

REVIEW of “*Popular Singing*” – Donna Soto-Morettini

I was delighted when a package came into my possession from A&C Black Publishing containing a fascinating-looking book on popular singing which is my area of specialism and expertise. I couldn't wait to read it! There is still so little available that elucidates issues concerning the pop voice that isn't yet another 'method' book or something purely biographical about a famous group or artist.

This book is a pleasure to read; good length and size, nicely presented, erudite, intelligent, passionately and cleverly delivered, if not a little controversial in places (but would it be a book about popular singing without at least a little controversy?). It addresses some of the dilemmas surrounding the teaching of the pop voice, including discussion of 'thorny' issues such as so-called 'dangerous' qualities, e.g. use of constriction, harsh onsets etc.

The format of the book is well structured, including descriptions of various voice qualities, onsets and 'releases' (offsets), phrasing, improvisation, stylistic analysis of blues, gospel, country, jazz, rock and pop, and finally ending with a very enlightening interview with Sir Paul McCartney. There is a largely effective mixture of explanation of terms and concepts followed closely by practical examples and exercises.

The author encourages some rather exotic vocal experimentation for finding fresh approaches to repertoire delivery and has a rather interesting take on analysing song recordings, complete with her own suggested legend of symbols to use for this expressed purpose. There is a comprehensive and useful listening resource section included and good suggestions for accessing these recordings relatively easily, cheaply and legally.

Whilst I largely agree with the author, there are however certain areas that caused me some concern. Even though it seems from her biography that the author had a substantial professional pop/rock live performance career a long time ago, the fact that she has been mostly involved with the musical theatre world since strongly flavours her presentation and is particularly evident in vocal delivery of the accompanying demonstration CD. There is no doubt that she can certainly sing, but the 'cabaret' edge in the delivery is all too clear and potentially off-putting to die-hard pop/rocksters.

I'm also flummoxed by the glottal onsets masquerading as a demonstration of the 'Simultaneous onset' on the CD and the harshness of the onsets employed on some of the tracks frankly cause me some concern in terms of vocal health. But the author does have things to say about pop/rock singing not always being safe and that this constitutes part of its appeal.

The terminology used in the book is unabashedly based on the work of American voice 'technician' Jo Estill and therefore could be a little alienating to readers unfamiliar with this particular method. The anatomical diagrams and explanations seem to stem from this background, but I'm concerned that the absence of labels on the external larynx diagrams provided could be confusing to those with little or no anatomical awareness, especially

where discussion of the thyroid cartilage etc take place in the text. It's not wise to assume knowledge I've found.

It's also curious to me that the author has chosen to rename some of the standard voice quality descriptors in common usage for reasons I cannot quite fathom. For example her '*Aspirate*' quality is generally known as falsetto, '*Elongated*' quality as 'Sob' quality (Estill), a '*Rumble*' onset is a growl and twang is split into '*hard twang*' and '*baby twang*'. There are even new terms, presumably of her own making, e.g. '*Compressed release*' and '*Gospel release*'. This worries me in that I don't believe it's beneficial for vocal terminology to splinter off into too many variables; it just compounds further misunderstanding and it's difficult enough for us to speak a common language!

Seemingly out of place with the Estill bias however, the author rather bravely yet controversially encourages, albeit limited, experimentation with certain constricted onsets and qualities which is likely to cause discomfort for 'Voice Craft' purists. In the discussion of said 'dangerous' qualities, I'm unsure why she places 'creak' (aka 'vocal fry') in this list and also fails to mention the work of Danish vocal coach Cathrine Sadolin who claims to be able to work with grittier vocal qualities quite safely. Equally, her assertion that vertical laryngeal movement is a given across the vocal range is likely to alarm the Seth Riggs-led 'Speech Level Singing' fraternity.

There is a tendency towards referring to some quite old-fashioned artists as examples of styles or qualities and some downright odd artist choices in my estimation. For example the inclusion of Elvis and Little Richard as examples of 'Rock' singers – early 'Rock n' roll' maybe, but neither would be the first name off the top of the head as actual rock singers; Jon Bon Jovi or Axl Rose maybe. This doesn't help the author's 'street cred'. And lastly, unfortunately there is no real discussion of styles relevant to modern pop singers such as Soul, Pop R&B, Funk or Hip Hop.

Shortcomings aside however, this is a good buy and contains some very useful ideas and information for anyone interested in this particular subject area. My parting thought is that we should support one of the better resources written in this under-represented sphere of research.

Kim Chandler MMus BMusEd AMusA
www.kimchandler.com