The immediate access to endless information on the Internet has changed the world in many ways. Sites like Wikipedia, Dictionary.com, and Thesaurus.com have all but replaced the print versions of similar, long-trusted desk companions. Given this climate, have traditional reference books become a thing of the past?

Author Matthew Hoch makes a strong case for their relevancy with his first book, published last spring, *A Dictionary for the Modern Singer*. The 300-page volume could be subtitled “All the things I’m supposed to know but can’t remember off the top of my head.”

Just coming up with a list of all the important terms singers should know—much less providing their definitions—might seem like an unending task. But Hoch took a systematic approach to the compilation. One of his first steps was to look through the glossaries of as many pedagogy books as he could find to get a sense of what other authors felt were essential terms and concepts. He then whittled the list down to words geared toward daily use in the voice studio. “If I found it to be too ‘PhD,’ too much in the speech clinic, too much in the science world, and not enough in the practical application world, I tended to eliminate it,” Hoch says.

Early on in the project, it was suggested that instead of publishing one all-inclusive dictionary, they might consider multiple volumes, written by different authors, each on a different topic. According to this plan, there could be a voice science dictionary, a diction dictionary, a pedagogy dictionary, etc. However, the publishers at Rowman & Littlefield were committed to the idea of a single-author resource, even though they knew that author must have a remarkable breadth of understanding on a vast array of subjects.

In this regard, Hoch was just the person for the job. A self-described “generalist,” he earned a bachelor of music degree with a triple major in voice performance, music education, and music theory. He then earned a master of music degree with a double major in voice performance and music history, followed by a DMA in voice performance. He has been a professional concert soloist and chorister, has performed in recitals and opera, has three levels of certification in Somatic Voicework training, has additional study at the National Center for Voice and Speech’s Summer Vocolology Institute, and serves as an Episcopal choirmaster in Auburn, Alabama.

Just as important in providing the necessary background for the dictionary, however, is his experience as assistant professor of voice at Auburn University. “I really like working with the young singer: teaching literature classes, teaching diction classes, working on practical pedagogy,” he says. “So I think in a sense [the dictionary] was written from my perspective just based on, after teaching these kids for...
15 years, what do I think they need to know?”

While paging through A Dictionary for the Modern Singer, it is easy to see how a change of context can give some words significantly different meanings. “Swing,” for instance, can refer to a big band style of music or a person in a music theatre production who understudies multiple parts. A “Mass” is a prominent genre of choral music but a “mass” can be a voice disorder when considering “lesions and masses (of the vocal fold).” Even something as simple as “cover” required Hoch to provide four definitions: an understudy in opera, vowel modification around the male passaggio, a new recording of a song previously released by a different artist, and the outermost layer of the vocal fold.

Acknowledging the lack of standardization when it comes to certain vocal terms, Hoch was careful in defining words that may come tinged with preconceptions. “Is ‘belt’ a naughty word or is that something that’s accepted?” he says. “Is ‘cover’ something that’s healthy or unhealthy? Well, it really depends on what you mean. If you’re talking about vowel modification, it’s perfectly fine. If you’re talking about artificially darkening your voice, it’s not so fine.”

In this regard, Hoch hopes his book can help take out some of the linguistic guesswork in the field by providing fair, “textbook” definitions of the words regularly used in voice studios. “I was really trying to be as noncontroversial as possible and explain as many different shadings of the words as possible,” he says.

He points to Vocapedia.info (a NATS-sponsored website) that, similar to his book, is also attempting to create some consensus. “I really think as pedagogues are talking to each other more and there’s more scholarly discourse about applied vocal pedagogy, these terms are going to become standardized,” he says. “But [currently] different
Book Review: A Dictionary for the Modern Singer

Reference books—dictionaries especially—are an understandably tough sell in the era of the Internet. If we need to know how many Ps are in the word “appoggio” or which composers were part of the Russian Five, we are probably more likely to do a quick Google search than to run to the shelf and open a book. But if we want a standardized definition of “belt-mix” or “placement” or “systematic pedagogy,” an Internet search may raise more questions than it would provide answers.

In Matthew Hoch’s book, A Dictionary for the Modern Singer, he shares concise but meaningful definitions for the most pertinent terms and concepts needed by students of singing. Much more than a basic dictionary, its topical focus and the reliability of its content make it a worthwhile addition to a singer’s library.

Though targeted to undergraduate voice students, studio teachers will also benefit from having this reference guide on hand as it describes genres and styles, offers brief bios of renowned singers and scholars, and defines terms related to music theory, musical expression, and vocal pedagogy. As Hoch explains in the introduction, the book is intended as “a generalist’s dictionary” and does not attempt to provide the depth and scope that more specialized texts offer. Therefore, the definitions vary in length, as needed. For instance, it takes five paragraphs to define the term “opera” while “fine” is simply defined as “end.”

Thorough without being pedantic, Hoch favors facts instead of opinions and reality over controversy. His multifaceted background as a performer, conductor, teacher, and scholar makes him more than qualified to write such an all-encompassing text.

Besides the dictionary entries, Hoch also includes nearly 100 pages of charts, diagrams, historical listings, and essays that are just as useful as the first 200 pages of definitions. Enlisting guest authors, the essays provide more extensive information on selected topics while the appendices offer easy guides to frequently referenced material, including an IPA chart, anatomy diagrams, a Fach chart, and a listing of medications and their effects on the voice.

A lengthy bibliography, organized by subject, suggests additional reading on many of the topics addressed in the dictionary and essays.

Given the number of non-English words found in musical and anatomical terms, pronunciation guides would have been useful. But if this omission allowed for more terms to be included within the space limitations of the book, then it was a fair trade. While Internet searches are certainly fast and convenient, the reliability of the information discovered is often dubious. Owning a go-to resource like A Dictionary for the Modern Singer that is well researched and thoughtfully compiled is undoubtedly worth the investment. —Brian Manternach

voice teachers mean completely different things with the same words. In that way, it’s a slippery topic.”

Case in point, the brief definition of “support” indicates that the term is related to “breath management.” The short entry for “breath management” ends with “See also appoggio.” Finally, under “appoggio,” techniques for efficient breath management are more thoroughly explored.

Though much of the dictionary focuses on concerns related to classical singing, it also includes terms and topics from CCM genres (musical theatre, pop, jazz, world music, etc.). “That was a big priority for me,” Hoch says. “That, to me, is part of making it current.”

Since much of the voice teaching taking place across the industry is in non-classical music, he wanted to be inclusive of these styles. “That’s just all part of what I think an undergraduate should experience,” he says.

Besides the dictionary portion, the volume also includes a section of essays and several appendixes that include charts, listings, and tips. One reason he felt it was important to include these bonus sections is that certain topics do not easily lend themselves to mere definitions. “I could define ‘stage fright,’” he says, “but that doesn’t tell you how to deal with it. I could define what ‘practicing’ is, but it doesn’t tell you good techniques to use in the practice room.”

Secondly, the essays gave him an opportunity to reach out to experts when a topic was outside his own area of expertise. Even though he could have written on some of the topics included, like the history of CCM or how to choose repertoire, he says, “Why reinvent the wheel if Jeanie [LoVetri] and John [Nix] had already written such fine articles?”

Two of the essays were reprints from previous publications, including “Practicing 101: Ten Tips for Making the Most of Your Time between Lessons” by Dean Southern, which originally appeared in the September 2009 issue of Classical Singer. The others are original essays invited specifically for Hoch’s book, including “Coping with Musical Performance Anxiety” by Heather Winter Hunnicutt and “What Every Singer Needs to Know about Audio Technology” by Matthew Edwards.

The appendixes contain additional useful information that is both objective (e.g., listings of the winners of the Tony Award for best musical and vocal works that have earned the Pulitzer Prize and Grammey Awards) and subjective (e.g., listings of “Major Song Cycles, Collections, and Sets” and “Essential Operas”). It also includes James Stark’s
“I really like working with the young singer: teaching literature classes, teaching diction classes, working on practical pedagogy . . . so I think in a sense [the dictionary] was written from my perspective just based on, after teaching these kids for 15 years, what do I think they need to know?”


Hoch understands that his book is in direct competition with the iPhones and laptops that are in practically every student’s hands. In his own online searches, however, he found that dependable information on vocal terms was not as readily available as many would believe. “Some of this stuff was hard to dig up on the Internet,” he says. “There were a lot of times where I had to consult other resources or ask other professionals in the field . . . other times [the information] is so available and so ubiquitous that you can’t sort out which definition you should trust or which you shouldn’t.”

In the end, A Dictionary for the Modern Singer came out of Hoch’s desire to better equip students with the knowledge they need as 21st-century musicians. His own background is proof of how broad interests within vocal music and a commitment to constant education can be a healthy cornerstone on which to build a career. “When they contacted authors for the series, the intention was to engage someone who is actively a performer and actively a practitioner and someone who’s a reliable voice,” he says. “I’m honored to have been asked to do this, and I hope that people consider me a reliable enough voice that they’re getting some useful information from this dictionary.”

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