

The Postpandemic Pedagogue

Matthew Hoch



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THE SUMMER OF 2021 MARKED the fifteenth anniversary of my participation in the NATS Intern Program. As I lived vicariously through this year's two classes of interns—through their various social media posts and *Inter Nos* articles—I could not help but reflect on my own experiences as an intern. Those ten days spent in Kansas City in June 2006 were a pivotal part of my formation as a teacher of singing. My master teacher was Don Simonson, who imparted a wealth of practical knowledge to us through our mentored teaching and lunchtime chats, drawn from his vast experience as a performer and university professor of singing. I observed and participated in classical vocal master classes and literature sessions, and there was one memorable presentation offered by the UMKC dean that was devoted to achieving tenure in higher education, since that is what many (if not most) of the interns aspired to do. I was headed into my first year as an assistant professor at Shorter College, so the timing was perfect for me. I left the program fulfilled, inspired, and ready to conquer the world.

That summer marked the beginning of fifteen years of navigating academic trenches. After six years at a small teaching college, I moved to my current position at Auburn University, which is an R1, land-grant institution. I jumped through all the required hoops to achieve promotion and tenure, focusing primarily on peer reviewed articles, books, and conference presentations, because I was told repeatedly that those activities “carry the most weight” with the committees that would decide my fate. My voice teaching certainly seemed to be more than adequate, with my students regularly achieving success at NATS auditions, MTNA competitions, and through placement in good graduate programs. I received affirmation from my colleagues in the profession in addition to awards for my work. In short, I had perfected my academic routine, which essentially looked the same from year to year. And every August that routine began again. It was easy to feel like I had become very good at what I do. It did not seem to matter if my teaching had not changed very much in between 2009 and 2019—everything seemed to be working just fine.

Then 2020 happened, and everything changed overnight. I struggled alongside my colleagues as we adapted to the new reality of online teaching. Our professional organizations cancelled conferences or converted them to online formats. My academic projects suddenly seemed trivial and irrelevant to the pedagogic world in which we were now living. For the first time in career, I felt wholly inadequate as a teacher and scholar. I did not know as much as I thought I did.

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In my personal life and day to day interactions, people have begun to refer to events in their lives as “prepandemic” or “postpandemic.” As a child, I remember my grandparents framing the timeline of their lives according to World War II, recalling their childhood and growing up “before the War” (with a capital “W”). I suspect the pandemic will occupy a similar station for all of us who have lived through it. In voice pedagogy, the past eighteen months have had significant implications for the future of our profession. The pandemic has hastened, exposed, clarified a variety of trends that already had been taking shape over the last two decades as we stood by, “both knowingly and unknowingly on the precipice of change.”¹ This editorial will attempt to summarize these emerging themes and their implications for the future of voice pedagogy.

ONLINE TEACHING IS HERE TO STAY

The most obvious tidal change in our profession is also perhaps the most significant. The postpandemic singing teacher will be expected to offer quality instruction both in person and online with equal comfort. While some singing teachers were ahead of this trend prior to the pandemic, many resisted the online teaching movement, and most singing teachers faced a steep learning curve beginning in March 2020.

With varying levels of success, most of us adapted to this change, even if we had no other choice. A NATS membership survey conducted in the second quarter of 2021 examined the online professional activity of NATS members—prepandemic versus predictions postpandemic—across four areas: teaching, conferencing, learning, and working remotely.² The results, perhaps not surprisingly, indicated a dramatic increase across all four categories: teaching remotely (up 43 percent), conferencing remotely (up 43 percent), learning remotely (up 28 percent), and working remotely (up 27 percent). In sum, teachers may have increased their online activity out of necessity, but, having gained or improved their remote technology skills, they intend to continue these online activities moving forward.

The prepandemic voice teacher could watch these changes from the sidelines without any reasonable worry of being negatively affected by self-imposed old-fashionedness. That is no longer the case. Anyone who

teaches at a university, college, or in a public or private school will now be expected to pivot to online learning at any given moment. Private studio teachers are likely to lose revenue unless they offer a variety of modalities to their students. There is no category of singing teachers who will not be forced to grapple with this new reality. Technophobia is no longer an option, and those who resist technology will become an increasing minority within the pedagogic community.

TECHNOLOGY AND INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSE

In a 2018 *Journal of Singing* article, Ian Howell made the following observation regarding technology’s effect on the dissemination of information within the academic community:

[R]esearch from the voice science and pedagogy community is more easily and instantly accessed (if not accessible) and disseminated than ever. The entire field stands to benefit from new media technologies (e.g., interactive online video lectures, podcasts, vlogs, blogs, and especially the social networks that allow for quick discovery) that enable everyone to publish and distribute their work on a scale unimaginable even a decade ago.³

Contrast this new reality with the pace of the traditional academic model. The process for publishing a peer reviewed article usually takes a year or more. Books take even longer. Conference presentations of research are taken in only by those who (a) can afford to attend the conference and (b) make the choice to attend a given presentation or poster session. Scholars who participate in discipline-specific conversations online, however—through the new media technologies that Howell enumerates—instantly connect with a much larger audience in a far more interactive way. It is difficult to imagine how we would have been able to respond to the challenges presented to us by the pandemic if our pedagogic discourse had been limited to traditional means.

The old-school model of “conferencing and publishing” is not only slow, but also elitist along institutional and financial fault lines. To be a part of the traditional pedagogic community, one needed either the financial backing of an academic institution or a certain degree

of personal wealth to be able to attend conferences. A private studio teacher may have little incentive to publish articles if an institution is not compelling them to do so. Perhaps these realities have created a vicious cycle in which teachers outside the university voice teaching community felt as if they were not welcome to participate in these kinds of pedagogic conversations.

Online forums and conferences present an opportunity to broaden our circle, and, judging by the NATS survey and trends within other professional organizations, the newer formats having emerged out of necessity during the pandemic are here to stay. Younger voices have joined our ranks, offering important perspectives with refreshing zeal. We have moved beyond the philosophical debate regarding whether conferences should be offered online to acceptance that they have and focusing on how to best deliver online content in a meaningful way. Those of us within the academy should use our influence to move beyond the traditional means of intellectual discourse toward a more practical and inclusive twenty-first century model.

SCHOLARSHIP MUST BE RECONSIDERED

Corollary to events described above, the old-world academy is becoming increasingly irrelevant, at least in terms of meaningful scholarship that directly impacts and reflects current pedagogy and practice. This is not a new observation. In 1990, Ernest L. Boyer published a landmark book titled *Scholarship Reconsidered*.⁴ In this volume, Boyer argues for more holistic and discipline-specific methodologies when assessing scholarship in academia. For instance, if one's area of expertise is piano performance, then performing a piano concerto with a top tier symphony orchestra would be equivalent to publishing a monograph with a top flight university press publisher.

Emerging from the pandemic, we are now poised on the precipice of another reckoning with the traditional academic model. While the call to move away from the "publish or perish" model has been ongoing for several decades, many institutions have been slow to update this paradigm. In contrast, the American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS) recently presented three inaugural awards to individuals and organizations whose nontraditional scholarship effected prompt,

impactful, and positive change during the COVID-19 crisis.⁵ These kinds of efforts offer a glimpse at what meaningful, discipline-specific scholarship may look like in a postpandemic world.

IN AN OVERSATURATED ENVIRONMENT, WE MUST CHOOSE DISCERNINGLY

Technology has provided us with instantaneous access to exponentially more information than was ever available to any previous generation. In the postpandemic era, one person cannot possibly take in all the knowledge that is available to the modern singing pedagogue. In his 1994 book, *The Western Canon*, recently deceased Harold Bloom wrote, "Who reads must choose, since there is literally not enough time to read everything, even if one does nothing but read."⁶ It is within this miasma that professional organizations like NATS can be particularly helpful, assisting teachers in sorting through and affirming what is most relevant and useful. The abundance of virtual opportunities is likely to complicate matters for our students as well. Five years ago, there was a limit to how many graduate auditions one could take or competitions to participate in, simply due to the time and expense of traveling to the required venues. As teachers and mentors, we will need to help our students make wise choices in this increasingly confounding environment.

EVER INCREASING SPECIALIZATION VERSUS CONSUMER DEMANDS

As I write this editorial, I am juggling several other projects. One of them is a revised and expanded edition of Berton Coffin's pioneering lyric diction textbook, *Phonetic Readings of Songs and Arias*.⁷ Reflecting on Coffin's legacy, I am taken in by the sheer breadth of his corpus of work. Coffin was one of the first acoustic pedagogues (*Overtones of Bel Canto* and *The Sounds of Singing*)⁸ who also published in the areas of lyric diction (*Phonetic Readings of Songs and Arias*), text translation (*Word-by-Word Translations of Songs and Arias*),⁹ and historical pedagogy (*Historical Vocal Pedagogy Classics*).¹⁰ Coffin remains one of the most important pedagogic voices of the twentieth century, but he is also a product of his generation.

As far as academia is concerned, the age of the polymath is over. In a previous article, I remarked on how the history of voice pedagogy over the past fifty years is something like a truncated version of the timeline of the history of science.¹¹ The early Greek philosophers also were the great scientific thinkers and astronomers of their day; now things are, by necessity, much more specialized. The acoustic theorists and pedagogues have staked out their territory, and investigations into biomechanics have now segued, appropriately, to outcome-based studies facilitated by interdisciplinary teams. Lynn Holding recently suggested that a “third pillar” of pedagogic scholarship devoted to cognitive science is emerging.¹² This trend toward specialization applies to styles as well: Commercial music specialists rarely give master classes to classical singers, and most classical pedagogues feel out of their element if asked to teach amplified styles.

This increased specialization, however, has run counter to consumer demands upon modern singing teachers. Several months ago, Scott McCoy wrote his final column as associate editor for voice pedagogy in the *Journal of Singing*. Writing from the perspective of a pedagogue about to retire, McCoy made observed how our profession has shifted in this regard as one generation has given way to the next.

We don't have a lot of evidence from earlier times that singing teachers were expected to prepare their students to sing a wide range of styles and genres; of course, that no longer is the case. The current generation of teachers largely are required to teach in styles that are musically and technically diverse. This is an ongoing sea change that has impacted voice teaching for nearly two generations. It isn't going away.¹³

This kind of “jack of all trades, master of *all*” mentality certainly does not reflect the philosophy or training that my teachers imparted to me. As I was mentored by McCoy's generation (and Scott specifically), I can certainly relate to his position. However, this emerging culture is one that the postpandemic voice teacher will encounter and must confront. The science-informed, function-based approach to voice pedagogy now emerging in our profession makes this emerging reality less a paradox and more a new paradigm. I believe there is still room for specialists in our field, and we must be honest

and humble enough to acknowledge when we are out of our element, encouraging our students to seek expertise elsewhere. It is our task to navigate this conundrum and find a *via media*.

BRIDGES WITH THE PERFORMANCE COMMUNITY MUST BE (RE)BUILT

A doctoral student at Auburn University recently emailed me asking, “What is the difference between voice pedagogy and voice science? These terms seem to be used interchangeably.” Reflecting on the voice pedagogy classes I took in the 1990s and early 2000s, I am not sure this question would have been asked back then. The fact remains that science—and vocal acoustics in particular—informs so much of the current pedagogic “group think” in organizations like NATS, but how much voice science does one really need to know to be an effective voice teacher? Were there no good singing teachers or performers prior to Vennard and Appelman?¹⁴ Any reasonable person would concede that this was surely not the case.

I have opined on this issue before, and, while my thoughts on many pedagogic matters have evolved over the past four years, my feelings on this issue remain the same.¹⁵ As the discipline of voice pedagogy continues to inexorably merge with voice science, we run the risk of further alienating the many teachers of singing who are not members of NATS and not engaged in the “academic” communities operating within the voice teaching profession. There are many more of these teachers out there than we often care to acknowledge in the classical community alone. And while NATS has evolved significantly in its efforts to reach out to teachers of commercial genres, there is still little synergy between “NATS and Nashville.”

With so much of our social interaction moving to online formats and “closed” social media groups, we increasingly run the risk of living within our own bubbles and conversing only with people who think like us and share our own interests and biases. This has created challenges that are playing out within society on a macro level, but our profession is not immune to the ubiquitous microcosms of this phenomenon. We must recognize these pitfalls and earnestly engage in outreach efforts with our colleagues in the larger profession.

RETHINKING AND EXPANDING THE TRADITIONAL CANON OF REPERTOIRE

The past several years have brought to the fore long overdue conversations about race and gender issues in our country. 2017 marked the beginning of the #MeToo movement, and 2020 saw nationwide protests erupt upon the murder of George Floyd, alongside a landmark Supreme Court decision that federally recognized gay and transgender rights in the workplace.¹⁶ These social issues also provided a catalyst for backlash via state laws, indicating that these matters are far from being resolved and there is still a need for active engagement with social justice issues.

There is no profession that remains untouched by this milieu, and there are significant implications for teachers of singing. Considering diversity when choosing repertoire to teach and perform is an immediate and obvious place to start. The Alabama chapter of NATS recently inaugurated an initiative to integrate composers from the BIPOC community into student audition repertoire. As editor of the *So You Want to Sing* series, we have published titles on spirituals, gospel, and the blues as well as a volume devoted to music by women composers.¹⁷ The Music by Women Festival at Mississippi University for Women has become a major hub for celebrating the music of women composers, annually attracting composers and performers nationally.¹⁸ I think back on my degree-required recitals—seven in total from undergraduate through doctoral school—and realize that all my repertoire was composed by white men. I am not proud of that, but I doubt that my experience is unique. Times have changed, and for teachers of singing, it is time to embrace this change. In the postpandemic era, every recital should include music by underrepresented composers.

More broadly, NATS inaugurated its “diversity and inclusion toolkit” in the spring of 2020,¹⁹ which builds upon the already existing diversity and inclusion statement.²⁰ Scholarship is emerging devoted to the pedagogy of working with transgender singers, and the National Student Auditions committee recently relabeled categories with gender-inclusive language.²¹ These will continue to be important issues as we move forward.

WE NEED TO RETHINK OUR BUSYNESS

When the arts world stopped in March of 2020, we had no choice but to slow down. Initially, all conferences and weekend performance gigs were cancelled, and for the first time in fifteen years I wasn’t scheduling myself every weekend and running from one thing to the next with barely enough time to sleep or catch my breath. I never stopped to think about the toll this perpetual busyness was taking on my performing, scholarship, emotional and mental health, and family. Frankly, I didn’t have time to think about it—I was always under pressure to meet the next deadline.

Many of us fall into this “busyness trap.” In her chapter on meditation in the recently published volume *So You Want to Sing with Awareness*, Michelle DeBruyn comments on this phenomenon.

Most people tend to create their own busyness. One author called the culture of busy “a hedge against emptiness,” and further suggested that if people were to slow down and smell the roses that they would have to confront what is happening on the inside. When we continuously make mad dashes from activity to activity, we have no time to take mental stock of how we are feeling, whether that includes major life events, trivial emotional responses, or simply what we feel about the activity to which we are rushing. Whether intentional or not, modern day culture is one of internal avoidance, which may give way to intrapersonal disengagement and decreased mental health.²²

I will not be returning to the lifestyle I lived before the pandemic. The past eighteen months forced me to recognize what I had been doing to myself all those years. Taking the time to move at a slower pace—the correct pace—with my academic work and day to day activities has not only made for a more pleasant process but has also yielded better results. This shift from a quantitative to a qualitative approach to work, and life, is a change that I intend to keep.

FINAL THOUGHTS: A PATH FOR THE POSTPANDEMIC PEDAGOGUE

One of my colleagues remarked recently that the two biggest mistakes that universities can make moving forward is (a) returning to doing things exactly the way they

were done before the pandemic, or (b) continuing to do everything that we did during the pandemic to adjust and survive. The same can be said of voice pedagogy. 2019 is now a former era. What shall we return to, and what should we not? The quintessential question that has yet to be answered lies in that equilibrium: Where, exactly, is that balance?

According to the National Center for Health Statistics (a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), the current life expectancy for a male living in the United States is 75.1 years,²³ and—according to the U.S. Census Bureau—the average age of retirement is 65.²⁴

By these statistics, I have passed the halfway point in my life and career. Circling back to McCoy's observations, I find myself stationed at a unique vantage point, sandwiched between the generation that mentored me and a new one that is emerging. Change is difficult. If I am being honest with myself, I would prefer to remain an old-fashioned academic who avoids social media, writes in seclusion, publishes in peer reviewed journals, and teaches unamplified singing. But that is no longer enough or adequate. The rising generation of pedagogues in our profession—a cohort rife with talent, energy, and vision—understands this dynamic.

Richard Miller once wrote that the “responsibility, excitement, and rewards of our profession lie in rising to new challenges to make the present and future of voice teaching even greater than its history.”²⁵ May we have the serenity to accept what we cannot change, courage to develop the new skills we must, and the wisdom to embrace both realities. May we also be humble enough to know our limitations and collegial enough to engage our fellow pedagogues to assist us when need be. In the postpandemic era, our pedagogic community has never been more vital.

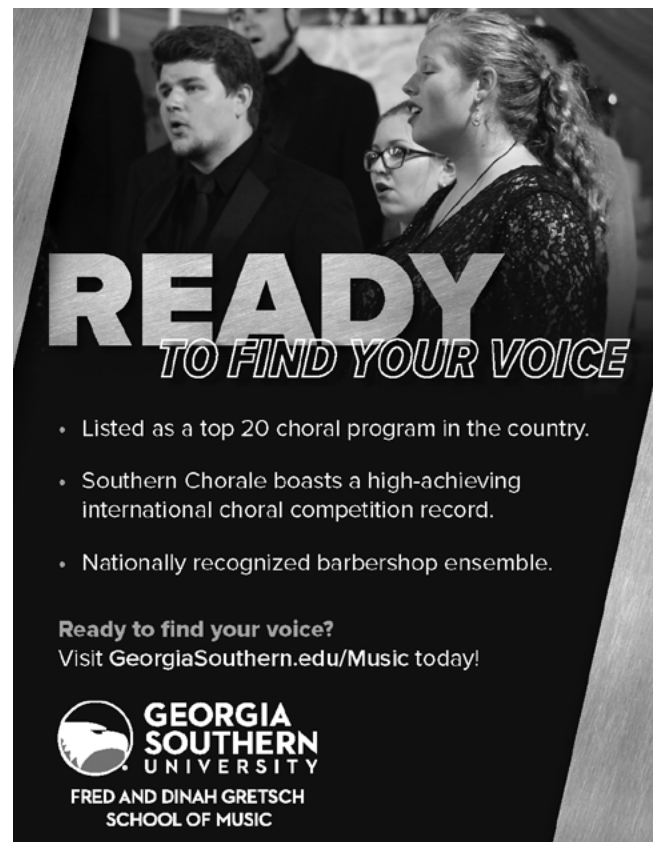
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Matthew Hoch is associate professor of voice at Auburn University, where he teaches applied voice, diction, and Women in Music. Prior to coming to Auburn in 2012, he spent six years as assistant professor of voice at Shorter College, where he taught applied voice, vocal literature, and served as coordinator of voice studies. Dr. Hoch’s students have gone on to successful careers in both classical and music theater genres and have won awards from the Metropolitan Opera National Council (MONC), NATS, MTNA, ACTF, the Vann Vocal Institute, and others. He has appeared as a soloist with the Oregon Bach Festival, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, the Vox Consort, Harmonie Universelle, the Hartford, Rome, and Nashua Symphony Orchestras, the Atlanta Baroque Orchestra, and the United States Coast Guard Chamber Players. Dr. Hoch is the 2016 winner of the Van L. Lawrence Fellowship, awarded jointly by the Voice Foundation and NATS. He is the author or coauthor of four books, including *A Dictionary for the Modern Singer*, *Welcome to*

Church Music & The Hymnal 1982, and *Voice Secrets: 100 Performance Strategies for the Advanced Singer*, and *So You Want to Sing Music by Women*. He is also the editor for three books recently published in the NATS So You Want to Sing series: *CCM*, *Sacred Music*, and *World Music*. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Singing*, *Journal of Voice*, *Voice and Speech Review*, *Opera Journal*, *Choral Journal*, *American Music Teacher*, *The Chorister*, *Classical Singer*, *College Music Symposium*, *American Organist*, *The Hymn*, *Kodály Envoy*, *Journal of the International Alliance for Women in Music*, and the *Journal of the Association of Anglican Musicians*. From 2008–2016, he served as Editor-in-Chief of *VOICEprints: The Journal of NYSTA*. Dr. Hoch has presented his research at many national and international conferences, including ICVT, PEVOC, PAVA, NATS, ACDA, VASTA, MTNA, NOA, CMS, AGO, HICAH, SAM, NAFME, ASA, IHS, the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada, the Voice Foundation Symposium in Philadelphia, and the International Symposium on Singing and Song in St. John’s, Newfoundland, and Labrador. He holds the BM from Ithaca College, an MM from the Hartt School, a DMA from the New England Conservatory, and the Certificate in Vocology from the National Center for Voice and Speech. In 2018, he presented performances and master classes in the United Arab Emirates as was awarded the Auburn University College of Liberal Arts Teaching Excellence Award.



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