

Jeanie LoVetri

Taking the Heat

BY MICHELLE LATOUR

If you're considering crossing over into styles other than classical singing, a program at the Shenandoah Conservatory might just be the place to explore your musical theatre, jazz, or pop voice this summer. Read about the woman who started it all and what she and her faculty have to say about the Somatic Voicework method.

Controversial. Outspoken. Passionate. Entrepreneur. Veteran teacher. Add to that pioneer in her field and highly respected by Grammy Award-winning singers, celebrated teachers, and world-famous otolaryngologists like Dr. Ingo Titze and Dr. Robert Sataloff. To whom do I refer? Jeannette LoVetri, creator of Somatic Voicework *The LoVetri Method*, a system of pedagogy based on voice science and health that is taught each summer at Shenandoah Conservatory's Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Vocal Pedagogy Institute. This summer marks the eleventh year of the institute, with nearly 1,000 past participants from all over the world. As a former CCM alumna with a primarily classically trained background, I wanted to find out more about LoVetri, her

methodology and, also, why all the controversy?

Somatic Voicework Defined

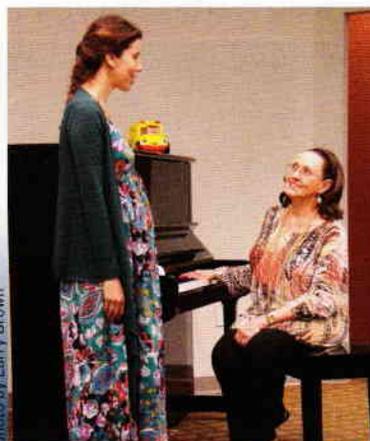
What is Somatic Voicework (SVW)? I stumbled upon the CCM Institute at Shenandoah during the summer of 2008. As a classically trained singer and teacher, I had always enjoyed musical theatre but never had the courage to attempt to sing much in that genre. However, my voice studio was increasingly filled with singers who were interested in learning how to sing musical theatre and contemporary styles. My initial efforts at using classical techniques for teaching musical theatre failed miserably, so out of curiosity and with a slight pang of desperation, I signed up for the CCM Institute at

Shenandoah Conservatory. It opened my eyes to a world of new possibilities. I discovered a system that solidly and safely taught musical theatre technique—and more.

"Somatic Voicework *The LoVetri Method* is a body-based method of vocal training which draws from many disciplines," says the SVW website (www.thevoiceworkshop.com). "It is based upon voice science and medicine as well as traditional classical vocal training; complementary modalities such as yoga, movement, dance, acting, and speech training; and various bodywork approaches." This method is intended to "unselfconsciously draw the mind of the singer into the physical process of making sound." A unique aspect of this training is that "It is based upon what



Jeanie LoVetri works with a singer to get the best delivery for both posture and sound at a workshop in New York City, 2013.



LoVetri with a student from Israel at the CCM Vocal Pedagogy Institute, 2013



LoVetri works with a student on breathing and "brightness" in the sound, New York City, 2013.

the voice is doing, not just how the voice sounds.” All of the vocal exercises used are focused on function; they are not exercises intended to merely “warm up” the voice.

Participants come from all walks of musical life: classically trained teachers and singers, public school music teachers, gospel church singers, successful jazz singers, speech language pathologists, and even experimental artists. Classes are offered in three levels, which can be completed within nine days. Participants may complete one level each summer or can take all three levels in succession. There are also three-day post-certification courses such as Barbershop Harmony, Speaking and Singing with the Same Voice, and Evaluation and Treatment of the Injured Singing Voice. Post-certification courses vary in content each summer. Classes utilize a variety of learning methods including lecture, discussion, small groups, and masterclasses.

I will never forget my first masterclass experience with LoVetri when I sang “There’s A Fine, Fine Line,” from *Avenue Q*. I unwittingly volunteered to be the first singer in the first masterclass of Level One training. I had no idea what I was doing technically and sang the entire song with my resonant, head-voice dominant, classical voice. Once she was through with me, however, I had

safely negotiated into new territory with exploring my chest voice. I was hooked!

Is It Safe?

How is LoVetri’s training different from other methods? Is it safe? Can classically trained singers successfully sing both classical and musical theatre styles? I asked several SVW faculty members to share their thoughts regarding the concept that many classically trained singers and teachers hold that singing musical theatre can hurt your voice.

“Cross-training is the current trend in vocal pedagogy,” says Marcelle Gauvin, a faculty member of the Shenandoah Conservatory Vocal Pedagogy Institute since 2006; world-renowned jazz vocalist; educator; recording artist; associate professor at Berklee College of Music; and head of the Jazz Voice Studio at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. “Done in an informed manner, it can successfully accomplish results without compromising a singer’s vocal health. The technique of mixing chest tone into a sound, rather than resorting to continual chest belt, as demonstrated in SVW, has kept many a professional voice versatile and healthy. The important issue here is how deeply any voice instructor is able to understand and identify vocal function. Any ear that is educated in these methods

can successfully cross-train healthy, stylistically appropriate singing over time.”

Classically trained singer Michelle Rosen joined the Shenandoah faculty last summer. She teaches privately in New York City, in addition to working with the Brooklyn Youth Chorus and teaching at the Westminister College of the Arts in New Jersey. “Vocal damage can occur in any style or genre of singing, including classical, if there is abuse, excessive singing, or oversinging,” Rosen says. “If CCM is damaging, then how do you account for the many, many successful veteran performers in various CCM styles? If you have a teacher who knows what they are doing, then you can safely sing in any genre. The current musical theatre scene is very vocally demanding, so it is best to get some well-informed training.”

Voice pathologist and singing voice specialist Wendy LeBorgne agrees. “Injury can happen regardless of style or genre.” A Shenandoah faculty member since 2006, LeBorgne is also the clinical director of the Blaine Block Institute for Voice Analysis and Rehabilitation in Dayton, Ohio, and the Professional Voice Center of Greater Cincinnati. “When you do vocal gymnastics on a daily basis, regardless of repertoire, you are potentially more at risk for vocal injury,” she continues. “Education,



Jeannette LoVetri



LoVetri demonstrates how to release the base of the tongue and the inner constrictor muscles at the CCM Vocal Pedagogy Institute, 2013.



LoVetri discusses vocal registers, a key ingredient in Somatic Voicework.

technical voice training, voice building, appropriate understanding, and implementation of vocal health and hygiene recommendations are a few of the necessary elements to maintain a voice for a lifetime—in any genre.”

LoVetri's Perspective

What is LoVetri's take on all this? I had the opportunity to talk to her about SVW, her philosophy regarding teaching and singing, and the controversy that occasionally comes her way. I first asked LoVetri what makes this method different from the plethora of other musical theatre techniques out there.

“I have not trained in other methods,” she says, “so I can only say what I know through what I have read, from talking to the people who created them, or from watching them in demonstration sessions. With that caveat, some of them are quite extreme or make no pretense about being grounded in classical vocal

pedagogy, which SVM is. Some even advocate deliberate manipulation of the larynx, which should be avoided, while others are very complicated or quite expensive.

“Somatic Voicework is gentle and it is grounded in trusting the body's own reflexes. It is always functionally based. It supports interdisciplinary exchange and has a strong medical component. We have medical lecturers in two levels and a three-hour medical lecture with a nationally recognized laryngologist each year. We consider the emotional and psychological dynamics of teaching and learning as being very important, and we work to help singers create the sounds they want to sing in the healthiest way possible. It is also the simplest of the methods, as it uses only register balance, vowel sound changes, posture, breathing, and stylistic authenticity as its primary tools. That makes it accessible to just about anyone who wants to learn it and put it into use.

“In fact, many SVW graduates say they have found it helpful for their classical singing. It certainly has helped me keep going all these years. My last public classical performance was in December 2011. I sang Handel's ‘Let the bright Seraphim’ with Baroque trumpet and organ at a holiday concert.”

LoVetri, a classically trained singer first, had an interesting path to non-classical styles. “As a teenager, I took voice lessons, played the organ at church, and would occasionally sing before Mass,” she says. “I got brave enough to seek out public performances by the time I was 16 and auditioned for a summer music theatre group. I ended up playing Marian in *The Music Man*, and the next summer I was cast as Magnolia in *Show Boat*. Those productions were directed by New York City Broadway professionals and had very big budgets and productions. I then went on to play in adult dinner theater and was cast as



LoVetri works with an instrument musician (bass player) who is learning to sing pop/rock at the workshop on Somatic Voicework *The LoVetri Method*, New York City, 2013.

photo by Karsten Staiger

LoVetri guides a group through a breathing exercise at the workshop on Somatic Voicework *The LoVetri Method*, New York City, 2013.



photo by Karsten Staiger

Ella in *Bells Are Ringing*. That role was written for Judy Holliday, who was a belter.

“I had no idea that doing these different roles was anything unusual until I came to New York City in my mid-20s. At that point, I discovered that Broadway wanted ‘belters,’ ‘legit’ singers, and people in between who did something called ‘mix.’ If I wanted a job, I had to figure out what all of those things were, and I was surprised to discover that I could already do them. Seems I had taught myself to adjust!

“I attended Manhattan School of Music for one year but left, as I was unhappy there. That was the end of my formal education. I continued to study classically in NYC until I was 28—at which point I stopped voice lessons, auditioning, and regular performing, because I found the Voice Foundation Symposium. That began my life-long interest in voice science research. Today I still work with two classical coaches and one music theatre/cabaret coach. It’s harder now, due to a partial paralysis of one vocal fold, but I am not ready to give up. I will always be a student and I will always be open to criticism and to new learning experiences.”

And LoVetri is no stranger to criticism. SVW seems to be surrounded by controversy. She has her own ideas why this is the case.

“I have never had any desire to be controversial, and I am always surprised when I am on the receiving end of rancor,” LoVetri confides. “Nevertheless, I am very honest and I speak the truth as I see it. I don’t always couch what I have to say in the most diplomatic phrasing, and that is problematic when I am speaking in public. Because my own life has been ‘outside the box,’ some of what I say seems to be in opposition to what most people understand about singing.

“I also have been a very strong advocate for ‘non-classical’ styles throughout my career,” she continues. “I never regarded them as lesser, and I always thought they deserved to be treated as equal to but different than classical styles. I found out very early on that others did not share my views. I created the term “contemporary commercial music” (CCM) to group the styles born in the USA together because they came up from average people scattered throughout the various geographic areas of our country. They have their roots in colloquial speech.

Classical music has its roots in Europe in the church and in the interests of and support by royalty and aristocracy.

“The formal conventions of classical music as it has evolved are far removed from jazz and its many spin-off styles that are now the most popular musical styles in the world. The term is certainly not perfect, but it seems to have done the job of jarring people out of seeing classical music as ‘the one true style’ and the other styles as being ‘second class,’ but the term still rankles some people. That discord is often directed at me, so it has given my work an aura of being controversial.

“What makes some people even more disgruntled is that I have been successful in offering Somatic Voicework, a pedagogy that has been accepted not only by other teachers and pedagogues but by five established universities and by medical and clinical specialists, not only across the U.S.A. but in foreign countries. Perhaps, as someone who has only one year of college and is a woman to boot, this success has ruffled some feathers. It comes with the territory of being ‘out there’—but if I couldn’t take the heat, I wouldn’t keep on cooking!”

Still not convinced? Then I would suggest attending the CCM Institute at Shenandoah Conservatory this summer to see if *you* can take the heat. Trust me, it is an investment you will not regret.

At the end of January, LoVetri will be the featured guest clinician at the Symposium for Voice Performance and Pedagogy, which is being held at Oberlin Conservatory. This intensive weekend program will focus on issues of vocal health and musical style in classical and contemporary commercial music. It features the Oberlin voice faculty and the Voice Center at the Cleveland Clinic’s Head and Neck Institute, along with LoVetri as master clinician.

Michelle Latour’s bio can be found on p. 39. CS