



# On the Voice

Matthew Hoch, editor

## Building Bridges and Moving Forward: Practical Voice Pedagogy for Twenty-First-Century Choral Directors

by Matthew Hoch

I am pleased to be writing my first “On the Voice” column for the ACDA *Choral Journal*. I hope to continue the tradition of my distinguished predecessors by managing, writing, editing, and delivering a series of articles that offer practical voice pedagogy for our readership. Since my appointment to this position, I have been in active discussion with a diverse array of scholars and practitioners whose essays will begin appearing later this year. I am excited about their contributions and hope that you will find these forthcoming pieces engaging and, more important, *practical* and *useful* to your weekly activities as educators and choral professionals.

The “On the Voice” column represents an increasingly rare opportunity for voice pedagogy and choral circles in the academic and professional world to intersect. When I began my college teaching career in the early 2000s, it was somewhat common for individuals who were primarily choral directors to teach singing lessons and, conversely, folks who considered themselves to be singing teachers first to direct choral ensembles. In my first two academic appointments—at the University of Wisconsin–Barron County and Shorter College—I was assigned ensembles to conduct despite having a DMA in voice. I have the impression from my mentors that this practice was even more prevalent in

previous generations.

The third decade of the twenty-first century, however, suggests a different paradigm is now in place. As professionals, we are defined by our major instruments and degrees. I would not be considered for choral positions at universities any more than someone with an MM or DMA in choral conducting would be granted an interview for a voice position. Our training, particularly at the graduate level, now focuses on depth rather than breadth; most choral curricula do not include voice lessons and many graduate-level conducting classes are only open to conducting majors. In addition, the premier professional organizations of our professions—ACDA and the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS)—curate different journals (the *Choral Journal* and the *Journal of Singing*) and host separate conventions. There is only so much time to read, and most individuals cannot afford to attend two professional conferences in the same year.

This state of affairs is unfortunate for the obvious reason that choral directors are also singing teachers. Through this column, I hope to offer a connection between these two communities by focusing on voice pedagogy topics that are relevant to the work of active choral conductors. The following is a preview of

forthcoming topics that I believe are among the most important to the twenty-first-century choral musician and common touchstones across the profession. Whether one teaches in the academy, in a public or private school, or works as a church musician, I hope you will find these discussions to be relevant to your work with singers of all ages.

### Group-Voice Pedagogy

For most of its history, the *Journal of Singing* and other voice pedagogy resources focused overwhelmingly on solo classical singing. There was little scholarship on how to best teach vocal technique in a group setting. The earliest pioneers in developing methodologies did so through the publication “class voice” textbooks.<sup>1</sup> However, few academic articles appeared and most voice pedagogy conferences were devoid of any “breakout” session devoted to teaching voice in group settings. Recent events, however, suggest this paradigm is shifting.

In 2022, NATS created the Clifton Ware Group-Voice Pedagogy Award to support teachers working with students in a group-voice setting.<sup>2</sup> The 2024 NATS National Conference in Knoxville will offer a premium workshop devoted entirely to teaching vocal technique in group settings.<sup>3</sup> This year will also see the long-awaited release of the updated fourth edition of *The Singing Book*, one of the most frequently used class-voice textbooks.<sup>4</sup> These resources are all rich in their offering of strategies to build vocal technique in group settings—including choral ensembles!

### Vocal Health and Wellness

The perennial topic of vocal health deserves regular revisitation precisely because science delivers new revelations and insights about the human voice on a monthly basis. Of particular interest to the choral singer are studies on vocal loading—how much singing is too much, and how can one best manage vocal fatigue. Myth-busting occurs on a regular basis (e.g., “Is there any evidence that caffeine ‘dries out’ the voice?” “Does *everyone* have acid reflux?”), and choral directors need this information to factually advise their singers on

matters related to vocal health. Of particular interest to the editor is the matter of singing while sick, which we all must do from time to time. When can one do so safely, and is there ever a time when vocal rest is the best strategy?<sup>5</sup> What medicines have a positive or benign impact on the voice and which could be counterproductive or even harmful in a given situation? These topics and more will be explored in future columns.

### “Nonclassical” Styles and Genres

In 1985, the voice pedagogue Robert Edwin wrote an article in the *Journal of Singing* titled “Are We the National Association of Teachers of Classical Singing?”<sup>6</sup> At the time, the answer was “yes”; few pedagogies for “nonclassical” styles (as they were called at the time) existed. How things have changed over the past several decades! The term “nonclassical” has largely been abandoned in favor of more affirming terminology such as contemporary commercial music (CCM) or simply “commercial music.” Methodologies—many of which are trademarked, adding a certain degree of division and complexity to the community—abound; should one study Estill®, Somatic Voicework™, Speech-Level Singing™, or Complete Vocal Technique™? NATS now has a regular column devoted to commercial music in the *Journal of Singing* and has even published a twenty-volume book series largely devoted to teaching and singing contemporary styles.<sup>7</sup> Exploring these alternative approaches to vocal technique is beneficial to the modern choral director, who increasingly is called upon to teach styles that fall outside of the traditional “classical” aesthetic.

### Online Training in Voice Pedagogy


The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in an explosion of online resources across all discipline, and voice pedagogy is no exception. How does one wade through this vast sea of educational opportunity? Future columns will focus on online training for choral directors who wish to focus in on some aspect(s) of vocal technique: biomechanical, acoustic, cognitive, and beyond.

## Gender Inclusivity

In recent years the voice pedagogy world has confronted gender bias and has sought to move past binary descriptors in print and instructional word. In 2019, NATS changed the names of its audition categories—long labeled “male” and “female”—to the non-gendered descriptors “treble” and “TBB.” On another front, virtually all of the classic voice pedagogy textbooks routinely refer to “male” and “female” voices, calling for a recasting of terminology as these resources are replaced and new publications emerge.

Choral directors are rapidly adapting to make their ensembles as welcoming as possible to nonbinary singers, and traditional assignment of voice parts and theatrical roles is now being reexamined.<sup>8</sup> The time is ripe for embracing these trends and actively engaging in discussions on how to best realize inclusiveness in our ensembles, across the profession, and for the singers with whom we work.

## Conclusion ... and an Invitation

I began this article with the tautological statement that all choral directors are voice teachers. As editor of the “On the Voice” column, I seek to publish contributions that will be as helpful to you as possible when you work with your singers. With this goal in mind, I invite you to suggest future themes and topics in the realm of voice pedagogy that interest you and would have palpable impact on your ensembles. I am eager to hear your ideas and look forward to delivering more pedagogical content to you in the coming months and years. 

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Popular titles include Van Ambrose Christy and John Glenn Paton, *Foundations in Singing: A Basic Textbook in Vocal Technique and Song Interpretation*, 5th ed. (New York: William C. Brown, 1990); Maribeth Dayme and Cynthia Vaughn, *The Singing Book*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014); Jan Schmidt and Heidi Counsell Schmidt, *Basics of Singing*, 6th ed. (Clifton Park, NY: Cengage Learning, 2007); Clifton Ware, *Adventures in Singing: A Process for Exploring, Discovering, and Developing Vocal Potential*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006).
- <sup>2</sup> [https://www.nats.org/Clifton\\_Ware\\_Group-Voice\\_Pedagogy\\_Award.html](https://www.nats.org/Clifton_Ware_Group-Voice_Pedagogy_Award.html), accessed January 10, 2024.
- <sup>3</sup> The workshop is titled “Better Together: Pedagogical Strategies for Group-Voice Instructors in Academic, Community, and Independent Settings” and will be led by Amelia Rollings Bigler, Craig Philip Price, Dana Lentini, and Cynthia Vaughn, all experts on the topic of group-voice pedagogy.
- <sup>4</sup> Cynthia Vaughn and Meribeth Dayme, *The Singing Book*, 4th ed., edited by Matthew Hoch (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).
- <sup>5</sup> <https://voicefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SUMMER-Newsletter-2020.pdf>, accessed January 13, 2024.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert Edwin, “Are We the National Association of Teachers of Classical Singing?” *NATS Bulletin* 40, no. 5 (1985): 40.
- <sup>7</sup> [https://www.nats.org/So\\_You\\_Want\\_To\\_Sing\\_Book\\_Series.html](https://www.nats.org/So_You_Want_To_Sing_Book_Series.html), accessed January 4, 2024.
- <sup>8</sup> Samuel Mariño, “I Would Love to Sing Lucia,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2022.