

**Sharon Mabry**

***Exploring Twentieth-Century Vocal Music:  
A Practical Guide to Innovations in Performance  
and Repertoire***

**Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 208 pp.  
ISBN019534961X, 9780195349610**

Sharon Mabry is an accomplished American mezzo-soprano, who specializes in the interpretation of vocal music by the composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. During her career as a recital singer she has premiered works by more than thirty contemporary composers and made eight critically acclaimed recordings. Moreover, she has around forty years of experience in teaching, currently as Professor of Music at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee. In 2002, Oxford University Press published her comprehensive publication, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Vocal Music: A Practical Guide to Innovations in Performance and Repertoire*.

In the introduction of the book Sharon Mabry describes her way to exploring 20th century music, in addition the concept and objectives of her publication. She seeks reasons why contemporary music is often ignored when considering possible repertoire for a concert or music lesson. Perhaps this is because people are often afraid of the unknown, whether they are music students, teachers, concert organizers, or listeners. It is clear that the fear and dislike come from a lack of understanding of the intricate parts.

The main section of the book is further divided into three parts. Part I focuses on positive aspects of singing 20th century repertoire and describes common characteristics of vocal writing from this period. Mabry tries to answer the question of why singing contemporary music is so important already during singing studies. She mentions that there are numerous challenges to singing contemporary vocal music, including a number of elements not commonly seen in the Classical or Romantic era compositions. Not everyone has the courage to embark on the study of such a demanding and diverse field of music and therefore chooses just repertoire from standard, traditional vocal literature.

Mabry uses her own development into a contemporary music specialist to illustrate how to find the joy of performing this interesting style of music. She recommends teachers and students not to remain rooted just in the traditional repertoire and proposes to choose an appropriate unconventional repertoire with respect to musical skills, language skills, level of vocal technique, vocal range, stamina, and flexibility.

Twentieth-century vocal repertoire requires good tonal memory, flexible voice, and the ability to use the imagination effectively. Then it brings several positive effects: voice becomes freer, mind more imaginative, interpretation more natural, and vocal self-

confidence more bold. Finding a way to perform innovative contemporary repertoire alongside standard classical repertoire, development of versatility, performance personality, and accurate stage presence have been challenges for singers for many years.

Extensive Part II provides a description of nontraditional notations and extended voice techniques found in the contemporary repertoire (e.g. Sprechstimme, recitation, nontextual sonic vocabularies, vocal effects – laughter, whispering, shouts, white tones, falsetto, glissando, tongue click or clack or whistling). Mabry discusses modern performance techniques and problems in great detail and she gives valuable recommendations for solving a particular problem. She offers numerous relevant rehearsal techniques, vocal exercises, step-by-step exercise routines, and suggestions for deciphering the score and developing spontaneity and confidence in performing with healthy and secure technique.

Although this is a very challenging subject to study, Mabry uses a breezy and easy-to-read style. For each example she follows the scheme: –What does it look like? – What does it mean? – Who used it? – What should it sound like? – How do I do it? She proceeds very systematically, which makes this part clear.

Part III offers some suggested recital programs that will introduce singers to the world of contemporary music, and then provides a list of the most important and interesting works for various voice types, with a description of each piece and its level of difficulty.

I would recommend Sharon Mabry's publication as an ideal guide to bring contemporary music closer to singers. She brings her personal experience and recommendations to understand this specific style of music. Pieces of contemporary composers are often extremely difficult to interpret, requiring to recite, trill, and whisper, or to read non-traditional scores, so the book is intended for singers whose technique and languages are already in place. Yet there is no need to worry. Respecting vocal skills by choosing repertoire, attention to detail, trying to experiment, and courage to read unusual notations and vocal directions, all lead to a successful and satisfying concert performance and good audience acceptance. Twentieth-century vocal repertoire brings exciting opportunities for singers to stretch their talent and demonstrate their vocal flexibility.

Because of its complexity and concrete and practically-formulated advice, Sharon Mabry has created a superb and cogent publication for all singers and voice teachers who are discovering the music of the 20th and 21st centuries. Her multi-faceted career as teacher, singer, and recording artist of contemporary music provides a true authoritative platform for this excellent book. Although there are a number of works that focus on the contemporary vocal music, few of them offer such insight into the pedagogical aspects and specifics of singing technique and the interpretation. In that fact, this makes Mabry's publication unique – it's more than just a textbook or a handbook: it's undoubtedly a reference work.

**Lucie Hilscherová**  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6970-8013  
Charles University  
Prague, Czech Republic  
lucihila@email.cz