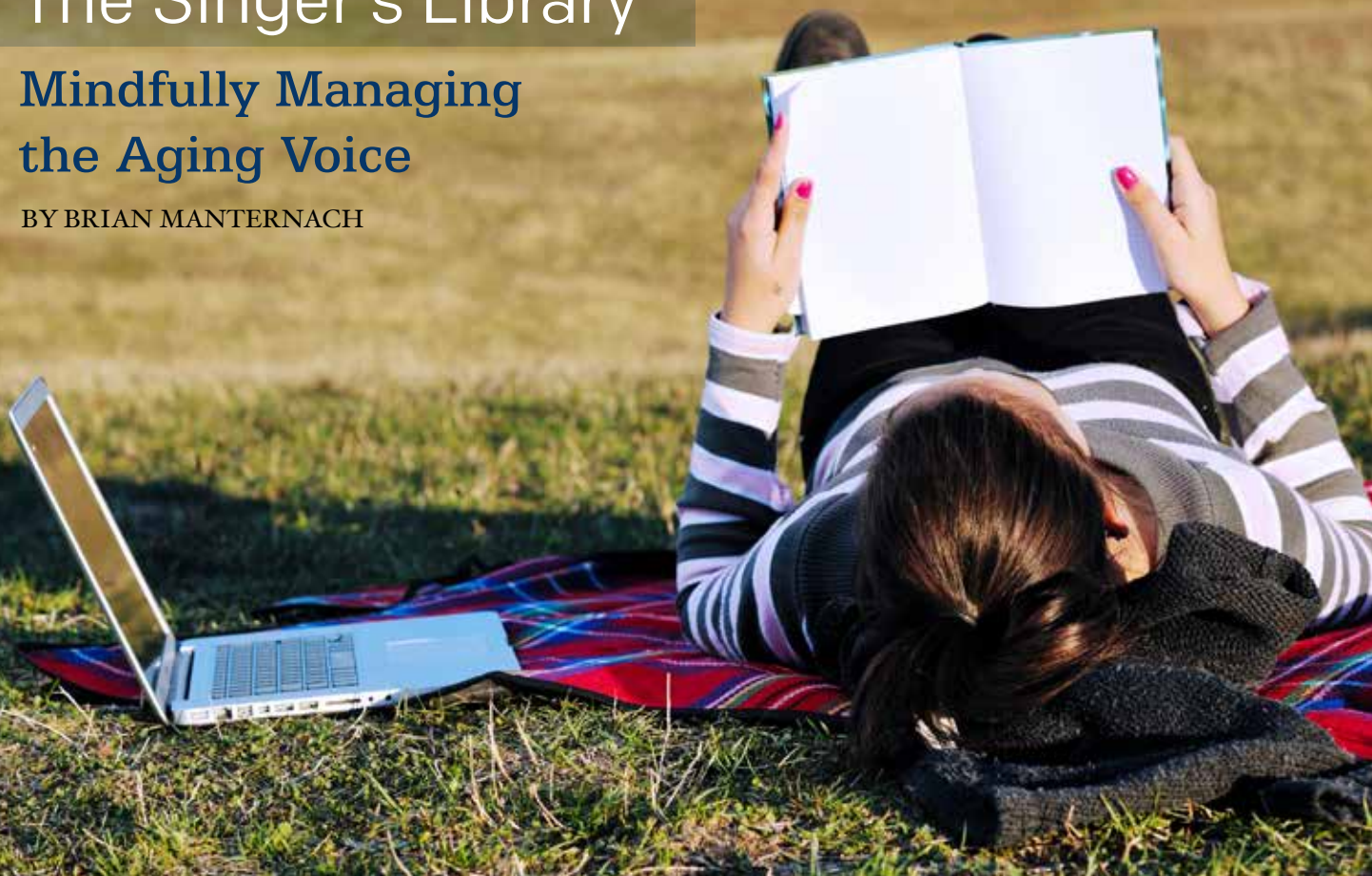


# The Singer's Library

## Mindfully Managing the Aging Voice

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



A new publication offers solutions and an increased perspective for maintaining a lifetime of singing.

**I**n Oscar Wilde's classic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the title character becomes despondent at the prospect of growing old. He declares that he would give his soul if only he could remain youthful forever. It seems that, even 130 years after Wilde's book was published, we still live in a society that values youth above all else.

In lieu of striking a "Dorienesque" deal with the devil, most of us will have to contend with the realities of aging. These changes can impact our minds, our bodies, and even our voices. What, then, should we expect from the aging process when it comes to vocal function, long-term career prospects as a singer, and our ability to enjoy singing as the years pass?

Author Martha Howe has compiled a team of authors to address these concerns in the new book *A User's Manual for the Aging Voice*, which she discusses in our interview.

### **What inspired you to write this book? Would you say the target audience is singers or voice teachers (or both)?**

Both—plus choir directors, actors, teachers, cantors, and anyone who needs their voice for their profession. The inspiration came from Noel McPherson [of Compton Publishing] during a conversation at the Voice Foundation symposium. He told me he would love to publish a book on the aging voice that wasn't too technical and would be broadly accessible. I was happy to take up the project. Being in my mid-60s, retired from the opera stage, and wrestling with my voice going rogue on me, I wanted to find out what was actually going on in there.



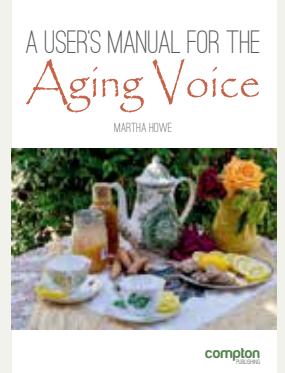
Brian Manternach

## Book Review

*A User's Manual for the Aging Voice* (Compton Publishing, 2018) brings the diverse backgrounds and experiences of eight voice professionals into one volume. The authors share stories of the age-related vocal struggles they have worked through in their own voices and in their decades of work as performers, clinicians, teachers, and scholars.

The book's primary author, Martha Howe, describes in the introduction that the first chapters outline common vocal changes known to occur as part of the aging process, including the voice-related hormonal effects of menopause. The middle chapters offer exercises and guidelines for stabilizing the voice, maintaining range, and continuing to enjoy singing as the years pass. The last chapters offer a shift in perspective, encouraging singers to view vocal changes as opportunities that allow them to explore new repertoire, discover new solutions, and evolve their expectations in ways that inspire an appreciation of "new vocal territory."

Modern media often present age-related news through a grim lens, warning of the impending frustrations, limitations, and resentments that come with lost youth. In *A User's Manual for the Aging Voice*, Howe and company eschew this ominous portrayal of aging and instead focus on how vocal function and the gratification that comes from singing can be maintained well into the later decades of life. As Howe writes, "Hopefully this book will assist you to enjoy your aging voice more, communicate more easily, and make music longer than you thought possible." —Brian Manternach



### **Besides your own chapters, you include guest chapters from seven other professionals with varied backgrounds and expertise. Why did you seek out these specific authors, and what do you feel their contributions add to the final published product?**

These seven collaborators bring a fascinating depth of knowledge and life experience, both as performers and as teachers, to their chapters. Of course, Barbara Fox DeMaio was the first person I asked as her doctoral thesis on the research around menopause is extremely important and informative. Brenda Smith had already published *Choral Pedagogy and the Older Singer* with Dr. Sataloff, and Karen Brunssen was in the middle of her book, *The Evolving Singing Voice: Changes Across the Lifespan*. These amazing women kindly summarized their work into individual chapters.

Singing Voice Specialist Sharon Radionoff's *The Vocal Instrument* captivated me, and she shares case studies of her treatment protocols with men and women with problems caused by aging. Powerhouse teacher, researcher, lecturer, and performer Lisa Popeil and I have had some fascinating discussions about our students' and our own aging voices. And Jennifer Trost gave an eye-opening presentation with Mary Saunders Barton at the 2016 NATS National Conference about the demands on her to continue performing

to keep her university position. Martha L. Randall is a deeply knowledgeable, excellent, and wise voice pedagogue and lecturer.

These multifaceted and multitalented women were willing to share their knowledge and the voice exercises they use regularly in their studios and clinics. I wanted the book to contain a variety of vocal exercises that work for all levels and all genders, plus tips, advice, and the insight that comes from experience.

### **In the first chapter, you describe how you used to have a mistrust of "too much science," believing that it did not relate directly to your work as a performer. But, as you get older, you actually find it helpful to know "what's under the hood." What do readers stand to gain from this part of the book?**

Why am I clearing my throat more? Why is my top range harder? Why does my throat seize up sometimes in the middle of a note or starting a vowel? What's going on for women between A3 and A4, the octave around middle C? Why is that such a minefield?

What happened to my breath control? Why do I swallow "wrong" and cough more when I eat or drink? What can I do about all of that? Although the answers are throughout the book, they all relate directly to "what's under the hood." The pictures

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are also a convenient reference for terms used throughout the book.

**Relating to women’s health, you cite statistics that indicate there is a lack of education about menopause in ob/gyn residency programs, and that close to 20 percent of medical residents consider themselves “barely comfortable” discussing or treating menopause. Do you believe this is why it can be difficult to find reliable information on the effects of menopause on singing? How do you feel this has impacted the singing community?**

The journey of menopause is unique to the individual, and Western medicine has traditionally looked for protocols and medications that are more “one size fits all.” That generalization is at the heart of the problem. Singers need to pay attention to their own bodies and track the changes. What is working and what isn’t?

Hormone replacement therapies and naturopath mimics may be a godsend to one singer and wreak havoc with another. Sometimes women can be prescribed androgens for energy or absorb them from a partner without knowing they will permanently lower your speaking and singing voice. Lack of knowledge can be treacherous. It is your body, your voice. Pay attention.

**In her chapter, Barbara Fox DeMaio points out that, although there is a prevalent perception that women have shorter singing careers than men do, she believes this is due to the profession placing more value on youth and beauty rather than an inability for women to vocally perform at a high level in their later years. What are**

**the effects of these kinds of industry/societal biases?**

This is a huge question and could make for several interesting doctoral theses. I can only speak from my own experience. Yes, especially with the advent of HD performances and close-ups, there has been a swing toward youth and beauty in the love interests. However, age is a plus and beauty a problem in character and most secondary roles.

From what I observed, career length was often determined by vocal technique, health, emotional and financial support, and the need to connect to family. There are female artists who have sailed through menopause, with or without hormone replacement therapy, and those whose energy and drive deserted them. Male artists do not have that forest to cut through.

**You also highlight that studies have shown that singing of any kind (in a group, in a choir, in lessons, privately, etc.) can reduce stress and help people feel better both emotionally and physically. Is this the overriding intention behind the book—to keep us all singing at every age and every stage so we can reap the benefits?**

Yes. Absolutely, yes. The more research is done, the more benefits are found for everyone. In the U.K., doctors can prescribe voice lessons. There is a reason singing and group singing has existed in every culture throughout known history and why it feels so good.

There is a theory that we sang before we spoke. Aboriginals speak of the song lines in the earth and of “singing them up” to activate them. Physicists tell us that we are composed of vibrating sound and light. Breathe and let that sound that surrounds and fills you be heard.

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Martha Howe