



The Singer's Library: Three-Step Singing Essentials

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Karen Bauer's new book emphasizes the importance of a kinesthetic approach to good singing, but it doesn't ignore anatomy, physiology, or voice science.

While we have lived for some time in an advertisement-saturated society, targeted ads go to increasingly greater lengths to hit us where we live. I once did a Google search for a reading lamp and, almost serendipitously, that same lamp started appearing in sponsored ads on my Facebook feed and as "Featured Recommendations" through my Amazon account.

I started to get the same feeling after Amazon recommended that, based on past purchases, I might also like *The Essentials of Beautiful Singing: A Three-Step Kinesthetic Approach* by Karen Bauer. Almost as if through targeted advertising, I started hearing about the book everywhere I turned. Out of the blue, a colleague mentioned he was considering the book for his vocal pedagogy class and asked if I had read it. I learned elsewhere that Bauer was scheduled to present at a conference I was already planning to attend. I later opened the *Journal of Singing* and found Bauer's article on "The Role of Kinesthesia in a Pedagogy for Singing." It seemed the stars were aligning to get me to read this book.

Perhaps I am now contributing to someone else's serendipitous moment by featuring the book here. In my conversation with the author, we discuss the three steps of her vocal approach, the role of kinesthesia in learning to sing, and just what "OOFing" is all about.



Brian Manternach

The introduction of *The Essentials of Beautiful Singing* states that the book "is designed to lend simplicity to a complex task." Was that difficult, considering the centuries-long history of voice study?

Voice science took on a fresh look in the 1970s with William Vennard's *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technician*. I was thrilled with that pivotal work and read it three times over! In the 90s [Richard] Miller and [Ingo] Titze, each in his own way, led the call for a fact-based pedagogy. Facts of singing are now offered in new, unprecedented depth and complexity, and our profession has gained valuable insights.

However, the challenge for teachers is to bridge the gap between complex scientific information and the how-to of skill development in singing. My book addresses this challenge by directly relating to the singer's experience of singing, that of using the body as a refined singing instrument. This is essentially a kinesthetic experience under the control of the central nervous system.

A common misconception is that kinesthesia refers only to the vague tingling, conductive sensations we experience while singing. Those sensations have little capacity for predetermining the nature of the tones we produce, whereas fully engaged kinesthesia has that capacity—by facilitating the motor skills required of singing. Recognizing kinesthesia as an important vehicle for bridging the science/singing gap, it was not difficult for me to incorporate it in a pedagogy—it just made sense.

Was the three-step approach developed primarily out of your experiences as a singer or as a singing teacher, or was it fairly balanced between the two?

As a singer, I am an empathic listener, to be sure. But students have individual learning styles that may

or may not relate to my personal singing history, so I try to depersonalize it. The book urges a clear, factual concept of the body as a vocal instrument that is the source of refined singing. Rather than urging a certain tone, the book urges a well-functioning body as vocal instrument. In this way, the student discovers a beautiful tone as the product of a well-functioning instrument. Instructions in the book hinge on developing a mindful correct intention to motivate a correct function in the body.

Much of the book is dedicated to the three-step process you call "OOFing," which is an acronym for Open Body, Open Throat, Forward Articulation. Can you give a brief overview of each element?

A student of mine came up with that acronym and I adopted it! It provided quick verbal cues to bring a singer's attention back to the essentials in moments when clarity of purpose has been compromised.

The Open Body simply refers to taking fuller breaths than in daily use, being sure that the ribs are expanding and that the belly and/or shoulders are not trying to substitute for the lungs! The tricky part of breath management is maintaining those efforts of

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Book Review

We have all been taught not to judge a book by its cover. So I'm embarrassed to admit that I bristled when I first read the title of Karen Bauer's book *The Essentials of Beautiful Singing: A Three-Step Kinesthetic Approach*.

A skeptical consumer, I am always hesitant to blindly accept the claims of advertisements, especially when the people touting a product's efficacy are the same folks who would profit from my purchase of said product. Having encountered rigid singing methodologies in the past—each selling the line of why their method was the most valuable and effective—Bauer's title raised two immediate questions: Is she claiming that singing can be learned in only three steps? Is she privy to certain "essential" elements of singing that have not yet been discovered?

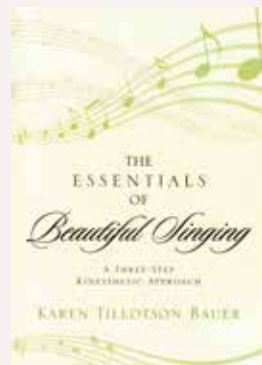
Upon reading the book, however, my preconceived notions were quickly shown to be irrational. In the introduction, Bauer clarifies that the book is centered on universally accepted essentials of fine singing (not something new that she came up with for marketing purposes). She also explains that her approach is intended to be broader than an idiosyncratic ideology or inflexible "method." Therefore, her terminology and exercises can meld with almost any traditionally sound method.

In spelling out the techniques for the book, Bauer enlisted the help of her husband who, as a musician himself, was able to take every exercise in the book on a vocal test drive. But as a non-singer, if he could not figure out how to do what Bauer was suggesting, she rewrote the vocalise.

Many of the exercises are familiar and, quite honestly, unremarkable at face value, which is in keeping with her plan of "cultivated simplicity." "Simple exercises done well are more productive than complicated ones done poorly," she writes. Therefore, what makes the content of the book unique is not the exercises but the mindset from which they are executed. Bauer's three-step approach essentially provides checkpoints (Open Body, Open Throat, and Forward Articulation, with posture serving as a "precondition") designed to address specific elements of singing while always considering how the entire body is interacting in the process. In this way, a complete, coordinated mechanism is developed through balance and awareness.

As the techniques are practiced, Bauer advocates "mindful pausing" for singers to evaluate physical sensations before and during singing. The sensations during singing come about as a result of following a specific process and, at that point, they may be used as tangible guideposts—instead of trying to create something like "forward placement" without the benefit of understanding what must occur in order for those sensations or vibrations to be present.

Bauer's helpful approach is not merely one teacher's bag of tricks or collection of sometimes useful images. Rather, it applies the functional understanding gleaned from voice science to the voice studio in a manner that accentuates practical, reliable, and repeatable techniques. The valuable philosophies found within *The Essentials of Beautiful Singing* deserve to be widely shared and enthusiastically practiced among singers and voice teachers alike. —Brian Manternach



expansion while singing—not as intuitive as inhaling, but also not that difficult when approached simply.

The Open Throat is a relaxed throat encouraged by a relaxed pre-yawning breath. It is a major resonator, and the book emphasizes the need for a large, air-filled cavity as opposed to a tight, muscle-bound throat.

Forward Articulation is a means of keeping the throat free of extraneous articulator movements or tensions, and it's not long before singers discover that if the body is squeezing rather than maintaining the efforts of expansion, the throat will squeeze too.

So, in a healthy instrument, the coordination of technical elements usually boils down to those three elements working together: Open Body, Open Throat, Forward Articulation.

The subtitle references your "approach" to beautiful singing, and you admit that while your approach has a particular slant, logic, and order, it should not be regarded as a canned method. What do you see as the difference between an approach and a method?

I use the term "approach" as an umbrella that could absorb varying means of communication, terms, exercises, personalities, etc. But I consider kinesthetic experience, communicated in one way or another, to be an essential ingredient in a pedagogy for singing. The functional body is, after all, our instrument.

Do you expect that many readers will find points of familiarity in the concepts you promote or do you feel you are presenting something quite new and different?

Coming after 20-30 years of immersion in voice science literature, these concepts might come as something new and different—although kinesthetic ideas were certainly apparent in Barbara Doscher's book *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice* and in some other voices along the way. Nevertheless, I felt like I was going upstream writing a book that did not fall in the voice science genre. I offered only as much scientific information as I deemed necessary for success with the exercises. I am touched that this approach has resonated with so many voice teachers and singers.

There are certain well-used phrases and practices that are not part of your approach. For instance, you intentionally avoid imagery in all but a few instances, you find the term "breath support" potentially problematic, and you clarify how the forward articulation you advocate is different from the common idea of "forward placement." Does this cause confusion with your students whose previous experiences have embraced these terms and methods?

Whenever a singer begins studying with a new teacher, there is a period of adjustment to new terminology, personality, and communication style. Simplicity and clarity of approach make these adjustments easier, and results can be immediate. Consistency takes time, of course, with constant reinforcement in the studio and mindful practice sessions.

But correct intent and correct function in an OOFing framework can provide remarkably clear goals! (I must emphasize that my particular words are not the *sine qua non* of voice pedagogy, only my own style, quirky as it may be!)

You argue that singing is more of a kinesthetic endeavor than it is an academic endeavor. As such, you say that detailed knowledge of physiology is indispensable for the voice teacher, but that the singer is better served by focusing on the application of that information. What, then, is the baseline understanding of physiology that singers should have in order to be informed but not bogged down by details and minutiae?

Yes, I think the act of singing is primarily kinesthetic. Regarding a "baseline understanding," it has to match the mission and context. An experiential pedagogy like mine relies heavily on anatomy and physiology. Obviously, a singer can't breathe well if he/she doesn't know where the ribs, lungs, and diaphragm are, so this might form the first level of a "baseline understanding." For right

or wrong, the book assumes that a knowledgeable teacher can address this orally or with supplemental illustrations.

Breath management, resonance, and articulation all rely on specific functions in the body. For matters of registration, acoustical considerations require addressing formants. To do this, the book becomes more "academic" in its presentation. Transition points are addressed as relationships between vowel formants and pitch in "chest voice" and "head voice." The chapter targets specific issues, such as "Head Register in the Male Voice," with exercises designed to encourage that.

The chapter on registration is the longest chapter in the book, but it maintains its focus on singing more than the cognitive information. Just as the singer discovers refined tone as a result of a refined vocal instrument, registration shifts are found to be largely the result of properly matching up vowels and pitches—all within the OOFing framework.

Although *The Essentials* is solidly grounded in science with relevant "academic" instruction as needed, the *raison d'être* for it is to demonstrate the role of kinesthesia in refined singing with as much simplicity and clarity as possible and to give the singer experiences of refined tones, resonance, range development, transition facility, and legato.

You describe how singers often focus on the sound of their voices rather than the kinesthetic experience that produces good tone (which you liken to putting the cart before the horse). Why do you suppose so many singers go about this process backwards?

Maybe it's how they are taught. My guess is that this was very common in "pre-science" studios and may well continue today. Maybe it's because manipulating the throat to achieve a certain sound is quicker and more immediate than coordinating a whole system such as Open Body, Open Throat, and Forward Articulation. The problem is that there is a cost for short-circuiting the process—e.g., problems of tension, pitch, timbre, lack of flexibility, beauty, and/or legato.

Tenor Brian Manternach teaches voice at the University of Utah in the Musical Theatre Program. He holds degrees in vocal performance from Saint John's University in Minnesota (BA), the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (MM), and the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music (DM). He can be reached at bmantern@gmail.com.

