

Your Voice Matters

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma



Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

For not my life and years alone I give—all, all I give,
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds
and volumes of worlds,
To span vast realms of space and time,
Evolution—the cumulative—growths and generations,
Space and time fused in a chant, and the flowing of eternal identity.

— Walt Whitman

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO MATTER?
The varied ways in which we use the word, both as noun and verb, cloud the issue. As a noun, it can refer to objects from microscopic to massive. It can also mean something less palpable such an issue (e.g., I have a matter to discuss). In our search for meaning in the World Voice Day 2023 theme, however, we will focus on the verb form. As such, it can indicate motion, as, for example, when infected wounds matter or ooze secretions. Its most frequent use, however, is qualitative, in either a negative sense (e.g., it doesn't matter, suggesting triviality or making little difference) or a positive one (e.g., Black Lives Matter, indicating significance and/or vital importance).

Writers have expended much effort and spilled lakes of ink debating over—or at least opining on—what matters in our existence on this terrestrial ball. Most lists seem rather shallow, itemizing ephemera such as happiness, romance, respect; but I recently found one that is rather thoughtful and comprehensive. Its compiler names peace, health, family and friendship, purpose, time, learning, and love—in that order.¹ Some lists include faith, with which I heartily agree, but I would argue that all of the items cited above are suffused with and summarized in the last: Love. Through the ages, many great philosophers, poets, and thinkers have proclaimed the primacy of love, the reason to be. Principal among these is the Apostle Paul, who, in I Corinthians 13:13, says, “. . . faith, hope, and love abide, these three: and the greatest of these is love.”² The Divine's definition of what matters is unequivocal: our lives are measured by how we love.

Unable are the Loved to die
For Love is immortality.
Nay, it is Deity—
Unable they that love—to die
For Love reforms Vitality
Into Divinity.³

Journal of Singing, March/April 2023
Volume 79, No. 4, pp. 433–435
<https://doi.org/10.53830/YTYS9445>
Copyright © 2023
National Association of Teachers of Singing

Most frequently, when outside agencies remind us that our voices matter, we are enjoined to express an opinion, cast a vote, or support a movement or cause. And it is a good thing—essential, in fact, to our stance as sensate, spiritual beings—to make our voices heard in the political arena, as well as in cultural, moral, ethical, racial, and humanitarian issues. In these matters, whether by means of vocal expression, writing, participation, action, or silence—sometimes the loudest voice of all—our voices matter.

For our purposes, however, we narrow the lens further: “Your [Singing] Voice Matters.” Curiously, the WVD 2023 theme is not substantially different from two earlier ones, “Love Your Voice” (2010) and “Your Voice Counts” (2012). In the first case, I had not yet come to the practice of posting the WVD theme on the cover of the March/April *Journal of Singing* and dedicating much of the issue to it, but in both instances the implications of the theme are similar to those we explore here.

A serious consideration of the WVD theme raises another important question: To whom do our voices matter? The most obvious answer is, of course, they matter to ourselves.

Because one’s voice is uniquely one’s own, it is incumbent upon us to care for, nurture, and preserve it. That means a correct, secure vocal technique, healthy dietary practice, avoiding unhealthy acoustic and atmospheric environments, and shunning abusive habits.⁴

The care and nurture of one’s voice means the care and nurture of the self, in the physicality and spirituality of both.

But your voice also matters to others, to our students, audiences, choir members, fellow congregants, colleagues. Your voice matters not merely in the quality of your singing—that is in fact quite secondary—but more in our commitment to a lifetime of technical training, study and widening one’s knowledge of the instrument and its repertoire, and, perhaps even more important, expanding intellectual horizons and becoming a whole person. Then, finally, communicating all in love for the other.

With that, dear reader, I attempt to close the circle of this essay. Our voices are bigger than ourselves, and I maintain that we can’t really effectively discuss “Your Voice Matters” without first determining what matters in

life. What matters in life is love. A corollary to the WVD theme could be to love your voice and share it with love. That does not mean simply to be proud of your voice; nothing is wrong with that, to be sure, but pride is self-directed while love radiates outward.

The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good
amid these,
O me, O life?

[Answer] That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute
a verse.⁵

* * *

As a lighthearted aside to this rather solemn discussion, I relate an instance in which your editor’s voice seems to have mattered. Readers may recall a confession in a previous “Editor’s Commentary” concerning my grammatical obsessions, where I included a photo of an unedited NATS t-shirt with the slogan, “Sing, Eat & ♪,” that lacked a comma after “Eat.”⁶ A few days ago, while combing the NATS website for some self-indulgent gift ideas, I saw a new edition of the shirt . . . with comma! Such matters matter!

NOTES

1. Natalia Bannister, “What Really Matters—The 7 Most Important Things in Life,” *Health and Self*, October/November 2018; <https://homemagazinegainesville.com>.
2. An inspiringly ecstatic musical expression of this theological tenet may be experienced in the final movement of Brahms’s *Vier ernste Gesänge*.
3. Emily Dickinson, “Unable are the Loved to die”; <https://voetica.com/voetica.php?collection=1&poet=4&poem=1718>.
4. See Richard Dale Sjoerdsma, “Your Voice Counts,” *Journal of Singing* 68, no. 4 (March/April 2012): 372.
5. Walt Whitman, from “O me! O life!,” *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Random House, n.d.), 221–222.
6. Richard Dale Sjoerdsma, “Editors, Editing, Editorials,” *Journal of Singing* 79, no. 2 (November/December 2022): 143; <https://doi.org/10.53830/PFWH8321>.

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 has occupied a significant part of his retirement and has been his passion for more than two decades. He plans to step aside as Editor in Chief at the end of the current publication cycle. 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. To honor Dick's service to the Association and the *Journal of Singing*, the NATS Board, at its June 2022 annual meeting, took the unprecedented action of conferring on him the title of Editor Emeritus, dedicated a board room at the National Office in his name, and, at the 2022 Chicago National Conference, he was awarded the coveted NATS Lifetime Achievement Award.

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.

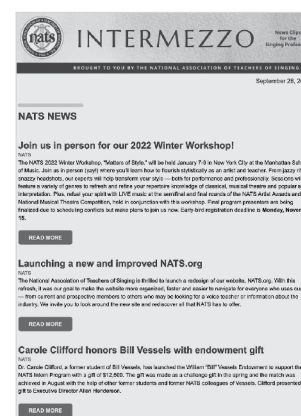
POSITION ANNOUNCEMENT. The Editor is pleased to announce the appointment of Justin John Moniz as Associate Editor in charge of the "Singing A Cappella to Zydeco" column, beginning with the September/October issue of the *Journal of Singing*. Justin currently is Associate Director of Vocal Performance and Coordinator of Vocal Pedagogy, NYU Steinhardt, and on the Vocal Arts Faculty at Manhattan School of Music. Justin brings much experience to the field of popular music and music theater through his work as performer, educator, author, clinician, and consultant. Current and former students have performed on Broadway, national and international tours, national television, and other important venues. We welcome Dr. Moniz to the *JOS* staff and look forward to his contributions to the publication.



INTERMEZZO

News Clips
for the
Singing Profession

Intermezzo is a weekly compilation of news clips about the singing profession, in addition to NATS news, that is delivered to each member's inbox. Intermezzo tackles today's most relevant issues, gathered from sources like The Associated Press, The New York Times, Financial Times and the leading industry publications. It is delivered to the inboxes of teachers of singing in the United States, Canada and more than 35 other countries.



BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF SINGING