



Thomas Lloyd

MY ENCOUNTER WITH ESTILL VOICE TRAINING

by Thomas Lloyd, R&S Chair, Community Choirs

When it comes to schools of vocal technique, I'm about as skeptical as they come. I'm especially suspicious of what I call "ideological" teaching – approaches that pretend to have all the answers, and anything that doesn't use the same precise language is just plain wrong, if not immoral. After about 20 years of giving and taking voice lessons at various times in my singing and conducting life, I've become a firm believer in the "Whatever works, so long as it doesn't hurt" school of singing. But now that most of the singers I encounter are in groups of 30 to 150 at a time, and most have never had formal vocal training of any kind, I struggle mightily to come up with ways to improve their basic vocal technique that really make a difference.

I encountered Estill voice training purely by accident. The community choir I direct has a "Singing for Seniors" program I started up five years ago with the indefatigable children's choir director Helen Kemp. Helen recently started conducting choirs at the other end of the age spectrum from her usual children's choirs (though at 91 she's still usually the oldest [and sharpest] one in the room!). We've held two workshops a year, one for individual singers and one for whole choirs, who take turns singing for each other before singing a couple of pieces with us. We've also had workshops for choir directors who work with aging voices, and this is where I first encountered Estill.

One of my committee members recommended bringing in a vocal therapist who was a daughter of a neighbor of hers, and was now in a private practice in northeastern PA and teaching at Misericordia University. Dr. Cari Tellis made her presentation with special credit given to some techniques she had recently acquired that were associated with a singer turned voice researcher named Jo Estill. Some of the techniques she illustrated were very helpful in getting a handle on run-away vibrato in the aging woman's voice. She got my attention. Then in passing she threw in something about "healthy belting," which certainly didn't apply directly to the aging voice, but sure did apply to my college students (and my own two high school teenagers at home) who love both singing in choirs and singing in musicals.

I asked her to stick around for a few minutes afterwards to test this idea that it was possible to belt one day and sing in a choir the next. I wasn't close to being convinced yet, but when I demonstrated a few things about classical singing using my own language and said "when you say this, do you mean this?", I came away thinking that by using more physically precise language than I do, she was getting at many of the same results I was aiming for – and she claimed my kids could apply these techniques to belt without abusing their voices, too. I had to find out more.

I called a trusted colleague who is a vocal therapist to ask if she knew anything about Estill. Her response was interesting – that Jo Estill herself had a bit of a brash personality when she gave talks and workshops (in her heyday before she retired) and tended to drive the traditional voice teachers crazy, especially with the "healthy belting" stuff. But what my colleague had seen of the actual techniques seemed quite sound to her. The part about ticking-off traditional voice teachers sounded good to me. But in terms of wider acceptance in the medical and academic community, a year later the major mainstream otolaryngology practice this colleague is a part of hired its first Estillian. After being much more familiar in Europe and among musical theater circles (most famously Patty Lupone, as well as Marni Nixon, Jason Stearns, and Klea Blackhurst),

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Estill is becoming much better known in the US among traditional voice teachers.

So I looked into the possibility of taking a training course that summer to find out more, only to discover that Dr. Kimberly Steinhauer, President of Vocal Innovations, LLC, the official source of Estill International, is based in Pittsburgh, PA. – (http://www.trainmyvoice.com/instructor_bio.php?id=1). So I went directly to the source and took the basic Level 1 and Level 2 courses from Kim that summer.

The organization of the Estill approach is both straight-forward and open-ended. Level One deals with mastering the different parts of the complete vocal mechanism in exercises called “Figures for Voice” (like in skating). Some deal with common parts we’re used to talking about – like the tongue, the jaw, the lips, the soft palate (which they like to call by its more common medical term – velum). Others, though, had to do with (horrors!) talking explicitly about what goes on in the larynx – both the “true” and “false” vocal folds (the “vocal ligaments” and the “ventricular ligaments”), the thyroid and cricoid cartilages, and, my favorite, the aryepiglottic sphincter (or, commonly known as the AES). For someone like me raised as a pre-Vatican II Catholic and taught by traditional voice teachers, speaking directly of anything going on in the larynx was like eating fish on Fridays or walking on the church lawn. Most blasphemous of all was the suggestion that the healthy larynx floats up and down with the range, to a greater or lesser degree depending upon the style of singing. (“Keep that larynx down, young lad!”)



Jo Estill

After learning how to isolate these components through the exercises, the “Figures” in Level Two are combined into “voice qualities” – different recipes for creating sounds appropriate for classical singing, opera, musical theater, speaking, etc. (While the “Figures” are fairly non-controversial, the “recipes,” as you can imagine, are the subject of much debate even among Estill followers.) The AES actually plays an important role in operatic “squillo” as the Estill-trained Italians (such as world renowned tenor Giuseppe Filianoti) will tell you. And the “thyroid tilt” by which the vocal folds are lengthened (such as when you whimper like a puppy dog) creates the sweet sound associated with choral or recital singing. The “cricoid tilt” plays a key role in “healthy belting” (and I’ve come to believe it also plays a role in healthy choral or early-music straight-tone singing as well, though I haven’t gotten official confirmation on this!).

Underlying these “Figures” and “voice qualities” is an approach to the breath that back in Cari Tellis’s demonstration first got my attention as something in sync with what I’ve always believed. Estill folks talk about “effort levels” and “anchoring” as the key to understanding the efficient use of breath and applying the right amount of effort needed for the vocal task at hand, using the right muscles to provide the necessary amount of control.

What’s refreshing about the Estill approach is that its teachers promote it as offering tools to aid in whatever approach to teaching you already employ, not to replace it. And after sitting in on a few sessions

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at an international Estill symposium last summer, I can verify that these tools continue to evolve according to both laboratory research and experience in the teaching studio.

In my own work, I've seen and heard results related to sound, dynamic range, consistency of support, and vocal color with my choirs, especially with my untrained singers. In my own singing, I've found a freedom in my upper register I wish I'd figured out a long time ago. And as for "healthy belting," after trying it out with a number of my college students and high school friends of my kids, I've become a true believer (it's got a lot to do with how you use the air, where less is distinctly more). I don't know if I'll make the effort to become an Estill Certified Master Teacher myself some day, but I know I already have a lot more freedom to talk about vocal technique in practical, useful ways with my singers – and some very handy tools of the trade.

Come find out for yourself at Kim Steinhauer's workshop at the ACDA Eastern Division Community Choir Festival, part of our "We the People" Conference, Saturday, February 13, 2010 at 3:30 at Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

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