

*Bel Canto can Belto*: Minnesota NATS 2017 Spring Meeting with Mary Saunders-Barton

Minnesota NATS hosted their 2017 Spring Meeting at the MacPhail Center for Music on March 26<sup>th</sup> featuring Mary Saunders-Barton. A faculty member at Penn State University, Mary Saunders-Barton is well-known for her workshop seminar, *Bel Canto Can Belto*. She is a frequent master class presenter at universities and professional organizations in the United States and Europe. Published articles include, “The Well-Spoken Singer,” “Yes, But Can You Do That 8 Shows a Week?” “Broadway Bound, Teaching Young Musical Theatre Singers in a College Training Program.”

She is currently collaborating on a book with colleague Norman Spivey entitled “Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act.” Her DVD tutorial “Bel Canto Can Belto: Teaching Women to Sing Musical Theatre,” was released in 2007. A companion DVD, “What About the Boys?” was released in 2014. In 2009, Mary was inducted into the American Academy of Teachers of Singing of New York City.

According to Saunders-Barton, the main theory behind her teaching and pedagogy is that musical theatre singing techniques serve classical singing techniques and vice versa. Training singers to be successful in today’s diverse market makes cross training the voice a necessity. The voice is one instrument used in a variety of ways. Her technique is speech-based with an elevated and energized production that includes the chest voice in the middle range. This technique integrates the registers through the various modes of sound.

*Mode 0 – vocal fry*

*Mode 1 – thyroarytenoid/chest voice*

*Mode 2 – head voice*

*Mode 3 – whistle*

Integrating the registers allows the singers to fill in the register transitions so that every step along the way is a reliable place to be vocally. Once the student becomes comfortable with the speech-based technique, the teacher may begin asking questions such as, “Is the sound functionally healthy?” and “Is the sound right for the character?”, etc. According to Barton, both musical theatre and opera are theatrical art forms, in which everyone breathes, sings, moves, and acts, all at the same time.

In singing, there must be a balance and a constant sense of fluidity and motion. Saunders-Barton often referenced the “rib swing” to keep the air moving and the notion of opening the ribs in the back while keeping them closed in the front. She also spoke of using “twang” to increase volume and resonance, a term often confused for nasality in the singing voice. According to Contemporary Commercial Music pedagogue, Matthew Edwards, “twang” corresponds with the same frequency range as the singer’s formant.<sup>1</sup> Twang should be considered a bright, forward resonance that features little to no nasality.

Saunders-Barton’s advice to musical theatre performers is, “You cannot compete with the band. Do not try to be heard. Trust your own cathedral and trust the feel and the resonance you are producing.” The topic of amplification was approached by Saunders-Barton, and her advice

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Edwards. “Mix it up Monday: Finding “twang.”  
<https://edwardsvoice.wordpress.com/2016/10/03/mix-it-up-monday-finding-twang/>  
Accessed April 16, 2017.

was simple, “You never train a student for a mic.” She feels that everything in the singing voice is a mixed and balanced registration and the belt voice is a just a middle voice color. The majority of musical theatre singing on Broadway is done in a high and balanced belt voice as the performances need to be repeatable eight shows a week. The hot topic of singing with a neutral larynx has resurfaced recently and Saunders-Barton’s opinion is that “the larynx does move and can be used for color.” One of her many technical ideas for the voice is, “what wears best, wears evenly, and singers must make sure that the whole voice is in play, the whole time.”

Belting, according to Mary Saunders-Barton, is a “calling thing, hearing where you must call the sound. Belting seems to be getting higher and higher and we must open the conversation about the sounds that are viable and sustainable for musical theatre. Taking vibrato out and pop styles are in, and rock is here to stay.” Her opinion in teaching singers is “to train the vibrato in and then take it out.”

During the workshop, Saunders-Barton referenced renowned speech therapist, Dr. Arthur Lessac and his method, Lessac Kinesensic Training, a holistic approach encompassing speech, singing and movement. This method teaches people to feel the vibrations of their own voices when they speak or sing.<sup>2</sup> This method has further been assimilated into a speech therapy entitled Lessac-Madsen Resonant Voice Therapy, a technique designed and implemented by Dr. Katherine Verdolini-Abbott and named in honor of her two mentors, Dr. Arthur Lessac and Dr. Mark Madsen.

In the second half of the workshop, Mary Saunders Barton worked with several talented singers in a master class setting. Her many comments included:

- Safety gestures are when the hands come up and are held in a place that is comforting to the singer. The hands are telling us (the audience) that the singer wanted to do something either physically or emotionally.
- The motion is in the stillness, the freedom to move when you need to...
- Breathing is the emotional setup for the phrase, feeling, song, etc.
- Gild the lilies that aren’t there already.
- *Nasalance* = the soft palate drops in the back when it needs to go up a bit.
- Men belt just as much as women do.
- The source and the filter are inextricable.
- Vowels are able to shift when the larynx moves for them.
- Try to fix nasality by getting the singer to be more nasal.
- Find songs that you love, work on them, and come back to them.
- Speech is speech.
- Put the air through the vowels, give them some love.
- A little bit of nasality is good. We want the ping, but not too much nasality.
- The neck and the shoulders do not support, they are attached and then they hang.
- You need to sound like a singer, but you also need to sound like someone who is saying this...
- Singing should always feel no more effort than a sigh.

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<sup>2</sup> Margalit Fox. “Arthur Lessac, Holistic Vocal Coach, Dies at 101.” New York Times, April 17, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/18/arts/arthur-lessac-holistic-vocal-coach-dies-at-101.html> Accessed on April 16, 2017.