

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

Seth Riggs—His CCM Legacy

Darren Wicks



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[Associate Editor's note: The following article originally appeared as a book chapter in *So You Want to Sing CCM* (Rowman & Littlefield 2018), edited by Matthew Hoch. It has been adapted for this column. Seth Riggs's deep concern for healthy voice technique makes it a very appropriate piece for this *Journal of Singing* issue acknowledging and celebrating World Voice Day and its 2019 theme, "Be Kind With Your Voice."]

SPEECH LEVEL SINGING™ (SLS) IS AN approach to singing developed by Los Angeles teacher, Seth Riggs. Few teachers can claim to have Riggs's track record and few pedagogies have been applied like SLS. Riggs's students have achieved success at the highest levels of the industry and across multiple musical genres. In his more than 60 years of teaching, Riggs has taught four winners of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions (New York), some 120 Grammy Award winners, and countless Broadway performers.¹ His television and movie credits include roles as voice consultant for Madonna (*Dick Tracy*, 1990), Val Kilmer (*The Doors*, 1991), Whoopi Goldberg (*Sister Act*, 1992), Michael Jackson (*This Is It*, 2009), and voice coaching for the *American Idol* television series. Riggs continues to operate a busy home studio in Hollywood, working with performers, actors, serious amateurs, producers, and teachers. In addition, he maintains an international profile as a voice consultant, teacher educator, and workshop presenter.

Riggs's contribution to CCM singing and pedagogy has been immense, and any publication on current CCM practice would be incomplete without considering his legacy. [Associate Editor's note: Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) is an umbrella term created exclusively by New York City voice teacher Jeannette LoVetri in January 2000 to replace the vague and often condescending term, "nonclassical."] From the outset, I must stress that I am not a spokesperson for Seth Riggs or for the Speech Level Singing organization. I was fortunate, however, to study singing with Riggs, with several of his master teachers, and to have been a certified SLS teacher for several years. Along with many colleagues, I left the SLS organization in 2013 to become a founding member of the Institute for Vocal Advancement (IVA).

My experience with SLS was profoundly formative and set me on the path to developing an approach to voice pedagogy that is based on functional principles and vocal balance. Although I am aware of controversies surrounding the SLS technique, I found Seth Riggs to be an exceedingly passionate and inspiring teacher who dedicated his career to helping individuals find vocal

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freedom. He is also a strong supporter of other teachers who want to achieve great results with their students. As a graduate student researching the practice of exemplary teachers, I was privileged to interview Mr. Riggs for my doctoral thesis. This article has been constructed from personal conversations and my experiences with the SLS organization. I also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of former SLS master teachers, Greg Enriquez, Spencer Welch, and Guy Babusek, who provided information and advice.

Very little about SLS has been published or subjected to scholarly research. Typically, singers learn the technique by taking classes with a certified SLS teacher. Teachers certify in the pedagogy via mentoring, attending seminars, working on their voices with master teachers, and through supervised on the job training. This process reflects the way Riggs likes to teach—he does not see himself as an academic or a voice scientist. In fact, Riggs was often critical of scientists, whom he felt had a lot of knowledge but could not demonstrate good singing technique. Moreover, Riggs does not believe someone can learn to sing or to teach singing from a book. Conversations with him about singing might start out conceptually, but would inevitably result in him singing to demonstrate concepts—or asking the conversant to sing!

In the early part of his teaching career, Riggs began formulating his approach to vocal technique. SLS was born out of frustrations with his own vocal journey and his assessments of the deficit in technique among professional singers he encountered. He described his frustration to me in these words:

Why is it that the greatest singers could go from the bottom of their voice to the top with pure vowels, even legato, and consistent vibrato? What could they be doing that I'm not? I had all these bits of paper that said I should be able to do it, but I couldn't.²

Riggs was disgruntled with his vocal education, which he felt had not prepared him for life as a professional singer. Despite obtaining a graduate degree and taking lessons with many teachers, he felt he was unable to find a teacher who could show him how to “put his voice together.” He explained further:

That's really what good singing is about. How do you get from your chest voice where you talk and not drag

it up to the top into your head voice, which is for the higher pitches? The masters of [the] *bel canto* [period] could do this and, somewhere along the line, we lost that wisdom.³

Another frustration for Riggs involved problems with word intelligibility, vowel quality, and the poor diction he observed among professional singers. Riggs felt that by forcing the voice, singers were destroying the beauty of the legato line, improperly handling their registers, and consequently distorting their words.

The great *bel canto* singers could maintain pure vowels as they sung through the *passaggi* and could do so without yelling or disconnecting into falsetto. So many pop singers don't seem to understand that yelling distorts all the vowels. I would prefer to take a sound that is not so heavy on a G₄ and then have access to the A, B^b, and high C above it, but most important—be able to understand the words.⁴

For answers to his frustrations, Riggs looked back to the practices of the great singers of the past, particularly those used during the Middle Ages in the training of the Schola Cantorum, the professional Roman papal choir. He followed that lineage of teachers through to the Italian *bel canto* school. Among his pedagogic influences, Riggs cites the Italian baritone and celebrated voice teacher Antonio Cotogni (1831–1918), as well as the Italian baritones Mattia Battastini (1856–1928), Riccardo Stracciari (1875–1955), and Giuseppe De Luca (1876–1950), who he felt demonstrated flawless technique and the ability to perfectly sing through their *passaggi*.

Riggs's greatest influence, however, was the Italian tenor Edgar Herbert-Caesari (1884–1969), who studied at the Santa Cecilia Academy in Rome alongside Riccardo Daviesi (1839–1921)—the great Sistine Chapel singer of the nineteenth century—and the celebrated Italian tenor, Beniamino Gigli (1890–1957). Settling in London in 1925 as Professor of Singing at the Trinity College of Music, Caesari became an eminent teacher of opera known for his research and efforts to restore the teachings of the *bel canto* school. Riggs cites Caesari's writings as the genesis for Speech Level Singing, particularly *The Science and Sensations of Vocal Tone* (1936), *The Voice of the Mind* (1951), and *The Alchemy of Voice* (1965).

While building his studio and clientele in Los Angeles, Riggs was engaged as a vocal consultant for laryngolo-

gists Henry Rubin, Hans von Leden, and Edward Kantor, who referred postoperative patients to Riggs to assist with voice rehabilitation. Out of the many referrals Riggs worked with, one patient was to change the course of his career—that was Stevie Wonder. Stevie came for postoperative care after undergoing voice surgery. His producer, Quincy Jones, was so impressed with Stevie’s progress that he began sending artists such as Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, and Natalie Cole to Riggs to improve their voice technique. From there, Riggs’s reputation expanded to the worlds of film and theater, and he received engagements from actors, directors, and producers, including Steven Spielberg, Bob Fosse, Oliver Stone, and Martin Scorsese. Through his continued success with high profile clients, Riggs established his reputation as the “teacher of the stars.”

Riggs defines Speech Level Singing as “a way of using your voice that allows you to sing freely and clearly with maximum power and clarity.”⁵ The central idea behind SLS is that singing should be produced as easily and freely as natural speech. “You should be able to sing through your entire range—from the lowest notes of your chest voice, up through the highest notes of your head voice—in a smooth, even, or what we call connected manner, and still maintain a relaxed speech level posture [of the larynx].”⁶

In a personal conversation, Riggs noted “the simplest definition of Speech Level Singing is the absolute refusal to help pitch in any way.”⁷ The absence of “helping” that he refers to is in fact the stabilization of the larynx in its natural “resting” posture during singing. Riggs believes that the larynx should remain “stable, but not locked” during vocalization, regardless of pitch and vowel changes. He further clarifies this idea:

So many people think that to sing they have to reach up for high notes or go down for low notes when actually the pitches are made on a horizontal—they are not made on a vertical. Now, the resonance may be on an up and down . . . when it’s speech level, you don’t “reach.” The cords will make the pitches. So, the technique I teach enables the cords to make the pitches without the performer having to kill themselves to sing high or to sing low.⁸

Speech Level Singing differentiates between the function of the extrinsic laryngeal muscles and the intrinsic muscles during singing and asserts that effi-

cient vocalization can only occur in the absence of interference from the extrinsic (the laryngeal elevator and depressor) muscles. As he describes in a 2010 interview with Babusek, “most of us who are teaching SLS have to get rid of extraneous muscles that other teachers have induced [in an attempt] to make a bigger sound. You’ve got to do the work with resonance—with co-ordinating and compounding the resonance in the bridges [*passaggi*].”⁹

Another hallmark of the Riggs approach is a rejection of subjectivity and imagery in the teaching of singing. In the preface to his book, *Singing for the Stars*, he protests that “the language of voice teachers and choir directors abounds in such confusing and dangerous clichés.”¹⁰ When asked to clarify his thoughts on this topic, he explained, “When teachers say, ‘put it in the mask,’ that makes me so mad, because they imply that a student knows where and how to ‘put’ it. You don’t ‘put’ anything. You allow it to go into that condition.”¹¹

In the absence of imagery, how are voice concepts taught using the SLS technique? Riggs is famous for his adage, “expect it, don’t direct it,” meaning that voice technique is best taught through principles of cause and effect. To achieve this, teachers should avoid describing singing in terms of a tonal ideal or an end result. Instead, they ask a singer to perform an exercise that enables the experience of the desired result. As Riggs explains, “I prefer to use exercises that have a definite cause and effect relationship, producing a desired result, rather than relying on the nebulous descriptions of someone else’s personal experience.”¹² When a student discovers a sound or coordination for himself, the teacher can ask him or her to describe and compare this result in a way that makes sense to the individual singer.

At some point, Riggs became increasingly critical of approaches to singing that put a heavy emphasis on breathing or that prescribed breathing exercises as a panacea for technical problems. Consequently, SLS deemphasized breathing in favor of registration and vocal fold function. Riggs taught that singers should attend to their posture, maintaining an elevated sternum/rib cage and abdominal flexibility, but apart from this, there was no need to practice specific breathing exercises in isolation. He felt that attempts by singers to “support the breath” usually resulted in unhelpful constrictions in the vocal tract, rather than the desired

result of better singing. In a 2004 interview with Randy Buescher, Riggs clarified, “if the larynx is not in the right condition regarding position and vocal fold structure as it relates to registration, it will not receive the air in a proper manner.”¹³ Thus, correct breathing and breath management occur spontaneously and naturally as a result of Speech Level Singing.

Riggs once remarked to me that there are as many different methods for teaching singing as there are teachers, so it wasn’t surprising that he received criticism from teachers who employed other methods or had different tonal preferences. Riggs has strong views on what constitutes good singing and best practice in the teaching of singing. What some know to be his passion and desire to find better or more efficient methods has at times been mistaken for egotism. To be sure, he is not afraid to speak his mind or tell someone he thinks they are wrong. Riggs is critical of teachers and university voice programs that do not teach registration to their singers. In his 2014 interview with Danny Schneider, he describes being fired from several tertiary teaching positions and, in his 2004 conversation with Buescher, Riggs admitted to being outspoken at teacher events. This candor eventually resulted in him being ejected from NATS.¹⁴ It is unfortunate that, to this day, this relationship has never been repaired.

Misunderstanding has often surrounded the terminology used by SLS teachers, which was viewed by some as in-house jargon. For example, the term “speech level” has regularly been misunderstood with critics confusing it with the Schoenbergian term *Sprechstimme*. Some also argue that singing is not like speech and therefore the foundations of SLS are wrong. Riggs’s intention, however, was not to liken singing to speech, only to remind us that good singing should feel effortless and easy—like talking. To cite another example, Riggs’s use of the term “bridges” to describe the *passaggi* is confusing to some, but this word choice reflects his intention that vocal concepts should be taught from the perspective of the singer. Riggs also teaches that when the voice ascends in pitch the vocal folds “zip up” or “dampen” along their length. This idea is challenged by some as inaccurate on scientific grounds.¹⁵ However, Riggs maintains that the concept comes from the bel canto tradition and was taught by Caesari. This alludes to a further source of criticism in that Riggs appears to resist voice science if

he feels that scientific truth does not directly benefit the singer. It is true that he believes that scientific information might be interesting, but is of little use to singers unless they can use it to sing better or, as he puts it, “get through their bridges.”

Riggs has been criticized by those who feel the technique does not allow singers to sing with a loud or full voice. In particular, he discourages belting in favor of the mix voice, claiming that the chest voice taken too high is an unattractive sound and injurious to the long-term vocal health of a singer. Riggs asserts that a strong mix can achieve the same or better quality than a belt. In conversation, he has mentioned being fired by record producers because he discouraged artists from producing strong or harsh sounds.¹⁶ Riggs does not allow his students to abuse their voices (even if that is a sound that is currently popular) and will not endorse other teachers or approaches that he believes compromise a singer’s vocal health or the longevity of a singing career.

Speech Level Singing is often discussed in relation to its core beliefs or the controversies surrounding its implementation. However, little attention has been given to the significance and impact of the SLS technique for CCM singing and the music industry, which I believe to be immense. Riggs’s achievements include pioneering one of the first teacher education programs in CCM pedagogy, inspiring a generation of CCM teachers who approach working with voices from a common mind set, and changing the sound of CCM singing by teaching his technique to so many artists in the industry.

Although Riggs advocates that his techniques are applicable to the performance of any style or genre of music, he was most troubled by some of the opera teachers of his day who asserted that a person who has a grounding in “classical technique” could sing anything. Riggs felt they were teaching a pedagogy that was not conducive toward CCM singers meeting their goals.¹⁷ He saw a gap in the market for competent CCM teaching and began attracting many clients who were contemporary singers and popular recording artists, adapting his pedagogy to suit the demand. Riggs never felt he was inventing something new, but rather reapplying successful techniques used by the great singers of the past to meet the needs of the present. Accordingly, Riggs’s most significant contribution is probably the reframing of bel canto techniques to suit the needs of CCM sing-

ers. He was among the frontrunners in the profession to present a structured pedagogy for the teaching of contemporary voice technique.

My strongest impression of Seth Riggs—after attending seminars and voice lessons with him—is his unmistakable passion for singing and for helping people achieve their vocal goals. He was never content to learn techniques merely to improve his own singing. Rather, he is an educator at heart with a sincere desire to improve the profession of teaching and quality of singing in the music industry. There are thousands of singers and teachers around the world who have been helped by Riggs and regard his techniques as revolutionary; at the same time, there are also critics. In his 2010 interview with Guy Babusek, Riggs responded to his critics by saying, “what we do has a better track record usually than those people who try to put us down.”¹⁸ Regardless of individual opinions of his teaching, Riggs was one of the first to develop a systematic pedagogy for teaching CCM singing. Additionally, he was a frontrunner in a new wave of teachers who approach CCM voice pedagogy from the standpoint of registration and vocal fold function. Any discussion of the history of CCM pedagogy would be incomplete without mentioning Seth Riggs as one of the discipline’s principal founders and most iconic figures.

NOTES

1. Randy Buescher, “An Interview with Seth Riggs,” *Journal of Singing* 60, no. 5 (May/June 2004): 457–490.
2. Seth Riggs, personal communication with the author (May 18, 2012).
3. *Ibid.*; brackets inserted by the author.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Seth Riggs, “The Method” (2007); <http://www.sethriggsvocalstudio.com/sethriggs/themethod.html> (accessed July 9, 2017).
6. Seth Riggs, *Singing for the Stars*, 5th ed. (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Company, 1992), 32; brackets inserted by the author.
7. Seth Riggs, personal communication with the author (May 18, 2012).
8. Danny Schneider, “Seth Riggs” (2014); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGREQ670LrU> (accessed July 9, 2017).
9. Guy Babusek, “Voice Lesson: Seth Riggs on Breath Support” (2011); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5W3_Otmv4U (accessed July 9, 2017).

10. Riggs, *Singing for the Stars*, ix.
11. Seth Riggs, personal communication with the author (May 18, 2012).
12. Guy Babusek, “Voice Lesson: What Is Speech Level Singing?” (2010); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vHUCwibNfM (accessed July 9, 2017).
13. Buescher, 488.
14. Danny Schneider, “Seth Riggs” (2014); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGREQ670LrU> (accessed July 9, 2017); Buescher, 457–490.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Seth Riggs, personal communication with the author (May 18, 2012).
17. Buescher, 457–490.
18. Babusek.

Darren Wicks is a vocalist, jazz pianist, and choral director with a passion for working with singers and music educators. His career spans 25 years and includes work as a high school music teacher, directing community choirs, studio teaching, amateur music theater, university teaching, and teacher education. Fascinated by comparative studies, Dr. Wicks has studied and has been certified in many approaches to singing and music education. He holds a Bachelor of Music and Master of Music Education degrees. His doctoral studies investigated vocal teaching and teacher effectiveness, leading him to consult with hundreds of voice teachers and to grapple with concepts that make for best practice in voice pedagogy. Over many visits to the USA, Dr. Wicks has studied with CCM educators and R&B artists across the country, developing his understanding of how to translate contemporary singing styles to Australian culture. He is a passionate advocate for the importance of community singing and currently directs the 120-voice Melbourne Singers of Gospel. He is founder and teacher of CCM singing at Total Voice Studio, www.totalvoice.com.au.

A star looks down at me,
And says: “Here I and you
Stand, each in our degree:
What do you mean to do, —
Mean to do?”

I say: “For all I know,
Wait, and let Time go by,
Till my change come.” — “Just so,”
The star says: “So mean I: —
So mean I.”

“Waiting Both,” Thomas Hardy