# Cross-Training in the Voice Studio

## A BALANCING ACT

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# Contents

# Foreword

The book you are about to read illustrates an exciting example of how unselfish collaboration, initiative, friendship, knowledge, and passion intersect to create a unique and forward-thinking approach to training the next generation of singing actors. You will be offered a glimpse inside the singing voice training world of "how things work when they are done well" between classical and musical theatre pedagogies.

Combining practical vocal exercises for applied learning and illustrative examples of outcomes, this book offers an exclusive peek inside the doors of these successful studios. Having had the privilege to watch first-hand the interaction of Norman and Mary (and their Penn State colleagues), I can tell you that the magic and collaboration of these teachers is something that I have rarely seen at other institutions and is special to both this book and to these people. So often, classically-based teachers and musical theatre-based teachers draw lines in the sand regarding vocal training, pedagogy, and genres resulting in animosity that divides colleagues across the profession. This is a training model that blends the rich history of classical vocal pedagogy into a complementary pedagogy which meets current industry demands.

As a personal aside, when Norman and Mary asked me to consider writing a foreword for this book, I couldn't help but be both humbled and honored at the invitation and amazed by this journey we call life and how it has come full circle. Any performer knows that the singing world is a small community, and one of my very first encounters with voice pedagogy came from a very young Norman Spivey 20 some years ago when I was a naïve undergrad at Penn State (well before a musical theatre program had been established). Little did I know that my world would collide again, this time with Mary Saunders Barton (and Norman

once more), at the belting conference in NYC that they discuss in Chapter 1. I was finishing my PhD on belting in musical theatre at the time, and Mary and Norman could not have been more welcoming, open, or interested in my findings. I will never forget the impact that a conversation at dinner that evening had on me and my career path moving forward as a voice scientist, singing voice pedagogue, and voice pathologist. Much has changed in singing voice pedagogy and in the demands placed on performers in the years since that initial encounter. *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act* outlines perfectly where our pedagogy has been, where we are now, and presents a call to action for the journey ahead. I hope you enjoy the nuggets of gold contained in these pages as much as I have. Following the guidelines that *A Balancing Act* proposes will help ensure that a new generation of performers emerges from training as viable, sought-after artists who are versatile and easily able to adapt to whatever vocal styles are given to them.

Wendy DeLeo LeBorgne, PhD, CCC-SLP
Voice Pathologist & Singing Voice Specialist

# Preface

This is a book by voice teachers for voice teachers. About voice teaching. Specifically, it's about a cross-training approach we have found to be successful with our students.

There are many wonderful resources that deal with acoustics, voice science, and other studio training essentials, but fewer that deal with the intersection of stylistic training in quite the way we discuss. For that reason, we have tried our best to keep the information as focused as we could on the actual balancing act of cross-training. It was all too easy to find ourselves writing about more general pedagogical information, but we knew that staying closer to the task at hand would ultimately be more valuable.

We have long admired those who have taken the plunge and written about singing. It's a daunting thing to do, in many ways an act of bravery, because we know that our understanding of the voice will continue to evolve. It's also tricky because we are talking about sounds without actually hearing them. That prompted us to include an audio component with student demos so that we are all "hearing" the same thing.

This is a snapshot of where we sense we are now, with many thanks to the colleagues past and present who continue to inspire us. We hope it will be a useful contribution to the conversation.

—Norman Spivey and Mary Saunders Barton

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## Once Upon a Time

Who would have thought that having two teachers being open to what the other had to share, deciding to learn from one another and work together could be to everyone's advantage—particularly to our students? From the beginning, we understood that continuing to learn is not about giving something up, but rather it is an opportunity to add something to the strengths you already have. We knew we had to be comfortable challenging each other, which we have done regularly, but always with the implicit understanding that even in our most vulnerable moments we were safe from the other's judgment.

This book is written for the studio teacher who needs strategies—and maybe who also needs permission—to work with students in a way that appeals to their diverse interests, their vocal well-being, and the current market.

What we hope you will find is that our book, meant to be a practical guide to building balanced, flexible, and resilient vocalism through concurrent work in classical and musical theatre styles, combines the best practices of traditional pedagogy with musical theatre singing pedagogy. It is a wonderful model because it appeals to what so many students want to work on while also fully developing their singing. In some ways, it's like finding a creative way for students to eat their vocal vegetables. In particular, we are most interested in the intersection of the two fields, though we also want to clarify certain elements relating to musical theatre pedagogy, since that field is nascent.

This way of working is so much a part of our daily bread that when our students learn that this approach isn't taken everywhere, they are often quite genuinely surprised. There could be other models of cross-training work, to be sure, but our training and experience put us here. Because we found the nature of our collaboration to be successful, we thought it might be important to set the stage—to have a look at our individual backgrounds and how we got where we got. As you will see, all paths are not parallel, and often the experiences you encounter are exactly the ones you need to help prepare for what's to come.

Isn't every singer looking for a balanced instrument? Taken at face value, this hardly seems like a revolutionary idea. Whether the goal is a *bel canto* ideal or the diversified sounds of Broadway, vocal health and longevity depend on balanced training from the very beginning of study. However, the process of cross-training in the applied studio yields surprising results when singers are willing to stretch beyond any self-imposed vocal identity. It is not unreasonable to imagine a future where opera and musical theatre embrace a similar priority in dramatic storytelling and the rare singer may even aspire to train for performance in both styles.

Sitting around a table with graduate pedagogy students at Penn State, it is inspiring to hear the inclusive language they use to discuss diverse aesthetics in singing. The next generation of voice teachers will have their studios filled with singers of many different stripes. It will be their responsibility to recognize and foster healthy dynamic singing in many styles, celebrating them all, judging none.

Talented opera singers are now expected to act as well as they sing. The training of these young artists will probably begin to have more in common with their musical theatre compatriots in this regard. Ballet dancers traditionally begin their training at a very early age in order to build the strength and coordination needed to dance at a professional level. Singing lessons may not always begin that young, but if we consider voice as movement, and it certainly is, functional training of laryngeal muscles is the singer's "barre work" when voice training does start. Physical therapists who help rehabilitate injured athletes and dancers stress the importance of even wear of muscles to prevent repetitive strain. It makes sense to consider the interaction of the laryngeal muscles in a similar way. Wendy LeBorgne and Marci Rosenberg illuminate this comparison very effectively in their book *The Vocal Athlete* (Plural Publishing, 2014).

Considered in this light, the initial training of any singer will begin with the same fundamental technical work regardless of stylistic aspirations. It is helpful to remember that we are conditioning singers, regardless of gender, in the same way. Laryngeal muscles are gender neutral. In this sense, the work

pieces can happily live side by side. What could be better than having diverse programs to celebrate and showcase their playful vocal exploration and talent?

Every private "semester" ends with a studio recital. Students present contrasting material—a piece in which they feel very much at home, and another that asks them to stretch into the newer parts of their singing. Before they launch into performance, we begin with a show-and-tell—a hands-on demo/explanation for family and friends about the warm-up and technical development we're doing together. Even though the students roll their eyes at the thought of exposing their vocalizing, it gives them a chance to get out some nerves and to be sure their voices are ready to go. It also lets our audience begin to understand what goes into tackling these pieces, and reminds the singers that trusting the process is what ultimately helps them on their journey.

## Developmental Cross-Training Repertoire

The balancing act of repertoire for classical and/or musical theatre voice study can take a number of forms—from the balancing of style periods, to genre and language, and of course, we are always mindful of the appropriateness of repertoire in terms of vocal training, and other factors like age, type, or *Fach*. With so many moving parts, it's no wonder that we often find ourselves in discussions about repertoire and in search of resources.

For our purposes, we are looking at beginning musical theatre pieces for developmental cross-training. The many anthologies devoted to repertoire for classical singers are extremely helpful, and there are outstanding repertoire resources from Christopher Arneson, Shirlee Emmons, Carol Kimball, and many other authors. But what might we choose to complement this with theatre songs? There are valuable repertoire resources in print and online. Nonetheless, we are often asked about repertoire, particularly developmentally appropriate material for middle and high school age students.

## Developmental Musical Theatre Repertoire for the Studio: Women

The following sample of possible repertoire for teen students can introduce young voices to balanced singing. It is important to keep in mind that the distinguishing characteristic of musical theatre singing is the variability of tonal resonance within any given song. A predominantly soprano song might suddenly launch into a belt moment. A chest-dominant ballad may release into a tender soprano. Story always preempts musical choices. "Just You Wait" from *My Fair Lady* is part of the soprano canon, but we would be disappointed if Eliza could not tell Henry Higgins what she *really* felt.

In order to make things easier for beginning students, it's a good idea to choose repertoire with fairly consistent range and quality as students develop skill in coordinating registration. Keys will often need to be adjusted in studio work to accommodate age and aptitude with an eye toward gradually increasing range and facility.

### *Soprano Mix—Beginner, Teens to Young Adult*

*Songs to help young sopranos begin to feel functionally confident and enthusiastic about characters and repertoire. Integrating the middle soprano is a priority, and it is wise to start there.*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| My Ship | *Lady in the Dark* | Weill |
| Far from the Home I Love | *Fiddler on the Roof* | Bock/Harnick |
| Ten Minutes Ago | *Cinderella* | Rodgers/ Hammerstein |
| Mr. Snow | *Carousel* | Rodgers/ Hammerstein |
| One Boy | *Bye Bye Birdie* | Strouse/Adams |
| Dream with Me | *Peter Pan* | Bernstein |

> a physical show. You never know when something will happen that is new or unexpected during a performance and if you are consistently training, you are more likely to be able to handle anything. (Alison Morooney, Penn State BFA Class of 2012, personal communication, November 17, 2017.)

## Recognizing the Village

No voice teacher is an island, although we sometimes feel that way. We cannot do it all, and we shouldn't try. In the ideal university setting, all we need to do is walk down the hall to speak to the dance teacher or the acting teacher, or to find out what is happening in studio class or to inquire about expectations from the director and musical director of a production, or a music theory teacher, or a diction coach or vocal coach if it's an opera, or to consult a voice and speech teacher about a dialect or a question about speech production, or a movement specialist in Feldenkrais, Fitzmaurice, Lessac, or Alexander about physical tensions that may be blocking a student's progress. In some cases, students may need to reach outside the university walls to consult with a massage therapist or a physical therapist or an allergist or to seek mental, spiritual, or nutritional guidance. If we suspect some kind of vocal injury, we will need to refer the student to an otolaryngologist. The list is long, and lines of communication need to stay open in this "village."

Working in a private studio setting, without the benefit of a community of colleagues at the ready, it may be more difficult to resist the impulse to be an "island" rather than to seek interaction with other performing arts specialists in the community. Experience tells us that teachers who are committed to the best interests of their students will be able to find and grow their own "village."

Voice teachers in professional studios in New York City and other performing meccas who work with singers pursuing stage careers have an even greater responsibility to encourage

their students to attend to all aspects of their training, especially areas that are weaker. Many of these performers will have graduated from 4-year programs with a "village" of training professionals all under one roof and all paid for by tuition. Arriving in NYC as a newly minted graduate of an elite training program can be a financial knock-out punch for many of these Broadway hopefuls who often find themselves spinning in circles trying to pay exorbitant rents, feed themselves, and keep their skills honed for auditions.

In the case of a young graduate of a classical program, they may go on to advanced training in graduate school or in a certificate program, and they will most likely build their "village" bit by bit among the coaches, conductors, and colleagues they meet at summer programs (some of which may be pay-to-sing opportunities), competitions (thank goodness for prize monies), and young artist programs.

Needless to say, being cast in a show or young artist program is probably the most important "village" of all because it creates a network of possible new professional opportunities, as well as friendships and emotional support in what can seem like an unforgiving world.

Nevertheless, there is a particularly vibrant "village" of support for these young people once they know where to look. One of these support groups, and possibly the most critical one as they acclimate to postcollege life, is the network of graduates who have preceded them and who already know the lay of the land. These more seasoned performers can help newcomers with basic "survival" issues, as well as recommendations for voice, acting, and dance training when they are ready to start.

Anyone training career-bound singers should be aware of the challenges facing them. The best way to help young performers stay inspired and involved is to introduce them to other professionals in the field who can continue to support their training. Some of these connections may have surprising outcomes as we have often seen, leading to other aspects of the business like teaching, casting, producing, directing, or writing, or perhaps to allied professions like speech-language pathology or arts administration.