

## Confessions of a Conference Ambassador

By Cynthia Vaughn, Associate Editor for Independent Voices

Oh, how I love music conferences! My first conference experience was the Texas Music Educators Association conference my senior year of high school, when I sang with TMEA All-State Choir. Between rehearsals we had special badges to get into the famed Hall of Exhibits. It was like Disney Land for music nerds. Oh, the swag! I got free stuff from booths for college music programs, music touring companies, music publishers, candy distributors, music software companies, music themed jewelry distributors. I remember being ridiculously excited about those branded pencils, note pads, perusal scores, and candy samples. Even now when I attend the national NATS Conference, when I'm not sitting in a session or concert or presenting something, you will find me in the Exhibit Hall, visiting with colleagues, vendors, and publishers. Over the years, some of those conference vendors like Glendower Jones (Classical Vocal Rep), Darin Adams (Appcompanionist), and Ann Baltz (founder Opera Works) have become friends.



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### NATS National Conferences

Since the first year that I joined NATS way back in 1983, I've been to every kind of conference that NATS offers. There is nothing like the large national conferences (now held every other year) — I don't recall ever missing one. It can be a bit overwhelming for first time attendees. Unless you have a clone machine, it's impossible to attend every session since many of the conference break-out sessions are scheduled concurrently. That ensures that there is a wide variety of topics for every audience from independents to academics, from voice science to mindfulness, from classical to popular to gospel to jazz to musical theater and more. My strategy is to prioritize all of the big, combined keynote presentations and pick and choose breakout sessions, knowing that I will miss some great presentations IRL and will have the option to see the videos later in NATS Live Learning Center. I prioritize the people. Between the sessions and the great concerts, I make time to see as many colleagues as I can. I love reminiscing with long time NATS friends as well as meeting new people. My conference survival strategy is to recognize when I've done too much "peopling" and need some alone time. Then I'll hide out in my hotel room for an hour or so

until I'm ready to go again. Be sure to make some time to get out of the hotel and see the city! NATS often plans a couple of outings before the conference starts, but you can also venture on your own during your stay. I try to arrive a day early or stay an extra day just so that I can explore the conference city. When I first started traveling to conferences, I always looked for someone to share a room with because that really helped with expenses. I still look for ways to save money, like skipping the lobby Starbucks and finding a nearby grocery store for room snacks. Yes, the big conferences are expensive, so I start saving between conferences. It's worth it! Highlights of national conferences I've attended include hearing and meeting artists like Renée Fleming, Kelly O'Hara, John Holiday, Stephanie Blythe and Christine Brewer, Zina Goldrich and Marcy Heisler, Florence Birdwell and Florence Henderson. I have heard keynote presentations by such iconic pedagogues as Richard Miller and Johann Sundberg. I return home from each conference with more connections, more books, song books, handouts, flyers, swag, resources, stories, and memories.



Making new friends at the 2022 NATS national conference in Chicago

### NATS Summer and Winter Workshops

For a slower pace, I really enjoy the NATS Summer and Winter Workshops. While the national conferences have a bit of everything for everyone, the workshops focus on one main area of interest with themed programming such as the January 2024 "Art of Collaboration." This workshop at Manhattan School of Music was one of my favorites and included finals of the NATS Artist Awards (NATSAA) and the NATS Musical Theatre Awards. The pace is less hectic, and I found time for lunches with friends and a Broadway and off-Broadway show.

### NATS Regional Conferences

One of the best kept secrets of NATS conferences is the fabulous regional conferences that are held around the country. Several regions, including the Northwest Region (Oregon, Washington, British Columbia) hold amazing



A handful of workshop and conference photos over the years, including trips to Germany and England.



conferences with regional and national presenters. Any NATS member can attend, even if you aren't a member of that region. Follow the regional websites for dates for upcoming conferences to watch for dates for upcoming conferences. It's a great way to see what is happening in our organization across the country. These conferences are often held over a weekend.

### NATS International Conferences and Tours

If you really want to widen your experience, go international! NATS and dozens of other voice teacher organizations around the world entered into a Joint Venture Agreement in 1994 to facilitate the International Congress of Voice Teachers (ICVT). The next ICVT conference will be held in Toronto, Canada, summer 2025. I love all of the NATS conferences, but my very favorite NATS experiences so far have been the relatively recent NATS Transatlantic Pedagogy Tours — to Germany in 2019 and to England in 2023. Imagine traveling with about 20 of your NATS colleagues and having 10 days to totally immerse yourself in the arts, culture, history, and sights of some of the major arts centers in the world. I can't wait to see where we go next!

If you think that NATS is just for students, think again! I hope I've enticed you to think of NATS as personal and professional development for YOU! Take advantage of the many opportunities to travel and attend NATS regional, national, and international events. I hope to see you next June in Knoxville, Tennessee for the 58th Annual NATS National Conference featuring such luminaries as Nicole Robinson, Lawrence Brownlee, Kerrie Obert, Amanda Reckonwith, and Eden Casteel.

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**Cynthia Vaughn**, associate editor for *Independent Voices*, has been a proud NATS member since 1983. She has been active in leadership at the chapter and region levels, and she was an invited master teacher for the 2020 NATS Intern Program (postponed to 2021 due to COVID). Before moving to Norfolk Virginia in 2022, Vaughn retired from Magnolia Music Studio, the multi-teacher studio she founded and directed in Colorado and Washington from 2008 to 2022. Previously, she was on the voice faculty of Colorado State University, and Art Connects International. Vaughn and the late Meribeth Dayme, PhD, co-authored three editions of *"The Singing Book,"* a leading college voice class textbook/anthology. The new 4th edition by Rowman & Littlefield and NATS Books will be available June 1, 2024.



# Are you an “Independent Voice”?

By Cynthia Vaughn, Associate Editor for Independent Voices

**Y**es, I’m talking to you. An “Independent Voices” author can be any voice-related professional who is a NATS member who is not exclusively or predominantly teaching full time at a university/college/conservatory. That includes many, if not most, of my colleagues.

“Independent Voices” authors may include:

- Independent home-studio teachers
- Independent studio teachers with offsite studios in commercial spaces, churches, schools etc.
- Independent voice teachers who teach virtually
- Independent studio teachers with associate teachers or partner teachers
- Independent voice teachers who focus on different types of clients: children, teens, adults, seniors, artists etc.
- Independent voice teachers who specialize in different styles of music: pop, rock, jazz, indie, singer-songwriter, country, RB, classical, musical theater etc.
- Independent multi-teacher studio owners
- Independent voice teachers who work for multi-teacher studios
- Independent voice scholars and researchers
- Independent voice teachers who teach group voice
- Independent voice teachers/content creators who offer courses; author books, blogs or social media content; host YouTube or other online channels; or present workshops in person or online
- Independent voice and style coaches
- Independent singers’ diction coaches
- Independent voice-related business coaches
- Independent coaches for vocal performance practice or performance anxiety
- Independent voice teachers who specialize in mind-body work for singers
- Independent collaborative pianists who work with artists
- Independent composers who collaborate with singers
- Adjunct or part-time academic faculty who also maintain an independent studio
- Retired or former academic teachers who are now teaching independently
- Independent vocalogists
- Choral directors
- K-12 vocal music educators
- Independent SLPs who work with vocalists
- Independent music therapists
- Sacred vocal musicians
- Other?

Any independent NATS member who has something to say or share that may inform, illuminate, or inspire our colleagues is invited to submit an article for consideration.

In this issue of “Independent Voices,” voice teacher/researcher Catherine Kay Brown shares how her voice disorder and vocal struggles have increased her humility, empathy, and self-compassion on her journey to mindfulness. Michelle Latour celebrates the success of The Rehart Gesner Fund, a special scholarship fundraiser for free voice lessons for K-12 music educators. Just when mezzo-soprano Sarah Hamilton had convinced herself that she was a teacher and pedagogue — not a performer, she found unexpected opportunities to sing as a soloist with symphonies and choruses. She learned that performing makes her a better teacher.



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### What’s your story?

“Independent Voices” articles and ideas may be submitted any time; however, the annual submission deadlines are July 1 (fall) and January 1 (spring). Articles may be 1,000 to 4,000 words, preferably first person. Please include a headshot and/or topical photo(s) and a 50-word bio. Articles accepted for (digital) publication will be available in the [public area](#) of [nats.com](#) and can be freely shared online. Email [CynthiaVaughn@icloud.com](mailto:CynthiaVaughn@icloud.com).

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