

# THE SINGER'S LIBRARY



## ARE YOU READY TO ROCK?

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

*The second book in the So You Want to Sing series aims to get your voice rockin' and rollin'.*

**M**atthew Edwards has always been a rocker. After playing in a rock band in high school and following his father's level-headed advice ("go to college or get out of the house"), he decided to major in voice performance, figuring that route would help him develop his abilities to pursue the music he loved.

"I found out that wasn't necessarily the case," Edwards says.

Discovering a definite lack of choices for those wishing to pursue serious study in genres outside of classical singing, Edwards's circuitous path through music convinced him to write *So You Want to Sing Rock 'n' Roll: A Guide for Professionals*, the second book in the *So You Want to Sing* series sponsored by the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS). Edwards is currently an assistant professor of voice at Shenandoah University and is a music theater styles specialist (pop, rock, country, R&B), so he is a logical choice to author the book. He is also the associate director of the Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Vocal Pedagogy Institute.

While working toward the operatic career that his college education had prepared him for, Edwards began to once again dabble in the rock music he had always loved. He insists he received phenomenal instruction at the Cleveland Institute of Music, but acknowledges it simply was not designed to make him proficient as a rock vocalist. "What I realized is that [despite] all this great training I've had and having studied with some really excellent teachers who worked wonders for my classical voice, it wasn't translating over into the rock as well," he says.

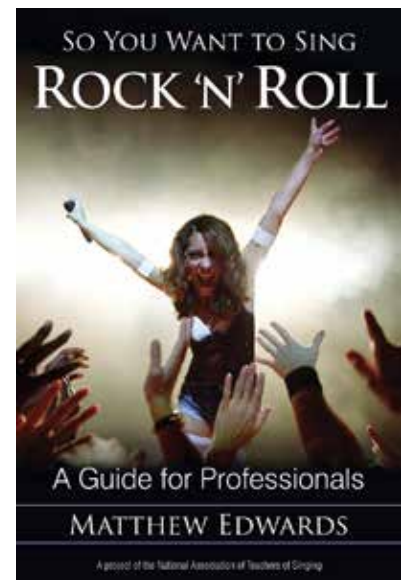
A man on a mission, Edwards began seeking information wherever he could find it about how to sing in the rock genres. "As I started to dissect things and I started reading on my own and exploring," he says, "I started finding that there are a lot

of things that can be very different. What I was doing wasn't wrong, it was just very specific to that genre and it wasn't helping me immediately cross over and do this other thing."

As a graduate teaching assistant at Louisiana State University, Edwards began to implement some of the techniques he had been uncovering in his search. "I really started experimenting and playing with some of these new things I was reading and finding out and seeing how it worked," he says. "It was really interesting to see the results when I thought outside of the box."

This curiosity led him to the NATS intern program, where he worked with Scott McCoy and Jeanie LoVetri, an experience he describes as life changing. "Meeting Jeanie and realizing there are other people out there who are really using science to try and break all of this down got me hooked."

Edwards observed that the books he had read about rock singing were often not taken seriously by many within the academic community since, as reflections of each author's hands-on experience, the books were not necessarily based on traditional, scholarly research. While supporting the validity of the real-world-tested methods advocated by these authors, he felt



there was room for a book that intentionally incorporates elements of voice science as they apply to rock singing, especially as that information has become more readily available. Keeping this element a central aspect of his book, he hopes to convince singers and teachers that the techniques are indeed in line with both voice science as well as hands-on experience. "It's not just haphazard," he says. "[Rock singing] can be done in a healthy way. There are a lot of us who care about the voice and we're trying to protect it. We're just trying to help people express themselves in the art form that connects most to them and their being."

While reliable resources on CCM singing are significantly more plentiful now than when he first started looking, Edwards notes that he initially had to do a lot of reading between the lines of the more traditional texts in order to

make useful applications. As an example, he cites a book he currently uses in his teaching, *Respiratory Function in Singing* by Thomas J. Hixon. While at first glance it seems this information is geared only for classical singing, it can help teachers and students draw conclusions about other styles.

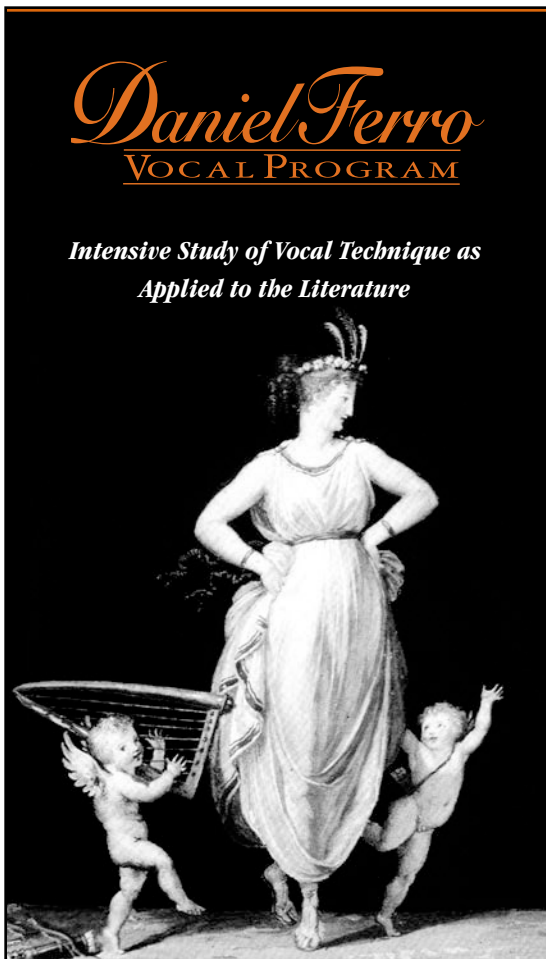
"[Hixon] talks about how lower breaths engage tracheal pull and open up and slightly abduct the vocal folds," he says. "Well, all of those things are great for classical singers and that makes a lot of sense . . . [but] a CCM singer's larynx is supposed to be a little bit higher—breathing low drags it down—so that's the opposite of what I need."

Edwards also indicates that for female voices, much of CCM singing involves carrying a chest registration higher in the range than classical singers do, which necessitates the vocal folds being tighter together—more adducted. "Thomas Hixon

just told me that breathing low is going to pull the vocal folds apart," he says, "so that's counterproductive to what I need."

Another common misperception he discovered about rock singing is that it is consistently sung at loud dynamic levels. Edwards is frequently reminding his students that what they are listening to in recordings is a finished, studio-mixed sound. "The younger generation listens to music in their headphones all day long," he says. "They get this big, massive sound in their head and then when they go to sing, they want to make this big massive sound."

To explain, he devotes an entire chapter to how audio enhancement technology works and ways it may best be used in rock singing. "I think that's why it's so important to introduce the microphone concept to that demographic—to help them understand that these people aren't singing that loud naturally."



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(For a demonstration, watch this video from Edwards's YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQgBNFU1n-w&list=UUHuH3XfVqDbK\\_O-IzLQIeqA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQgBNFU1n-w&list=UUHuH3XfVqDbK_O-IzLQIeqA).)

Due to the long history of classical singing, Edwards believes the genre has fairly well established ideals of sound quality. Rock singing, on the other hand, places a higher value on individuality and exploring less traditional sounds. "In the pop/rock genre, people are trying to sound like themselves," he says. "What record executives are looking for is the next unique thing. They don't even know what it is yet."

Any technical direction, then, must honor each singer's individual sound while at the same time build vocal capabilities. "If we try to get everybody to sing in the exact same way, we're potentially taking away those things that make them unique," he says. "And so that's where we have to help find what works for them and allows them to stay healthy and—even if it defies our own reasoning and it doesn't make any sense how they get away with it—if they can do it and people like it and it doesn't hurt, I say it's good."

Edwards feels much of this work can be done through self-exploration while following some overriding principles of vocal health and function. But students must also know that "When it stops working and it starts hurting, you need to

come talk to me and we'll figure it out," he says. "I'm not going to squeeze you into a box. I'm going to help you find you."

Encouraging students to find their own particular voices can mean they sometimes make sounds teachers might not initially understand. "I have students who can make sounds that I can't make," he says. "What I usually tell them is 'Fine, if you can sing that way for a half hour to an hour and you still have a voice left at the end and you can still glide up and down and it sounds the way it should, then OK.'"

Knowing that the book is sponsored by NATS, Edwards had an initial sense of who his intended audience might be. In that regard, it is not necessarily meant for singers who have little to no experience with any kind of singing. "I think I was writing it for the people who already had some knowledge and wouldn't necessarily need to run to a teacher to understand all of this," he says.

As with all the books in the *So You Want to Sing* series, a second edition is planned to continue to provide updated information but also to tweak the format once they have a clearer sense of who is reading the books and what information readers most need.

Edwards was specific, though, in not trying to make it too much of a side-by-side juxtaposition of classical singing versus rock singing. "In one of the earlier versions, I tried to do a lot more comparison to classical stuff to tie it together," he says. "Some of the feedback I got from people was to focus on what it is instead of trying to compare it to what it's not."

Encouraged by the direction NATS has taken in recent years to help promote understanding of all the CCM styles of singing, Edwards also realizes there are many voice teachers and singers who still resist these techniques. Some of that could be due to preconceived notions of what constitutes a healthy sound or perhaps a lack of exposure to recent research.

"I think the reason that people are against it is they don't understand all of the findings that have been presented in the last 10 years," he says. "Once you have time to present that information in a nonconfrontational way, I find that a lot of them go, 'Oh, this isn't as dangerous as I thought it was.'"

Knowing that students determined to sing rock will probably do so, even if it is against the wishes of their voice teachers, he believes any encouragement they receive to sing the styles in a healthy way is beneficial. "If they want to sing rock 'n' roll, let them sing rock 'n' roll," he says, "and be their supervisor and help them understand."

In fact, while practicing the techniques necessary for rock singing and building well-rounded, flexible voices, Edwards regularly includes what many would consider to be aspects of classical technique. "I think that everybody should be doing cross-training," he says. "So, by that, if the sound that you like has a high laryngeal position, you need to learn how to sing in a lower laryngeal position as well, because otherwise you're



The poster for "Casentino Voice" features a scenic background of a valley with a castle. At the top, the title "Casentino Voice" is written in a red, cursive font. Below the title are two portrait photos: Valerie Girard on the left and James Gray on the right. Underneath the photos, the text reads: "Master classes, Voice lessons, Coaching, Performance" in red and black. Below that, it says "August 1 - 8, 2015 | Pratovecchio/Stia (AR) Italy". The main body of text describes the event: "Amidst the natural beauty of the Casentino Valley with its ancient country churches, castles, sanctuaries and panoramic views of the Apennine mountains, join soprano Valerie Girard and vocal coach/conductor James Gray for an intensive week of vocal training, culminating in a festival concert at the Castello di Porciano. For more information: [www.valeriegirard.com/masterclass](http://www.valeriegirard.com/masterclass) Email: [girardval@gmail.com](mailto:girardval@gmail.com)".



Edwards uses experiential learning as part of the process of teaching musical theatre performers to sing and perform like rock stars.

### Book Review: *So You Want to Sing Rock 'n' Roll: A Guide for Professionals*

The second book in the *So You Want to Sing* series, sponsored by the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), follows the format of the first volume, Karen Hall's—*So You Want to Sing Music Theater*. In writing the all-encompassing manual, author Matthew Edwards builds on the collaborative approach of the preceding volume by including several chapters and appendixes from guest authors to further bolster his already solid text. An assistant professor at Shenandoah University, Edwards has substantial credibility and is an established leader in the field of Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) singing techniques.

Scott McCoy's thorough and informative chapter on voice science is reprinted in its entirety from the first volume in the series (though it is curious that the title "Singing Music Theater and Voice Science" is unchanged for this book addressing rock singing).

The chapter "Vocal Health and the Rock Singer" by Wendy DeLeo LeBorgne includes several added paragraphs from the version published in volume one, including a new subsection entitled "Specific Vocal Wellness Concerns for the Rock Singer."

An appendix written by Kathryn Green addresses the troubling lack of consensus surrounding the term "bel canto" and the techniques that define "classical training."

Christina Howell's "Breathing for Singing" appendix carefully and thoughtfully outlines the breath-management strategies for rock singing and effectively explains how techniques designed for classical singers differ from those for rock singers. And Jonathan Flom's appendix on finding a consistent and marketable brand offers guidance and direction necessary for any serious endeavor, artistic or otherwise.

The book attempts to at least touch upon all the most important elements of a career in the rock industry and, as such, each chapter could easily be expanded into an entire tome unto itself. But in this volume, Edwards offers just enough on each subject to provide appropriate context and background to indulge the diverse audience of readers the work will undoubtedly attract.

To his credit, and in the spirit of collaboration in which the entire series is written, Edwards twice refers readers to Melissa Cross as the trusted authority on death metal "screamo" singing. Acknowledging that it would take more room than he was allotted to thoroughly understand this type of "vocal distortion," perhaps future editions would consider a guest chapter or an entire volume on this unique style of vocalism.

The book is enhanced by its online component, once again featuring videos, sound clips, and exercises to further guide vocal exploration.

Matthew Edwards and the *So You Want to Sing* series have made another significant addition to the quickly growing body of literature on CCM singing. Backed by NATS and steeped in the language of functional training, it has immediately become an authoritative text on rock 'n' roll singing. —*Brian Manternach*



going to get stuck . . . regardless of what style of singing you want to perform, you need to balance the system."

Realistically, he understands that even teachers who embrace the science and accept the techniques of CCM singing may still choose to not teach these styles.

"That's OK. There's nothing wrong with that," Edwards says. But he hopes these teachers will help guide students interested in singing CCM styles to teachers who are equally interested in teaching them.

"If we get to that point, I think it's fabulous," he says. "I think it's much better than when I asked and was told, 'No, that'll damage your voice.'"

Knowing what healthy CCM singing sounds like can take time for singers and teachers whose interest and study are primarily in classical genres. But the more informed teachers are about overall vocal function and how that applies to different styles of singing, the more they can offer their students.

"We know how [the voice] works, so let's teach it like we know how it works. And whatever exercise gets that particular student to the place they need to be, it's great," he says. "I think if you're using any technique for a functional purpose that meets the needs of that particular singer, then it's valid and worthy."

*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 of 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](mailto:bmantern@gmail.com). ©*