



# SO YOU WANT TO SING?

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

*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 reaching 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 has otherwise brought success.

The techniques required to sing Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) have stirred up controversy among vo-

cal pedagogues for years. In some cases, insistent adherence to outmoded beliefs, despite ongoing evidence to the contrary, has unfortunately 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 fearing 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.

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 vocal pedagogy.

With her book on music theatre, 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—belting—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

## Book Review:

### 'So You Want to Sing Music Theater: A Guide for Professionals'

With the new publication of the *So You Want to Sing* series of books dedicated to vocal techniques for Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM), the authors have a daunting task before them. But if the first book, *So You Want to Sing Music Theater: A Guide for Professionals*, is indicative of where the series is headed, this will be a major contribution to the conversation of healthy singing across genres.

Author Karen Hall has intentionally written her book for a diverse audience. The tone of the writing is user friendly and appropriate for beginners, while the substance is suitable for those with more advanced study on the subject. Singers and teachers new to music theatre singing will find plenty within its pages to explore while those more experienced with CCM techniques will have a valuable body of information to compare and contrast to their own practices.

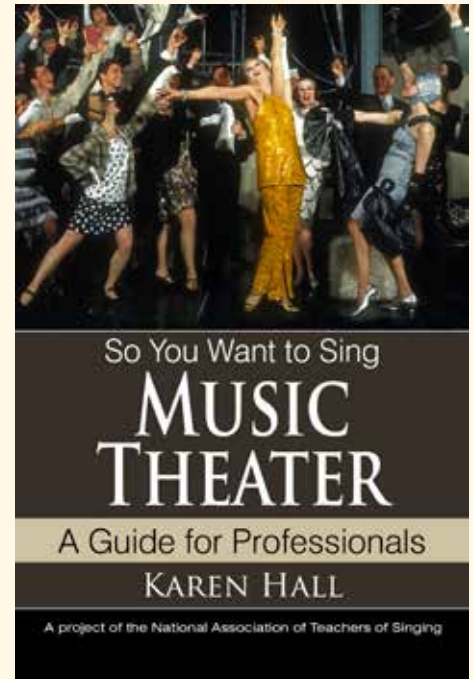
The authority NATS brings to the project cannot be overlooked, especially since its network of resources in this arena has grown significantly. A glance through any recent issue of the *Journal of Singing*, a NATS publication, will show a considerable amount of

space dedicated to CCM singing. In addition, the CCM-based workshops presented at NATS regional and national conferences are increasingly popular and well-attended.

Many books related to CCM singing thus far lack in-depth discussion of physiology. Many are in workbook format with exercises and CDs as guides but without much discussion on actual vocal function. Hall's new text provides an alternative that, with the backing of a stalwart academic institution like NATS, may bring peace of mind to those who have resisted these techniques up to this point.

If 150 pages seems thin to accomplish all the book sets out to do, keep in mind that the explanation and description of exercises (including separate sections on physical preparation, breathing, phonation, resonance, registration, and articulation) is found on the NATS website rather than in the book ([www.nats.org/Music\\_Theater\\_-\\_Resources.html](http://www.nats.org/Music_Theater_-_Resources.html)). Audio clips of vocalises and examples of different styles of music theatre singing are located on the website as well.

Anything the book may lack is made up for in its potential as the series moves forward. If the online component is updated as intended



and if the plan to reissue the book periodically in order to remain current is maintained, there is nothing keeping it from becoming a standard resource in voice studios everywhere.

At long last, this is the resource so many of us have been waiting for.

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 non-classical 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 Organization 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 col-

leagues, 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 theatre, but when she was hired to teach voice to music theatre majors at 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 theatre 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 theatre] 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 theatre 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 theatre where head voice-dominant singing is the norm.

Second, Hall is adamant that a healthy head voice is necessary for long-term 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 come 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 theatre 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 theatre.

While Hall’s book specifically addresses singing for music theatre, 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 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, CCC-SLP, 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




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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 an-

swers. 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 to be—then I'm very happy. I feel like I made a very big difference."

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