



Book review

**Yoga for Singing – A Developmental Tool
for Technique and Performance**

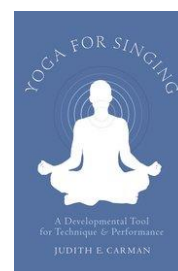
Judith E. Carman

Reviewed by Kate Binnie

Yoga for Singing – A Developmental Tool for Technique and Performance

Judith E. Carman

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“The connections between Yoga and Singing are many and intimate. Both rest on the foundation of awareness, control, and use of the breath. Both require control of a strong and flexible body developed for freedom and endurance. Both demand mental concentration and the ability to coordinate mind and body. Both lead to the knowledge and expression of the soul. Both open the heart. They are natural partners” (p. 4).

Judith E. Carman's comprehensive manual – the premise of which is laid out above – is the fruition of a lifetime's study of singing and yoga (the Viniyoga school). Carman's many years of teaching vocal performance at university level in the USA, combined with 30 years' worth of yoga teaching to opera singers, students and choirs, culminates in this extraordinarily detailed, serious and practical guide.

The Viniyoga tradition, within which Carman trained and teaches, was established in the USA by Gary Krafstow in the 1980s. His approach evolved

from long study in India with T. Krishnamacharya and T.K.V. Desikachar who are commonly acknowledged to be (alongside B.K.S Iyengar) the fathers of what we know in the West as yoga. Viniyoga emphasises the uniqueness of each student and encourages a personal practice that focuses on self-awareness, “beginning from where we are” (Krafstow 1999: 17) and on careful adaptation of postures and practices that is right for each person, each day. This tradition is well chosen by Carman who elegantly explains at the start of her book why singers of all ages, shapes, sizes and yoga experience and ability can and should include a Viniyoga practice as part of their student singing, training and life-long practice. Viniyoga is not about the body beautiful, but about self-discovery, self-awareness and integrity to the body and its individual needs. Early in the book, the author makes the connection between the holistic approach integral to yoga (yoga meaning “to yoke” together the different facets of ourselves; body, mind and

spirit) and the necessity of the successful singer to be not only physically flexible with excellent breath control, but with psychological resilience and emotional awareness and openness.

The book is divided into clear sections: the *Body*, the *Breath*, the *Mind*, the *Heart* and the *Performer*, with each section clearly describing a posture or practice, its connection to singing technique, and where possible a photograph to illustrate. In the *Body* section, asanas (movements or postures) are described with their Sanskrit name, their category (e.g. standing twist) their relevance to the singer with precise anatomical explanation, difficulty level, classical form, Viniyoga adaptation, common mistakes, risks and contraindications.

Although necessary information for a complete and safe practice, the desire of the author to be thorough led me to feel bamboozled by textural detail. Yoga is essentially a process of embodiment and this is somehow at odds with the cognitive processing required to read a technical book (which this is). In my experience of both singing and yoga teaching, students seem to learn best using a mix of styles – kinaesthetic (doing, feeling), auditory and visual processing. In a live yoga class or individual session with a teacher this is what happens and it is almost impossible for a book to describe this process although many hundreds or thousands of yoga books have tried.

However, Carman is aware of this difficulty and clear to point out that yoga is best learned, like singing, from a class and teacher. To this end, there is a companion website (www.oup.com/us/yogaforsinging) to the book with video materials and illustrations. Deliberately, the demonstrations are provided by singers not yoga specialists, which means that unlike most other yoga books and videos/websites, the models have everyday body types and are wearing black physical education clothes (not slinky leotards). In this way the message communicated is that yoga practice really is for everyone, and not, as many people seem to think, only for young and flexible women. Visual demonstrations certainly flesh out the text for the *Body* section but my main criticism of this is that it is unwieldy to use. As a teacher and experienced practitioner, I could quickly read the text and understand what it meant for my body/breath as I had already experienced and embodied the postures and practices, but I doubt this would be the case with someone without this grounding. I have always found this with yoga practice books; reading the yogic texts, philosophy and psychology is useful, but once you have to actually do a practice, from a mindfulness breath awareness to a complicated asana, it's difficult to do with a book in hand or a computer to click and

move on (each asana is in a different file on the video material for this book).

The *Breath* section was easier to use and very clear. Each breathing practice is described with concise bullet point instructions, plus an excellent table *Functions of the Breath* that explains the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of breath and breathing practices in relation to life, yoga and singing. Pranayama practices and breath ratios are especially useful to the singer, improving lung function and capacity and allowing longer phrases and better support for the voice, as well as stimulating the relaxation response to calm the effects of “stage fright”.

In the *Mind* section, the ways in which the breath can manipulate the nervous system and thus the emotions and mental processing is explored and explained, along with connections between being a performing singer and a yoga practitioner. These include one-pointed focus (concentration), the balance between being concurrently strong/focused and open/aware and the ways in which a yoga practice can help us to let go of unhelpful habits or “samskaras”, form new ones based on positive intention and take the singer forward where they want to go. This focus infuses every level (physical and vocal, mental, spiritual) through the focussed identifying and affirmation of “highest values” (p. 269).

The *Heart* section explores the more spiritual and esoteric aspects of yoga to do with mindfulness meditation practices including loving-kindness, visualisations and mantra. Here, the book touches on the evidence-based ways in which meditation practices positively affect the brain, emotional reactivity and stress response, but I would have liked to have seen a little more here. The evidence-base for yoga as an intervention for a variety of physical and mental health issues is growing, particularly in the field of neuroscience where links are being made between the neurological and psychobiological components of wellbeing. Particularly of interest are recent studies on the effects of a yoga intervention on young musicians' performance anxiety (Khalsa et al. 2009) and a recent systematic review on the effects of yoga on stress management (Sharma 2014) both of which are relevant to performing singers and musicians of all types and genres.

Carman's book focuses particularly on the classical singer, but another book I have explored in comparison (the only other one I could find) *Yoga for Singers* (Lister 2011) quotes popular and jazz artists Madonna, Sting, Diana Krall and Sheryl Crow throughout, explaining how they use yoga for vocal technique, nerves, life balance and optimum physical functioning. This lack of “frills” in *Yoga for Singing* (no glossy photographs or celebrity

quotes) is in keeping with its technical seriousness, but it would perhaps have been nice to get some relevant sound bites from opera yoga devotees e.g. Karitta Mattila and Roberto Alagna to act as refreshing pauses to the nearly three hundred pages of text and rather small, monochrome photographs.

The final section, for the *Performer*, draws together the composite facets of the singer with what has gone before in the book; training the body, command of breath, connection with heart and soul and finally, command of relaxation which is vital for singers who may need these practices before and after performances to manage anxiety and to keep anchored and steady throughout the vicissitudes of a long professional career.

I found several parts of this book very practical; notes for the teacher (how to disseminate yoga skills to voice students) notes on weight, diet and eating mindfully (without harsh diets and self-judgment) and instructions on diction and pronunciation. Particularly useful were the instructions on singing vowel sounds or foreign language phrases whilst moving and practising asana to aid memorisation and improve the singer's ability to move and sing seamlessly (essential for the opera stage).

As a singer, music therapist and yoga teacher myself, I was delighted to discover this book which introduced new and reinforced old ideas and practices that I use personally to support and free my voice, but also teach to individuals and choirs. I also use yoga techniques with clients and patients in music therapy, finding the mindfulness aspect of yoga, breath awareness and relaxation techniques especially helpful in alleviating anxiety. The yoga acts as an adjunct to the therapy, down-regulating the nervous system, releasing physical tension, and opening the door to the therapeutic process. This connection (the use of yoga and mindfulness in psychotherapy) has already been made by others (e.g. Brown & Gerbarg 2012; Weintraub 2012) but I find it especially useful in creative music therapy sessions across client groups, especially when clients and patients want to use their voice in song-writing or vocal improvisation. This book will be a useful aid to my singing and clinical practice.

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