

Karen Brunssen

# Kindred Spirits Celebrating NATS 75th Anniversary and World Voice Day



Karen Brunssen

**H**APPY 75TH ANNIVERSARY TO ALL OF US! March 23rd marks the day the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) was founded. Seventy-five years ago, in 1944, a group of voice pedagogues announced the formation of NATS at an MTNA Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio. Through the combined efforts of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing, the Chicago Singing Teachers Guild, and the New York Singing Teachers Association, 138 people became the charter members of NATS, forming the organization that has become the pre-eminent professional organization for voice teachers and specialists. For us it is a professional affiliation with many kindred spirits throughout the United States and Canada. What would the “state-of-the-art” in voice teaching around the world be without NATS? How lonely would it be in our studios and clinics if we didn’t have each other to lean on and learn from? Would voice research about the singing voice be where it is today without NATS? Would we have the tools we have today to enhance and inform our pedagogy without NATS?

Over the course of the past 75 years, NATS membership has increased and our influence—through scholarship, programs, events, and student auditions—has broadened and deepened. Since 1944 membership has grown steadily. In 1948 we had 1,200 members, in 1991 4,962, in 1994 over 5,000, and in 2004 over 6000. Membership spiked in 2010, thanks to our first on-line membership application process, to 7,360 members. Canadians became eligible for membership in 1950. They became eligible to hold office with full membership in 1966. Canadian provinces became a part of NATS regions in 1980.

During the past 75 years our budget has kept pace with inflation and increased as we gained new members. Dues were \$12 in 1966, \$20 in 1971, \$40 in 1985, \$55 in 1995, \$65 in 1999, \$80 in 2006. For a good number of years, they have been \$96. Adjusted to inflation, \$12 in 1966 would be equivalent to approximately \$94.80 now. Wow! It is safe to say that what NATS did in 1966 has expanded exponentially with far more value than \$1.20 in 2019; we have gone above and beyond keeping pace with inflation. We can all be very proud of how far reaching, inclusive, and cutting edge NATS strives to be. Thanks to your ideas and involvement, our community vibrantly spans Canada and the United States. Moving forward we are doing our first-ever significant fundraiser for NATS. We will encourage additional financial support from members and other kindred spirits who share our purpose, interests, and

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hopes for making greater strides than our current “dues dependent” budget allows. I can’t think of a kinder thing to do for our professional organization as we mark the past 75 years and look forward to the next 75.

World Voice Day is commemorated on Tuesday, April 16, 2019. It started in Brazil with the goal of increasing public awareness of vocal health. The mission is to point out the relevance of voice science, pedagogy, and the vocal arts to psychology, neurology, cognition, linguistics, mathematics, physics, biology, phonetics, music history, and more. The health of the human voice is very important to quality of life in speaking and singing. The interdisciplinary scope of voice science, pedagogy, and art is obvious to us, but merits more recognition beyond this special day that draws attention to the voice. On April 16 there will be concerts, celebrations, talks, classes, workshops, and other events all over the globe. The goal in 2019 is to top the impressive 795 events from 55 countries around the world last year.

The theme for this year’s World Voice Day is “Be Kind With Your Voice.” It brings to mind more than just talking and singing, but also why, how, and what we express with our voices. It is interesting that the theme does not say to be nice with your voice; it says to be kind. Many things can be nice in our lives. “What a nice party.” “That’s a nice song.” “Be nice to your sister.” Objects and events are referred to as nice. Being nice can be more of a behavioral veneer as compared to the intentional goodness of being kind. Being kind is to have compassion, understanding, mercy, empathy, tenderness, and benevolence. Those often require more than a feeling or a behavior. Our excellence as pedagogues and voice specialists can be a great kindness when it enables others to sing unencumbered, so their sentiments and thoughts are evident. The opportunity we have to be kind with our voices as voice teachers and specialists in studios, classes, and clinics is a privilege.

Within our studios and clinics, we experience the need to make smart choices with our voices to inspire students’ actions vocally, musically, and dramatically as we encourage their vocal instruments to find optimal facility. Our choice of words, gestures, vocal inflection, and examples should stream from a treasure trove of knowledge and understanding. Through NATS we can learn from each to add to, refresh, and discover new ways toward best practices for vocal production.

Our voices help lead students/clients toward the right sensations— instant and instinctive, or new and different. Aesthetic vocal preferences, effective diction strategies, empirical and fact-based illustrations, supportive repertoire, and revealing exercises are all part of our tool bags. For each singer, better singing can give better voice to music history through the repertoire itself, whether it was written by composers hundreds of years ago or recently. The interpretive nuances of legato, *mesa di voce*, varied vocal textures, singing in many languages and styles, contribute to students’ self-discovery of optimal sounds, sensations, and musical choices. Working with them on the combined efforts of respiration, vibration, and resonance is being kind with our voices so they can be kind with theirs.

The activities in which we take part within NATS offer many opportunities to exercise yet other versions of kindnesses. We share a love of the human voice and see the benefits of singing in people’s lives. How fortunate we are to also call it our “work.”

Last fall, two colleagues from other universities, Dr. Scott Piper from University of Michigan and Dr. Chadley Ballantyne from Stetson University, visited my studio to watch lessons. During both visits my students got to experience the fresh ears and perspectives from these NATS colleagues. Of course, I invited their input within the lessons, and what they contributed was unbelievably good for the students, and even more so for me. That professional, scholarly kindness personified the depth of knowledge and understanding that resulted in impressive strides in students who aren’t even their own.

At the Central Region NATS Conference and Student Auditions in October, I attended a scheduled gathering with Dr. William Hudson and about 40 SNATS members for pizza and discussion. He had everyone sit in a large circle and share what they do in their SNATS chapters. Everyone was very “nice” and polite; however, by the end I recognized a familiar kind of kindness that likeminded singing musicians often experience. With that, right then and there, these students took action and started a Central Region SNATS Facebook page. Then they asked that the student poster session be moved to a convenient time so they can have a pizza meeting, visit the student poster presentations complemented by a clever pedagogy scavenger hunt, and meet to share ideas with each other.

The many kindnesses we experience in NATS merit acknowledgement. I am definitely the kind of person who sees a cup as being half full rather than half empty. At a party I tend to notice who is there, and don't notice who is not. I see NATS as an incredibly benevolent organization that merits the energies and support so many people put into it. That includes problem solving, traveling to events, bringing students to auditions and events, getting up early to adjudicate, being on a committee or board, going through the messiness of tackling new initiatives, and being bold in asking fellow members to give more rather than less. Every step of the way I meet great NATS members who have, do, and will give generously of their time, abilities, expertise, and financial resources. This will matter for our future. I am confident these kindnesses will multiply!

Also note what is left unsaid in this article. We know about despicable, unacceptable behavior that is the opposite of kindness. Let's be guardians of the goodness at the core of people singing. Be kind with your voice!

As we celebrate NATS' 75 years:

Be kind with your voice by sharing it with others so they may be comforted, entertained, or inspired.

Be kind with your voice by singing in tune, in time, with the right vowel.

Be kind with your voice singing with others to experience the complexity of voices together.

Be kind with your voice so you are inclusive all the way around.

Be kind with your voice by being an inspiring fact-based voice teacher for your students.

Be kind with your voice by leading your students to new musical and vocal challenges.

Be kind with your voice by helping students/clients discover uncharted vocal territory.

Be kind with your voice by believing in the musical and vocal potential for each person.

Be kind with your voice by supporting NATS!

Full lasting is the song, though he,  
The singer, passes.

"The Thrush in February,"  
George Meredith



chat

***Presented by Inside View Press***

Join our live, real-time discussions  
for voice teachers and singers.

*Hosted by Kari Ragan*

Mark your calendar for our  
upcoming sessions:

**Sunday, March 10**

"The Special Psychoacoustics of the Singing Voice"  
with Ian Howell

**Sunday, April 14**

"The more things change, the more they stay the same:  
some thoughts on the current state of pedagogic practice"  
with Scott McCoy

**Sunday, May 5**

"A conversation with Stephanie Blythe  
and Christine Brewer"

*Co-sponsored by The Voice Foundation*



The NATS Chat season finale on May 5 features Stephanie Blythe (right) and Christine Brewer. (photo by Robert Levy)

**6 pm PT, 7 pm MT,  
8 pm CT, 9 pm ET**  
**Sign up here. It's free!**  
**nats.org/nats-chat**

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

# Be Kind With Your Voice



Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

Kindness must watch for me  
This side the ground.

James Agee, "Sure On This Shining Night"

**W**ORDS MATTER. And what a large difference a little preposition can make.

In her communication to me a few months ago, Dr. VyVy Young, Associate Professor in the Department of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery, Division of Laryngology, at the University of California-San Francisco, and newly appointed chair of the World Voice Day Committee, shared the theme the committee had chosen for 2019: Be Kind With Your Voice. A hasty and careless initial (mis)reading of Dr. Young's message led me to consider kindness *to* one's voice, an important but altogether familiar idea that has been embedded implicitly in previous WVD themes, and one that offers an expansive menu of options for discussion. Furthermore, it is fundamental to the mission of our Association and that of the *Journal of Singing*, a concept that inhabits many of the pages of this publication. But it was the wrong preposition.

*With* changes everything. In that previously mentioned memo, Dr. Young wrote, "We thought [the theme] had a nice relevance from both a vocal health and wellness perspective as well as a subtle general unity/humanity perspective too."<sup>1</sup> As I started to wrap my mind around the preposition "with" and develop ideas for the present edition of "Editor's Commentary," simultaneously editing and preparing the master manuscript for this issue of the journal, I began working with President Karen Brunssen's "From the President" column, only to discover that she had addressed every idea that I had intended to explore. And she had so cogently and beautifully written about these matters, I felt that I had nothing further to add. If you have not already read her excellent column, please do so now before continuing here.

Consequently, I chose to direct my attention toward the "unity/humanity perspective" identified by the WVD Committee. To begin, I think it is important to establish that, of course, a characterologically unkind person can perform isolated acts of kindness, just as an essentially kind person may slip occasionally into decidedly unkind behaviors. Still, kindness as I define it here is—indeed, must be—a consistent, unifying, overarching quality, one that is not only congruent with, but also crucial to the life of the artist. Can you be genuinely kind to your students, for example, and habitually kick your dog? As another demonstration of inconsistency, a master class I recently viewed on Facebook showed a teacher gesticulating wildly as the student sang, actually touching her on occasion, seemingly inducing fear and tension in the student (and observer). Although the "master" seemed to speak kindly to

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the student between vocalizations, I found it a disturbing contradiction as physical and verbal gesture were in disagreement. Did this teacher personify kindness?

Words matter. How many of us have experienced insincerity in performers, even professional artists? Sometimes a ravishingly beautiful voice is only that, failing to speak to the soul. In performance, kindness with your voice means a total understanding and assimilation of text, along with proficiency in nuance of the language.<sup>2</sup> In his poem “Who is Sylvia,” from Act IV of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare sings,

Is she kind as she is fair?  
For beauty lives with kindness . . .

For us who live with and in beauty every day—of music, words, and thoughts—to be devoid of kindness is a contradiction; it must inform and radiate from every fiber of our being.

Words matter. In a climate where kindness is not only seldom practiced but also often ridiculed as weakness, it is especially incumbent on us as artists to voice a counterpoint. If we don’t practice kindness, we end up destroying ourselves. In a recent popular news magazine, an article by Vietnamese American intellectual and novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen reports the author’s repeated encounters with a “love it or leave it” rhetoric and posture in an increasingly xenophobic landscape.<sup>3</sup> Earlier, *Time* published an entire issue on the theme “Beyond Hate,” the necessity for which is a distressing commentary on a culture of intolerance, a dearth of kindness. The preposition embedded in that theme, however, implies a certain optimism, expressed especially in the lyric prose of Nancy Gibbs.

Leadership will come from uncountable individual decisions to model kindness, to fight alienation, to get offline and into the streets or classroom or the sanctuary and help someone in trouble.<sup>4</sup>

Being kind with one’s voice, then, goes beyond a literal interpretation, as we sing a song of welcome to and acceptance of the Other, with heart, mind, and voice. At the foundation of kindness lies love (I Cor. 13:4); kindness heals; artists who live in kindness are healers.

A song need not necessarily be sung, nor a text written. The song and text of my life will not be what I’ve said,

sung, or written. Kindness with our voices expands to the larger community, the world. Our art, a conduit that flows both inward and outward, supplies us with that “süßer, heiliger Akkord” that infuses our “holde Kunst.”

“And be ye kind to one another . . .” (Eph. 4:32); be kind with your voice; make the world a kinder place with your “song.”

## NOTES

1. VyVy Young, MD FACS, email to author (October 10, 2018). The American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery (AAOHS) has provided downloadable materials, posters, tip sheets, etc., to aid in the commemoration of WVD 2019.
2. See Richard Dale Sjoerdsma, “Honesty in Singing,” *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 5 (May/June 2017): 477–479.
3. Viet Thanh Nguyen, “American Like Me,” *Time* 192, nos. 22–23 (November 26/December 2, 2018): 28–34.
4. Nancy Gibbs, “The Only Way Forward,” *Time* 192, no. 20 (November 12, 2018): 25.

## NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

### Membership:

Membership in the National Association of Teachers of Singing is open to any citizen of any country whose professional training and experience qualifying him or her as a teacher of singing.

**Associate Membership** is available for voice teachers and advanced students who have not as yet completed the requirements for full membership.

**Affiliate Membership** is open to persons or groups that are interested in vocal pursuits but are not actually involved in the teaching of singing, such as speech therapists, laryngologists, schools, publishers, and music stores.

### Publications:

Membership includes a subscription to the *Journal of Singing*, the official journal of NATS, and to *Inter Nos*, the NATS Newsletter.

### Information:

Applications for membership may be completed online at [www.nats.org](http://www.nats.org). The website contains detailed information about the qualifications for membership and the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Teachers of Singing.

**Visit the Membership section of [nats.org](http://nats.org) to learn more.**