing a collective sigh of relief. Permission granted!

Brian Manternach's bio can be found on page 38.

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