

# The Singer's Library: Class Voice

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

*A new text helps teachers explore efficient and effective implementation of the class voice format.*

In the opening pages of the 2018 book *So You Want to Sing for a Lifetime*, author Brenda Smith's dedication reads, "To Ronald G. Burrichter, an inspired lifelong singer and teacher." In Smith's 2019 book *Diction in Context*, she again acknowledges Burrichter, referring to him as her "best singing friend, who contributes his knowledge and insights to my work." In a new publication, *Class Voice: Fundamental Skills for Lifelong Singing* (Plural Publishing, 2022), Smith and Burrichter join forces as coauthors. This partnership is nothing new, however, considering they are faculty colleagues at the University of Florida and are also a married couple.

As they do in the book, they combine their voices in the interview below to discuss the "basics of singing," the benefits of learning to sing in a group setting, and the process they followed in this latest collaboration.

**You have both had long and varied careers as musicians and educators with expertise in many**

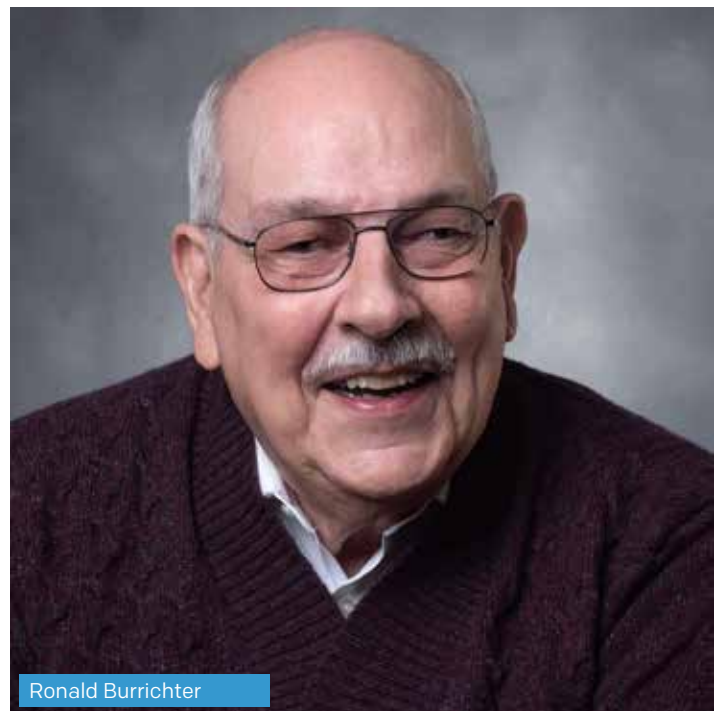
**subjects: diction, vocal pedagogy, choral directing, and studio voice, to name a few. Given those backgrounds, what in particular draws you to the class voice setting? What is special about learning to sing in this kind of environment?**

Ronald Burrichter taught voice skills in a class setting for instrumental music majors for a decade at the University of Florida. Brenda Smith taught class voice at the University of Maryland and Rowan University to nonmajors. Since 2004, we have been associated with the Oak Hammock Singers, a vocal ensemble of senior citizens residing in a continuing care retirement community near the University of Florida. In 2011, Burrichter and Smith together founded a group called "Sing for Life," an arts-in-medicine initiative intended to serve Parkinson's patients and their caregivers through voice-strengthening activities.

In all these activities, we have noticed how voice-building exercises aid voices and give a sense of well-being for each participant at any age. Our experience prompted



Brenda Smith



Ronald Burrichter

us to collect best practices between two covers. Our book, *Class Voice: Fundamental Skills for Lifelong Singing*, is designed to serve all age groups, voice types, and interests.

As far as what is special about learning to sing in this kind of environment, it is fun to sing with others! A voice class is an exploration of songs and musical ideas in a nonthreatening environment. Inexperienced singers find the class environment a boost for their confidence. They can observe the singing of others and receive positive feedback from their peers about their own vocal growth.

It is possible to sing with others to gather initial skills before having to sing alone. It is helpful to hear the responses of other singers as a means of finding one's own place in the world of singing. The group discussions are useful for the integration of basic concepts.

**Several times, you reference the four “basics of singing” as relaxation, posture, breathing, and resonance. Of course, singing is a complex activity involving many systems. Therefore, you could have included any number of additional elements, such as registration, articulation, and cognition. The most noticeable omission, however, is probably phonation, which many pedagogy texts discuss at length. Why did you decide not to include it as one of the “basics?”**

The “Basics of Singing” concept is understood as the foundation of voice building in the American choral community. The concept itself is associated with the work of the late Drs. Wilhelm Ehmann (1904–1989) and Frauke Haasemann (1922–1991), whose workshops and writings had a strong impact on choral singing in the United States between 1960 and 1991.

The steps begin with achieving physical and mental relaxation, preparing posture, activating breathing, and engaging the voice. In the textbook, the term “resonance” is used to mean “phonation,” or the connection of breath to sound. The first two steps build the basis for the vocal instrument, from which the vocal instrument is set into motion by breath engagement to create vocal tone for speech or song.

It is important to note that *Class Voice: Fundamental Skills for Lifelong Singing* is not a vocal pedagogy text, but a course plan for creating learning opportunities for beginning singers of all ages.

**Similarly, most books on singing do not include relaxation as one of the basic elements of singing. Why did you feel this was important to include?**

The singing voice is a human instrument. The condition of the singer's body and mind has a profound impact on the success of the voice. In our work in private and/or class

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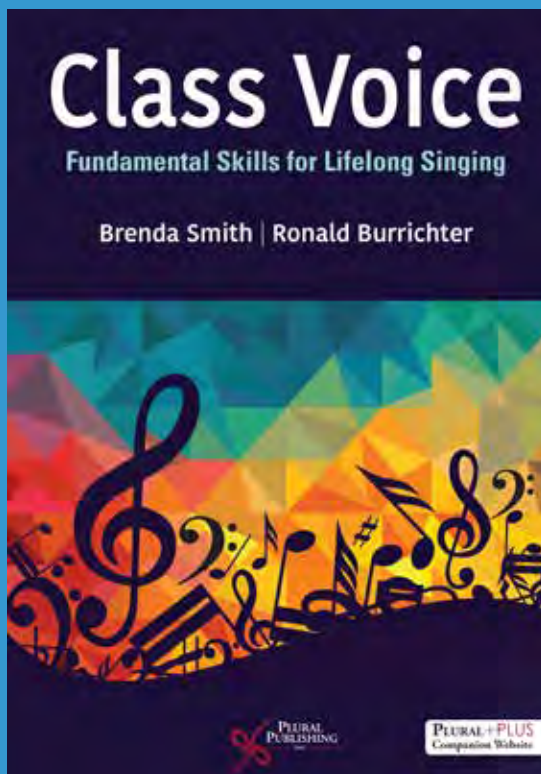
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## REVIEW

Well known author, musician, and physician Robert T. Sataloff sings the praises of *Class Voice: Fundamental Skills for Lifelong Singing* in the book's foreword. He highlights how the book is different from other texts on the same topic due to its flexible, open format that encourages teachers to use the information provided to design their own curriculum in the way they see fit. He also notes his appreciation for the authors' use of "evidence-based voice pedagogy" in a way that intentionally dispels many of the myths that can confuse beginning singers.

Sataloff and Brenda Smith are frequent collaborators, having previously cowritten two textbooks, *Choral Pedagogy* (now in its third edition) and *Choral Pedagogy and the Older Singer*. It is no surprise that he contributes a chapter to *Class Voice*, as well, titled "Anatomy and Physiology of the Voice."

The bulk of this newest book, however, is written by Smith and coauthor Ronald Burrichter, with each of them providing chapters of their own while also combining their efforts on cowritten chapters.

Given Smith's expertise, there is natural overlap in *Class Voice* with her previous publications through sections on diction, choral singing, vocal aging, and lifelong singing. In *Class Voice*,

however, these topics are presented with the needs of those in a group singing class at the forefront.

The book offers a variety of practical suggestions and advice for those teaching—or considering teaching—class voice. The authors provide guidelines for class presentations (with sample assessment forms), ideas for midterm projects, and sample templates for practice logs. The companion website contains additional resources, including suggested syllabi and weekly lesson plans. The authors encourage readers to pick and choose the sections of the book they find most useful and applicable to their work.

As accomplished professional musicians, Smith and Burrichter shift the focus of *Class Voice* from perfectly pristine performances to exploring the intrinsic value singing has through its ability to build community and enhance quality of life. "Singing is a simple, priceless gift," they write. "With your voice, you announced your presence on Earth. Let its presence in your life be a constant source of creativity, comfort, and companionship."



Brian Manternach

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**It's notable that you have invited two of your former students to write sections of the book as guest contributors. Vincent Oakes writes a section on "Considerations for the Adolescent Singing Voice," and Erin Nicole Donahue writes a chapter called "The Science of Healthy Singing" and an additional section on "Gender Spectrum Voice." What was it like to include former students in this project?**

We wanted our book to present the most current research and best practices. We believe that the principles of good voice teaching should flow from one generation to another. We rejoice in the successes of Vic and Erin, whose expertise is unlike our own and completely complementary to our goals for *Class Voice*.

We hope that the freshness of their voices and depth of their knowledge and experience will enlighten younger as well as older readers. We are very proud of their achievements and grateful for their willingness to share their insights in this textbook.

**As a married couple, as well as faculty colleagues, you have undoubtedly sung together and taught together many times. What was it like taking on yet another joint endeavor as coauthors of this book?**

It was a team effort based upon shared experiences in the field of teaching singers of all ages in a wide variety of settings. We easily divided the subject matter between us and worked separately before melding our chapters into the final format.

We hope our readers recognize the value of a textbook for class voice that does not have an anthology but invites repertoire selection determined by honest discussion among those who wish to learn and those who teach them. Our daily conversations about the content had a freshness and vigor we hope translates into an excitement about singing, and singing learning, to those who use our book as a resource.

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