

# Deciphering the Estill Voice Training Method Itself

by Lisa Golda

*Last month Lisa Golda shared an introduction to the Estill Voice Training method in “Deciphering Vocal Technique.” This month she follows up with Estill instructors and workshop participants to further discuss the method and what it has to offer singers and teachers.*

Reporting on the five-day Estill Voice Training workshop at charming Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, left me with a new perspective on vocal technique. Months later, I am still thinking about Estill—both the explicitly targeted vocal exercises or “figures,” and the outlook that “Any non-abusive voice quality is accepted and nurtured.”

I certainly got excited and, judging from the animated buzz of conversation at the breaks and the rapt silence and enthusiastic participation during the workshop presentations, the other attendees were, too.

“One of the things I love about Estill is that if you’re an athlete, you might be really good at one style of sport, but that athleticism translates,” said Corinne Ness, director of the Carthage College musical theatre program. “If you think about a baby or a little kid, they use their voice in all kinds of ways and never hurt themselves, so I sometimes think that we are trained to think that there is only one right way to use the voice efficiently.”

Ness, whose training is operatic (she has an MM in voice from Roosevelt University), has carved out a niche as a musical theatre specialist. She first encountered Estill at the 2006 NATS conference where she was presenting her own research. She has since embraced the method.

“I was just really excited about the language. I felt like it was the language of possibility,” she said in a phone interview a few weeks after the workshop. “It helped me to describe it to my students, to put together the science and the images I knew. We’ve all heard about ‘spin the breath’ and all those sorts of things . . . the way that this method put those things together made sense for my students.”

As Maggie Spanuello, former student of Ness’ and a workshop participant (she is pursuing master teacher certification in Estill), put it, “I tell people, when I was singing before, it was almost like Russian roulette. In my opinion, Estill is organized in a way that provides you with vocabulary to do things that some teachers have trouble communicating regarding manipulating your voice.”

Estill’s explicit physiological language contrasts with the imagery-focused semantics of many classical studios. “I had only worked with teachers that only did imagery, and I think that is quite common,” Ness said. “They [Estill] gave you the shiny box and opened it up and showed you how to put it together. Here’s the muscle that’s doing that; do you feel that? And they got it. We always talk about how to get students to practice, and they were getting excited about it in a way that was very specific.

“Jo Estill modeled [this method] on figure skating,” Ness continued. “[Figure skaters] had to practice these compulsory figures. There are certain things that we ought to be able to do with our voices. . . . Those sounds in isolation aren’t the final product, but by making certain choices or adding certain qualities to what you do, you’re aware of the possibility of what you could do. Then . . . they take those figures and put them into recipes for certain sounds . . . so they have an opera, belt, falsetto recipe.”

One example of these figures focused on the true vocal folds. Participants were taught to differentiate between, and then use, three different onsets: glottal, aspirate, and smooth. Then we covered four phonation options, each named with a description of the vocal folds when producing the sound. The first was a delicate function called the “thin” folds figure. “Stiff” was a great illustration of breathy sound, and “thick” a demonstration of the vocal cord activity associated with full-voiced singing. “Slack” (vocal fry) was the fourth option. Once the options had been taught and mastered, we were directed to move between them in one sound on one pitch—for instance, start with thick folds on “e,” switch to thin, and then do an aspirate offset.

Not everyone at the workshop was

Certified master teacher candidate and Carthage alumna Magdalene Spanuello (center) works with Carthage student Maureen Toomey (left) using Voiceprint software as Kim Steinhauer (at piano) looks on.



photo by Ken Sabbar

sold on Estill. Richard Sjoerdsma, former music department head at Carthage and currently the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Singing*, observed just the morning half of two Level Two sessions of the five-session workshop. He was put off by the “isolating” aspect of Estill. He mentioned the true vocal fold figures (thin, thick, etc.) explained above. “That, incidentally, is illustrative of an approach that reminds me very much of Cornelius Reid—that is, isolating the various components of the vocal instrument, including register separation, and then reassembling and reintegrating. I’ve not been supportive of that approach,” he said.

“Estill Voice Training looks at voice production as a holistic process,” e-mailed Kim Steinhauer, founding partner and president of Estill Voice International, in response. “Level One is voice from the ‘inside-out.’ We do isolate the anatomy and physiology responsible for salient changes in the singer’s vocal color or timbre. However, Level Two addresses the voice from the ‘outside-in.’ We start with the vocal color as a whole and then study the acoustic, perceptual and, finally, physiological properties of each voice quality.”

Sjoerdsma did have some positive observations of the method. “It brings the singer to an intimate knowledge of the vocal instrument and its control,” he said. “It requires the singer to be knowledgeable of and conversant about its component parts. Additionally, it applies voice technology, specifically spectography, to the art and act of singing.” But he thought that singers who had already had some training might benefit most from Estill.

Also a potential drawback, Sjoerdsma felt, was Estill’s lack of connection with a performance tradition. “I would describe it as an attempt to systemize a pedagogy for all voice instruction, classical and non-classical,” he said. “I tend to react negatively to any ‘one size fits all’ methodology and, in fact, it appears to me that the approach works better for female than male voices, better for non-classical than classical singing. I spoke with some male attendees who also felt that some exercises simply didn’t work for them.”

I turned to Steinhauer and Ness for responses to Sjoerdsma’s concerns.

“Estill Voice Training (EVT) is more a language and less a pedagogy for the voice production of singing and speaking—or the craft of voice. We don’t consider it an exclusive, ‘one size fits all’ pedagogy at all,” responded Dr. Steinhauer. “EVT translates an already existing technique into the language of anatomy and physiology—thus helping us all to speak and sing better and with confidence.”

“As for how Estill works with different types of voices, as well as male/female, that type of material is covered in more advanced courses,” said Ness. “What we hosted at Carthage in January was merely a five-day introduction to Estill—the figures and some recipes. There are advanced courses in Estill which deal with permutations and modifications for different types of belting, different types of operatic repertoire.”

Jeremy Ryan Mossman, part-time musical theatre faculty at Wayne State (he teaches classes in voice, musical theatre performance, and song interpretation)

was one male who raved about Estill. When I contacted him, he was planning to pursue certification.

“My teaching is not just stronger since Estill, but smarter,” Mossman e-mailed a few weeks later. “My students leave lessons having achieved something quantifiable, whether it is the ability to retract their false vocal folds, easily find ‘the ring,’ or just sing with thinner folds, and their excitement and motivation is much higher. It has changed the overall teaching atmosphere. It is a wonderful thing having confidence through the science behind singing (reality) as opposed to relying on the trust that what previous classical teachers preached was accurate (mostly functional fiction). I feel like Estill simply tells the truth about singing, and I am glad that I am able to pass on those truths to my students.”

As for my own experience, both my teaching and my singing have improved since my limited exposure to Estill. I have had plenty of previous courses in pedagogy, but they weren’t as interesting, exciting, or concrete in their potential application to both my students’ singing and my own. I have a much clearer understanding of how some voice parts impact sound. I no longer start all of my students on the same classical “recipe” of raised soft palate and low larynx regardless of whether they even want to sing operatically—because I no longer believe that classical singing, as much as I love it, is the only healthy option.

And I’ve only seen the tip of the Estill iceberg.

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