

# A Conversation with Kristin Chenoweth, Part 1

Leslie Holmes



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**I**N THE GREEN ROOM, backstage at Boston's Symphony Hall, Kristin Chenoweth and I had the following conversation. What impressed me so much was that we were doing this interview *right before* Kristin was to go on stage and sing a solo performance before a packed house at Symphony Hall. How many singers are so relaxed about performing that they could do that?

**Leslie Holmes:** Talking with Kristin Chenoweth in the Green Room at Symphony Hall on April 30. How does time fly like that?

**Kristin Chenoweth:** I don't know. The other day I was at a NATS competition and I was about 20.

**LH:** As you know, this conversation is for the NATS *Journal of Singing*. The first thing I have to say is that you are so much fun. I have had the best time watching you perform on YouTube. In talking with David Letterman and Conant O'Brien, you were hilarious.

**KC:** Thank you. I have fun with that. When I do shows like that, I have to remind myself that people want to get to know me. I'm not hiding behind a role, or anything.

**LH:** I read a quote from you saying, "I just want the audience to have fun." When you perform a recital, you talk to the audience.

**KC:** Absolutely.

**LH:** You make them feel as if they are your friends. That is so important. Otherwise, you are this person on stage who is just a voice.

**KC:** I am so happy that you brought in that very point because, when I was in training, my teacher, Miss Birdwell, said, "Sometimes you let the voice falter, because you are so into the song. I would normally straighten that out a little bit but, with you, I don't know what it is." Not that



Leslie Holmes and Kristin Chenoweth

she didn't straighten me out . . . a lot. I think she just understood my heart and, honestly, as a teacher, I think that is the biggest challenge, knowing each kid and how you work with them. Believe me, she was hard on me. There were times when I didn't feel as if I deserved it. There were times when she was easy on me and I didn't feel as if I deserved that, either.

**LH:** It's very interesting that, at Oklahoma City University, you got a bachelor's degree in music theater and a master's in opera performance. Why on earth did you do that?

**KC:** My teacher talked to me at length about what was happening to my voice as it started to mature. I never had a voice like that before I went to OCU. My parents were engineers. I had piano lessons and ballet lessons. I sang in the choir.

**LH:** And you sang gospel music.

**KC:** I sang gospel music. I sang country music. When I went to OCU, my voice really started to open up. I understand, now, that I had natural technique, but she really explained to me what was happening in my larynx . . . what needed to happen more of and what needed to happen less of. Boy, did it start clicking.

**LH:** Tell me what she said.

**KC:** She said, first of all, "There are not many voices. There is one voice. Your mix is strong; your operatic high notes are strong. Your lower voice is not there. But, I don't want you to think of it that way. I want you to think of it as one voice." I didn't understand. That was probably a big help to me throughout my whole career. The second thing that she explained to me—obviously the most important aspect of singing—was how to breathe, the tire around the stomach that we had been hearing about our whole lives. I had been in ballet, so I didn't understand that my diaphragm and rib cage would actually expand. It's interesting. When I am doing work that requires a lot of time, like filming for TV, I'm not working out like I should. I swear my rib cage gets smaller. When I start singing a lot, I go back to a different size of dress. It should always be that way. The way I'm speaking now, I'm thinking a lot about it. Speaking has always been the biggest challenge for me. Boy, did we work on it a lot.

**LH:** One of the pieces I heard you sing on You Tube that really impressed me enormously is "[The Girl in] 14 G." You sing along in a music theater pop style and then, suddenly, out comes classical, almost opera, singing. Then, immediately, you go back to the theater pop style. It is amazing. Both voice types are so good and so right. It seems so easy. Is it easy?

**KC:** No, it's so hard. It was easier when I was in my 30s and 20s. Now that I'm in my 40s—I'm 48—it seems to get a little harder.

**LH:** That's young.

**KC:** Yes, you're right. I just have to think about the breath support. It's funny, I think about the breath support and the different characters in that song. That song was written for me by Jeanine Tesori and Dick Scanlan. They wanted to write a song for me that inhabited all the things I can do. I was a lucky girl. Any artist wants a song that challenges them. I had, obviously, done the arias "Glitter and be Gay" and the Queen of the Night. What I always remind myself when I am singing that song is that it is one voice. Never let the audience worry for your voice. Is she going to make it? Is she going to hit it? It's not about hitting it. You're arriving on the note.

**LH:** You're not hitting.

**KC:** Hitting is like singing really loud.

**LH:** I take that word right out of my students' vocabulary.

**KC:** I'm so glad you do.

**LH:** Hitting? No. Releasing.

**KC:** That's exactly right. There's a misconception nowadays with what's being celebrated. Believe me. I love all kinds of music. I seriously do. I think one of the reasons I can appreciate a singer, like Adele, is that she couldn't do all the touring that she does and write the songs she does if she didn't have breath support. It's a beautiful sound. There are other singers that I worry about a little bit more, and I wonder how long that career's going to last.

**LH:** I wonder how some of the popular singers of today can still talk.

**KC:** Unfortunately, what's happening a lot now is lip-synching. Most singers who tour don't sing live, being

very blatant and truthful. I don't judge it. I just do something different.

**LH:** Talking about the audience having fun. *You* are having so much fun.

**KC:** Even if I don't sing their kind of music, I think it's important that you be your authentic self. If you do that, nobody can really get that mad at you. You're singing your authentic truth. That's what I want to say to young singers. I know that teachers have to expand our repertoire and our minds. I would have never understood that I loved Ned Rorem, for example. I would have never known who that was until I was introduced to it. You understand . . . I would have never known the songs he wrote on poems by Emily Dickinson. This has shaped who I am as a singer and as an artist. Believe it or not, I take "The Silver Swan" with me when I am singing Willie Nelson. It's not just the music; it's those words that mean so much. Those words and the vowels. And I don't think young singers always understand how important the consonants are. When you're tired, the consonants can be your best friend. They should be your best friend, anyway, so that people can understand you.

**LH:** Your teacher, Florence Birdwell, is quoted as saying, "Don't sing it if you don't mean it."

**KC:** Yes. Many times she'd take music out of my hand and say, "You're not ready for this. You don't understand it. Until you're willing to go there, we'll have to put it away." I can remember being hurt and crying. Of course, now I completely understand. An example of that is the song by Kender and Ebb, "The Coloring Book." I started singing it. Miss Birdwell said, "Why are you singing that song?" I said, "I just like it. It's pretty." She wanted to know if that was all and I said it was. She had me put it away. Many years later—in fact, four years ago on tour—I took it out and never touched it again. My director said, "Don't be scared of it. I think you understand it now." So, I took it out and it's in my repertoire, now. I still don't quite understand it, but the goal is to try to understand what it could mean to me. That is as important to me as technique. There are a million great voices out there. I have heard them, believe me. I used to sing at competitions and all that. I am the type of person who doesn't care.

**LH:** That's right. What I love about what you do is that you are sort of a goofball (in a good way). I have heard many people sing "Glitter and be Gay," but I've never seen anyone have such fun with it. Then, you turn around and give your heart and soul out with "Maybe This Time." To be able to do all of that is so special. When you're playing a character in a show, do you try to use the character's emotions, to figure out what the character would be thinking, or do you use Kristin's emotions?

**KC:** First of all, I thank you for the comparison and for a compliment like that. Coming from a teacher, that is the highest. It makes me so happy. I think, for me, taking *Candide*, for example, there are so many great singers these days, like Renée Fleming and Anna Netrebco, that not only is it wonderful to have your technique and be able to sing, but you have to not be scared of these arias and parts. You just have to think of what Cunégonde is thinking and feeling at that moment. She is asking very good questions, and ones that I think young women everywhere, who've done anything they kind of wish they hadn't, ask. I went there. I thought of her. And, of course, that gives the opera an arc. When you come to "Make Our Garden Grow," at the end, it is the most beautiful choral music I have ever heard in any opera. That's just my opinion. When I was 19, and doing it for the first time, "Make Our Garden Grow" was a technical challenge. But when I did it again, at 33 or 34, "Make Our Garden Grow" was the most beautiful moment I had had on stage in a long time. It's not just Cunégonde, if I'm being completely honest, it's Kristin, too. Kristin Chenoweth singing "Make Our Garden Grow," with a cast, at 33 or 34 is a lot different from Kristi Chenoweth singing it at 19.

**LH:** Kristi Dawn Chenoweth.

**KC:** Yes. Looking back on my life, how far I've come and my career, I am humble and grateful. It has been a gift.

**LH:** And you are going back to Broken Arrow [Oklahoma] soon. There is a music complex there that is in your name.

**KC:** I just can't believe that that has happened. My town has been wanting a performing arts center. Six years ago they opened it up and named the theater after me.

I thought, “What will I do with that?” And now, for the third summer, we will have a camp where some of my mentors will come and teach, and some of my famous friends will come and sing. There will be acting, improv . . . how important improv can be in a rehearsal process. You have to be willing to fail to succeed, and you have to be able to feel safe in the rehearsal room to do that. We will discuss all of that. The camp is growing. It is going to be my legacy—it *is* my legacy. I do a master class there once a year for five high school students and five college students, which actually end up teaching me more than I teach them.

**LH:** “By your students you’ll be taught.”

**KC:** Then, I hear myself on a sound check and realize I’m not doing what I just taught them to do. I am continuing to learn and to grow.

**LH:** If we stop learning, we might as well just stop.

**KC:** Why continue it?

[End of Part 1]

O Winter! frozen pulse and heart of fire,  
What loss is theirs who from thy kingdom turn  
Dismayed, and think thy snow a sculptured urn  
Of death! Far sooner in midsummer tire  
The streams than under ice. June could not hire  
Her roses to forego the strength they learn  
In sleeping on thy breast. No fires can burn  
The bridges thou dost lay where men desire  
In vain to build  
O heart, when Love’s sun goes  
To northward, and the sounds of singing cease,  
Keep warm by inner fires, and rest in peace.  
Sleep on content, as sleeps the patient rose.  
Walk boldly on the white untrodden snows,  
The winter is the winter’s own release.

“January,” from *A Calendar of Sonnets*, Helen Hunt Jackson

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~ Dr. Wendy LeBorgne  
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