

# The Singer's Library:

## Connecting Pedagogy, Science, Technique, and Style

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Covering a wide range of vocal styles, an updated publication strives to apply voice science to create technical flexibility for singers wishing to explore other genres.

Continuing our “new editions with new additions” features, this column highlights the second edition of *Vocal Technique: A Guide to Classical and Contemporary Styles for Conductors, Teachers, and Singers* by Julia Davids and Stephen LaTour, a 2021 release from Waveland Press.

In this conversation, the authors explain the reasons for including information on singing in contemporary styles in the second edition. They also discuss the importance of including choral conductors in the book's target audience and relate what readers are saying about the new updates.

**The first edition of *Vocal Technique* focused primarily on classical singing, but the new edition incorporates the techniques of (and science behind) singing in contemporary styles. This constitutes a significant expansion in the book's material. What inspired such a dramatic revamp?**

**Stephen LaTour:** When we decided to write a second edition, our original plan was to update the book to reflect scientific research conducted since we wrote the first edition. We also wanted to expand our presentation of semi-occluded vocal tract exercises, resonance, and vocal health. In the first edition, we had some material on belting and musical theatre, but it was fairly limited. We recognized, however, that many developing singers want to be able to perform a variety of contemporary styles, many universities have musical theatre programs, and musical theatre requires an ability to perform numerous contemporary styles.

As we reviewed the recent literature, we also noticed that there has been an explosion of research on differences among various styles. Delving into the literature, we realized that we had the opportunity to present an integrated approach to vocal technique that allows a singer to be stylistically flexible. In the process, we hoped to take some of the mystery out of vocal technique for contemporary styles.



Subsequent conversations with colleagues who teach contemporary styles and discussions with developing singers convinced us that we needed to revamp the book to cover both classical and contemporary styles. There was one casualty of this process—we had to eliminate plans to include a substantial chapter on psychological aspects of vocal technique and vocal performance. We are thinking about developing material on this topic for our website ([www.vocaltechnique.info](http://www.vocaltechnique.info)).

**A unique aspect of the book is that it gives considerable attention to elements of choral singing, which other pedagogy texts often omit. Do you believe that voice teachers and choral directors are more often on the same pedagogical page these days, or do they generally reside in separate camps?**

**Julia Davids:** As a singer and a conductor, I've got my feet firmly in both camps! We work from the premise that each person has one voice—the same equipment, if you will. There are a variety of ways of inflecting our voices, of course, based on style and context, but we know so much more about the physiology and the science than we did in the past.

There are certain truths that we can all agree upon about the way our voices work, and Steve and I think that a more thorough understanding and standardization of language will allow for better communication among voice

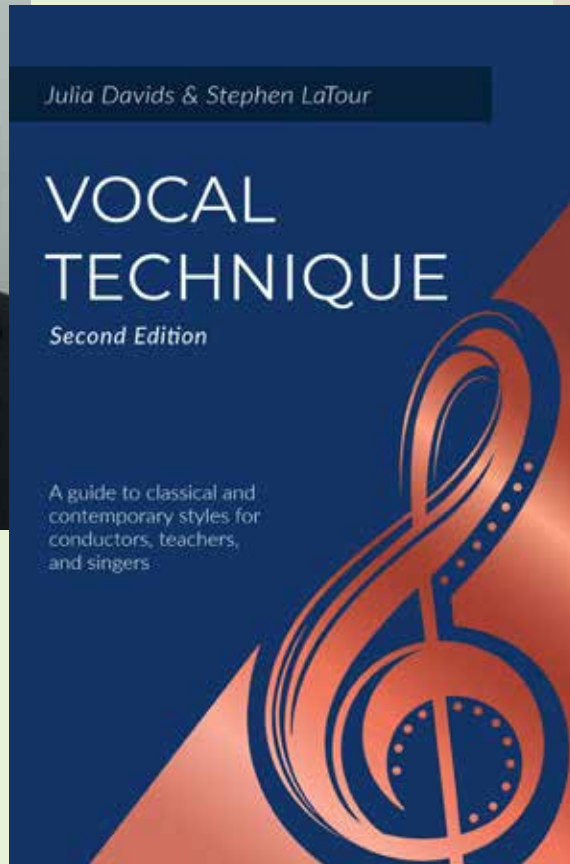
teachers, choral directors, and singers. In addition, many singers do not have a voice teacher other than their choral director—and even for those singers who do study voice, they may very well spend more hours with their choral director. It is essential that the choral director understand the voice and work to learn accurate vocal technique concepts and language in order to support singers and facilitate communication.

**You encourage teachers and conductors to help singers understand how their voices produce sound in part by explaining the purpose of vocal exercises. How much of this information is important for singers to know? Is there a point at which too much anatomical or functional detail can bog singers down?**

**SL:** Our bias is to explain more rather than less. We believe that if singers understand the reasoning behind an exercise, they will choose more effective exercises and implement them more efficiently. For example, a semi-occluded vocal tract (SOVT) exercise creates back pressure on the vocal folds, which keeps the upper surface of the folds somewhat separated, giving the glottis a more rectangular shape. (This is a bit of an oversimplification, but it is a useful way of talking about one of the effects of an SOVT exercise.)



Stephen LaTour



Julia Davids

## Book Review

For the second edition of *Vocal Technique: A Guide to Classical and Contemporary Styles for Conductors, Teachers, and Singers*, authors Julia Davids and Stephen LaTour provided a variety of added content. In some cases, they wrote brand-new material, as seen in the extensive discussion of belting. In other cases, previous sections were supplemented or updated, as in the incorporation of new research into the vocal health chapter and the inclusion of transgender singers in the section on changing voices. In still other cases, some sections required reworking, as in the more nuanced presentation of posture, which is based on modern conceptions of body alignment and flexibility.

Not only is the second edition steeped in voice science, with more than 160 additional references, it is also well vetted. The authors consulted with a team of voice professionals who offered comments on the new material. They also received guidance and input from three primary reviewers who have specific areas of expertise: Karen Brunssen, co-chair of music performance at Northwestern University and former president of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, is a classical voice teacher who is particularly knowledgeable about the changing voice; Rollo Dilworth, professor of choral music education at Temple University, is a choral conductor and composer; and Matthew Edwards, artistic director of the

CCM Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah University, specializes in singing in contemporary styles. Subjecting the manuscript to scrutiny from such outside voices as these ensures that the final published content reflects information on which there is reasonable consensus among prominent voice professionals.

*Vocal Technique* is impressively in-depth, especially given how much ground is covered. Perhaps most importantly, the book debunks the outdated notion that there is only one way of singing that is healthy, sustainable, and “correct.” Rather, it identifies a variety of technical choices that can be applied when singing in different styles and settings. Furthermore, its emphasis on a “stylistically flexible vocal technique” gives singers permission to pursue (and enjoy) singing in a wide range of genres, rather than pigeonholing themselves in a single style or technique. By providing a complete guide that is, as the authors state, “practical and grounded in vocal science,” *Vocal Technique* is a reliable one-stop shop for singers and teachers of all stripes. —*Brian Manternach*



Brian Manternach

This vocal fold alignment reduces the amount of breath pressure required to phonate, making it easier to sing higher pitches. Many voice teachers and conductors suggest humming as an SOVT exercise. But humming doesn't create much back pressure because it allows a lot of air to go through the nose. If you understand this, you will realize that other exercises, such as singing through a straw or singing a prolonged "v" will be more effective.


Of course, if an aspect of technique is not under conscious control, one could argue that functional explanations are not useful and may become counterproductive. For example, control of pitch is largely through mental representations (imagery) and biofeedback. It would be counterproductive to spend much time explaining muscles controlling pitch if that would lead to misguided efforts to directly control those muscles. Yet pitch is affected by some consciously controllable aspects of technique such as breath pressure. It is, therefore, helpful for singers to understand why and experience how, for example, insufficient breath pressure can cause a sung pitch to be flat.

Nonetheless, singers of varying age and professionalism differ in their degree of interest in functional explanations. Imagery has long been a powerful way of teaching singing. As teachers get to know the learning styles and needs of

each student, they will decide upon the level of detail to present about the underpinnings of technique and related exercises.

**What has been the response thus far to the new edition? Are those familiar with the first edition receptive to the inclusion of contemporary singing styles?**

**JD:** The response has been overwhelmingly positive! The second edition has already been adopted by many university vocal pedagogy courses, and studio voice teachers are so grateful for the thorough treatment. I've done countless workshops and masterclasses on the concept of vocal cross-training—working intentionally on flexibility of tone quality, in particular. Most choirs perform a wide variety of repertoire, so choral directors are very appreciative of the specifics of how we can vary our sound in a healthy and intentional way. In addition, emerging singers are not only interested in singing in a variety of ways, but they also know that tonal flexibility will make them more marketable and comfortable in a greater variety of musical contexts.

*Brian Manternach's bio can be found on page 39.* 

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