

Carl Swanson, Associate Editor

The Connected Voice Teacher

Kari Ragan



Kari Ragan

SINGERS WHO CHOOSE TO TEACH privately instead of pursuing an academic position experience both rewards and challenges. Private teaching grants independence, but also isolates teachers in a profession that depends upon collaboration and connection. Nevertheless, they can find many opportunities to stay engaged and informed. This article suggests numerous ways in which teachers can connect outside the boundaries of the private voice studio, including continued education, networking, performing, and fostering collegial relationships.

EDUCATE

For centuries, singing technique has been passed down from generation to generation. However, the past few decades have brought about a great deal of advancement in teaching singing through modern studies in voice science. This new information is having a profound impact on current voice pedagogy. It is imperative that voice teachers in both private and university studios continue to expand their knowledge of voice science so as not to perpetuate misconceptions inadvertently passed on from one teacher to the next.

Various organizations provide opportunities for continuing education. NATS, The Voice Foundation, NYSTA, MENC, and Opera America are a few that can lead to remarkable collaborative relationships, not only from the singing perspective, but also from fields of medicine, speech, and drama. It is necessary for the effective voice teacher to be informed and educated beyond his or her collegiate degrees and to continually refresh his or her knowledge. Numerous voice-related organizations offer many opportunities for teachers to develop and stay connected to a larger body of voice professionals.

In my personal experience, I have found three pivotal organizations to be educational, inspirational, and informative. First, our own NATS works at the national, regional, and district levels to create opportunities for expanding our education about voice technique, repertoire, artistry, diction, and numerous other facets of singing. The national conference is essential in reigniting the teacher's spirit and staying current on voice science and voice pedagogy. For instance, the 2008 conference in Nashville presented opportunities for teachers to learn about "Practical Application of Learning Science" while providing specific tools about how these findings can directly inform their teaching. Another class explored the relationship between singing and yoga and its effects on breathing, posture, concentration, and

Journal of Singing, September/October 2010
Volume 67, No. 1, pp. 67-71
Copyright © 2010
National Association of Teachers of Singing

relaxation. There were classes to explore the “Counter-tenor Voice,” “African American Women Composers,” and “Teaching Children to Sing.” It was exciting to note that fifty percent of the classes were dedicated to contemporary commercial music (CCM) pedagogy, which is invaluable to teachers trained mostly in the classical tradition.

Exhibits associated with the national conference also can be enormously informative. These allow the teacher to explore new repertoire and updated computer programs for managing the private voice studio. Topics include how to manage the financial aspect of a voice studio, how to manage the student’s practice time, how to track repertoire assignments, and how to discover creative ways to stay organized. One also found opportunity to experience new technology for the private voice studio such as Voce Vista™, a hardware/software product used for analyzing the singing voice through real-time spectrum analysis and electroglottograph.

In addition to the national conferences, local NATS chapters frequently plan exciting workshops and events. Participation ensures not only further learning opportunities, but a chance for collegial interaction that is crucial for staying connected.

Second, NYSTA (New York Singing Teachers Association), the oldest professional association for singing teachers and voice professionals, is a rich resource for expanding or refreshing knowledge of the singing voice—and you do not need live in New York to benefit. Of particular significance is their Professional Development Program, an essential five-course series that covers anatomy, acoustics, voice health, repertoire, and comparative pedagogy. There are three ways to participate in NYSTA’s PDP course. If you live in the Tri-State area, classes can be taken in person. However, those living out of state can take courses via real-time webinar online or on demand at your convenience. Additionally, they have a newsletter called *VOICEPrints* with important articles on a wide range of topics, as well as an online community forum. Having recently joined this organization and personally taken the Professional Development Series, I can attest to its enormous value, with positive effects on my teaching. The anatomy and acoustics courses in particular have informed my teaching by giving me a current language to support what I already instinctually learned from great teachers. If you are a voice teacher who has

not taken a pedagogy course in the past decade, the webinar is a great place to start. Dr. Scott McCoy, NATS Past President, currently teaches the anatomy and acoustics courses, ably communicating these complicated topics and relating them to our practical needs.

Third, The Voice Foundation is a unique resource, especially for those willing to venture outside the basics of pedagogy. Affiliated singing teachers will become acquainted with other voice professionals, including otolaryngologists, speech therapists, and speech-language pathologists. The national organization has several local chapters open to membership, each offering meaningful topics for discussion. Recent agenda items at the newly formed Northwest Chapter in Seattle, for example, have included “Reflux,” “The Injured Singer,” “The Irritable Larynx,” “Birdsong,” “Breathing and Emotion,” “The Challenge of Choral Directing,” and “The Transgender Voice.” In January 2009, the Northwest Chapter combined forces with the Northwest Academy of Otolaryngology; medical doctors, speech therapists, and voice teachers discussed “Vocal Fold Paralysis” and “Making Sense of Glottic Injectables.” Presentations included numerous slides of vocal fold hemorrhages and nodules, while doctors discussed each prognosis and approach from both the medical perspective and that of voice teachers. This type of interdisciplinary collaboration is invaluable for the voice teacher who wants to expand his or her knowledge about the function and care of the voice and its application in the studio. As a member of The Voice Foundation, I have found it extremely rewarding working with colleagues who share my passion about the voice while working in a different specialty. Due to the increase in interdisciplinary work with my students the past several years, these relationships have become invaluable. The generosity of the otolaryngologists and speech therapists and their desire to work closely with my studio have immeasurably informed my teaching.

A unique aspect of the private voice studio is a diversity of students. Our studios incorporate the child singer, the avocational adult, the teenager with modest to high aspirations, and the emerging professional. Their musical interests often cross several genres; thus, it is essential that the private voice teacher, who accepts a variety of students, is proficient in all genres being taught. It is no longer acceptable to simply apply classical technique

to all styles of music and dismissively insist that is the only healthy and viable option. As a classically trained singer, I initially experienced a great deal of confusion when teaching music theater, specifically belting. However, my introduction to CCM through the NATS organization over the past several years has informed my teaching in all genres, has encouraged my exploration of current voice science, and updated my teaching methods. As a result, I have a more in-depth knowledge of the singing voice. Now having had several years of direct application of this “new” technique, I can affirm it has indeed transformed my teaching for both classical and CCM students.

Certainly, we must all continue our own pedagogic studies as both a teacher and singer. One obviously would not consider consulting a doctor who had done nothing to continue his education since graduating from medical school. Several other professions require their members to maintain certification by attending a certain number of hours of continued studies. Should we as voice teachers do less?

ASSOCIATE

The connected voice teacher can benefit not only from participating in educational programs provided by voice-related organizations, but also by developing broad associations for mutual benefit. Meetings and events of these diverse organizations provide a fine starting point for networking opportunities. At both district and national levels, teachers can reconnect with past colleagues from their collegiate and performing years to develop new collegial relationships. This can lead in turn to new affiliations with fellow teachers who have developed a variety of specialties. Developing relationships with one’s colleagues creates opportunities for continued learning through simple conversations or a more proactive approach by organizing an event, workshop, or master class.

Start by exploring within the local NATS chapter to find colleagues’ special interests and education. For example, in the Seattle area we have a strong organization of early music specialists; therefore, our Puget Sound NATS chapter arranged a workshop on Baroque ornamentation. Because I recently had the wonderfully unique experience of singing with a lutenist, a future workshop for my studio will have students prepare a song from the

Renaissance or Baroque era. They will then perform this piece in a master class with a lutenist who will coach them on the declamatory style specific to that genre. Does a fellow member specialize in Spanish music? Students might enjoy learning songs by Manuel de Falla, Enrique Granados, or Fernando Obradors, and performing with a Spanish guitar. If you are a female teacher with many male singers, bringing in a trusted male colleague for the men in your studio might be an informative occasion for both you and the students. Recently, I had a friend in town singing with Seattle Opera who excels at acting, so I arranged for her to give coachings on how to bring a song to life during voice lessons. The students and I both benefited from this special opportunity for that week’s lessons, and my colleague and I enjoyed collaborating as teachers. Additionally, many in our chapter have developed a special relationship with Robert Edwin, a leading CCM pedagogue; we bring Robert to Seattle at least once a year for workshops, master classes, and private lessons to expand our understanding of this vocal style and technique. Possibilities are endless in the variety of master classes one could organize, especially if strong associations are made with other artists in the community.

As an interdisciplinary venture, I recently scheduled a workshop at the offices of a speech therapist with whom I frequently collaborate. The topic was “Good Vocal Health,” and was attended by students who are avocational singers, emerging professionals, and teenagers. She began by distributing several handouts on the care of the singing voice and reviewing basic laryngeal anatomy. There was some focus on the speaking voice with the goal of optimal voice health for everyone, including the well trained singer. The teenagers were profoundly impacted by the videostroboscopies of vocal folds showing nodules that had developed from voice abuse, in particular a video of a cheerleader who developed severe nodules and hoarseness from misuse. Next, the speech therapist introduced the singers to her equipment, called SonaSpeech, to demonstrate how she manages an initial evaluation of the average speaking pitch frequency, phonation time, rate of perturbation, voice breaks, and voice volume averages. She then discussed what course of treatment might be used for a singer that presents with a problematic speaking voice and how that can affect the long-term success of a singer.

What about connections within the local music community? There is a wealth of resources outside the voice teacher community for developing productive relationships. For instance, I arrange for students to attend two or three productions a year of Seattle Opera performances at a significantly discounted rate. It is particularly fun when I have a friend and colleague either conducting or in the cast of a particular production, as we arrange a backstage visit after the opera performance. For a music theater experience, the nationally acclaimed Fifth Avenue Theatre offers a similar discounted rate. Organizing attendance at an opera or music theater production for the voice studio at an affordable rate might provide a rare opportunity for a young singer to attend a professional level production, the long-term impact of which cannot be underestimated.

Making associations can open doors for both student and teacher for further connections. In particular, since many young singers in private study would like a performing outlet beyond their school choral program, there often is a local company that offers workshops, classes, and performances specifically for the teenager. In a suburb of Seattle, we have a terrific company called Issaquah Village Theatre. Within their professional theater company is a program called KIDSTAGE that is uniquely designed to use theater to build critical life skills in their participants. They offer year-round classes in singing, dancing, acting, and audition preparation, as well as quality musical productions. The benefit of having this type of outlet for my singers' talents is immense. It keeps them inspired and engaged in their singing lessons, and gives them stage experience. Additionally, it has provided me further opportunities for collaborative relationships as we have been able to utilize each other's expertise. Specifically, I recently enjoyed organizing a monologue workshop with the KIDSTAGE director for my students. Since this aspect is often outside the training of many voice teachers, it was helpful for my students to learn about monologue preparation and execution.

Summer months are an opportune time to develop new programs. Several years ago I began an annual summer performance workshop. I wanted to give students more opportunities to perform while making certain they were incorporating good voice technique. One of the greatest rewards of this workshop has been collaborat-

ing with a male colleague who brings a different style and expertise to the program. The students enjoy witnessing this collegial process and having a trusted outside source. My colleague and I select a group of twenty singers; music is assigned, learned, and memorized prior to the workshop, and the week is spent staging scenes culminating in a performance on the final night. The original intent of this workshop was to be able to provide vocal guidance in the midst of staging so as to incorporate the private lesson into the performance process. Additionally, it can be an exciting way to expose students to new ideas and provide variety for the teacher and student from weekly studio lessons.

As singers we learn early about the power of networking. These same principles apply to the connected private voice studio. We are often called upon to adjudicate for other NATS chapters, MENC, local universities, and numerous other festivals. These experiences rescue the private voice teacher from isolation and provide opportunities for further collaboration. Furthermore, one never knows what other circumstances and connections networking may create. For instance, recently I adjudicated our state competition and made connections with voice teachers across the state. As a result, two universities are planning master classes for me to present.

Finally, most voice teachers consider themselves, first and foremost, performers. Yet it is easy to become so focused on the business of running a private voice studio that the performance aspect of our career is neglected. Continuing to create performance opportunities will encourage teachers to further their own voice pedagogy, broaden their musical experience, and collaborate further.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative that private voice teachers remain connected to educational and scientific developments, the teaching profession, and their colleagues, not only for continued growth as teachers, but also to prevent isolation. In the past two years I have had the privilege of attending master classes with Marvin Keenze, Jeanette LoVetri, and Robert Edwin; earned NYSTA's Distinguished Voice Professional by completing a five-course professional development series via webinar; attended the Teaching Men to Sing workshop at Indiana University

where I had the opportunity to learn from Paul Kiesgen among other recognized pedagogues; begun the process of becoming a Wicklund Certified Singing Voice Specialist by attending the first of three levels of training with Dr. Karen Wicklund; earned Level I Certification with the Somatic Voicework (sm)/ The LoVetri Method with Jeanette LoVetri; observed at the clinics of three otolaryngologists who specialize in voice; organized workshops on monologue preparation and vocal health; attended numerous workshops, master classes and meetings through the Northwest Voice Foundation Chapter and Puget Sound NATS Chapter; attended the NATS National Conferences in both Nashville and Salt Lake City; given numerous master classes and workshops throughout the Pacific Northwest in addition to adjudicating several competitions; and read numerous books and articles, including *Journal of Singing*, *Journal of Voice*, and *Classical Singer Magazine*. I am so grateful for the wealth of experience, expertise, and knowledge my colleagues have shared, especially those who began exploring voice science many years ago. My hope is that by continuing to invest in my education and by collabo-

rating and connecting with colleagues and organizations, I continue to both inspire and be inspired for the betterment of my teaching.

Soprano **Kari Ragan** holds degrees from Indiana University (BM, MM) and the University of Washington (DMA). Dr. Ragan was the 2009 recipient of the NATS Pedagogy Award, and as a Singing Voice Specialist (SVS) participated in a panel on voice disorders at the 2010 NATS National Conference. Her article "Intubation Considerations for Singers" was recently published in NYSTA's *VOICEPrints*. Although her primary training, performing, and teaching are in the classical genre, she has additionally specialized in CCM pedagogy. She is a frequent performer, adjudicator, and clinician throughout the Pacific Northwest. Dr. Ragan is a member of the Northwest Chapter of The Voice Foundation, NYSTA, Northwest Artists, and recently served on the board of the Puget Sound NATS Chapter.

As an active performer she has sung with such companies as Seattle Opera, Spokane Opera, Fort Collins Symphony, Helena Symphony, Washington East Opera, Spokane Symphony, Lyric Opera Northwest, and Opera Idaho, among others. In addition, she is a frequent recitalist, having recently presented a series of concerts throughout the Northwest, with Maestro Dean Williamson at the piano. She has been recognized as the Regional finalist for the Metropolitan National Council Competition and the MacCallister Competition.

PUBLICATION DEADLINES

Vol. 67 No. 1	Vol. 67 No. 2	Vol. 67 No. 3	Vol. 67 No. 4	Vol. 67 No. 5
Sept/Oct 2010	Nov/Dec 2010	Jan/Feb 2011	Mar/Apr 2011	May/June 2011

Article manuscripts should be submitted directly to the Editor-in-Chief. All manuscripts are evaluated by the Editorial Board. Decision to publish rests with the Editor-in-Chief. The deadlines published here refer to articles that have already been accepted for publication.

Features and Reviews by Continuing Contributors

01 May 2010	01 July 2010	01 Sept 2010	01 Nov 2010	01 Jan 2011
-------------	--------------	--------------	-------------	-------------

Submission of Advertisements

01 July 2010	01 Sept 2010	01 Nov 2010	01 Jan 2011	01 Mar 2011
--------------	--------------	-------------	-------------	-------------

Issue to be placed in mail approximately

03 Sept 2010	03 Nov 2010	04 Jan 2011	05 Mar 2011	05 May 2011
--------------	-------------	-------------	-------------	-------------

Issue to be received by subscribers approximately

17 Sept 2010	17 Nov 2010	18 Jan 2011	19 Mar 2011	19 May 2011
--------------	-------------	-------------	-------------	-------------

(Dates of delivery may vary depending upon local office policies.)