

Don't Call Them Seniors: The Joy of Teaching Older Adult Singers

By Cynthia Vaughn, *Inter Nos* Associate Editor

In our youth-centric society, it is good to remember that some of the most interesting people you will ever meet were alive long before you were born. When I opened Magnolia Music Studio, my after-school and evening lesson times quickly filled. I spread the word that I had several day-time lesson spots available for adult students and retirees, and what started as a practical business goal became a passion. I love working with older adult singers! I learn as much from them as they learn from me. While there is no typical older adult student, allow me to introduce you to a few:

Jerry is in his late 70's and had never taken a singing lesson in his life! He plays harmonica in "The Little Known Gospel Band", a bluegrass band of mostly older adults at his church. Jerry had been thinking of doing some back-up singing with the band, but he wanted some help to make his voice stronger. At first, Jerry struggled with pitch and was barely audible. Within a few lessons, he was able to recognize pitch (matching the piano or his harmonica) and brags now that he can "belt out" the hymns at church and he doesn't mind who hears him! He approached his first singing lesson like a chore, but after the second lesson he announced, "Well, that wasn't so bad. In fact, it was sorta fun." He is going to keep practicing on his own and with the band, but he promised, "I'll see you down the road for some more lessons."

Charlotte, 81, recalls the very moment that she decided to take voice lessons again, after a decade's long break in performing. "I saw Tony Bennett on TV singing duets with

Lady Gaga. He sounded great and I thought, 'If he can do it, so can I.'" Charlotte is no novice to vocal lessons or performances. One of her earliest teachers was the late Berton Coffin at the University of Colorado in the 1960s. She has fond memories of Coffin's teaching and his wonderful sense of humor. Over the years, Charlotte continued to sing in choirs and to perform leading roles in Community Theater. Since resuming singing lessons after a twenty-year hiatus, she has performed on student recitals and as a church soloist. "I sound pretty good!" she says matter-of-factly, "I love my weekly lessons."



Jerry (third from left) studies voice with Cynthia Vaughn and plays harmonica in The Little Known Gospel Band.

to prepare. Four years later she is still taking regular singing lessons in Colorado with my colleague Aimee Woods, and performing in studio classes and student recitals.

Sandra, 74, has a great ear for music! She sang in school choirs—"always alto"—and later sang in community choruses. She has fond memories of singing the choruses in Handel's Messiah with the local symphony and community chorus. "I loved all of those moving notes and harmonies." Sandra hadn't sung in public in decades, however, and after

Nora was a contemporary of Bob Dylan and was active in the Jewish folk music movement in the 1960's in New York City. "Oh, the stories I could tell!" she said with a wink. After Nora retired as an engineer (one of the few women in her field at the time), she joined a Unitarian church choir that welcomed singers of all faiths. She decided to sing a solo in the church talent show in 2013 and thought she would take "a few" singing lessons

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some health challenges and cancer surgery, she thought that singing would help her spirits. She wasn't ready to sing with a group yet, so she scheduled some individual singing lessons to see if she'd like it. "I just want to sing for myself. I really really like to sing!" Now she sings for "pure enjoyment" and to build her confidence. She was thrilled when I showed her how to use her "fancy iPhone" to find YouTube karaoke tracks and sing along with big band songs from the Great American Songbook. Her voice range is now lower, due in part to cancer treatments, but she doesn't mind. "I'm a tenor now, so I can sing along with Frank Sinatra in his keys."

Alan, 84, just recorded his first album. "My granddaughter asked me to make a recording and I thought "Why not? I'm not getting any younger." Alan started taking voice lessons about six months before his summer recording sessions. His goal was to get his bass-baritone voice back in shape like it was in his 60's when he regularly sang bass solos with the local oratorio society and sang a leading role in the operetta *El Capitan*. Alan planned the song list for his CD, and he even designed and printed the CD cover and liner notes. He is already planning a fall concert at a local assisted living center and he has re-joined a church choir. "I hadn't sung in six years and a piece of me was missing."



Alan Barnett's goal was to get his bass-baritone voice back.

Teaching older adult students is much the same as teaching younger students. I still teach technique (breathing, alignment etc) and assign repertoire in addition to the songs the students choose. While each older adult student is unique, here are some general suggestions:

1) SIT OR STAND: Always have a chair available for an older adult student to sit or stand as they need or choose. I don't make a big deal about it. I just let them know the chair is there and it's fine to sit at any point. "Don't ask permission. Just have a seat."

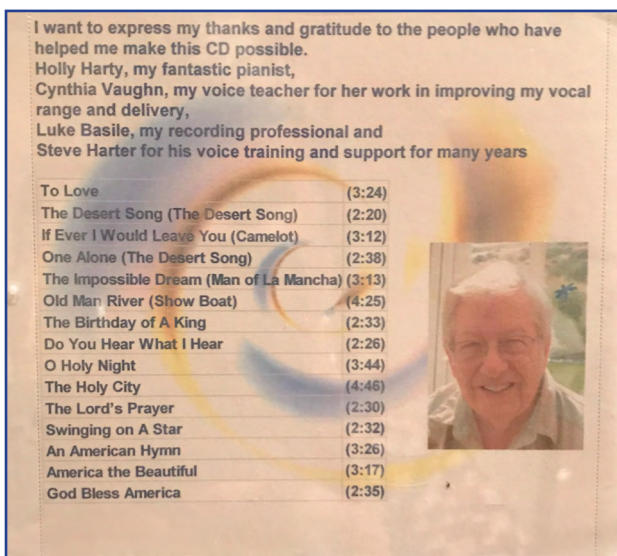
2)TRANPOSE: Most of my older adult students have limited or somewhat lower voice ranges. The ability to transpose songs to fit the singers' range is essential. I have a digital piano that allows me to quickly transpose a song to a more comfortable key. I also have a streaming subscription to [SheetMusicDirect.com](https://www.sheetmusicdirect.com) that gives me quick access to thousands of songs on my iPad and allows me to transpose to any key.

3) USE LARGE PRINT: Sometimes reading music is difficult. I can print out songs in large print or just print the lyrics to songs once they are learned. Memorizing music isn't a big deal. I leave it up to the student whether they want to sing with or without the sheet music. Typically, older songs are easier to sing from memory than something new. That's true for singers of any age!

4) BREATHE!: I tell my older adult students to breathe "wherever and whenever you need to breathe, just take a breath and keep singing." As lessons progress, singers can usually hold notes longer and take fewer breaths, but it's not a big deal.

5) TELL A STORY: Life experience gives older adult singers a perspective that younger singers simply don't have. I have been moved to tears listening to songs like "Send in the Clowns," "Young at Heart," "When October Goes," and "Blame It on My Youth."

CD liner notes for Alan Barnett's "greatest hits" CD. It was recorded at a local recording studio, featuring songs that were requested by family members and friends.



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6) PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES: While some older adults truly only want to sing for themselves (no pressure!) many will eventually be open to the opportunity to sing on a student recital or studio class. Please include your older adult students in intergenerational concerts. A twelve-year old will inspire an eighty-year old, and vice versa!

7) LEARN MORE: There are some excellent resources through NATS publications, *Vocapedia*, and other online sources. Dr. Stan Hill has compiled a helpful list of articles at <http://galachoruses.org/resource-center/singers/aging-voice> including:

- *Singing Strong With an Aging Voice* by Leslie Guinn
- Transcript of "Aging of the Voice" NATS Chat with Dr. Albert Merati
- *Practical Remedies for the Aging Female Voice* by Dr. Patti Peterson

I encourage you to explore teaching older adult singers. Your life will be richer, and, as my student Alan says, "We're not getting any younger!"



Fourteenth Annual NewVoice Educators Symposium at Indiana University *Greetings from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music in Bloomington, Indiana!*

You are cordially invited to attend the Fourteenth Annual [NewVoice Educators Symposium](#) from February 16-17, 2018 (Friday-Saturday) at Indiana University, Bloomington. The symposium, sponsored by Student N.A.T.S. at Indiana University, is designed to provide new and future voice teachers an opportunity to present an academic paper related to singing or teaching voice, and to network in a collaborative, professional, and friendly environment. Attendance at the symposium is open to teachers, students, and singers of all levels, but invitations to present are limited to those with five years or less of full-time, collegiate teaching experience.

The symposium is a free event but does not include travel expenses. If you are interested in presenting, please submit an abstract of your proposed presentation no later than **December 15, 2017**. Please include your name and title, email address, institutional affiliation (if applicable), and contact information with your submission. You will be sent an electronic confirmation of receipt of your abstract, and a notification once presentations have been selected. Please send abstracts, questions, and any other correspondence electronically to:

David Tahere
Vice President; Chairperson, New Voice Educators Symposium
Student N.A.T.S. at Indiana University
dtahere@indiana.edu

We hope to see you in Bloomington in February!