

# The Singer's Library

## A Systematic Approach to Studio Voice Teaching

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



**A new publication focuses on the five major vocal systems and works to identify technical challenges and provide corrective measures.**

Oxford's [lexico.com](https://www.lexico.com) defines the word "systematic" as "done or acting according to a fixed plan or system; methodical." In *A Systematic Approach to Voice: The Art of Studio Application*, however, author Kari Ragan clearly states that the approach she outlines in her new book is neither "fixed" nor part of a set methodology.

In the following interview, Ragan discusses the inspiration for this 2020 Plural Publishing release. She explains her emphasis on the process of singing and describes how the systematic template she offers allows both teachers and students more freedom than is often found within immutable methodologies.

**In the preface, you relate that when you were in the throes of pursuing a singing career, you were not yet passionate about voice science since you didn't truly understand its application. When did that change for you?**

It was a series of life events that seemed to come together at once, including working on my DMA,

becoming a NATS member, and coming into contact with Dr. Scott McCoy's book *Your Voice: An Inside View* [the most recent edition was featured in the March/April 2020 issue of *Classical Singer*]. I'd been singing and teaching professionally for well over 15 years at that point, but never with an eye on a science-informed approach. I went to Indiana University, where the focus was on a performing career, and then spent my post-collegiate years studying with the renowned Ellen Faull, who was an amazing teacher. But everything was focused on a traditional approach to learning to sing.

I remember seeing Dr. McCoy speak at a regional NATS conference about specific muscles of dominance with regard to registration and I thought to myself, "We're going there as a teaching profession? How cool. Facts!" I've never looked back.



Brian Manternach



Kari Ragan

Dr. McCoy's book outlines principles of voice production for the singing teacher. He makes this information accessible while not requiring one to be tied into Scott McCoy himself. The teacher must still explore their approach to the application of the science-based knowledge.

Since I was already an experienced teacher, it allowed me to adapt my approach through personal creativity and flexibility. It did not require me to adhere to another's methodology. That's what hooked me—facts and a lack of methodology that I needed to follow. My book, hopefully, provides guidance in the direction of application; a sort of part two to Dr. McCoy's book, if I might be so bold as to align myself in that way with his seminal work.

**How did that both influence you as a teacher and impact the systematic approach you advocate in your book?**

It sparked something in me, and I became voracious in learning facts about voice function and vocal health. I had always been mystified by conversations about, for example, different teachers' technical approaches to breathing for singing. In Dr. McCoy's book, and many other books which focused on voice science, I found concrete answers to longstanding questions. There was no mythology—rather, facts about how the mechanics of singing work. Of course, one still needs to figure out the application of that information.

Additionally, I had begun my work in affiliation with a medical voice team as a singing voice specialist, so this information resonated with me even more. Having a common language and knowledge base with my medical colleagues was imperative.

I know Dr. McCoy wasn't the first to title chapters by the voice systems (respiration, phonation, registration, articulation, resonance), nor the first to explore science-informed voice pedagogy. But his book so very clearly provides the necessary information within that systematic context, and that resonated with me. Without even knowing it, over time I realized I was "diagnosing" vocal challenges through a systematic approach. During lessons, I would assess which of the



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## Book Review

In *A Systematic Approach to Voice: The Art of Studio Application*, author Kari Ragan devotes most of the book's space to five chapters that cover the main elements of singing: respiration, phonation, registration, articulation, and resonance. As the title implies, the chapters systematically break down each element by providing an overview of physiology and function, followed by "Teacher Takeaways" of how the science informs the pedagogy—and, finally, an "Application" section of author-recommended vocal exercises designed to strengthen these particular aspects of a singer's technique.



Clearly on the side of "evidence-based voice pedagogy" (a term the author herself coined in a 2018 *Journal of Singing* article), Ragan also understands that an in-depth knowledge of voice science is not itself sufficient for successful studio teaching. For instance, she acknowledges the lack of consensus regarding the theories and terminology related to registration.

Therefore, although she encourages teachers to find "science-informed strategies" for registration, she allows for the reality that doing so may still involve using terms that are influenced by sensation rather than function. Similarly, she points out that although historical pedagogy is "fraught with misinformation and folklore," it can still be the basis used to build an effective singing technique.

Working to address all aspects of voice technique during studio lessons can sometimes be overwhelming. As teachers' ears become more attuned to recognizing inefficiencies in their students' singing, focusing on issues only when they become problematic can prevent building a technique that is well rounded and thorough. *A Systematic Approach to Voice* offers a process for developing each of the major areas of vocal technique, both in relative isolation and while being mindful of how each element functions within the entirety of the vocal system.

Rather than following a predetermined route that rigidly adheres to one teacher's methodology, Ragan provides sound strategies that can be flexibly implemented in various ways, allowing each teacher to use *science* to explore the *art* of studio application. —Brian Manternach

voice systems I perceived the dominant issue to be residing in.

Of course, that's a huge overstatement, because the systems work independently and interdependently. However, this approach provided me with a strategy for teaching using a concrete framework rather than a guessing game. Singers made changes more quickly and—more importantly—I realized my teaching became more effective because students had clearer strategies to take into their own practice sessions.

Because I'm both an academic and an independent studio teacher, I could foresee how the book would be useful for both studio application and teaching a second semester voice pedagogy course. Each of the five systematic chapters provides an overview of what would generally be taught in a first semester pedagogy course. The next section of each systematic chapter is titled "Teacher Takeaways" and highlights key points and the importance of understanding voice mechanics from the overview.

A main focus of the book is the application of those principles—using vocal exercises framed within a systematic approach. The book is intended for singers, teachers of singing (academic or independent), or choral directors who want a science-informed approach to the application of guiding vocal efficiency.

**You describe your book as "an organizational template" that frames strategies and vocal exercises within "a systematic approach." Can you explain how this is different from a methodology?**

Great question. I even begin chapter one with "This book does not advocate a particular *method* of teaching singing." I think the difference lies in semantics and perception. I did not want the book to be perceived as a method I was selling or that what I present in the book is the "be-all and end-all" to how one should teach singing. It provides an approach that allows for a great deal of independence and flexibility from the teacher. They will feel armed with science-informed strategies from the overview to guide their approach to application.

In the Wild, Wild West of teaching singing—which has escalated even more with the inception of the Internet—I just have a negative reaction to the word "method." I don't teach a method. I stand on the shoulders of giants in the field of voice science and historical pedagogy to whom I am indebted; anything I've learned comes from them, and I just hope to share that wealth of knowledge in a meaningful way.

**In the first chapter, you write that when goals and strategies are clearly established as part of a systematic approach, students are more able to replicate the successful aspects of their voice**

**lessons in their individual practice. In this sense, you believe that teachers aren't teaching students how to *sing* so much as how to *practice*. Do you feel that a systematic approach essentially helps students become their own teachers?**

It enables students to feel like a collaborator in the process. It empowers them to explore and experiment on their own while having informed strategies to guide their journey. As a professional singer, no matter how advanced we become, there is always a need for the eyes and ears of a teacher and coach. I always say to students, "I'm not worried that you won't need me anymore, but I do want you to have a sense of autonomy."

**There is a lot of emphasis in the book on embracing "the process" of singing since, as you say, "There is no point of arrival for the singing artist, rather an ever-evolving destination." Is a systematic approach to voice appropriate for singers of all skill levels and at any stage along their journeys?**

I love that you noticed that emphasis, because I do want singers to embrace the process whether they are young/emerging singers, avocational, injured,

or going through a vocal change, such as the aging voice. When I was a young singer, I was always looking for the technical answer—that one thing that would lead me to greatness as a singer. That's just not how it works. And, in actuality, I love the process of learning to sing; voice lessons and coachings are some of my fondest memories.

So, yes, the systematic approach is for every skill level of singer at any stage along their journey. I have many students who have studied with me for 10 to 20 years who are professional singers. We frequently talk about coming back to each system and working through the exercises as a baseline of voice production. Even as they evolve as singers and are challenged by new or more advanced repertoire, they can access baseline or neutral vocal production and won't veer off the railroad track too far.

*Brian Manternach's bio can be found on page 66.*

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