

The Singer's Library:

Let the Games Begin—Training Singers to Be Vocal Athletes

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



Read about a well-researched and informative book on contemporary commercial music written by two voice scientists who are also speech language pathologists.

Last summer's Olympic Games demonstrated once again that even non-sports fans can enjoy getting together to watch elite athletes compete. We cheer for the competitors while marveling at their abilities, understanding that countless hours have been devoted to building strength, stamina, agility, coordination, and skill at their particular sport.

When developing a training regimen, it stands to reason that decathletes follow a different procedure than sprinters since, in addition to running, the decathlon

also includes pole vault, long jump, and discus, among other events.

Although training elite singers may look vastly different from training Olympians, both groups must apply similar levels of dedication to their disciplines in order to reach the highest levels of performance. Like decathletes, singers who specialize in Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) require training that is designed to build the specific skills that commercial music demands.

This was the mindset of authors Wendy D. LeBorgne and Marci Rosenberg in writing *The Vocal*

Athlete. Geared toward the “21st-century hybrid singer,” the book provides scientifically based information and exercises for gold medal performances.

In my conversation with the authors, they discuss classical vs. CCM singing, vocal health, and building a technique that is adaptable to many styles of music.



Brian Manternach



Wendy D. LeBorgne



Marci Rosenberg

a master-apprentice relationship through the experiences of a given master teacher. Over time, the science behind historical classical pedagogy has begun to emerge, either confirming specified training techniques or discounting their physiologic benefit in the training of singers.

As there are very few commercial voice pedagogy training programs and limited research in the area of commercial voice pedagogy, we hope that *The Vocal Athlete* will be a starting place to build discussion and form a basis for ongoing physiological development in the commercial music singer.

How is traditional voice teaching not necessarily up to the task of helping CCM singers meet the demands of performing in these genres?

WL: There are many benefits of traditional voice teaching to coordinate and balance the singing mechanism. However, the vocal aesthetic of the commercial singer requires both a unique aural acuity and understanding of the stark contrasts between classical and commercial voice training.

Marci Rosenberg: As there is an overall movement toward more pop and rock style singing in contemporary music theatre, teachers whose background is solely

You describe in the preface that, due to the lack of non-classical vocal pedagogy training programs, many singers who wanted to pursue CCM genres were relying on natural ability, imitation, or studying with teachers who often did not have specific training in CCM singing. Have you seen this situation improve since the book was published [in 2014]? Is any progress being made?

Wendy D. LeBorgne: Historically, classical vocal pedagogy and singing voice training has heavily relied on



Affiliated with Albuquerque Music Teachers Association

VOCAL ARTISTRY ART SONG FESTIVAL

To encourage the further study of Art Song Repertoire

2017 Mélodies Françaises - French Art Song

April 28-30, 2017 at the Albuquerque Academy

This Festival is open to all singers living in the state of New Mexico

A weekend of concerts, master classes, & performances from New Mexico's Art Song singers

Guest Faculty for the 2017 Festival

Sylvie Beaudette *Eastman School of Music*

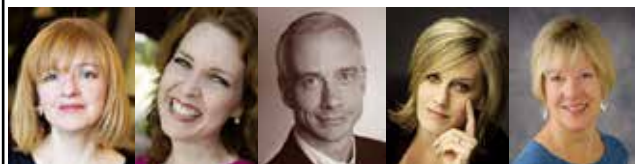
Amy Pfrimmer *Tulane University*

Brent McMunn *USC Thornton School of Music*

Jeanne-Michèle Charbonnet *Texas Christian University*

Martha Rowe *Pianist, Singer, Life Coach Retired Professor NMSU*

Founder and Coordinator Jacqueline Zander-Wall



Application deadline April 1, 2017 Visit our website for complete schedule and application www.vocalartistryartsong.com

classical are not typically well versed and well prepared to manage the different technical skills associated with this type of singing. Numerous differences in laryngeal behavioral, vocal tract shaping, use and implementation of audio technology, and even respiratory differences (especially in the case of a dancer) must be addressed in order to facilitate a healthy technique.

The book emphasizes building a technique that is agile as well as adaptable in order to meet the demands of an ever-evolving industry. How must CCM singers be adaptable in ways that classical singers do not?

MR: Music theatre singers often have to be a vocal jack-of-all-trades. A singer might be performing in a pop or rock musical and get called to go audition for a legit-style role.

If they want to work, they need to be able to easily weave in and out of various vocal styles.

WL: The classical vocal artist generally trains toward a given Fach, which dictates the roles for which they audition (and are considered). If a classical singer changes Fach, it is generally a long process to transition (partly because of the re-coordination of motor learning related to timbre, weight of the voice, age, range, flexibility, etc.). The musical theatre performer must be able to transition from a very classical sound to a pop-rock sound within the same audition (I just had a singer who had to do this in a Broadway audition last week). It becomes incredibly taxing on the singer.

One thing that may be of note is that many classical singers are in the “heart” of their career at a slightly

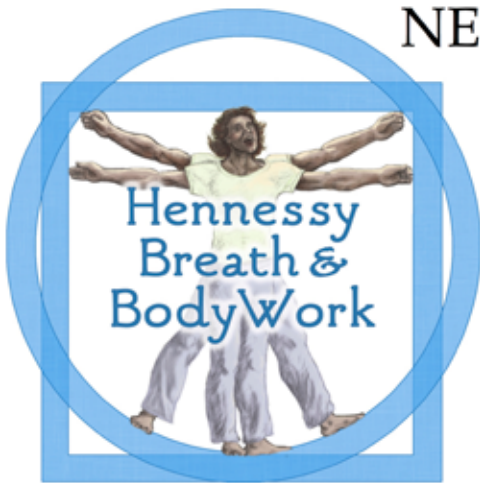
older age than the “heart” of a pop-rock musical theatre career. Many of our Olympic gymnasts are under the age of 25. This may have to do with flexibility, speed of recovery when doing backflips off a balance beam, and the physical demands that require a specific age and body type. By no means am I suggesting that classical singing isn't physically and vocally intense; it absolutely is. What I am suggesting we consider in our vocal athletes is that our classical singers might be more akin to Tour de France cyclists and our commercial music singers are more like the X Games bike riders. Both are high-level athletes doing super-human activities, but they demand both a different training and type of athlete.

The focus on voice science, anatomy, and physiology as

Hennessy Breath & BodyWork

NEW WEBSITE ~ ONLINE VIDEOS

Like a Netflix account, but without the monthly fee!



HennessyBB.com

- Monthly BodyWorkShop© Video Subscription: stay current with the latest in Ruth's work
- Vocal BOOT CAMP Video Series: over 17 hours of instruction! Get in the best vocal shape of your life!
- Teacher Certification *available now!*
- BodyWorkShop© for Your School or Group
- Performance BodyWork with Ruth via Skype or FaceTime

Ruth Williams Hennessy, Director

creator of the DVD, *Voice at the Center*: “highly recommended” by the N.A.T.S. Journal of Singing

Formerly Hennessy Whole Body Voice. Ruth's work is so effective for *everyone*, we decided to change our name!

well as medical issues provides more in-depth information than many vocal pedagogy texts. How much background in these areas is necessary before picking up the book? What is the target audience (undergraduates, graduate students, professional singers, voice teachers, etc.)?

MR: When we wrote the book, we attempted to keep it at a level consistent with what one may find in a graduate-level pedagogy course. That said, there is enough good, general content in the text that even someone without a strong anatomical or pedagogical background could find several useful and relevant chapters. For those wanting an even deeper level of understanding, we included other recommended resources. There are also several good online resources and videos that help augment our chapters.

WL: I'm now in my second year of teaching this book as a doctoral-level commercial vocal pedagogy course at Cincinnati Conservatory to DMA or AD students who have exclusive classical training. Their background in pedagogy seems to be sufficient for using this text and increasing knowledge base.

I've also used the anatomy and physiology portions of the book for my undergrad vocal pedagogy course (also all classical singers) at Cincinnati Conservatory—and although it may stretch them a bit based on their backgrounds, they are able to use the text to develop a better understanding of pedagogy and the vocal mechanism.

Rather than inserting vocal exercises into the chapters of the book, as is done in many pedagogy texts, you

published *The Vocal Athlete: Application and Technique for the Hybrid Singer* as a 120-page supplement of exercises with a demonstration CD. Why was this important to include?

MR: We wanted to create a resource for teachers who teach CCM styles. We went directly to the teachers who teach in reputable MT programs and also solicited known teachers and SLP (singing voice specialists) in the industry to share exercises. This workbook can function as a standalone book of exercises, but we tied it into various concepts within the textbook where applicable.

While it demonstrates great collegiality in the willingness of all these teachers to share information and “best practices,” were you concerned that some of



VANCOUVER EARLY MUSIC PROGRAMME & FESTIVAL 2017

The Compleat Singer

— ADVANCED LEVEL BAROQUE VOCAL PROGRAMME —

Sunday July 30 - Friday August 11, 2017

The application deadline for this Programme is April 15, 2017

Bringing movement, passion and projection to the interpretation of baroque vocal music

Ellen Hargis

course director and voice

Marie-Nathalie Lacoursière

gesture, stage movement & baroque dance

with coach/accompanists

Christopher Bagan

harpsichord

Michael Jarvis

harpsichord

Lucas Harris

lute

The setting is intimate, the attention is individual and the results inspirational

SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE

Apply at:

earlymusic.bc.ca

For more information:

workshops@earlymusic.bc.ca

Book Review

This column has featured several resources dedicated to Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM), and each book makes contributions to the general understanding of how to sing in non-classical genres. *The Vocal Athlete* by Wendy D. LeBorgne and Marci Rosenberg, however, adds something new to the conversation.

Divided into three sections, the book places distinct emphasis on providing scientifically based information. In this way, the chapters in section one—dedicated to structure and function of the voice—are thorough in their descriptions but also include numerous pictures and tables designed to make the information as accessible as possible. A particularly unique and useful feature of this section is the survey and summary of breathing strategies as advocated by prominent voice teachers and authors across history. Placed in the same chapter in which the anatomy and physiology of the respiratory mechanism is explored, readers can easily see how diverging techniques and philosophies were formed and promoted over the centuries.

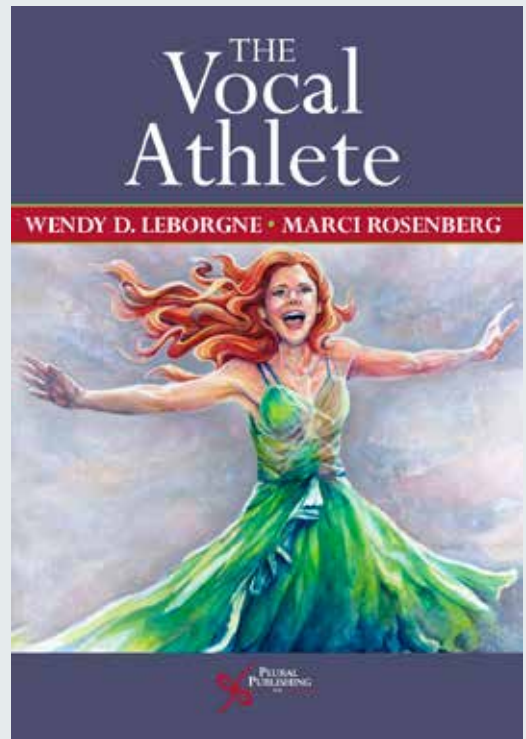
The chapters of section two are devoted to vocal health and fitness and cover a wide array of topics from vocal injury to reflux to medication. Four guest authors provide chapters in this section from their specific areas of expertise.

The third and final section of the book addresses vocal pedagogy for the 21st-century vocal athlete. After an overview of classical voice pedagogy, the authors delve into the subject of “belting.” They first provide an outline of techniques espoused by several modern pedagogues and then examine what has been learned about belting from research, including information on laryngeal muscle activity, subglottal pressure, formant tuning, spectral slope, nasality, and inertance and compliance theories. Section three ends with chapters on exercise physiology, motor learning, and audio technology.

In writing *The Vocal Athlete*, LeBorgne and Rosenberg had no small task before them. Even today, much of the information on singing commercial music is scattered among various sources (some of which are pedagogically dubious). Much of the information available has been passed down from teachers in the guise of “this always worked for me” which, though often successful, can be difficult to corroborate. Although academic journals continue to publish studies designed to help define and identify the elements of successful and sustainable CCM singing, many voice teachers feel ill equipped to tackle the more dense concepts of voice science.

In this regard, *The Vocal Athlete* is an important and necessary resource to further bridge the gap between the lab and the studio, translating academic knowledge into useful information through effective and codified tools. As voice scientists and speech-language pathologists, LeBorgne and Rosenberg provide data, techniques, and context that are well referenced and thoroughly researched. As singers and voice teachers, they write in a way that facilitates understanding and highlights practical implications for the voice studio.

–Brian Manternach



“ . . . our classical singers might be more akin to Tour de France cyclists and our commercial music singers are more like the X Games bike riders. Both are high-level athletes doing super-human activities, but they demand both a different training and type of athlete.”

the exercises would conflict with the information you present in the main text of *The Vocal Athlete*?

MR: We made a conscious decision not to edit or change (other than basic editing to clarify) exercises that these professionals submitted. We provided author’s notes where appropriate to help provide context or clarity. With all voice training, the exercise is only as effective as the intention behind it. It is the role and responsibility of the teacher to use judgment when creating or implementing any vocal exercise. We state in the book that no exercise should cause strain or discomfort. We as teachers must always assess and modify any exercises based on what the student needs at that moment.

WL: Another huge benefit to having a variety of teachers contribute exercises was the idea that no two students are the same. We wanted to provide a resource that allowed for “more tools in the toolbox” for our singing teachers.

The references at the end of each chapter indicate that you consulted some of the most recent research in the field. In publishing the book, were you concerned that some of the information might quickly become outdated due to ongoing research?

WL: One aspect of many vocal pedagogy books is that it relies heavily on the experiences and perceptions of a given author. We wanted to provide a pedagogy text that was grounded in peer-reviewed research hopefully showing the singing voice community what has been done and where we still need to explore the science behind the art of singing.

What has the response been to the book? What impact do you ultimately hope it will have?

MR: We have received very positive feedback about both the text and workbook. We are often told that the text provides a lot of very useful information all in one resource. We think the book has wide appeal because we essentially designed a textbook that we would want to have. Our background as speech pathologists/singing voice specialists, voice teachers, and performers allowed us to create something we thought would appeal to all disciplines.

WL: Generally, the feedback has been positive. It has always been my goal in my work and research to provide a bridge between the science and art of singing. There are often impressive scientific papers that do not have a strong link to actual performance. I hope that a book like *The Vocal Athlete* will help to bridge that gap for both singers and scientists.

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. ©



The Viterbo University Music Department offers YOU...

- a dedicated voice faculty of artist-teachers
- outstanding programs in piano, voice, and music education
- classical and jazz/showchoir choral ensembles
- operas and musicals fully staged with orchestra
- faculty coach accompanists

Voice Faculty

Dan Johnson-Wilmot
Ann Schoenecker

Choral Faculty

Nancy Allen
Brett Robison

Coach-Accompanist

Judy Stafslieen

Degrees

- B.M. in Music Performance
- B.M. in Music Education (choral/general)
- B.A. in Music



La Crosse, WI • www.viterbo.edu/music

