

The Teacher as Performer

An Interview with Sarah Hamilton

Sarah Hamilton has a successful independent voice studio in the Shenandoah Valley of central Virginia, where she is also active on the board of Virginia NATS. With a full studio of teen and adult students in addition to many other activities, Sarah had not been focused on her singing career since before the pandemic. Classically trained with a master's degree, she had immersed herself in vocal pedagogy and anatomy, and learning musical theater and popular cross-over styles to meet the needs of her students. Then, starting summer of 2023, the invitations to perform as mezzo-soprano soloist with regional choruses and orchestras began. Between November 2023 and March 2024, her professional engagements included alto soloist in Handel's *Messiah*, Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, and Bach's *St. John Passion*. Just when she had convinced herself that she was a teacher, not a performer, she found herself in demand as a regional soloist. It was a bit overwhelming. "I didn't even have a newer concert gown!" After accepting the engagements, she connected with her classical roots and began working with a voice teacher. Her performances have been hailed for her rich mezzo tone, musicianship, and coloratura. Independent Voices editor Cynthia Vaughn spoke



Sarah Hamilton

to Sarah Hamilton a few weeks before the St. John Passion performance.

Inter Nos: Why is it important for you as a TEACHER, to also be a PERFORMER?

Sarah Hamilton: Oh, so many reasons. First of all, it helps me to know what my students are going through when they are auditioning and performing. It is experiential — I learn from doing, not just reading about it. I gain new insights every time I learn and perform new music. I meet new colleagues. I can model preparation for my students. Preparing and performing

gives me empathy for my students. It gives them — and me — some grace because everyone makes mistakes, and no one is devoid of nerves. The myth that you must be "perfect" to be a professional is just not realistic.

Inter Nos: How do you have time to work on your own voice when you are teaching four plus days a week and doing studio admin other days?

SH: I make it a priority to carve out regular practice time and schedule my weekly lesson on a lighter teaching day. I rarely cancel lessons, almost never, but there have been a lot of respiratory viruses going around this winter. In

L to R: Dr. Benjamin Bergey, Shannon Kiser, Dr. Jordan Davidson, Olivia Rominiyi, and Sarah Hamilton



January I cancelled three days of lessons and I slept! It was what I needed to rest and recover. So, I am learning — and modeling — how to take care of myself and my voice. It's one of the benefits of being my own boss.

Inter Nos: What have you learned about being a professional soloist?

SH: Things I already knew: Be prepared. Be reliable. Be on time (early!) for all rehearsals and performance calls. Be collegial. Oh, and ask the soprano soloist what she is wearing so that we don't clash!

Inter Nos: Anything else?

SH: Yes. I am becoming more confident as a performer and teacher. I am learning to trust my voice and technique more. I always work on being better, but I am less critical about my singing. I'm not overthinking as much and I'm more in the moment.

***Sarah Hamilton**, mezzo-soprano, is an independent voice teacher in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. She holds a bachelor's degree in vocal performance from Messiah College (Grantham, Penn.) and a master's degree in vocal pedagogy from the Shenandoah Conservatory (Winchester, Virginia). Hamilton opened her voice studio in 2014, training singers in both classical and contemporary voice.*

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