Norman Spivey

Building Bridges: Paths to a Multifaceted Career

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Over the last year I've written in these columns about my background with NATS, highlighted activities at the chapter and the national levels, and urged members to support the NATS Foundation and to become involved in service to the Association. In the coming issues I'd like to offer thoughts about continuing to develop as teachers, revisit our ethical responsibilities, look at changes in student auditions, and feature those who work behind the scenes in NATS. Here we go!

I want to thank Past President Kathryn Proctor Duax for inviting me to speak at the 2015 NATS Intern Program. In preparing what I would say to these young teachers, it occurred to me that those remarks might also be something to share here, and that constitutes the remainder of this column.

MY OWN JOURNEY

Back in my student days we didn't have the Intern Program. We didn't even have pedagogy degrees. And we certainly didn't have training in nonclassical styles. Thank goodness, it's *your* day!

What I'd like to share with you today is a little of my own journey. I remember what it was like to be a young teacher, and looking back, I can see the tremendous benefits of having continued to learn and evolve. I'll touch on working in academia, having a private studio, teaching classical and music theater singing, and how performance can transition between a traditional and a more updated framework. I'll also want to talk about staying engaged with NATS and the potential for giving back.

So, how many of you consider yourselves collegiate voice teachers? Private voice teachers? And within those groups, how many focus primarily on classical styles? On other styles? Anybody interested in crossing over and embracing another side? How about we build a bridge?

I imagine that my musical formation was probably similar to many of you—I grew up singing in choir at school and at church, I participated in community theater, I knew the music on the radio and television, I tried my best to learn piano, and I played the soundtracks to the classic music theater canon. So when I got to undergraduate school it seemed like I had a whole new world of art music and classical technique to explore.

When I think about my behavior as a student, I can see that I was already a teacher in training—I just didn't have a name for it back then. We didn't have soundproofed practice rooms; we had a hallway full of cacophony. I would hear that familiar aria from that famous opera or that incredible song and

Journal of Singing, September/October 2015
Volume 72, No. 1, pp. 1–5

think, "I've got to know more." I was particularly drawn to the girls' voices—maybe because they had so much to teach me. Their sound was unlike mine, they sang all of this different repertoire . . . and they were pretty. I'd go into their practice rooms and ask about their singing. How is it that your high notes are so easy? How do you make that long phrase work? You want me to play the accompaniment? (More about the importance of piano later . . .) What is this piece about? Really, you can trill? My friends were very patient. But little by little I grew, and as I grew I had more information and less fear.

While my classroom pedagogy study was limited (in undergraduate class I learned Vennard, and later I studied comparative pedagogy with John Large), I began to put more names to more things. I kept reading, I kept listening, and I kept asking. As I continued my own training, I felt a growing affinity and a pull toward French art song. It wasn't so much that I knew the language—believe me!—it was that the repertoire felt like a match, vocally and aesthetically. After graduate school I was fortunate enough to have a Fulbright grant to Paris, where I learned from a generation of great French singers—Souzay, Crespin, Mesplé, Bacquier. I stayed for several years, paying my rent with oratorio and concert work, and, maybe more important, I was able to be an apprentice of the sights and sounds of the language and culture.

When I moved back to the U.S., it was to begin teaching at a university. I was delighted with this next step—after all, I had been preparing for this moment for a long time. What was daunting, however, was that this first job included applied voice students along with the triple threat of lyric diction, vocal literature, *and* pedagogy. Not long after, when I came to my present position, my load became more specialized with applied teaching and voice pedagogy, which has been a wonderful combination ever since.

WORKING IN ACADEMIA

My first decade in academia was as a traditional classical singer, teacher, and pedagogue. As our program in music theater continued to grow, and as I kept being interested in what my colleagues were doing, I was brought back to all of the soundtracks I grew up listening to and the shows I had been in. The girls in undergraduate school had taught me about Pamina and Baby Doe; now I needed to get better acquainted with Nellie Forbush and Elphaba. The journey opened me up to new thoughts, new sounds, new methods, new repertoire, and new partnerships. And it brought with it additional training. I took theater classes and studied acting at my university, and explored my own singing with music theater voice lessons in New York. My traditional recitals morphed into cabarets, which I'll come back to. I performed new roles, including Harold Hill and all the dads you can name. I was, and continue to be, a student of the genre (which I think is a fundamental tenet of building the bridge). The listening, observing, and doing influenced my work in the studio, making it richer, and enhancing what I could offer students. Teaching classical and music theater singing now seems like a perfectly normal thing to do. At Penn State we affectionately refer to this as "Bel Canto/Can Belto"; it's a workshop, but it's also a philosophy that embraces working in both styles as a way to build instruments that are stronger and more resilient. Hopefully, we are building bridges by acknowledging that the road goes both ways.

Those of you on the tenure track may be wondering how crossing over like this might impact your dossier, pondering if it's ok to do things outside of the box. I would hope that you'd all be fully supported in adding on knowledge and abilities. I have seen it happen, though, that colleagues sometimes don't know how to react when a teacher branches out. Maybe they wonder if there will be some classical amnesia, or an erosion of what came before. Perhaps they are unsure if the new skills will be solid enough. Of course, it's perfectly fine to specialize—we certainly need that too. But I have found that stretching beyond one's comfort zone often helps more fully inform what you already know, and creates flexibility, empathy, and greater understanding. In any event, every institution will have its own idiosyncrasies, and hopefully its own system of mentoring. Something I'm pleased to draw your attention to in this regard is a paper we worked on last year in the American Academy of Teachers of Singing, "Research and Creative Accomplishment in Promotion and Tenure: A Realistic Look at Expectations for Teachers of Singing in Academia." For those of you going through this process, I encourage you to have a look at our work. It might help clarify how a singing teacher's career may differ from

our instrumental colleagues, and may serve as a lifeline as you build your bridge. The paper was published in the November/December 2014 *Journal of Singing* and is also available on the AATS website.

While we're on the topic of academia, some of the best things about this career include long continuity in the work with students, a regular salary, retirement and health care benefits, possibilities of institutional funding (though dwindling) to support presentation of work off campus, flexibility in terms of scheduling, a curriculum that supports students in their work (including diction, aural skills, theory, history, literature, piano, and ensembles), and maybe, most important (and potentially most challenging), a built-in network of colleagues. There are also moments when it seems like there is endless paperwork, advising, committees, meetings, and the like, but all in all it's quite wonderful work.

HAVING A PRIVATE STUDIO

So much for my day job. My second job is running a private studio. For many years when my children were young I didn't maintain an independent studio, choosing instead to be as present as I could in their growing up. Over the last few years, as my youngest has been in high school, it seemed like the perfect time to begin. With a few referrals and word of mouth, the studio has quickly grown to capacity. I felt that I had a lot to offer the students, but a different demographic, of course, brings with it the need for a different skill set. I've learned how to change my vocabulary for the very young or very novice, have become the resident theory and aural skills teacher, and have turned lesson plans upside down because of the varied goals of the students. It also became clear that studio policies needed to differ from the materials I put together at the university.

What I don't think I was expecting, however, was how much I would love the work. This seems to be a common theme when I talk to others who teach independently. We tend to agree that the best thing about private teaching is almost everything. The work is constantly varied and very pure, it's just about the work with the student in front of you. There is no accreditation or promotion and tenure or shared governance. There is as much flexibility as you like (though of course with that freedom comes the foible of "no work, no pay"). With a home studio it's a delight to have so much music in the house. Having students in so many of the shows and concerts in town, I feel more and more invested in the community and its musical life. I'm thankful to have adequate piano skills, because I know my work in the private studio would be much more challenging without it. Something that is trickier without the infrastructure of the School of Music is providing performing opportunities for private students. Even so, we get together for studio recitals every semester, and I've had nine high school seniors give solo recitals over the past several years. It's great to see the students taking delight in the work, and I can't believe how often I get messages from parents with gratitude for what they see the work bringing to their son or daughter. What they may not know is how the gratitude comes full circle.

INVOLVEMENT WITH NATS

Holding office in NATS is my third job. Like any volunteer service we engage in, the rewards come because you believe deeply in the mission of the work. The best things about NATS are that it is an association that sets out to help us in our work, to bring us together, to support our students as they grow and develop, to foster continuing education, and to move the profession forward. It's about more than just me.

I hope each of you will stay engaged in NATS. The Intern Program is one of our crown jewels. It has been a generous gift. How will you give back? You can continue your membership and stay engaged. Attend local meetings and adjudicate auditions. Bring students to activities. Be a good colleague. Reach out to teachers in your community. Attend workshops and conferences. Submit an article to the *Journal of Singing*, or apply to present your work at a conference. Volunteer for service to a committee or for an office. Give to the NATS Foundation. Your generosity will come back to enrich all of us.

BUILDING BRIDGES IN PERFORMANCE

So, back to updating performance . . . For many years I sang traditional recitals, and then I began to branch out into a more informal kind of cabaret. What I did at first may not have been entirely idiomatic, but as I've often said, the best way to start is to start. I sought out music

theater colleagues and students to perform with me, I interspersed programs with classical and music theater repertoire, I worked with pianists who knew the style. I wrote patter. I tried to be engaging.

After several seasons of this I wondered what the future might be. My wife encouraged me to return to my kinship with French art song, and think about partnering this with some sort of theatrical presentation—possibly on Reynaldo Hahn, since he had such a rich circle of friends, and she liked the way I sang his music. I talked to actor colleagues who had created one-person shows, and I worked with a playwright who wrote a fantastically voracious work on Hahn's life and loves. Wouldn't you know that he wasn't only a composer, he was also a music critic, conductor, singer, and . . . pianist—a *bona fide* Renaissance man. The script had all the biography in there, but ultimately it was much more about relationships, love gone unspoken, and the unfinished business of life we all leave behind. Not only would I be playing Hahn, the *bon vivant* and darling of the salon, but I would sing in my most far reaching soprano as Marguerite in *Faust*, and play Sarah Bernhardt's highest drama *en français*, all the while moving the story forward with his songs, accompanying myself at the keyboard. I certainly discovered I couldn't be too worried about my singing.

My piano skills were not bad, but I knew I really needed to build a bridge to go from playing vocalises in the studio to accompanying art songs that I also happened to be singing. I worked with a coach, and if there was a place to perform, I was there. I had to figure out this different performance medium. I debuted my new skills at a *soirée* with friends. Then there was a retirement party, a school-wide performance hour, a salon evening, a piano colleague's studio class, our high school summer music camp, a faculty *potpourri*. My captive audience never tired of hearing me play and sing these lovely pieces. Ultimately I sensed that I needed to take the safety net away and decided to perform it all from memory. It was terrifying and rewarding. I filled a sabbatical semester taking the show on the road, fulfilling multiple roles, including booking agent, stage manager, props master, and dresser. It made production meetings and musical rehearsals easier to schedule, but it may have brought the notion of a "one-man show" to a whole new level. The tour culminated with performances at the NATS conference in Salt Lake City and the 2010 Intern Program. Who could ask for more receptive audiences than that!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Speaking of building bridges, let me tell you about one of the things I love best about our work. We spend our days with music inspired by monumental passions, with poetry that helps us understand what it means to be human, how we are part of nature, how we wrestle with the eternal. The human condition is on the pages we study and sing. The material goes beyond specifics of culture, gender, and race to let us recognize the bonds we all share. We understand that young love is the same whether it happens on another continent or in another century. Romeo and Juliette transcend the stage—whether they are spoken in Shakespeare, sung in Gounod, or belted in Bernstein. We know them. People are people.

I realize that in many ways my views are that of a cockeyed optimist, but I don't see that as a bad thing. How can our glasses not be overflowing when we spend our days with Mozart and Schumann and Sondheim? Claude Debussy and Jason Robert Brown are my teachers—they make sure I pay close attention to the ink on the page. Paul Verlaine, Langston Hughes, and Emily Dickinson are my counselors—they open my heart.

Remember that learning is life-long. You never get all the way there. I was recently reminded of this at the 2015 NATS winter workshop. I expected to go as a representative of the Association, but what I came to learn was what a student I can still be. The presenters opened me to so many ideas, new information, and creative ways of working in the studio. They helped me build new bridges.

Each of you already does what you do at a very high level or you wouldn't be here. But what you are developing in this program, in addition to building your teaching skills, is a sense of community. That's something that goes beyond the studio—it's skill-building-for-a-lifetime. Your colleagues, whether in academia or among independent studio teachers, are a powerful network and can help mirror your strengths and flaws.

It can be a vulnerable thing to admit you don't know everything all of the time, or to recognize that someone

else might do something better. Honoring what others bring to the table sounds simple enough, but of course it takes self-confidence, a focus on students, and ongoing communication. Let me encourage you to be generous enough to learn from your colleagues, bold enough to share what you know with others, and humble enough to acknowledge what someone else does well. That is the essence of "we are stronger together."

Here you have been exposed to new ideas and new repertoire, you've made new friends and discovered new mentors. What will you bring back? What will continue to move you forward? Please be in touch and let us know! You are the future. We'll be watching, and continuing to learn from you.

So, in terms of building that bridge, explore what is multifaceted about you. It may be something very different from the path I have had; it may include other styles or methods or who even knows what, but be open to the journey. Keep being a student. Practice the piano. Stay open to the possibilities. And enjoy!

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