

Deciphering Vocal Technique with Estill Voice Training

by Lisa Golda

A singer and teacher attended a five-day workshop recently on the Estill Voice Training method and reports on her experiences. Find out what this method is all about and what it has to offer both teachers and singers alike.

What if there was a scientifically supported, systematically organized, and aesthetically unbiased way to teach (and master) the mechanics of singing? What if this method could be used not only with classical singers, but also with belters, jazz crooners, and vocal artists of all kinds? And what if it was not an endless maze of semantics and subjectivity, but a simple matter of focused practice based on a clear understanding of vocal function and the associated artistic possibilities?

Such an approach actually exists, according to the founder and many supporters of the Estill Voice Training method. Classically trained singer and researcher Jo Estill, now in her 80s, created the method, promoted today by Estill International (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) and its certified teachers throughout the world.

I had no knowledge of Estill prior to arriving the first morning of a five-day Estill workshop at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, this past January. My only hope was that I might learn something about belting, having recently become more active as a musical theatre performer. I soon learned I was in for much more than a basic introduction to belt.

“Welcome to a scholarly discussion,” smiled Kim Steinhauer at a classroom filled with sleepy (and, at first, shy) singers and teachers. Steinhauer is a founding partner of Estill International and an accomplished singer, music teacher, and voice researcher who has worked with Estill since 1985. “We’re going to do gymnastics like crazy. . . . We’re going to give you vocal choices. . . . No ‘singing.’ We’re going to make sounds.”

We weren’t shy long. Steinhauer’s lively manner and sense of humor, as well as the method’s inherent inclusivity, soon put everyone at ease. A versatile singer whose professional credits range from the Witch in Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* to a Valkyrie in Opera Theater of Pittsburgh’s *Die Walküre*, Steinhauer is also a specialist in Communication Science and Disorders (PhD, University of Pittsburgh). She’s also a vocal gymnast. In the course of the sessions I attended, Steinhauer beautifully demonstrated vocal sounds of all kinds, including odd ones like throat singing and a Louis Armstrong-style grind.

That vocal versatility—combined with her understanding of the physiology behind the sounds, her ability to associate

Top: Kim Steinhauer leads workshop participants in the application of vocal techniques.

Middle: Jessica Lorenz (left) participates in a workshop with international opera star Nicole Cabell at the Estill workshop at Carthage College.

Bottom: Carthage voice faculty member Corinne Ness helps Marco Tang, a Canadian sound engineer and singer, with the steps of the Estill opera “recipe.”

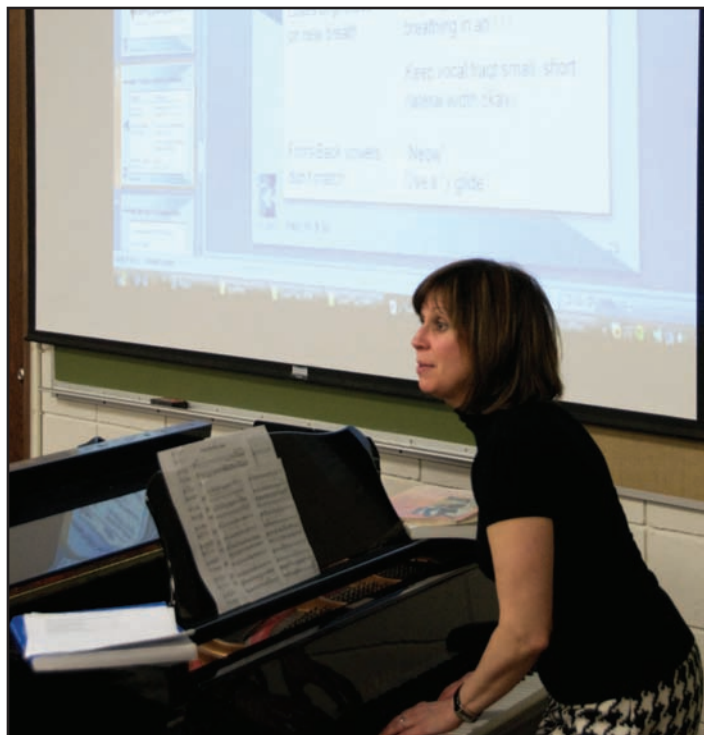


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them with familiar oral-vocal functions (“like licking peanut butter off the roof of your mouth,” for one example), and the different learning modalities (visual, aural, kinesthetic) she used to teach us *how* to make them—made the workshop material incredibly fascinating and informative and, well, learnable.

The participants themselves were also fascinating. Ranging in age from college students to mature mid-career men and women, attendees were speech therapists; voice teachers from New York State, Detroit, and Chicago; a club singer from Quebec; studio engineers; and professional singers.

Kurt Link, a bass who covers at the Met, is preparing for a potential second career as a teacher. “You don’t sing forever,” he told me. “I’m always attempting to improve my own technique, but I also want to learn more about the science of this.”

Melissa Foster, senior lecturer in musical theatre and non-major voice at Northwestern University with a professional recording résumé including RCA, Sire, and Universal Records, said that she too was “always trying to add to that toolbox.” And Jeremy Ryan Mossman, an adjunct theatre instructor at Wayne State University and vocal coach who specializes in working with actors, said that he thought Estill “was much more tangible for people who aren’t used to living in the classical world.”

Following introductions and a creative analogy to Sondheim’s *Sunday in the Park with George* (“Estill is like pointillism: when you stand back, it all comes together,” Steinhauer said), a multimedia PowerPoint presentation introduced us to Jo Estill and her research.

Mention the name “Estill” to your current classical voice teacher, and he may blanch and whisper the “b-word.” Estill

was one of the first voice researchers to investigate belting physiology, and so she remains etched in some older singers’ minds, Steinhauer said, as “the belting lady.” I later asked a classical teacher I know about Estill, and belting did come up. The method’s supposed neglect of the breath may also arise—Estill was apparently famous in her heyday for saying that students had been breathing all their lives, and so she focused most of her attention on adjustments of the “filter,” or vocal tract, rather than on support (which is emphasized by the Western classical model).

What many members of the singing community may not be aware of is the method’s basis in research and practical application, documented since 1974 when Estill and her colleagues made their first presentation at a “Care of the Professional Voice” symposium at Juilliard. Papers written by Estill alone or jointly with

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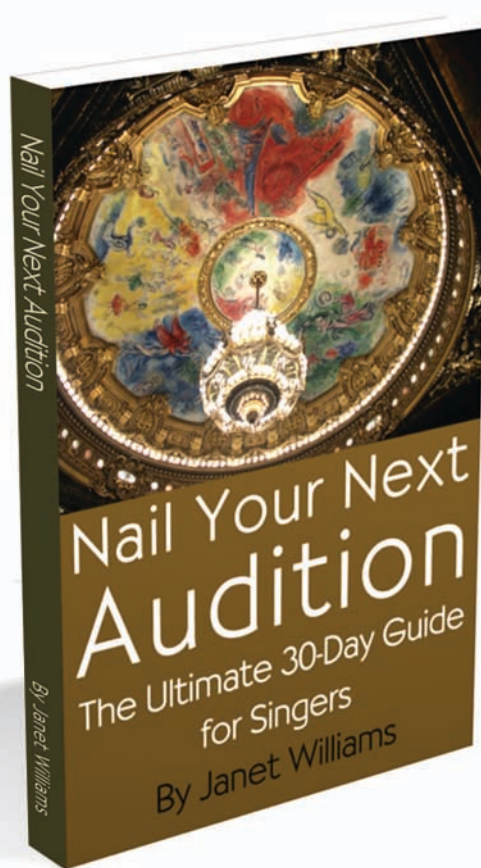
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Steinhauer and others, with Richard Miller-esque titles like “Supralaryngeal activity in a study of six voice qualities” and “The role of the aryepiglottic sphincter in the performance of the ‘*messa-di-voce*’” have been published in the *Journal of Voice*; *Speech and Language: Advances in Basic Research and Practice*; and *Annals of Otology, Rhinology and Laryngology* as well as presented at the Pacific Voice Conference, the World Voice Conference, and multiple times at the International Voice Symposium.

This, from the “the belting lady”?

Despite all the research behind the method, the application of the associated knowledge is simple and accessible—and Steinhauer’s presentation was, too. Part of our introduction to Jo Estill was video/audio of her vocal cords and the surrounding mechanism as she sang “Happy Birthday” to demonstrate the basic Estill vocal qualities. (Go to trainmyvoice.com to hear examples of falsetto, twang, sob, operatic, and belt.) Steinhauer pointed out the differences in physiology as we watched and listened to Estill, noting the semi-closure of the mechanism during the belt, for instance.

Then we were invited to get up and sing “Happy Birthday,” starting as “party guests who have *not* been through 20 years of voice training,” joked Steinhauer.

And we did sing like boisterous party guests (speech/belt quality)—and then like an innocent child (falsetto), like a teasing “nyah-nyah” bully (twang), repentantly and remorsefully (sob), and like a “proper” singer (operatic). It was interesting to hear how quickly we were able, in a moderate range, to recognize and imitate all of the “recipes” for basic vocal qualities.

I was fascinated to discover that producing these qualities sometimes called for adjustments of the vocal tract that are completely opposite to what singers learn in their classical technique (a higher larynx position, for instance). That doesn’t mean, however, that they are harmful to the voice. Conversely, aspects of some operatic singing are actually comparable—physiologically, at least—to belting.

We listened to two singing samples that illustrated this parallel: “Vesti la giubba” sung by Franco Corelli and “Stripped” by Christina Aguilera. Aguilera was using a variety of functions: the sob, a childish falsetto quality, some nasal twang, and a variety of onsets and offsets, all coordinated into a consistent and musical style. But, “he is belting,” Steinhauer said of Corelli’s higher notes. “Those cords are thick! He is allowed—we, women, are not allowed to belt.” At least, not when it comes to opera.

I found that comment interesting—and enlightening. “Belt” refers not to the repertoire or the singer/character, but to the way the vocal apparatus is behaving. Which, according to the Estill “recipes” for opera *and* belt, would indicate false vocal folds retracted, cords thick, aryepiglottic sphincter narrow, velum high, and head, neck, and torso anchored. Differences between belt and opera, stylistic considerations aside, would, according to the Estill model, arise in the areas of cricothyroid tilt, larynx position, and tongue position—although, things can change in the male voice once he moves into the head voice. “It’s more like yelling,” I have heard—which is analogous to belting and lines up with what Steinhauer said about Corelli.

It made sense, from a purely intellectual perspective—which can be all that one gets in a traditional vocal pedagogy class, with maybe a few videos thrown in for good measure. But according to Steinhauer, Estill went one step further.

“We learn our voice parts: the larynx and the thyroid . . . [but] it’s not about just locating them. What happens when you move them and try to make everything else constant?” Steinhauer said.

“I know my oboe, how it works,” she continued. “But inside the throat? No. We could point to it, but we didn’t know the physiology and what impact moving those parts had on the sounds. That’s meaningful now. If we do not connect it with *us*, it’s out the door. So what if I can name all the cartilages of the larynx? So, then she [Estill] divides that. We have to give categories to these, otherwise it’s hugely complex.”

Before learning those parts and categories, however, we had a discussion of what one participant termed “a dirty word” in the world of singing: effort. “If you don’t want to call it effort, call it energy,” Steinhauer said as she led a demonstration of kinesthetic awareness by pinching her thumb and forefinger

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together. We were to do the same thing, at varying levels of effort from 1 to 10, while keeping other parts of our hand uninvolved. Most singers have heard “just relax” in lessons, or “There should be no effort when you sing,” or “You are making too much effort.” But where? In what part of my vocal production? How much is too much?

Steinhauer explained that experienced opera singers have become so good at what they do that they aren’t necessarily aware anymore of the muscular activity that is involved in making their sound. It feels easy to them because it has, for the most part, become automatic. As with walking down the block—you don’t have to micromanage yourself once you are an adult but, at least when we are learning how to walk, effort is conscious. “There is a difference between production and perception in your system,” Steinhauer said. “You’re going to feel that work, especially for belting.”

She was quick to add, however, that there was a difference between vocal cord trauma and muscle ache. “Tickle-scratch-cough” was the warning sign she advised to look for. With the targeted exercises we were doing, and the expert way in which we were guided through them, I experienced no ill effects.

We spent the rest of the exhilarating and mentally exhausting eight-hour day learning the first series of the 13 compulsory figures: onset/offset options for the true vocal folds and options for the false vocal folds (which I certainly had never made any conscious connection with—or, at least, I didn’t *know* that I had).

“Some of these figures are really hard to feel because they are deep in the vocal tract,” Steinhauer said. “That’s why we have these up front, so that by day five, you’re feeling it.”


This sort of detailed and unbiased discussion of the vocal anatomy, and learning to feel and understand the nuances of how the voice works—both in isolation and in concert—is what Estill is all about.

“We don’t talk about it as a technique or only one way to sing,” explained Steinhauer. “Estill is a language [that gives singers] the words to express what they were doing in their classical vocal technique based on what was happening in their bodies with the anatomy and physiology. It’s a translator; it translates the techniques that you were doing with your various teachers. It’s like a Rosetta Stone.”

I gained several “translations” from the Estill Rosetta Stone in just one day there. I left the workshop filled with excitement and a renewed sense of vocal possibility, and curious about what the next session would bring, both for me and the varied participants present. I still had a few nagging doubts, like could Estill really help everybody? One thing was certain: I had seen enough to want to know more.

PART II:

Stay tuned to learn more from Steinhauer, including how the heck you retract your false vocal folds and why you would want to, comments from Carthage College associate professor Corinne Ness about why Estill works for her and her students, and follow-up feedback from workshop attendees, including Richard Sjoerdsma, editor-in-chief of the *NATS Journal of Singing*.

Lisa Golda currently lives in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. A graduate of the IU Jacobs School of Music, she is a Teaching Artist for Chicago Opera Theater, maintains a private voice studio, and writes about the arts. She also performs regularly at several theaters in the Milwaukee area and has taught adjunct voice at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. Learn more at www.lisagolda.com. 



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