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# The Changing Paradigm of Professional Singing

Deanna Joseph

*Georgia State University*, [djoseph@gsu.edu](mailto:djoseph@gsu.edu)

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# **THE CHANGING PARADIGM OF PROFESSIONAL SINGING**

A CONVERSATION  
WITH  
TOP SINGERS AND  
CONDUCTORS  
IN THE UNITED STATES

**DEANNA JOSEPH**

Deanna Joseph  
Director of Choral Activities  
Georgia State University  
[djoseph@gsu.edu](mailto:djoseph@gsu.edu)

There are currently thousands (see sidebar on page 27 for 2013-14 NASM data) of students studying vocal performance in music schools and conservatories across the United States that go on to have careers of all types. The following article is a conversation with nine of the country's top conductors and singers. These men and women share their thoughts on what is required to be successful as a professional soloist or choral singer in the twenty-first century, whether in opera, oratorio, early music, commercial recording, or other genres.

## THE PANEL

### THE CONDUCTORS



**Simon Carrington:** Yale University professor emeritus who has enjoyed a distinguished career in music, performing as a singer, double bass player, and conductor, first in the UK where he was born and later in the United States.



**Joshua Habermann:** Conductor of the Dallas Symphony Chorus and music director of the Santa Fe Desert Chorale.



**Simon Halsey:** Conductor Laureate of the Rundfunkchor Berlin, Chorus Director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra Choruses, Choral Director of the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.



**Craig Hella Johnson:** Founder and artistic director of Conspirare and music director/conductor for the Victoria Bach Festival and Cincinnati Vocal Arts Ensemble.

### THE SINGERS



**Dashon Burton:** Classical bass-baritone based in New York. Burton sang in the *St. Mark's Passion* at the Oregon Bach Festival and had the role of Jesus in the *St. Matthew Passion* at the Carmel Bach Festival. He is a former member of Cantus.



**Estelí Gomez:** Founding member of the Grammy award-winning experimental vocal octet Roomful of Teeth. She makes her living traveling full time as a performer, collaborator, and teacher in concert, oratorio, recital, and chamber music venues.



**Kathryn Lewek:** Soprano who recently made debuts at the Metropolitan Opera, Washington National Opera, Australia's Hobart Baroque Festival, the English National Opera, Austria's Bregenz Festival, and the Deutsche Oper Berlin.



**Kelley O'Connor:** Grammy award-winning mezzo-soprano who has performed in world premieres by composers Osvaldo Golijov and John Adams. She has a passion for the concert stage and has performed with many of America's leading orchestras.



**Kyle Stegall:** Tenor specializing in the performance of concert and recital repertoire. He has appeared as a soloist with William Christe, Simon Carrington, Joseph Flummerfelt, Masaaki Suzuki, Nicholas McGegan, and David Hill. He is also a chamber musician and ensemble singer.

## What qualities make a singer marketable? Why?

**Simon Halsey:** So many things!

- A healthy, straightforward singing technique that will allow you to sing for forty years every day
- A flexible sound and light vibrato but with the possibility of a variety of colors
- Good ears and ensemble skills
- Good sight-reading
- An energetic and responsible attitude to work
- The desire to be professional in all good senses
- Good people skills
- The ability to graciously take direction and work in a team
- Good health and vitality
- Flexibility and fitness
- Stylistic awareness

**Simon Carrington:** This depends so much on the area of our profession in which a singer has ambition to succeed. In the world of opera or musical theater a strong, resilient voice and charismatic personality can help launch a career as long as the singer has enough financial resources to be able to engage a repertoire coach/accompanist to help prepare roles. In every other area, the depth of the singer's musicianship and the flexibility of the voice are essentials that enable a singer to immediately adapt to each opportunity that arises.

**Craig Hella Johnson:** A singer needs a grounded and healthy technique—a core vocal foundation that will serve them in a wide variety of musical contexts. A high degree of stylistic flexibility is often very valuable—to be able to step out as soloist and then return into a section of singers and understand any necessary shifts when singing back in



Estelí Gomez

the section, for example. I marvel at the singers I have the privilege to work with—they are not only beautiful artists but also remarkable athletes. They have learned how to pace themselves so that they can fully engage in the choral texture but also step out as soloist deep into the concert and sound fresh. It's really incredible. In the evolving American professional choral scene, it is important that singers learn to take care of their bodies. Many of these singers are required to travel quite a lot and are expected to drop into a new city and be able to step into rehearsal with physical and musical readiness, despite this travel and often demanding rehearsal schedules.

**Joshua Habermann:** Above all is flexibility. The ability to sing in multiple styles: full-throated, straight tone, classical, folk, and popular is key in the current environment. That flexibility extends also to the ability and willingness to sing both soloistically and within a section, which is really important in the professional chamber choir world. In terms of interpersonal skills, it's crucial that singers be dependable, well prepared, and positive.

**Estelí Gomez:** Recently I've started to give career talks at universities at which I've been either an alumna or artist in residence, so I've been thinking about this particular question quite a bit. For my first of these talks about a year ago, I began asking friends on each gig, in different cities and in different genres, about their take on "the most important qualities in a performer to ensure that they are both hired and rehired." By far, the quality that came up most frequently was: be kind. The world of pro-

# OF PROFESSIONAL SINGING

fessional singing continues to be competitive, physically and emotionally taxing, and without prescriptive steps or guarantees for every individual artist, along most every step of the way. However, if both employer and colleague can be sure that a singer will show up having had enough respect for all involved to come prepared; that he or she will then be willing to adjust for changes as needed with grace and flexibility; and all in all will be secure enough in his or her own skin to treat others with utmost respect and kindness—he or she is a marketable, rehirable artist.

Another important quality I would highlight is flexibility. A big part of our job has always been wearing many stylistic hats—to sing the jazz standard at a friend’s wedding, pop arrangements at a bar mitzvah, musical theater at graduation—without having to turn a gig down since our only setting is “operatic.” This is not emphasized in school as much as the profession inevitably requires: one may still specialize in a genre, but ignoring all others is ultimately a huge detriment to one’s hire ability. Another facet of flexibility is the capacity to adjust for unexpected changes. You may well have to sight read a different line of the duet or be delayed enough that your travel day becomes a red-eye straight into rehearsals or work alongside unkind, ego-laden, insecure individuals. There isn’t much time, in these situations, to get caught up in regret, fear, complaint, or self-pity. Meeting change with grace and flexibility is a huge challenge and hugely important.

**Kathryn Lewek:** There are three main things that I believe make a singer irresistible to all those who observe

them on (and off) stage: confidence, vulnerability, and personality.

Confidence: I don’t mean the fake kind that some people wear like an ill-fitting article of clothing. Know your stuff, know how to use *your* voice, be in full command of your craft, know your limitations and your assets, and be proud of yourself for knowing that you have done everything you possibly could do to make yourself a success. Be an island. Sustain yourself on hard work and self-discovery, experimentation and guts, and selectively learn from those that you trust to visit your island (teach-

## NASM Accredited Institutions HEADS (Higher Education Arts Data Services) Data Summary of Number of Students Studying Vocal Performance, 2013-14

Undergrad  
3,371 sopranos  
1,021 altos  
1,135 tenors  
1,052 basses

Associate  
227 sopranos  
113 altos  
135 tenors  
86 basses

Graduate  
MM  
714 sopranos  
183 altos  
249 tenors  
216 basses

DMA  
230 sopranos  
50 altos  
94 tenors  
90 basses



Craig Hella Johnson

# THE CHANGING PARADIGM

ers, coaches, fellow singers, conductors, directors, and recordings of singers you admire).

**Vulnerability:** Be open with people. Be real. Care about your colleagues, and care about your audience, or they won't care about you. Leave everything on the stage. Audiences don't care for half-baked emotions—they want it all. They may have no idea what it takes for you to give it all to them out there in the lights, but that's not what it's about. Don't show them how hard it is for you to act; rather, show them how easy it is for you to communicate. This goes for the people you work with too. To a director, a conductor, a person you are sharing the stage with, nothing is more irresistible than an artist who has the willingness to open him or herself authentically.

**Personality:** Have it. Whatever your flavor is, have it. Maybe some people won't like you, but there will be a lot of people who will love you.

**Kelley O'Connor:** How relevant this question is, especially now with all of the news about singers and weight! I truly believe it is a complete package that makes the artist, and not just one element. Yes, we must sound good, and yes, we must look good. This is a visual and aural art, and we need to be able to suspend people's reality with our looks as well as our voice. I am fairly certain that what makes me marketable is my ability to express my sentiment with honesty when I am performing. I am not solely focused on the sound I am making but on the message that I am communicating. I feel that this has allowed me to go as far as I have gone. There are definitely better singers than me out there, but I know what I do best and I stick to that. For me, it is about a personal relationship with the audience. Playing a character doesn't fit me as well, and that is why I have chosen the path of a concert singer (singing primarily with orchestras as soloist). This platform is completely focused on the music and allows for intimate collaboration with the conductors and orchestras. Luckily, I was a choir nerd and learned everything I ever needed to know during those formative years.

I went from not being able to read music to being a new music specialist. Go figure! My college choral conductor still can't believe it, but I developed my ability to learn music quickly in choir and how to work in an ensemble situation. I know that I find it much more enjoyable thinking of the orchestra, conductor, and myself all creating

the product and not just me alone.

**Kyle Stegall:** In the relatively short time I have spent as a full-time professional singer, I have observed that what makes a singer most hireable is the degree of skill with which they use their instrument. Students often feel that what is most important is how high, loud, or fast you sing, but in reality, such a great variety of repertoire is being performed today that a singer essentially is hireable if they are using *their* voice in a healthy and solid way. Because of the individual character of each voice, singers tend to specialize in repertoire that complements their own instrument. Trouble occurs, of course, when a young singer decides that they want to sing certain repertoire before they have developed their technique. If young singers are lured into taking work that is inappropriate for their voice at that moment, it can be damaging both mentally and physically.

Conductors tend to hire singers they can trust and singers who are well versed in the performance practice of the programmed music for which they are hiring. Conductors don't have time to spoon-feed musicians in any way. Singers become more hireable by having a reputation for knowing their music backwards and forwards and for walking into rehearsals with a well-rounded understanding of the context in which their vocal line exists.

Ensemble skills are key. There will seldom (if ever) be a situation in which a singer is hired to stand onstage and sing alone. Whether you are hired as a symphonic soloist, cast in an opera, singing as part of a professional



Kyle Stegall



Simon Halsey

choir, or participating in small-ensemble music, you are responsible for making music *with* your colleagues. It is expected that you will participate in all rehearsals and performances with a careful ear for balance, tuning, and musical shaping. Collegiate ensembles are perfect environments to hone these skills. These are not bonus skills; they are expected for professional-level music making.

As in any line of business, one will encounter colleagues with varying levels of proficiency with interpersonal skills. Learning to communicate with a wide variety of personalities is one of the more difficult and crucial skills a musical artist can have. Making music is a passionate endeavor that depends on successful collaboration. There will be differences of opinion, and each artist will inevitably bring different skills to the party. Generally speaking, a genuine smile, a work ethic, and a general respect for others will take you far.

**Dashon Burton:** Musicians of all kinds need to be flexible in today's changing market while also maintaining a deep sense of individuality throughout all of their projects. This of course applies especially to singers who are trying to leave their mark on a project as a soloist in a busy touring schedule with different conductors and ensembles. Complementary to flexibility is preparedness. It's crucial to be so comfortable with the music that if the conductor takes a different tempo (within reason, hopefully!) you can be prepared to take on the challenge and still maintain your performance standards. Of course, being a collegial and pleasant person to be around is most important at

our stage; it's a long career, and we all want to work with talented people who make each other feel good. There are exceptions to this rule, but I wouldn't risk your career on you being one!

**What skills does a singer need in order to make a living as a full-time professional musician?**

**Halsey:** See above.

**Carrington:** It is important to remember that the opera stage is just one of many contexts in which a singer can make a living nowadays. Since so few of the many singers that work through voice degrees at conservatories and universities have much real chance of success on the opera stage, my answers will concentrate on all the other areas where promising singers with everything but sheer volume of voice can succeed and very profitably. The essential skills include: musicianship, sight-reading skills (it is critically important to be not only a good reader but a very quick and fearless reader), highly developed ensemble skills (the equal to those of a member of an accomplished string quartet), an unassuming sensitivity to the musicians around you, and a natural and easy collegiality.

**Johnson:** It is necessary that the singer have a depth of the fundamental musicianship skills: superb sight-reading, consistent intonation, great rhythm, agility, and a broad color spectrum. But equally important is that a singer has what I call a "chamber music sensibility"—a set of skills and experience in making music with others at a very high level. Developing instrumentalists are given this training often for many years in string quartets and wind quintets, etc. So, from a very early age, many of them have the orientation of this type of listening and discernment. This training and coaching is incredibly valuable for these instrumentalists and prepares them for a life of music making in many contexts. A singer needs to seek out situations that can nurture this chamber music sensibility: to develop listening, awareness, and responsiveness to a high degree.

**Habermann:** I prioritize excellent musicianship right along with vocal quality. There are so many fine singers now of every voice type that what distinguishes one from

# THE CHANGING PARADIGM

another is often the ability to read something perfectly the first time. In many professional situations, even at the very highest levels, there isn't any time to waste. Those singers who prepare carefully and can read very fluently are the ones who get hired. The spirit and energy that singers bring to not only performance but also rehearsal is a critical component of getting hired and, more importantly, getting rehired for the next opportunity.

**Gomez:** Organizational skills. Independence. Money-management. Body-awareness. Each of these qualities could be described in so much detail! But yes, the ability to manage one's own small business and care for all factors involved: how to file taxes for work in many states, how to book cheap and efficient travel, how to cope when said travel becomes exhausting and lonely, and how to take care of one's body and instrument while constantly on the road and dealing with changes in environment, different sleeping situations, being under time and climate and food constraints. Remember that an unhappy body, heart, or mind make for a very compromised instrument, and it's the personal responsibility of the professional musician to account for a consistently high-quality performance.

**Lewek:** Here are the nuts and bolts: Sight-read well. Learn music quickly and correctly (in other words, use a coach to polish your work, not teach you the notes). Work on your piano skills. Work well with your colleagues. Keep track of everything, keep all your receipts, and get an accountant you can trust to do a good job with your taxes. Get a big suitcase that has four fully rotational wheels. Know how to keep your body healthy so you can be reliable. Always sing as well as you can, and don't mark all the time in rehearsal. Attach your emotions to your singing and support. Work every day to improve your multi-fluency in German, Italian, and French (in that order). Know everything about what you are singing. Read the sixteenth-century poem that inspired the novel that inspired the play that inspired the libretto that inspired the composer to write the notes you are going to sing. Leave no stone unturned. Be an expert.

**O'Connor:** You must be flexible. You must be prepared. You must know your limits. You must always be aware that you need to look the part (dressing appropriately for



Kathryn Lewek

rehearsals, donor functions, and conductor meetings). You are a product, and you are selling yourself at every moment. Every rehearsal and performance is an audition for a singer. That is just how it is. You can get hired one year and have no contracts the next. It is a very fickle industry, but that is the nature of the beast. It is okay to not be chosen for every gig. Whether or not someone likes what you have to offer is a completely personal opinion and not the opinion of the world at large. It is important to remember that and not take every hit as the final blow. You have no idea what a company or orchestra is looking for. You only know that you tried your best.

**Stegall:** Time-management and self-management are the two most important skill sets for the self-employed professional musician. The successful self-employed musician must be his or her own accountant, scheduler, boss (work-enforcer), and sometimes marketer and manager. In the highly structured academic setting, self-worth and accomplishment are too often gauged from the completion of assigned tasks and from singing in required concerts. In the world of the full-time performer, one must discipline oneself to work toward personal, musical, and career goals. Nobody will be cracking the whip for you, so to speak. You must always be practicing your craft, not because you have a jury coming up or because your lesson is tomorrow and your recital is just around the corner, but because you must be the very best artist you can be



own work. Being self-employed means you are ultimately responsible for your product.

**Burton:** To make a living as a professional musician, one needs to be organized enough to keep a tight schedule, to balance business and personal finances, and to attend to the craft as much as possible. Scheduling is difficult for all of us, but we need to make sure that we show up with plenty of time to get ready in a leisurely manner. We also need to make sure we balance enough downtime to prevent getting run down. Finances and taxation laws are difficult but critically important. Keeping good credit is important so that you're able to have an array of financial options at your disposal. Saving for retirement as a freelancer is very difficult but by no means impossible. It's better to think of it now than to wait. Investing in an accountant who can help you file your taxes may be worth your time. Find one who works with musicians; we have very specific challenges to attend to. Finally, making sure that you are able to get to your instrument every day is important. Of course I mean vocally, but remember that we have additional challenges with language, acting, and further contexts as well. So, making time to study language and read books about the historical context of the pieces you're taking on is important.

## **How is professional singing changing in Europe? How do singers make a living there? Is it the same or different in the United States?**

**Halsey:** The UK is not unlike the United States, but the rest of Europe is different. In the UK, most jobs are freelance and require quick-thinking, flexible, enjoyable, reliable people-or they don't get asked again. In Germany, there are lots of full-time jobs in radio and in opera. Here, attitude, energy, vocal health, and flexibility are very important.

**Carrington:** The huge advantages that a freelance professional singer in Europe has over his or her American counterparts include ease of access to the different projects and vast amounts of varied opportunities available within a relatively small radius. For instance, a well-trained and flexible English tenor can be a Bach Evangelist in Holland one day, record a couple of pop sessions in Lon-

don the next, sing a Lieder recital in Cologne the next, and then go on tour with Ars Nova in Copenhagen. If your technique is secure, your musicianship well developed, and you have had plenty of ensemble experience, you can make a very good living.

Being a freelance musician in the United States is much more difficult because of the distances, the relatively small number of professional opportunities, and the lack of a national health insurance.

**Gomez:** I will preface this response with the admission that I spend only about a month of every season, at most, working in Europe, so my knowledge is limited as compared to many friends who are living over there making a living in music. However, I would say the main differences that I've noticed in classical singing in North America as compared to Europe are based in aesthetic. I did a competition in Poland a few years ago right out of graduate school that was specific to early music singing; the judges were kind enough to give me specific feedback after advancing to the final round. Our final program would consist of twenty minutes of music, so I chose the flashiest early cantata I could think of, Handel's *La Lucrezia*. But I was cautioned away from using too much flash: multiple judges mentioned that the aesthetic for early music in North America still involved more "very loud, very high" than they believed necessary, and that in Europe, listeners were far more interested in tasteful use of vibrato or lack of vibrato, the occasional ornament quite high or quite low, and dynamic contrast. Rather than an unspoken rule of "if you sing early music, you still need to prove [to an audience] that you can sing loud, high, and with full vibrato," I was encouraged to prove no such thing and instead be as much my own artist as possible. It was very freeing!

At any rate, from what I can perceive, the methods for making a living in Europe are as they have been for years: Fest contracts at different levels of houses for opera singers, case-by-case contracts for chamber ensembles, and word-of-mouth/agent-based solo/oratorio/recital contracts. The cost of living/work availability breakdown does seem more humane there than here, and I know there are differences in benefits, but without living there currently I can't be too sure of specifics.

# THE CHANGING PARADIGM

**Lewek:** Most successful solo singers in Europe find Fest positions at one company and have contracts that start at two to three years with benefits and security. Unfortunately, almost all companies in the United States can't support that. The closest thing to it is the American young artist program (YAP), most of which are now filled with mid thirty-somethings who haven't yet gotten onto the United States regional company circuit because they either don't have an agent who can connect them with audition opportunities, or they've just gotten caught up in the YAP culture of America and keep auditioning for a new YAP position every couple of years. It's not to say these singers aren't talented and marketable; by all means, they are. But the harsh truth of it is that at some point, young American singers simply must take the plunge and find a way to become international singers. American singers are well admired in Europe for their skills and work ethic and usually have a lot of success finding jobs there, but most of the American singers that I talk to are terrified by the idea of the unknown. Start planning your audition trip in Germany. Believe me when I say that I love singing in the United States—it always feels like home more than anywhere else in the world. But I am so grateful for the opportunities to work all over the world, in places where people still fight to get tickets to the opera, where the houses are packed to the rafters, and where there are companies that can support the business of making opera, and where I can work and then go home with a paycheck worthy of being described as “making a good living” at this singing thing.

**What changes do you see happening in music (both solo and ensemble) over the next fifty years?**

**Halsey:** I think music will move even further toward freelance work. Musicians will have a greater need to be multiskilled and will probably need to get more involved in youth and community work as well.

**Carrington:** I have seen great changes in styles of singing, both solo and choral in the United States over the past twenty years. There are more and more American singers who are developing their natural potential as oratorio and ensemble singers rather than being pushed in the direction of opera for which their voices will never be suitable.



Joshua Habermann

The growth in popularity of early music and the styles of singing now considered appropriate for that genre have made a huge impact. Long may this trend continue! In parallel, I see teachers of the few student singers who do have the essential golden cords to be successful in opera once again emphasizing the beauty and power of the great voices of the first half of the twentieth century for whom vibrato meant shimmering vibrancy rather than an overdeveloped wobble!

**Johnson:** The level of professional choral music is growing and improving consistently, and I fully expect that the results of this will be that a great many more people in more cities will be able to hear choral music making at this level. This is really great news for choral music and for all of us who love it. There has been a dramatic shift in the last twenty years as many more composers are being drawn to write choral works. Some who had never thought to compose for choirs are beginning to write choral music because the quality of performances has been consistently rising through the years and the results are satisfying.

**Habermann:** We have seen a growth in the number and variety of opportunities for singers, and I would expect that to continue. Whereas in the past singers trained specifically with the operatic model in mind, thanks to the early music movement and also the growth in quality and number of professional choral ensembles, now there are

# OF PROFESSIONAL SINGING

more options. Those singers who have the skills to take advantage of the variety of performance opportunities will be better positioned than their peers who put all their eggs in one basket.

**Gomez:** I'm excited by the possibility of big changes in the way classical singers are trained and treated in the United States. In my last lesson of my master's degree with wonderful teacher and mentor Sanford Sylvan, I was basically told, "This is yours now." The idea that young professionals are inheriting the classical music-making scene is so exciting and such a huge responsibility. We are responsible for serving as examples of informed, articulate, creative musicians whose instrument happens to be voice; we as teachers can also entirely change the stereotypes so often tied to voice faculty. These are my own big dreams for change, specific to my corner of the field. Otherwise, I do think it will become more of a challenge to travel constantly for work: commuting twice a week in a plane is, after all, not an especially sustainable way of life. I believe that new venues and opportunities for presenting fusion musical/performance experiences will continue to flourish. New York City used to be the place for young artists to live cheaply among likeminded artists; it's not as financially feasible now. There will continue to be shifts in the way performers make a living, but that has always been true and will continue to be true, as no single method functions forever without adjustment.

**Lewek:** This is a tough question. It is a controversial question. To be honest, I just have no idea. The landscape of this business, especially in the United States, is so rocky: companies closing, companies fighting unions, unions fighting companies, pay cuts, cancellations. I'd rather answer the question, "What changes do you *hope* to see happen in music over the next fifty years?" To which I would reply, today we need to start educating young people in music so that fifty years from now the earth will be filled with adults who have had enough exposure to all kinds of music so that they can make informed, personal decisions on what genres of music with which they want to enrich their lives.

**O'Connor:** This is definitely hard to say. I sing a lot of new music, and I love collaborating with composers and

giving my insight. I personally prefer to hear music with a melody. I believe that many more electronic elements will come in to play, but we have to embrace them. I have done many pieces that are amplified and have been criticized because of this. However, I find it liberating because I am not worried about projecting. I can create many more colors without worrying about the size of my voice. Change is coming, and we have to adapt. Divas are far and few between nowadays, and there is a reason for that.

**Stegall:** I believe the next few decades will see a significant increase in public interest in new compositions. Music has been used throughout history to make political and social statements in profound ways. Whenever a people need a voice, whenever a larger audience needs to be reached with a message of hope and change, music will be there. Music is the language that artists use when spoken word is not enough or not allowed. Music speaks to a universal audience in a language far more sophisticated, flexible, and communal than any other. New music will be a vehicle for necessary communication. All positive change starts with communication, and nothing communicates like music.

**Burton:** I'm not sure, because I haven't been in the field for a long time. I assume that with the global financial challenges, we'll need to be even more creative to come up with new ways of supporting ourselves as full-time musicians. I assume technology will play a huge role through music production and social media.

**How can conductors teaching in university schools of music or conservatories better prepare young singers to have fulfilling and profitable careers in the field?**

**Halsey:** Collegiate conductors must be aware of what is required of singers in the professional world.

**Carrington:** Conductors should challenge and foster the musicianship of their voice students, train them (oblige them!) to be as quick and as responsive as instrumentalists. They should not hesitate to be as demanding as a Julian Wachner in New York, a John Eliot Gardiner in London, or a Freda Bernius in Stuttgart! Traditional choral

# THE CHANGING PARADIGM

pedagogy has its limits, and those need to be breached to train singers to be ready for anything and not always in the right and expected order.

**Johnson:** Conductors can expose young singers to the many opportunities available when seeking to develop a career that includes a broad range of singing experiences. Singers should be encouraged to seek out coaching and teaching from pedagogues who are experienced in this broader spectrum of the art and who can help prepare them for the rigors of this kind of musical life. Also, a professional training approach provides an extraordinary opportunity for professional formation with distinguished artists.

**Habermann:** High-level ensemble experiences during student years can be an excellent training ground for professional-level work, but the singers have to make the connection rather than seeing them as unrelated experiences. Conductors need to talk to young singers about the opportunities that exist beyond the traditional opera path and help them make the connection between the skills required in the choral experience and undergraduate music curriculum, and those expected in the professional world. An 8:00 a.m. ear training class, for example, can be a tough sell to a college freshman who sees no purpose beyond fulfilling a degree requirement. We have to change that mind-set to make it clear that those skills are the building blocks without which professional employment in music is unlikely.

**Gomez:** I think a conductor's most salient, relevant job to encourage young musicians is to contribute to the conversation about careers in a truly open, supportive manner. It's so, so important for young performers to know that musicians who teach or compose or run volunteer programs or pursue arts administration in addition to (or instead of) their performing are no less valued or needed as members of the musical community. There are so very many ways to make a living in the field, and an obsession with performing and only performing can take away from very viable, meaningful other facets of the larger pursuit. Conductors can encourage young singers to pursue their passions beyond prescribed categories of what they should want or what seems to be glamorous,



Dashon Burton

exciting, or profitable. Aiding students in discovering the reasons why they involve themselves in this field, and how they may best serve one another and connect, is so much more important. No matter what role music will play in a student's life, as a career or hobby (or both, at different times), teachers and conductors can promote fulfillment by demonstrating acceptance of many paths and encouraging flexibility in goal-making.

**Lewek:** Love the music and show that on your face when you are working with young singers. As a singer myself, nothing inspires me more than that. Here's another idea: take one rehearsal a week and just read through new music, challenging the choir of young singers to make music while they are sight-reading. Sing through each selection twice and see how it changes. Tell your choir to communicate with you, the leader, but also with one another and see how awesome a performance you all can give one another. Several things might come from this: better sight-reading skills (I cannot stress enough the importance of this), more individual artistic decision making, more communication between leader and ensemble, more communication between singers within the ensemble, and a low-stress situation in which to experiment.

**O'Connor:** I believe there needs to be a combination of tough love and support. The world is not always kind, and you don't want to go from somewhere where you are completely nourished to the dry Sahara. Find ways to



Kelley O'Connor

challenge singers with different types of music and not just standard repertoire. I have found some of my most liberating vocal moments through singing world premieres because I am not comparing myself to anyone. I am making my own version. I learn so much about my own instrument during this process. Be careful to not give students big roles too early. It really forms bad habits that are almost impossible to erase (at least that is my experience). Let students explore different types of classical music and not just the top twenty arias. Concert music has changed my life, and I wasn't really exposed to it during my college years. I wish that I had found it earlier.

**Stegall:** Collegiate conductors and studio instructors must involve themselves constantly in field research. These mentors are the most important people in the developing musician's life. They are the professionals charged with the responsibility of making students aware of the demands of the actual performing profession; they are often the student's closest link to the profession to which they aspire. Directors of collegiate ensembles must know how professional ensembles function. Sight-reading in rehearsals of top-performing ensembles in a music program should not be tolerated. Musicians must come to rehearsals prepared. Collegiate conductors can help train their students to acclimate to this culture by maintaining similar standards in their own ensembles.

**How can students glean the skills they will need in the professional world from singing in choral ensembles?**

**Halsey:** With good conductors and voice teachers, plus touring and visiting, plus summer schools, bravery, and daring, they should be able to put together a great education *for themselves*. Be constantly questing, asking, listening, and visiting.

**Carrington:** A small one-on-a-part choral ensemble is its own training ground; all the members have to work at the speed of the fastest and not the slowest. There is a built-in culture in an ambitious ensemble that sets its own standard to which all members must aspire. In a choral ensemble it is the responsibility of the conductor/director to create and encourage the same demanding environment, to expect each member to be as responsible and responsive as a one-on-a-part singer or a principle wind or brass player in a chamber orchestra.

**Johnson:** In the best of choral situations, a singer can develop musical and vocal skills individually while at the same time gaining a tremendous amount of artistic development from the collective, shared experience. Since the greatest success in choral music making arrives as a "we," certainly there are so many things that can be learned and understood from creating music within the choral ensemble. "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." There is a certain surrender that takes place when someone commits to contributing their individual voice to the whole. Music speaks so powerfully of its own essence when we, as performers, can get ourselves out of the way and allow the music to speak through us. Choirs are a great place to keep learning this more deeply. For example, the expressive communication of professional choirs lends them power. All of these gorgeous individual voices, with all of their training and experience and their expressive gifts, come together with a shared decision to make music as one. Wow, the potential of this exploration feels endless.

**Habermann:** The ensemble experience offers an opportunity to sing a variety of literature in a variety of ways. Whereas in private voice lessons a student might be

# THE CHANGING PARADIGM

exposed to thirty minutes of music for a jury, or perhaps as much as recital-length program, most choral ensembles cover several times that much music in one semester. Learning to move quickly through that breadth of literature, to work both independently and also with careful listening across a section, is all part of a high-quality choral experience.

For many instrumentalists, the meat and potatoes of their training is building musicianship and competence to get into a great ensemble, most likely an orchestra. I would wager that the percentage of instrumentalists coming out of programs who are gainfully employed in music is much greater than the percentage of singers. This is due, at least in part, to singers' historical focus on solo opera careers, which happens so rarely for so few. It is the equivalent of instrumentalists coming out of programs and expecting to play concerti right away. It may happen for one in a great number, but not for many. Now that there are more opportunities for professional ensemble singing, the next generation of vocalists needs to develop the same skills as the instrumentalists: phenomenal musicianship and the ability to play/sing both individually and in an ensemble.

**Gomez:** Here is one more chance to mention the importance of kindness and the "works well/plays well with others" concept. No singer is an island: even the soloist in recital or in front of an orchestra is absolutely a collaborator. Singing well with others leads, ideally, not just to high-level collaboration in performance, but to a heightened capacity for communication, which translates to nearly every field. Encouraging and facilitating self-expression, communication skills, and human connection in performers and audience members is one of the most basic aims of our profession and manifests itself not only in the professional musician community but in the world at large. We can hope that the necessary components that produce a satisfying, collaborative musical experience will lead by example and encourage young people to pursue their own meaningful contributions to society through music or another pursuit.

**Lewek:** I sang in a lot of professional choirs before my solo career got started. For me, the benefit of this (other than the fact that it was my alternative money-making strategy) was that it was a safe situation for me to explore

lots of different music, sing in the greatest halls in NYC for the first time without the added pressures of being the soloist, improve my language, diction, and sight reading skills, and it also provided networking opportunities and kept me singing. Also, I truly believe that you can't be a successful soloist without knowing how to work with others and communicate with them on stage, and choral singing is a fantastic way to sharpen those instincts.

**O'Connor:** As I touched on earlier, musicianship skills that are necessary to maintaining a high level of our craft are fostered in choirs. I developed my ability to learn music by ear. I can pick up music very quickly because of my time in choir. I learned to go by what I feel and not what I hear, which is another important learning tool and helpful in keeping yourself in check on the road. Choirs also teach us how to work well with others. There are always many different personalities in a choir, and the same goes for orchestras and opera companies.

**Stegall:** Ensemble skills, interpersonal skills, preparation skills, and self-discipline can all be gleaned from singing or playing in collegiate choral ensembles.

**Burton:** Choral ensembles teach you to trust your ears and to always go with the flow! When singing in choral settings, it's almost always the case that you're working with someone else's musical tastes and opinions. Being flexible allows for less personal frustration and in the end can mean a stronger performance if everyone comes to meet in the middle in different aspects. On the other hand, if you have to eloquently and assuredly state your case in a choral setting, you'll be able to do the same to a conductor in a solo setting. In this way, singing in an ensemble helps us express our opinions about music more clearly.

**Please add any additional thoughts that have not been covered above.**

**Carrington:** Choral conductors should test their own ears and those of their singers by dispensing with the piano at all times and by steady and consistent use of musical exercises to train the ears of their singers at the beginning of every rehearsal. These should not follow any orderly method but rather be based on real-time chal-



Simon Carrington

lenges: turn a page and drop a minor 6th, for instance! In my experience the biggest handicap young singers carry is a fear of intervals, which slows them down, allows unsteady singing in an attempt to cover for uncertainties, and encourages poor control and loose vibrato. This in turn hampers the singing of a beautiful legato line. Exercises should be different every day, have no particular pattern, and thoroughly and unashamedly encourage friendly competition between choir members to develop speed of response. Singers of all ages and all levels of training will rise to the challenge. It's human nature!

**Habermann:** Other thoughts about university teaching of singers: While I do see the creation of more professional singing opportunities, many of our voice majors are not likely to make a living as singers. This is something that I don't hear talked about much but is undeniably true in many if not most cases. I don't think we should discourage our students from having a dream or going into voice study even if they are not career-bound. Music, including vocal music, is a worthy field of study that teaches discipline and exposes us to extraordinary beauty. It provides meaningful experiences during our collegiate years, which are for many the highlight of their musical lives and not to be underestimated. If anything, by being honest and upfront with our students about the odds of "going pro," we serve them better than by promising, or more often tacitly implying, that there is something waiting for most of them when the truth is that there is not. The same

could certainly be said for the study of literature, history, religion, and so many of the liberal arts. While all noble and worthwhile pursuits, their study enriches the soul, if perhaps not the pocketbook. It seems to me that at the heart of it is a question of disclosure and honesty. Thanks to the incredibly active choral culture that we enjoy in the United States, music, and particularly choral music, can be a meaningful part of a student's life well beyond college. The fact that many of our majors will earn a living doing something else isn't shameful but should also be no secret.

**Lewek:** Finding success in this business is a little bit like treading water in the deep end of a pool for a while before a big race. There are plenty of "right place at the right time" start stories from singers. You have to be ready to follow any and all opportunities that arise, and you have to have the set of tools to make those opportunities blossom into something positive. Treat everything like it might be your big discovery.

**Burton:** For my friends who haven't exactly had a great start from the get-go about any of these individual elements, don't despair! I often talk with my colleagues at educational outreach events about this very topic, and I'm usually getting just as much advice as the participants! That is to say, there is no quick answer, and everyone at every level is struggling in some way. If you're trying to cut back on spending for financial health or late-night post-rehearsal snacking for physical health, it's okay! Take the changes to your habits slowly and breathe all along the way. I myself struggled through organizational and financial issues but over the last several years have had some great breakthroughs. So, even though you're reading our success stories, realize that you already do and will have many of your own!

Take your teaching responsibilities very seriously, and if you don't teach or don't want to teach, do your best to somehow return some of your energies to the field or to the world beyond yourself. Volunteer for an arts organization or even for a homeless organization. You never know what you're going to learn from someone or whom you'll meet. 📌

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