

# The Singer's Library

## Pedagogical Practices

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



Two books explore and preserve the ideas of renowned voice teachers who have left a lasting impact on the singing world.

**N**early every issue of *Classical Singer* features an interview with an acclaimed singer as its feature article, which explores the singer's path to a successful career. Many of these singers give credit to the teachers they have had along the way who helped them develop the skills that are put to the test each time they step onstage.

Two recent books have turned the tables and put teachers in the interview seat in order to help understand what skills and knowledge contribute to effective teaching.

The first book, written by Robin Rice and published by

Inside View Press, is titled *Great Teachers on Great Singing*. Pre-millennial singers (and well read millennials!) will immediately recognize the title's homage to the 1982 Jerome Hines classic *Great Singers on Great Singing*. For his book, Hines conducted interviews with prominent singers of his generation that he had shared the operatic stage with. He then crafted the interviews into chapters made up of prose as well as direct quotes from the conversations, which discuss each singer's approach to vocal technique.

Rice uses a similar procedure in *Great Teachers on Great Singing* by interviewing and observing lessons taught by 14

prominent American teachers of classical singing, some of whom include W. Stephen

Smith (professor of voice, Northwestern University Bienen School of Music), Carol Vaness (professor of voice and opera, Indiana University Jacobs School of Music), Patricia McCaffrey (voice faculty, Metropolitan Opera Lindemann Young Artist Program), and George Shirley (distinguished university emeritus professor of voice, University of Michigan).



Brian Matternach

In each chapter, Rice introduces the teacher with a few paragraphs of biographical information before including word-for-word excerpts from their conversation together. "Conversation," rather than "interview," is truly the more appropriate way to describe these sections, since Rice engages in a back-and-forth exchange that helps clarify each teacher's intent. He sometimes shares similar experiences, as appropriate, and other times probes deeper on a given topic.

Rice then offers his thoughts and reactions to the discussions in "Parting Thoughts" before concluding each chapter with "Lesson Highlights." These highlights come from his observations of voice lessons conducted by each master teacher and include quotes (divided by topic) and exercises alongside the verbal instruction that accompanied each specific vocalise.

As with *Great Singers on Great Singing*, similarities in teaching philosophies as well as wide-ranging disagreements are immediately apparent. Scott McCoy prepares readers for this phenomenon in the Publisher's Foreword, explaining that "miracle" vocalises guaranteed to lead to specific results do not exist. Furthermore, he believes that nearly any pattern of pitches can bring about excellent singing when employed by skilled teachers who can motivate students to their best vocalism.

Rice reinforces this idea in the Author's Foreword, explaining that every note of instruction given by each teacher during the observed lessons was effective for the student that the teacher was working with. Therefore, he discourages any teaching that relies on a "fixed methodology." In his observations, each teacher proved to be a master at simplifying the process of singing through encouraging proficiency of movement and economy of work. The mantra he saw at play was "Be effective, not perfect."

Katherine Osborne masterfully edited the approximately 1,500 pages of transcripts from the conversations for concision, clarity, and continuity while admirably preserving the characteristics and personality of each teacher. She writes in the "Editorial Principles" chapter that the recognizability of each teacher will bring smiles to the faces of readers who may personally know these teachers. This was certainly the case for me as (in the interest of full disclosure) I read the chapter on my former teacher, Robert Harrison. Although our last lesson together took place more than 10 years ago, his "voice" jumped from the pages and memories of our lessons flooded my mind.

Both Rice and McCoy emphasize that the teachers included in *Great Teachers on Great Singing* are not necessarily the only great teachers in America or even definitively regarded as the "best" teachers. Rather, they are teachers with long track records of inspiring successful results in their students. Indeed, Rice indicates that he has already compiled a list of additional teachers he hopes to interview for a second book.

Although *Great Teachers on Great Singing* places 14 "great teachers" at center stage, Rice adds an important voice of his own by leading each conversation, offering context, and sharing personal reflections. A staggering number of



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COMPOSING  
FUTURES

concepts worth exploring are ingeniously presented in a way that allows each teacher's ideas to flow through the filter of Rice's viewpoint. As such, readers benefit from the mind of a 15<sup>th</sup> great teacher.

The second book highlighting great teaching is *A Spectrum of Voices: Prominent American Voice Teachers Discuss the Teaching of Singing*. Written by Elizabeth L. Blades and published by Rowman & Littlefield, it is also a compilation of interviews with successful teachers of singing. It was first released in 2003, so the passage of time necessitated several changes and updates for the second edition.

First, 11 of the original teachers who contributed to the book have passed away during the intervening years, including well

known authors and pedagogues Oren Brown, Barbara Doscher, Richard Miller, and Shirlee Emmons. Their comments have been preserved and reprinted as they first appeared in 2003.

Second, four original contributors have reviewed and edited their comments to better reflect their current line of thinking, while four other contributors opted to leave their original comments intact and unchanged.

Third, six new teachers were invited to contribute, including Stephen King (the only teacher common to both *A Spectrum of Voices* and *Great Teachers on Great Singing*) and three teachers who specialize in contemporary commercial music (CCM): Robert Edwin, Jeannette LoVetri, and Mary Saunders-Barton.

Lastly, a new question was asked of each teacher: "In the last 25 years, advances in technology, voice science, and medicine have had an impact on our profession. Please speak as to how these fit into your own teaching."

Unlike *Great Teachers on Great Singing*, Blades arranges her book by topic rather than by teacher. In this way, readers can quickly compare a variety of perspectives on broad topics like registration, expression, or objectives, while more specific topics can be located through the general index. On the other hand, readers interested in the thoughts of pedagogues can find them catalogued by teacher in the Index of Teachers' Remarks.

In another contrast from Rice's approach, Blades asked intentionally open-ended questions and restrained herself

## BACHELOR AND MASTER OF ARTS DEGREES IN VOICE

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Marvin Mills,  
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*collaborative piano*  
James Harp,  
*collaborative piano/*  
*Artistic Director of Maryland Opera*




from joining in the discussion (which she called “a subtle form of torture” for someone who loves to engage in conversation on these topics). Follow-up questions were posed only if a teacher asked for clarification.

The book is divided into three sections. Part 1, “Vocal Concepts,” explores technical elements like alignment, breath, diction, and use of imagery. Part 2, “Training Singers: Practical, Artistic, and Professional Development,” examines what occurs in a typical lesson, how to guide student practice, and how to build artistry, among other topics. Part 3, “Teachers’ Professional Training,” delves into each teacher’s own voice training, explores how teachers stay current in their information and instruction, and inquires as to what attributes they feel typify an outstanding or exemplary voice teacher.

*A Spectrum of Voices* is a quick but engaging cover-to-cover read, especially considering that each teacher’s response to each individual question is generally only one to five paragraphs long. But it can also be used as a reference book to be frequently revisited when seeking ideas on specific topics. The updated second edition assures that the information provided is both current and grounded in tradition. In this way, the book serves as a historical record of teaching philosophies from the recent past as well as a chronicle of how teaching has changed (or, in some cases, stayed the same) over the years.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Van Doren once said, “The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.” Both *Great Teachers on Great Singing* and *A Spectrum of Voices* reveal diverse approaches and opinions that outstanding teachers have chosen in order to help individual singers discover their unique voices. Rice and Blades are to be credited for compiling and presenting so many important pedagogical paths and perspectives.

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