

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

Culture vs. Science in Voice Pedagogy



Robert Edwin

IS MEZZO SOPRANO OPERA STAR STEPHANIE BLYTHE, who, as her alter ego “Blythely Oratonio” singing “Nessun dorma” in male drag as a tenor, a freak of nature; or are the diverse ways she uses her voice actually possible for most female singers?

Conversely, is countertenor Broadway star David Sabella, who, playing the character “Mary Sunshine” in the musical *Chicago* and singing “A Little Bit of Good” in female attire as a soprano, an anomaly; or is the way he uses his voice something most male singers can do?

Can all men be, by nature, sopranos and altos as well as tenors and basses? And can all women be, by nature, tenors and basses as well as sopranos and altos?

Now, to our main question: Do cultural and tribal beliefs still inform our voice pedagogy more than science and therefore inhibit singers from exploring the full potential of both the human voice and human artistic expression?

For this teacher of singing, as well as an ever growing number of fellow pedagogues who celebrate Stephanie and David as role models for all singers and not freaks or anomalies, it is time to demand that voice science be the flag bearer of our profession instead of archaic myths, inaccurate definitions, and cultural biases.

The twenty-first century has seen an explosion of gender fluidity. Much like Middle Eastern singers who hear many pitches between Western European semitones, some of us in modern society have acknowledged the gray between the black and white of our culturally rigid definitions of male and female.

Gender fluidity also has triggered a big pushback from those who reject the gray and cling to the black and white: “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” The fact that Adam may love Steve or that Eve might want to be Adam is not open to discussion among a still significant number of people.

A cursory examination of voice pedagogy history reveals strong parallels between culture and singing. We now know that the human larynx is basically a gender neutral instrument, neither exclusively male nor female; yet we still adhere to a pedagogic system that was developed centuries ago with strict male/female delineations. For example, early Italian voice pedagogues declared a female voice was divided into chest, middle, and head registers, while the male voice consisted of chest, head, and falsetto registers, a determination based more on gender than on science.

Why then with twenty-first century scientific knowledge do we still call cricothyroid-dominant muscle activity in males “falsetto,” implying Mr. Sabella sings in a false voice even though it sounds very much like Ms. Blythe’s “head” voice? If we go to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, we read that cul-

tural gender bias informs the definition of falsetto: “an artificially high voice; especially: an artificially produced singing voice that overlaps and extends above the range of the full voice . . .” So, Mr. Sabella’s singing, when he is not using his equally good baritone, can be classified by some as false *and* artificial? While we’re on the subject, why do we still call registers/voices “head” and “chest” when that activity occurs in the larynx that houses the vocal folds? How many of us are still being told, “Don’t sing from your throat, sing from your diaphragm”?

Contradictions abound. While female vocal folds (12.5-17.5 mm) tend to be smaller than male vocal folds (17-25 mm), differences in function are minor. Vocal fold and resonance tract size affects range, but on many current voice range charts sopranos are told they sing from C₄ to C₆. That assumes women aren’t supposed to use “chest voice,” otherwise known as thyroarytenoid-dominant (TA) vocal fold activity, because that’s a man’s territory. Tell that to all the female-declared students in my studio, none of whom have to stop at middle C₄ when descending to their lower range. Tell that to Helen Leahey who holds the Guinness World Record for lowest note sung by a female—a D₂.

At the opposite end, basses are told they sing from E₂ to E₄, totally discounting any significant use of cricothyroid-dominant (CT) muscle activity since “it’s a woman’s voice and false to males.” Tell that to the male-declared students in my studio who, after dispelling the falsetto myth, find they can join the altos—and some, even the sopranos—in vocalizing. Tell that to Xiao Lung Wang who recently surpassed Adam Lopez as the Guinness-certified “highest note sung by a male” record holder. Mr. Wang went off the top end of the piano with an E₈, besting Mr. Lopez’s mere E₈.

Down on the left side of the piano, Guinness says present record holder Tim Storms goes off that end into infrasonic territory, below the level of human hearing. Alas, I can’t send you to YouTube to hear that one.

What fascinates me about this whole gender rigidity/gender fluidity issue is how long it has been going on. Strict cultural rules for men and women have been in existence since recorded history, yet “exceptions” were constantly made:

- Shakespeare told very human stories of love, hate, life, and death without the benefit of female actors. Juliet was a guy.

- The church fully supported the Adam and Eve story yet allowed castration of young males who exhibited singing ability so they could sound like females in adulthood. Fortunately, David Sabella and other countertenors managed to pull that off without the surgery.
- Classical opera composers put pants on women so they could look and sound like young men even though they were not singing like traditional young men of romantic age would. Shouldn’t the women have been singing in their TA-dominant register (“chest voice”) to sound more “manish”?

Then there’s the terminology. “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,” turns into “How do I describe thee? Let me count the ways.” For example, chest voice (*voce di petto*) has many aliases: modal, heavy mechanism, lower register, thick folds, belt, Mode 1; or its evidence-based name, thyroarytenoid-dominant muscle activity, TA for short.

How about head voice (*voce di testa*)? We also like to call it legit, falsetto, loft register, soprano, light mechanism, thin folds, upper register, Mode 2; or its fact based name, cricothyroid-dominant muscle activity, otherwise known as CT. (For a more complete discussion of terminology, please visit the American Academy of Teachers of Singing website and download “In Support of Fact-Based Voice Pedagogy and Terminology,” a paper we published in 2014 that I was proud to chair.)

I have been a singing teacher for over four decades and have been advocating for fact based, gender neutral voice pedagogy both in the micro environment of my independent studio and in the macro environment of national and international conferences, seminars, and workshops for much of that time.

Since 1985, when my first column, “The Bach to Rock Connection,” appeared in *The NATS Bulletin*, I have been confronting a voice teaching system that claims radical differences between female and male voices. In 2008, I wrote perhaps my most definitive column on the subject, “Cross Training for the Voice” (*Journal of Singing* 65, no. 1 [September/October 2008]: 73–76). In it, I shared the story of Julie Bishop, a professional opera singer and a DMA candidate at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who asked me to help her explore her belt and mix voice for music theater work. Her teacher gave her permission with the caveat that if

this cross training experiment at all compromised her classical voice, lessons would be terminated. Much to her and her teacher's surprise, her overall voice and performance skills improved. She was able to belt efficiently to D₅ and her classical voice had greater flexibility, texture, and expressivity. She did then vocally what Stephanie Blythe is doing now.

Although voice pedagogy has improved significantly over the years, we're not where we need to be. How can our students learn what is actually going on in their singing systems if we as teachers keep using outdated, unscientific, and culturally biased information? The pushback I get from boys who "don't want to sound like a girl" is because they have bought into the falsetto myth someone told them. The girls who are told that the chest voice is unlady-like and makes them sound like boys still appear in my studio.

The issue is not what students gain by exploring the whole voice and personality; it's what students lose when they don't: complete vocal development and flexibility and an understanding of their full vocal capabilities both physically and artistically. To Forrest Gump, life was like a box of chocolates. To singers, life can be like a box of crayons. Remember the joy of going from your first box of 8 crayons to that awesome box of 64 or maybe even 120? How much more you could create with all those wonderful colors!

How many other myths, superstitions, limits, and downright lies have we had to fight through in our lives? Big ones like "The stork brings babies" and little ones such as "Santa Claus brings the Christmas presents." How about "The white keys on the piano are letter notes and the black keys are sharps and flats," or really big ones such as "Climate change is a hoax"? In our profession how many myths still hang around?

Despite vocology, voice science, and basic knowledge of anatomy and physiology, our voice teaching profession is still victimized by and still participating in a pre-science driven culture. Can we reform our profession so that it is evidence based, gender neutral, and science driven? That will be hard to do as long as gender bias, sexism, racism, homophobia, misogyny, and science denial abound in our culture. Yet, do it we should and do it we must. As Charlie Rosner said and Eldridge Cleaver

revised, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

Robert Edwin has been a professional singer/actor since 1965, a recording artist since 1966, an ASCAP songwriter since 1967, a published author since 1968, and an independent studio singing teacher and coach since 1975. He has served NATS in many capacities, among them: New Jersey Chapter President (1985–1992); author of "The Bach to Rock Connection," the first regular feature in the *Journal of Singing* dedicated to CCM voice pedagogy (1985–2002); National Secretary/Treasurer (2002–2006); first master teacher in the Intern Program to represent the independent studio sector (2005); first "wired" master class clinician at a national conference and a NATSAA finals judge (Nashville 2008); guest host - On Line Chat (2008); Chair of the first National Music Theater Competition Advisory Committee and a finals judge (Orlando 2012); *Journal of Singing* Associate Editor of "Popular Song and Music theater." (2002-present).

A leading authority on Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) and child voice pedagogy, Mr. Edwin is a frequent faculty member at the Voice Foundation's Annual Symposium: *Care of the Professional Voice* and is an active member of the distinguished American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS). His DVD on child voice training, *The Kid & the Singing Teacher*, with CCC-SLP Barbara Arboleda is available at www.voiceinsideview.com. He is a featured master teacher in Elizabeth Blades' *A Spectrum of Voice-Second Edition* (Rowman & Littlefield), Matthew Hoch's *So You Want to Sing CCM* (Rowman & Littlefield), and has a "recipe" in Brian Winnie's *The Voice Teacher's Cookbook* (Meredith Music). www.robertedwinstudio.com

A bird half wakened in the lunar noon
Sang halfway through its little inborn tune.
Partly because it sang but once all night
And that from no especial bush's height;
Partly because it sang ventriloquist
And had the inspiration to desist
Almost before the prick of hostile ears,
It ventured less in peril than appears.
It could not have come down to us so far
Through the interstices of things ajar
On the long bead chain of repeated birth
To be a bird while we are men on earth
If singing out of sleep and dream that way
Had made it much more easily a prey.

"On a Bird Singing in Its Sleep,"
Robert Frost