Sing For Your Lives

By Graham Anduri and Stefanie Kavas Anduri

As musicians, we constantly seek answers to questions about our place in society. Why do we make music? What do we contribute to the world? Why is music important? How do we advocate for music education? What is the purpose of music in our lives, and in our society? As professional singers and professors of voice, we both have known somewhere deep in our souls that music held great importance for us, and for the world, but verbalizing how and why was another matter. It has taken us a long time to identify just why music is so crucial.

Our journey together began fourteen years ago. We met as undergraduates at Colorado State University. We had dreams of living the Bohemian travelling artist life, living on the stages of the world and being constantly immersed in operatic artistry. We both received graduate assistantships at the University of Florida, and then again at the University of Southern Mississippi for our DMAs. We realized that our earlier dreams were far from practical if we were to have a family, and we discovered a love of teaching. We both had our first college teaching jobs at the University of Mobile, teaching adjunct while finishing our dissertations and raising our first child. In 2015 Graham took a chamber choir on tour to Romania where they sang concerts and did workshops for orphanages, schools, churches, after-school programs for disaffected Roma (gypsy) children, nursing homes for disabled youth, and a men's prison. The trip was life-altering in so many ways. Weeks and months went by, and after digesting everything that transpired on the tour, a new sense of purpose for what we do began to emerge.

We both realized that music was about connecting with people. It allowed the choir to connect with inmates who spoke a different language, with disabled children who couldn't move, speak, or feed themselves, and countless others from myriad walks of life. Singing for and with these people erased any perceived divisions or fears. We were reminded that beneath all of our uniqueness, we all share the same fundamental humanity. This was the first big life lesson music taught us.

As we have progressed in our careers as performers and teachers since then, we have discovered that many of the lessons we teach our students to help them sing better are also lessons that have helped us to live more intentionally. We have realized that singing is, in many ways, a reflection of our lives,

Sing For Your Lives workshop, led by Graham Anduri (center)

and how we sing says a lot about how we live. Concepts kept surfacing in voice lessons such as "relinquish control to gain control," or "connection over perfection," and as we meditated on them, we recognized the importance they held in our own lives. We knew we had to take things outside of the studio into a bigger arena. We decided to offer a series of vocal workshops called "Sing For Your Lives!" Each session focused on a different voice/life lesson. Our students ranged in age from teenagers to senior citizens. Among the group members were amateur choral singers, high school aspiring music majors, our own college music majors, fellow voice teachers in the area, and our work colleagues. In this four-part course, we explored some of the life lessons singing has taught us. The lessons we focused on were:

1. Relinquish control to gain control

2. High notes are easy: where your energy goes, your life will follow

3. Let it shine: Let your voice be heard

4. Connection over Perfection: The Singer's life purpose

In each class, we explored the concept of that day through breathing exercises, vocalizes, songs, and discussions. We asked participants to make primal noises, and we were met with unabashed wolf howls, owl hoots, and baritone mating calls, among others. We asked them to scan various parts of their bodies as they sang warm-ups and songs in unison.

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We asked them to become aware of their internal monologue as they sang. This brought awareness to their self-imposed limitations. In our experience, most tension is the result of an emotional reaction. In some cases, singers try to control their voices by over-manipulating their alignment, breathing mechanism, laryngeal position, pharyngeal space/shape, etc. Other times, singers allow their bodies to react to a fear response when they experience a foreign sensation or approach a daunting high note. They might tighten and lock their core muscles, thrust their jaws forward, or retract their tongues to create a sense of control over their voices. Or, they lose sight of the longer phrase lines, and get so hyper-focused on those high notes (read: high-pressure life events) that they push and squeeze for all we are worth in an attempt to make it work just perfectly. This creates a constrained sound at best, or a catastrophic voice crack at worst, which is what we were trying to avoid in the first place! In any case, we usually end up neglecting the rest of the phrase that comes later. If, instead, we sing through the high notes (rather than "hit" them) and sustain them – feed them sustinence (rather than "hold" them) so that that they serve their role within a whole phrase, then we end up with easy, free, beautiful, expressive high notes and wholistic musical phrases.

University singers on tour sing and play with Romanian orphans

Similarly, people often grasp onto a false sense of control in our lives. We try to micromanage each detail of a chosen task, without leaving wiggle room for hurdles in our paths.

Graham Anduri holds a Romanian orphan

When confronted with opportunities, we often choose the safe path and refuse the risk. When we allow stress and fear to guide us, we don't allow for any creativity, cooperation, or serendipity to occur, and we lose sight of that event's place in the grander scheme of things. Each big event is just another chance for us to connect and communicate something important with others. It won't be the last opportunity, and a failed attempt does not constitute failure as a human. In the class, we played a video of Jose Carreras leaving a San Andreas-sized crack in the high note of "Celeste Aida." Most people in the class knew who Carreras was, but no one remembered him for his voice cracking. Rather, they remembered him as one of the Three Tenors – a world class singer who touched millions of ears and hearts. We also remarked on how he recovered the high note and kept singing to the end of the phrase. He wasn't worried about one little high note in the grand scheme of an entire opera, or an entire career. He was singing for connection, not perfection!

The class that we were initially the least excited about, but that ended up being the favorite of many of the participants, was "Let it Shine." We discussed three ways that we have noticed in which people withhold their voices as singers:

1. Shy, or timid singing ("I hope no one hears me!")

2. Swallowed, safe, self-indulgent singing ("I sound great inside my head!")

3. Over-worked, constricted singing ("If I just work a little harder, it will be better!")

All three of these approaches result in some form of inhibited sound that stems from a sense of egoic identification with the sound of one's voice. We want to control our vocal representation of ourselves so that it will be perceived exactly how we want it to be. But again, we get in the way and the thing that we are afraid of doing is what we achieve. When we can relinquish control, and allow that primal, natural sound to come through, it may feel a bit like a wild animal at first, but it comes across so much more honestly and expressively. When we embrace the vulnerability of singing, then we harness the power of singing. In line, we must use our voice to speak up when something needs to be said. We related a story about seeing a man beating his young child with a belt in their front yard, and not stopping to say anything for fear of our own safety. While we of course reported the event to the authorities, we neglected to use our "voices" to act out against a horrific scene of abuse and save a helpless child. It is something that we have both regretted ever since. But the practice of letting our singing voices be heard unabashedly and uninhibitedly (though not necessarily always loudly, as we discussed in class) is a kind of self-improvement practice for using our voices to speak up and speak out when the situation calls for it.

We came into each class session with an outlined course of vocal and life lessons to sing through, discuss, and experience together. And we learned so many more by hearing the stories and the experiences of everyone in the class. The positive response from all who participated was overwhelming, and the immediate outpouring of support and intrigue from friends and colleagues around the country has created a whirlwind of excitement for us. It seems there is a message that is waiting to be relayed about the power and purpose of singing. It is not a message that we created – it has been there all along – but certainly one that we have discovered for ourselves, and one that we want to share with the world. So in response to those early existential questions about why we do music, we now have the following reply: WE SING TO SAVE THE WORLD!

Dr. Stefanie Anduri currently teaches voice at Colorado Mesa University, works as a freelance writer, presents vocal workshops, maintains an active performing career, and raises her two boys along with her husband, Graham. Stefanie has been performing since the age of 7, when she decided she wanted to be an opera singer after singing in the children's chorus of Carmina Burana. *She loves exploring new musical and vocal styles as a means of conveying the myriad facets of the human experience. Her pedagogical approach to singing and teaching aims to get the body out of the way of the soul.*

Dr. Graham Anduri is the Director of Voice Studies at Colorado Mesa University, where he teaches voice, choir, and opera. He is passionate about using music as a vehicle for connecting people and improving himself and society. Graham's career as a performer, director, and conductor has taken him throughout the U.S. and Europe, and has shaped his perspective on the personal, societal, and global importance of music. He lives with his wife, Stefanie, and two boys, Leo and Max in Grand Junction, CO.