



Anna Diemer



Deborah Conquest



Cynthia Vaughn

## Teaching Older Adult Singers Online

A conversation with Anna Diemer, Deborah Conquest, and Cynthia Vaughn

**T**he older population is beginning to burgeon again as more than two-fifths (41%) of the ‘baby boom’ generation is now age 65 and older” according to the US Department of Health and Human Services. Many of these older adults are “aging in place” and may not drive or have someone to take them to weekly in-person voice lessons. Online lessons are a bright spot of socialization, creativity, and learning. NATS members Anna Diemer, Deborah Conquest, and Cynthia Vaughn share the benefits and joys of working with this special demographic.

**What is it that you enjoy about teaching older adults? Did you teach older singers online before 2020?**

**Deborah:** One thing I love about teaching older adults is they are just so happy to be making music again. Many of them are picking up singing after a long hiatus or after a significant time away from reading music or significant hormonal changes and they’re not sure what to do with their voice now. I had not taught older adults online prior to 2020.

**Anna:** I enjoy helping my older adult clients rediscover their voices — many of them have not had any formal vocal study since their teens or 20s, and both their own voices and vocal pedagogy have changed a lot since then. It is rewarding to lead them through this process of regaining function and ease in the voice that some of them had dismissed as a relic of the past. I find that my older adults also enjoy learning how the voice works, so I get to nerd out with them over pedagogy.

**Cynthia:** I didn’t teach online until 2020. Now I find it much easier to teach older students online than in person, especially

when the singer has visual or hearing challenges. In person, the student would sometimes have trouble hearing me on the other side of the piano or across the room or seeing my facial expressions. If there were other noises in the hall or street noise, that made hearing more challenging. With an online lesson, the student and I are close up “face to face” on screen. I like using gallery view so that the student and I are side by side on screen. It helps them feel like we are in the same room and they can mirror my alignment or vowel shape. I don’t have to shout to be heard. I simply turn up my microphone and ask the singer to turn up their speaker.

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**What challenges did your older adult students have making the switch to online lessons?**

**Anna:** At the beginning of the pandemic, I sadly lost a few students because they were unable or unwilling to make the switch to online lessons. Most, though, were eager to keep singing, so I tried to accommodate them in any way that I could. With this population, I mostly used FaceTime and Skype and my folks didn’t have trouble with the online technology. In the beginning, we had the typical audio, latency, and internet

connectivity problems that everyone had while figuring out the shift to going online, but once that was settled, I found that my clientele in this demographic increased! I have taught several clients how to use *ForScore* PDF reader on their iPads, which provides convenience and improves accessibility for these singers. Several times, I drove out for a socially-distanced outdoor lesson in one client's butterfly garden for a change of pace, which was delightful. We made it work!

**Deborah:** The ones who have continued online are pretty quick to adapt to the online platform. Maybe it takes a few more reminders about turning on your "Original Sound" and adjusting the camera. I also go through all of their Zoom settings at the beginning of every lesson.

**Cynthia:** I don't think we give enough credit to the adaptability of people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s. The octogenarians were born during World War II and have seen more changes and technological advances than we can imagine. All of my students got a free "tech set up" session with me in 2020. My student Charlotte, now 87, bragged that she taught her family how to use Zoom during the pandemic lockdown! If we have any technical difficulties or Wi-Fi outage during a lesson, we switch to FaceTime on their phones or just do an audio lesson.

### What are the benefits of online lessons for your older adult students?

**Anna:** One concern of my older adult clients is "aging out" of their choirs. I think private study helps give them the confidence as well as technical prowess to keep singing as long as they would like to, in the ensembles that they would like to. Several of my retired singers perform with upwards of three choirs each, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to help keep them in good vocal shape so that they can continue to enjoy the camaraderie and stage opportunities of their organizations.

**Deborah:** Many of my older students are no longer driving and are dependent upon rides from other people. I have one student who lives in a senior living facility and even when that facility is on a lockdown due to influenza or COVID, we're still able to have our voice lesson. I think socially, it's also a good way for them to keep active and keep their social circle wider than perhaps before.

**Cynthia:** The convenience and inclusion of online lessons can't be overstated. Some older students don't drive or they or a spouse are immune-compromised. Online one-on-one lessons help with mental acuity, socialization, isolation, and bring pleasure. One student looks forward to her Wednesday lesson every week. "It's my favorite thing!"

### What kind of repertoire and styles of singing do your older adult students enjoy?

**Anna:** The vast majority of my older adult clients are active in their local community and church choirs, which gives us an endless supply of repertoire to sing! I love it when a singer shows up with their score full of sticky notes so that we can address certain phrases in their lesson. Choral-orchestral repertoire is the studio top hit, and we also work on sacred solos when those opportunities arise at church.

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**Deborah:** They seem to love classical music. One of my 80-something-year-old students didn't want to sing Christmas songs — she wanted to sing all of the soprano arias from Handel's *Messiah*! And she did so with great success. They also love the great American songbook, Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney, etc.

**Cynthia:** Some of my older adult students sing in their church choir and/or community choir. I will sometimes reach out to their choir director and ask for a PDF of their choir music so that I can help them in their lessons. My 87-year-old student also sings classical. She studied with THE Burton Coffin in the 1960s. One student in her 70s has a great low (tenor?) voice and she loves to sing folk ballads and protest songs from the 1960s — Peter, Paul, and Mary; Bob Dylan; Joan Baez. She recently taught me Ian and Sylvia's "Four Strong Winds" that has been covered by a lot of artists including Neil Young. Oh, and she loves Ed Sheeran!

### Are your students still performing in choirs or community shows? How do you keep them motivated in lessons if they have "retired" from performing in public?

**Anna:** Most of my older students are still singing in choirs. I hope they will never retire from singing!

**Deborah:** One of my students actively sings in her church choir as well as her senior living facility choir. Almost all of them participate in some sort of karaoke! Another student sings at hospice bedside.

**Cynthia:** Most are still singing in choirs, but not always. The ones who aren't singing in public, enjoy their lessons for fun,

learning, and socialization. Their stories are as important as vocal technique.

### What do you, the teacher, learn from working with this population?

**Anna:** As an AFAB person in their 30s, I feel that I have learned a lot about what happens to the voice throughout the lifetime so that I can hopefully age as gracefully as my clients have. I can also help ease this transition for my clients who are just beginning that journey. And, of course, I love listening to their stories!

**Cynthia:** I've learned to be a better listener and to teach slower lessons. It's ok if we only get through one or two songs. Call and response works well, and I try not to rush or talk-over the conversation or song.

**Deborah:** I've learned some new repertoire, particularly songs from the 1920s and 1930s that maybe were new to me. I find that if I wait a little longer than usual in the back-and-forth of conversation, they're able to hear and understand me better. I've learned so much as a teacher and my life is richer for working with this population.

**Anna Diemer** (they/them) is a professional singer, arts entrepreneur, and the owner of Diemer Voice Studio, LLC in Asheville, North Carolina, and online. They help singers unearth and unleash their inner voices, working with singers who have had vocal injury, are experiencing voice dysphoria, or just want to sing healthily throughout their entire lifespan. When they're not singing, Diemer enjoys whipping up new recipes in the kitchen, spinning and hiking to stay active, and crushing their to-be-read pile.

**Deborah Conquest**, soprano, is a teacher and owner of Conquest Voice Studio in Rochester, New York. She loves hiking, rockabilly music, competitive powerlifting, houseplants, being a stage mom and chocolate cake — not necessarily in that order. She received her master's degree in music and doctoral studies from Cincinnati Conservatory of Music (CCM), bachelor's degree in music from SUNY Fredonia (New York), and Honors Certificate from Eastman Preparatory Pre-Collegiate.

**Cynthia Vaughn** is an author, teacher, and clinician who recently moved across the country from eastern Washington state to eastern coastal Virginia. Online teaching has allowed her West Coast students to continue their voice lessons. She has become skilled at converting time zones as she adds students from other parts of the country. Vaughn enjoys working with voice teachers and avocational singers. She has special fondness for working with older singers because, "at age 65, they keep me young!"



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