

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

Cultivating Instincts in Our Music Theater Students Using Spectral Pedagogy

Elizabeth Gerbi



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He's teaching me to change my instincts . . . or, at least, ignore them.

— Sheila (Catherine O'Hara), *Waiting for Guffman*

AS I NEAR THE END OF my first decade as a college voice instructor, there are certain undergraduate archetypes I have come to cheerfully anticipate. For example, there are always singers who seem committed to proving to the audience that their flesh and blood physical assets are merely illusions, and that the corporeal bodies they emotionally identify with are the ones the audience ought to see. Unconsciously, their upper backs may remain in a constant state of flexion, to demonstrate they are not, in fact, 6-foot-one statuesque romantic leads, but the round shouldered comics that they were cast as freshmen in high school (before their growth spurts and accumulations of a few varsity basketball letters). Indeed, once students have been typed in their early years, perhaps having been told by an instructor they trust to consider themselves forever a sexy soubrette, a dancer “who sings a little,” a “Maria Von Trapp,” etc., it is a Herculean undertaking to expand their vision beyond those words, even if the truth would ultimately open up many more roles for them.

There are also students who are determined to fight tooth and nail against the *Fach* that nature bestowed upon them. I find this is nearly always due to the influence of well meaning former instructors who, perhaps not coincidentally, generally produce singers of a voice type identical to their own. Invariably, these students will barricade themselves from acknowledging any sort of acoustic evidence to the contrary, asserting “I *am* a soprano” or “I *am* a bass,” refusing even to leaf through a mezzo or tenor anthology on the basis of the editor’s label. It can take a lot of convincing to show these students that singing is a muscular event, and that the voice can be trained to do a great deal, including, in some cases, to remain static and employ only one register/timber/habitual volume out of mental resolution, despite the unique size, color, and flexibility of their biological instrument.

The most common archetype I encounter, though, is a bit of a paradox: the students who have been “carefully taught” to disengage from their performance for purposes of “getting it right.” I regrettably admit that this mindset

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is endemic in the majority of incoming freshman I've observed. Deliberate Disengagers (DDs) often appear the embodiment of disciplined, tenacious workers, and will practice their pieces diligently, making bold, physical choices that would have made their high school directors weep with pride. To many performance faculty, these students will appear as rising stars from the day of their first audition, and will appear on every level the sort of students most voice instructors dream of having as studio members.

After DDs sing a particularly well prepared selection in one of my repertoire classes, their peers will applaud enthusiastically. Beaming with satisfaction, the students then turn to me for feedback, waiting for me to suggest the vowel modification or hand gesture that will further solidify their prowess. Instead, I will smile, praise them for their efforts, and ask them what they want out of that piece of music. Next, I offer them some guiding questions to help specify in what direction we should work that day. For instance, are there areas in the music that feel less authentic to them, as the singer? What happens in their mind and body when they experience an emotional disconnect? Are all of the sounds they are making consistent with the story that they are trying to tell, or are they making "safe" choices to correlate with parts of their voice that feel comfortable right now? How do they think this piece should sound, and what changes would they like to make to realize their concept? And, perhaps cruelest of all, I might ask them how they feel as a whole about what they have achieved that day. Exhilarated? Frustrated? Anxious? Proud?

The DDs, who were previously delighted, will deflate before my eyes, more so than if I had offered scathing criticism. They will shift their feet, and alternate between avoiding eye contact and surveying my expression to see if they have answered "correctly," or if I will take pity on them and answer my own query. If the DDs speak, they will answer questions with questions, terrified to speak declaratively lest they appear imbeciles in front of their classmates. Sometimes they panic, or, on rare occasion, bark back at the patent absurdity of my inquiries, as if their own feelings about the performance are the least important rather than the most important variable.

No matter what the reaction, it is clear in DDs' expressions that any anxiety they feel must be indicative of failure, and that in their minds I have clearly lost all

respect for their performance skills that day. Despite my pains to deconstruct their performance into small, manageable bits of identifiable and repeatable phenomena, making every effort to use functional language for vocal events, and pulling out every pedagogic trick in my toolbox to engage mindful reflection, I will often only get a despondent, "So, was it good or not?" in response.

It took me years of similar exchanges to realize why my classes were so challenging for these sorts of students. First of all, I was not telling them what pieces to perform, which caused tremendous apprehension among those who had listened carefully to their teachers every step of the way for repertoire recommendations. I would provide selection rubrics, or, in some cases, require purchase of a particular voice anthology, but would ultimately require them to make their own selections on the basis of their performance goals and repertoire needs. In other words, I allowed for the potentiality of them choosing pieces that were poor matches for them, therefore placing them in a situation in which this might be discovered in live performance, in front of their peers. I naively operated under the assumption that students would prefer the freedom to choose material that really expressed their current emotional lives. However, students did not perceive such freedom as being worth the possibility of public mortification at picking the "wrong" selection, especially as I, their professor, had the ability to save all involved pain, as well as time and effort, by simply assigning appropriate selections. After all, why else had they sought out training but for the benefit of expert opinions that might spare them difficult experiences?

In fact, in the pursuit of becoming highly directable, eager learners, these DDs inadvertently became followers and were comfortable proceeding only if they had been given exact directives. Flexible parameters were not advantages according to their worldview, but insurmountable obstacles. Coming of age in a culture where reality singing shows were more culturally pervasive than school choral programs, these students had inadvertently learned that the true goal of voice study was to avoid traumatic responses regarding their performance rather than engage their imaginations, creativity, or unique expressive qualities by risking the occasional "new" sound. The game, as it were, was to avoid the wrath of the proverbial cantankerous judge

(one particularly famous British producer's stern brow and pithy turn of phrase might come to mind), which could be assured by singing only within the limitations of one's extant range and stylistic wheelhouse.

Having never risked singing in the extremes of their range, these students lacked practice with the necessary tools to justify vocal choices in specific musical or functional terms. To these students, the transformed Eliza Doolittle did not sing with perfect intonation and a reinforced head register because she was now a regal, elegant lady, but so she would not be labeled as "pitchy" by a curmudgeonly adjudicator with an ax to grind. Elphaba belted the end of "Defying Gravity" not because the character was experiencing euphoric self-actualization that needed to be broadcast across all of Oz like a trumpet call, but because Idina Menzel had set an artistic/commercial precedent. Lacking specific vocal concepts to guide their choices, DDs are accustomed to repeating what they hear on cast albums, thus at best becoming accomplished imitators rather than authentic performers. In the most fortunate cases, DDs might realize their weaknesses and establish a relationship with a trusted instructor who might offer tremendous guidance, but even in these cases the actor as an interpreter remains dependent upon others to effectively dictate their performance choices.

So, faced with these factors, was the answer to change my assignments so students could enjoy more immediate success? Should I begin to assign specific repertoire and provide the evaluative judgments these aspiring singers were so hungry for? No, I argued. The answer was instead to create an *environment of experimentation* so that students are given the freedom to fail without consequence, perhaps for the first time in their performing lives. By designing assessments based on factors such as their effort/overall preparation, ability to perform specific vocal tasks, and insightful analyses of one another's performances, I might create an environment where new skills could be cultivated and applied, and students were allowed to engage mindfully in their own performance.

It takes a long time, often every minute of the four years we are allotted, to convey to most students that voice study is a dynamic, progressive, and frequently mercurial practice. One season a student might find herself being cast as a romantic, Golden Age *ingénue*, and the next the endearing but gullible best friend.

What is interesting, though, is how desperate many of our students are to reveal their "true" type as one or the other; they rarely embrace the possibility that they may represent multiple types simultaneously, or that certain qualities may be magnified or dampened in relation to other actors. I recently enjoyed a fascinating casting process for a college production of *Rent*, which sent a flurry of students to my office wondering why they were called back for Maureen (the megalomaniacal performance artist) or for Joanne (the Ivy-League, responsible, principled ACLU lawyer), when they had long been told that they clearly represented the opposite type. In instance after instance, I had to explain, "Yes, you do have the vocal chops for a _____, but compared to your scene partner, you invariably seemed like a _____." Students left my office baffled, wanting to believe my feedback, but held in arrested development by their prior experiences that informed them that one or the other was the finite, inflexible truth.

Some of this unyielding fixation on rules and typing might be due to the very sort of causal, methodic thinking that we are trying to promote in music theater students who wish one day to work on Broadway. After all, we've asked them to constantly consider and reconsider their physical type, and work with a voice teacher to unveil their golden *tessitura* so they know the exact keys to best feature their strengths and conceal their weaknesses. In fact, we have made auditioning for the music theater seem more like a series of determined protocols than what it is: an opportunity to bear witness to the magical, spontaneous amalgam of dramatic text and personal intention, eloquently defined by Ronald Willis in his guidebook for performance respondents as "fragile magic."¹ I wonder if all of this excellent advice, designed to save students copious amounts of trial and error, might actually prevent them more empowering access to their internal barometers. Our efforts to fast-track students through these trials, averting hundreds of hours of struggling, not only prevent students from developing effective corrective techniques to deal with their weaknesses, but deny them the chance to identify singularly effective moments in their own performance.

This focus on expediting training might ultimately hinder some performers over the broader duration of their careers. Recently, Jennifer Hudson was interviewed on Playbill.org about her transformation from a twenty-

something, prototypical “Effie” in the film adaptation of *Dreamgirls*, to the slinky, sexual Shug Avery in the 2015 Broadway Revival of *The Color Purple* on Broadway.² Although Hudson’s dramatic weight loss may be related to the roles she is now offered, I am driven to look critically at her striking, confident features in both “before” and “after” photos; to me, both women are casting possibilities for her face, body composition, and soulful voice. After all, couldn’t Shug be a voluptuous woman brimming with sexual confidence? On the other hand, could Effie potentially be cast as a woman who is not corpulent, but who is trapped by a negative body image, so “appears” less commercially viable than the Deena (a “Diana Ross” type), although she might only be a few extra pounds higher on the scale?

I applaud both Ms. Hudson’s versatility and inspiring adaptability, but I remain surprised at how few performers are successfully able to transcend the business’s typing standards in a similarly organic manner. In the entertainment industry, it is an accepted notion that types change only chronologically, as stated in Sondheim’s *Follies*: “First you’re another sloe-eyed vamp, then someone’s mother, and then you’re camp.”³ However, it is highly unusual for an actor to make lateral moves within similar age categories the way Hudson has done. It is unclear what the ramifications on her career would have been if she held steadfast to either performance identity. How well could a woman who saw herself as the hedonist Shug portray Effie’s sexual masochism? Might Hudson, if she followed an agent’s assessments of her commercial assets, refuse an audition for Effie, asserting that she will sing only for Deena? Likewise, a performer who felt somehow that she possessed only an affinity with Effie’s commitment to Curtis might be challenged to revel in Shug’s polyamory. Fortunately, Hudson’s ability to adapt to various changes in and around her career has, yet again, proven her both a survivor and a singer-actor to be reckoned with.

In order to promote this sort of career-spanning flexibility and authenticity in our own classrooms, we need to give students the practice in artistic autonomy noticeably lacking in the earlier stages of their training. Even if a student is fortunate enough to be able to afford a continuous stream of voice instructors, coaches, managers, therapists, and stylists, no amount of professional counsel can replace the gut instincts some of the best

programs in the nation have unintentionally deactivated. The very essence of self that makes for a compelling performance rests in artists’ ability to hone in on their own narrative, and tell unique, engaging, personal, *real* stories—the kind that are generally defined by the enigmatic constancy of change.

By putting pressure on students to continually generate high caliber performances, as is often the case in conservatory BFA programs, we reinforce a model in which external cues trump internal instincts, and outside indications of mastery are far more important than a performer’s own thoughts and feelings about her efforts. In a program where a student might sing only Effie or Shug, or Joanne or Maureen, because an instructor has labeled that character as their inherent “type,” we deny students the innumerable benefits of the road less traveled. Therefore, it is essential that at least some of students’ performing experiences are nonevaluative and allow opportunities for critical deconstruction. In my teaching, I designate particular classes and activities as “workshop” spaces (akin to traditional studio classes) versus “performance” spaces; the former allows for pronounced risk taking with very low potential academic, musical, or social consequence, while the latter allows students to practice the sort of higher stakes singing required for main stage auditions, showcases, or master classes for esteemed guest artists. Most programs offer the latter in abundance as a matter of course, but rarely designate specific classroom experiences as safe spaces for trial and error in preparation of such make-or-break assessments. By increasing the amount of time spent in “workshop” mode, we gently sow the seeds for fruitful change in the studio, ensuring that higher adrenaline capstone performances may indeed bear transformative fruit.

Much like a well oiled exposition of a Broadway show, in order to define a “workshop” space that invites constructive cognitive dissonance, we must establish the rules at the onset of instruction. The instructor should explain, preferably on the first day of class, that auditions are “performance” spaces, where students should bring pieces that have the best evidence for success . . . but that they will find these sorts of pieces only via trial and error, which will be the object of the “workshop” space.

The main focus in a workshop-based classroom, then, is to treat performances as a series of individual, quanti-

fiable choices, that are not in and of themselves positive or negative, but that cumulatively yield appropriate or inappropriate responses from audiences when different ratios of these variables are achieved. For example, when a student sings a high note in a mixed voice as opposed to a full belt in a song where that same note is conventionally belted, that experiment needs to be evaluated on its own merits, asking if on this particular day, with this individual voice, in this unique interpretation of the piece, a mixed registration best serves the story. In this setting, the class should not disregard the traditional approach, but compare the results of changing variables to the existing template.

In this vein, I have adopted a system of “spectral pedagogy” to help distill comprehensive experiences into their base, measurable components. For example, in the music theater class, students might be invited to take individual aspects of their singing performance such as registration, volume, use of vibrato, and diction choices and place them on a spectrum, which can simply be designated a numeric value of 1 to 10. Thus, we have an easily understood model for isolating specific vocal functions. In my classes, I use the following categories: chest voice dominant production (thyroarytenoid dominant) versus head voice dominant (cricothyroid dominant) production; straight tone versus “spinning” (vibrato); “spoken” versus “sung” (legato) articulation; loud versus soft volumes; bright versus dark timbres; horizontal versus vertical vowels. Some voice pedagogues might notice that the first term in each of these pairs is commonly associated with contemporary belt production, while the second set collectively verbalize the musical values of most classical singing schools.

Longtime readers of this column will note parallels to Robert Edwin’s own highly versatile Balancing Act Model,⁴ which, either through “trickle-down” pedagogy or through direct observation of Edwin in his studio, has clearly informed my own teaching. Edwin, a longtime pioneer of continuum-based instruction,⁵ grants teachers license to address virtually any component of singing by deliberately encouraging students to experiment with “hyper” and “hypo” perimeters such as phonation (pressed versus flow) and expression (overactive and tense versus passive). Doing so, Edwin argues, does not only permit students to develop their entire vocal mechanism and defy traditional boundaries surround-

ing registration and gender, but also allows students to naturally employ the very sort of cross-training most likely to avoid future injury.⁶

Adapting this model in my own studio classes, I begin by allowing the student to take educated guesses about where on the spectrum to begin, and then move toward either spectral extreme as the work develops. So, if a student brings in Maureen’s *ode de* street performance art, “Over the Moon” from *Rent*, we might start by asking the following questions: How much vibrato does it make sense for this character to employ?” Should there be continual oscillation, in the manner of a classical singer (a 9 on our spectrum), or a rare event, only at the very conclusion of phrases (2)? Which registration matches what we have come to know of this character’s personality—does she sound more “Maureeny” with a head dominant quality (3) or a chesty mix (7)? Volume wise, is Maureen eager to be heard, or is her vocal quality covered and *sotto voce*, as if avoiding arrest from some passing mercenary policeman? Experimenting on this spectrum allows students not only to exercise enormous vocal control, but allows them practice in and the opportunity to be emboldened by their own interpretive decisions.

Another important element of this process is the deliberate employment of strategic opposites to establish the “wrong” direction. To break the ice, the instructor might ask students to make choices that contradict traditional readings of characters in order make new discoveries. An operatic “Greased Lightning” at an “8” registration and a belted “Glitter and be Gay” at a “2” can do wonders to instill in students a much needed sense of humor about their efforts while cultivating the very playful environment that is so critical for music theater training (yet strangely absent in many of our classrooms). Also, for students who are working outside of their vocal comfort zones, this can allow us to work along a spectrum of tonal possibilities, so even if a “3” is the desired outcome, they can inch their way backwards from a “7” toward their ultimate goal.

As the expression informs us, change is never easy. Opening a classroom up to this sort of trialing and experimentation might at the same time lead the instructor to a place of discomfort; just as we are asking our students to abandon their former methodologies, we must shed our authoritative instincts to provide the

right answer for every query, lest we lose all credibility in our students' eyes. Through the process of leading students down side roads, we allow ourselves the ability to stumble upon unexpected truths in the material. In addition, students will be given the gift of knowing their professors are artists both empowered and limited by their own experiences, just like their students. The only difference is that we, as instructors, have the power to positively affect the students' learning environments with the pedagogic insights afforded by more advanced age and accumulated "mistakes."

To err is human, as they say. However, to passionately commit to error? That's the sort of music theater exercise I love to observe.

NOTES

1. Ronald A. Willis, *Fragile Magic: A Guidebook for Theatre Respondents* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2012).
2. Karu F. Daniels, "Really? Me, as Shug?"—Why Jennifer Hudson Is Stepping into a Role (and a Broadway Debut) She Never Imagined; <http://www.playbill.com/article/really-me-as-shug-why-jennifer-hudson-is-stepping-into-a-role-and-a-broadway-debut-she-never-imagined-com-369735> (accessed June 1, 2017).
3. Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954–1981)* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 221.
4. Robert Edwin, "Too Much, Too Little, Just Right! The Balancing Act Model," *Journal of Singing* 55, no. 3 (January/February 1999): 73–75.
5. Robert Edwin, "Rock *Fach*: From One Extreme to the Other," *Journal of Singing* 51, no. 1 (September/October 1994): 55–60; Robert Edwin, "Cross Training for the Voice," *Journal of Singing* 65, no. 1 (September/October 2008): 73–76.
6. Ibid.

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As a singer-actor, she has appeared in regional productions ranging from *I pagliacci* to *Les Miserables* to *The Kenny Rogers Christmas Tour*. Recent projects include music directing *The Chris Betz Show* (Rose's Turn/Sage

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She is an active theater and music educator, simultaneously working as a New York State School Music Association Adjudicator and Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Respondent. She has also taught workshops in music theater pedagogy and performance at the International Thespian Festival, KCACTF, New York State Theatre Education Association, and New England Theatre Conference, and has regularly presented papers/participated on panels for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. Please visit www.facebook.com/elizabethgerbisinger for more information.

[He] For I have a song to sing, O!
 [She] Sing me your song, O!
 [He] It is sung to the moon
 By a love-lorn loon,
 When fled from the mocking throng, O!
 It's the song of a merryman moping mum,
 Whose soul was sad and whose glance was glum,
 Who sipped no sup and who craved no crumb,
 As he sighed for the love of a ladye!

[She] I have a song to sing, O!
 [He] Sing me your song, O!
 [She] It is sung with the ring
 Of the songs maids sing
 Who love with a love life-long, O!
 It's the song of a merrymaid, peerly proud,
 Who loved a lord, and who laughed aloud
 At the moan of the merryman moping mum,
 Whose soul was sad and whose glance was glum,
 Who sipped no sup and who craved no crumb,
 As he sighed for the love of a ladye!

Gilbert & Sullivan, *The Yeoman of the Guard*,
 Act II (Jack Point, Elsie Maynard)