Innovations in Voice Training: Exploring Additional Tools
by Erica Tobolski

Many methodologies are employed in voice training. Some of these approaches remain relevant while others are merely transient. Time reveals which methods resonate with the greatest number of people relative to our experiences, cultures and philosophies. An approach or “system” may serve as a foundation for training, or be part of a larger whole, playing a supporting role with a particular function. As voice practitioners, we are constantly weighing the merits of this approach or that, choosing to employ one primary methodology or incorporating many viewpoints in order to express a set of beliefs that naturally shift over time. My own quest for knowledge has led me to explore two additional tools: The Jo Estill Voice Training System and the computerized feedback programs of Kay Elemetrics. While it is unclear whether or not these two particular approaches will emerge as primary systems for theatrical voice training, or be part of a larger whole, playing a supporting role with a particular function. As voice practitioners, we are constantly weighing the merits of this approach or that, choosing to employ one primary methodology or incorporating many viewpoints in order to express a set of beliefs that naturally shift over time. My own quest for knowledge has led me to explore two additional tools: The Jo Estill Voice Training System and the computerized feedback programs of Kay Elemetrics. While it is unclear whether or not these two particular approaches will emerge as primary systems for theatrical voice training, without a doubt they are on the leading edge of innovative techniques. Only time will tell if they will become integrated into our training procedures or are but a brief stop on the continuing quest.

Over a year ago, I met Dr. Julie Fortney, Professor of Music in Voice at Mars Hill College in North Carolina. She and her colleagues in the Voice Performance and Musical Theatre programs include in their curriculum the Estill Voice Training System (EVTS) in conjunction with a computerized speech lab. An on-site visit to the speech lab and a Level 1 Workshop in EVTS, supported through a grant from the University of South Carolina, introduced me to these innovative approaches to voice. The Estill system, designed primarily for singers but applicable to speech and voice, teaches voice production and how to move the structures of the vocal mechanism (e.g. retracting the false vocal folds in order to avoid constriction). This simple but profound...
technique does not in itself make one a better singer or speaker, but reproducing the movement consistently and accurately is the craft. Artistry and Performance Magic are the next level, as craft is applied to artistic expression through a song or piece of text.

The computer programs used in the speech lab are from Kay Elemetrics, a New Jersey company who designs and builds speech analysis and feedback hard- and software. At the 2001 ATHE Conference, Dr. Fortney and I co-presented a session called “Computers, Speech & Singing: Speech Science Meets the Artistic Voice.” The presentation demonstrated features of the Multi-Speech software program, such as the real-time pitch capture and the IPA Vowel Chart. Both of these interactive features can be customized for a particular task, and allow the speaker to see as well as hear changes in their speaking patterns. The computer program assists the student in learning a specific skill, such as matching the IPA symbol to its coordinating sound, by providing a structured opportunity for self-remediation.

These latest experiences have reinforced my philosophies about teaching voice and speech, and what role technology might play in future training. Many of us have strong opinions of the use of, or even validity of technology in what is arguably an artistic expression. Given that technology has a reputation of being cold, analytic, even robotic, it’s not surprising that those involved in celebrating the human experience would distrust its encroachment. In light of this distrust, we may be prone to dismiss the use of technology when in fact it may be complementary to our current methods.

Computers alone cannot train a voice, but they may be extremely useful in supporting integrated, wholistic training. As a supplemental tool, they offer a way to practice specific skills (e.g., learning the IPA symbol or Lessac number by seeing the symbol, hearing the sound, and reproducing the sound both by ear AND by feeling the shape of the oral/pharyngeal cavity and the articulators). The interactive computer programs accommodate all types of learning modalities, especially important with individuals whose primary orientation is visual. In a similar vein, EVTS merges knowledge of anatomy with natural behaviors, “prompts” such as laughing or crying, which produce a particular vocal quality. Estill’s methodical research and pictures of the vocal mechanism in action allow us to see what we’ve been hearing.

Although we may have differing views on which means to employ, our curiosity continues to lead us into ever-new territory. The research and technology being generated by speech scientists and analysts today is certain to influence voice professionals as they conceive of future training practices.

Erica Tobolski is an Assistant Professor at the University of South Carolina where she oversees the voice component of the MFA actor training program and is a Certified Lessac Trainer.

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