

How I Met My Mentor: Meribeth (Bunch) Dayme (April 20, 1938 – October 28, 2019)

By Cynthia Vaughn

I don't recall exactly when I first met the esteemed voice pioneer Meribeth Bunch online in the 1990s, but it was in the early days of the VocaList Listserv, a dedicated electronic mailing list for classical singers that was a forerunner of today's forums. In VocaList I recognized the name of Meribeth Bunch, PhD from my graduate school pedagogy text, *Dynamics of The Singing Voice*. I was a bit of a lurker back then, but I was thrilled that my Apple Macintosh Performa could connect me with voice professionals from across the country and world, including Dr. Bunch in London. Never one to shy away from technology, Dr. Bunch later found her way to an America Online voice teachers "chat room" that I had designated for NATS members. The original AOL chatrooms were a bit like Facebook groups and private forums, but there was no feed or notifications, and dial-up connections were the devil. You just dropped into the chatroom hoping someone would be there to talk about singing. Sometimes it was crickets. Other times it was quite lively! Official NATS Chats have since evolved into a sophisticated interactive webcast with host Kari Ragan, but in the early days there was no video—the guest and attendees had to type their questions and comments in real time. Sometimes only a few people joined the chat, but when there were a dozen or so it was almost impossible to follow the conversation thread with everyone "talking" at the same time. When I invited Dr. Bunch to be a guest, she surprised me by immediately accepting and stayed up all night to join us at 2am London time.

Meribeth Bunch and I became casual online acquaintances and I was fascinated by her work in voice science and anatomy and her uniquely holistic approach to performance and the teaching of singing. A pivotal moment in my life was reading Dr. Bunch's 1999 book *Creating Confidence: How to Develop Your Personal Power and Presence*. I read and re-read this slim paperback and it was truly life-changing.



Using my new-found personal power, I asked the editor of *Classical Singer* magazine if I could interview Dr. Bunch about her book. I had been writing for *Classical Singer* for a few years as a feature writer and associate editor, but had stepped away from monthly deadlines to begin a doctoral program at the age of 42. I was terrified at being the "oldest graduate student ever" and Dr. Bunch's book had arrived at exactly the right moment in my life. My former editors gave

me the go-ahead to interview Dr. Bunch as a Contributing Editor. My preference then as now is to conduct interviews via email for accuracy, but Meribeth insisted on speaking to me personally on the phone even though long-distance international calls were expensive. I was shocked when I first heard her voice. I expected a London accent, but I heard a gentle Southern accent from her North Carolina roots. One phone call turned into many phone calls as I learned about her life, career, and the research and spiritual influences that had led her to meld the study of voice science and anatomy with research in the human bio-field and consciousness. My article and interview of Dr. Bunch was published in the April 1999 issue of *Classical Singer* magazine under the title "The Incredible Shrinking Singer: Rebuilding Your Confidence". The article (reprinted here on p. 17) was well-received and Dr. Bunch was pleased that I had captured the essence of her book and had not misquoted her. I recently learned that she had been quoted out of context in the early 1980's by a London tabloid and caused a stir for supposedly criticizing a prominent politician's speaking voice as "weak." *Creating Confidence*, (Kogan Page 1999) is now out of print but can still be purchased online from used book sellers.

After the *Classical Singer* article was published our regular phone calls stopped. Then unexpectedly, I recall a phone call from London one evening in late 1999. It was Meribeth. (We were on a first name basis, by now.) The new music editor at W. W. Norton & Co. had reached out to Meribeth Bunch regarding submitting a proposal for a voice class song anthology and textbook for non-music majors. The editor had worked for another publisher that had decided not

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to publish one of Meribeth Bunch's proposed books (which eventually was published by W.W. Norton as *The Performer's Voice* in 2004). The new editor encouraged Meribeth to submit a proposal for a university voice class book and insisted that she would need a co-author, and offered to send a list of vetted authors. Meribeth said, "No, wait. Before you do that, there is a voice teacher and author in Colorado that I would like to ask. We work very well together and I like the way she writes and thinks." Years later I learned that Meribeth had also consulted a spiritual advisor before asking me to collaborate. It helped that I had years of experience teaching class voice, but Meribeth didn't know that at the time. And that is how a relatively unknown writer ended up co-authoring three editions of a best-selling voice class textbook, *The Singing Book*, with a renowned voice expert and author.

Much of the information from *Creating Confidence* found its way into her later books *The Singing Book* and *The Performers Voice*.

During this time she also began developing *CoreSinging®*, which she described as "a trailblazing approach to Vocal Performance Pedagogy which synthesizes performance, technique and therapy into a joyful new way of teaching and learning to sing, including Eastern concepts, Western traditions, quantum mechanics, and recent studies on consciousness." I had previously visited Meribeth in London for one of her vocal anatomy workshops (I still have the clay larynx!) and in 2010 I traveled to her new home in beautiful Annecy, France for her first *CoreSinging®* Teachers Certification Course—an intensive 45-hour course over 7 days. The course was limited to nine participants and I was the only American. My colleagues were from the UK, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Canada, and Scotland. *CoreSinging®* is an approach that can be applied to many voice methods and our teacher's certification class included university voice faculty, a famous opera singer, a jazz singer, a pop singer, a Feldenkrais practitioner, Estill teachers, and a children's choir director. Except for the fact that we were all women, we were as diverse as could be. This experience in France was a highlight of my life, and inspired me to teach singers of all styles and ability. Later that year, I hosted Meribeth at Magnolia Music Studio in Colorado, her first USA *CoreSinging®* Teachers Certification course. I am

still good friends with everyone in that course. Meribeth, then in her 70's traveled from France to Colorado one more time, before declaring that transatlantic travel was becoming too strenuous for her. She began to create online content and to focus on European and UK introductory courses that were less physically demanding. I assisted with one of her short courses for The Voice Care Network in London in 2013, while we were supervising the accompaniment recordings for the 3rd Edition of *The Singing Book* at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance at University of Greenwich. Though I am twenty years younger than Meribeth, and am now the age that Meribeth was when we first met, I could truly never keep up with her!

In 2016, after 40+ years of living abroad, Meribeth decided to return to the United States to be near her sister and family in California. The move was difficult, but she continued to grow her online courses and found a network of new friends and local business associates. She had spent her entire life forging new paths and starting

over, even legally changing her name in 2004 from Bunch to Dayme, choosing a name that resonated with her literally and figuratively. Her brilliant intellect and generous spirit never dimmed, but her health began to deteriorate the last year of her life. Meribeth had always planned to live to be 96. Exactly 96. However, when her doctors finally diagnosed her with late onset advanced ALS, she texted me that she was "relieved" and that "81 is good." She argued with her doctors, however, that she would need at "least two weeks because she had things to do." She passed away a few days later in hospice with her family and beloved dogs Chip and Muppet nearby.

As news of Meribeth's passing spread, there were hundreds of tributes from around the world. She touched many lives through her teaching, research, books, workshops, and friendships. One of the most profound and touching tributes was by NATS member and editor of NATS "So You Want to Sing" series, Dr. Matthew Hoch. Two days before Meribeth died, Matthew received a package. Knowing Matthew's interest in the work of the late Dr. William Vennard, Meribeth had arranged to have her early papers and work with Dr. Vennard sent to Matthew.

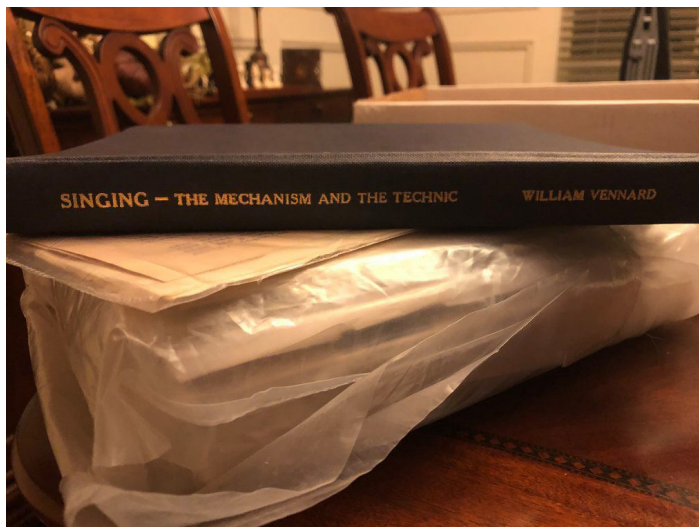


Meribeth Dayme at the NATS National Conference in Las Vegas

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“It is with great sadness that I learn of the passing of Meribeth (Bunch) Dayme (1938–2019). Meribeth’s legacy in the field of voice pedagogy cannot be overstated. She was one of the last students of the legendary William Vennard (1909–1971) at the University of Southern California, where she earned her PhD in 1974. She then went on to earn tenure and the rank



of associate professor at the University of Delaware before leaving the security of academia to continue her research at the Royal College of Surgeons in London on an NIH post-doctoral fellowship. In 1982, she published *Dynamics of the Singing Voice*, which is perhaps the most erudite investigation into the biomechanics of the singing voice published in between Vennard’s *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic* (1967) and Miller’s *The Structure of Singing* (1986).

“Meribeth remained in Europe until 2016, where she built a solid reputation as a pedagogue and clinician in England, France, and Switzerland. During this time, she was named the 2001 winner of the Van Lawrence Award and founded her own methodology, *CoreSinging®*, in 2009. In 2004, she coauthored and published a “basics of singing” book with Cynthia Vaughn titled - simply and appropriately - *The Singing Book*, which quickly became one of the most-used class voice texts in higher education and private studios across the country and beyond.

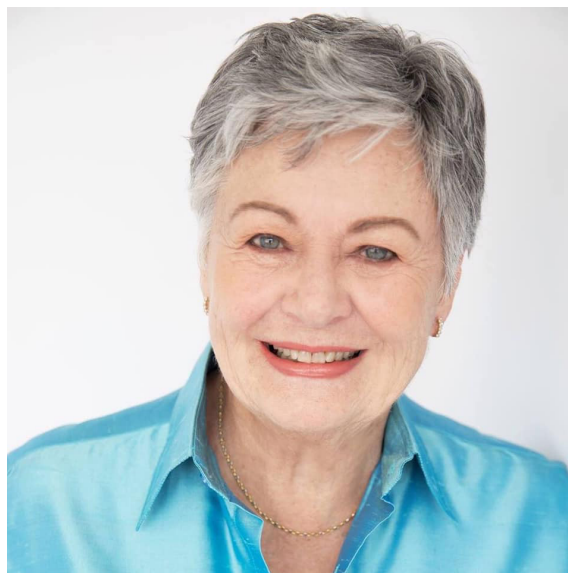
“Perhaps most significant, Meribeth was one of the only scholars of her pedigree and stature who was not afraid to pursue lines of inquiry that were not necessarily in line with the values of the establishment. I know of no other pedagogue, for instance, who has dovetailed the discipline of voice pedagogy with the bioenergy fields of Valerie V. Hunt or Tor Nørretanders’s theories of human consciousness, to name only two of her more recent explorations.

“Meribeth was very kind and generous with her time when I was doing some research on William Vennard in 2017 and 2018. I enjoyed hearing about her experiences under his tutelage, and I was fully aware that I was speaking with one of only a handful of living “primary sources” who could offer firsthand insight into Vennard and his teaching, along with many other interesting anecdotes.

“On Saturday, October 26, the postman left an unexpected box on my front porch. When I opened it, it contained an original 1967 hardcover version of Vennard’s *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic* with the initials “M. A. B.” engraved on the back cover. On the title page was following inscription: “To Meribeth Bunch, with confidence that she will achieve her worthy and unusual ambitions. Cordially, Bill Vennard.” (She certainly did.) The package also contained a rather thick stack of some of Vennard’s research papers, which I assume he passed on to Meribeth before his death during her doctoral studies in 1971. I will certainly “pass them forward” as well when my time comes.

“R.I.P. Meribeth, and thank you. We are so lucky to have known you.” — Matthew Hoch

I miss my friend and mentor every day, but she will be with me in countless ways. At Meribeth’s request and the blessings of her family, I traveled to California in February, 2020 and returned with Meribeth’s archives—papers, books, journals, photos, poetry, musings, newspaper clippings, original *CoreSinging®* materials and more. It is my duty and great honor to keep her work and share her legacy. Thank you for helping me find my true voice.



“Your voice is the sound of your spirit.” — Meribeth Dayme