

A Spectrum of Voices: Then and Now

An interview with NATS member Elizabeth L. Blades, author of *A Spectrum of Voices: Prominent American Voice Teachers Discuss the Teaching of Singing* (Second Edition 2017)

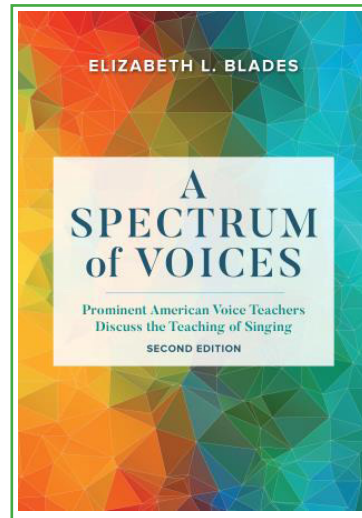
Inter Nos: Your 2002 first edition of *A Spectrum of Voices* is a pedagogical classic in its own right. What compelled or inspired you to revisit the topic 15 years later?

Elizabeth Blades: In recent years, more than one colleague has hold me, “We need you to do an update!” Also in the meantime, a whole new generation of young voice teachers and professional singers has emerged, most of whom do not know the original book or, I’d venture to say, most of those “Prominent American Voice Teachers” within its pages. The first edition of *A Spectrum of Voices* was a labor of love and qualitative research for my doctoral dissertation collected more than twenty years ago. Back then, I was exceedingly fortunate to sit down with exemplary voice teachers and “pick their brains”, unaware that their collective responses would become an important historical document preserving late twentieth-century practices in the field of comparative vocal performance pedagogy. Sadly, eleven of the original prominent American voice teachers have left us.

Inter Nos: What were your biggest “aha” moments as you compiled interview responses for the new edition?

Elizabeth Blades: Oh my, where to start? There were certainly many “heart-tugging” moments. Re-reading the brilliant, eloquent comments of those original 20 teachers, I had vivid flashbacks of each and every interview. There I was, a young, unknown voice teacher/doctoral student sitting across from greatness, so blessed to be given that experience. Every opportunity to reconnect with the First Edition teachers (dubbed “The Originals”) – some in person (God bless Marvin Keenze, who urged me to submit the first book manuscript to Scarecrow Press), others by email and two – Helen Swank and Joan Wall – by phone. How wonderful to hear those two ladies’ voices again, after 25 years! Both are as sharp, witty, gracious and generous as ever. With heart in mouth and great hope I contacted 6 more teachers (“The Joiners”) to ask if they would agree to an interview. All were enthusiastic at the prospect.

Inter Nos: How did you decide which teachers to include in the new edition?



Elizabeth Blades: Initially, I sat down with Mary Saunders-Barton in a quiet corner of the NATS 2016 conference in Chicago and asked her a bunch of questions. My first intention was to incorporate as many CCM [Contemporary Commercial Music] genres and teachers into the second edition, but quickly realized that would be an entire new book! So we narrowed the field to include Music Theater (in addition to “classical” as a carry-over from the first edition). Once

we were in that train of thought, it was very apparent that Jeanie LoVetri and Robert Edwin were at the top of the list. Meribeth Dayme was one of my icons as a doctoral student and as a teacher of vocal pedagogy courses, then and in my full-time collegiate teaching. When I met her in person (at the 1996 International Congress of Voice Teachers conference in London, England), it was a seminal moment! Since then, she has become a dear friend and mentor – and an obvious choice for this 21st century compilation of “exemplary voice teachers.” As for Edith Davis Tidwell and Stephen King, I returned to my original process from qualitative research design and sent out a survey to a group of teachers who have used and endorse the first edition.

Inter Nos: How important was it to include teachers who represent a wide range of age, gender, academic setting, independent studio, and style?

Elizabeth Blades: Well, in all honesty, I left that up to Divine guidance – and it worked out!

Inter Nos: Who did you write *A Spectrum of Voices* for? Is it exclusively for college teachers and pedagogy students?

Elizabeth Blades: Not at all! My intention is that it will also be a resource for independent teachers, professional singers, students, choral directors, vocal-general and vocal-choral music educators in private, as well as academic teaching. I had my own independent studio in Rochester, New York, a few years before conducting the doctoral dissertation research study which culminated in the book’s

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first edition. True, the original 20 teachers were all engaged in full-time higher academic university/conservatory teaching, as was I. But, I could imagine independent teachers finding it and feeling supported by the shared knowledge and experience. The book holds a wealth of teaching strategies to guide and inspire students, novice teachers, and even highly experienced teachers of singing. It's the best advice from some of the best teachers.

Inter Nos: Turning the tables on the author. You were very careful in your research and writing to avoid inserting your own biases and beliefs. Now, I'd like to give you the opportunity to answer a few of your own questions, in your own voice:

1) In the last twenty-five years, advances in technology, voice science, and medicine have had an impact on our profession. Please speak as to how these fit into your own teaching?

Elizabeth Blades: I love to learn about amazing technological advances in voice science.

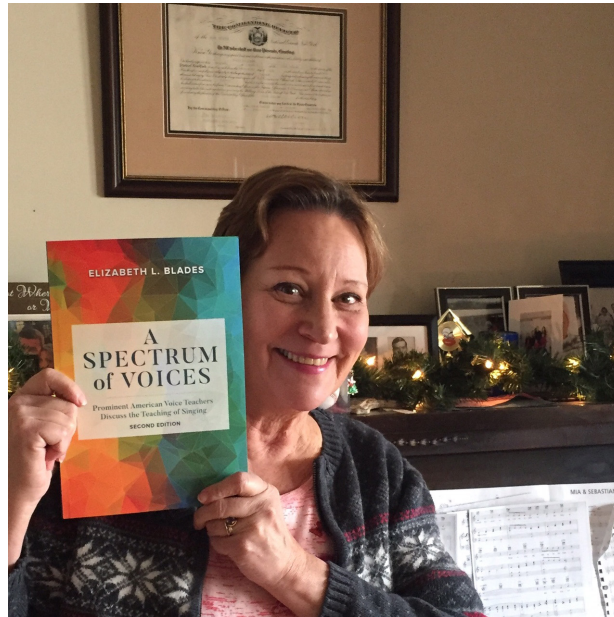
Whenever possible, I attend presentations – those by Ingo Titze, Johann Sundberg (most recently at ICVT in Stockholm last August; I'm glad to see he will be presenting at NATS in Las Vegas this summer), Scott McCoy, Ken Bozeman, John Nix, and many others. What they offer certainly informs my teaching, but I don't necessarily make it the center-point of my instruction. Still, it's very cool.

As the Founder-Director of VocalHealthWorks, dedicated to advancing vocal health, Voice Medicine is an essential requirement for my own singing and for guiding my students. Ever since the early 1990's, I've avidly followed the work of superb voice clinics whose excellent teams of otolaryngologists, surgeons, vocal therapists, pathologists, etc. are a resource for intervention and remediation. NATS has also done a great job highlighting this area, both in *Journal of Singing* and at national conferences (Robert Sataloff, Steven Zeitels, Robert W. Bastian and the like). Technological advances in voice science include spectrographic analysis, laryngoscopic stroboscopy, etc.)

The biggest impact on my current teaching is the freedom to teach online. At least half of my present studio is lessons taught via FaceTime with folks in California, Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and Maryland. Even those who are local (who walk in my front door and work with me in person) have an option to take a FaceTime lesson when weather or transportation becomes an issue. It's fabulous!! I can sit at my piano with my 6x8-inch iPad and high-fidelity earbuds; the sound is as true as if they were there in my music room.

They're in the comfort of their home – sometimes in pajamas! Still, we take the lesson seriously and get a lot done.

Early on, it was apparent that a slight delay (about ½ second) in transmission would inhibit my real-time accompaniment. All of my students have become adept at singing a capella, with only the starting pitch given – they've learned to be more secure, confident and independent. If they want, I will record myself playing their accompaniment with a voice memo app and then send it via text message, Facebook Instant Messenger or email. You got to love that capability.



Elizabeth Blades, author of *A Spectrum of Voices*

2) How do you strive to help the student find that complete union

of music and inner experience that result in a powerful performance?

Elizabeth Blades: I studied and learned from some incredible teachers and coaches over the years – and I read my own books! In addition, I've incorporated a great deal from the 55+ years I've been a singer, an actress and a performer. Most of my current students are adults between 40 and late 70s who have a wealth of life experience from which to draw.

3) How do you stay current in your field?

Elizabeth Blades: I attend conferences – NATS, ICVT, Pan-European Voice Conference, Physiology and Acoustics of Singing (PAS) when it was active; I adjudicate Student Auditions and participate in NATS chapter workshops (especially during my 10 years with Colorado-Wyoming NATS). I read: *Journal of Singing*, *Inter Nos*, *Classical Singer*, and ...books! Of course I read those in the field, but also

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outside of voice performance. I usually have 6 or 7 books I'm reading at the same time. Currently my bedside table books include *The Spontaneous Healing of Belief* (Gregg Braden), *The Brain That Changes Itself: Remarkable Discoveries and Recoveries From the Frontiers of Neuroplasticity* (Norman Doidge), *The Human Antennae: Reading the language of the universe in the songs of our cells* (Robin Kelly), *The Practicing Mind: Developing focus and discipline in your life* (Thomas Sterner) – that last one was recommended by Laura Brooks Rice in her second edition update.

Inter Nos: There were 15 years between the first and second editions of *A Spectrum of Voices*. If you could see in the future, what do you imagine singing and the teaching of singing might look like in 2032.

Elizabeth Blades: I'm of an age when I can look back 30-40 years and recall how singing/ voice performance was taught then and how much has changed. In 1995, music theatre was very much looked on with suspicion or outright hostility...but that began to change, slowly but surely, into the early 2000's and the second decade. Now look – music theatre – not just "legit", but rock, rap, hip-hop, etc. is totally accepted as the equal of classical music at NATS conferences. "Hamilton!," "School House Rock," "Dear Evan Hanson," "Come From Away," "The Color Purple," etc. have assumed a rightful place alongside Handel, Puccini, Strauss, Britten, Argento et al.

The world is shrinking and we are no longer as insular – I just had an Instant Messenger video chat with a voice teacher in Ireland County Cork who teaches "Trad" (what we Americans would call Celtic), rock, jazz, blues and more. Multiple Facebook teacher forums enable us to communicate with teachers and singers all over the globe. I am in touch with friends who are voice teachers from every continent - except Antarctica!

Body-Mind: When my co-author, Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner Dr. Samuel Nelson, and I first published *Singing With Your Whole Self: The Feldenkrais Method and Voice* (Rowman and Littlefield) back in 2001, a well-meaning colleague warned me that being associated with "that woo-woo stuff" would seriously impact my career, I was dumbfounded. He was incorrect about my career, but his opinion did represent the prevailing perception at that time. Of course, now everything has become "body-mind" – which is as it should be. In my heart of hearts, I have to believe that the natural progression between now and the 2030's will be to embrace what's missing...soul. The complete human is all three – as is the complete singer. A very wise woman once told me "singing is the purest form of prayer." I truly believe that.

2032? I will be 81 by then. I fully intend to emulate the heroes in this book, most of whom are on the other side of 60, many closing in on 80 (or already there)...still teaching, presenting, attending, learning – vitally involved. Passion for our craft and sharing that passion is what keeps us young – that and all that good oxygen!

Elizabeth L. Blades holds both master and doctoral degrees in music from the Eastman School of Music. She is the founder-director of Vocalhealthworks, which offers master classes and workshops dedicated to advancing healthy technique. Blades is co-author of Singing with Your Whole Self: The Feldenkrais Method and Voice and frequently presents national and international workshops in Feldenkrais application, as well as in vocal pedagogy. She is also a certified CoreSinging teacher and adjunct professor of music at Shenandoah University.

How Technology Has Changed Publishing in the 21st Century

Correspondence for my dissertation study (1990-1993) and the 2002 first edition of *A Spectrum of Voices* (1994-2001) was done entirely via US Postal Service. My interviews with the original group of teachers were on location (at conferences, in their homes or professional studio space) and recorded with an 8mm video camera and two SONY cassette tape recorders.



Fast-forward to August 2016 – September 2017: All correspondence with the interviewed teachers and with Rowman and Littlefield publishing was conducted by email. The 6 "joining" teachers had the choice to answer the interview questions by email, or to schedule a phone call with me while I recorded their answers with a Radio Shack Desktop Digital Recorder as well as my iPhone 6 voice memo app (always have a backup). I then transcribed those verbal responses on my Lenovo laptop, saved in a PDF file and sent via email to the teacher, who then edited it to their satisfaction to return to me. Once I finished the manuscript, I sent it via Word PDF files to my editor. In a few weeks' time, I received the "galley" version to proof-read and instructions to format.



As you can see from the time spans, what took 6+ years to publish at the end of the 20th century was accomplished in just over 12 months in this new 21st century.

—Elizabeth L. Blades

