

Karen Hall, Associate Editor

So You Want to Sing?

Brian Manternach



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[Associate Editor's Note: In 2012, in partnership with Roman Littlefield Publishers, NATS launched an exciting and ambitious series of voice pedagogy books that includes online resources entitled *So You Want to Sing*. As independent studio teachers, many of you encounter students who want to sing many different styles of music. Each book in the innovative series offers a comprehensive overview of a particular style of singing from jazz to blues to music theater. I authored the first book in the series, *So You Want to Sing Music Theater: A Guide for Professionals*. As a result of writing the book, I was interviewed by Brian Manternach for *Classical Singer* magazine.¹ His interview is reprinted with slight modifications below. The magazine article also included his review of the publication, which is not included here.]

SO YOU WANT TO SING?

A NEW SERIES OF BOOKS HOPES to shed light on the techniques needed to sing in styles outside of the classical genres.

Arguably, the most uncomfortable part of the learning process arises when new information conflicts with previously held beliefs. When this occurs, we are forced to make a decision: change direction (enthusiastically or begrudgingly), remain skeptical until thoroughly convinced, or simply resist, dismiss, and stick to your guns.

Vocal technique has often relied on practices that have been passed down from studio to studio, sometimes harking back to master teachers of bygone eras. It is not surprising that teachers are often hesitant to embrace instruction that may go against trusted, longstanding traditions. To do so could feel like betraying a teacher or method that otherwise has brought success.

The techniques required to sing Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) have stirred up controversy among voice pedagogues for years. In some cases, insistent adherence to outmoded beliefs, despite ongoing evidence to the contrary, unfortunately has stunted productive dialogue and delayed widespread understanding on the matter. Moving beyond a current way of thinking need not be done flippantly. But when a reasonable alternative is carefully explained by those with credibility, we are all served by embracing the innovation rather than fear the change.

This pioneering spirit is the motivation behind a new series of books designed to explore the styles, techniques, repertoire, and performance practices behind CCM singing.

Journal of Singing, September/October 2015
Volume 72, No. 1, pp. 83–86
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National Association of Teachers of Singing

The National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) sponsored the books and chose Karen Hall as both series editor and author of the first book, *So You Want to Sing Music Theater: A Guide for Professionals*. Her primary purpose is to remove the unknown and help singers and teachers explore these genres with confidence and passion while encouraging sounds that are both stylistically appropriate and sustainable from a vocal health perspective. She does so with the blessing and shared resources of NATS, an organization that has long been a leader in the field of voice pedagogy.

With her book on music theater, Hall hopes to clarify certain false assumptions she used to believe herself. “I think probably the biggest misconception, and it is changing, is that any sort of nonclassical singing—belt-ing—is unhealthy and will ruin your voice,” she says. “That certainly is what I was taught in my younger years, and that’s just been patently disproven.”

The emphasis NATS places on voice science is an important reason Hall feels confident about her assertions. “Voice science has been so helpful in helping us understand, what is healthy singing? What’s going on in classical singing? What’s going on in CCM singing? [It] put a lot of those misconceptions to rest,” she says.

While in the not so distant past NATS may have been seen as resistant to nonclassical ways of singing, the organization has taken a decided turn toward providing reliable information to those interested in CCM styles. This move has not been lost on Hall, who says, “National Association of Teachers of Singing doesn’t say National Association of Classical Teachers of Singing. So if we’re going to call ourselves that, we need to mean it.” Hall took an intentionally collaborative approach to the book, consulting colleagues, mentors, and known authorities to find the most pertinent and effective information. This was especially important considering that her own background had largely been within the classical world. With undergraduate and graduate degrees in vocal performance from the University of Houston and additional study at the Mozarteum Summer Academy in Salzburg, she is a five time Metropolitan Opera Regional Finalist who has performed across the U.S. in opera, operetta, oratorio, recitals, and chamber music.

Hall always had an appreciation for music theater, but when she was hired to teach voice to music theater majors at the Boston Conservatory, she recognized how

little prepared she actually was. “I’ll never forget the first few lessons I had with these students,” she says. “We had very experienced young people coming in there singing and what I discovered right off the bat was they used terms and made sounds and I didn’t have a clue—and I’m the teacher!”

Initially, she followed her first impulse of “imposing” a classical sound and technique on the students, believing that to be the only healthy way of singing. But as she continued working, she began to change her mind. “I had been a singer and a teacher long enough [that] I realized, for the most part, what they’re doing is healthy [and] functional—just different.”

When Hall began pursuing doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, she decided to write a teaching guide for music theater pedagogy as her dissertation. “I was determined to find a topic that had meaning, that I was interested in, and that would have a life after I did my dissertation,” she says. “I knew instinctively [that music theater] was going to explode on college campuses, as it has.”

One technical element Hall discusses in *So You Want to Sing Music Theater* is the importance of developing and strengthening the head voice, especially for females. This is necessary for numerous reasons. First, there are many occasions in music theater where a head voice-dominant sound is appropriate, and a “belt” would be as out of place as it would be in opera. In fact, there are entire categories of music theater where head voice-dominant singing is the norm.

Second, Hall is adamant that a healthy head voice is necessary for longterm healthy belting. “The best female belters I’ve ever taught have extraordinarily developed, healthy head registers—without exception,” she says. “The healthier that head voice register is, the healthier their belt.”

In her teaching studio, one of her first approaches is to listen for issues that may indicate inefficiencies in the upper register, like the presence of raspiness, a lack of clarity, or too much effort while singing. “Then I ask myself, ‘How are they creating the sound?’” she says. “Is it a vocal fold adjustment they’re making or is it a resonance adjustment—or is it a lot of both? Where I find they can get into the most trouble is when they’re not relying enough on resonance adjustment. That’s where the pushing and the tightness comes from.”

Hall relates the story of Marisha Wallace, her former student at East Carolina University. Wallace came to Hall's studio quite proficient in belting, but with a head voice that was "in trouble." Hall carefully explained to Wallace that they needed to step back and spend at least a semester just working on the head register before they started to do any belt singing. While Hall knew she was asking her student for significant trust and patience, Wallace took the time and did the work. The results speak for themselves, as Wallace recently made her Broadway debut in *Aladdin*. "I truly don't think she would have lasted if she hadn't stopped and strengthened," Hall says.

Like operatic singers, Hall believes music theater singers also fall into a particular *Fach*. "You have mezzo belters and soprano belters, in my opinion. The adjustments are a little bit different," she says. In fact, some of her current research involves taking a closer look at the "high belt" range that is becoming increasingly common in contemporary pop and rock style music theater.

While Hall's book specifically addresses singing for music theater, each successive text in the *So You Want to Sing* series will take on a new CCM genre and will be written by an acknowledged specialist in each particular field. For instance, book two, *So You Want to Sing Rock 'n' Roll*, is written by Matthew Edwards, assistant professor of voice and voice pedagogy at Shenandoah Conservatory. Jan Shapiro, chair of voice at Berklee College of Music, will write book three, *So You Want to Sing Jazz*. In each book, readers will find a consistent look and layout. Though some elements may change slightly due to the requirements of each genre, Hall is intentionally keeping the books uniform for ease of use.

In addition, each book in the series will contain two chapters written by guest authors. Scott McCoy, who holds a DMA and is professor of voice and pedagogy at the Ohio State University, writes a chapter addressing voice science. The other guest chapter focuses on vocal health and is written by Wendy DeLeo LeBorgne, PhD, CCCSLP, director of both the Blaine Block Institute for Voice Analysis and Rehabilitation in Dayton, Ohio, and the Professional Voice Center of Greater Cincinnati.

For years, instructional texts on the voice have included CDs so readers can hear the sounds discussed in the pages or even sing along with guided exercises. Hall has opted against this component, however, in

favor of links to the NATS website where audio clips have been uploaded. "The reason we didn't include a CD is you're stuck. Once you do it, you do it," she says. "With the online portion at NATS, it takes people to the website, and we can change it and do whatever we want at any time."

The website dedicated to *So You Want to Sing Music Theater* shares vocal exercises Hall has used with her students and those she has collected from other CCM teachers, including Robert Edwin, Jeannette LoVetri, Elisabeth Howard, Howard Austin, and Mary Saunders-Barton (who authors the book's foreword). As information is shared and as research reveals new and more efficient ways of singing in these styles, the website will adjust to stay current and bring the most relevant information to the public.

Hall acknowledges that the *So You Want to Sing* project is a significant undertaking and, as such, cannot provide all the answers. But she believes that as the discussion continues and begins to involve more people, the information shared through the series will only improve. "It's a good start that's going to get a lot better," she says. "And I just keep remembering that."

She also understands that she has volunteered to be a bit of a guinea pig, to "stick her neck out" and take a shot at this controversial subject. But that did not deter her efforts. "I just went for it," she says. "It's just important to me, the whole topic. I'm just so glad this is finally happening."

Ultimately, she hopes the series will give singers and teachers "permission" to begin exploring the world of music that is available to us all, even if it is outside our preferred genre. "All music matters. It all has a place and it's all important," she says. "If I can do my little part—and that's how I look at this project, to help that come in to be—then I'm very happy. I feel like I made a very big difference."

NOTE

1. Brian Manternach, "So You Want to Sing?" *Classical Singer* 27, no. 10 (December 2014): 42-45.

Brian Manternach, tenor, is on the voice faculty of the University of Utah's Department of Theatre. He has made solo appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and South Bend Symphony, among others, and made his European operatic

debut as Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* for the Oper im Park festival in Sankt Anton am Arlberg, Austria. For two seasons, he served as apprentice-artist at the Skylight Opera Theatre in Milwaukee.

Manternach has presented lectures and workshops for the National Center for Voice and Speech, the University of Utah's Voice Disorders Center and the Philosophy Club, the Utah Theatre Association, and the Catholic Diocese of Salt Lake City. He has been a vocal consultant for broadcast journalists and members of the political and corporate worlds. He is currently president of the Northern Utah chapter of NATS.

A writer for *Classical Singer* since 2006, he is the author of "The Singer's Library" book review column.

Originally from Iowa, his degrees in voice performance include a BA from St. John's University/College of St. Benedict of Minnesota, an MM from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and a DM from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Previous teaching appointments include the University of Notre Dame, Indiana University South Bend, and Juan Diego Catholic High School.

In 2006 **Karen Hall** graduated from Columbia University, Teachers College, with a Doctor of Education degree, having earned Bachelor and Master of Music degrees in vocal performance from the University of Houston. Additional study in operetta was completed at the Mozarteum Summer Academy in Salzburg, Austria. The College Music Society, the

Voice Symposium, and the Texoma NATS Artist Series have recognized Karen's doctoral research and subsequent teaching guide concerning music theater voice pedagogy. Most recently, NATS and Roman & Littlefield Publishers invited her to write the book on music theater singing as part of their innovative series titled *So You Want to Sing*, a collection of pedagogy books encompassing all styles of singing. She served as the Series Editor for the entire project from 2013-2015. In 1995 Karen was chosen to participate in the NATS Intern program, she has served on the NATS Board of Directors—Boston Chapter, and on the Board of the New York Singing Teachers Association (NYSTA). Currently, she is the Associate Editor for "The Independent Teacher" column in the *Journal of Singing* and Vice-President of the Rio Grande Chapter. A versatile performer, Karen has performed in opera, operetta, concert, oratorio, recital, chamber music, and music theater throughout the United States, most notably on the PBS special master class, with the Seattle Opera and the Seattle Symphony. She is five-time Metropolitan Opera Regional Finalist and has won awards from the Texas Federation of Music Clubs, the Vocal Arts Foundation in San Francisco, and the Eleanor Anderson Lieber Awards. Karen lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico and teaches in her private studio *Songwerks* and serves as the Interim Chair, Fine Arts Department and Interim Director, Music Program at Northern New Mexico University. Previously, she has been a faculty member at the Crane School of Music/SUNY Potsdam, the Boston Conservatory, the Berklee College of Music in Boston, and New York University

PUBLICATION DEADLINES

Vol. 72 No. 3
Jan/Feb 2016

Vol. 72 No. 4
Mar/Apr 2016

Vol. 72 No. 5
May/June 2016

Vol. 73 No. 1
Sept/Oct 2016

Vol. 73 No. 2
Nov/Dec 2016

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Issue to be received by subscribers approximately

13 Jan 2016	6 Mar 2016	7 May 2016	4 Sept 2016	5 Nov 2016
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