

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

Life in the Time of Corona



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ONE OF THE PERILS OF PUBLICATION, not only for authors and regular contributors to professional journals such as this, but also for editors, is the looming presence of early deadlines. Although *Journal of Singing* readers ordinarily would find little reason to notice the publication schedule that appears in each issue, a brief scan would show that deadlines for recurring columns occur four months prior to publication. As Editor in Chief, my deadline for submitting an edited manuscript for a particular issue, as well as for “Editor’s Commentary” is one month later.

We have learned to our dismay that much can happen between deadline and publication, for example, the tragedy of 9/11 that fell in my first few months as editor, and, most recently, the coronavirus pandemic that has enveloped the world. In these instances, a quick, after the deadline editorial response can seem callous, tone deaf, or out of sync with where readers find themselves at the time of publication; I hope that my last minute insertion into the May/June “Editor’s Commentary” does not fall into that category. As I write this little essay (late May 2020), it will be three months before it sees print. One hopes that our situation will have improved dramatically by then.

Since that last “Editor’s Commentary,” coronavirus has created a major upheaval in how we go about life, in how we conduct ourselves. Concomitantly, two basic human needs have gone unmet, or, at least, have been seriously compromised: the need for community and the need for beauty (along with the experience of beauty in community). Cancellation of educational, cultural, and social group events/activities, social distancing, and even wearing face masks that shield a significant amount of our nonverbal communicative ability, have resulted in a feelings of isolation and loss, as well as fear and foolhardiness (as caution too often is conflated with coercion). We haven’t been here before, and we struggle to find our footing.

That struggle, as it impacts the world of performing musicians, is waged, it seems to me, at a deeper, more intensely spiritual level. Esteban Batallan, principal trumpet for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra spoke for many as he lamented the shutdown of rehearsals/performances resulting in a partial loss of soul, adding, “A part of our soul is not at peace during this time.”¹ For singers, in a previously unimaginable turn of bitter irony, the medium actually can be the menace. A healthy, well lubricated, energized vocal sound projects a range and area of respiratory droplets that can be a threat to others, leading to a cessation of public solo and group study, instruction, and performance. Online classes, virtual group performances, remote voice lessons, can be effective, but the requisite technology may not be widely available. In the latter instance, it would seem that the independent teacher

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demographic has been particularly adversely affected (see “Letters to the Editor”).² In any case, the energy of face to face communication is seriously diminished. A need to bond, especially through music, “relates to the fundamental features of being human,”³ and that need too is compromised in isolation.

Crises are circumstances “in which history is written.”⁴ In 1982, influential economist Milton Friedman wrote, “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”⁵ The artistic community, in adjusting to this new environment, has shown enormous energy, creativity, and invention. Voice practitioners everywhere will celebrate NATS for quickly finding ideas “lying around” in its search for innovative ways of bonding with each other and for means to cope with the challenges that confront us. NATS, sometimes in collaboration with other professional organizations, has produced several informative webinars and chats, and has created a NATS COVID Resource Guide. Readers are encouraged to visit the Association’s web site (www.nats.org) to access these resources. Additionally, NATS members have created inspirational “A Word and a Song” events to post on email and Facebook. Finally, Zoom has become an effective replacement for onsite committee meetings; I have found the many I have sat through to be fundamentally broadening—although not in an entirely positive sense.

It follows, then, that crises offer opportunities for reflection, re-examination, and change. In this uncertain time, we can be certain that our world will be much different on the other side of this pandemic, and it is left to us as individuals and as a society to ensure that change is for the better. I do not mean only how we go about our business and daily activities, but rather who we are and what we stand for individually and collectively. Our search for meaning must determine what is important, what is essential. Corona has changed me. As only one illustration, I have formed a new understanding of and appreciation for time. The patterns of daily existence that define time and determine its rhythm have been upended (and there’s no app for that). Consequently, I find myself rethinking my place on this planet in the time allotted to me, and my relationship and mission to it and its inhabitants. Also, in my age-related vulnerability to

viral infection, I am more sensitized to the fragility of life and the importance of living well in the moment.

To cope is to hope, and we have already witnessed that hope expressed in song—from balconies, doorways, rooftops, social media. Music is spiritual, it heals, it bonds, it elevates. In a recent radio broadcast interview hosted by my colleague Greg Berg, (now) Past President Karen Brunssen said, “Keep music in your life in any way you can. We still have a song!”⁶ In so doing, we continue to shape that “bessre Welt” of which we sing.

And now a little *JOS* anecdote to lighten the corona moment. Interesting things frequently happen to an editor. In February, I received a package of unpublished songs from NATS member and composer Kenneth Mahy, who offered them *gratis* for distribution to interested persons. What was particularly interesting in this case was that Mr. Mahy is a professor emeritus at West Liberty (West Virginia) State College, where my wife’s late uncle was a professor of speech, and subsequent correspondence revealed that the two professors were acquainted. In my letter of response, I told Mr. Mahy that I found his songs worthy and would forward them to Kathleen Roland-Silverstein for review in a forthcoming issue of the journal (see p. 129). I further suggested that he send these materials to Glendower Jones, founder and manager of Classical Vocal Reprints, to consider for publication. That venture proved successful, and a chance correspondence rescued several significant songs from obscurity.

It is with considerable regret that I report the resignations of Andrew Adams and Sherri Weiler from the *Journal of Singing* Editorial Board. I am grateful to them not only for their expertise and valued contributions to the peer review process, but also for their personal and professional encouragement and support. At the same time, however, I am delighted to announce the appointments of Judith Cloud and Elvia Puccinelli to the Editorial Board. Dr. Cloud, of course, is familiar to NATS members as a noted composer whose songs have been reviewed frequently in this journal, and she is also Professor of Voice at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. Dr. Puccinelli, much in demand as collaborative pianist and clinician, is currently Associate Professor

of Music and Coordinator of Collaborative Piano at North Texas University. I warmly welcome both to my editorial staff.

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Erratum. The Table of Contents for the previous issue of this publication (*Journal of Singing* 76, no. 5 [May/June 2020]: iii) erroneously identified the author for the feature article, “A Guide to Tom Cipullo’s Captivating Song Cycle, *Late Summer*,” as George Zavracky. His correct given name is Gregory. The editor regrets the error.

NOTES

1. Howard Reich, “You Lose Part of Your Soul,” *Chicago Tribune* (May 17, 2020): Section 4, 1–2.
2. As I mentally began to formulate this column, my intent was to examine the challenges posed by remote voice pedagogy. I polled my *JOS* contributors, Editorial Board, and AATS colleagues to glean information, and soon discovered that the matter was larger than this column responsibly could accommodate, but also that the topic is being addressed by others more qualified than I. I express my deep appreciation to those who responded to my solicitations.
3. David M. Greenberg, and Ilamit Gordon, “Lockdown singing: the science of why music helps us connect in isolation,” *The Conversation* (May 6, 2020); <https://www.juancole.com/2020/05/lockdown-singing-isolation.html> (accessed May 20, 2020).
4. Rutger Bregman, “Now is the Moment to Change the World,” *Time* 195, no. 18 (May 18, 2020): 34.
5. *Ibid.*, 35.
6. Karen Brunssen, interview with Gregory Berg, *The Morning Show*—WGTD-FM 91.1 (May 20, 2020).

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma received his AB degree from Calvin College, MM in voice from the University of South Dakota, and PhD in musicology from The Ohio State University. His research and dissertation on the music of Franz Christoph Neubauer (1760–95) have rendered him an authority on this composer, resulting in contributions to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and *The Grove Dictionary of Opera*. Additionally, he has written articles for *The NATS Journal*, penned reviews for *NOTES* and *The Piano Quarterly*, and has authored a book on Neubauer published by A-R Editions.

In 2007 he retired from a 39-year career at Carthage College, Kenosha, WI, where he taught studio voice, opera, vocal literature and diction,

voice pedagogy, and directed opera productions. During that time, he served almost three decades as Chair of the Department of Music and eight years as Chair of the Fine Arts Division. Dr. Sjoerdsma, a tenor, also has performed widely in opera, oratorio, concert, and recital, both in the US and in Western Europe. A veteran of 22 European solo concert tours, he has performed principally in Germany, but also in Sweden, Hungary, Austria, and France. Additionally, he has appeared frequently as guest clinician and adjudicator, has conducted symphony orchestras, and has led a number of voice master classes.

After having managed the “Bookshelf” column since 1972, a responsibility assumed under editor Harvey Ringel, Sjoerdsma was appointed Editor in Chief of *Journal of Singing* in 2001, a post that occupies a significant part of his retirement. He has been a member of NATS since 1971, and was invited into membership of the prestigious American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS) in 2002.

A multifaceted career as scholar, pedagogue, performer, and editor was instrumental in Sjoerdsma being honored by the OSU School of Music 2017 Distinguished Alumni Award. Further honors accrued as Carthage College dedicated his former voice studio and established an endowed scholarship in his name.

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