

Braving the Belt: My Journey from Classically Trained Teacher to Musical Theatre Pedagogue

By Rita N. Gentile

I come from a pretty stereotypical big Italian family. We grew up thinking there was only one “right way” to do things and were always under the protective watchful eye of an adult. There was a series of bushes about four houses down from ours, which served as the boundary line we were not allowed to cross when venturing outside on bikes or to play. My brother and I would meet new friends at school and be floored if they didn’t see their grandparents every day, or have an elaborate buffet packed in their lunch boxes. What do you mean you don’t go to Catholic mass every Sunday? It was even more shocking when we hit our teen years and discovered that not every family listens to Andrea Bocelli, Luciano Pavarotti, or “Ave Maria” on repeat while driving in the car.

It may not come as a shock that I ended up on the classical track when I chose music as my career path. I began piano at age 6 and voice at 14, and I was truly blessed with excellent teachers. For the rest of my college years, followed by 13 years of teaching choral music, I focused mainly on classical voice pedagogy with my students. As I began working more with middle and high school-aged students through private voice teaching, I became keenly aware of the demand for musical theatre voice instruction. Being a smart, highly motivated, accomplished musician and educator, I was confident I could teach any style of music to my students based on my classical knowledge. Right? Wrong. I found myself assigning repertoire I sang in college, such as *My Fair Lady*, *The Mikado*, *The Music Man*, and a long list of lovely theatre standards. I remember when *Wicked* came out on Broadway and suddenly all my college friends turned to “belting their faces off” trying to find their inner Idina. On the outside, I stuck to my classical training and let the Puccini soar whenever I was asked to sing; however, on the inside I was yearning to find my inner Idina as well. The truth of the matter was my belt voice was on the other side of the bushes, neatly placed just outside of the safety zone where I allowed myself to travel. By establishing my own “right way” of singing, I had inadvertently planted a line of bushes that my own students couldn’t pass. I knew in order to be the best voice teacher I could be, I had to break down my own performance barriers. I could not continue to avoid assigning a variety of rep to my students because I was unsure of how to teach it.

George Bernard Shaw said, “He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches.” This simply cannot be true in vocal music. Singing is a highly personal and largely intangible craft. Before students can grasp anatomical language, and sometimes even when they can, we rely largely on sensation. What does one imagine, or what sensation do they feel when practicing a certain vocal technique? If the teacher cannot demonstrate skills and knowledge themselves, how do they describe the sensations or imagery to a student? The simple answer is that they cannot do so effectively. Yes, they can regurgitate information from research, but that in itself is limiting. It does not allow a pedagogue to approach their students with multiple ways to explain and/or achieve the same concept. From my own experience, many younger students rely heavily on hearing a model first. Now, having said that, it is unrealistic to think you have to belt like Idina Menzel to be a successful musical theatre performer or teacher. That is where the breakdown between classical and musical theatre singing begins, and where we as teachers must take the reins to best serve our students. The Elphaba belt of Idina Menzel is very different from the Elphaba of Ana Gasteyer, yet each delivers an electrifying chill at the end of Act I. It is important as a voice teacher to be able to demonstrate belt quality when introducing the technique to students, with each teacher recognizing their belt is uniquely theirs. I learned that, just like all the Elphabas, I did not have to sound like Idina in order to have a successful belt voice. I realized I had come to define what belt was by associating it with a few singers, when really they were only one example of what a belt could or should be. As a teacher, it was more important I learn how to talk about the many types of belt qualities and describe them to my students than it was to try to emulate a sound based on a singular ideal. As teachers, we want to be able to demonstrate, encourage and celebrate an array of vocal colors in our students. We must possess a common vocabulary to talk about these vocal techniques with students and colleagues. I wanted not only to find my own belt voice, but also to learn the language upon which to build a teaching method. I needed to seek out training rooted in that very language I sought to understand.

The first step in my journey from classical technique to musical theatre technique was finding a program that specialized in

musical theatre and contemporary styles. Voice specialist and creator of Somatic Voicework, Jeannette Lovetri, and voice researcher Edrie Weekly (2003) conducted a survey that showed only 45 percent of participants who taught musical theatre rep had any type of training in musical theatre pedagogy. Only 21 percent of that group received their training in a formal undergraduate or graduate setting, while the majority learned via outside sources such as private voice study. Out of all the participants, 19 percent of those who taught musical theatre singing had no formal training or professional performance experience of any kind. It is no wonder that belt and contemporary technique have been such controversial topics in the field of voice when practitioners are relying on such a vast array of source materials and scholarship

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from which to draw their teaching techniques. I settled on a program rooted in the Estill technique. Jo Estill, an American voice researcher, developed the Estill voice training method to aid singing and speaking professionals in the healthful use of their voices. Having come out the other side of this program, it is important to reiterate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. There were aspects of Estill that provided me with the “aha!” moments I so desperately needed, while other concepts or approaches were lacking for me. This is the beauty of being a reflective and active learner. It is important to be inquisitive, take what you can, but also leave behind what doesn’t work for you in order to look for a new route to the same destination. Isn’t this what teaching is all about? Most importantly, it left me hungry for more, but with a solid foundation of knowledge to discern facts from fiction.

From my perspective as a classical singer, the definition of belt was quite simple: loud and high chest voice. Like most of my high school students, I tried to take a heavy chest voice up as high as I could push it in an attempt to achieve the elusive “Broadway belt.” As you can predict, this mostly resulted in a raw, hoarse voice afterward. I eventually accepted I just didn’t have the voice for musical theatre and stopped trying for many years. During that time, I had kids (hello, voice changes!), and during one pregnancy experienced significant vocal problems that required speech therapy and rehabilitation. It took many years to find my “normal” voice again, and when I did, I was

much more hesitant to try out new things for fear of my vocal health. This experience put vocal health education at the forefront of my teaching and further discouraged me from introducing musical theatre repertoire to my students. Voice pedagogue Scott McCoy (2007) shared in my misconceptions before conducting a study that showed a correct belt was neither “always loud” nor a “heavy bottom-up” approach. He also pointed out classical singers often relied on “self-amplification” versus musical theatre singers who largely worked with microphones.

The classical community has long-debated the topic of belt quality in terms of its effects on vocal health. Estill (2005) argued belting does not pose physical harm when done with proper technique. She went as far as saying that humans make belt sounds from infancy. McCoy (2007) also stressed the importance of understanding negative effects come from incorrect technique. New York based voice teacher Julie Balog (2005) stated, “To be clear, the belt style is an extension of the speaking voice, not a pushing up of the chest voice” (p. 402). The research seemed to suggest that even I could learn to find my healthy belt voice. I had settled on a program of study to serve as my vehicle for the journey and it was time to hit the road, cross the bushes, and explore the new world on the other side.

I was fortunate to be able to approach my artistic crossover with my voice teacher who I had already been studying with for two years. It is imperative to work with someone who you can trust with your instrument. Perhaps the toughest part of my musical theatre voice work was accepting I was an old dog, and it was going to take some extra work to learn new tricks. I wasn’t used to being behind the curve in terms of musical ability and this became a stumbling block in itself. Self-doubt is a breeding ground for the development of performance inhibitions, and I hid behind my fair share of “I can’t” scenarios during this time. Eventually the “I can’t” turned into “I will” and finally into “I did.”

To begin our new work together, my voice teacher incorporated the use of “twang” into my warm-up regimen. Twang, useful for many qualities, can be achieved nasally or orally. Nasal twang can be produced by employing a high tongue, narrow aryepiglottic sphincter, and a high larynx according to Estill (2005) recipes. Oral twang, while utilizing a narrow aryepiglottic sphincter and high tongue, also will require a high velum. Estill (2005) pointed out, “Often described as a nasal quality, twang may or may not actually be nasalized” (p. 41). This was a big jump for me as someone who spent years cultivating a round, ringing, and spacious classical tone. Not only was

twang a new sensation but also a new sound to get used to. While I perceived this nasal quality as nothing short of ugly, my teacher assured me the sound reaching the audience was clear and appropriate to the style I was singing. What I did notice immediately was that while I had to really engage wholly in the thought process, the physiological aspect of producing the twang quality felt like less work vocally. I thought musical theatre singing was supposed to be vocally draining? Maybe my preconceived beliefs were wrong? I found I required less air to produce the sound I was aiming for, and I didn't feel fatigued in doing so. I also felt more control when bridging from chest register to head. This opened up the door for me to explore the middle voice that had previously been a mystery to me in terms of belt qualities. As I mentioned earlier, I imagined belt voice being the carrying up of the chest voice as high as it could go, but I was starting to discover a new power source in the mid-portion of my range through the use of twang and the acoustic benefits that go along with it.

The middle bridge between "legit" and "belt" is often referred to as a "mixed" sound. A mixed approach uses a thinner vocal fold than belt while also incorporating twang or nasality to characterize a more speech-like quality in one's mid-range. Mix also can still employ the sweet quality of a thyroid tilt as described in classical singing. I achieved my "mix" using one of the Estill recipes that calls for narrowing the aryepiglottic sphincter, maintaining retracted false vocal folds, and keeping the velum in the mid position. Like many voice qualities that Estill provides "recipes" for, there is often more than one way to achieve the desired effect. For example, a singer may achieve the "mix" using a nasalized approach as I described for myself, or with a thicker fold and thyroid tilt that is not nasalized. For me, the use of the mixed voice gave me the options I needed to create a belt-quality that worked for me. At the same time, it also bridged the gap between what I referred to as my "chest" and "head" voice. Rather than being the dreaded "in between" voice that came with a defined "break," it instead became a welcome place to explore more colors I didn't know my voice had. It became evident I didn't have to immediately transition from a legit operatic sound to a brassy belt in one fell swoop, but that there were choices to be made somewhere in between. Once I embraced the idea that I didn't have to sound the same as every other belter out there, I was able to fully release my inhibitions and start trying new sounds.

The next concept to tackle was the use of pitched speech and "call" voice. I spent many a night sitting on my bed giving my best cricoid tilt while saying "hey you!" across the room to no one in particular. The cricoid is a ring of cartilage that circles

the trachea. Estill believed singers have the ability to tilt the cricoid. This is still a controversial topic as many believe the cricoid does not tilt. Regardless, it didn't take long for my three year old to join in on shouting "hey you." My husband, who has endured many a vocalise in our home, was not a fan of this one. There was a delicate balance between shouting and speaking on pitch with just the right amount of subglottic air pressure to support it. I could easily tell when I was producing the sound correctly because it felt like very little work. However, I didn't find it every time I tried. I still feel like I'm re-learning to walk when attempting a correct belt technique. It is the same concept, one foot in front of the other, but just a slightly different balance and coordination.

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Throughout all of this technical work to find this new voice of mine, we were required to self-tape submissions to show progress. Voice coach Ron Browning (2016) spoke of his work with crossover singers saying, "Much of what I see on the face of a singer new to crossover work is a look of terror." Not only did I feel this terror while exploring this new world of musical theatre singing, but I definitely showed it on my face and in my body language, as was evident on my recordings. It is hard to be a perfectionist and try new things at the same time. While I understood the technical aspects of what was being asked of me, giving myself permission to struggle and make mistakes was another battle entirely. I would equate this to when I tried taking beginner violin lessons as an adult. I was an accomplished pianist and thought another instrument would come to me quickly and naturally. Needless to say, I only lasted a few months before it became too frustrating for me. By the end of my first semester in the musical theatre voice program, I knew I had to have an honest conversation with myself before I could tackle the new semester. This was perhaps the most pivotal moment in my learning. I had to stop caring what everyone thought about me and stop comparing my voice to others. At this point I actually started having fun with the music I was making, and I appreciated my own voice for its strengths rather than my perceived weaknesses.

Letting go of my confidence issues allowed me to focus on my real reason for taking this journey, which was to become a better teacher. The Estill voice technique can be a lot of information to the beginner, but my own voice teacher pointed me in the direction of the children's version of Estill's program. This worked perfectly for me because sometimes you simply need something broken down to the absolute basic form before it clicks. It also was helpful to gain some Estill language, examples, and imagery that would work for my own students. Voice coach Ron Browning (2016) pointed out, "It seems the sillier the play, the faster the breakthrough, and the quicker the progress with crossover studies." It made sense to me. How many times have we asked a student to make their best fake "opera diva" impression to explore that classical sound? Browning (2016) continued by saying, "Teachers need ways to get the students to free themselves from the constant stricture of being rational." I realize now, that perhaps I can be an even more effective teacher for having gone through many of the same frustrations my students will experience on their journey to finding their musical theatre voice. It is possible that the vocal struggles I have been beating myself up over can be turned into a positive teaching experience for my students.

Eureka! I've found worth in my own journey.

My final semester in the program went much better than the first, which is funny in hindsight, considering that studies were unexpectedly transitioned to online as a result of the global pandemic. I distanced myself from the technical aspects of belting, cry, mixed voice, etc., and I started putting all my focus on character and storytelling. It was amazing how much of the voice followed. I continued to video myself even though it was no longer required, and I started seeing the change before I could hear it. My belt voice wasn't perfect, but it was there this time and gradually becoming more consistent. I conquered my fear of performing in this new voice in what I will call a "semi-public" forum. I couldn't hold a public recital the way I imagined due to the pandemic, however, I had a small group of family present as I recorded the full program of planned music. Sometimes it is even more nerve-wracking to perform for people you love versus strangers, so this was still a great culminating experience for me. Most importantly, I'm more accepting now of the fact that vocally I am, and always will be, a work in progress. The perfection I imagined for myself is

unattainable in any genre, therefore I found the key to my own success by embracing the failures and learning from them.

If you're a classical singer preparing to brave your own belt, here is my advice:

1. Throw out all preconceived notions you have formed over the years about musical theatre singing. Bury them deep, and don't let them resurface.
2. Accept that new concepts may not come easily nor quickly, and be kind to yourself throughout the process.
3. Set small goals. Don't expect to go from Renée Fleming to Idina Menzel overnight. Celebrate the small victories, and listen to your body if something simply doesn't feel like it's working vocally.
4. Find sources of information that speak your language. Find a teacher who can break down the same concepts in a way that makes sense and works for your individual needs.
5. Don't forget to explore and engage your whole voice. You don't have to, nor should you, turn your back on your "classical" voice in order to explore new territory.
6. Your voice is yours. Strive for making sound qualities in ways that are healthy for you individually as discussed with your teacher. Perhaps you won't achieve a brassy belt in the exact same way as the next person, and that is ok.

The single most important piece of advice I can give to the crossover practitioner is to simply take the first step. There is no one right way. You can walk, skip, run, ride your bike, or do cartwheels, but whatever way you choose — just make sure to get past those bushes. There's a whole world to explore on the other side.

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Rita Gentile holds a bachelor's degree in music from UW-Parkside and both a Master of Education in music education leadership and Master of Music in music theatre vocal pedagogy from Carthage College. She is currently a second year doctoral candidate at Boston University in the area of music education. Rita owns RG Performing Arts Studio in

Kenosha, Wisconsin, which offers voice, piano, dance and theatre lessons as well as workshops to all ages. She is actively engaged as a performer, and she serves as the Director of Choirs at Lance Middle School and the Director of Music Liturgy at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. Rita is a proud member of NATS and a former Freshman Women's category winner. She also holds memberships with WCDA, MTEA, NafMe, and serves as a Level 2 adjudicator for the Wisconsin School Music Association. She is an avid learner and advocate for vocal health across all genres and ages. She resides in Kenosha with her husband, Ben, and their three children; Vinny (10), Dominic (8), and Gioia (4).