

# Book Review

by Sue Anderson

## It's never too late to sing

by Heidi Pegler and Pam Wedgwood

published by Faber Music (2011)

ISBN10: 0-571-53432-5, 80pp with 2 CDs £12.99

## It's never too late to sing,

piano accompaniments written and arranged by Pam Wedgwood

published by Faber Music (2011)

ISBN10: 0-571-53669-7, 140 pp, £12.99

Once again, Heidi has collaborated with Faber to fill a gaping hole in the market! Firstly it was the *Language of Song* series, produced with her colleague Nicola-Jane Kemp, which gave singing teachers the language and pronunciation package they so desperately needed. In this case, she has joined forces with Pam Wedgwood, whose book 'It's never too late to play piano' has proved very popular. The book is intended for beginners, and very deliberately does not assume any prior knowledge. Explanations are clear, and the all information given, both physiological and musical, is expressed in direct, accurate language. Here is the ideal package for those people who have been saying to themselves, 'Oh I wish I could sing/join a choir' but have hitherto had little access to well-informed guidance.

The book is divided into 15 units, each focussing on a different aspect of singing. However, there is an initial section 'Getting started' which brings body and breath into focus, with practical suggestions for posture, alignment and breathing. She introduces the issue of breathing as follows: 'Breathing is obviously important for singing but can often become clouded in mystery and terminology. Breathing for singing is an extension of what we are doing naturally every day in order to stay alive'. In one page the principles of breathing are described succinctly, covering the importance of the lower abdominal area, and the dangers of trying to hold onto air rather than allowing it to flow.

Unit 1 begins with 'warming up', with the musical

concepts of moving by step or jumps introducing simple melodic shapes as exercises, and then adding *When the saints*, and *Cockles and Mussels* as the first songs. Tongue and Jaw are the focus of Unit 2, and then Unit 3 has a more musical emphasis as there are hints about separating the reading of rhythm and pitch in the early stages, and the importance of the tonic triad. Unit 4 looks at the vowels, making sure from the beginning that the jaw is not over-active, but that the tongue does it job. To my delight, Heidi has introduced the subject of diphthongs, at this early stage. In my experience, clarifying the need in singing to spend longer on the first vowel (except for /iu/as in 'new') of a diphthong, can make a very real difference to the tone quality produced.

The decision to include only a vocal line, but to have everything to be sung on the accompanying CDs, has meant that there is a great deal of information and music within this single, very reasonably priced volume. It also makes the vocal line clearer, and removes the distraction of a written piano accompaniment. Each of the 15 units has 2-4 songs as well as exercises, and then there seven 'concert pieces' at the end, making 41 songs in all. The songs are mostly well-known 'classics', including folk-songs such as *Shenandoah* and the *Skye Boat Song* (unit 10), and songs from the show, including *Let's face the music and dance* (unit 11) and *Flash, bang, wallop!* (unit 5). The only song which does come from the classical repertoire is Handel's aria *Non lo dirò col labbro*, in its 1928 manifestation by Somervell, namely *Silent Worship*. Although the teaching repertoire is well chosen for the intended purchaser, I do think that the blurb on the back of the book, citing the 'wealth of music' as ranging from 'classic and folk to pop and jazz' is a little mis-leading.

Another quibble that I have is with some of the accompaniments. I found the harmonisation of *Cockles and Mussels* in Unit 1 rather fussy, particularly for the refrain, 'Crying cockles and mussels, alive alive-oh!' And I wonder about the logic of introducing quaver movement under the line 'she died of a fever', which the singer has been told: 'Try singing the sad last verse very softly'. For me, it just doesn't work very well. Similar fussiness is found in the accompaniment to the *Skye Boat Song*, which has continuous semiquaver movement throughout this lilting 6/8 piece.

However, this tendency is reversed in the show songs, which mostly follow the published versions in harmony and character, but with simplified arrangements with fewer notes and generally lighter texture. There are a few discrepancies with the original piano reductions which have puzzled me, as there doesn't seem to be any particular reason for changes made. For example, in *Let's call the whole thing off!* there is one chord in the original for the whole bar on the word 'Oh!', as the singer contemplates the emotion of parting. In the arrangement, there is a change of chord on the second half of the bar; I do wonder

why. Similarly, a chromatic inner part in *Let's face the music and dance* is repeated unaltered in the arrangement, whereas in the original it is changed at the second phrase to lead more easily into a chord change at 'Before they ask us to pay the bill'. Again, I just wonder why such a change was made. Incidentally, at bar 30 in the same song, the RH accompaniment is written an octave higher than it is played on the CD.

But these are perhaps rather nerdy quibbles in the face of a really amazing achievement! There are so many people who would like to sing, but don't know where to start, and

this book really does offer a way in, with sensible answers to those questions which we are all asked. It is a very sound, thoughtful and well-paced introduction to the subject, with excellent repertoire choices. In the foreword, it is also made very clear, that, although the book can be used without a teacher, a singing teacher is 'highly recommended' as they will help one learn more and progress at a faster pace than working alone. If the guidance in this book has been followed, there will not be any misconceptions about singing to unravel once the would-be singer does arrive at your studio - a good foundation will have been laid. SA

## British Voice Association Forthcoming events

### Voice & the Brain

Sunday, January 15th 2012: 9.30 – 5pm

Park Crescent Conference Centre,  
London W1X 5PN

Speakers will include Sophie Scott, (Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience UCL), Katie Overy (Senior Lecturer in Music Psychology, University of Edinburgh) John Rothwell (Professor of Neurophysiology, UCL), David Reby (Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Sussex).

### Accent Method

Monday 13th, Tuesday 14th February

& Wednesday 20th June 2012

Priory Rooms, Birmingham B4 6AF

## Voice Care Network Forthcoming events

**Spring Study Day** 12th May 2012: London **Annual Study Meeting** 7th - 9th September 2012, venue tba

For full details please check on [www.voicecare.org.uk](http://www.voicecare.org.uk) or phone 01926 864 000

This popular course is being held for the first time out of London.

Course tutors are Sara Harris (SLT) and Dinah Harris (Singing Teacher)

### Weak, Wobbly or Working? The Multidisciplinary Management of the Ageing Voice

Sunday, 25th March, 2012 at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester

### Acoustics Study Day & Van Lawrence Award

Saturday May 20th, 2012: Baden Powell House, London  
Full details for all events will be found on the BVA website: [www.britishvoicessociation.org.uk](http://www.britishvoicessociation.org.uk) or phone the administrator on 0207713 0064

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