

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

Training the Next Generation of Music Theater Voice Teachers: Penn State's First MFA Pedagogy Grad Takes Stock

Christy Turnbow



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Mary Saunders-Barton



Norman Spivey

INTRODUCTION

Mary Saunders-Barton and Norman Spivey

In 2011, after several years of gestation, Penn State launched its MFA in Voice Pedagogy for Musical Theatre. The impulse to create a training program specifically for music theater voice teachers came as a direct response to what appeared to be an obvious deficit at the collegiate level. Having presented Bel Canto/Can Belto workshops on campus and across the country, and with a tradition of pedagogy training at Penn State, we were fully poised to begin this new venture. Christy Turnbow was our first student and, in many ways, was also the perfect model of our vision for the program.

We early realized that every aspect of the training of these teachers would be collaborative, a group effort. Voice teaching is one aspect of an integrated process that includes acting and dance as well as related skills of speech and movement. Teachers need to respect the interdependence of these skills in training performers. In addition, these teachers-in-training require robust facility in music, music theory, and piano. (Music theater voice teachers need to be able to accompany their students!) They must also acquire and maintain a broad familiarity with the repertoire of many different styles of singing in performance and practice. They need plentiful hands-on, supervised teaching experience in all these styles as well. They need a thorough working knowledge of the voice, both anatomy and function, and the curiosity to pursue more knowledge in the larger community of voice professionals. And we haven't even mentioned individualized voice training.

The program we envisioned would have to be extremely flexible, capable of meeting the needs of students with very different strengths and deficiencies. We concluded that the effectiveness of such a training program would lie in combining resources of our School of Theatre and School of Music. The hybrid curriculum would be interdisciplinary, with half of the course credits coming from music and the other half from theater. The degree would be in theater, however, taking advantage of an artistic synergy already flourishing among the existing MFA programs in acting, and in directing and music directing for music theater.

The core of the program is the voice training. Providing each student with weekly classical and music theater voice lessons takes collaboration to a whole new level. Sharing students requires trust, confidence, and a meeting of the minds. The teachers need to stay in close contact, allowing the student to sort out the teaching styles and information that might at first glance seem to conflict. Stretching the student in diverse ways requires faith on the part of the student and both teachers, but the results can be exciting. In many ways it is like a double major, but on the same instrument.

The two of us have been collaborating for fifteen years, so we felt very comfortable proceeding along this path together. We had many long, animated conversations driving home from our meetings of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing in New York City, dissecting every detail of what was going on in Christy's lessons.

Christy's work at Penn State stretched her in many directions. It was fascinating to see the growth that took place with this approach and how the lessons complemented each other in surprising ways. Her development was also enhanced by the inclusion of a Shakespeare class and a role in *Love's Labours Lost*. As a final performance project, she created a rollicking comedic cabaret, exploring the definition of a diva and showcasing all of her singing skills. It included the "laments" of Adelaide, Fiordiligi, Lady of the Lake (*Spamalot*), and Cunegonde.

Watching from the wings like eager parents, we have been waiting to see how Christy's training would serve her in the real world. She has had time to reflect on her experience and the impact it is having on her career.

IN CHRISTY'S WORDS

The Oxford English Dictionary defines cross-training as: "training in several different sports to improve fitness or performance in one's main sport." Having recently graduated with an MFA in Voice Pedagogy for Musical Theatre from Penn State, music theater is my "sport" of preference, and during my studies I was involved in some intense voice cross-training. When Norman Spivey and Mary Saunders-Barton created this new degree program, they felt that it was important to include traditional *bel canto* technique and repertoire in addition to the rigorous training in music theater singing.

As a student in this program I had two voice lessons each week, one in each genre. As a result, I am not only a better belter, I am also a better actress, musician, and classical singer—but, best of all, I am a better teacher!

For the first time in nearly twenty years of voice study and performance, I had the opportunity to perform a principal role in an opera, an experience that has greatly benefited my voice and my performing skills. It engendered in me a greater respect for opera and the difficulty of this craft; it is indeed a strict regimen and requires very specific skills. I was also challenged as an actress, which I had felt would be my strongest suit on the opera stage. To my surprise, I found it a challenge having to wait to respond while my partner sang his long refrain repeating the same text over and over. The actress in me was ready to respond much sooner, and I found it difficult to stay engaged authentically, while adapting to a different dramatic pace. So, I had to think about my character in new ways, and change my approach as I examined the choices she made and what motivated her. In addition, to my great delight, I found more freedom, ease, and stamina in my upper range. I had spent the bulk of my music theater performing career singing the Golden Age soprano roles, but as I put a new focus on my classical singing the top blossomed, and I found more depth and expression in my soprano. My new approach as an actress also contributed to the vocal freedom. As I fully committed emotionally to the character, my technique improved, and as a result, I could do all of the things the director was asking for without worrying about my singing. I do not anticipate a career as an opera singer or a strictly classical teacher; however, I passionately affirm that, because of my experience in opera, I am a better overall singer, actress, and teacher.

Cross-training opened both ends of my voice. I had easier access to the whistle register, additional low notes, and my belt technique became better than it had ever been. Because of the many ways I was using my voice day in and day out, I gained a much better understanding of the relationship between resonance and pharyngeal space. In learning the styles appropriate to classical opera, I needed to try to isolate my "head voice" and "chest voice," rather than mixing the two as I would typically do in music theater. This in turn helped clarify my understanding of mixed registration in other styles.

While working on my high soprano literature I often found that the best warm up was to belt. This gave my voice a foundation on which to build the high coloratura. I have discovered that during my practice if I am struggling in one genre it is often helpful to switch to the other for a few minutes and then come back. Belting can give grounding and fullness to my soprano sound, and the soprano opens and frees the mix/belt. Also, there is a surprising similarity in navigating the belt *passaggio* and the whistle tone *passaggio*. I have found that if I struggle with one then I am also usually struggling with the other, and the solution is often the same adjustment of resonance in the respective octaves. I can sing my high soprano literature, turn right around and sing a much lower belt song, and then go back to the high. There is no need for any kind of preparation to switch between the genres or any kind of “time out.” It is all just part of what I do every day.

I often tell my students, “If you want to be a belter you must embrace the opera singer within you.” Students who have branded themselves as alto/belters and resist working soprano repertoire limit themselves as artists and run a greater risk of poor vocal health. One of my students who had branded herself this way was recently cast as a soprano in a show. I am so grateful to that director! She came to her lessons suddenly motivated to work on her high voice. The stronger her soprano became, the stronger her mix/belt became. Also, female music theater singers who have only studied or imitated mix/belt singing can find it very difficult to navigate the upper *passaggio* because they don’t know how to separate the head voice out of the mix and move into a rounder more resonant tone above that transition. Because of my own experience, I now have a better understanding of how to guide others through this process.

Finally, my experience in cross-training opened a whole new world of understanding register transitions in male voices. Like many teachers of young students, I taught primarily female voices and only rarely had the opportunity to teach males. Because I didn’t think I could really perceive what a male singer feels, I was at a loss as to how to help him in matters of registration. That is no longer true for me. I distinctly remember a lesson where the mix/belt sounds I made elicited a “Yes!” and I said, “That sounds like a tenor. . . .” Indeed, the navigation of the mix/belt range is remarkably similar

for both genders; I now can teach and demonstrate with confidence for male students and am finding great success in helping them extend their ranges.

The result of my intensive period of cross-training has been an exponential improvement in all areas of my craft as a singer and a teacher. By honoring the traditions of the past and also advocating for a greater understanding and tolerance of more contemporary genres, we can help develop singers with voices that are as fit and flexible as they can possibly be. As I emerge from my graduate studies, I look forward to a bright future secure in the knowledge that singing teachers of contemporary genres will no longer be consigned to learn what they teach “in the trenches,” but can unite with their classical colleagues to seek higher education in our “sport of preference.” Let the games begin!

Christy Turnbow currently resides and teaches in New York City and at Montclair State University. She has also been on the voice faculty at Brigham Young University. She was the creator and director of the Hale Center Theater Academy for the performing Arts in Orem, Utah. She played Marian Paroo on the National Tour of Susan Stroman’s revival of *The Music Man*. Some of her favorite roles have been Guenevere in *Camelot*, Tzeitel in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Christine in *Phantom* (Yeston/Kopit), Mabel in *Pirates of Penzance*, Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*, Marguerite in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Fiona in *Brigadoon*, and Maria in *Love’s Labours Lost*. She earned a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy from Brigham Young University and a Master of Fine Arts in Voice Pedagogy for Musical Theatre from Penn State University.

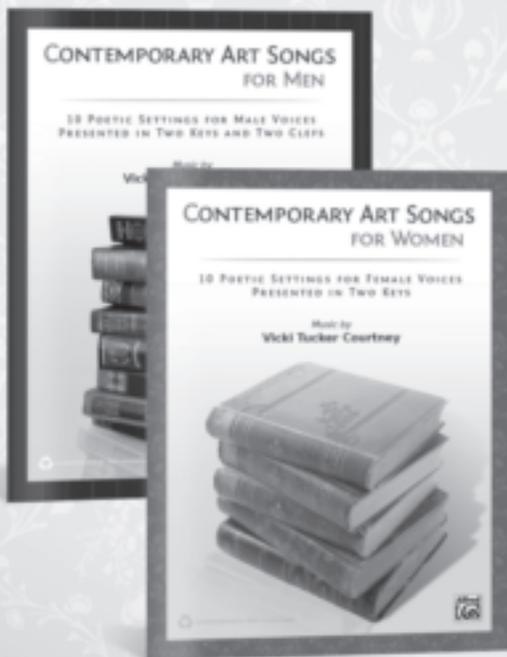
Mary Saunders-Barton is professor of voice at Penn State University. She serves as head of voice for the BFA in Musical Theatre and as program head for the MFA in Voice Pedagogy for Musical Theatre. In addition to her university teaching, Mary maintains a studio in Manhattan for professional performers. In the 2014 season her students have been seen on Broadway in *Wicked*, *Mamma Mia*, *The Lion King*, *After Midnight*, *Kinky Boots*, *Book of Mormon*, *Newsies*, and *Beautiful*. In August 2013, Mary was the keynote music theater speaker at the International Congress of Voice Teachers in Brisbane, Australia. She is a frequent master class presenter at universities and professional organizations in the US and Europe. She was a master teacher at the 2014 Intern program for the National Association of Teachers of Singing at Ohio State University. Her DVD *Bel Canto Can Belto: Teaching Women to Sing Musical Theatre*, was released in 2007. A companion DVD, *What About the Boys* was released in July 2014. Mary is a member of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing in New York City. Belcantocanbelto.com

Norman Spivey is professor of voice and voice pedagogy at Penn State, and also maintains a large private studio. With Penn State music theater voice colleagues, he co-teaches the workshop *Bel Canto/Can Belto: Learning to Teach and Sing for Musical Theatre*. He is a recipient of the Penn State College of Arts and Architecture Faculty Award for Outstanding Teaching, and a member of the distinguished American Academy of

Teachers of Singing. Currently serving as NATS President, his affiliation with NATS has included offices at the chapter, district, regional, and national levels, participation in the Intern Program (as intern, local coordinator, and master teacher), the Van L. Lawrence fellowship, and contributions to the *Journal of Singing*. Contact Norman at president@nats.org, or for more information please visit www.normanspivey.com.

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