

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

These Are Not Your Great Grandfather's Vocalises

Robert Edwin



AFTER MANY YEARS OF LEADING WORKSHOPS, seminars, and master classes, I am firmly convinced that teachers of singing who wish to learn more about nonclassical or Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) must understand the voice technique, repertoire, and performance requirements from the singer's point of view. Simply put, teachers have to do it themselves, not just watch it being done to someone else. Aiding in that self-discovery process are CCM-based pedagogy books that also include CDs with vocal exercises and songs. These books allow us to learn and do ourselves, to adapt material for use in our own studios, and to provide supplemental material for our students outside the studio.

Although the number of CCM singing teachers is on the rise, many of us don't have the time, energy, or resources to create CDs of vocal exercises that technically and artistically support CCM singing. Classical Western European-derived vocalises serve classical Western European repertoire. The teachers I'm about to mention have developed vocalises and technical exercises that serve pop, rock, jazz, rhythm & blues, gospel, country, as well as modern music theater styles. Allow me to highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of their books and audio supplements.

Let's start with Karen Oleson's, *I'm Vocalizing 2! with a World View* (www.vocalizing.com), a follow-up to her 1991, *I'm Not Crazy, I'm Vocalizing*, which targeted the singing commuter as well as the aspiring contemporary singer. With colleague Timothy Strong, Ms. Oleson's VoiceTech company has created a CD and instruction book that take the singer through an eclectic mix of singing styles, including classical. The CD's strength is its fabulous synthesized accompaniment tracks that make it easy to feel and respond to each particular style. The singer first hears the exercise with a guide vocal. The singer then can try the exercise with an instrumental guide, and finally, to an accompaniment-only track. I especially enjoyed her exercise, "a la Marchesi," which borrowed an actual vocalise from legendary nineteenth century voice teacher Mathilde Marchesi and turned it into a jazz scat. Ms. Oleson encourages the student singer to try different vocal patterns, to improvise, and especially to have fun—not a bad idea for amateur or pro. The CD's weakness is its sometimes stylistically stiff and even "pitchy" guide vocals. The student singer, however, can get past that very quickly by moving to the second and third versions of the exercises.

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Elisabeth Howard's new book *Sing!* that includes four CDs (www.alfred.com), is the direct opposite of the Karen Oleson CD in as much as the *Sing!* accompaniment tracks are rather plain, keyboard-only efforts. The guide vocals by Ms. Howard, however, are worth the price of admission alone. She is a vocal chameleon who can authentically capture a multitude of singing styles from operatic to rock. She gives student singers a doorway into each style and then encourages them to try it on their own, first in slow motion, and then up to speed. Along with singer/teacher Howard Austin, they take the time to demonstrate and explain many of the technical and artistic details each style requires. The book's weakness is its often confusing mix of pre-science and modern science terminology.

While not exactly a CCM support book, *The Singing Book*, by Meribeth Bunch and Cynthia Vaughn (www.wwnorton.com) needs to be mentioned, for it pioneers a new approach to class voice at the college and university level. It has a great variety of repertoire beautifully played on accompanying CDs, and has some of the best modern, science-based descriptions of vocal anatomy, physiology, and function I have ever read in such a book. The absence of pre-science voice terminology is both enlightening and refreshing. Clearly, the authors want to build bridges from the traditional to the contemporary without declaring one art form superior to another. That approach is definitively stated in the Preface of *The Singing Book*.

Often, class voice becomes one of those required courses that students consider boring and instructors consider a chore. In many instances, the course is handled in the same way that many classical private studios are—as a kind of private lesson in a group format without regard to the various styles of singing and the varied interests and abilities of those required to take class voice. This book represents the antithesis of that philosophy.

While many CCM singers may not connect to the repertoire choices in *The Singing Book*, they may find Breck Alan's approach in *The Art of Body Singing* (www.bodysinging.com) to their liking. Mr. Alan in the book's Introduction states:

Most systems of vocal training, both historically and currently, are oriented in a coaching fashion, where students begin singing right away and are given only the vaguest tips on how to improve technically . . . In the past, the only place to get really de-

cent vocal mechanics training was from a good opera program. The drawback being you received training via a style, and that usually meant no matter what type of music you might later sing, you would probably sound like an opera singer trying to sing something else.

Mr. Alan is decidedly not taking an operatic approach. With guitar in hand, he guides singers through a gamut of exercises that are in strong support of nonclassical sounds. His speaking style is very casual and contemporary, much like the standard speech and language patterns of today's youth. He does, however, require the student to assimilate a lot of created terminology (Buffer Air, Gushing, The Drool Exercise). He says, "I call it . . ." a lot. A singer with no formal background in voice training may not find that a barrier in any way. The trained singer, on the other hand, may get bogged down reinterpreting previously learned terminology. On the other hand, perhaps the trained singer will find Mr. Alan a liberating force, gleefully dumping past learnings to enter into a new age lexicon and performance style.

Finally, we look at Anne Peckham's book/CD, *Vocal Workouts for the Contemporary Singer* (www.berklee.com). Her CD has great accompaniment tracks and great demonstration singing, as well as very comprehensive and systematic vocal exercises. A beginning CCM singer would be given a solid foundation in both technique and style, while a professional CCM singer would get all he or she needs to increase vocal strength, flexibility, and coordination without sacrificing style. The book has twenty-six exercises for warming up and developing the voice, basic and advanced workouts for high and low voices, and two and three part exercises for harmony practice. Unfortunately, *Vocal Workouts for the Contemporary Singer*, like Ms. Howard's *Born to Sing* book, also uses pre-science terminology juxtaposed modern vocology, a sometimes misleading and confusing mix.

While one would hope that our publishing colleagues would make every effort to bring their books into step with the laws of nature, the actual location and function of the component parts of the singing system, and current accepted science with regard to resonance, acoustics, and biomechanics, one has to compliment their work in the development of technical and artistic support for the singing styles of a majority of today's music. Con-

temporary Commercial Music is now being taught, researched, and critiqued by professionals around the world. Our better understanding of all its related aspects can only improve our delivery of the best teaching of singing to those students and artists who want and need our expertise.

Robert Edwin has gained international recognition as a singer, composer, teacher, and writer. He has sung Bach cantatas in church cathedrals and rock songs in Greenwich Village, performed in New York coffeehouses, recorded for Avant Garde and Fortress Records, and toured extensively throughout the United States and abroad.

His diverse performing career is matched by an equally diverse teaching career. A leading authority on Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) and child voice pedagogy, Robert Edwin preaches what he practices at his large private studio in Cinnaminson, New Jersey, where clas-

sical singers interact with music theater performers; rock, pop, and jazz vocalists; child singers; and pageant contestants.

Robert Edwin has served on the adjunct voice faculties of the University of Michigan, the New Jersey School of the Arts, Burlington County College (NJ), and continues to serve on the Applied Music Staff of Camden County College (NJ). He is a frequent faculty member of The Voice Foundation's Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice. A member of the distinguished American Academy of Teachers of Singing, he has led master classes and workshops in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Mr. Edwin is an Associate Editor of the NATS *Journal of Singing* and the past NATS national Secretary/Treasurer. His column, "The Bach to Rock Connection" (1985–2002), was the first regular feature in the *Journal* dedicated to nonclassical voice pedagogy. In 2005, he was honored to be the first Master Teacher in the NATS Intern Program to represent the private studio sector. www.robertedwinstudio.com

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